THAI STREET IMAGINARIES:
BANGKOK DURING THE THAKSIN ERA (2001-2010)

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ABSTRACT

As Bangkok built toward a turbulent climax of street violence between 2001 and 2010, the nation’s political fault lines began to manifest themselves as a series of stories, films, and creative work about politics in the city. Behind the “scenes” writers like Uthid Hemamul, Pinyo Traisuriyathamma, Panu Trivej, Kanthorn Aksornnam, and Siriworn Kaewkan framed politics as a particular form of urban visuality. Furthermore, filmmakers such as Apichatpong Weerasethkaul, Pen-ek Ratanaruang, Kongdej Jaturanrasamee, Pimpaka Towira, Uruphong Raksasad, and Santi Taepanich enhanced this visual perception with an auditory dimension that politicized listening. Together, these creative dimensions re-worked images of the urban street in an attention economy which served a symbolic role in Thai political history.

These stories were also unique in their materialization of Thaksin-era power. They opposed the order of a global city standardized in the neoliberal management style of Thaksin Shinawatra, where new cultural and economic reforms were uncritically championed. From the smoldering remains of the Asian Financial Crisis, Thaksin’s new thinking brokered a landslide victory in the nation’s 2001 election, but opened new political divisions which led to his ouster by military coup d'état in 2006. The case studies assembled here reconstruct images of Bangkok to show how street politics operates as both an opposition to, and extension of, the media conventions of the Thaksin era. My critical approach to creative media serves two ethical purposes. First, it extends the perceptive space of street politics by capturing the everyday dimensions of a new multi-mediated city where mass transit systems and skyscrapers take flight from the landscape of the street. Second, it documents street politics even in the absence of historic
protest events. This dissertation thus explains how urban settings come to be perceived as a significant space of political activity, and how the culture of fiction manifests itself in concrete ways at unexpected times.
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Fig. 1.1 An aesthetic cartography of Thaksin era Bangkok (Personal drawing)
Montage 1: Streetscapes

One way of understanding Bangkok during the Thaksin era is by paying attention to how people write about looking. Bangkok-based fiction writer Kanthorn Aksornnam writes about a tourist in Tahiti by way of a fictional narrator overlooking the streets from a Bangkok balcony in the short story “As If Snow Fell on Tahiti” (2010). Between the television set and the balcony, the narrator describes Greek mythology and reviews of Tahitian filmmakers alongside panoramic observations of the Bangkok streets below. Her looking is, like the city, disconnected. Throughout this eclectic collection of Thai “new wave” fiction, the reader continues into the global domain of looking. In “Extraordinary Things,” a young woman sits on a streetside bench in Sanam Luang, Bangkok’s oldest public park, and remembers a past relationship through the images stored on her digital camera. She looks out at the outdated royal landscapes as they blend into the t-shirt slogans of foreign tourists. This image traffic comprises the world of Bangkok through an urban dweller increasingly articulated by how they pay attention.

These characters tell stories in how they look, but also in how they listen. “The ‘Banana’ witch interview” (2009) takes place down the street, at another intersection in Bangkok’s Old City. The short story brings together a hipster journalist and a television soap opera star he interviews at an Old City bar, in a landscape decorated by the influence of a late 19th century European modernism. Halfway through the story, the differences represented by their genres of employment are symbolized by a “Berlin Wall.”

Our eyes met, the hero making contact and the heroine responding with a smile. Right then the Berlin Wall came crashing down (the real Berlin Wall came crashing down in 1989 if you remember. I thought of “Another Brick in the Wall” by Pink Floyd).

She and I exchanged sarcasm and a verbal abrasiveness that seemed never-ending, as “Another Brick in the Wall” played in my head. It could play uninterrupted for another three thousand years.

The continuity of the song runs against the “Berlin Wall” that obstructs normal communication in the city. A global political event stands in for obstacles to listening. But these media fragments of contemporary fiction can also be heard as locally situated political analogues.

In May 1992, thousands of democracy protestors broke through military partitions in the Old City, which they referred to as the “Berlin Wall”. Alan Klima (2002) refers to this security cordon in his attempt to connect a history of protest on Ratchadamnoen Avenue with the emergence of neoliberal markets into Thailand in the 1990s (see Klima 2002: 107, 113). The streets had to be cleansed, and looking had to be controlled through censored television transmissions of the event. But these government strategies backfired as more people headed for the streets. “Ratchadamnern Avenue had become a stadium. And you could not see it for yourself unless you went there in person, because TV was censored” (Klima 2002: 108). What they saw was horrifying, a rain of bullets and an all-out military assault. In the days afterword, bootleg videotape vendors trafficked images of violence back into the streets where the crackdown was waged. The bootlegged images
were compiled from international broadcasts, backpacker videos, and camcorders that never aired publicly, and then sold in the informal markets of the working class. The street became an audiovisual experience that countered a national media culture. A literary allusion to listening and looking in Bangkok became political by virtue of the specificities of that part of the city.

Kanthorn’s short stories shuttle between space and time, between musical soundscapes and the Old/New landscapes of Bangkok, which is not so different from her own routes through the city’s streets. On an average day, she edits articles at the northside suburban offices of the leftist Way Magazine, boards a bus south to assemble a radio broadcast at an office building near the New City center, meets several writers at a non-profit artist commune across the Chao Praya River, and then heads north to a friend’s mixed-media bar in the Old City. Her writing reflects these routes and the way the city, like power, can be de-centered. Creative media plays a central role.

Kanthorn has chosen not to take an ideological position on national politics, which has divided into strict left/right camps since 2006. Instead she believes that her creative work is political by its mode of deployment: a departure from established literary conventions, opening space in a world dominated by men, and her preference for marginal subjects. The experience of the city, which includes vertical living, media ubiquity, and the temporal weight of living ‘in transit’, is engaged politically as a reinterpretation of what it means to be part of the cityscape. In the final scene from “As If Snow Fell on Tahiti” assembles this “‘distanced’ montage of the city.

I walked back into my room and grabbed the CD for the film Duck Season [Fernando Eimbcke 2004] and put it into the player, and the film projected moving images from the rectangular 24 inch screen. I saw the panoramic world until it seemed too vast from the perimeter of the rectangular screen, from that round and flat CD. And I could still see a small glimpse of my neighborhood, the houses, the rooms, and the lives of the infinite people I can’t see from the balcony. I sit watching things in this way. There might have been millions of people, or a mere hundred of them, and we’re watching the same images. One might say that we’re watching the same movie, listening to the same songs, even as we’re positioned at different corners of the world.

The passage underscores the underlying question of the dissertation, which is how political thinking is possible in a world where one image occupies many screens, sometimes by military force, and other times by the repetitious global trafficking of images. Kanthorn’s montage of Bangkok is as much about fiction and media as it is about mass transit and highrise developments that change one’s perspective of the street. As a result of the urban infrastructure layered over streets, she finds a montage of audiovisual fragments. But in a significant way, these fragments of image traffic tap into a politics of the street by encouraging the reader to imagine what sorts of stories, beyond her own, may have unfolded there.
Fig. 1.2 Phan Fa Bridge in the Old City. February 2010. (Personal photo)
Fig. 1.3: “We are the same family.” (Personal photo)

Fig. 1.4 Restaurant along Ramintra Road (Personal photo)
Fig. 1.5 *A Day* “The best of Thai short films 1992-2001” compilation (Personal photo)
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION: THAKSIN AND THE STREET

Fig. 1.6 Old City | New City (Personal drawing)
Between 2001 and 2010, democracy in Thailand appeared sidetracked by two events. First came the election of former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in 2001 and the continuation of neoliberal opportunism after the Asian Financial Crisis. Thaksin’s modern and global appeal was highlighted in his popular campaign slogan “think new, act new”. But shortly into his second term, a second event occurred that signaled a conservative and traditionalist backlash against him: on September 19th of 2006, a coalition of military networks loyal to the Thai monarchy sealed Bangkok intersections and carried out the first coup since 1991. Thai street politics, conventionally understood, surged throughout Bangkok between 2006 and 2010 as a means of representing two sides of this national disagreement. This dissertation reconceptualizes this period of urban street politics using fiction, film, and the daily encounters they evoke. Hence, it reframes the political from the bottom up by demonstrating how Thai creative media remaps Bangkok beyond the limited duration of historical protest events.

These creative ventures emerge as political mobility, in the sense outlined by Michael J. Shapiro (2010), i.e., “genre-city relationships as they articulate the micropolitics of urban life” (2). This micropolitics, Shapiro continues, “is less ‘urban theory’ than an approach to cities that generate ways to think the political” (4). The micropolitical genres of Bangkok have directed me toward the real/reel distinction that the political theorist Jacques Rancière uses to discuss the politics of aesthetics. The “real” is a policy issue, a picture of the world that plays upon the presuppositions of the subject and their inclusion into a planned consensus: e.g., national unity, agreement, mapped boundaries, how a movie “should” end, and so on. Against the pre-designed discourse of
policy, creative media reclaims space and time by exploring its constraints and openings and how they make possible the movement of a particular image.

It is in the moments when the real world wavers and seems to reel into mere appearance, more than in the slow accumulation of day-to-day experiences, that it becomes possible to form a judgement about the world” (Rancière 2003: 9)

Fiction and film re-map the nation using “reel” routes. They complicate a presumed image linking to the global and national traffic of images outside of dominant institutional narratives. My own ethnographic encounters with creative media in Bangkok reeled into politics through film and fiction, a traffic of imagery comprised by a series of disagreements. My time in Bangkok led me to inquire into what is being “read,” who “writes,” how seeing and hearing reproduce power, and how these answers assemble the legibility of Bangkok within popular perceptions of the Thaksin era. To treat this question I have wired together a transdisciplinary toolbox from film and literary theory (Beller 2006; Bruno 2002; Crary 2001; Deluze 2004; Nornes 2008; Rancière 2006; Shapiro 2010), critical media theory (R. Williams 1977; Jameson 1991), urban geography (Askew 2003; Harvey 2003; Highmore 2006; Dorrian and Rose 2003), sound culture (LaBelle 2006; M. Chion 1994) and Thai Studies (Anderson 1986; Baker & Phongpaichit 2005, 2008; Klima 2002; Phongsawat 2005; Winichakul 1995). It is the links, as much as the methods, that help to articulate street politics.
Traffic and Maps

Thaksin, given a brief to solve Bangkok’s notorious traffic problems, suggested that he could achieve this in just six months. He apparently believed that a computerized system to control the city’s traffic lights—which are notoriously operated manually by traffic police, using far longer timings than international norms—could transform the situation. Unsurprisingly, however, Bangkok traffic failed to improve, and his earlier pledges were quietly forgotten. (McCargo and Ukrist 2005: 9)

It is a flexible and continuous mass, woven tight like a fabric with neither rips nor darned patches, a multitude of quantified heroes who lose names and faces as they become the ciphered river of the streets, a mobile language of computations and rationalities that belong to no one. (“To the ordinary man”, De Certeau 1984)

Contrary to buildings, which almost always belong to someone, the streets in principle belong to no one. (Perec 1997: 47)

Young men in red shirts then took over Sukhumvit Road, one of the city’s central arteries, directing traffic and sometimes stopping and inspecting cars before letting them pass. (Mydans 2010)
What about the street is political? In Thailand, the first question deals in whether to move backwards from 2006 to 2001, from ouster to election of Thaksin Shinawatra, or from 2006 to 2010, from ouster to the massive flood of Thaksin supporters in the streets of Bangkok. But outside of this Thai politics discourse, the question cuts between the various local spaces where planners, security officials, protestors, street vendors, students and numerous other groups mobilize, or are mobilized, on any given day in the city. The experience of the cityscape is highlighted in the significance of this question for Bangkok’s ordinary urban dwellers. George Perec, a student of the critical urban theorist Henri Lefebvre, was interested in the life of cities and its rhythms. Perec, like many Thai writers, observed the material signals of cities, and attempted to record what he called “infraordinary” phenomena: from stoplights that issue commands to a personal diary based on things a pedestrian empties out of their pockets at the end of the day. Infinite histories, he believed, could be based on this way of mapping the city.

The street, “which belongs to no one,” is mapped by many bodies in many ways. Streets lead to many possible places. Thai media helped me question my own inscription of Bangkok during a particular time: the books, the classes, magazine articles, interviews, art exhibitions, bus numbers, canal boats, and the protests. My own routes, as I began reading more and more Thai fiction, began to intersect with the perceptive descriptions of the city’s many characters. Perec wrote of these multiple viewpoints of the city, a multiplicity that is central to our understanding of it. The point, he suggests, is to acknowledge the density of imagery in a world were these images stream in contradictory directions: not unlike traffic.
In popular culture about Bangkok, traffic is far from an ideal condition for the formation of spatial perceptions. In *The Beach* (2000), Richard (played by Leonardo DaCaprio) heads to Thailand as a backpacker during the post-Asian Financial Crisis tourism boom. At the time, the devaluation of the baht translated into the exponential purchasing power of the American dollar. In Bangkok, Richard finds himself trapped within the stereotypical features of the Western city, and the congested and disordered nature of the Eastern imaginary. At night he watches Western films and moves through the streets where the only consistent feature is traffic. This is not exotic Thailand, but a nation mired in bad urban development. But Richard’s ideal image of Thailand, as the film’s trailer highlights, “must exist.” It is an exotic image of pristine beaches far removed from his, and everybody else’s worst nightmare: traffic and the inability to map Bangkok’s disorder. The development of this image comes to fruition when Richard stumbles upon a map, acquired from a more experienced British expatriate named Daffy. The map leads Richard out of traffic and toward the image that Western media has projected onto tropical Thai space. With the map, he does not need to experience the process of undoing that Bangkok poses to both national and global images of Thai space. This global mapping continues in the Thailand of Michel Houellebecq’s novel *Platform* (2003) all the way up to Todd Phillip’s film *The Hangover II* (2010).¹

The map is Western everyman’s guide to Bangkok, representing one of many methods where narratives of the ‘less-developed’ are accompanied by numerous attempts

¹. See also, Alex Chilton’s 1978 single, “Bangkok” (7” Lust/Unlust Music) which presaged the exotic devilism of Murray Head’s hit 1984 single, “One Night in Bangkok.” Chilton manages a critical overemphasis of orientalist mappings of Asian cities.
to make foreign space intelligible. The organization of its streets, from maps to other mediums, are always already a reduction. But they are also significant sites for looking at how power is assembled. In Bangkok, the streets exist as parts within the whole that Marc Askew (2002) has called the “post-metropolis.”  

The “post” in post-metropolis refers to several changes in the legibility of cities, such as the symbolic perception of financial, administrative, and residential variations of urban life. On several research engagements in Bangkok, I have attempted to “read” the city according to the expressions of its streets. I’ve found that the street is a common reference points for the relationship between creative political activities and urban dissections of the nation, especially in the re-mappings of Thai fiction and film. I began to read the character of the post-metropolis through these creative media forms, which served as markers of my own development in Thai language acclimation. At the same time, these mediums provided alternative perspectives on the politics of the street whereby protests, elections, media industries, and other institutions of power might be perceived through different points of access.

Between 2006 and 2010, government protests and governmental coups highlighted the street as a significant actor. Walking these Bangkok streets provoked my own thinking about un-“covered” political events that dissolve into the large-scale events of the evening news reports. The spontaneous mobilizations of people in Bangkok during this time led toward literal detours, u-turns, and distractions. Protests and institutional

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2. The concept emerges in Edward Soja (1989; 2000), who treats labyrinth cities like Los Angeles according to socioeconomic processes that alter previous spatial codes with new urban realities.

3. Edward Said (1981) treats the Western journalistic tradition in the double sense of understanding how stories are “covered”. On one hand to “cover” a story is to report an event, but it is also a means of overlooking another event. One story thereby covers another.
interruptions were much like traffic, hindering one’s movement through the city as one suspended in time. Jonathan Crary (2001) has noted that “suspension is also a cancellation or interruption” to perception, where individuals depart from the visual regimes that command their “attention” (10). In Bangkok, power and disruption in the street are irreducible to any single force.

Askew’s urban ethnography of Bangkok demonstrates how “landscapes of power” mediate the streets of Bangkok. This mediation allows people the ability to “understand the ways that people practice their lives and shape space and its meaning.” Institutions of power (like the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration or the politicians who wield policies through urban institutions of governance) shape these streets, but so too do urban subjects who influence the material manifestations of power in different parts of the city. Askew notes how power moved between different parts of the city between the late 19th and early 20th century, as a “new modern urban text began to displace the older text of the sacred city”. Here Askew is referring to the way in which the original core of power began to extend to southern commercial blocks and northeasterly suburbs through the construction of new roads. The city is thus perceived as a central “text” in the transition from modern to postmodern space because urban residents, like ethnographers who came to study the city, understood each part of the city

4. See Dorrian and Rose (2003). In this collection, John Dixon Hunt argues that media texts connect landscape with power by illuminating “the very physical places where the characters, events and actions of literature as well as life are represented as taking place” (123); see also Crouch and Malm who suggest that “the power of representing landscape is the power of the text, whether written, photographed, filmed or otherwise produced (Crouch and Malm 259).”
to hold a unique symbolic character. This character, like the interpretations of many texts, was rapidly changing.

One of the key modern texts in Thailand is the map, which arrived with the 19th century need to represent the visual existence of the nation in Western geopolitical terms. In other words, Siam (the original name for Thailand) became distributable as part of a civilized global order. This was in part because its territory was rendered manageable by standardizing space into a single image. As an image, this mapped territorialization comprises the first means through which Thailand could be trafficked globally. Thongchai Winichakul similarly demonstrates the role of the map in creating the ‘modern’ space of the Thai nation. He argues that by displacing older cosmologically Buddhist texts, the modern map reflected the appearance of the nation as civilized (Winichakul 1994). Askew reappropriated this national model to the level of the city to demonstrate, for example, how modifications to Bangkok’s modernist Old City and the global-expatriate influence on the city’s newer cosmopolitan landscapes moved urban subjects toward inexplicable forms of hybridity. Since the 19th century, the first road, New Road, was always perceived as a point of hybrid contact where merchants and corvee laborers walked near diplomats (Fournereau 1998). But the newer streets of the city symbolize monstrous consolidations of capital in places like Sukhumvit Avenue where foreigners inhabit new fashion boutiques alongside any number of adult entertainment districts. Older community models gave way to postmodern modes of individualism, shopping malls of consumerism, and what Askew calls the “micro-levels” of the city modeled on virtual communities of communication technologies. Askew found the Thai post-metropolis to be an intricately weaved and “multi-layered” text beyond any
“simple portrait of what the city is” (106). Bangkok is image traffic. The view comports well with Highmore’s (2005) point that the city is “anti-disciplinary” (vii), disordered by “the accelerating tempo of modern life” (144). If neoliberal leaders invested heavily in the organization of this disorder by monopolizing virtual communications technologies, the struggles of the street defy order.

But there is a certain threshold, a breaking point, at which this disorder produces new maps of the city. For example, Askew’s treatment of Wanich Jarunggidanan’s short story “Muang Luang” (“The Capital” 1985) serves as case and point. In Wanich’s story, the urban dweller yearns to return to the naturalistic images of the northeastern countryside, a nostalgia highlighted when a provincial (northeastern “luk thung”) folk song is abruptly sung by a fellow bus passenger while the two are stuck in Bangkok traffic. The rhythm of the post-metropolis is slowed by modernity’s malfunctions, but the bus rider’s reflections are illustrated through sounds and images superimposed over the actual Bangkok bus route. The audiovisual perception of the character, invoked in song memories and images from the past, wage a critique of the city and its construction of pollution-canopied skylines. This relationship between reality and its presentation, as Askew demonstrates, is “the promiscuous visual juxtaposition of past and present characterizing the postmodern urban landscape and symbolization” (105).

A post-metropolis is this visual juxtaposition between two times, as “The Capital” illustrates, but it is also a mapping of disparate global spaces—a bus that pieces the city together as it moves from part to part. Upon my first trip to Thailand in 2001 I had yet to read Askew’s prescient analysis of Bangkok as the post-metropolis. But my explorations of Bangkok’s streets in 2001 were heavily linked to the traffic of global images. This was
the year when I first arrived in Bangkok to teach English for a year, four days after the attack on the World Trade Center that year. While most of the U.S. was becoming insular, I was being propelled outward as a fragment of global traffic. I had read several travel guides, purchased maps, but had never been outside of the territorial United States. In the weeks previous my local Bronx-based video store provided me with a variety of movies that use Thailand as a backdrop, secondary “texts” which I assumed would assist me in prepping for the impending geographic transition. In the global-cinematic imaginary of Bangkok, Roger Moore rides through the city in a car chase in *The Man with the Golden Gun* (1974), jean-Claude Van Damme trains amid the streetless ruins of Thailand’s historic Ayuthaya in *Kickboxer* (1989), Claire Danes is tricked into signing a confession for a crime she didn’t commit at a Bangkok airport in *Brokedown Palace* (1999) and Leonardo DiCaprio waits at a congested Bangkok bus stop en route bluer waters in *The Beach* (2000). On a rooftop party in Brooklyn, a college friend, who had backpacked across the Thailand in the months previous, iterated that “there is nothing better than reading Alex Garland’s *The Beach* (1996) as you make your way from Bangkok to Koh Phi Phi,” the islands where the movie was filmed. For the characters of these films, the point was to avoid traffic and trafficking.

You can read thousands of books and watch just as many movies about any particular place whereby, from an English-language point of view, the streets of elsewhere are captured from the vantage point of someone simply passing through. Creative mediums map these communication routes. Abe Nornes sums up the fact that film is very much a part of global “traffic,” a concept metaphor that reflects back upon a street condition.
The Internet gets all the attention, but film prints have also moved around the world with remarkable speed, even within years of cinema’s invention. This trafficking in imagery expanded forcefully through broadcast television. Today, the global circulation of moving images is increasingly intricate and saturating, thanks to videotape, satellite television, VCDs, DVDs, and the Internet, not to mention in-flight movies and the ubiquitous video screens of our urban spaces (Nornes 2007: 5-6).

The above passage begins with the circulation of film in global traffic and ends with its entrance into “urban spaces”. The representation of urban space is ubiquitous because cities are transit points for most travelers and the sites that house the bulk of national populations. But the relationship between city and media begs the question of direct material encounter. How, in other words, does representation mediate the urban experience in Bangkok? This question became increasingly significant as I arrived in Bangkok in 2001, during the first year of the “reign” of Thaksin Shinawatra. This was a time purportedly evacuated of the political due to a ubiquitous and rejuvenated economy of neoliberal consumption.

**Think New, Act New**

My first memory of urban Thai space lies in an experience at the movie theater in 2001. Before the film, a five-minute montage of the life of King Bhumibol Adulyadej graces the screen at which time every audience member must stand. Since the 1970s, when laws like the 1942 National Culture Act were made retroactive to restore power to the monarchy, a montage film trailer of the “Royal Anthem” has been shown before every
movie in Thailand (“Punishments for” 2008). The montage assembles images of the king as grand civilizer in the provincial heartland and figurehead of the modern Thai Kingdom, previously ordered by the 19th century expedition of mapping. The cultural customs of power, in this way, become internalized as law through the act of looking. If, in the movie theater an audience member does not stand, other moviegoers are likely to report the act of dissent based on Thailand’s lèse majesté criminal code.5

In Bangkok, the practice of looking can be extended to time spent in traffic where traffic rarely ‘flows’ freely. This regular occurrence of traffic extends the time of looking, a circulation of free flowing objects later subject to control in the economy of images. According to Jonathan Beller (2008), cinema, painting, television, and other visual art forms freely depart from the status quo, before they are branded and commodified into the “attention economy” of spectacles. Cities are legislated by legibility, from billboards and to streets named after shopping malls, to stop lights and whistles. This “attention economy” connects individual and value in the sense that “[p]erception is increasingly bound to production”. To produce value is to perceive the proper spectacle, which Beller identifies as implicit to the aesthetic regime of late capitalism. Beller’s “economy of attention” helps to explain how the traditionalism of a short film might latch on to contemporary film economies of projection, but the frame eludes the historic visual production of older traditions in Thailand. The monarchical procession of power was built into the city during the late 19th century at a time when the collective was reinforced

5. For a recent application of the lèse majesté criminal code, see Yimprasert (2010).
by the individual production of the visual object. Looking was about attending (being attentive) to the demonstration of power, and of one’s inclusion with its field.

Today this regime of attention is more ubiquitous than ever, and functions in Bangkok not simply through a system of signs and images trafficked through movie theaters. As if witnessing an unexpected parade, the royal motorcade of yellow Mercedes proceeds through Bangkok uninhibited as police block intersections well ahead of time. The way the motorcade averts traffic to remain linked is not unlike the constellation of its political network. Duncan McCargo (2010) has recently indentified several idioms through which the monarchy filters into Thai politics. Official discourses call Thai government a parliamentary democracy (since the overthrow of the absolute monarchy in 1932), but McCargo finds the polity rooted in three terms: network monarchy, bureaucratic polity, and “royal liberalism.” The royal network consists of military, bureaucrats, prominent families, and various civil society representatives. Affiliates of the network make continual appearances at events so that the public remains aware of their political position. It operates through a large system of appointments, as these “public officials” check the new ideas of elected representatives—creating a ‘liberal’ façade of fairness. The monarchy can exist beyond its formal network through an economy of attention and gaze. The King has always been the center of attention, at least since the 1970s, but things were about to change. In 2001, Thaksin Shinawatra had just come to power with the anti-traditionalist campaign slogan “Think New, Act New”.

6. See Giles Ji Ungpakorn (2007). “The elite do not care much for either public healthcare or public transport. They can pass through traffic jams with police escorts, unlike public ambulances responding to emergencies (10).”
Against the “sufficiency economy” frugality that informed the King’s response to the Asian Financial Crisis, Thaksin encouraged a bravery to consume. He signaled all that was new: he was global. He was called the “white knight,” unscathed by the “contagion” of the Asian Financial Crisis (Thanaphaiboon 2005). Traditionally, Prime Ministers celebrate election victories by paying merit at their local Buddhist temples. But Thaksin, to celebrate his victory, drove his Porsche to a Bangkok Starbucks (McCargo and Ukrist 2006: 1). Thaksin was about consumption, but he was also about a “politics of the new” or, as Pitch Phongsawat (2005) wrote, a “politics of cool.” Dateline correspondent Ginny Stein noted “You could be excused for thinking he’s a rockstar. But this is Thaksin Shinawatra, Thailand’s Prime Minister” (Thaksin’s Thailand 2005). He was touchable (handshaking here, tears there), undermining the strict divisions between “the people” and “authority” so clearly demarcated by the visual regime of the Thai monarchy. Thaksin made the monarchy seem old fashioned, and inaugurated a new era of the nation by redirecting where and how people looked. He took command of public television (iTV), when its other part owner, the Crown Property Bureau investment portfolio of the monarchy, went into debt after the Asian Financial Crisis. He changed its content, from a 70 percent to 30 percent relationship of news to entertainment coverage, to a continuous line-up of game shows. This shift toward the entertainment spectacle symbolized larger attempts to streamline public dissent in the media during his tenure. Gilles Deleuze offeres a related point that “in disciplinary societies one is always starting again…while in societies of control one is never finished with anything” (Deleuze 1992: 5). Thaksin ensured the continuation of neoliberalism in Thailand by buying into ailing media institutions and eliminating the boundaries between nation and economy. While
academics critical of Thaksin question his modus operandi as “a means to an end” in the
“[opportunistc] pursuit of wealth and power” that McCargo and Ukrist (2005: 20) call
“Thaksinization,” more needs to be understood about the time: i.e., about the political
extensions of his ideas.

While Thaksin de-centered many other national assets and extended executive
offices by creating his own institutions, the real issue is that “think new, act new”
challenged conventional ideas about being political. Academic discourse about Thailand
in general, and Bangkok specifically, illustrates the period as one of political evacuation.
In one popular view, Thaksin represented a possible “deviation from the clear, promising
trends of the past three decades” (Montesano 2002: 99). Even the King critiqued
Thaksin’s anti-Democratic posture in Thaksin’s “lack of toleration for differing points of
view” (Ibid). Others saw Thaksin as a normalizing economic neoliberalism whereby
newness lay in his ability to “institutionalize money politics” on a “more regularized
stage” (Baker and Phongpaichit 2001). Democracy was being challenged by newness and
this was nowhere more apparent than at the level of the street. This is where things start
to get complicated. Thailand has a tradition of street protest at key moments, points
which (like 1968 in the American and French contexts) highlight key democratic shifts
(Katsiaficus 1987). These shifts, projected in major street events, illustrate a collective
and oppositional Left challenging a conservative “extreme” right authority. October 14th
1973, October 6th 1976, and May 1992 are the primary events that mark the climactic
points of a vigorous street protest tradition along a linear plotline in the national Thai
chronology. And, as Alan Klima (2002) underscored, the events are overshadowed by the
trail of dead bodies that these events produced. These markers close the past in the
commemoration of the dead, or reconvene an investigation in the search for the disappeared. These events are conceived as student uprisings, in the events of the 1970s, and a “middle class” mobilization in May of 1992. In each case, the masses converged on the royal core of the Old City and pressured the government for democratic openings. Many Thai Studies academics do a good job of categorizing who was involved (military, the police, the middle class, and commemorate key leaders who have changed sides many times since) without really underscoring why the protestors were “there” in that part of the city (Callahan 1998; Murray 2000; Klima 2002). Why were they “there” on those particular streets? The lack of such large-scale moments during the Thaksin era leads many to view post-1992 years as depoliticized and deprived of a properly-tuned vision. Instead of “who,” the question of protest in the Thaksin era would revolve around “where”.

The Old City, the historic area of early modernization, seemed pacified by the time I arrived. At Bangkok’s Thammasart University at the end of September 2001, the year Thaksin was elected, I joined a gathering of students and alumni to protest the U.S. and coalition bombing of Afghanistan around a rolled out banner that, in Thai language, read “We are all one family” (Figure 1.6).7 Two weeks later, on the other side of campus, a new memorial was unveiled as a national dedication to the October 6th 1976 crackdown.

7. In Bangkok, Buddhist monks arrived at a northern suburb elementary school for a special Saturday session, speaking with teachers about how the attack on the WTC restored harmony to a world of American greed. Brit-pop anthems like Manic Street Preachers “Baby Elian,” Doves “N.Y.,” Dido’s “White Flag,” and Coldplay’s “Politics” captured a certain degree of anti-American sentiment at the global level. The contemporaneous song “Very Good,” by Thai indie band Modern Dog, seemed to register the global anxiety of these post-9/11 themes that could erupt “anyplace, anywhere, anytime”. Anusorn Tipayanon’s London and the Secret of the Kiss, which is being made into a big budget movie as of 2012, is the first 9-11 themed Thai language novel inspired by the death of the author’s friend in the WTC.
on leftist students. During the same month, the Thai film *Moonhunter* (2001) was released in Bangkok theaters to the dissent of the 1970s period through the eyes of a “disillusioned” participant. This was the spirit of the 1970s superimposed onto the age of Thaksin. But across the street, in Bangkok’s largest open space, the royal grounds of Sanam Luang, street vendors sold screen prints of images from the 1970s events alongside t-shirts from a similar crackdown in May of 1992 that read “No more dictatorship in Thailand”. Bookstores released a variety of official textbook accounts. Politics had been absorbed into institutional narratives. But there were exceptions, places that spoke to the strange ways political traditions stay alive. In a northern Bangkok suburb, an outdoor restaurant along Ramintra Road commemorated the 1992 events with a centered “No more dictatorship in Thailand” mural. (Figure 1.7) But still, the key to interpreting the scene lay in who paid attention to the mural. History, in this way, did not unfold chronologically through time, but as a sporadic trafficking of images into various symbolic spaces. The Bangkok street, Ratchadamnern Avenue in particular, is the most significant site of political memory and of attentiveness. Away from the street, “real” politics, since 1992, seemed microscopic beneath towering skyscrapers, the Skytrain, and other symbols of the post-political post-metropolis.

This narrative of street politics ending in 1992, the same year that Thaksin came onto the scene by investing in media technology, seems to be more than coincidental. 1992 was the year the Stock Exchange of Thailand (STET) began trading, the year when the military exited politics after brutally executing scores of pro-democracy protestors—and thus no monstrous mobilizing force. In 1992, the Metropolitan Rapid Transit Authority (MRTA) was established to move Bangkok residents beneath the city (in plans
to build a subway)—in which case, solving traffic problems meant urban dwellers would never see political events (Khaothien and Webster 2000: 31). The Democratic coalition, referred to as “the angels,” led the 1990s through a period of “reform” (Murray 2000). And while the Asian Financial Crisis deflated faith in the neoliberal order, the survival of figures like Thaksin reassured consumers that vulnerability could be fixed by simply changing management. “Think New, Act New” highlighted this shift in management. But somehow, things change by virtue of a detour. This detour is the story I seek to illustrate in the pages that follow: this detour is a story of a political action of a different order, and the way it tuned-in the streets.

**Creative Thai Media**

Let me begin with Kongdej Jaturanrasamee’s film *Sayew* (2003). It is about 1992, the street, the videotape, and a certain part of Bangkok with which politics is usually associated. Before one can understand this film, or why it emerged in the Thaksin era as a flashback of 1992, or even why the streets matter, one must explain the development of the street as political.

With the rise of the Siamese nation-state, power was transferred from the Kingdom center of Ayuthaya to the seaside port of Bangkok. Power was concentrated in specific parts of Bangkok, the most significant being called Rattanakosin after its dynastic lineage. At the end of the 18th century, this royal-bureaucratic center of Rattanakosin was carved into an island, sealed off and inaccessible to the common person. In the 19th century, street construction connected the island core to other divisions
of the city for commercial purposes. The canal system, dug as a “military highway,”
extended the monarchical system of landholding nobles. They were “designed to open up
communications” in different spaces of the city, as Baker and Phongpaichit observe
(2002: 17). By the middle of the 19th century, the city was global and networked through
traveling merchants, “corvee” laborers, and a host of East Asian and Western expatriates
(Askew 2002). Westerners were there to sign treaties, while other forms of immigration
rose due to the entrepreneurial promise opened by these treaties (Askew 2002: 30). The
street soon replaced the river for as the primary site for communication. In the street,
monarchical processions displayed the national power of the governing elites in an
otherwise global city. When the monarchy fell to parliamentary democracy in 1932, royal
processions were replaced by popular street gatherings to commemorate national days.
Interrupting the royal procession with Futurist monuments designed by the military (and
influenced by WWII alignment with Axis powers) the street became a national symbol of
the people. From street processions to “new intersections” authority transferred from the
monarchy to the military. In the latter half of the 20th century, film, radio and television
replaced urban design as the key site for the transmission of national power in Bangkok.
Entering the street was the only way to contest media perceptions of the nation.
Sometimes the media brought people into the streets, as is the case in 1976 when
conservative radio hosts called upon rightwing youth to murder offenders of Buddhism.
In the 1976 case, a coalition of soldiers, “Neighborhood Scouts,” and provincial
volunteers called the Red Guar, stormed the Old City’s Thammasat University and
massacred scores of students (McCargo 1997: 34-35; Klima 2002). The violent event led
to a mass exodus of students, writers and artists from Bangkok to seek refuge in Marxist
communes in the jungles of Northeastern Thailand and Laos. At other times, people entered the streets to “see” the truth because television was censored, as in 1992. The Old City of Rattanakosin is the common denominator of the political protests of 1973, 1976, and 1992. Its symbolic sites mediate the memory of events in the same way as television and radio mediated communication. It was through this modernization of media, the ebb and flow between people and power, that street politics emerged as a primary site of contestation.

The Bangkok setting of Sayew thus arrives with significant baggage, particularly in its symbol of a videotape and its 1992 “Black May” backdrop. But now it is 2003, the age of Thaksin, a time to move forward, “think new,” rest at ease with existing historical chronologies as they periodically appear on television. The film thus critically engages the past through an abrupt exploration of unauthorized material: from a black market, a videotape brings to light what the protagonist has never seen on television. I have mentioned that Thaksin is perceived to have defused the power of media by purchasing iTV after it went into debt after the Asian Financial Crisis. ITV went on air in 1995 as a response to media reform campaigns that mobilized around a television “blackout” during the pro-Democracy protests in May of 1992. Due to government censorship of television at the time, no one saw the street protestors gunned down by the military. In the following days, a discourse of “Black” May 1992 would take shape through a new politics of creative media: the videotape. Military violence was being recorded in the streets of Bangkok even as “American audio and video industries” pressured Thai authorities to crackdown on illegal video duplication (“Bangkok urged” 1992). Days later working class video vendors flooded the streets with evidence.
The videos, entitled "Civil War in Thailand," are a mix of private recordings by hand-held cameras and broadcasts from CNN, NBC, BBC, and other news organizations. They have been a big hit among the Thais, who did not see the graphic scenes of soldiers shooting unarmed civilians on military-controlled local television. (Jones 1992: 5A)

In the same streets, and in the days afterward, the videotape averted the television censorship of 1992 and surfaced as evidence of military brutality. The creative medium of video transferred power from leadership and the institutional control of television to a new trafficking of images. These images, compiled from international broadcasts and amateur camcorder footage, were duplicated and pushed back into the area via bootleg video vendors.

In a manner that inverts Thaksin’s “Think new, act new” slogan, Kongdej Jaturanrasamee’s film Sayew (2003), returns to the streets of 1992 to contest the political filters and media ubiquity of the Thaksin era. The film’s primary motif is videotape. Sayew revisits the theme in 2003 to address the politics of media as “medium”. As Marshall Mcluhan (2001: 8) suggested, the content of the media is a distraction from the power waged by the ‘medium’ itself. Our attention should be focused on the way technology changes over time. It is how content is trafficked that matters, the movement and mediums that transition between the narratives of events. In Sayew the main character, Tao, stumbles upon the violent global images of a “snuff” film. Snuff is “exhibitionist,” whereby censorship is about obstacles to exhibition. Tao manages to evacuate these images from her permanent memory. The theme complements the Thaksin era of depoliticization by asking, implicitly, “what happened to Black May 1992”? But
while the film ends in the plot time of 1992, it shows that the primary obstacle to politics is the inability to look. Looking, a practice transferred from street to video, is the primary mode of registering and retaining violence. The videotape reveals what might otherwise be hidden, and that the duration of the political revolves around an economy of attention. All eyes remain on Thaksin because he conveys the image of a civilized Thailand in the age of global image traffic. Underscoring the modernity of the nation alongside the emergence of Thaksin, Pichan Thanaphaiboon (2004) rendered the following point:

One can’t deny that since Thailand faced the gravity of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, the prominent role of white knight was set for Thaksin Shinawatra. He administered over politics and the market all the way to the seat of the 23rd Prime Minister of Thailand, as predicted (Thanaphaiboon 2004: 1).

Phichan continues that Thaksin was responsible for “civilizing the Thai nation in every way” (1).

At the time of the Asian Financial Crisis, an influx of Western image entrepreneurs gained a foothold on the national Thai image. A music video by Jon Bon Jovi in the historic capital of Ayuthaya, and the Mortal Kombat film set in exotic Phuket, complimented the heavy-handed destruction of the southern Thai landscape by the Hollywood production crew of The Beach. Inside Thailand, organizations like the National Film Association of Thailand, the Amazing Thailand campaign, the Forestry Department, the Fine Arts Department mobilized a ground force of provincial mobsters
to silence opposition to this cinematic crypto-colonialism (Ing K 1998). In this climate, a few miles away from *The Beach* set, Apichatpong Weerasethakul waged a critique of civilization in his short film *Third World* (1997). The film initiates a process that will inform all of his more popular work in the ensuing years: a disjuncture between what the audience sees and hears, the blurred boundary between city and province in the age of urbanization, relations between migrants and citizens, and a transfer from images of leaders to narratives of the marginalized. But most importantly, the film elicits transparency by revealing how seeing and hearing are constructed. To be “Third World” is to be constructed from the outside, a process illustrated by revealing the soundman’s boom mic in the film’s first image. *Third World* is part of a larger project called *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000), which begins with a moving pan through the streets of Bangkok. As a hallmark of Apichatpong’s filmmaking, the films divert attention from

8. The Tourist Authority of Thailand, charged with revamping the tourist sector of the economy in the wake of a financial crash, invested nearly 4 billion baht. This incentive was designed to de-center the national image away from sex tourism and recenter it on the “backpacker” trail represented in films like *The Beach*.

9. Apichatpong Weerasethakul (a.k.a., “Joe”) began work with like-minded artists at Project 304, an art and video installation group in Bangkok and Chiang Mai, in the late 1990s while completing his first studio feature *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000). In 1997 he, alongside co-curator Grittaya Gaweepong began screening experimental and new wave films in the summer of 1997 (at the time of the Asian Financial Crisis) with the series title Kick the Machine, which became a production company by 1999. His second film *Blissfully Yours* won the Un Certain Regard prize at Cannes Film Festival in 2002, but was banned in Thailand due to explicit scenes. After his third film *Tropical Malady* won the Jury prize at Cannes, it came to Bangkok in the summer of 2004 and was screened at a theater burned down during a crackdown on street protests in 2010. Apichatpong’s growing global notoriety would clash with Thai cultural governance when his fourth film *Syndromes and a Century* (2007) was banned within a tense political climate only months after Thaksin Shinawatra was ousted in a military coup. While bombs were raging in Bangkok streets during May 2010, *Uncle Boonmee who can recall his past lives* (2009) took the prestigious 2010 Cannes Film Festival Palme d’Or prize. After a late arrival connected to visa complications, the director stood at the podium in France and stated publicly that the Thai government “is controlled by a group of mafia.” On that day, snipers and tanks were executing a crackdown on protestors in the streets of Bangkok.
national narratives by compiling the stories of the nation’s marginal characters: mobile Bangkok fruit vendors, a migrant worker from Burma, queered soldiers, and deaf school children. Like the videotape, these images challenged dominant images in an era of global image traffic.\textsuperscript{10}

Apichatpong’s work resists the national image in the same way as other creative media exhibitions. The Thai language magazine called \textit{A Day} (the “I Love New York” issue), which I purchased during my first month in Thailand in 2001, includes a collection of subtitled experimental Thai short films shot between 1997 and 2000 (Figure 1.8-1.9). The short film collection incorporated filmed landscapes into my expanding mental archive of Bangkok imagery as a material product of an emergent screen culture and as a sign of the city’s cutting edge independent film scene. The short films were also markers of global processes between the Asian Financial Crisis and the 2001 election of Thaksin Shinawatra. But at the same time, the films drew my attention away from Thaksin and into the street. In \textit{Bunzi Chaiyo, Episode II (The Adventure of Iron Pussy)} (1999), Michael Shawanasaï explored the Japanese production of Bangkok’s infamous Tanaya Street red light district, on one hand, and its profusion of Manga caricatures into urban Thai culture on the other (Figure 1.10). Additya Assarat’s \textit{Motorcycle} (2000) presents Bangkok from a distance. For example, the film shows, in one room, a telephone call revealing the death of a son in a motorcycle accident. In another room, men of the village are shown watching a television set that beams a Bangkok kickboxing match to

\textsuperscript{10} Films like \textit{Blissfully Yours} (2002) and \textit{Tropical Malady} (2004) would motivate the Thaksin administration to capitalize off this creative field with a new Ministry of Culture in 2002 and the formulation of an Office of Contemporary Art and Culture.
Thailand’s rural periphery (Figure 1.11). These films provided rare glimpses into the relationship between streets and politics by projecting the city from different angles: for example, the imagination of Bangkok from a provincial railroad track, the soundscape of an abandoned building, the hyper-sexualized streets of Patpong and Tanaya, and new televisual links between city and province. The films contrasted heavily with the attention economy split between Thaksin and the King, or of the spectacular street politics of 1973, 1976, and 1992. The collection also showed how medium of film might contest Hollywood versions of Thailand by using different parts of the city to pull apart the idea of a unified national image. These projects deflected attention away from the central images during the Thaksin era and toward an audience “which had grown up in the era of globalization” (Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 220).

The world of creative media seemed to invoke the newness of the Thaksin era against Thaksin himself by provoking new perspectives on urban space in Bangkok. This is why Uthid Hemamul’s 2006 novel Mirror | Reflection returns to the streets on the day of Thaksin’s election to redefine what politics is. The reader is drawn into a period between 1999 and 2001, between two very different lives of a character named Morn. Morn attempts to move past the death of a former love interest, a relationship he says is fraught with “personal politics,” and toward a New City life as a DJ. At a climactic point in the novel, Morn is stuck in traffic. Traffic creates a moment for the taxi driver to express optimism about Thaksin’s election. As a political opposition, likely the imposition of the author’s view onto the character, Morn states that politics is personal, not institutional, and asks the taxi driver to U-turn toward another part of the city. Morn’s change in direction is as much about symbolic identifications of parts of the city as it is a
split from fixed urban identity. Throughout *Mirror | Reflection*, Morn lives different lives in different parts of Bangkok. In the Old City he is a student of aesthetics, in the New City he is a DJ, and in the suburbs he is a lover. In different spaces he can reveal and conceal different parts of himself. Here, as in the past, the street is the liminal space where time is suspended and politics ‘happens’. The street connects the urban body with the pedestrian body through a protagonist that cross-cuts between past and present, between normal and marginal, by moving across different parts of the city.

The relationship between the streets and the collective effervescence of political events reach a perspicuous climax in Pinyo Traisuriyathammma’s 2010 short story “Cindy and Jang: an old road that brought us together.” The title symbolizes the journey of two characters who travel to an art exhibition on one of Bangkok’s oldest roads, Rachadamnern Avenue, where they are held-up by an anti-Thaksin protest in 2006. The title, “an old road that brought us together” includes the reader as part of “us” and links the historical symbolism of Bangkok streets as collective sites of political activity. All of these stories and films resist governed representations of politics in Bangkok, and enlist the streets to convey an alternative regime of sounds and images. They point to an ambiguity between subject and cityscape within in a field of experience that Giuliana Bruno (2003) calls the “streetscape.” The streetscape, not unlike what Ben Highmore refers to as a “street scene,” points to the way the body is mapped emotionally by the space of the street. If film provides visual point-of-view shots, the streetscape adds emotional viewpoints to the urban encounters of the pedestrian. Matthew Malsky (2008) notes that representing the “street scene” was central to the production of modernity’s alterations according to viewer participation in both optical and auditory urban referents.
As a reorientation of any synchronized image of space and history, these approaches to the street are heavily influenced by Walter Benjamin’s assertion that the creative energy of art is “of the street” (257). To cut through something is to renew it, and streets cut through cities. Creative media perceptions of the street during the Thaksin era, in this way, can be pursued as a critique of dominant national organizations of the city. But it could also been perceived in reverse: to use the street is to make divisions, disagreements, and incisions into out-dated aesthetic conventions.

The image traffic of Bangkok undertakes significant global dimensions in a variety of street scenes in the contemporary fiction of Prabda Yoon. During the Thaksin era, Prabda Yoon is the most visible writer, but also one focused on the relationship between cityscape and media representation. Prabda highlights the memory of an urban street in the short story “Purity of the Dead” (2005). The story is written as a transcript of a conversation between a 23 year-old girl named Jinnata and a fictional grim reaper sometime after her death from the bombing of her vacation-bound tour bus. The short story replays the event that led to Jinnata’s death and her relationship with her stepfather, who she had only recently met after being abandoned by him 10 years previous. Jinnata, however, diverts from the topic to emphasize her final thoughts as her bus passed through the fog over the Bangkok cityscape. The fog reminds her of early childhood memories, clouded by a memory of abandonment. Through the fog she recalls “open spaces” where buildings are demolished to make room for new developments. This is her final memory prior to the crash.

I sat looking out along the route. I was looking at empty green spaces. I imagined what might become of these empty spaces in the future, like the
place where I lived. Once upon a time it was empty as well. Along the entire bus route, I reflected. In the future, what will replace nature? It will probably be something that humanity has constructed. Homes. Factories. Shops. Or the road will be widened. Isn’t it possible that one day every global space will be man-made? I sat constantly thinking along these lines.

(Yoon 2005: 18-19)

The angel of death continues his inquiry. “What are your feelings about the event itself?” Jinnata responds with a virulent attack on television coverage that mediates terrorism by “providing instantaneous noise that quickly fades.” Jinnata represents “purity”, an innocent victim claimed between media and the street. The story represents a more recent brutality, as Alan Klima (2002: 66) pointed out in his telling of Thailand’s historic military crackdowns. Death in the streets of Bangkok is the nation’s most modern and decisive political feature.

The attention economy of the Thaksin era faced-off with the proliferation of creative media, and even literary critics seemed to play a part. In a strange coincidence, a January 10 2002 issue of the Far Eastern Economic Review that introduced Prabda’s work to the world as “the voice of a new generation” was pulled from circulation due to its “un-Thai” coverage of royal history (Figure 1.12). In a global world of national images, there could only be one face of Thailand, and Thaksin’s aspirations for managing this face meant eliminating competing images through censorship, banns, and blacklists. The society of control had not displaced the disciplinary society afterall. Creative media personalities were directly targeted and critical journalists became blindly complicit; they called into question the iconoclastic rejection of norms that Prabda represented. Critics
called his work non-political and materialistic, a far cry from the collective struggles of earlier political movements. In the various critiques, he was labeled as too postmodern, a child of globalization, and a deviation from ordered traditions of Thai literature. Even the Anti-Money Laundering Organization, established in the wake of the Asian Financial Crisis, pursued an investigation against Prabda under an act designed to eliminate “drug trafficking, prostitution, racketeering and crime syndicates.” Prabda promptly responded by stating a need to resist “silent intimidation” by building a “political conscience in the public” (“What’s in a name” 2002).

While I could not read these counter-narratives of Thai fiction in 2001-2002, due to inadequate Thai language skills, subtitled films like Goal Club (Kittikorn Liewsirikul 2001) projected, in a quick paced montage, a cosmopolitan urban youth synchronized to the metronome of the global city and the television screens which dictate the actions of the characters. In the one scene that visualizes a weekend excursion to a beach resort, the media literate urban teenagers hold a camcorder to each other to capture “real life”: “we’re making the Thai Blair Witch Project” (Yue 2001). The characters walk and ride mopeds through a variety Bangkok streets: near Old City canals, New City shopping districts like Siam Square, and other streets where they are routinely running away from something. Their realism, like the Runaway World (Giddens 2003), motivates them to indulge in new risks because they lack traditional forms of identity. It is captured by their proximity to the street like a camera consciousness central to the city’s newness under Thaksin. The film moves between rapid and slow motion, and between highway
underpasses and the musical soundtrack of a music video to address the rhythm of Bangkok at this particular time.\(^{11}\)

Numerous Western observers see such figures as mere byproducts of a decadent city. William Warren’s *Bangkok* (2002) cites the evacuation of a symbolic relationship between street and politics. With exotic allure, presaged by the likes of Joseph Conrad in 1898 or Somerset Maugham in 1923, Warren’s account chronicles the history of the city through European eyes, decadent and away from the modernist ambitions of its original design. The “ultra-modern city architecture…look stained, shoddy and graceless, a far cry from the elegant boulevard envisioned by Chulalongkorn after his visits to Paris and Berlin” (87). Warren evaluates new forms of urban movement, such as the Bangkok Skytrain, as a scenic field for exposing “those silent construction sites slowly rotting away in the tropical sunlight, you would never know that Bangkok had any more problems than it had had in the past” (101). If this is the New City, the Old City does not

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\(^{11}\) Prabda Yoon’s early fiction ranges from musical asides to commentaries on visual art, and raise the intersection of private character-based viewing, recording, and landscape encounters to the level of public awareness and reflection. In his most well known short story “Probabilities”, the 1st person narrator returns to the home of his childhood to collect his things following the death of his grandmother—who raised him in the wake of the death of his own parents in an automobile accident. In the story, the narrator produces a montage of images, which he reveals through his grandfather’s projection of old 16mm films for the neighborhood, his art school education, and the stifling of formative aesthetic ambitions with his executive position in the vibrant advertising industry. Alongside these optical scenes, the narrator reflects on the role of sound through his grandmother, who would play Mozart at high volume to compete with other neighborhood sounds, and eventually assumes the role of sound designer for community viewings of her husband’s 16mm films. It is the protagonist’s grandmother who finally disapproves of the narrator’s re-appropriation of the communal production of Dracula 16mm for a jawbreaker commercial at his Bangkok-based advertising agency. The death of the narrator’s grandmother haunts his present, forcing the narrator into a critical reflection on the role of creative culture in Thailand’s media economy where, contemporaneously, a new Prime Minister was brought to power through global images. Prabda’s critique conveys how that the contemporary subject produces images and must therefore reflect on their exchange in a new global assemblage.
fare better. The city’s oldest public space at Sanam Luang, “has become the haunt of drug addicts, homeless people and prostitutes, and much of the ‘life’ there is provided by tourists and students of Thammasat and Silpakorn Universities” (102).

For Warren, this urban decadence comprises the evacuation of political action. To lament the Old City is to lament they symbolism of Thai politics, which has, in the past, historically unfolded along the Old City setting of Ratchadamneon Avenue. Nearing a conclusion, Warren juxtaposes today’s younger generation with model mass movements in 1973 and 1992, when young students and middle class residents challenged dictatorship in Bangkok streets. Today’s youth, he confidently observes, are comprised by their “mobile phones,” “imitation Prada bags”, “baggy jeans” and “orange hair,” unlike a bygone era in which “there was another generation that was neither mute nor devoted to pleasure and that led a kind of revolution” (118).

Now the students (like those elsewhere) seem apathetic…They gather at places like Siam Square or in countless pubs and discos; they sometimes take recreational drugs like Ecstasy and amphetamines; they attend rock concerts and chat on the Internet.

(Warren 2002: 120)

Warren argues Bangkok’s streets have been depoliticized; from the Old City centers of neoclassical domes to the New City’s financial and shopping districts, Bangkok lacks politics. Writing around the time of Thaksin Shinawatra’s election in 2001, or perhaps alienated by expatriate social cleavages, Warren’s model of politics remained mired in an outdated era.
Creative media returned to the street, not as a street protest but a politics of the street. In the age of audiovisuality, dominated by prominent figures who circulate their image by commanding large media institutions, creative media heads for the streets as a capture of “real life,” or what Jacques Rancière calls “reel”. Their work is political in the re-presentation of political events as well as how they resist dominant narratives through fictional modes. Rancière perceives these configurations as a relationship between the reel and the real. At the assumed “real” level, national and urban institutions organize the street through mapping, screening, zoning, other kinds of projection manage and reorganize the city in response to political protests, architectural trends, voting strategies and so on. Hence, Rancière (1992) refers to these gestures of the real as “policy” issues. Literary recollections, film backgrounds, montage, bootlegged videos, and other media temporalities, are reel by questioning to presumed validity of the real. Creative media is a point of ambiguity between real and reel. I treat these works to call into question one reality of Bangkok, the “policy issues” that emerge around prominent figures, by dividing them into different reels. In the Thai context, these streets provide a literal and symbolic point of division. As I began my field research in 2006, a new economy of attention waged battle against both Thaksin and these regimes of creative media. In 2006, the military returned.

**Reclaiming the Streets**

By 2006, competing camps in Thai politics converged media campaigns with street protests movements in a manner unprecedented since 1992. The street campaigns seemed to legitimate the perspectives of each side by manufacturing the image of a concensus.
These yellow and red-shirted groups joined with the tradition of Bangkok street protest in the symbolic areas where they began, but quickly shifted to areas of the city that symbolized newness. These groups were led, even accompanied, by competing media markets. Thaksin lacked a moral defense in the attention economy of the yellow shirts, which framed their televised uprising as “Thaksin against the King” on Asia Satellite Television (ASTV). Sealing his demise, Thaksin sold off the nation’s largest media channel (iTV) to Singapore-run Temasek. These national faultlines led to the ouster of Thaksin on September 19, 2006 and to ensuing street battles between 2006 and 2010 among groups calling themselves the yellow shirts, the red shirts, the multi-colored shirts, the black shirts, the blue shirts, and so on. For many observers this ‘chromopolitics’ was a byproduct of media competition, where a simplistic mise en scene was employed for the purposes of identification onscreen (Murdoch 2009). While reputable sources saw these protestors appealing for the King to intervene (Kurlantzick 2010), the political movements subconsciously hovered toward the New City of Thaksin. This is a major point of Panu Trivej’s 2008 short story “The Phenomenon of a person that disappeared from the life of another.” A resurgent national traditionalism, since Thaksin, could be symbolized by the occupation of transnational hypermarket shopping centers, movie theaters, airports and fashion boutiques.

The initial 2006 street scene arrived as a military coup orchestrated by a group of generals in the name of Thailand’s ailing Monarchy. It was designed as an event to be viewed by all. Appearing to restore tradition to a modernized world of distorted signals and tangled wires, the “coup-makers” opposed the new media-oriented politics of Prime Minister and telecom tycoon Thaksin Shinawatra. The military attempted to produce the
image of mass approval for the coup by projecting, on television, streets lined with yellow-shirt clad loyalists and a storyline about the valiant king’s men (i.e., the military) rising up against the increased corruption of Thaksin.\(^\text{12}\) In the streets of Bangkok, the appearance of yellow-shirted loyalists was assembled to represent the displacement of Thaksin by the broadly supported military regime. On the morning after the coup, a Channel 7 news anchor on the “Saket Khao” program narrated images of the military procession through key Bangkok intersections stating, “This is a peaceful coup, not like in the West.” In cinematic montage, the news assembled different street activities across Bangkok to represent various gestures of support for the swift military presence. The soldiers, as the television programs showed, were effective in directing traffic.

Like the virulent opposition to Thaksin, the circulation of creative media images also met with direct confrontations from traditionalist institutions re-militarized by the coup. For example, Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s film * Syndromes and a Century* (2006) was banned by Thailand’s Censorship Board in the months after the coup. The film’s obvious mockery of Thailand’s regimentation of everyday life unfolds in several scenes that reflect on the way contemporary encounters coexist with Thailand’s three pillars of nation, religion, and monarchy. In one scene, the film’s protagonist is given a yellow t-shirt as a gift from his girlfriend, which he politely declines (Figure 1.13, Figure 1.14). In declining the yellow t-shirt, the protagonist has chosen to place his loyalties beyond or outside the nationalist/Royalist conventions of anti-Thaksin street protests (Figure 1.15).

That year the yellow shirt-clad Peoples Alliance for Democracy (PAD) called for the

ouster of Thaksin, but also aligned with the national tradition of wearing yellow to commemorate the King’s 80th birthday. Against the celebratory mood of the birthday festivities, *Syndromes* employs claustrophobic low-angle shots of royal statues, monks vocalizing their desire to change roles, and an urban coldness accentuated by soundtrack drone. Hospital workers are regimented into single-filed groups and ordered into several colors. A leader in the front tells them “Maintain your distance” (Figure 1.16). As the sequence continues, the procession of the hospital workers is revealed to be led by the monastic leadership of monks. The film itself is a *reel* version of post-coup life in Bangkok. In April of 2007, with the military yet to hand power to a civilian government, *Syndromes* was swiftly banned under and outdated censorship law from 1930. The law was originally designed during the period of Absolute Monarchy and specifically applied to halt the penetration of unauthorized global images into Thailand. In response to the ban, the director wrote the following lines:

What if I called my new film *My Beautiful Life Under Thaksin and the Military Junta*? Would they deem it a disruption of social order and ban it?

Apichatpong perceived the attack on his work as pressured by a post-Thaksin traditionalism, even as the filmmaker had consistently opposed the economy of attention outright. Since *Third World* (1997), his films catalyzed politics by underscoring the staged procedures of looking, and being seen, in Thailand.

Apichatpong’s *Syndromes and a Century* encouraged filmgoers, and film critics, to look at the post-Coup end of the Thaksin era as a regimentation of national roles. Nowhere would this turn more violent than on the streets of Bangkok. At the end of 2006,
bombs exploded simultaneously in four intersections across the city on the first New Years Eve celebrations following the coup.\textsuperscript{13} After expediting a new constitution and Internal Security Act, the military finally held national elections in December of 2007. But instead of moving into a new era, the Thaksin-aligned Peoples Power Party drew a landslide and used this mandate to move Thai institutions back toward Thaksin’s policies. In Bangkok, the yellow-shirted PAD literally ran officials out of government buildings. The PAD even occupied the airport to symbolize the closure of global traffic. And then, in 2008, the Red shirt clad United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) began turf wars with the PAD across the streets of Bangkok. Originally designed as a street protest ‘collective’ to counter the PAD, the Thaksin-aligned UDD seemed to provoke the return of the military each time they gathered en masse.

The red shirts, and those who they claimed to represent, benefited from the global traffic of Thaksin. They perceived the order of Thaksin as bypassing the feudal hierarchies of the nation under a symbolic monarchy. For many red shirts, Thaksin was seen as epitomizing modernity for all, which was worth fighting for. As the “battle for Bangkok” surged between the yellow and red shirts, traffic cameras served as a form of security surveillance. In the spring of 2010 the battle reached its climax. Traffic had been brought to a halt. Streets were sites of occupation and movement through the city was best accomplished by boat. I moved between the Old City and New City each day via the Saen Saeb canal, the pre-street mode of communication in Bangkok. Shopping malls, the beacon of neoliberal fashion, were shut down. All kinds of maps re-directed movement

\textsuperscript{13} See “Thai PM blames rivals for blasts”: “[N]ormal life has returned to the capital, with traffic able to move through areas blocked off by police after the explosions.”
throughout the city: televised security maps, maps for out-of-town protestors tacked onto trees, revised tourist maps in hotel lobbies, and the proliferation of art superimposed over historic walls of the city. The government put emergency laws into effect and the Center for the Resolution of the Emergency Situation (CRES) launched a national broadcast designed to tell Bangkokians how to negotiate traffic in the following week when the March 12 protests were scheduled to begin.

The March-May 2010 stand-off between so-called Thaksin supporters and the Thai military in Bangkok illustrated a geographical shift in political perceptions of the street, as the battles had moved from the Old City of Rachadamnern to the New City shopping mall district of Rajprasong Avenue. As in times past, the contest ended in a massacre of people. Thaksin’s institutional opposition, the unelected Abhisit government that followed the removal of the Peoples Power Party, ordered the military to fire on the protestors under the pretext of “Operation Reclaim Space”. To mask their intentions, they produced alternative versions of the events through journalistic, and national chronologies. They intended to reassure the nation of tradition, unity, and a status quo in one of the world’s most eccentric and volatile cities. Media sound bites unfolded as a reality decorated in fiction and contrasted heavily with people’s observations at street level. Government narratives of unity heavily contrasted with political encounters of the street in Thai films and fiction (e.g., in Citizen Juling [2006], The Truth Be Told [2006] Agrarian Utopia [2008] or short stories such as Panu Triwej’s “The Phenomenon of a person that disappeared from the life of another” [2008]).

My aim is to explore Bangkok in light of street politics during this time using a transdisciplinary mode of inquiry. On one hand this means complementing street protest
with a culture of the street that manifests its creative avenues of power. I do this through an exploration of fictional texts to examine how urban space is revised through the political dimensions of creative media. Over the past decade, the circulation of media in Bangkok has generated new images that fall outside the imagery of dominant power brokers, such as Thaksin or the Monarchy. As I have tried to express above, and as a direct result of the attention economy brokered by two competing political institutions, the creative resistance that follows is not easily noticeable. This begs the question as to how viable a politics of fiction is into the institutional realm of power. The dissertation began long before names like Apichatpong Weerasethakul were retrievable in most university libraries throughout the world. It is partly a response to the way political subjects are told their political avenues have been exhausted if they don’t wear either yellow or red. The dissertation attempts to make sense of the alternatives through ethnographic and textual analysis of the street in Bangkok from 2001-2010 with the realization of the limitations of textual readings of the city: for example, that mapping a concrete meaning of any text directs us away from the spontaneity of traffic, i.e., always transitional fields of everyday power. The regime of creative media helps to locate collaborations between the ordinary and the extraordinary, the links between claiming the street and being stuck in traffic, and the political metaphors that entail a relationship between streets and power. This dissertation is about dropping our maps, the comfort of disciplinary guidebooks, and heading into the uncertain traffic of Bangkok during the Thaksin era.
Chapter Organization

The chapters assembled here organize a temporality of the Thaksin era. I analyze media produced from 2001 to 2010 and significant political disruptions that resulted from Thaksin’s tenure as Thailand’s Prime Minister. The conditions of the Thaksin era gave rise to a new image of politics, a contradiction I illustrate through creative media in Bangkok. If Thaksin’s newness departed from old power networks in an economy of attention, it makes sense to address other practitioners engaged in aesthetics, visual culture, and the urban spaces where political subjects are most heavily saturated by imagery. Writers and filmmakers engage street politics as a triangulation of institutional, urban and creative processes anchored in the following chapters.

Chapter Two introduces Bangkok as a visual exhibition during the time of King Chulalongkorn and maps an urban semiotics by explaining historic shifts in the practice of writing fiction about the cityscape. I examine the Thaksin era shift by comparing the New City of Uthid Hemamul’s novel Mirror | Reflection (2006) and the Old City traditionalism of Pinyo Traisuriyathamma’s short story “Bangkok/Paris, Jang and Cindy: On an Old Road that Brought Us Together” (2010).

Chapter Three turns to the “Black May” 1992 street protests and military crackdown to connect landscapes of violence with videotape’s trafficking of memory. Specifically, the chapter shows how film, two novels, and a short story illustrates the circulation of history in the Thaksin era. The assembly of the past enlisted by these works projects a specific kind of consciousness I refer to as a reverse-chronology. I show how this reverse chronology works in Sayew (Kongdej Jaturanrasamee and Kiat Songsanant
2003), *Democracy, Shaken & Stirred* (Win Lyovarin 1995), *Time* (Chart Korbjitti 1995), and “Call From an Old Friend: Or, the end point of some things” (Uthid Hemamul 2008). These postmodern works shuttle backwards as a critical rejoinder to the way Thaksin-era media outlets reproduce the modern fictions of national chronology.

Chapter Four demonstrates how the televisuality of truth accompanied the modernization of media in Thailand by surveying Thaksin Shinawatra’s ownership of iTV, the televisual management of the 2006 coup that ousted him, and the aesthetic critique of documentary fiction that emerged among filmmakers, writers, and protestors in the aftermath of the 2006 coup. Pimpaka Towira’s *The Truth be Told* (2006), Uruphong Raksasad’s *Agrarian Utopia* (2000), and Panu Trivej’s short story “The Phenomenon of a Person Who Disappeared from the Life of Another” (2008) each confront the reliability of truth by capturing the mise en scene of Bangkok “street scenes” in 2006.

Chapter Five emphasizes soundscape, and illustrates how the sonic dimensions of film and sound design uphold and critique visual regimes of power. These dimensions were emphasized in the cultural governance of a “reconciliation” campaign in 2010, but also in the competing aesthetics of Thai Public Television and documentary short film since 2006. Specifically I compare the “policy” sound bytes of politicians after the 2010 crackdown on red shirt protestors with contemporary Thai film’s political appropriation of sounds of the street. Sound politics emerge as a response to barriers in listening.

Chapter Six concludes this creative media approach to politics by demonstrating the differences between media time, figural time, and street time in contemporary Thai literature and film. The chapter triangulates these themes by comparing the realistic
figures of fictional melodramas with the fictional attendants in the documentation of Bangkok. The chapter reiterates the stakes of the Thaksin era was one of a transformation from Old City to New city and a thematic attempt to reconnect with the street at a time when urban infrastructure builds toward the sky.

Each of the chapters works through the complex network of media screens and cityscape, a circulatory network for the reproduction of national pasts and the global present. Between the chapters I include several “montage” sequences in which I piece together images and transdisciplinary theoretical frameworks for the creative media analysis of Bangkok streets.
Montage 2: Cityscape

To make urban culture intelligible and legible meant policing it: encouraging particular metropolitan attitudes and outlawing others; bringing assumed ‘rogue’ elements under control; and planning a regulated form of modernization (Highmore 2005: 6).

The cityscape modernizes within a controlled field of vision. Architects, urban planners, governmental authorities, and artists each play a part in this mode of controlled exhibition. The urban plan of Bangkok’s Old City during its late 19th century construction was organized in such a way, like a book, to be read according to the intentions of a central visual design (Askew 2002: 286; Silapa & Wathanatham 1992).

National exhibition is also modernity’s key mode of reconstructing what does not necessarily exist (Berman 1982: 18; Lefebvre 1995: 1; Woolf 2008). In this way, the centering of Bangkok’s Old City core can be perceived as a national exhibition mounted to reassert the centrality of the monarchy against the rise of the bureaucratic nation-state in the late 19th century. Like a film, Bangkok developed through massive architectural and visual modifications to the landscape—modeled on earlier planning measures of George Eugene Haussmann that King Chulalongkorn had observed on a trip to Paris. Monuments, canals, buildings, and streets were assembled to ‘exhibit’ the symbolic presence of government. A modern city, in appearance, is a designed and legislated space.

As a departure from the Old City, the New cityscape must be read by its complexity rather than the wholeness of its image. As Fredric Jameson (1991) explains, the postmodern city challenges modern legibility, especially through the transmission of culture and ideology through mediums like literature, video, architecture, and film. Postmodernism becomes readable as a set of divisions, i.e., as a sequence of departures from a coherent design. Bangkok’s landscapes, from a modernist national heritage to contemporary global mediascapes, can thus be re-read through the proliferation of spaces post-dating its modern period.

One of Bangkok’s newer developments along Sukhumvit Road, the Queen Sirikit National Convention Center (QSNCC), exists as an exhibition hall surrounded by the city’s second largest public park. As a central site of Bangkok’s New City, it is clearly designed to orient contemporary social affairs around a new economic regime. Among other activities, it is home to the always-crowded Bangkok International Book Fair, the Tourism Authority of Thailand’s Thai International Travel Fair, and a host of weekly trade fairs. The building was completed for the 46th annual IMF/World Bank meetings, held in Bangkok months prior to 1992’s “Black May” protests. Alan Klima (2002) cites the construction of the exhibition hall as a key step toward building Thailand’s “New World Order” and a new regime of images for exchange within a neoliberal markets. To comport with the sanitary façade of neoliberal deception, Marc Askew (2001) notes that large partitions were installed behind the exhibition center in order to hide the slums from the exhibition itself: “new walls were constructed to obscure these unsightly habitats of
the poor” (139). From institutional to aesthetic commentaries on the city, Bangkok’s new world order could only be upheld by screening out parts of the cityscape.

The Bangkok International Book Fair is one of the QSNCC’s largest, and most anachronistic, exhibitions to date. Fiction writers, like those treated in the following chapter, rely on autographs, exhibition booths, and publisher activities to intermingle with potential audiences. The QSNCC, built as a meeting place for neoliberal diplomats, ironically distributes fictional texts that pull these illusions apart. These aesthetic exhibitions of Bangkok, redistributed through the contemporary screens of urban characters, juxtapose the modern system of urban design (the city as nation) with the postmodern age of media.
CHAPTER 2. ELECTION | EJECTION: A CRITICAL GEOGRAPHY OF THE THAKSIN ERA

Fig. 2.1 Pedestrian routes through Bangkok fiction (Personal drawing)
The Thai Rak Thai party won by a landslide, making Police Lieutenant Thaksin Prime Minister. The taxi driver told me that this Thaksin guy would solve the economic problems left behind by the previous administration. No need to worry about corruption. Rest easy, he held, Thaksin is already loaded …No! I won’t speak of politics nor will I think about it! (Hemamul 2006: 222)

Jang talked as he walked, slowly into Rachadomneun Nok Avenue where they reflected on the next destination. They came upon a stage of a group of Thais protesting for the removal of their government.

(Traisuriyathamma 2010: 75)

**New Road-Old Road**

Contemporary maps of Bangkok streets in fictional accounts of the Thaksin era are exceptionally political. These maps emerge because former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra provoked a new kind of politics, and contemporary Thai literature responded to the time with a critical urban geography of this newness. The above two passages, from a novel and a short story, bracket the highest and lowest points for Thaksin Shinawatra, the Prime Minister of Thailand between 2001 and 2006. Uthid Hemamul’s
novel *Mirror | Image* (2006) takes place at several points in the life of its protagonist, Morn, who undergoes a shift in political identity while riding in a Taxi cab near the expanding edge of Bangkok’s central core. Morn cues the reader to the era: it is the day of Thaksin’s triumphant election in 2001.

On the other side of an era, Pinyo Traisuriyathamma’s short story “Bangkok/Paris, Jang and Cindy: On an Old Road that Brought Us Together” leads the reader to the “Old Road” of Bangkok where, in 2006, the Peoples Alliance for Democracy (PAD) call for Thaksin’s resignation. Between 2006 and 2010, both works surfaced as Thaksin’s afterimages, impressed upon the national memory through experiences of the street that marked the shift from Old to New City. These works center the everyday politics of this collective memory, which call into question prevailing assumptions of the “passive” urban dweller during that time.

As a *palimpsest*, the city exists at this intersection of intended design and everyday re-readings of its landscapes. For example, David Harvey (2003) compares the Georges Haussman’s 19th century “rational planning” of Paris with Honoré de Balzac’s contemporaneous literary mapping to the same city. As a city “available to all,” Harvey emphasizes Balzac’s anthropological layering of Paris beyond the intentions of urban planners: “Check the city out, he often advises, and figure things out for yourselves” (47). As much as Harvey’s “critical geography” attends to the old cities of Europe, he is no less attentive to the fluidity of urban newness distributed by global economic processes. Such processes decenter the intensions of modern designs with new forms of “relational space” (2006: 123). Harvey points out that fixed space made private property possible in its measurement of territory (the locus for “states, administrative units, city plans and
urban grids” [121]), but that post-Einsteinian relative space “depended on the frame of reference of the observer” (122). Urban fiction about Bangkok relies on these pedestrian observations to highlight plural points of access to the city, its past lives, and travel between different parts of the cityscape.

Since the late 19th century, the development of Bangkok has been perceived as a culturally governed desire for order. The desire attempts to manage a geographic and infrastructural center. In this sense, urban design can be understood as the city’s first “modern” media. But like media, the design has changed to incorporate new communication routes between parts of the city. In 1862, King Mongut connected the monarchical core, known as Rattanakosin Island, with an expanding commercial zone of new immigrants (expatriates, diplomats, corvee laborers, and merchants of neighboring countries) by constructing the New Road. This commercial artery, named Charoen Krung (“prosper the city”) led outside of Rattanakosin Island where bureaucratic and political administration was centered. It was electrified in 1895, for the purpose of running windowless tram cars toward an expanding business core 6 kilometers south (Warren 61; Fournereau 1998: 43). Lucien Fournereau’s 1892 account highlights the New Road as a site of global cosmopolitanism, ranging from numerous Southeast Asian mercantile groups to Western diplomats. Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit (2005) also call attention to Bangkok at the time as a “cosmopolitan population” that “throng the streets”

14. The central royal core was settled in 1782, with Lao/Isan and Cambodian corvee labor brought into the new city in 1783 to dig the Banglumphu/Ong-Ang Canal between a northern and southern section of the Chaopraya River—the equivalent of approximately a 30-minute walk. This addition effectively connected the monarchical central core with an outer bureaucratic zone that would be developed by King Chulalongkorn in the late 19th century’s modernization policies. Once known for its sparse forests and cow pens, the area has been through numerous revisions; see, Sinlapa 1992: 115.
In their account, as in Fournereau’s, new streets seemed to threaten the order of the city as havens of prostitution, gambling, disease, and all manner of social decay. As a reflection of the first sign of other global cities, movies warned “Bangkok will become like Paris” (103). But the so-called scare was more likely an affront to the growing decentralization of power.

Bangkok did, indeed, become like Paris from the perspective of urban design. Shortly after returning from a tour of Europe in 1897, King Chulalongkorn ordered the construction of a new artery through Rattanakosin Island (hereafter referred to as the Old City). The king was impressed by what Marc Askew (2002: 36) calls the “global urbanism” of European cities, and he paid particular attention to the arrangement of streets. He brought back cameras, film projectors, and renewed urban perspectives that, in the 1890s, underscored the importance of the city’s look and feel. The cameras would help to command the attention of urban audiences by directing the point of view. Jonathan Crary (1990) so notes that 19th century visual technologies “involved the arrangements of bodies in space” and “were techniques for the management of attention, for imposing homogeneity, anti-nomadic procedures that fixed and isolated the observer” (18). This visual logic simultaneously materialized in concrete planning measures. Bangkok undertook characteristics of the Western city by extending the Royal-bureaucratic center of the Old City through a new avenue modeled after Paris’s Avenue des Champs-Élysées. This artery consists of an eastern direction along Rachadamnern Avenue (which means “royal procession”) and turns northeasterly along Outer Ratchadamnern Avenue. This “modern” plan, Warren (2002) notes, was more a “well-planned” exhibition than an everyday network of routes. But since the late 19th century,
the structures were neither “dated” nor globally “placed,” but a cinematic corridor to many entangled worlds. The additions to the landscape during this period directed visibility, but also assured that space in Bangkok would be understood first and foremost at the level of the street.

The earlier construction of the New Road that ran south was different from the northeasterly extension of Ratchadamnern Avenue, which soon became the Old City’s most important royal street. The northeasterly Outer Ratchadamnern Avenue extension signified an order that contradicted the cosmopolitan chaos of the commercial artery. British fiction writer Somerset Maugham observed the Outer extension as both “well-planned” and contrived:

There is something stagy about them, so that you feel they are more apt for court pageants than for the use of every day. No one walks in them. They seem to await ceremonies and processions. They are like the deserted avenues in the park of a fallen monarch. (Somerset Maugham 1923, in Warren 2002: 68)

These road constructions, or oppositions between different street perspectives, materialized the visual “spectacle of civilization and progress” (Askew 2002: 31). Not only did the King adorn Bangkok’s inner core in the Romanesque domes of neoclassical architecture amid panoramic vistas he’d witnessed in Eugene Huassmann’s revitalization of Paris during the 2nd Empire, but developed urban perception in Bangkok through the exhibitionist strategies of these visual reforms.

By the end of absolute monarchy in July of 1932, three decades after the redevelopment of Bangkok’s exhibitionist inner core, a military dictatorship came to
power. The symbolism of absolute monarchy and Western recognition gave way to other aesthetic regimes where, layered into Old City to this day, futurist (i.e. “triumphalist”) monuments designated the emergence of a new order. Mew Aphaiwong and Corrado Ferocci commissioned the Democracy Monument in 1939 to impose a new relationship between the government and the people. Unveiled on the nation’s inaugural Constitution Day, the monument contains eight murals, depicting various associations between the constitution and soldiers. The primary aesthetic theme is political: away from the absolute monarchy (or by appropriating its symbolic power), soldiers enforce authority. Rachadamnern Avenue, the previous site of the royal procession, had been interrupted by the construction of the Democracy Monument at its center point. For such processes, the Situationists reserved the term détournement, referring to a departure from “preexisting aesthetic elements” with a new “milieu” (92). The streets thus became the primary site for interruptions of power. It was often anticipated that these kinds of street politics would perpetually return to Ratchadamneon Avenue, where Monarchical celebrations, national protests, and the country’s first McDonalds intersect. Afterall, the Old City remains the site of symbolic authority and political resistance, even as the New Road and Outer Rachadamnern Avenue broke away from this symbolic core over a century ago.

Protestors during 1973 and 1976, rising against the Old World Order of Cold War era Thai military dictatorships and American military bases, clogged this symbolic artery.15 Upon the emergence of a “new world order” where neoliberal politicians grew wary of

15. Benedict Anderson (1986) narrates this geopolitical story through Thailand’s Marxist tradition of social realism. Literature should be collective, and the city could be symbolized as a site of collective protest. But as the Old World Order ended, literature detached itself from that model of collective politics symbolized in the Old City.
state control and military dictatorships, new urban perspectives also emerged. These perspectives de-centered the image of politics by de-centering the image of the city.

Throughout the 1990s, a new city developed around new parts of the city. Royal City Avenue was constructed in 1991 to center nightlife entertainment activities. The Queen Sirikit National Convention Center (QSNCC) was built in 1992 to host an annual meeting of the International Monetary Fund. In 1999, the Bangkok Transit System opened its Skytrain near Jatujak, Southeast Asia’s largest outdoor “informal market.” By the time of Thaksin’s election in 2001, the Old City became old news as a historical coordinate for relationship between street consciousness and political events. The “reel” action had moved to other parts of the city.

**New City: Uthid Hemamul’s Mirror | Image (2006)**

Pedestrians along the street appeared as though they were shooting a movie or music video (but none saw a camera or film crew). (“A Starless Sky” [2005: 177] Thinakorn Hutangkul)

The landscape of the city ends up interacting closely with filmic representations, and to this extent, the streetscape is as much a filmic “construction” as it is an architectural one. (Bruno 2002: 27)

Royal City Avenue (RCA) was constructed in 1991 as an outdoor shopping district and nightlife hub of Bangkok’s 20-something crowd. It appears as the backdrop for various
In Writings On Cities, Henri Lefebvre observes, “the city is an ouvre, closer to a work of art than to a simple material product” (101). Levebvre purports that people of the city produce it because, as an ouvre, it invites their participation. This theme holds direct relevance to urban artisans like Uthid Hemamul, who took up fiction writing after receiving his BFA in painting from Silapakorn University in Bangkok’s Old City. The pen, he claimed, was more economically feasible than paint and canvas. He seems to ask how the environment, dispositions, and events in cities develop a mobile map of urban space. Deron Albright (2003) and Giuliana Bruno (2002) have developed this conception of mobility according to the Situationist concept of psychogeography. Psychogeography conceptualized alternative assemblages of the street as a transformation from topographic space to the spatialization of emotion and affect. As it pertains to artforms like architecture, literature, and film, Uthid Hemamul and Pinyo Traisuriyathamma parallel the intimate urbanity of other Thai writers like Thinakorn Hutangkul, Pinyo Triwej, and Panu Triwej, who cross-cut the psychogeography of Bangkok using the techniques of other contemporary mediums like film and art exhibition. They employ ruptured jump cuts through the city alongside its eclectic soundscapes to connect questions of urban
perception with national developments. They are particularly interested in reflecting the way contemporary mediums record images of urban life. This urban imaginary exists as a psychogeographic interplay of zones that Giuliano Bruno refers to as the “streetscape.” Bruno collapses architecture, film and literature into “an art form of the street, an agent in the building of city views” (27). Uthid’s development of cinematic techniques draws inclusion into Bruno’s approach. From the street, characters map politics, which Bruno reads as an “atlas of emotion” waged against the official governing of space. These characters exist in what Bruno calls the “geopolitical substance of ‘transport’ across mapping and film” where the street operates as a liminal zone between different symbolic parts of the city. This liminal zone places character transitions on par with national shifts, which, in the following stories, unfold on the streets of Bangkok. The difficulty in reading these stories lies with their disorder, through flashbacks and flashforwards that call our attention to the different times of the city as they are experienced by these characters.

One way to connect contemporary media with a critical geography of the street is to observe the ways artists organize landscapes into a disconnected cityscape. How, in other words, should these streets be understood? Martin Lefebvre (2006) notes that landscapes in film are usually relegated to setting and background, which seem to minimize their presumed significance. But beyond the storylines, these landscapes appear as “reservoirs of verisimilitude” by recognition and the possibility of having been there. It is “reel” but not real, since this sort of filmic encounter with a previously encountered place is, Catherine Russell observes, “thoroughly penetrated by the apparatus of vision—the camera, the gaze, the frame—and the technologies of visual culture” (150). However,
transportation systems, the windows of tall buildings, and other positions that overlook the city, compliment cinematic framings of the street. Film and landscape, and filmed landscapes, design possibilities for experiencing the street.

The use of film framing to provide a political commentary of the Thaksin era saturates the images used in Uthid Hemamul’s description of Bangkok in the 2006 Thai-language novel *Mirror | Reflection* (2006). The novel presents Bangkok as mixed up, which is the common presupposition of even first-time tourists. But the novel maps this disorder against a desire for order that has been programmed into the design of the city. The temporal setting of the protagonist is familiar to the Thai-language reader as a period marked by the resurgence of a proficient global city, after the Asian Financial Crisis, at the time the election of telecommunications tycoon Thaksin Shinawatra in 2001.

Uthid has produced a corpus of literary criticism on the works of other Thai authors. In treating the work of his contemporary Kittiphol Sarakanonda, for example, he observes the way landscape acts upon character perceptions of themselves and the author’s construction of the story.

> The landscape gradually creates their lives with the story and a diverse set of fragments until, ultimately, they discover their own destination.

(Hemamul 2009: 91)

Uthid’s emphasis on the landscape resonates in one of the early episodes of *Mirror | Image* as the protagonist, Morn, leaves Bangkok’s most prestigious art school, Silpakorn University via bus from the heart of the Old City. Traffic keeps the bus at a disordered and untimely slow pace, which provides the source for his mental reveries. As a reading methodology, this relationship between what he says and where he goes provide the key
for translating the remainder of the novel. The French philosopher Giles Deleuze underscores this connection between artistic works and a politics of movement:

Movement is a translation of space. Now each time there is a translation of parts in space, there is also a qualitative change in a whole. (Deleuze 1986: 8)

The rhythm of the novel is moderated and disrupted by movement through the street, a rhythm which jumps between two different lives of a post-collegiate disc jockey named Morn. He calls himself a metronome, but sees with cinematic perception: slow motion, the quickened pace of episodic montage, or tied to soundtracks. He reads romantic literature and envies the life of ascetics, but promotes nightlife that encourages mass conformity. He refutes politics but then resigns to the existence of a politics at the everyday level. He aspires toward the difference implicit in his love affair with a transgendered girlfriend, but ultimately forges a normative heterosexual relationship at the end of the novel. In all cases, he is a contradiction. The novel raises questions about his movement between these worlds, and does so by illuminating the routes he takes through the city.

The most significant dimensions of Mirror | Image are weaved into two narratives, which the reader follows by cross-cutting between alternating chapters. The novel’s opening sequence finds an Old City-based artist returning to a relationship with a suburban-based transgendered woman after a two-year hiatus. Alienated and in search of artistic inspiration, this artist views the world through the lens of literary personalities abstracted from romantic and modernist literature. His sexual preference is ambiguous, or propelled toward the experimentation of an aspiring artist, which seems to motivate this
reunification with his transgendered foil. However, his attempts to ‘enlighten’ her through various forms of contemporary global high-art in music, books, and dining are largely resisted. This story, contained in the novel’s even chapters (1,3,5…) guide the reader through Bangkok according to the everyday lives of these two characters some time around 1999.

Meanwhile, another story unfolds in the odd chapters (2,4,6…) set along Royal City Avenue (RCA), a popular nightlife zone for hip Bangkok college students and young professionals. The avenue is regarded as a ‘mainstream’ social enclave of middle class hip and a government designated “Entertainment Zone”. Unlike other areas, the street is easily accessible from Bangkok’s nearby sprawling northern districts that include Lat Phrao and Huay Khwang. RCA predates the distinct high culture dance clubs of Thong Lor’s “high society,” but postdates the post-GI beer gardens of Sukhumvit Road. The street represents the New City from the perspective of the not-quite-formed identities of disenfranchised youth after the Asian Financial Crisis. In RCA, Morn (nicknamed “Monster”) has recently gained employment after finishing art school some time around 2001.

In parallel montage, the novel cross-cuts between these two different stories that seem to be about two very different male characters, but in a third section breaks down to reveal we have been reading two different points-of-view of Morn. This transition into a third section, where Morn’s new identity is produced, arrives at the moment Morn learns of the election of Thaksin, at which point he demands that his taxi driver turn in a different direction. Like all new roads in symbolic sites of Bangkok, a change in direction signaled new political moments.
But before getting to how this national political event raises an urban intersection for psychogeographic purposes, the author deploys several characteristics of the Bangkok. First, Bangkok is itself “otherness,” whereby the encounter of mobile characters with new conditions threatens urban legibility. At the outset of the novel, especially between chapter 3 and 5, Uthid explores the surfaces of Bangkok in 1999. The verifiable qualities of the urban landscape here appear through actual bus line numbers and routes, street names, and city districts. One of the reasons these place names are allowed to appear so distinctly in the foreground is that we don’t yet know the names of the characters (this is not apparent until the final third of the novel). Their anonymity form a counterpoint to the reader’s familiarity with the streets of Bangkok. The landscape is the focal point of the story. Where all is anonymous, the streets direct the reader toward particular points of specificity.

In 1999 Morn lives with a friend on the Western side of the Chaopraya River, not far from school. He sleeps through lectures and lacks the creativity necessary for artistic productivity. Lacking the necessary inclinations to finish art school, he rekindles an old highschool relationship with the transgendered Katha, who now lives in a high-rise apartment building in the Bangkok suburb of Rangsit. Attempting to reboot the relationship, they meet halfway at a coffee shop at the Lat Phrao edge of the city. This is key. With Katha, Morn is exploring a different part of a city just as he is experimenting with an alterior self. In this part of the city, Morn overhears stories of traffic accidents

16. See Uthid Hemamul (2009): “the city looks at them as the ‘other’. They look at the city as the ‘other’” (92).
and the fatalities of urban development finally transacted in the death of Katha.
Terminating this phase in Morn’s life, Katha leaps to her death from the skyward
 cathedral of a neoliberal high-rise.

Morn resists otherness in the suburban outskirts of Bangkok, in part by preaching
Old City “modernist” values onto Katha. For example, Morn bombards Katha with
Herman Hesse novels, alternative music recordings, and other modernist tropes of an Old
City education at Silpakorn (which are derived from the author’s own autobiography).
Failing to convert to these “core” values, he decides to take her on a trip to the Old City
itself. In a taxi, Morn and Katha map the path from the Rangsit suburbs back to the Old
City where, getting out at the Western backpacker enclave of Khao San Road, they walk
to an Indian-Thai flavored restaurant Roti Mataba—signifying the diversity of a century
old Muslim community-run restaurant across from the Portuguese-styled Phra Sumen
Fort. It is closed, so they venture further down Phra Athid Road to the bohemian-imaged
Hemlock Restaurant. Once inside, the restaurant speakers play the soundtrack to Cinema
Paradisio over their conversation.

These events draw sharp distinctions between different parts of Bangkok, but they
also explore uneven relationships of power in the development of a proper urban
perception. Seeing himself as an extension of the Old City core Morn is dumbstruck by
articles about Katha’s death as they emerge in local newspapers. In these reports he is
nowhere mentioned, and perhaps a relic of a Bangkok past that is no longer relevant in
the present. Morn saves and recites these media clippings at the end of the novel. The
clippings form a media archive that can be stored away and deleted to make room for
another phase.
The novel’s second story is therefore about a transition into new city rhythms, two years later, through post-collegiate life in RCA. After reconnecting with an old friend he is offered a job as a DJ at a bar called Brown Sugar. There he muses about music, generational difference, and how these rhythms operate as an extension of his experience of the city. The rhythms are oneiric and only ethereally present, catalysts for a succession of real and unreal states of Bangkok life. Unlike the previous episode, the RCA story unfolds in Morn’s 1st person point of view so that the rhythms exude an ambiguous and ruptured self-image. In one instance, these rhythms drive him into an imaginary dream as he walks along the sidewalk (away from the city) on Petchburi Road at night. The image is of a girl he had previously met that night, of a “boisterous” girl from Brown Sugar.\textsuperscript{17} She is more a foil to Katha than Morn, but it is impossible for the reader to calculate this opposition at this point in the novel. The image brings the streets in line with his marginal position within an ambiguous sexual order. Continuing down the sidewalk, he imagines himself inside her car.

“Monster. Monster.” Her voice reverberated like a Dolby Surround System from one ear to the other, each wavelength in tempo with the vehicles along the street. I lowered my head and walked onward, one more sound to a despicable story, loud, sonorously reverberating from out of my chest. (115)

\textsuperscript{17} While are numerous translations for the Thai equivalent such as “boisterous” and “mischievous.” Perhaps “confident” is the best fix in the context of the story.
Morn registers the streets through an imagined soundscape. The present is blurred by a past not yet accessible to the reader. Morn’s oneiric fantasy is in the street, where the city has always been ordered.

But at another level, Morn’s oneiric filter renders his observations, though interesting, unreliable at best. When Morn enters the red light Nana district of Bangkok described in chapter ten he observes, “for me it was like dropping into a scene from a David Lynch film” (173). Nothing is certain. And though he seems to welcome Katha’s sexual alterity at one point in the novel, he ultimately enters the dominant social order of heterosexual normality at the end of Mirror | Reflection. Many Thai readers are understandably put off by this conclusion. But this is not the only politics of the novel. The politics of the street I’m drawing from Mirror | Image is infrastructural according to the movement of pedestrian bodies. It is not simply the micropolitical pursuits of Morn, nor the macropolitical narrative events that highlight the political processes that drive characters from one part of the city to another. It is the interrelationship between micropolitical and macro-mapping, between the election of Thaksin and the places Morn goes, that dictate the political as a rhythmic pulse at street level.

The novel reaches this political shift, expressed in urban geographic terms, between chapter 12 and 13. As a personal politics, between to individuated divisions of sexual marginality and heteranormative normality, Morn realizes the contradictions of his past with Katha, and his mainstreamed life at RCA. This point of uncertainty is highlighted in the novel’s most perspicuous political event, the day of the election of Thaksin Shinawatra. The political theorist Thomas Hobbes (2000) observed that individuals, if dissected, illustrate mechanical and audible constructions “with engines
that move themselves by springs and wheels as doth a watch…For what is the heart, but a spring; and the nerves, but so many/strings” (265). The allusion between political subject and a metronome rings similar to Morn in 2001, who compares his identity-in-transition to a time bomb waiting to explode. Uthid enlists this concept of a metronome to juxtapose his protagonist’s position as a club DJ with the mechanical ordering of a national body. In the proceeding scene, Morn’s private reflections on Katha (which he refers to as “personal politics”) clash with his taxi driver’s uninvited commentary on Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra’s 2001 landslide electoral victory. Morn had entered a taxi in order to visit RCA, symbolic of Morn’s present temporality. Though the taxi is heading toward RCA, all that is new about Morn, a conversation about all that is new about Thailand turns him toward an attempt to grasp the past.

The Thai Rak Thai party won by a landslide, making Police Lieutenant Thaksin Prime Minister. The taxi driver told me that this Thaksin guy would solve the economic problems left behind by the previous administration. No need to worry about corruption. Rest easy, he held, Thaksin is already loaded. I listened to this story about wealth, which spoken as a sort of morality, confused me about how the two could be mixed. I remained silent the entire way because I didn’t want to talk politics with anyone right now, or ever. Because in any case it already

18. See, Thomas Hobbes (2000). Hobbes illustrates the legitimacy of leadership as mechanical, just as instruments have makers and orchestras need conductors. This allusion to orchestras and conductors is also significant in that politics is auditory: “and for the cause of hearing, that the thing heard, sendeth forth an audible species, that is an audible aspect, or audible being seen; which entering the ear, maketh hearing (268).
concerns you, even what takes place on your bed; especially if you’re an unclothed and disenfranchised individual, politics awaits the rhythm to clothe you. It’s little more that taking something from you as a means of making you an instrument. This is politics…No! I won’t speak of politics nor will I think about it! (Hemamul 2006: 222)

At this point, Morn changes his mind about going to Royal City Avenue and asks the taxi to change directions. The taxi turns toward Lat Phrao, and to Lak Si on the northern edge of central Bangkok, where he reflects on the past. The coffee shop where he once reunited with Katha earlier in the novel seems absent, as if subsumed in a wave of the district’s infamous condominium boom. However, Morn questions his conscious perception. He states: “this is a fantasy” no different from “the fabrication of economic conditions” (224). All of this mental reflection, the visual imposition of a new image over a landscape that once existed to embody his identity through memory, is political. He concludes: “It’s here that politics has again rearranged my life, clothed me, and taken something from me” (224).

Uthid’s ability to shuttle between different angles, scenes, times, and social orders, exhibit all the workings of a carefully crafted film. Uthid’s film commentaries (See Hemamul 2008) and involvement in film projects likely inform the audiovisual motifs of Mirror | Reflection where Bangkok is set in motion by rhythm and cuts. But it is the newness of the era, of the Thaksin era specifically, that move Uthid through the street in a specific way and provide cause for a change in direction. However, the direction Morn takes, unfortunately, conform with the streets of his time. To conclude his story, Morn blends into Bangkok’s streetscape as he peers through the window of an
RCA-based Japanese franchise restaurant to find his RCA boss enjoying a meal with his wife and two children. Nearby, his eyes pan to the reproduction of a wandering dog outlined in earlier chapters. It is now nursing several puppies. The scene cuts to Morn who, like the offspring of the wandering dog, finds renewal with the “boisterous” girl he’d earlier encountered in a dream along a Bangkok sidewalk, and then in real life at Brown Sugar. She helps Morn to evacuate Katha, and other parts of the Bangkok landscape from memory. Repressing the inclinations of an artist for the normality posed by stability, Morn, webbed within the temporal frames of the future, desires order. From artist to DJ, Morn exhibits the social geography of Bangkok and, at the center of novel and landscape, organizes the playlist of his normalization under Thaksin. Section three is thus a transitional dénouement, between a personal politics of self and the rhythms of the New City, which propel Morn into an attempt to organize and reorder a variety of seismic events by returning to each of the landscapes discussed in the story.

Uthid’s more recent critical essays treat the “act of seeing” as the most specific marker of reality in cities that have become increasingly generic (see Hemamul 2009: 92). For example, he highlights the contemporary writer’s tendency to “set the eyes of the reader toward looking” in his review of Kitthiphol Sarakhanonda’s 2005 short story collection Elsewhere (see Hemamul 2009: 106). The streets of Bangkok are thus paved into various works of Thai fiction as focal points for political vision. In other words, even

19 See also the vertical-horizontal axis through which urban vision is orchestrated in “That Day” (Hemamul 2008), Peter Schwenger’s (2002: 153) treatment of Nicholas Baker’s “escalator” writing in The Mezaninne (1987), Georges Perec’s Life: A Users Manual (1987), or J.G. Ballard’s High Rise (1975). However it seems obvious that cinematic technology is not simply visual, but temporal and audiovisual.
as Morn exhibits the designed rhythm of Bangkok’s metronomic order, he prevents the emergence of a permanent center by his uncalculated movement through different streets. Ultimately, he does not return to the Old City but decisively conforms to the New City norms of Royal City Avenue. Narrative time becomes real time, as Morn’s conclusion follows upon the heels of Thaksin’s election.

**Old City: Pinyo Traisuriyathamma’s “Cindy and Jang” (2010)**

Upon King Chulalongkorn’s return to Bangkok from Europe in 1897, the monarch would bring back several films and a film projector. Several months later, a Lumière Brothers associate S.G. Marchovsky would demonstrate the European process of modernization before a Bangkok audience with Thailand’s first demonstration of the cinematograph. Such illustrations run counter to the original intentions of modernization. At the level of political institutions, between the monarchical shaping of Bangkok’s then “new” landscape, or the modern London described by Virginia Woolf, nations attempted to compete with the flux of new images through the exhibition of landscape centers.20

In one reflection on modernism’s disorder Marshall Berman (1982) invokes the rhythms of the “modern experience” as a “highly differentiated and dynamic new landscape” (18). This interplay, between disorder and order in Thailand’s global experience of new landscapes, is beautifully imagined across the urban landscape of “Bangkok/Paris, Jang and Cindy: On an Old Road that Brought Us Together”, a short story in Pinyo Traisuriyathamma’s 2009 collection *Global Grammar*. Just as Uthid

20. See, “Rathadamneon: The Democratic Road to Political History” (1992);
Hemamul’s novel switched directions by positioning the 2001 election of Thaksin as its psychogeographic interruption, Pinyo’s story uses 2006 protests in the Old City to evaluate shifts in contemporary political perceptions of the street in Bangkok. The story forces the reader into a historic juxtaposition between the stability of Bangkok’s built image and its disordered institutional politics of the present. The cinematic shuttling between multiple times and spaces, from an Old City photography exhibition about Paris to an PAD yellow shirt protest, centers landscape perception and politics around an otherwise mediocre romance narrative.

In “Bangkok/Paris”, a wealthy Chinese entrepreneur Jang and a Singapore-based corporate lawyer named Cindy have arrived in Bangkok for the weekend. Cindy is unhappily married in Singapore, and has engaged Jang in a casual sex fling at a recent business conference. They work for a common global corporation. In the story, Jang flies to Bangkok where Cindy has been sent to clear up several ‘legal issues’ with the Temasek acquisition of Thaksin Shinawatra’s Shin Corp. This actual January 2006 Temasek/Shin Corp deal is the primary impetus for the emergence of “yellow shirt” Peoples Alliance for Democracy (PAD) protests that would culminate in the September 16th 2006 military coup that sent the Prime Minister into exile. Cindy and Jang trace a path along the streets of Bangkok, cartographically and temporally, to connect Thailand’s earlier periods of modernization with the emergence of a new street politics that these landscapes had been designed to obstruct.
To begin the story, Jang finds a newspaper advertisement for a photography exhibition of Paris housed in a gallery in Bangkok’s Old City. Cindy voices her excitement to attend, especially as she’s “never been to that part of Bangkok before” (Traisuriyathamma 2010: 72). The author paints three interwoven dynamics. First, Cindy and Jang identify the routine tourist activities of shopping and local cultural consumption as cliché—opting instead for an alternative kind of “heritage” tourism. To view a French photography exhibition within a Bangkok gallery speaks to a particular kind of cultural artifice that codes their route according to 19th century relationships between global modernization and urban planning. Second, it is ironic to arrive in one city and to see an image of another. Finally, on their trip to the Old City, the two characters witness a strange “New politics”, a reference to King Chulalongkorn’s inscription of French architecture onto the landscape of the Old City upon return from his Paris visit in 1897. “New politics” is also a reference to a contemporary political movement led by monarchical loyalists and long time politician/media executives threatened by the liberalization of then Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Here, the juxtaposition of multiple times amid the Post-Shin Corp telecommunications-linked global world is executed between the coexistence of old and new landscapes.

On their way to the Old City, Jang and Cindy travel the aesthetic routes of Thailand’s new creative industry in its broadest sense. They begin from the commercial

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21. The terminology for this part of Bangkok is tricky, however the use of the term Rattanakosin stands for the ‘monarchical’ overtones in the early modernization of a Bangkok central core, labeled Krung Rattanakosin (Askew 2002 17-18, 285). The current administrative district name for the area is Phra Nakhorn (“royal capital”), but is often referred to colloquially as Yaan Kao (“Old City”).
district, first connected to the city’s symbolic sites of political power through the 1850s construction of the New Road. Heading back to the Old City, their taxi begins at Siam Square and passes the Bangkok Art and Culture Center (BACC), the culmination of a discussion begun less than a year after Thaksin was elected. They proceed north via Phayathai Road then northwest on Sri Ayuthaya Road before being held up by a critical mass of street protestors at Outer Ratchadamnern Avenue. In critical terms, this movement reverses historical time, from the postmodern landscape of Siam Square to the modern exhibitive tradition of the Old City. When the two characters shift south on Outer Ratchadomnern (past Dusit Palace, old and new parliamentary buildings, and military headquarters) they encounter an anti-Thaksin People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD) yellow-shirt demonstration. In journalistic discourse, the protest group has defined their agenda as “New Politics”, and donned yellow shirts as a gesture of loyalty (but more importantly, the color-coded unity of a world represented by image surfaces). Cindy and Jang’s Thai chauffeur reiterates this journalistic perspective to caption their observations, as the car continues toward the gallery.

The protest unfolds at the edge of Bangkok’s central core, along Outer Rachadamneon (“Ratchadamnern Nok”) which means “outside the procession”. Outside the time of Cindy and Jang’s procession through the Old City, means outside of national time. The global time of these characters is unlikely to register the violence between protestors and governments that unfolded here in 1973, 1976 and 1992. This particular PAD protest is still blocks away near the Old City center, and remains symbolically

22. See “Four companies to bid for Bangkok art center” (2002) for protest and development strategies related to the BMA-led construction of the BACC.
“outside the procession” because they are part of the New City programs of media politics. In fact, the protest aims to critique the divestiture of shares in Shin Corp., one of Southeast Asia’s largest telecommunications companies, to Singapore. Pinyo’s title speaks to Ratchadamnern as an “old road that brought us together” in terms of placing this anti-Thaksin protest alongside all others that unfolded nearby. These memories continue to haunt the image of modernity’s forward progress. Within this critical discourse, Cindy and Jang proceed backward in time, from Outer Rachadamneon to the central core of the Old City.

The targeted Thai reader is quite aware of these motifs, of the large promenades that beg pedestrian viewing across an extensive tree-lined vista, but also the protests and violent pasts that unfolded here (most recently in the May 1992 military front launched at the nearby Phan Fa bridge). Urban theorist Kim Dovey (2001) read this area through a passage from Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*:

> The city…[consists] of relationships between measurements of its space and the events of its past: the height of a lamppost and the distance from the ground of a hanged usurper’s swaying feet…As this wave from memories flows in, the city soaks up like a sponge and expands…The city, however, does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand.

(Dovey 2001: 265)

All of the experiences of newness operate within this sponge-like assemblage of times and spaces, simultaneity, and the figurative/cartographic procession of the boulevard where Cindy and Jang peer from the protection of a car window.
Jang and Cindy finally arrive at the small Old City art gallery several streets away from the protest site, where they view black and white images at the exhibition and the separation of old and new Parisian districts through the viewfinder of a contemporary Thai photographer. His viewfinder, they observe, restores the details they have failed to register in other photographs. Speaking to the photographer’s position in a new skyscraper looking down at Paris’s older district, Cindy remarks, “I really like this image. It invites one to inquire what they’re thinking and where they’re heading” (Traisuriyathamma 2010: 73). The statement is a parallel reference to the relationship between urban planning and modernization, equating the construction of the city with thinking. The spectator’s new observations refer both to the growing verticality of the city and the administrative height restrictions that keep the Old city “old”. Furthermore, the images produce new angles and perspectives made possible by contemporary urban development. Conservation efforts to exhibit the 200th anniversary of Thailand’s Chakkri dynasty in 1982, like the restorative Rattanakosin Master Plan that balances nationalist exhibition with Western tourist consumption of historic Thai sites, continue to hail King Chulalongkorn’s Western modifications to the Old City landscape. But common attempts to focalize either the national, monarchical, or aesthetic narratives alone, would surely fail to register the short story’s cinematic dimension where French photographs and exterior Bangkok streets converge.

In the gallery, the characters are reoriented away from the horizontal route through Bangkok and toward a vertical axis, where the exhibition of Paris demonstrates how the city’s historic districts have changed according to the perspectives of photographers who now shoot from the cities newer skyscrapers. In Paris, as in Bangkok,
new and old cities coexist as competing perceptions of urban space. Unlike, the streets of protest, this perception of the street is leveled at a safe distance. This geographical feature of vision presented in the story comports well with Giuliana Bruno’s (2002) reflection on the relationship between architecture and filmic montage, where the connective mode of viewing (montage layered from the different locales of seeing) is made possible by movement. Modern spectatorship is comprised of a convergence of viewpoints along heavily designed routes. From an emotional standpoint, Bruno calls this method *psychogeography* to elaborate the experience of *site-seeing*.

The figure of the promenade is the main link between the architectural ensemble and film. As we have seen, this connection is created by way of peripatetics, located in the path of reception, and developed along the observer’s route. The architectural ensemble and the cine city further share the framing of space and the succession of sites organized as shots from different viewpoints. Additionally, the elements of both are adjoined and disjoined by way of editing. Like film, architecture—apparently static—is shaped by the montage of spectatorial movements. (56)

The urban planner Georges Eugène Haussmann edited the Parisian landscape with broad vistas, promenades, and numerous monuments devoted to France’s Second Empire, and issued strict building restrictions as a protective measure against protests in Paris in the mid 19th century. Referring to this “Hausmannization” that connects modernity with image and landscape, Burgin (1995) employs a cinematic language:

Like an arrested filmic lap-dissolve, which refuses to decide either origin or destination, the image forms through condensation. It also forms
through displacement to, or from, the image of Baron Georges Eugène Haussmann’s infamous percements that ripped through working-class districts of Paris like the cannon fire they were designed to facilitate. An ambivalence inhabits this textual fragment: as if two different spaces—one sealed, the other permeable—compete to occupy the same moment in time…the ambivalence marks the representational space of modernism in general. (Burgin 1995: 145)

It is not clear whether King Chulalongkorn reflected upon the Hausmannization designed to control Parisian protests between the revolution of the peasantry in 1789 and the Paris communes of the mid 19th century, but the afterimage in Pinyo’s “Bangkok/Paris” shuttles us between such sophisticated coordinates of the cinematic landscape. From the Grand Palace in the Southeastern corner of the royal center to the northeastern parliamentary buildings around Dusit Palace, road construction proceeded northeasterly in a tightly controlled space adorned with two rows of mahogany trees where movement gave way to fixed vision. This is why Jang and Cindy, even on the way back from the gallery—there are only two possible directions—must confront the yellow shirt “New Politics” movement. The Thai monarchy’s international expedition of 1897 returns, ironically, to force two global travelers into an involuntary encounter with everyday politics.

King Chulalongkorn’s late 19th century urban expansion inaugurated modernism as a mobile exhibition, a powerful monarchical procession amid the partitions of visual control. Pinyo moves from intention to intervention using the exhibition that Cindy and Jang attend to revisit two historical events in the time of the present. The author invites
the reader to question whether the characters will reflect on their political encounter, or whether all cities are now dictated by an increasingly “global grammar” comprised of numerous languages, histories, and layers that render the decoding of events all the more futile. The relationship between viewer and medium exists as a new politics that questions the contingencies of being modern. By tracking movement between New and Old Cities, Pinyo shows how an impending Thai coup can develop out of the need to restore unity to the otherwise fragmented Bangkok landscapes.

**Conclusion: Politics and Streetscapes**

The past could be unrolled, distances could be annihilated. And those terrible dislocations which are inevitable…could be bridged by some device of scenery. We should have the continuity of human life kept before us by the repetition of some object common to both lives. (Woolf 2008: 175)

The greater the share of the shock factor in particular impressions, the more constantly consciousness has to be alert as a screen against stimuli; the more efficiently it does so, the less these impressions enter experience. (Benjamin 1968: 163)

“That day I strolled through the heart of the city worrying about some meeting when I suddenly observed a giant construction crane collapse
thunderously downward. The sound screeched as the dust from the building materials fumed. I was fortunate to miraculously survive where many people lost their lives. From that day on, I’ve changed the way I view life. I don’t see the value of career life so insanely, moving myself up the ladder, elevating my reputation and getting richer. Life is too short to end up alone with those things.” Jang talked as he walked, slowly into Rachadomneun Nok Avenue where they reflected on the next destination. They came upon a stage of a group of Thais protesting for the removal of their government. (Traisuriyathamamma 2010: 75)

Cindy and Jang demonstrate how everyday narratives, built-in to the landscape, undermine structural and qualitative explanations. They use the “streetscape” to remap the politics that other observations of urban design fail to register, but they do so by responding to the street. The street becomes an “atlas of emotion,” to borrow Bruno’s metaphor, and a mode of jumping between different time periods as they broaden the coordinates of the Thaksin era. Burgin thus notes, “[t]here is more to our wanderings in the city than urban planners take account of” (Burgin 1996: 93).

How then does what they see render the city readable? And more specifically, how do their processes of experiencing the street re-route conventional political coordinates of city and nation? I have used Morn, from Uthid’s 2006 novel Mirror | Reflection, and two characters from Pinyo’s short story, as figures that organize responses to different times of Bangkok as a politics of the street. Beneath all the global motifs of their literary aesthetics the national questions they raise remain central to understanding
their politics of writing. Their questions underpin one of the primary, if not most often overlooked, dimensions of the Thaksin era. New global forms are disseminated within material national dimensions: when all else is ephemeral, the street remains solid. Doane (2003) observes that “[w]hat is at stake is the representability of time for a subject whose identity is more and more tightly sutured to abstract structures of representation” (11). The street and media play a part in this representation. She continues: “Time becomes heterogeneous and unpredictable and harbors the possibility of perpetual newness, difference, the marks of modernity itself” (11). Concealed within a succession of haunting stream-of-consciousness passages that presage the final chapter, Morn’s narrative becomes flustered in time: it is the time of the election of Thaksin Shinawatra, and a flight from the disordered rhythms of Bangkok. On the other hand, Cindy and Jang are not sure what time it is, nor are they sure where they are. They are, in this sense, more tightly sutured into abstract structures of representation, from the gallery exhibition to the yellow shirt protests that aim to end the Thaksin era. Uthid and Pinyo’s mode of inflecting disorder into landscapes, as a series of temporal juxtapositions that oppose and critique Bangkok’s late modernist design, give rise to new conceptual routes for talking about politics.
Montage 3: Videoscapes

In the mid-20th century, new forms of literary fiction represented a convergence between politics and visual culture that, according to Fredric Jameson in 1991, was not unlike the promise of the videotape (1991: xv). As “exhibits,” these new forms were held together equally by production and reproduction, reading and re-reading. The greatest potential for politics in the postmodern era would reside in its reproductive technologies. In his magnum opus, Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (1991), Jameson contributed an entire chapter to the possibilities of the medium of video and whether its play of signifiers would alert a materialist consciousness to the systemic crises of late capitalism (namely, alienation). Using a late 70s experimental work entitled AlienNation as an example, Jameson showed how the work’s juxtaposition of high and low cultural “themes” distanced its critical capabilities from interpretation and therefore, as an exhibit, proved exemplary of postmodernism’s paradoxical escape from meaning. Though postmodernism’s “textual exhibits” (xvii) seemed designed to recover the political inadequacies of the 1960s, no single work could escape the “total flow” of video televisuality. “Coterminous with postmodernism as a historical period,” (73) the videotext thus remained a “degraded” medium, according to Jameson, devoid of memory.

The emergence of video in contemporary media studies is, like Jameson’s pessimism, usually positioned within a modernist yearning for self-reflexivity in technological innovation. We should be able to reflect on what media does in relation to other mediums, but the postmodern re-wiring of modern society is a powerful diffusion of television technologies into other re-mixed mediums. In this “media archaeology” videos are both nostalgic and subversive. They show signs of use (e.g., static and the interrupted signal), pushing the viewer into a reverie. But videos also recall the variable position of authorship as someone taping, copying, distributing to friends, viewing in repetition until the tape no longer rewinds, and so on. People don’t simply watch videos but “use” them.

These individual encounters are related to practices of recording and become increasingly political alongside what Lucas Hilderbrand (2009) calls the reproductive practice of “Video bootlegging”:

A set of practices and textual relationships that open up alternative conceptions of access, aesthetics, and affect...taping has served as a method of amateur archiving for ephemeral content...[where] reproduction and sharing create new meanings and communities. (5-6)

Unlike Jameson’s lament of a medium’s lack of specificity, new videotaped landscapes (what I’m calling “videoscapes”) surfaced in Bangkok as markets of massacre videos after the “Black” May 1992 military crackdown on non-violent protestors. As one article from the Christian Science Monitor harkened in the months after the Thai crackdown on pro-democracy protestors in 1992, “The military doesn’t look good on videotape”. The emergence of unauthorized videos in political space moves toward Hilderbrand’s description of video aesthetics as relational, a question of greater access to aesthetic authorship, reproduction, and distribution. Against Jameson’s pessimistic exhaustion of video’s political potential, the violent recordings of Black May “help to produce and
sustain cultural memories…that would otherwise be forgotten in ‘objective’ histories” (xiv). They are not simply artistic and underground, but a significant part of the culture of street politics. The medium help us to look beyond the narrow frame of an event waged by a middle class “mobile phone mob” and into the politics of working class video vendors.

Media mappings of landscapes blur the border between screen and street. A ‘video landscape’ “presents nature and/or the urban landscape as its subject matter” in new ways by constructing new vantage points of a landscape upon a screen (Poissant et al 2001: 43). Thai films like *Sayew* (2003) returned to the videoscape of May 1992 to reiterate the violence at the intersection between a found video and a political landscape. In a similar way, the reverse chronology of Uthid Hemamul’s short story “A Call From an Old Friend: Or, the end point of some things” (2008) employs the video technique of *reverse chronology* as a means of rewinding to, and reflecting on, Black May. As Mary Anne Doane (2004) notes, the real time of media landscapes (where events unfold in an imagined chronological order) is itself unreal, a continual myth fabricated from the need to create order. In this way, the cinema and other mediums reinforce authority in creative media by maintaining a chronological order. Videos, short stories, and films, by returning to Black May, replay Bangkok’s “found footage” as an interrogation of contemporary instantaneity and dominant chronologies by “exposing the profound rupture underlying the apparently seamless continuity of real time.” (Doane 2004: 278)
CHAPTER 3. VIDEOSCAPES AND ALTERNATIVE MEMORIES OF BLACK MAY
There is an official chronology to every large-scale event. Within sanctioned national discourses, an official chronology organizes people, bodies of work, and institutional bodies. But in reducing time to an official chronology, the nation forecloses other possible perspectives. Emerging media technologies, often unauthorized, assist in a broader ability to access events. Several years ago, in the dead center of the Thaksin Shinawatra era (2001-2006), the mainstream Thai film Sayew (“tantalizing” 2003) revisited a prior moment in controversial Bangkok recollections. Most analyses observe the film’s sexual and censorship-related plot devices, but its subversive “videotape” theme calls into question the linear and chronological organization of political events. The fictional film draws upon the factual landscape of Bangkok in May 1992 through the eyes of a quirky and ambiguously “queer” comparative literature student named Tao. Tao’s encounter with a videotape illustrates how the past is effectively “taped over”. Furthermore, the film’s video motif brings to light a historical revision based in a will to forget implicit to the Thaksin era and the country’s political relationship between technology and chronology since 1992. I argue below that its “central” scene is assembled around an amateur “bootlegged” videotape, which demonstrates how censored renditions of May 1992 protests were circumvented. The mystery here lies in why this issue surfaced in 2003, during the Thaksin era.

23. From the frame of Southeast Asian cultural studies, Kamjorn Luiyaphong reads Sayew through three audience responses based on several narrative interpretations of the film’s intended representation (2004: 182-183). His primary question relies on whether Tao, in a story about sexual identity, is authentic in her ability to perform multiple roles.
Sayew (2003) is a film about Tao, a young woman pursuing an undergraduate thesis work on romance novels at a prominent Bangkok university. Tao is introduced as a naive intern for her uncle’s pornographic magazine where she hopes to edge the margins of her sexual inexperience by writing erotica columns. However, her uncle refuses to publish her columns due to her inability to capture the minds of its male readership, citing her lack of worldly experience. While this dimension of the film draws upon the familial nature of Thai politics, the acquisition of experience through new reproductive technologies, such as videotape, focalize Tao as a national subplot. Halfway through Sayew, Tao overhears a conversation involving an illegal “cutting edge” video, recently acquired by the magazine’s more experienced lead writer known as the “young stallion.” With a desire to consume unauthorized material, she quickly sets out to obtain the tape. For Tao, the tape would contribute a real world anchor to erotic experience that could not be obtained from her academic education. Tao thus secretly commandeers the videotape from the young stallion’s knapsack after he offers her a ride home.

The scene, like all political scenes in Thailand’s national political history, begins at the street. From the street, Tao walks through her apartment’s ground floor restaurant where neighbors watch daily news about the May 1992 democracy protests on television. The viewer knows that television accounts censored the violent outbreaks of Rachadamnern Avenue at the time. But this story can wait. Tao continues upstairs to her family’s one-room apartment, finds her mother sleeping, and inserts the mysterious video into the player. The signals sent from video to the television screen show up in the scene
only as sounds, translated to the audience through a montage of Tao’s facial responses. In the video, the sounds of screams inform the viewer that Tao has mistakenly stumbled upon a “snuff” film. In the darkness, she shrieks beneath the newness of pornographic images of violence and stops the tape in disgust. It is an experience she would rather forget. The viewer is not granted access to what Tao sees, but instead hears only the sound-tracked presence of vulnerable bodies. The audiovisual schema enables a transfer from a fictional genre to historic events, and from video to the encounter with violence. Outside of previous attempts to categorize the film’s sexual politics (Kamjorn 2004; Phongsawat 2005), the scene emphasizes the role of videotape technologies in the replay of a 1992 political event.

Sayew locates the significance of the videotape as an audiovisual playback technology that recovers the horrific event of violence. The film’s narrative time, 1992, coincides with non-narrative events such as Tao’s affective response to screaming bodies not accessible to the viewer. Furthermore, Tao’s ability to access the videotape speaks to the unauthorized copyright violation of bootlegged media circulation. The videotaped violence of the “Black May” 1992 events circulated as new markets of evidence to counter the censorship of national television networks. Television was heavily managed by the Suchinda military regime during the May 1992 protests, but the ensuing flood of

24. In Cinema 1: the Movement-Image, Gilles Deleuze (1986) refers to this category of facial sequences as “affection-images”. According to Deleuze, before images take “affect” in the action of bodies, these subject bodies enter the interval of affection: which "surges in the center of indetermination, that is to say in the subject, between a perception which is troubling in certain respects and a hesitant action. It is a coincidence of subject and object, or the way in which the subject perceives itself, or rather experiences itself or feels itself 'from the inside' (third material aspect of subjectivity)" (65). Deleuze continues, "it is not surprising that, in the image that we are, it is the face, with its relative immobility and its receptive organs, which brings to light these movements of expression while they remain most frequently buried in the rest of the body" (66).
videotapes that captured the military’s use of violence belonged to the people. Documentaries like *The Black Records* (“from the heart of democracy-loving Thais”), video captures of BBC cameramen, tourist video, and foreign news broadcasts of the events smuggled back into Thailand by flight attendants, demonstrate the number of channels that circumvented the government control of television. “Bootlegged” on Bangkok streets, but censored from Thai television, these “massacre videos” rendered military brutality available for reflection and critique. (Callahan 1998: 18)

Limiting technology is part of defining modernity and the image of forward progress. From its inception, video had been perceived as a subversive political tool in its ability to interrupt the television’s institutional continuity. Thus Nam June Paik observed, “Television has been attacking us all our lives, now we can attack it back” (Rees 1999: 87). Though pessimistic, Fredric Jameson also called attention to video’s compilation-based index as the most political of media aesthetics in the postmodern era. In the context of Black May 1992, Alan Klima (2002) demonstrates how video restored a presence of bodies otherwise relegated to the “offscreen space” of censored screens during free-to-air television. Electronic media had always served a central role in the broader chronology of politics by managing the visibility of events. In 2003, Sayew restored a past time to the present through the videotape motif.

25. See *The Black Records (Bantheuk Si Dam* 2010), as screened on Thai television at the end of 1992: “These records are compiled from one particular strand of memory, from the heart of democracy-loving Thais. We call this document, the ‘Black Records’”. Also, several BBC cameramen capture the Royal Hotel brutality in *Phutsapha Thamil* (2007). One of the more notable amateur “tourist” videos was captured by two American college students, Mike Appel and Andrew Kunian, who had intended to “document life in another culture” while on vacation. Caught in the middle of a military crackdown their “disaster footage” was incorporated into an episode of the 1993 American caught-on-video show I-Witness Video (see *Bangkok Massacre* 2008).
Below I elaborate upon similar efforts to compliment the injection of politics into the Thaksin era by using video images to recover political memory. These questions about time invite a return to Win Lyovarin’s literary chronology of Thai politics in *Democracy Shaken and Stirred* (1997), but also Chart Korbjitti’s use of a media language and everyday memory to allegorize street politics in his post-Black May novel *Time* (1993). The convergence of politics and aesthetics in recollections of Black May lend to questions about memory, time, and the tools available for countering state narratives of political events. But there is something different about this recollection of videotapes during the Thaksin era, during a time that digital jumps have trumped analogue continuity as an everyday experience. The media references must then anchor the ambiguities of time with concrete memories of events. Uthid Hemamul’s short story “A Call from an Old Friend: Or, the end point of some things” (2008) highlights the “videoscape” of political events in Bangkok through a “reverse chronology” of Black May. Like a videotape, Hemamul’s literary reverie of two friends rewinds, by situating the events in reverse order, until they arrive at the Black May protests of 1992.

This concern with *Sayew* (2003) and Uthid Hemamul’s short story are oriented below as an elaboration of William A. Callahan’s (1998) critique of national chronologies that follow violent political events. They are, he suggests, designed to screen out national divisions. Callahan further emphasized that the “electronic politics” of Black May, from the locus of the state, were assembled “by organizing/manipulating images through techniques such as editing, layout, language, captioning, camera angles,
use of colour, and choice of background music” (19). While the chronological frames of memory are constructed through a variety of dominant “flows,” the architecture of video is especially conducive to alternative memories. Video works against the experience of the present.

**Disillusioned Thaksin Era**

The exhibits here are the videotext...video can lay some claim to being postmodernism’s most distinctive new medium, a medium which, at its best, is a whole new form in itself. (Jameson 1991: xv)

*Sayew* illustrates how videotapes circulate in secret networks, between street vendors and domestic spaces. Its content, like the city, is subject to erasure, reproduction, and individual encounter. But most political observers, for good reason, are more interested in the social context of *Sayew* than its media motifs (which include the videotape, but also the typewriter, radio, television, and antenna). Thai political theorist Pitch Phongsawat, for example, analyzes *Sayew* as a break between a Marxist idealism and the broader culture of depoliticization under Thaksin. In Thaksin’s first year, the film *The Moonhunter* (2001 Bhandit Rittakol), based on Seksan Prasertkul’s biography of years spent in jungle encampments of the Communist Party, foreclosed the past as a period of being misled. In Thaksin era films, Marxists were doctrinaire and youthfully fickle, a

throwback to decades of so-called disillusionment. Their jungle commune praxis is represented in ideological self-righteousness and various doctrinal splits between Vietnamese and Maoist variants of Marxism. Many returned from the jungles to assume jobs as university professors in Bangkok during the 1980s. These misled dissidents of the 1970s were reintegrated into Thai society through a policy of national unification under the amnesty policy of Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanonda (1980-1988). By 2001, at least in films like The Moonhunter, the issue of an oppositional and divided national past needed to be reconciled by this sense of disillusionment. It is better to forget.

The Moonhunter represents the 70s generation as a disillusioned band of college-aged Marxists, poets, and long-haired adventurists. But among the so-called depoliticized youth of the Thaksin era, the “moonhunter” image depicted a nostalgia for the days when this sort of political visibility existed. Upon closer analysis, the replay of 1973 and 1976 street protests were related to more immediate concerns under Thaksin. A character of Thinakorn Hutangkul’s Thaksin-era short story, “A Starless Night,” evokes this nostalgia:

A million people left their houses to join protests in the newsreel footage of May 1992, October 1973 and 1976. Organized protest is the right of the people in a democratic country. But Thailand has such a small amount of organized protest among highschool students, university students, the people, and every other group in our time. (Hutangkul 2005: 134)

The above nostalgia laments a presumed loss of political ideals within a country mediated by Thaksin’s telecommunications satellites. This assumption, furthered in William Warren’s (2002) account of youth depoliticization in “postmodern” Bangkok, reinforced by Thaksin’s own management over media. From the Old City of Sanam Luang to the...
New City of Siam Square, Warren juxtaposes Generation Thaksin with model mass movements in 1973 and 1992, when young students and middle class residents challenged dictatorship in Bangkok streets. Today’s youth, he follows, are comprised by their “mobile phones,” “imitation Prada bags”, “baggy jeans” and “orange hair,” unlike a bygone era in which “there was another generation that was neither mute nor devoted to pleasure and that led a kind of revolution.” (118) Warren observes:

Now the students (like those elsewhere) seem apathetic…They gather at places like Siam Square or in countless pubs and discos; they sometimes take recreational drugs like Ecstasy and amphetamines; they attend rock concerts and chat on the Internet. (120)

The politically-minded urban resident is either irrelevant or sealed in a time capsule.

Warren’s lament is not unlike the masterful Thai-language collection of Thaksin criticism Seeing Lotus Bloom from its Seed (2005), where Pitch Phongsawat reiterates how constitution reform and street protests are viewed as processes of the past. Black May 1992 is the center of this past, since it was only after military brutality that “reform” could begin.²⁷ Life under Thaksin, according to Pitch, is constituted by a “concrete fantasy”, i.e., a disillusioned sense of one’s part within the systematic whole. Pitch positions Sayew as a critical response to the chronological myth of The Moonhunter. By re-visiting Black May from the temporal locus of the Thaksin era, the film questions the

²⁷. See Pitch Phongsawat (2005). Pitch holds that the 1997 People’s constitution (39) led to “the production of the new subject” (40) within a system he calls “Thaksinism as hegemonic project” (37).
de-politicizing modus of the “concrete fantasy” at the everyday level. “Thaksin-ism,” he concludes, is a hegemonic project that controls the present by managing the past.

The inverse side of this “concrete fantasy,” the side that aims toward the recovery of truth, is the return to these landscapes. Sayew, and Pitch’s analysis of Sayew, had returned to Old City references because this marked the most vivid memory of political protest. On May 18th 1992, hundreds of injured and fatally wounded protestors were fired upon by the Thai military in Bangkok, an act validated by the Internal Peacekeeping Law. Then 2000 men were dragged out of an Old City hotel that protest organizers had transformed into a make-shift infirmary. They were taken to what Klima’s account of Black May calls the “off-camera space” of military dictatorships. This move followed an announcement that “death squads would hunt down and kill rioters” (“Thai troops” 1992). By the end of the week, a royal decree had been issued to grant amnesty for all parties involved in exchange for the resignation of General Suchinda Kraprayun in a highly publicized television broadcast where King Bhumibol sits above the leaders from each side. Like two misbehaved school children reprimanded by the principal, Chamlong Srimuang, leader of the so-called democracy movement, knelt beside the four star general Suchinda Kraprayoon. The plight of demonstrators to end six decades of military rule remained without significant closure because screens fell short of disclosure. Television censored both critical perspectives and violent images unfolding at the time. On the other hand, the televised end to the event depicted two virtual leaders who claimed to represent hundreds and thousands who materialized throughout Bangkok’s violent landscapes. But as one demonstrator put it “what we want now is to ... chop him (Suchinda) piece by piece and smear him with salt to satisfy our anger.” (“Thai PM” 1992)
After a failure of institutional politics to represent people, and to reconcile to anxieties of Black May specifically, the direction of Thai politics remained unsettled. The choice of the color “black” as a key frame for remembering May 1992 could have signaled a mourning for the loss of democracy, as black banners stretched across the center of Old City protests in May of 1992 and read like the cinematic subtitles of the streetscape in widescreen. Or “black” might refer to the black markets that sold video footage of the massacre, and had emerged much earlier to counter the full penetration of neoliberal markets and copyright enforcement by U.S. trade officials in Thailand. Or ‘black’ could refer to the infamous black-handed police officer that restored safety to Bangkok’s criminal-ridden streets in the fictional film worlds of The Gunman and Sayew. But ‘black’ also referred to a high degree of invisibility, a non-presence that demanded a return to images concealed from censored productions of the event. In the following week 800 people were reported missing. It was against this climate of concealed truths and non-presence that bootlegged videotapes and foreign reports, censored in state-dominated television, were sold in black markets and screened at nearby universities. Everyday critiques of military involvement in the Black May events were answered by mainstream politicians declaring statements like “Nothing can be hidden nowadays” to insinuate the government’s capacity to deal with ensuing investigations into the May events (Shenon 1992). These uncertainties would play out between the revealed and the concealed, the visible and the invisible, and as a public discourse interrogated by the critiques presented in print as well as in the street. At the time, avant-garde choreographer Bancha Suvannanonda had planned to screen a left-leaning theater production critical not only of Thai politics, but a Thai imaginary framed by monarchical and religious iconography. As
a result of a lack of recognition to identify those responsible, Bancha predicted, most Thais would do nothing to address the future of Thai politics: "Even during the political unrest, the majority just sat back and expected God, the King or the government to put things right." (Pereira 1992) Even more forthrightly Bancha critiqued the relationship between the everyday real and its representation:

> The masses are stuck to the TV -the idiot box. Did you know how useless the broadcast media was during the unrest? I was living two streets away from the action and witnessed most of it with my own eyes, but saw something totally different on TV!" (Pereira 1992)

After 1992 and the failures of television, alternative media presentations of political events are preoccupied with restoring some relic of reality. But they know this reality is questionable. Like a wounded landscape of fiction that uses the scars to narrate spatial memory, disasters are stored with the ambivalence of mediated truth.

**Thaksin’s Politics of “cool”: Sayew (2003)**

Pitch’s treatment of *Sayew* positions the Thaksin era backdrop of the film. It is the landscape through which the film must be read. He asks, for example, is the film simply demonstrating a disillusioned character? Or does Tao represent the privatization of politics, the only available model within the macropolitics of “Thailand Inc.,” where Thaksin emerges as self-proclaimed CEO? Under Thaksin, new relations between culture and technology hinged upon a larger economic/executive structuring of the Thai nation that forged new connections between the marginalized provinces and the urban center.
For Pitch, the emergence of *Sayew* during Thaksin’s tenure is a part of the break from a Kantian “common sense” notion of collective politics (e.g., the politics of unity) in order to move into more “fractured” interpretations based in what different groups in Thai society consume. He uses the term “good sense” to encourage a presupposition of difference, and therefore disagreement, since the political is both a ‘count’ and ‘division’ (20-21) of the body politic. Thaksin’s “new politics” sought to wire subjects into processes of consumption propelled by what Pitch calls a politics of “cool” (86). Thaksin’s “war on poverty” was designed, for example, so that the marginalized can be included or counted as “cool” consumers (41, 88).

*Sayew* uses consumer items, such as literature and videotapes to revisit Black May by digging beneath the screen culture of politics. In fact the film begins when a young student purchases an erotic magazine, and ends when Tao is marketing her “best-seller” romance novels. To get to this point must find the right language for writing about a world beyond her experience, and thereby sets off to explore. At each time she finds herself unwired, even marginalized, from surrounding networks. After all, she is not originally from Bangkok. In one sequence, Tao’s university thesis committee critique her senior project for failing to elaborate Thai literature’s relation to Thai society. Even the old world, exemplified by increasingly irrelevant university professors, has failed to fortify Tao’s increasingly disillusioned present. She is marginal and uncool by every convention. Furthermore, her failure at a lesbian relationship and the overall inability to manage her “personal” politics lead to a will to forget and start fresh. Tao is also surrounded by a quickening modernity, a world of deadlines and writing assignments, quick experience displacing innocence, where long-takes capture her in the visual modes
of this present: looking, writing, reading, and watching. As a rural migrant to Bangkok, a geographic allegory to parallel her own sexual deviation from the center, the atmospheric landscape shots capture Tao beneath large antennas that signify isolation, alienation, and transmission of a world mediated through an expansive network of telecommunications. A similar establishing shot captures John (orphan, friend, and future husband of Tao), whose depression can be understood as related to Tao’s attraction to girls. As the film time-lapses 10 years into the future, they are shown together—a scenario demonstrated as repressive by virtue of its suffocating color scheme. Background, and the social text of the national image, consumes them both until the final scene brings them back together as a happy nuclear family not unlike heavily broadcasted transmissions of “nam nao” (“garbage”) Thai soap operas that periodically enter the film. And this marks the end of the film. Her marginality is replaced by the appearance of cool at a particular point in time.

Pitch is asking, first, whether the appearance of Black May events, at several intersections of the film, pull Tao’s personal story into the domain of national politics: in particular, how is a woman counted in the political body, is ideology pliable, and how is voyeurism a way of looking at the larger phenomenon of political spectatorship in Thai society? The film demonstrates that these points, for instance, in a voyeuristic scene where Tao and John spy on Tao’s hero, the “Black Hand.” Tao has come to know the Black Hand, a famous Bangkok policeman, through his masculine presence on television and as superhuman figure who eliminates criminals through his swift marksmanship. When Tao and John spy on the Black Hand in an everyday context, discovering his inability to satisfy a prostitute, Tao’s illusions of his screen presence are dispelled by his
everyday inadequacies brought down to earth. In this sense, the voyeurism of the film turns characters toward a recognition of manipulative screens and the discovery of missing narratives. This is why, Pitch suggests, the role of Tao in the film, must be read against the background of 1992 to show that little can be suppressed in the long run, and that every “part” must be “seen.” At the peak of the Thaksin era, with the forward march toward newness underpinned by a telecommunications empire and media consolidation, Sayew reversed chronology back to 1992.28 There we find screens within scenes that, in 2003, prefigure video’s critique of television that rewinds toward its postmodern Black May beginnings.

**Street Memory**

Contrary to buildings, which almost always belong to someone, the streets in principle belong to no one. (Perec 1997: 47)

At dawn the army troops hit hard, storming Bangkok’s Royal Hotel, searching room by room, smashing heads with M-16s, arresting and dragging off 2000 protestors, leaving behind some seriously wounded. Dozens of men, women, and children...[static] demonstrating against Prime Minster Suchinda. *(Bantheuk Si Dam 2010)*

Through the availability of audiovisual materials, we build memories of places that assist in reading present landscapes. Laura Marks thus notes: “All of us hold knowledge in our bodies and memory in our senses” (2000: xiii). As an ontology comprised of the duality of sensation and intelligibility, audiovisuality comprises the streets and screens of urban landscapes. Videos reconstruct an audiovisuality of violence in the past tense, and 1992 specifically, by building a memory of the landscape. As I walked through the Old City area of Bangkok between 2006 and 2010, I consumed textbooks, VCDs acquired from political rallies, and the perspectives of various Thai media experts, in order to inform my understanding of the connection between this particular landscape and its past. While I had not been in the country during the 1992 massacre, the engagement between text and the streets of the present allowed me to build a memory. While official medias govern a particular appearance, a connection with the memories of others inflect our own histories.

In the first week of March 2010, I purchased the bootlegged VCD “Recalling Black May 1992” in front of my apartment along the main throughway of the Old City—Ratchadamneon Avenue. Here, on one of the largest streets in Bangkok, a major traffic vein had been transformed into a series of large screens and stages, organized around a demand for new elections. The protest site generated its own genealogy of media events through vendor kiosks where television sets played historic episodes from Thailand’s violent protest history, all the more eerie since each of these scenes unfold somewhere along this street. The VCD, containing all the squiggly noise of used video, was a reproduction of Black May violence in 1992 here sold as a critical analogue to the military’s return to prominence after the September 19, 2006 coup. One quickly notes, as the title sequence reads “A Summary of Events: 17-20, Black May 1992,” that the video
is an obvious VHS transfer duplicated numerous times before making its way onto the plastic VCD. Alan Klima (2002), in his account of Black May summarizes the emergence of this particular video genre:

The first day after the soldiers have left, a few cautious vendors set up stalls selling video footage of the murders—warily, nor sure if they are doing something improper…The first daring entrepreneurs on Ratchadamnern Avenue make a killing, selling tapes at prices up to one thousand baht per cartridge. Soon others buy tapes, retape them, and set up their own stalls. Many of the vendors have TVs hooked up to running cars and vans so that they can display their wares in support of their hawking cries to the crowds that their videos are the good stuff, the uncensored stuff, the foreign stuff, jampacked with dead bodies…Bangkok’s elaborate means of production for pirating video, which has been earning the country top priority for trade sanctions from the United States because it is hijacking Hollywood, are now churning out their own material, local images captured by international business but taken back again, for an audience that cannot get enough. (Klima 2002: 142-143)

The return to Klima’s emphasis on video black-markets yields several avenues of political inquiry. Specifically, how do media forms govern the appearance of political events? Or, as Callahan’s (1998) treatment of Black May inquires, how is the truth “acted out” (16)? Videotapes engage the signals of reality through the analog connections between videotape and television screen. Such medias connect landscapes with presentations by transmitting signals captured at one time and playing them back at
another. As a screening of past signals over present screens, the videotape extends the duration of a prior event.

The relationship between memory and media has been long considered a political topic. As such, video responded to the failure of television by extending the duration of events against a televisual impulse to move forward. Fredric Jameson (1991) thus reflected on video’s propensity for linking anything and everything, breaking the hegemony of television’s commodity capitalism. In video, dominant image sequences might be pulled apart, deconstructed, and reassigned. However, Jameson cautioned, wouldn’t the promiscuity of linking images, absent from material origins, offset by its inability to anchor meaning? In Bangkok, meaning is anchored by the landscape of the Old City, and Ratchadamneon Avenue. Klima (2002), in his ethnography of Black May, recalls that the government censorship of televisual flows during May of 1992 made presence at Ratchadamneon Avenue imperative to the experience of the event. “It was the place to be in Bangkok.” (108) Callahan (1998) drives home the point: “They wanted to see for themselves what they couldn’t see on the television or hear on the radio.” (17) In this way, people are not simply passive spectators managed by state control over screen culture. Videos in 1992 cut political sequences into a variety of patterns worth revisiting, precisely as a departure from the state’s command on the electronic media. Like the

29. In particular, this point is influenced by Walter Benjamin’s (1968) treatment of “modern” temporality as the convergence of past and present (157). National memories filter through an existing archive of “real” events that tap into the recollection of the spectator.

Mass production is aided especially by the reproduction of the masses. In big parades and monster rallies, in sports events, and in war, all of which are captured by the camera and sound recording, the masses are brought face to face with themselves. (Benjamin 1968: 251)
video, building a memory that links the landscape of an event with contemporary forms of playback help to wage a political critique of the present.

**Violent Chronology**

In a reflection on Hayden White’s politics of history, Callahan (1998) has observed how the organization of the event, and not its particular medium, remains characteristic of its manipulation.

> Although it appears to be a bare-bones listing of the facts without commentary, the chronological form has its own ideology…This chronological story is a teleological writing and editing of history: the end determines the beginning, and orders the choice of events to be included in the story, and thus the progression of the chronology. The chronology then is used to trace back the causes that lead to a certain event, while covering its own tracks of production. (Callahan 1998: 60)

Chronology moves from the past to present in a continuous stream of images organized into a particular sequence. But the memory of Black May relies upon the mobilization of the videotape in a way that offsets the linear distinctions of history with the virtuality of landscapes. The videotape was available in the very landscapes where its footage was recorded. While a videotape operates politically by re-opening the case of violence, chronological histories emerge in the aftermath of events to inaugurate closure. Chronology demarcates a history of space, such as Ratchadamneon Avenue in the Old City, via reference to an assumed historical event.
Win Lyovarin’s award winning novel *Democracy Shaken & Stirred* (1994) uses a linear organization of military coups since 1932 to write a chronological work of fiction, which is narrated by two fictional narrators on a Bangkok park bench in May 1992. The narration is accompanied by an archive of black and white images used to validate their story. At one axis of the narrative, the two old men—once political foes—have reconciled through the lessons history has taught them. Unity is afforded by generating a “big picture” by organizing scenes from history. Here, a second axis on the national history of technology intrudes. From event to event, Thailand’s political modernity moves from radio to cinema, television to ATM machines, McDonalds and fax machines. The existence of black and white photographs, and specifically the ruins of Bangkok’s Old City in 1992 captioned with “de ja vu at Democracy Monument,” speaks to a vicious circle of Thai politics conditioned by the repetition of chronology. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

Lyovarin’s *Democracy Shaken & Stirred* guides the reader through a violent memory via movement between photographs and text. At the beginning of each chapter images are arranged in a sequence, indentifying the main characters for each historic episode. The assembly of images and text is a means of reasserting the dominance of key figures.

More recently, The Foundation for the Promotion of Social Science and Humanities Textbooks Project has assembled an exhaustive account of Black May for use in Thai schools (*Phutsapha 2535 [2007]*). Like an authoritative theatrical version of events, the book itself is arranged in wide screen aspect-ratio (4:3). Its companion VCD opens with a scene between a BBC field reporter and its London headquarters on May
19th. The first line fixes the time: “the shooting started at 5 a.m.” The chronology of Black May uses an audio transcript of the VCD alongside spliced-in reports from various English and Thai newspapers, and a variety of poems (e.g., as penned by Naowarat Phongpaiboon) and lyrics from songs performed during the protests. Like Democracy, Shaken & Stirred, the collaboration of text and image shift between a presence of various actors and recognition of common images to build the larger national chronology of the event.

But the urban spaces where politics “happen” are not only characterized by technology platforms, and anything else with “links,” but through cuts between time. In this way, Tao connected with brutality through video, Bangkok residents connected with the landscape of Black May through massacre videos, and numerous other media forms recall landscapes that reconstitute memories of violence through an aesthetic rearrangement of time. Chart Korbjitti’s post-Black May novel Time (1993), more than Democracy, Shaken & Stirred (2003), serves as a literary barometer of post-Black May visual culture by through the juxtaposition of text and images. However, unlike Lyovarin’s style of inserting actual images into the work, Time’s narrator chooses to look at the world through a vocabulary of film-shots. In the story, the protagonist and narrator is a film director, out of work for some time as he mourns the recent death of his wife and daughter. These deaths can be perceived as an allegorical reference to the Black May massacre. After reading a newspaper advertisement of an infamously “boring” Thai
theater production, the film director decides to attend. At one level, a stage performance might take his mind off of other things, but he is out of place in the world of theater. The film director sits in the dark theater pondering why the young thespian troupe have decided to perform a story about the lives of the elderly living in a convalescent home. The story, a possible temporal predecessor to the films of Apichatpong Weerasethakul, moves with excessive slowness as if to necessitate a mode of reflection that the film director struggles to avert. On stage, as one Thai literary critic notes, characters “wait” for a variety of things: a woman waits for her son to visit, residents wait to be bathed, a nurse waits to report to her supervisor that this will be her last day, and a character waits to die (Chusak 2002). Off-stage, the film director-spectator waits for some significant measure of action to happen and, while doing so, speeds up the events by imagining film-shots whereby the reader undergoes a repetition of scenes as a means of comparing times.

The film director resists the empathic world of the onstage characters by imposing a visual vocabulary of film shots onto the stage play. This is his way of speeding up the action. There is one scene that he does not see, but only hears off stage. As Suthira Duangsamosorn’s (2005) analysis of the novel iterates “the most symbolic of all the characters in the play is an old man who none of the inmates have ever seen. He lives in a cell in their ward and keeps shouting periodically, ‘There is nothing, absolutely nothing’. (31)” The film director can only see that the other characters steer clear of this cell and, in the final scene, find that it empty: “It is only an empty room. It is only an empty room.

30. According to Jameson’s chapter on video technologies, “boredom” can be understand as “an index of what has to be refused in the way of other people’s cultural practices and their threat to our own rationalizations about the nature and value of art” (1991: 72).
An empty room. (Duangsamosorn 2005: 31)” Though he can impose a visual mode of manipulating what he sees, the aural action cuts through his attempt to organize a response.

*Time* has been interpreted in terms of the anxiety of waiting and ignorance of the author themselves to decode the event, but the question of an empty cell that remains unexplained in Duangsamosorn’s analysis of the novel juxtaposes the failure of audience recognition (through the film director’s interpretive vocabulary of film shots) with the audience’s subconscious suspicions that a non-visible presence remains to be disclosed. In other words, the unseen forces the film director into an active moment of reflection. The reader must actively connect waiting and languid characters, death thematics, an empty cell that contains a voice but no visible body, and the novel’s emergence in the aftermath of Black May. In an oft-cited section of Lucretius’s *The Nature of Things*, the pre-Socratic narrator explains that sounds without bodies are not supernatural, ghostly, or strange recurrences. Instead, they are an excess of recent matter left behind, sometimes bouncing around in space until they disintegrate or diffuse. Against the recent matter left behind by the events of Black May, the sounds of a voice emerging from an empty cell provides moods and affects as significant reminders of political disclosure in Korbjitti’s *Time*. And like democracy in Thailand at the time, the story remains staged in an empty theater where the cell remains without a body to occupy it. In Lyovarin’s *Democracy, Shaken & Stirred*, chronological “facts” wage claims to the totality of the event whereby aesthetic form is conscripted for ideological purposes. But in *Time*, the reappearance of a caged body through an lingering voice speaks to the process of recovery. The recovery is brought to bear on the film director’s conscious images as new kind of memory. I
interpret this novel as a likely allegory to Black May, but above all a political relationship brought to the foreground through an individual whose visual habits are challenged.

Reverse Chronology: Uthid Hemamul’s “A Call from an Old friend” (2006)

We said a lot of things in the past. Lots of things are hard to remember, and a lot is hard to forget. But everything is in a container, a container of youth that we keep in storage. (Uthid Hemamul 2008: 92)

The “container” in the above passage corresponds closely with the technology of the videotape. Containers collect memory and store materials, especially videotapes. They are “youthful” in being replaced by DVDs and digital file sharing technologies. In a juxtaposition of 1992 and 2006, Uthid Hemamul’s short story “A call from an old friend (or the end point of some things)” (2006) escapes the social realist tropes of pre-Thaksin era literature by connecting stories with changes in media form. The geographic shifts of the story operate in ‘rewind’ mode: in this case, the reverse ordering of four telephone conversations from present to past. I end with this example because it blurs the line between memory and landscape, as videoscapes, to personalize the period between Black May 1992 and life during the Thaksin era. This reverse ordering of events, referred to as “reverse chronology” in media examples that range from Atom Egoyan’s The Sweet Hereafter (1997) to Coldplay’s “The Scientist” (2001), calls into question simply cause/effect relationships. By placing the present up front, and slowly moving toward the past, readers and audiences gradually recover specific details and are exposed to the
chronological construction of the event in question. Uthid’s story utilizes the four telephone conversations, *in reverse*, to connect two old friends who haven’t spoken since Black May of 1992. It is the crucial event that, in the protagonist’s view, has bound them forever. We know it is the most significant event because it is the last. The author has recovered, even re-centered, politics to a period supposedly evacuated of street protest in the same way Black May videotapes recovered violence that had been censored from television coverage.

I will treat this story in the order rendered by the author, which begins with the final of four telephone conversations between two old friends. However, I will fill in details from each of the sections so as not to confuse those who haven’t read this story. The story dialogue unfolds through the telephone conversations of Chut and Ek. The telephone lines link the nation through a network that is dominantly owned and operated by Thaksin. Chut and Ek met ten years ago as former classmates at a vocational art school 3 hours outside of Bangkok, Ek is now married and living a cosmopolitan writerly life in Bangkok. Chut initially calls Ek to pay respects after hearing of the recent death of Ek’s father. Over the years, Chut has been in and out of a mental hospital due to his parents’ assumption of madness, but has since earned a living in the “outside world” as a motorcycle driver by day and by painting pictures by night in his self-imposed and individuated world. Over the four phone conversations, the reader learns that Chat and Ek have grown forgetful of their past. The reader rewinds toward Black May as a means of recovering the collective past of the two characters. The story concludes that the past is an illusion or, as Ek the narrator suggests, a “mythology.” It is only in the process of rewinding that the consequences of events are rendered intelligible.
In the final episode of their renewed relationship, the phone rings to interrupt Ek’s heated discussion with his wife over an unplanned pregnancy. In the phone conversation, Chat refers to a trip to Bangkok earlier in the day. Walking along the streets of Ek’s neighborhood, Chat attempted to meet him in passing. We only find out in the final conversation that Chat’s desire to meet on the street is patterned after an emotional memory of the street during Black May 1992. Chat even mentions that while strolling along the street he dropped a picture of Krishnamurti, from the cover of a book they had both read (1000 Moons). The street and the book provide sites of legibility for reading the collective dimensions of their relationship. The street and the book once bound them together. Chat pushes Ek to recall this intimate past, but Ek is pressed by more immediate concerns in the present. Across the room, Ek’s wife is grappling over a decision whether to have an abortion or conceive. In frustration, Ek decisively breaks ties with Chat in the attempt to “abort” significant events from his past. The phone rings again, Ek’s wife picks up, “her face still” and hangs it up five seconds later explaining “wrong number.”

The next scene narrates Chat’s third call to Ek. It is 2 a.m., a time in which Ek sleeps and Chat is up painting. Chat tells a sleepy-eyed Ek that he’s been inspired by a naturalistic landscape where he has recently set up a house by a canal. This landscape, he reminds Ek, is based on discussions they once had about their planned future as artists together, memories of a shared future. The reader begins to doubt Chat’s transcendental idealism and romantic yearning for nature as a similar departure from reality. He too is distanced from the street. Ek, via his transition to a Bangkok highrise, has moved beyond the naturalism of Krishnamurti but also aloof from any conception of street politics. As the phone call ends, Ek pans the apartment’s interior of modern technologies and his
sleeping wife. “Is there really anything so strange about this central image of life? Why should I be ashamed of it? (81)”

The following scene opens with the 2nd call from Chat, a dialogue that cuts between Chat’s static reading habits, a strict adherence to Krishnamurti’s teachings (i.e., self inquiry and the liberation of individual thought) and Ek’s to distance himself from the province. Originally from the rural provinces, Ek went on to study art in Bangkok, the point where he lost contact with Chat. Ek peruses malls and movie theaters and consumes the sanitized condominium verticality of the city. His mobile urban lifestyle contrasts heavily with Chat’s provincial immobility. This phone call largely explains why it is that Chat would be lost in the city at the point he sought to spontaneously locate Ek.

Here, moving backwards in time, the end of the short story positions the founding event of their seemingly eternal bond of friendship. The final scene (followed by a brief reflection on behalf of the narrator) is the first and most significant phone call that Chat makes to Ek. The conversation marks their reunification after over a decade of silence. It is 2 a.m., and Ek is awakened to the familiar voice of an old friend though hesitates with uncertainty as to the initial identity of the caller. We know it is Chat, who has called Ek to offer his condolences for the recent death of Ek’s father. With the passing of time Ek’s circle of friends has changed and Chat was not invited to the funeral. Chat asks if Ek remembers two primary memories. The first is what Thais call “rap nong”, which unlike hazing is a fraternal classmate bond with usually less-violent self-mockery.³¹ Chat was a

³¹ Rap Nong (งานรับน้อง) is a traditional ceremony akin to high school and college ‘hazing’ rites in the West, though far less violent. Here, first year students are challenged in various forms of submission, such as sexualized dancing or adherence to various commands and or drinking
loner, while Ek the socialite at the time was sent over to encourage Chat to participate in the “rap nong” rites. Chat agreed under the condition that Ek would read, from start to finish, a novel by Sujit Wongthej. And so begins their friendship through their mutual engagements with a text. But, as the next memory suggests, texts are legible meeting pints drawn from common places where new bonds begin. In the second memory, Ek and Chat—still classmates in art school—are watching the Black May demonstrations in Bangkok from a television in Khorat (a few hours outside the city). They jump on the first minibus to the city and find themselves caught within the historical intensity of May 1992. Running through streets and alleys amid the rain of military bullets, the two classmates duck behind a wall somewhere near Silapakorn University (Bangkok’s premiere art school, and the institution that will eventually bring Ek to the city). Ek breaks down in tears. The outpouring of emotion evokes a fear of the street battles and the ethical bond of friendship in the moment. Ek, as Chat reminds him in this phone call, then and there in 1992 verbalized the words “friends til death”. In these last pages of Uthid’s short story, in the first phone conversation, Ek cries. Emotion flows back into the structure of neoliberalism that mediates human relationships through communication technologies. And, furthermore, a politics of the street returns from the container of a distant past through the process of rewinding. Finally, the emotional climax, Ek notes, provides the proper moment for mourning the passing of his father.

games, by elder veterans of their school programs. On one hand, some argue these rites are crucial in forming lasting peer bonds. On the other side of the debate, conservative moral authorities tilt toward banning the tradition.
The authors of chronological events are taped over through new personalized, and mulit-temporal, accounts. And while both characters of this account appear as disillusioned products of the Thaksin era, this final episode repositions Chat as “someone who has come back to steal my heart once more.” It is a memory with a short lifespan, and an interruption, Ek concludes, from “a container of youth we keep in storage.” The reverse chronology of this story, despite its inability to bring two characters into permanent contact, return them to the streets where videoscapes of violence can be remembered. The incorporation of a video form into a work of contemporary Thai fiction is implicit to this political return.

**Conclusion: Forgetting and Remembering**

Thai people do not forget easily, but Thai people have pursued a forgetfulness of various events through the process of writing and history molding, which deliberately overlook significant events that have unfolded in the past. (Chusak 1996: 50)

Chusak Pattarakulvanit, in his reflection on the role of history writing, hints at the violence of capturing the past as a process that buries other bodies, other accounts, beneath the surface of its all encompassing image. It is often more pleasant to forget than to mine a violent past. But instead of simply illustrating what has been forgotten, Uthid’s story form emphasizes the replay of events. As Chusak reiterates, chronologies overwrite the past. The question is whether individuals, as much as the videoscapes themselves, are
not sites of alternative playback. Haven’t playback technologies of the post-Black May era reveal the concealed?

Callahan (1998: 145) concludes that modernity is to blame for the loss of memory after 1992, and arrives at this conclusion by compiling street, institutional, and literary memories. Callahan shows that different groups have different reasons, around which they organize strategies, for remembering Black May. Like modernity’s demand to move forward, the exhibition of the event seems to result in foreclosure. But even if Pitch Phongsawat suggests, with Callahan, that forgetting is a process in the “active construction of images,” people’s active critique of memory is equally pervasive. For Alan Klima, the filth of bootlegged videos productively countered the cleansing of a city after May 1992, where a “new world order” of neoliberalism required new forms of exchange: specifically, the clearing away of dead bodies. I am suggesting that the cityscape, as the site of screens and fictionalized political events, remains a significant medium of memory. It is from the city that all medias are most heavily narrated and, in the case of Thailand’s most significant two political battles in 30 years, where violence is most visible. It is the coincidental encounters with such spaces, the texts within texts, that chronologies are pushed backward upon reflection.

Tao doesn’t want to remember. But Sayew suggests that forgetting, in the metatextual re-staging of 1992 by the film team, is unlikely. Words, such as Thaksin’s “Think new, act new” slogan, fall short of the resonance of an urban past that must

32. I derive Pitch’s standpoint from his lecture notes from Week 10 of a course on Thai politics called “From Facism to Political Reform and the transitions of Political Science.” In the final two pages he offers an inciteful summary of Callahan’s work. See Pitch Phongsawat (2010).
include political violence. The depth of history is instilled in how deep one penetrates its technologies of presentation—always modified in reverse through poetics as much as ideology.

The above recollections unfold within urban spaces where creative media compilation proliferates, and where events most often find their centers. To playback an event is to extend, filter, and manipulate its duration as a superimposition of one time over another. These videoscapes, as landscapes played back through media screens, fold into significant critiques of sanctioned political memories during the Thaksin era. Furthermore, the video moments of Black May organize time through a return to the street, and establish their plausibility, disorder, and analogues by recovering bodies, events, ideas, memory, and possible futures.
Montage 4: Landscapes

The intersection between the street and media perception can be mapped by focusing on windows of landscape encounter. This means, for instance, questioning how different kinds of urban expression (architecture, planning, noise, maps) are framed. The body of the urban dweller registers and projects the landscape through frames. For Laura Marks (2000), film is itself an embodied landscape, or “an experience of bodily similarity to the audiovisual images we take in” (xvii). Furthermore, urban landscapes are themselves audiovisual “disjunctions” that force the viewer to rethink what they see/hear (see also Chion 1994). These disjunctions are coexistent yet ruptured relationships between body and screen, sound and image. Marks roots “intercultural” engagement in such an “audio/visual disjunction,” for example in the films of Trinh T. Minh-ha, where the voices of post-war vulnerable bodies are separated from the body of images that would otherwise frame them (34). We might observe Marks’ treatment of audio/visual disjunctions as the mode through which the body breaks the frame of common horizons (e.g., identity, the nation, etc.) in order to perceive new collective arrangements.

The concept of landscape can also be framed politically in geographic terms. For example, new disciplinary relationships between cultural geography and aesthetics explore the presence of place beyond the fictional frames triangulated through authors, texts and readers. Christ Lukinbeal and Stefan Zimmermann’s The Geography of Cinema: A Cinematic World (2008), is organized to “fully address all the modalities of film geography” as a means to focus on the settings of the cinematic world rather than its narratives. Tom Conley makes a similar geographic interrogation of film politics in Cartographic Cinema (2007), and other co-edited collections map cities through poetic intersections of visual culture and urban planning (Dorrian and Rose 2004), comparative literature (Moretti 1999) and the field of politics. However, many of these embodied frames span a limited set of Western and European spaces. Though not directly related to the study of film, Thongchai Winichakul’s (1994) concept of the “geo-body” is remarkable in connecting the national body of maps with viewing subject bodies to expand the range of relevant landscapes into visual studies. In fact, maps illustrate several possibilities for film by illustrating the relationship between nations and the geographic framing of bodies in space.

For pedestrians, travelers, or national subjects, the cinema has always remained central to the embodiment of landscapes beyond controlled viewing practices through “sight-seeing” and the emotional cartography of space (see Bruno 2002). Moreover, everyday routines insert new frames into urban scenes, from a scene from a Skytrain window to the audiovisual disruptions of a street scene. These audiovisual fields of everyday life exude what Victor Burgin (2006) has called the cinematic heterotopia, or the space where displaced parts of film are encountered. It is not simply film festivals,

33. Fredric Jameson’s The Geopolitical Aesthetic (1995) is the exception in treatment of “new wave” films from Taiwan and the Phillipines. His peripheral mapping of the margins of late Capitalism, however, fits within a totalizing generalization of a Hegelian world-system.
living rooms, or electronic billboards that run film trailers along elevated train routes, or black and white film memories that we’ve substituted with our own, but all of the above.
Fig. 4.1 “Thailand is a giant tree.” (Personal photo, Bangkok Arts and Cultural Center, 2010)

Fig. 4.2 “Violence” (Personal photo, Bangkok Arts and Cultural Center, 2010)
CHAPTER 4. BROADCAST: STREET POLITICS AND SCREEN CULTURE AFTER THAKSIN

Fig. 4.3 Crackdown Cartography (Personal drawing)
The real must be fictionalized in order to be thought. (Rancière 2006: 38)

The stage is the street itself. The audience stand or are seated along its sides, on the sidewalk, on balconies, or in front of windows. (Crapanzano 1986: 61)

The 2006 Coup

On September 19, 2006, a Thai military coup d’état ousted national Prime Minister and global telecommunications tycoon Thaksin Shinawatra, who was on a trip to the United Nations in New York. Armored tanks rolled through Bangkok that night until they arrived at major intersections and occupied television stations. The military tactic of controlling both urban landscape and broadcast airwaves was not unlike the anti-government street protests in previous months. Both signified a growing disaffection with Thaksin’s unchecked executive power. At the army-owned free-to-air television station Channel 5 the former Miss Asia 1988, Thawinon Khongkran, announced the following re-scripted coup declaration:

- The Council for Democratic Reform under the Constitutional Monarchy which is composed of the leadership of the Royal Thai Military and Royal Thai Police Force have taken control of the situation in the area of Bangkok and surrounding areas and have met no resistance in order to preserve/promote the peace of the country. (*Thailand Announcement* 2006)

The giant tanks cordoning off the city’s key intersections had orchestrated the Royal Thai Military’s first successful coup in 15 years. The following morning, one Channel 7 news
anchor on the “Saket Khao” program narrated images of the military procession through key Bangkok intersections stating, “This is a peaceful coup, not like in the West”. In cinematic montage, different landscapes of the city were represented in various gestures of support for the swift military presence: young girls handed off flowers to low-rank soldiers, a young professional sprayed his luxury BMW with coup slogans, and a mother walked hand-in-hand with her child to see history-in-the-making on “Kids Day.” The military coup unfolded as a non-violent ritual of landscape theater, but also as a televisual event that supplanted consent into the political event.

But the manufactured complicity during this time did not fool many, even as urban Thai media became increasingly regimented. Television was the first institution to come under the new guidelines of the interim military junta in 2006. Major channels were occupied as security guards and urban police regiments enforced martial law with camcorders.34 At the same time, an emergent genre of documentary fiction waged an aesthetic resistance to this media governance and formed a zone of ambiguity within new transmissions of political communication and control. As television governs truth claims about Thailand’s fractured political present, Bangkok’s post coup poetics demonstrate new forms of resistance. The examples that follow are thus concerned with the relationship between the militant sphere of broadcasting and a responsive media aesthetics that arose as a critical analogue to the 2006 coup.

Specifically, Bangkok became illuminated as two different kinds of landscapes: an orchestration of a political event; and a documentarian critique of the dominant images

34. See Bhumiprabhas, Subhatra, Pravit Rojanaphruk, and Pennapa Hongthong (2006).
of broadcasting. In this way, cities become audiovisual documents that are neither fictional nor real, but negotiations formed from the assemblage of an aesthetic regime of images. On one hand, governments broadcast an appeal to truth, on the other a projection of disagreement within conventional forms of representation. Competing with the dominance of post-coup broadcasts of truth, films like *The Truth Be Told* (2007) *Agrarian Utopia* (2009), as well as Panu Triwej’s short story “The Phenomena of a person who disappeared from the life of another” (2009) reorient the political within an aesthetic regime of documentary fiction. The Bangkok landscapes presented in these works operate outside a prevalent televisuality by critiquing truth common to the representation of reality. These works question contemporary representations of politics, by reading the landscape against the documentary form itself. Furthermore, they show how televisuality works as a property that “connects” images by reassembling sequences from film, television, literature and the broader aesthetic regime of Bangkok after the coup.

**Thaksin and Aesthetic Regimes**

The ouster of Thaksin Shinawatra coincided with a top-down ordering of political communication and control, especially since his rise and fall from power hinged upon media management. Since the early 1990s, the self-made entrepreneur built media clout by acquiring satellite concessions and investing in profitable mobile phone networks. During this time, as Ara Wilson (2004) observes, Thaksin’s development of the kingdom meant that he “would represent Thailand” (138). These partnerships between politics and
imagery consolidated political power throughout the 1990s (gaining a suspicious momentum after Black May 1992 and the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis) by penetrating Thailand’s expanding communication infrastructure. During his premiership (2001-2006), Thaksin infiltrated the 24-hour news and entertainment channel, Independent Television (ITV), and set up government media projects, such as Thailand Creative & Design Center (TCDC), to develop “creative economy” strategies. Thaksin’s media trajectory symbolized the rise of neoliberal programs in Bangkok filtered through significant governmental control. These national directives were aimed toward positioning Thailand as a technological hub of Asian globalization after the Asian Financial Crisis even as Thaksin strengthened the nation-state’s monopolization of dominant modes of media expression.

Thaksin’s communications empire seemed threatened only in the 8 months preceding the September 2006 coup. Between January and September, protest movements against Thaksin utilized cable television to shift public opinion. The coup could be waged, as in 1991, because the larger media machinery had communicated approval. In 2006, Sonthi Limthongkul’s Asia Satellite TV (ASTV) channel provided the cable transmission of the street protests of the People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD). These protests gave visibility to an oppositional politics, but also fueled the potential for a coup by visualizing the existence of a critical mass against Thaksin (Baker and Phongpaichit 2009). People began to look outside their windows for validation of what they saw on television, through frames that open into the everyday exterior of urban landscapes. But the approval wrought by images is momentary and ephemeral, and the landscape of Bangkok, since 2006, has been rocked by violent aftershocks of the coup.
Windows have become vantage points for attack while screens capture these settings like windows above landscapes of violence. Collectively, these scenes are compiled by the broadcasting of Bangkok in the present.35

Broadcasting thus produces and validates violence, but also constricts the representation of political subjectivity.36 Jacques Rancière’s concept of an “aesthetic regime” is useful here in its interrogation of how political subjectivity is represented. The aesthetic regime of images emphasizes how subjectivity might be creatively reconstituted as political outside of those presupposed representations. Equality, as the governing principle of the aesthetic regime, calls into question the borders separating classes, categories, and genres that order different types of images. During a street protest in March 2010, Jatuporn Promphan’s rally cry “we have our own aesthetics” spoke to an equality of subjects with regard to images used to stigmatize their presence, beyond the screened communications of practical politics and into their renewed projection of Bangkok’s Old City landscape. There, a variety of art installations became background

35. The most violent aftershock of the 2006 coup arrived between March and May 2010 alone, now available in a vast visual and journalistic archive. Major-General Khattiya Sawasdpipol, who had sided with protestors calling for new elections, was assassinated while being interviewed by a New York Times reporter Thomas Fuller. Hiro Muramoto, a Reuters cameraman was shot dead as he filmed the April 10, 2010 standoff between soldiers and an unknown “black” clad group near a popular backpacker refuge in the bureaucratic center of Bangkok. The online images of both events attest to the morbid extremes of political video.

36. These perspectives popular in the study of political communication is, largely, derived from the ontological dimension of Plato’s cave allegory in Book VII of The Republic. These mimetic approaches range from textbook paradigms, as summarized in Richard Huggins’ “Political Communication and the Media” (Axford et al. 2009), to the aesthetic “society of the spectacle” approaches of the Situationists (Debord 1994). For Plato, stationary subjects collectively view shadows of events in place of their source in reality. In the allegorical darkness of a cave, subterranean subjects are depoliticized from an active critique of images because they lack a spatial point of reference. There is no movement, nor changing points of view. Against Plato’s limited perspective on the use of images to “educate the citizenry” from the top-down, there are openings in images that exceed their originary presentation.
for photographs and a military crackdown broadcast in real time. Their aesthetic approach continued into other areas of image management. At another April 2010 protest site at Rachaprasong Avenue in the New City section of Bangkok, protestors covered traffic/police surveillance cameras with the explanation “they’ve blocked our media, so we will block theirs”.

This resistance to being screened, and the desire toward re-presentation is a response to the dominance of contemporary image technologies. These technologies constitute what a recent Bangkok art exhibition has called “the broadcasting of life.” The exhibit housed in the Numthong Gallery of the Bangkok Art and Cultural Center asks the viewer to consider whether “we are losing our abilities to separate reality from the virtual” (Lertyasao, Hengsapkul, Pichtkul 2011). Are not, however, settings in film designed to anchor a story in a real world? And is it not the case that documentaries and televised news coverage dramatize events that are presupposed to have happened by means of its managed broadcast? In Bangkok, especially during times of significant political upheaval, media broadcasts are saturated with fictions, not journalistic integrity.

In the second half of the 20th century, Raymond Williams showed how a variety of advertisements, dramatized serials, and news programs complicated distinctions between fiction and the real world. The rising dominance of television could thus reproduce dominant ideologies in a never-ending broadcast. In television, time slots are divided among various shows and linked through advertisements. Televisuality is thus a succession of discontinuous temporal sequences held together within a continuous durational flow. Though Williams’ work is concerned with television in the late 1970s,
his thoughts on televisuality sketch a framework for the broadcasting in other media spheres.

[O]ne of the most obvious elements of television is its quality as sequence. We can switch on and off for particular programmes but in some ways the programmes are conceived as a whole and they’re often received as a continuity. I have come to feel lately that the kind of analysis we most need is of this general flow: of the organization, the methods and the values within and through which particular programmes occur. (Williams 1989: 133)

Williams felt that television followed broader patterns of modern living. He writes, for example, that the cinema and photography followed the everyday movement of social groups in the sense that technology captured “motion”. As both technology and cultural form, television arose in light of the increased domestication of national subjects.

In this sense, the broadcast is the most common mode of participating in political events. The virtuality of surface-level screens is given added depth by connecting a variety of material landscapes in continuous flows. At worst, subjects attribute truth to a dominant broadcast flow and television sets forecast violent outcomes, as in the 2010 protests treated below, or reproduce what urban residents believe they have already observed. From a political standpoint, television thus seems to produce an anticipated order of affairs.

What is being offered is not, in older terms, a programme of discrete units with particular insertions, but a planned flow, in which the true series is not the published sequence of programme items but this sequence
transformed by the inclusion of another kind of sequence, so that these sequences together compose the real flow, the real ‘broadcasting’ (Williams 2003: 91).

To complicate matters further, the “broadcasting of life” has extended beyond television, from screen to landscape and vice-versa through new social media channels. Televisual flows can no longer be contained within either domestic spaces or the technology of television itself. The way in which everyday image sequences flow through new modes of audiovisual distribution complicate previous understandings of broadcasting as a “planned flow... perhaps the defining characteristic of broadcasting” (86). At one angle, individuals disconnect from intended televisual representations and other obligatory modes of media exchange. From another, events escape the limited frames of television as they flow into the streets.

**Televisuality and Truth**

In art exhibitions, street protests, and televisual theory, the ordering of screens within the context of flow and broadcast presupposes a gap between image and reality. Locating truth, i.e. closing the gap, becomes an ultimate goal. I have thus far approached televisuality as antithetical to an aesthetic regime of images because it favors truth at the expense of ignoring disagreement. This relationship between media and truth is related to Thailand’s complex media history where art forms compete in the hierarchical management of national agendas.
The entrance of visual technologies into Thailand hinged upon the management of truth. Photography, because of its visual comport with Western epistemological dominance, was perceived as a truth machine (Apinan 1990). The still photograph was followed by the movement of sound and image regimes as telephones and film entered Bangkok at the end of the 19th century. In the first part of the 20th century, these mediums existed primarily as novel toys of monarchical exploration until the 1930s, when political events demanded the deployment of centralized methods of audiovisual control that coincided with a de-centralizing urban city. As power shifted in the 1932 coup, the institutionalization of the media through the Publicity Division (renamed the Public Relations Department in 1952) began to regulate the emergent media forms of radio and television by requiring individual licensing. In the 1950s, television wars took place between Channel 4’s Thai Television Company and the Army-run Channel 7 to create, today, a televisual memory ranging from propaganda to coup announcements replayed in film. This televisual memory unfolds, for example, in Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000) where several post-Pacific War scenes connect government “announcements” with nationalist sentiment through radio broadcasts. In a similar way, anti-street protests segments were aired in the spring of 2010 using black and white images of the torched Black May ruins of the Publicity Division.

Between the 1980s and 1990s, the neoliberal era of Thai politics enhanced its visual broadcast by linking image transmissions into a competitive divide between corporate and government priorities. In 1987, for example, Channel 3 took out a 30-year lease from the Mass Communications Organization of Thailand (MCOT), in order to
upgrade their predominantly urban Bangkok transmission to a national and transnational reach. MCOT’s existing channel 9 would be able to “ride piggyback” as a media partnership. Millions and dollars of loans from Bangkok Bank were used to structure the deal, primarily to build “replay and transmission stations,” in exchange for placing a family friend as president of Bangkok Entertainment, the largest telecommunications consolidation at the time. As the transmission stations became operational, the media consolidation began to rival the army-run Channel 7. “Lavish colorful promotion” and low-priced antennas combined with live coverage of sporting events to lure “upcountry” audiences (Ralnat 1990). The expansion of television could lead to communication links that had previously not existed, especially in connections between Bangkok and Thailand’s provincial regions. As a media geopolitics, television partnerships would decentralize older networks of power established by decades of military dictatorship. Their success, as Annette Hamilton presciently documents, was short-lived:

The [1991] coup that overthrew the government and inaugurated the brief but terrifying era of General Suchinda Krapayoon was in part a response to increasing media freedom and the rising political demands of an affluent “new class,” which were being articulated on television and in both the Thai- and English-language press. (Hamilton 516: 1993)

Hamilton thus finds an articulation of political subjects through the rising relevance of television and viewer participation. During the Black May 1992 street protests, national audiences participated in the dénouement of violence when, on television, General Suchinda Krapayoon and protest opposition leader Chamlong Srimuang sat below King Bhumibol at the Bangkok palace. This event marks the most heavily viewed and replayed
television event in Thailand’s media history. Sitting above the deferential opposition leaders, King Bhumibol called an end to the conflict. This televisual “end” enclosed the narrative by ignoring the rising death toll in the landscape outside. In the subsequent months, bootlegged videos emerged to expose one-sided television censorship through its counter-archive of brutality.

The most significant backlash to government control over the broadcast of Black May emerged in the form of grassroots media reform campaigns. But it was only through the convergence of the Crown Property Bureau and the Nation Multimedia Group that Independent Television (iTV) was made possible in 1995. As Thailand’s first public broadcasting station (each shareholder was limited to a 10% stake), iTV sought to restore truth through its 70 percent news-to-entertainment mandate. Meanwhile, the expansion of cable television nourished a pre-Asian Financial Crisis middle class with digital technologies motivated by “the quality of the programming, the stereo sound on fiber-optic cable, and so on.” (Burpee 1996) Digital cable networks began to replace conventional transmission stations because they were cheaper and could be sold on the basis of technological innovation.37

In both television coverage of event settings, as well as transitions in urban infrastructure that accommodate televisual networks, the virtual streams of national

37. "Five years ago, this would have cost $20 million and required a huge broadcast facility. Now, for a fraction of that cost [$3.5 million], with fewer people, you can create a digital signal, perfect. UTV is fielding inquiries for 5,000 new subscribers a week…they can't lay the cable fast enough." Said Itthivat Bhiraleus, chairman of Broadcasting Network Thailand (BNT).
broadcasts heavily mediate Bangkok’s image.\textsuperscript{38} Throughout the 1990s, media scholar Thitinan notes, mass media institutions like television began to rival “real estate and property development” as strategic investment opportunities (217). Amid urban decadence and global divestiture, the Asian Financial Crisis spawned the consolidation of competing medias in Thailand. Films projected Bangkok in the craned and unfinished landscape of neoliberal architecture and government corruption. Against corruption, Thaksin’s new post-1997 alliance with former media competitor Charoen Pokphand expanded the number of screens where a new Thai Rak Thai party began to disseminate direct communication tactics with the assistance of professional advertising firms (Funston; Baker & Phongpaichit 2001). Thaksin’s landslide electoral victory in 2001 arrived precisely within an urban landscape where, amid other unforeseen consequences of 1997, media reform unfolded against directed attempts to control it. Throughout Thaksin’s premiership media reform surged against his increasing management of media markets. But these campaigns failed to register the maneuvering of virtual flows within the representational regime of truth that must always be questioned. One of Thaksin’s key competitors, Telecom Asia, changed its name to “True” on the Stock Exchange of Thailand (SET) and spread throughout Bangkok in a new type of flow that included coffee shops and mobile communications. Rather than treat this truth flow within the corporate frames of competition, the cinematic critique of documentary fiction attempts to recover the material depth lost in the virtuality of televisual flows.

\textsuperscript{38} Indie labels like Bakery Music and Thai-based global conglomerates like EMI both suggested that these cable stations would help strike a balance between niche demographics and mass markets. (Burpee 1996).

The Thaksin years comprise the golden age of Thai globalization. It is a post-Asian Financial Crisis resurrection and a re-packaging of “civilization” through the appearance of global management. Media technologies and screen culture become a form of micro-management, where the relationships between individuals and media became emblematic of national political concerns. As telecom reform became a national priority, especially in the year immediately preceding Thaksin’s election, NGOs like the Campaign for Popular Media Reform (CPMR) drew attention to governmental interference in media industries. In particular, they questioned the institutional procedures of appointing regulatory officials. Until 2006, the CPMR led the critique against Thaksin’s attempt to dominate national airwaves. The deputy secretary-general of the CPMR, Supinya Klanarong, waged a publicity campaign against Thaksin’s use of “executive decrees” to manage media industries. The issue of truth, within a dominant distribution of images, remained a primary theme waged against the political fictions of Thaksin’s media markets. The issue of access to representation, in image as in political institutions, underpinned the shifts from democracy building to urban presence.

Pimpaka Towira’s film *The Truth Be Told* (2007) “documents” the everyday struggles of media reform activist Supinya Khlanorong and her critique of Thaksin Shinawatra. Supinya’s personal struggle was popularized throughout Thailand through her participation in heavily televised Peoples Alliance for Democracy (PAD)
demonstrations. Instead of capturing her onstage activities, the documentary film follows her everyday movements around Bangkok as she fights a million dollar court case prosecuting her for libel. As an average Jane fighting the Thaksinian machine, her legal plight attributes to her a rare valiance as she searches for a room of her own amid a landscape of political chauvinism. But before trial concludes, the documentary plot is beset by the 2006 coup. In the final scenes, soldiers commandeer television stations during the night to prepare the nation for “official” military broadcasts. As night turns to day, an overhead establishing shot captures tanks rolling into Bangkok along a fluttering tree-lined street. Shortly before the credits role, the camera slowly zooms toward the trees from a second floor window. From this window the audience notices the frame of another window. As a document, this concluding sequence identifies this historical day in Bangkok as September 19th 2006. As a fictional motif, the window directs attention to events outside a simple story about Supinya. The military, through subversion of screen and landscape, has occupied the final scenes of the film.

The film’s final sequence suggests that the military has invaded primary modes of national representation. A military presence relies on a coerced system of spatial reassignment, which obstructs the possibility of a proper ‘resolved’ ending to Supinya’s struggle. Unlike Pimpaka’s interruption of the documentary plot of The Truth Be Told, Bangkok television stations accounted the disruptive coup by assuring the public that everything was normal, if not improved. The military, and complicit television channels, operated within a politics of representation that Jacques Rancière calls “the distribution of the sensible”: 132
I call the distribution of the sensible the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it. (Rancière 2004: 12)

What can be seen in a landscape (or referenced), or what appears in repetition in dominant media channels, orders the “parts” that are to be recognized. In such ways, Rancière finds images to be policed. The regime of “ethical” and “representational” truth, that Rancière draws from a critique of Plato and Aristotle respectively, is thus premised upon an essential co-belonging of parts. In this critical tradition, Pimpaka’s film demonstrates a disagreement about a national order through a mise-en-scène that projects “parts and positions within” a larger distribution of sensibility. A window appears in the final scene as a departure from the representations of dominant screens. Its frame forces the viewer toward an alternative image of the natural landscape. Pimpaka’s decision of the final shot of *The Truth Be Told* enlists the film’s alternative logic. Rather than represent the ideological views of Supinya, or position an outcome for the military’s invasion of Bangkok landscapes and screens, the final sequence calls upon viewers to imagine new relations.

In the film, Supinya’s yellow shirt seems to project a recognizable affiliation. Media mogul Sonthi Limthongkul organized the protest movement known as the Peoples Alliance for Democracy (PAD) in February 2006 by encouraging his followers to wear yellow shirts. He began, like other protests to follow, by starting at Old City sites and then continued toward the shopping center and park spaces of the New City to project urban middle class loyalties. The yellow shirts exist between a cable television station
(ASTV) and a street presence, and are perceived as consenting to—if not activating—the current military role in politics (Baker and Phongpaichit 2009). In the preface to the first Thai language book on Rancière, Thammasart University political theorist Chairat Charoensin-olarn (2010) speaks to an immediate relationship to current Thai street politics:

At the time of the political mobilization of the People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD) in 2006 and the emergence of a critique of rural voters by characterizing them as ‘victims’ of populist policies disseminated by the Thai Rak Thai party, I’ve been brought to consider Rancière’s *Disagreement* once again. This is because I feel that rural voters, or the grassroots, resemble ‘the part recognized so as not to be counted’ in Thai society. This moved me to read Rancière more seriously and expand into other domains of his work. (my translation of Charoensin-olarn 2010: 7-8)

Collective politics build around virtual networks, links between urban spaces, events, and media screens. Rancière views political operations as a collection of parts that break from dominant representations of the whole. As a cinematic procedure, new relationships are “cut” from the generalizations of media images for an extended reflection on the problems of a particular distribution of the sensible. Rancière so notes:

The image is never a simple reality. Cinematic images are primarily operations, relations between the sayable and the visible, ways of playing with the before and the after, cause and effect. These operations involve different image-functions, different meanings of the word ‘image’.

(Rancière 2007: 6)
Rancière understands such operations as part of a cinematic fable where films can be read against intended designs (e.g., by the director) since a camera always records (passively) contrary results. In other words, the two contrary routes of a film work extend in one direction toward screen representations and another toward the opening up of new seemingly unrelated windows. In this way, *The Truth be Told* fictionalizes the landscape of Bangkok after the coup in order to counter the truth-wielding narratives of national broadcasts.

The prominence of the yellow-shirts during the time period is so pervasive that they routinely invade the screens of popular culture. For example, their presence is felt in scenes from the fictional film *Syndromes and a Century* (Apichatpong Weerasethakul 2006), banned in Thailand for its purposeful mismatching of roles and costume. But no film digs beneath the theatrical fictions of the movement like Uruphong Raksasad’s *Agrarian Utopia* (2009). The final reel of the ambiguously fictional film parallels Pimpaka’s aesthetic departure from plot continuity. In the film, the better part of a year is compressed into two hours as two poor northern families exemplify the relations of the modern-day sharecropper who live and work on land managed by a wealthier tenant. This part of the film is meant to signal the plight of Thailand’s rural majority who remain poor regardless of political shifts in Bangkok. Near the end of the film, the plot of northern land is sold, leaving the two families to separate and seek work elsewhere. According to *Cinemascope*’s Robert Koehler (2010), *Agrarian Utopia* is “recording” in the broader tradition of documentary fiction, but capturing its images through some departure from truth. For example, in an earlier scene from the film, politicians speak on stage in a town center while rural laborers vaguely feign interest. From the scene Koehler observes,
“Uruphong’s camera and microphone don’t make these pols seem like fools so much as actors playing roles in a public game, a game in which the public is all too willing to join”.

The film then departs from the plot by cutting away from the rural landscape of labor in the final sequence of the film. One of the characters has relocated to Bangkok in order to seek employment as a construction worker. Rather than focus on his labor, the camera follows his foot journey through Bangkok’s Old City, where he observes the 2006 protests that preceded the coup against Thaksin. There he sees images of the middle class PAD who stand against Thaksin’s populist policies. The worker walks by stages and monuments where he observes actor at each turn, dramatizing various political slogans, burning effigies, and representing the “public games” of Bangkok in 2006. The worker stands alone as alienated by the representational regime of images that choreograph anti-Thaksin political theater only months preceding the coup. While the character has remained a center of rural presence in the preceding sequences of the film, he is virtually invisible in Bangkok’s yellow mise-en-scène. In his Thai language preface to The Political Thinking of Jacques Rancière, Chairat Charoensin-olarn (2010) thus notes that rural voters were considered mere “victims’ of populist policies,” rather than intelligible political actors.

As the mirror image of the PAD, the red shirt movement known as the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) capitalized on this representational void in the aftermath of the 2006 coup. Like the subjects of Agrarian Utopia, they lacked presence in the city. The red shirts are perceived as poor and, repeatedly, have assembled in Bangkok against military-appointed regimes and anti-rural policies. As the flipside of
dominant post-coup representations, the UDD represent numbers, as the largest voting block in Thailand, and an absence in terms of their geographic marginality. They are not perceived as “part” of the city. In dominant broadcasts, they are construed as the rural-disposessed, abandoned to the barren and population-heavy Northern/Northeastern region. Contrary to dominant screens, the UDD has successfully inserted windows into the landscape. But this time they used virtual windows. In December of 2008, for example, Natthawut Saikua’s “From the land to the sky,” invoked naturalistic landscape tropes as an allegorical means of elaborating social hierarchies (see Watha haeng pi 2010). Between the original delivery in 2008 and the replay of the speech in the aftermath of the military crackdown on the UDD in 2010, the video employed fictions to illustrate an untold truth. According to Thai film historian May Adadol Ingawanij (2010), the speech offered a “basis for people’s identification with the redshirts’ movement” through its circulation in new media networks, and circumvented the pro-middle class stance of Bangkok-based television broadcasters as a Youtube clip. Appealing to a topography of political landscapes, Natthawut prophesied: “the voice we’re making now – our cries and shouts – is the voice of people who are worth only a handful of earth… and it will rise to the level of the sky.” Like Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I have a dream” speech, Natthawut’s beautiful imagery superimposed material space upon the virtual screen of a media event available for reflection and replay. These screens also prolonged, and anticipated, a presence beyond the immediacy of the physical landscape.

The travels from earth to sky, is one from horizontal rural structures to the verticality of cities. If it seems that red shirts often invoke images of farm life far from the city, or that middle class yellow shirts dominate the visible “part” of the Bangkok
workforce, these representations merely produce an underclass as foreign to the city. Bangkok’s largest class, even cinematically construed, is the factory and service industry of the post-1980s rural-urban migration wave, so much that Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times* has been dubbed into provincial northeastern “Isan” dialect and sold in middle class spaces. On most days, the urban poor are visible before the middle class awake, cleaning shopping malls before they open, bussed through the city hours before and after the white-collar class pack the fashionable Skytrain. Reflecting on the role of the dispossessed in previous historical moments Klima (2002) offers the most precise of ‘outsider’ descriptions:

They are not apparently newsworthy people. The as-yet-undemoralized urban poor are ordinary people barely getting by on the strength of their values, which they are ready and able to apply to the moral universe around them. The equivalent in countries that were colonized is, perhaps, the class of politicized poor. This class of poor urban Thais has taken on the ideals imparted to them from both state-organized channels and a more traditional inheritance, a moral inheritance that has often been twisted around for use against them. Through aristocratic ideologies, state propaganda, primary school education, popular Buddhism, and through their family ties, they have incorporated ideals that they can take quite literally at times, and that have provided them with some measure of stability in their personal lives, despite all economic odds—which they

39. In 2008, I purchased my copy at Tesco Lotus kiosk on Rama IV Road two blocks from National Stadium.
can clearly see are stacked neatly against them. But then, as people are wont to do, they begin to apply these ideals to the literal reality before their eyes. (Klima 2002: 112)

Like Klima’s account of the “as-yet-undermoralized urban poor” during Black May 1992, the red shirts were not simply rural. On the contrary Pravit Rojanaphruk finds that the red shirts were circulating their media in spheres of the landscape considered middle class strongholds: “in bookstores on the Skytrain, in newspaper shops and bookstores in shopping malls like Siam Paragon, B2S in Central Chidlom or Thonglo or Lad Phrao.” (Prachatai 2010) In other words, presence is not simply documented but managed in images. The ordering of protestors into a distribution of colored t-shirts fed into dominant government representations. If television worked with common representational conventions of the poor and uneducated, the political regime of cinema attempts to restore equality.

The UDD in Tropical Malady (Apichatpong Weerasethakul 2004)

Most people that tuned into a television set in Thailand between March and May 2010 will recall the government-sponsored commercials that switch between an animated version of “the Thai village” set in flames through villainous forces, and a more realistic dilapidated setting of Bangkok’s old city ravaged by the protests of Black May 1992. Fewer people recall the limited 2004 screening of Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s Tropical Malady (2004). Both entail a similar ending.

Flashforward. When the Siam Theatre burned to the ground during the May 2010 crackdown on UDD protestors, numerous Facebook posts recalled their favorite memory of the cinematic space. Lap-dissolve. The film sprung to mind at the beginning of March 2010 as Bangkok administered preparations for the coming protests. I thought of the limited 2004 screening to a Bangkok weekend crowd, and the exiting audience as they emptied the theater spouting phrases like “I didn’t get it” or “isn’t there an ending?” In the film’s final scenes, a tree wavering in darkness is illuminated by fireflies but then slowly dissolves into the blackened night after the insects depart; a soldier breaks down in tears as he confronts a ferocious tiger speaking to him from the extended branch of a tree; the soul of a white cow appears to depart from its decaying carcass; and, in the final montage of shots, different parts of a large Lumphu tree, known for its attraction of fireflies, appear in succession.

The ending is allegorical. Without a clear narrative, the viewer is invited to connect to various branches of the tree. Who is the wise tiger that dominates the jungle, or the soldier who has embraced an animal-like nature to negotiate its many mysteries, and what is the relationship between death and division, fear and reverence? Apichatpong’s film comprises an aesthetic regime, which helps to elaborate contemporary political forces in two images that bracket the film’s final sequence. As noted above, the key sequence configures radiant fireflies as a means to illuminate a tree as its luminescent leaves flutter in the wind of night. In the latter part of the sequence, the fireflies seem to exit the tree in a subsequent fade to black. Virtually, the scene harks

There was an unbroken chain of them for some ten rods, all flashing their phosphorescence in concert about sixty times a minute. Every flash somewhat resembled a flash of lighting, except that the light was spangled with innumerable bright spots, from which the light emanated. At length, one part of the chain lost its time, then another part, until they had broken into some three or four companies harmonizing in their own groups but not as a whole band. (Dan Beach Bradley, in Warren 2002: 41-42)

It is not only that “parts” of a whole that underpin the function of the firefly between Apichatpong’s film and Warren’s Bangkok landscape, but that the site of Old City protests, Bang Lamphu, is named after the forest of trees that attract fireflies. In this sense, screens become windows that open to possible landscapes whereby Apichatpong’s scene might be positioned as an allegorical presence of national parts. As Susan Hayward (1996) notes, “Cinema makes absence presence; what is absent is made present.” The tree is symbolic of the nation in Thai popular culture, and fire (and by default the firefly) is a trope that warns of national division.

When the UDD’s march on Bangkok began officially on March 12th 2010, a prompt response began to emerge in the following week as Siam Square-based youth group converged at night in candle light ceremonies outside the Bangkok Art and Culture

40 “Cinema makes absence presence; what is absent is made present. Thus, cinema is about illusion. It is also about temporal illusion in that the film’s narrative unfolds in the present even though the entire filmic text is pre-fabricated (the past is made present). Cinema constructs a ‘reality’ out of selected images and sounds” (Hayward 1996: 3).
Centure BACC). Their assembly was designed to urge the red shirts to call off their protest. For the most part, the BACC crowd wore white shirts, a sign of purity and unity against the darkness of national division. As the number of young white shirts dwindled after a few days of “free hug” campaigns, they left behind a “Wall of Freedom” to clarify their views (a throwback to the construction of a “Berlin Wall” in the Old City in the Black May 1992 protests). In one image along white boards stretching across the front of the BACC, a caption is inscribed over a crayon sketch of a tree. It reads “Thailand is a giant tree. Thai people are multi-colored leaves…the tree gives us peace.” (Figure 4.1) Another mural places a tree beside a Thai flag and guitar. The caption reads “Conscious music: stop destroying the Thai nation and cease arguing, [at least] for our father.” Like the ending of Tropical Malady, these two images of shaken trees are lit by the presence of fire in another image that reads “violence”. (Figure 4.2) It is the eve of Thailand’s political future, a night waiting for mourning, a fire signifying the end.

The non-violent white shirts, hedging their bets that red shirts may also break their promises of non-violence, marked up the “freedom wall” with a tree in flames. The cruel irony is that Apichatpong’s Tropical Malady screened in 2004 at the site burned in 2010, less than a ‘stones throw’ from the Freedom Wall. But it didn’t really matter whether the build-up to the March 12th 2010 protest would return to Bangkok far better organized and non-violent than in the protests of previous years. There were always some images somewhere, some sound bite and some archaic landscape reference to invoke fear of inevitable violence. Like the white shirts, make-shift pressure groups like People Who do not Accept Civil War and the Stop Hurting Thailand Group organized “horn – blowing” campaigns from the screens of Facebook (The Nation, “Groups” 2010). Popular
news dailies propagated a “forest surrounding the town” scenario with keywords like “Maoist tactics” to illustrate the vulnerability of the city to the possibility of red shirt violence. (Rajanphurk and Jakawant 2010) The Internal Security Act was swiftly enacted to demarcate “forbidden” space, unless you wore white, multi-colored, or any other color than red.

The red shirts effectively countered this image like fireflies illuminating their presence. In a “blood ritual”, thousands of protestors volunteered to donate 10cc of their blood to stain government buildings, which was designed to leave ‘marks’ upon official space. Then, on March 20th, 65,000 protestors divided their city with the “Red March,” a procession through the major streets of Bangkok in what dominant news outlets called “the largest caravan in Thai political history.” (“Bangkok” 2010) Countering the smear images of the white shirts, the UDD’s art wing then used 45,000 cc of the volunteered blood to paint various textual and iconographic motifs of democracy into the background of the red shirt’s Old City main stage. (“Painted” 2010) On stage Jatuporn Promphan, a Black May student leader turned seasoned party veteran, stated on behalf of the UDD: “we have our own aesthetics”.41

The landscape presence of the Red shirts forced new images into the aesthetic regime of the nation. In a two-day television deliberation, collectively broadcast on all free-to-air channels, government and protest leaders appeared in a choreographed television event known as “the dialogue”. In a well-ordered representational scheme, three blue-shirted Democrat representatives of the government, including PM Abhisit

41. For “aesthetics”, he used the word “silapa watthanatham”.

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Vejajiva, sat across from three red shirt leaders at a neutral location. I watched the television event first from a street-side noodle stand near the official Red shirt protest site at Ratchadamneon Avenue. As I finished eating and walked back to my apartment two blocks away I passed the Democracy Monument where cinema size screens broadcasted the event to a booing audience. They knew the conventions of television were never fair. Equality, Rancière cautions, exists in aesthetic regimes rather than representational ones.

Less than a week later, PM Abhisit Vejajiva appeared alongside the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC) on television and declared a State of Emergence to “restore normality to Bangkok”. At the same time, a surreal battle to restore the red shirt cable and internet broadcast Peoples Television (PTV) unfolded at the frontlines of ThaiCom’s Teleport and DTH Center in the Bangkok suburb of Pathum Thani (“Media” 2010). Just a few days earlier, The Nation (Kwanchai Rungfpaisarn, p.4A) reported that 90% of television viewers get their politics from ASTV (a yellow shirt station) or PTV (the Peoples Channel of the UDD), which requires satellite transmission. Newspapers ran front-page images of red shirts decisively occupying the satellite hub of Thailand’s televisual center in panoramic landscape shots. Everywhere became a window over the landscape. The shock and appeal of such images were rooted in the revelation that screens too can be traced back to specific landscapes as the source for image transmission.

The next day, on the morning of April 10th, the military launched “operation reclaim space” at the stronghold of red shirt protests in the Old City. On television, from Thai PBS to the government-run MCOT, soldiers were seen launching tear gas and so-called “rubber bullets” into crowds of red shirt protestors while tearing through their
temporary infrastructure. But these new televisual scenes could only been measured against previous weeks of protestor demonization, in which Red forces only appeared to torch the nation. By early afternoon, the wind switched directions, blowing tear gas back into the direction of the military procession leading to a brief retreat. By early evening, troops were consolidated at the nearby intersection at Khok Wua, a block west of the Democracy Monument. In the darkness of the evening events become unclear, and only edited video clips form the cinematic memory of a highly volatile historical archive. Through the Sony Handicam of Anthony Joh (“Thai Army” 2010), an hour-long staring contest turns violent as petrol bombs, grenades, bottles and machine gun fire mix with traditional Thai percussion blaring through military loudspeakers. Official accounts record that over 21 civilians died and 858 were injured in the largest incidence of collective violence since Black May 1992.

The red shirts held their protest for another 5 weeks, consolidating their numbers in the more upscale New City. The New City became reappropriated from the usual Rajaprasong Avenue center of Prada, the Four Seasons Hotel, and the favored space of youth fashion shoots. Traffic cameras were turned into security cameras, which the protestors covered with trash bags. Newspapers and government representatives began repeating the word “red terrorists” in the ensuing weeks, and reported that armed groups were creating a separate sovereign nation within the center of Bangkok. The government responded with a tactic they called “the blockade”. As an extension of the State of Emergency, the Centre for the Resolution of the Emergency Situation (CRES) led a decisive military crackdown. As the September 19 2006 coup had shown, military operations in the city always comprise a blockade, a management of the landscape related
to the controlled sequencing of images. Over thirty buildings were burned to the ground during the final military operations. The two most often cited are Central World—housing Bangkok’s largest diorama of international monuments amid its most exclusive fashion boutiques, and the Siam Theater. They appear as the new and the old, the future and the past, one instilled with significant historical distance and the other a far-reaching symbolic link to the world. Between Siam Theater’s screening of *Tropical Malady* and the kinds of presence that link landscape and screens, an aesthetic regime plots the future possibilities of cinematic imagery.  

The question of how landscapes and screens design political events in Bangkok is beautifully expressed in Pimpaka’s shift from the military occupation of the city, it’s commandeering of television stations, and a window that looks toward the natural landscape. The urban landscape exists as a multiplicity of frames that foreclose and direct a variety of perspectives. *New York Times* contributor, Thomas Fuller, best captured the politicized windows of landscape viewing in his observation of Thai street violence in May 2010.

I have come to view my windows as an emblem of the turmoil. The architects of this city’s gleaming apartment blocks and office towers did not anticipate gunfire. They thought about prestige and the liberating feeling of floating above a sprawling metropolis, separated only by glass.

42. Not long after 2007’s Bangkok International Film Festival at Central World, *Art4D* (the oversized equivalent of a Thai language *ArtForum*) devoted an entire issue to the innovative architecture of SF Cinema, underscoring the links between interior and lifestyle. *Art4D* also organized 2007’s Bangkok Design Festival at Central World that year. Until the fire, Central World has occupied the center of post-Thaksinian aesthetics.
A city with floor-to-ceiling windows is a confident city. Sheets of glass, unlike the thick walls and tiny windows of centuries past, send a message: We are not worried about what lurks outside. (Fuller 2010)

Fuller’s account of the 2010 crackdown returns to the link between a window and a landscape in the final sequence from Pimpaka’s *The Truth be Told* (2007). It is the window that Rancière identifies with an aesthetic age where authors write of simultaneous perspectives from several windows to project the multiplicity of experience between film and the real world. This kind of perception, Anne Friedberg (2009) wrote, constitute the “virtual window” where screens of computers, theaters, mobile phones, and television frame the contemporary audiovisual world. Screens become real, forecasting a probability, a window through which landscapes are encountered. From the new city of high-rise condominums to the old city area of Ratchadamnoen Avenue, landscapes become screens as images superimposed over landscapes. Beyond the intended representations guided by controlled conditions, *The Truth Be Told, Agrarian Utopia,* and *Tropical Malady* open new windows into the aesthetic regime of Bangkok after the coup.

**Streets and Windows in Panu Triwej’s “The Phenomenon” (2008)**

I stood up to move toward her, but the closer I got the more trash blocked our path. (Panu Triwej 2008)

Panu Triwej’s short story “The phenomenon of a person who disappeared from the life of another” (2008), disrupts linear political narratives by jumping between time and space.
The story connects a memory of Black May 1992 to a wave of anti-Thaksin street protests leading to his ouster in 2006, but also connects protagonist to the landscape of Bangkok through the virtual windows of new media. The plot is held together by the narrator’s search for a former love interest assumed to have disappeared during 1992, who reappears in the landscape of yellow shirt protests in 2006. As the narrator searches for Rai Dao (lit. “Starless”) amid the 2006 PAD-led protests, he carries around a laptop and maintains a conversation with a friend in Paris named Tin Tin. The story offers hope for the connections that global media technologies entail (e.g., beyond the mass audiences of nation-based televisual control), but laments the disconnection they forge between narrator and his own socio-political landscape. Throughout his movement around Bangkok’s Old City his laptop remains his window to the world.

Engaged in a Microsoft Instant Messaging (IM) conversation with Tin Tin, the landscape of the story (and of its reference to a “hyper-Bangkok”) is mediated by new digital screens. The narrator is married with two children, currently unemployed, and living in an old 3 story shop house in the vicinity of Ratchadomneun Avenue in Bangkok’s Old City. He was also a former student leader during the “Black May” 1992 protests. Tin Tin is preparing to cheer for his national side in the 2006 World Cup.43 Within this general image of national competition, Tin Tin has also observed global television coverage of Thailand’s then Prime Minster Thaksin Shinawatra. In the popular news story that set off a wave of PAD “yellow shirt” protests leading to the coup months

43. In Thongchai Winichakul’s “Introduction” to Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation (1994) begins with a reflection on a televised World Cup match between Denmark and Scotland to show how viewing practices position individuals within a geopolitical arrangement of nations.
later, Thaksin defends the controversial sale of shares to the Singaporean company Temasek. The deal would effectively globalize the majority share of Thailand’s telecommunications industry. These two screens, Tin Tin’s television recollection and the online computer conversation, meet the everyday frame of a car window where, later in the day, the narrator witnesses a yellow shirt protest organized around opposition to the Temasek deal while dropping his kids off at a tutor living nearby.

From this vague introduction to the characters the story already seems to draw a bridge between windows, screens and various modes of encountering the surrounding landscape. The reader must doubt the truth of images at each level. From the car window, the narrator sees Rai Dao who, almost immediately, fades from view. The narrator signs back on to MSN to seek advise from Tin Tin, a conversation the author uses to juxtapose a Black May idealism with a depoliticized present mediated by technological advancements under Thaksin. Later in the day the narrator joins his children’s tutor (a Bangkok school teacher named Mr. Peng). At the protest site, Mr. Peng commands the political enthusiasm of the narrator’s wife and children with his animated gesticulations of a violent history and the construction of national monuments on Ratchadommeun Avenue. Bored and in search of Rai Dao, the narrator walks a few blocks West to Sanam Luang park, the “space of revolutionaries”, which he supposes would be the most probable spot to meet her.

Among the Sanam Luang crowd, the narrator returns to MSN via his wireless laptop: “Bonjour from hyper Bangkok! (81)” he writes to Tin Tin. The narrator remains in Sanam Luang for 10 days, returning home every 3 or 4 days to shower. His time away from home leads to a disheveled appearance and a growing ambivalence between screen
and landscape. In Sanam Luang, a haven for homelessness and transient provincial migrants, the narrator’s appearance begins to distance him from the surrounding middle class protestors. His heat exhaustion and dehydration send him into a mirage. It is reflective montage of the surrounding landscape that include alley vendors, protestors conversations about occupying shopping malls, and a sighting of Rai Dao stepping off a nearby bus. All of the images compete for his attention and Rai Dao thus fades into the fractured schizophrenic landscape. In response the narrator’s futile search for Rai Dao and the heightened anxiety of images leads him into a liquor store. Intoxicated along the sidewalk, the narrator is soon identified as a homeless drunk by some of the fellow protesters and brutally beaten as bystanders shout “Those who don’t work are a despicable kind!” As if emerging from the screen, Tin Tin (or the narrator’s imagination of Tin Tin) rescues the narrator who regains consciousness in a hospital with numerous broken bones but no permanent life threatening damage.

Rai Dao is a symbol of a desire for the real, but screens and their motifs restore order beyond reality’s stable presence. So, the narrator decides, “I didn’t think as heavily about Rai Dao again. It is a past flowing along with blood and the sound of cracking bones” . The narrator, a product of Thaksin’s technological leap forward, is turned to the future but the story points to a point of undecidibility. Neither the virtual character of screens nor the materiality of landscapes validate plausible appeals to reality, but instead exist as perpetual points of ambiguity. A week later, in a wheel chair, the narrator is wheeled to national elections where he “cast a ballot and prayed for everything to quickly return to normal. (89)”
The story is one among numerous stories written after the 2006 coup. Readers are offered windows into the landscapes of post-coup politics constituted by screens of collective identity. Siriworn Kaewkan’s preface to *The Disappearance of Ariya and other Stories* (2006) fits within a similar mise-en-scene of collective identity. The opening line reads, “Currently, most people are wearing yellow shirts. I am wearing red. It’s my personal preference, and I don’t own a yellow shirt” (8). As if the stories to follow will break from the representational regime of Thai politics, Siriworn concludes “But who knows, at some point I may want to wear yellow. Maybe tomorrow, the next day, or some day…” (9) The artist protagonist of Kittipol Sarakanonda’s short story “Illustrations” (2008) receives a phone call from his wife while held up in Bangkok traffic. She mentions that the PAD has occupied the airport, which orients the story within the post-coup temporality of Thai politics. The two primary characters of Pinyo Traisuriyathamma’s short story “Bangkok, Paris, Jang and Cindy: along and old road that brought us together” (2010) encounter PAD street protests on the way to an Old City art gallery. In these otherwise separate genres of contemporary Thai literature, politics invades fiction as the only plausible appeal to truth. Rancière so notes: “The real must be fictionalized in order to be thought” (2006: 38).

**Conclusion: Windows and Screens**

Documentary fiction invents new intrigues with historical documents and thus it touches hands with the film fable that joins and disjoins—in the
relationship between story and character, shot and sequence—the powers of the visible, of speech, and of movement. (Rancière 2006: 18)

It is difficult to come to terms with a politics that is rooted solely in the relationship between art works and a departure from their conventions. But a historical document, as the above epigraph suggests, is concerned not simply with the “documentary” but the entire regime of fiction where the conventions of representation are worked out. I have attempted to work through a variety of media vocabularies that frame political events and re-work the relationship through a variety of windows. These redistributions of images counter dominant screen media broadcasts, on one hand, and anchor new perspectives within recognizable political landscapes. The landscapes of street politics during the Thaksin era are accessed through material and virtual windows. These landscapes are visible from outdoor observations of protestor/military occupations of the street, but competing television broadcasts form the dominant windows to the city. These broadcasts impinge upon the culture of post-coup street protest which often turn violent according to the tele-visualization of anticipated outcomes.

The medium of television provided the most vivid dissemination of national representations in a vibrant screen culture where dominant political personalities competed for the management of relevant images. As a national broadcast, Thaksin’s rise and fall from power operated within the flow of images that later validated the latent return of military presence in September of 2006. The broadcast comprised the intentions of political actors, and also mediated the voice of street protestors within the narrow conventions of representation. Between Thaksin, the military, the PAD yellow shirts, and
the UDD red shirts, the landscapes of politics filtered through a broadcast managed from above.

On the other hand, the aesthetic regime of images questions the violence of representation by creating new orders of re-arrangement. Pimpaka Towira’s *The Truth Be Told* (2006) and Uruphong Raksasad’s *Agrarian Utopia* (2009) demonstrate the way in which documentary appeals to truth can be deformed through their departure from the dénouement of plot. The ending of each of these films emphasize the ongoing post-coup limbo of street protests in Bangkok but also restore a sense of dignity to subjects beyond the representational assignments common to national conventions. While Pimpaka juxtaposes the military occupation of Bangkok with a window above the landscape, Uruphong “stages” the presentation of street politics in Bangkok as a fictional via its distance from the people it proposes to represent. In both cases, the work of fiction generates a more plausible approach to truth and the national document.

The landscape motifs of UDD street protests in 2010 through a comparison between Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s *Tropical Malady* (2004) and a contemporaneous white shirt non-violence protest at the Bangkok Arts and Culture Center demonstrate the regime of fiction as a garden of political references. This case study shows that ways in which landscapes produce images. Panu Triwej’s re-interpretation of the 2006 anti-Thaksin protests in his short story “The phenomenon of a person who disappeared from the life of another” (2008) provides an additional case study for the relationship between fiction and politics. The narrator’s encounter with various screens and windows frame the landscape as heavily mediated and susceptible to misrepresentation. His story exemplifies
a growing genre of Thai literary fiction where everyday relationships filter through political landscapes.

It is from the street where violence is most visible. Everyday landscape encounters, the documentary fictions that drive stories beyond frames, point to a variety of alternative perspectives on Bangkok since 2006.
Montage 5: Soundscapes

Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s first feature length film, *Mysterious Objects at Noon* (2000), is unique in the way it renders the sounds of bodies before revealing them visually. The film begins with the vocalization of various voices that emerge from the radio of a truck as it moves through the visible streets of Bangkok. A megaphone on the top of the truck amplifies the voice of its driver who has arrived in the city to sell fish and other perishable goods in its cargo. When the truck comes to a halt to deal with customers in an urban alley, in a space that appears to be a construction-site manned by provincial workers, we hear the voice of one of the truck vendors narrating her personal history: of a body sold into labor by her parents at a young age. The bodies of her oppressors are evoked in cut-away shots: to billboards of contemporaneous politicians and campaign ads. In an immediate break from this narrative, an “off-screen” interviewer asks, “Do you have any other stories to tell us? It can be real or fiction. From a book or something.”

From this pseudo-documentary world of Bangkok sometime between 1997 and 1999, cut between laborers at street-level and their everyday referents, a fictional world takes shape. The film is about how every story is constituted by its missing parts. Because each of its characters lack voice in dominant national representations, sound is employed as a tool of voice recovery. Most treatments of this film revolve around its visual qualities, and the way a its camera crew travel through Thailand—leaving the city to map the country from North, West, East, and finally South. But the film’s ability to restore presence to Thailand’s vulnerable bodies is accomplished through its sonic cartography.

*Mysterious Object* arrives several years after the second so-called “new wave” in Thailand, during what many speculators had called a renaissance in Thai film (Stephens 2001). Shot during the late 90s economic downturn, Apichatpong’s film represents resistance to the single narrative by using the surrealist technique of Exquisite Corpse to traverse the multiplicity of the Thai landscape. At the time of release, the recent Art Institute of Chicago graduate had been working outside of a global studio system. This global studio system entered Thailand on the heals of a network of film markets latched onto Cannes, Venice, Berlin and other dominant global cities. Companies like Miramax and Fortissimo recruited the innovative styles of fellow Thai film-makers like Wisit Sasanatieng and Pen-ek Ratanaruang. As Chuck Stephens (2001) chronicled for the Village Voice, these companies were fast setting up shop in Bangkok. While other contemporaneous Thai films exploited the accentuated color schemes of a “nostalgic” cinematic past (see Harrison 2007), *Mysterious Object* was filmed in 16mm black and white, a film stock directly related to the hardships of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. It’s lack of visual style in the kitch network of global markets is replaced by the way it records urban sound as a site for political investigations.

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44. In the post-war era of Thai film-making, where newsreel footage dominated the cinemas—as in other countries, “reversal film” stock (non-negative film) left behind was used to make narrative studio films which produced its “classic” vivid color of older Thai films. Many film critics called new Thai cinema postmodern and nostalgic in this referential and anachronistic use of color in films like *Tears of the Black Tiger* (Wisit Sasanatieng 2000).
Mysterious Object, as the Thai fiction writer and film critic Uthid Hemamul (2001) once wrote, is not Thailand ready-made but “Thailand” as a project. The exterior urban soundscape develops the interior world of film to accentuate peripheral spaces and objects (e.g. natural sounds of shaking trees, crickets, wind, or the fast paced Thai modernity that produces the mechanical sounds of laborers, locomotive movement, television, radios, and the infinity of off-screen sources that evoke inquiries rather than sonic origins). Even if the camera misses these parts of Bangkok, the soundtrack recovers them as aural [mysterious] objects. This overall sound design captures some measure of the everyday, not simply relegated to the materiality of film, but restoring a presence to those otherwise inaudible.

To give voice to the marginalized, a film crew travels around to record the nation’s voiceless groups. They begin at the street to tap into the nation’s historical relationship to mass oppositional movements, but also to position the film’s politics as “ground-up.” The prominence of urban noise emphasizes a sound design common to laborers in the aural landscape of Bangkok. From a mobile cargo truck, their goods are marketed through a speaker system at high volume. The film crew moves from place to place asking various voiceless characters to tell a story about a fictional character named Dogfahr. The story content is mere formulaic experiment that makes no coherent sense. One must simply note that there are interconnected versions of a story, controlled by the way each group builds upon previously recorded versions after listening to them collectively. This sonic motif carries into other references to sound. For example, in one version of the story, Dogfahr (“the mysterious object) is a young woman who takes care of her semi-deaf father. In a provincial doctor’s office, father and daughter consult with the middle aged female doctor about ways to improve his hearing. The doctor recommends that the father purchase a hearing aid, which Dogfahr argues is out of their price range. But, at the heart of this conversation is an analogue to national politics: people are not listening to each other. Seeking more than routine medical advice, the father states, “My daughter doesn’t care about me, doctor.” The ensuing conversation weaves together a variety of sonic tropes:

Father: whenever I turn the T.V. on for news or music…
Dogfahr: but that’s a lot of money…
Father: She says it’s too loud.
Doctor: Listen, I will explain it to you.
Father: But when she goes to church…
Doctor: Listen, listen…if you don’t do anything it will get worse.
Father: But when she goes to church…the music there is so loud.
Doctor: Wait, wait…I’m trying to explain to you. If you don’t get the hearing aid your symptoms will get worse. And remember, don’t take any Chinese or herbal drugs. Now, you can continue uncle.
Father: When she goes to church…she sings like crazy [proceeds to gesticulate what he means by crazy]. It is so loud, but she seems to be okay with that. I feel terrible. I just want to relax with my T.V.
Doctor: Well I’ll prescribe you the same medicine. And you come back next time. At least we’ll see some improvement. Please be patient.
As Dogfahr’s father exits the frame, Dogfahr remains behind to consult the doctor about strange [“mysterious”] markings on her neck after which the film cuts back to Bangkok, and the initial storyteller. The sounds of the storyteller, a streetside food vendor, remind the audience of her presence. The film cuts back to the images of her fictional world. The entire sequence has demonstrated film’s ability to move speech beyond screen and into the imagined world of the urban laborer. The motif of a hearing aid foregrounds the relationship between the intensity of space and the possibility of hearing.

The film later jumps to a scene in the mountainous landscape of Thailand, where several Karen narrators continue the story of Dogfahr (who has morphed from the body of the teacher, to a mysterious game piece, to an orphan boy). Several boys assist each other in continuing the story in Karen language, while one among them translates their tongue into Thai—which is then subtitled into English. They project their own desires onto the story of Dogfahr who becomes, like the narrators, migrants imagining a route to the city. They vocalize their intent to find work in Bangkok.

Three primary media references emphasize the aural character of Mysterious Object. First, the audience finally witnesses the Dogfahr recordings played back in a northeastern village. The village decides to continue the story by conducting a music-based folk tradition (mor lum) mixed with the narrative conventions of the contemporary Thai soap opera. Visualizing a tale of melodramatic deception and revenge, their folk tradition undertakes the televisual output of Bangkok’s studio industry. It is a modern soap opera played through traditional sounds. While the images convey rural-ness, the sounds convey urban mechanics of reproduction.

Most of the film’s routes seem to lead out of Bangkok, but the city punctuates the sonorous elements of the Dogfahr story by intruding at periodic moments. Halfway into the film, after the film crew has headed north, we arrive at an unexplained flashback. Two men are shown listening to a radio broadcast that proclaims the end of World War II. It is followed by a patriotic song about Thai unity (a reference to the post-World War II Phibun Songkhram regime). The song feeds into a second part, where two Bangkok primary school girls use sign language to continue the story of Dogfahr. The significance of this sequence lies in the extension of sound, via a radio that plays over an inaudible sign language. Mysterious Object is about the sound that doesn’t express the image but plays over it, for better or worse. The film makes audible what would otherwise remain silent.

Rick Altman (1980:12) has noted that the interplay of visual images among early silent filmmakers, once radical and political, became pacified by synchronized sound in the era of the ‘talkie. This integrated body of sound and image seemed to close the art within a world of the coherent spectacle as witnessed by the audience in a theater, suggesting that films—decorated with all the features of a believable reality—could be self-contained and, by default, less disruptive. The viewer is not moved or affected, emotionally, because the viewer knows the stage or screen production is simply a dramatization. But Mysterious Objects overturns this conscious separation of viewer and fictional world. The events, recordings, and aural objects that invade everyday life in Mysterious Objects, overturn the stability of visual images.
CHAPTER 5. THE POLITICS OF RECORDING
BANGKOK
Sound may create a relational space, a meeting point, diffuse and yet pointed; a private space that requires something between, an outside; a geography of intimacy that also incorporates the dynamics of interference, noise, transgression. From one body to the other, a thread is made that stitches the two together in a temporal instant, while remaining loose, slack, to unfurl back into the general humdrum of place. Sound might be heard to say, *This is our moment.* (Labelle 2010: xvi)

**The expanded spatiality of *Syndromes and a Century* (2006)**

To experience Bangkok politically is to encounter the intersection of media noise and the cityscape. Media noise is not a pejorative dimension of politics in this sense, but a productive stream of urban voices. Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s critically acclaimed *Syndromes and a Century* (2006) employs two montage sequences to code the rigid ordering of Bangkok at the end of the Thaksin era. In the sequences, a slow and eerie [machine-like] drone plays beneath iconography of Thai authority. The soundtrack cues a mood as a map for reading symbolic sites of power in Bangkok. Royal and religious statues connect with other images of authority in the vicinity of a Bangkok hospital. In one shot, random groups in the hospital are organized according to color and told, “Keep walking, maintain your distance”. The final shot of the final montage, and of the film, contrast these figures of authority with an aerobics instructor leading the crowd to a fast-paced techno song in one of the city’s public parks. Sounds in Apichatpong’s films seem to access any number of dream worlds of Thai popular culture. But were these aesthetic
relationships between audio and visuality threatening the harmonious unity of the Thai nation?

Using an outdated 1930 Censorship Law, Thailand’s censorship board banned the film based on the visual character of these sequences. However, it is the film’s sound design that seems to bring scenes from the hospital into a direct allegory about Bangkok under military rule. Sound designer and musician Koichi Shimizu originally recorded the chilling soundtrack drones of these sequences from the top of an abandoned Bangkok building. In this sense, the film can be read as a recording of Bangkok during a particular time, compressed within the fictional world of a world renowned Thai auteur. Below I unpack a variety of political recordings of Bangkok by connecting soundscape with the noise of cinema at the end of the Thaksin era.

*Syndromes and a Century* can be perceived as the first film to politicize the post-2006 Coup era in Bangkok. The Thai government’s ban on its 2007 domestic release, pending cuts to four scenes, kick started the Free Thai Cinema movement. The movement, spearheaded by Apichatpong, eventually led to a new ratings system and highlighted the role of film in the broader politics of media reform. But film also becomes political in what it manages to record, i.e., as a medium for replaying sound. How, for example, do films capture moments in a city’s history (e.g., by incorporating actual radio clips, actual settings, and actual ambience that attest to the passivity of a microphone)? Koichi Shimizu’s looped “ship whistle,” originally recorded for an art installation about abandoned buildings in Bangkok, exists alongside other sound themes of *Syndromes*: a monk who aspires to be a DJ, a dentist that performs as a professional musician, and the final scene where an aerobics instructor organizes the masses within a
rhythmic metronome of Bangkok’s technoscape. Koichi’s work exemplifies the importance of mood and ambience as political undertones of sound design, on one hand, and attentiveness to urban landscapes through recording and revising those sounds for inclusion into various works.

Brandon Labelle (2006) has interpreted the sonic record of cities as an “expanded spatiality.”

Noise comes into play because it is unavoidable: tracking sound into such global and ancient territories necessarily delivers up the strange, the grotesque, the horrific along with the magnificent. (Labelle 2006: 215)

Noise is unbiased, and indistinct. Noise thereby operates as a critical rejoinder to the selective control and treatment of dominant voices in the relationship between politics and the cityscape. This expanded spatiality re-constitutes a regime of visual images by adding new recorded parts. Kong Rithdee’s short film Noise (2010) critiqued the refurbished landscapes after Bangkok’s military crackdown in 2010 by projecting images of shopping and market normalcy over sounds of gunfire and sirens. But then, halfway in the final minute, the film goes silent and switches to images of a bombing at the New City’s Financial District of Silom Road in Bangkok. We hear the sounds of street-level markets in the first half, but do not hear the warnings that bombs entail. How then, Kong asks, is reconciliation after the violence even possible?

These insurrectional film aesthetics push against the dominant sound bites of cultural governance and other harmonious discourses of national unity. Within the frames of these official channels, the short film collection Sawasdee Bangkok (2009), broadcasted in the summer of 2010 with added video journalist (VJ) commentary,
emphasizes the “unity” of Bangkok’s different districts. One of its directors, Prachaya Pinkaew, expanded the spatiality of cultural governance in the music video (MV) “May Our Happiness Return” which played on the Bangkok Skytrain throughout the summer of 2010. Inside the space of the city’s mass transit system, the music video’s valiant celebrities appeared blue screened onto the streets of Bangkok alongside divisive protestors that pull apart the nation in May 2010. The MV evacuates noise from the streets, by failing to register what microphones really recorded. Instead, the viewer views a filtered street culture from the distanced perspective of the Skytrain.

The dominant sonic configurations of cultural governance motivated a creative response in the form of sound. Sounds contested images of reconciliation after the May 19th 2010 crackdown at Ratchaprasong Avenue and Siam Square in the New City section of Bangkok. Sound design and soundscapes open toward an alternative “recording” by registering the voices of the street, and of politics beyond dominant media sound bites. The film record is central in recovering how the city is perpetually edited and layered by reinterpretations of noise.

**Bangkok From the Perspective of Sound**

Every text, no matter how rigid its hierarchical organization, must after all work through associations of sound as well as ideas. (Bolter 2001: 33)

In Chapter 10 of Uthid Hemamul’s novel *Mirror | Reflection* (2006), a recently graduated art student named Morn sits in the most vile and kitch of Bangkok visual representations.
In a hostess bar leftover from the GI-period, Morn contemplates moving forward into the future while conversing with a “mamasan” who cites passages from Balzac and Fitzgerald. On stage, two surreal twin sisters, who seem to appear from the fragments of a David Lynch film sing a song by the late eighties Thai band The Forest Flowers: They sing “Like the shattering of a glass bottle…my heart is crushed being led by you.” Morn is immediately propelled by the verse, away from the bar’s musty smell and visual kitch, and into a memory of the past. Sounds such as these appear throughout the novel to disrupt generic readings of Bangkok by writing new scenarios into it. Jacques Rancière so notes that film and literary fiction unleashed a “silent revolution” cutting across boundaries and space with a “voice hollowing out the visible.” (15)

Other contemporary Thai writers likewise note the significance of sound in urban environments. The contemporary Thai fiction writer, Siriworn Kaewkan, indulged me in a conversation about the role of sound as a type of audio track that laced the sensory nodes of is work. “Sound in literature. I like that,” he said. In January of 2008, we sat next to one another at Hemlock, a restaurant known for the transfusion of new artist culture into Bangkok’s Old City. New wave writer Kanthorn Aksornnam and veteran Jamlong Fancholjit were also there. Kanthorn would later note Jamlong’s advice that writing fiction is a matter of organizing the sounds in your head into a continuous rhythm. The restaurant is the site where an alienated art student tries to convert his girlfriend to his esoteric aesthetics in Uthid’s Mirror | Reflection (2006). Both Uthid and Siriworn had studied painting down the street at Silpakorn University, the historic Bangkok art school responsible for designing the core of the Old City’s modernist landscape. But they critiqe the deceptive exteriors of being modern in their depictions of
chaotic urban soundscapes. They also rely on an expressionist sound poetics of character bodies. A variety of soundtracks play throughout their work as a means to convince urban audiences that they listen to the city.

Uthid Hemamul and Siriworn Kaewkan are interesting examples for the topic of soundscape because they intentionally confuse sound designs with soundscapes. In the 1970s, R. Murray Schafer (1977) had designed a vocabulary for soundscape studies through a juxtaposition of disintegrating keynotes (e.g., birds chirping) and signal noise (e.g., manmade urban sounds). Such juxtapositions attested to the growing prominence of urban lo-fi soundscapes where signals increasingly bury keynotes to compose layers of ambient noise. Modernity, Schafer notes, is constituted by the loss of “long-range viewing” of rural landscapes and replaced by fragmented close-ups, an “overdense population of sounds” that distract and interrupt nature with crossed frequencies. These tremulous shifts in aural perspective helped to develop an acoustic ecology of what Schafer calls “sound events.”

Two of Schafer’s observations are interesting for the point of this analysis of Bangkok sound culture. First, sound can change the conventions of “viewing”. Second, a “sound event” (or any event in the city for that matter) is co-constituted by any number of sounds. These “soundmarks” constituted shifts in space and time, and demonstrate some byproduct of power. Using terms like ‘soundscape’ and

45. See Gille’s Deleuze juxtaposition between the cinema and events: “It is at the level of interference of many practices that things happen, beings, images, concepts, all the kinds of events”(Deleuze 1989: 280)”

46. Schafer stumbled upon the significance of sound in the novels of the 18th and 19th century where noise obstructed the aural unifiers of community he calls “soundmarks”: Thomas Hardy’s description of the London Curfew Bell, Gorky’s depiction of machine rhythms as eliminating worker singing in The Artamonovs, Stendhal’s industrialization of the 19th century French province in The Red and the Black, and Thomas Mann’s realization that the urban dweller has synchronized the rhythms of nature and machine in “A Man and His Dog”.

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‘soundmark’, Schafer locates a language to talk about sound in relation to the modernizing landscape of cities.

Besides the changing aural field of cities, there are other things about sound that make it political. As a “value added” component of visual space, Michel Chion (1994) shows how sound can never be directly controlled.

There is always something about sound that overwhelms and surprises us no matter what—especially when we refuse to lend it conscious attention; and thus sound interferes with our perception, affects it. Surely, our conscious perception can valiantly work at submitting everything to its control, but, in the present cultural state of things, sound more than image has the ability to saturate and short-circuit our perception. (33)

Chion shows that sound serves to problematize viewing conventions, or even visual expectations of space. Whether one thinks of Labelle’s concept of “expanded spatiality,” Schafer’s “soundmarks”, or Chion’s “value added,” a common theme emerges: sound cannot be controlled.

In contemporary Thai fiction, sound plays upon bodies webbed into complex mediascapes and the monstrous cityscape. In many cases, the sounds are liberating. For example, Uthid’s protagonist of the short story “That Day” reflects on how his Compact Disc collection represents a phase (or ‘sound-event’) that he subsequently exchanges for a new lifestyle “that day” at Tower Records in a Bangkok shopping mall.47 Uthid sounds

47. “A Day” tells of the upward and downward mobility of young consumers, who exchange their lifestyles according to shifting global trends. The author demonstrates this relationship, vertically, by moving the characters from the underground parking garage of a shopping mall to a
the life of an urban DJ, in *Mirror | Reflection* (2006), as a metronome disturbed by the differences between parts of the city. The protagonist changes because the parts of the city operate at different rhythms. One of the banned scenes from *Syndromes and a Century* (2006) contains a monk who aspires to be a DJ:

> I’d like to be a normal person. But a mysterious force has a hold on me…I used to dream of being a DJ.

The role of the DJ is to mix things up, creating the façade of continuity between different parts—e.g., in a song rotation. In both *Mirror | Reflection* and in *Syndromes*, the characters contest their roles within at a time of key national shifts (Thaksin’s 2001 election and the 2006 coup, respectively).

Siriworn’s narrator in “Our Resemblances” maps Bangkok from the point of view of an alienated pedestrian. Near the end of the story, its protagonist listens to a Travis album to set the mood for reading a text by Michel Foucault. All of these elements are meant to assemble various ways in which bodies experience space, but also the way in which urban space regulates the body. In the same way, Siriworn’s narrator Srimin, in the short story “About A Navigator on Top of the Baiyoke Skyscraper” ignores the “sounds of the Muslim community” so he can concentrate on a map of Thailand, visually, from the perspective of Bangkok’s tallest building. In this sense, the optic regime of map is

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48th floor restaurant that overlooks the landscape. Along the way they exchange their beloved compact discs, expend this money at the said restaurant, and ultimately return to the underground parking garage with less than when the story began.

48. “When exactly did we return to our room? About midnight. Of course, about midnight. From there we layed down and read Michel Foucault’s *Les Courps Docile*. We turned on THE MAN WHO album by TRAVIS to softly accompany our reading of Foucault, but soon got hungry. We thought of the leftover pork pot roast that we had bought around noon and the little bit of rice left in the pot” (Kaewkan 2006).
read through from the skyscraper, which disciplines the character’s view of the cityscape. Srimin is described as nearly blind, but the reader also learns that he is going deaf. Like the space of the cinema, sonic settings accompany the political registration of urban space. At times, signal interruptions cut the national image into a series of differences.

In recent months, upscale condominiums built for carefree vision have been replaced by the sounds of broken glass and ricochet. Just as the above sounds reorient story characters, the May 2010 protests recalibrated Bangkok’s auditory system. Bangkok became aurally redistributed through sniper fire, the music videos of reconciliation, toward which new critical recordings were aimed.

**Reconciliation and the Critique of Visual Culture**

After months of protest and a brutal military crackdown in the New City section during May of 2010, a state of emergency continued in Bangkok as the proclaimed “net” of the Thai government. The net, as in any configuration of culture and politics, attempted to web together a roadmap toward national reconciliation. To create a “roadmap” is to pacify the streets. After sniping out the crowd, a divide and conquer campaign waged by assault rifles from unseen spaces, the government disseminated post hoc images of violence and a veiled imaginary of a unified national past to resolve the unsettled disagreements of previous protests. Then, as in 1992, the government established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Assembly for National Reform to assemble evidence of wrongdoing between March and May 2010. Media celebrities like Pornthip Rojanasunand, the rock star hairstyle of the Center for the Resolution of the

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49. See Roland Barthes: "to delay the truth is to constitute it" (Barthes 262).
Emergency Situation (CRES), sided with government versions of the violent confrontations through her usual “science project” styled forensics—a charade designed for the visual consumption of television’s mass audience. The voice of the Prime Minister Abhisit Vejajiva worked as an analogue to the national image by envisioning possible investigatory outcomes. Like a photographer on a publicity campaign, he assured his supporters that “Truth for Reconciliation Commission would be able to provide the whole picture of what happened, so the government can form a reconciliation plan” (Thip-Osod 2010). In step with other government agencies, the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration sponsored photo exhibitions and smile campaigns under the fundraising slogan of unity “Together We Can.” On Facebook, images of a harmonious Bangkok were heavily circulated. Reconciliation meant revising the image by moving beyond a recent past.

While sounds often operate as a lingering resonance (e.g., Lucretius believed that haunted rooms are simply echo chambers), images fix time through revision, commentary, and truth claims.  

The afterlife of “Bloody May,” as the May 2010 crackdown came to be called, reverberated through visual archives. Like New York City in the days after 9-11, amateur photographers arrived at the burned out Bangkok ruins of the former Central World shopping mall to take snapshots of damages incurred. Death tolls and Youtube captures  

50. “Two web posters, one of them my source, were threatened with a lawsuit by one of the Culture Ministry's well-known watchdogs (she's human, by the way) after they posted critical messages on the popular Pantip web forum disparaging the antediluvian policies of our inglorious ministry. The messages, for instance, discussed the regressive tendency of the ministry as well as its dogged refusal to encourage cultural diversity by sticking to the narrow-minded definition of what Thai culture is. My source cited a name in his comments: Ladda Tangsupachai, the watchdog chief who has a low opinion on modern art, love songs, non-Thai fashion, and so on” (Rithdee 2009, “New Facebook Group”)

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appeared like a flashback from Alan Klima’s (2002) narrative of “Black May” 1992 where bodies and torched buildings formed the charnel ground of Thailand’s neoliberal “new world order”. In 2010, days after the grenades and sniper fire subsided in Bangkok, all sides equipped themselves with images to align the meaning of the event with their own favorable interpretation. Crackdowns and riot control were then replaced by a policy shift toward a state-sponsored “reconciliation” campaign [phrong dong in Thai]. For silenced protestors, this “ground-zeroed” Bangkok exemplified a loss of faith in visual narratives where the representational regime of images remained suspect.

The broadcast of the Sawasdee Bangkok (2009) short film series aired on television during this summertime reconciliation period of 2010. It is exemplary of this silenced relationship between media and street. In particular, the Thai Public Broadcasting Service (Thai PBS) implemented this televised short film series as a platform for advertising the concept of unity by prefacing each of the films (including Pen-ek Ratanaruang’s social critique “Silence”) with a commentary on their settings. Its theme of “harmonious city” accorded with simultaneous reconciliation initiatives to move beyond representations of street unrest by restoring perceptions of a historic unity.

The thin veneer of truth is exposed by these fixed images, which motivate the need to move beyond visual artifice. The city, as Ben Highmore (2005) has noted, is “anti-disciplinary”, a space distilled with a high degree of everyday indecisiveness (xii). It can not be fixed. The cityscape is “as much about listening as seeing, as much about immersion as gaining epistemological distance” (145). The epistemological distance Highmore critiques is the point of view of the urban planner. The ‘image’ of the city was something “dug into the environment” in order to harmonize multiple landscapes into a
coherent and ordered urban body (152). A planner’s perspective, according to Highmore, is one of legibility. Sound opposes legibility by replacing visual representations with layered noise.

In one visual reincarnation of the nation, film directors like Pracha Pinkaew quickly assembled a music video with fashionable heartthrob teenagers against blue screens later to be filled in with the actual backgrounds of burning buildings and gunfire. Pinkaew’s video imagines another past where, like Schafer’s (1977) observation of the power of sound in representation: “we are thrust back into the wells of memory, attractively fictionalizing the sounds of the past, smoothing them out into peaceful fantasies” (180). As a political analogue, the video enlists governmental practices of visual manipulation in its presentation of the landscape. The images dominated the usual rotation of advertisements on the Skytrain, the city’s most accessible mass transit line. Beyond the video, celebrities took to the microphone to voice the need to “come together” to reclaim an imaginary past where all of Thailand lived harmoniously in rhythm with the same metronomic pulse.\(^5\) Shopping malls re-opened.

As Bangkok seemed to return to normal within a month of the 2010 crackdown, the renowned critic and documentary filmmaker Kong Rithdee delved into the stock footage at the offices of the *Bangkok Post* and put together a short film called *Noise* (2010). The short film uses video of a Bangkok seemingly reconciled and jovial amid the soundtrack of the previous month’s violence. In the final sequence of the 4-minute film, 

\(^{51}\) The MV recalls the image of a fictional Greek chorus that film director Wisit Sasanatieng satirizes in the first scene of his 2006 film *Citizen Dog*, where everyone in Bangkok sings together except for it’s main character—who, like the King of Thailand, is questionably silent.
the screen fades to black and the sound cuts to silence. And then a camera pans a
Bangkok intersection and finds several people carrying a wounded Thai woman. She is
carrying a Thai flag. The nation survives in its many manifestations, in spite of the
silence of others.\textsuperscript{52} In several pre-reconciliation newspaper columns, Rithdee had waged
a critique of the government’s homogenization of the Thai image. The Ministry of
Culture, he noted, had “uncultured” the creative economy. When government money was
funneled into nationalist film adaptations once reserved for the theater under the first
military dictatorship in the 1930s, Rithdee compared the plight of making films in
Thailand to “the cries of the street protesters.”

But Pinkaew’s video has imagined another past, an image reset with pop music.
The video recalls a nation that must be sung back together onscreen. It is a place where
noise has been silenced, and interference will soon be effectively calibrated. The video’s
soundscape elevates the subject’s propensity toward truth in a karaoke-like world. It is
not unlike the final scene from Apichatpong’s \textit{Uncle Boonmee who can recall his past
lives} (2010), where two main characters sit ghostlike in a karaoke lounge after viewing
images of the military on television. The space of politics is thus enveloped and
distributed as sound waves, reverberations and recordings that replay in the sonic
universe between noise and music.

\textsuperscript{52} Kong Rithdee also captions the film in the original \textit{Bangkok Post} (Online) version, now
posted on Youtube. “Is everything back to normal? What's the definition of normalcy anyway?
One month after the May 19 incident, all is smooth on the surface -- perhaps we have even
forgotten -- but underneath the carpet the cracks are real. When we walk the street we hear
chatters of joy but listen carefully, maybe the noise, the cacophony, the recalcitrant nightmare, are
still audible, faint and unreal and pushed to the background. I found some footage from the
Bangkok Post's multimedia department and put together this clip, as an afterthought.”
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D8xKrLJa4vj
Thai PBS and the Sound Bytes of Unity

I think there is only one truth, not your truth or my truth. And it's the truth that people cannot deny, but must accept because it's the only one. Otherwise, they're not dealing with truths, but opinions. We tend to let our emotions prevail even when we have to solve a problem. Feelings are natural, but when it comes to solving a problem, rational thought and facts are required.” (Wongruang 2010)

Photography was seen as a magical instrument, a priceless gift from the West. It produced quick results and could tell the truth in acceptable ways. (Apinan 1990: 58)

Governmental incursions into national image-making is always one attempt, among many others, to direct the aesthetic possibilities of any particular work. Sawasdee Bangkok arose as one television station’s attempt to bring many of Thailand’s more reputable film directors inline with a historic triangulation of markets, technology, and the control over publicity in Thailand. The work might be understood alongside the emergence of the Thai Public Broadcasting Service (Thai PBS), which came into effect in February 2007 as an attempt to replace Thai Independent Television (iTV). iTV entered the airwaves in the early 1990s as a 30-year concession requiring a 70 percent quota on “news” reporting. Since the 2001 election of Thaksin Shinawatra, the station had increasingly turned toward 172
entertainment broadcasts (meanwhile changing its name to TITV). The ‘T’ stood for Thai, but In early 2006, Thaksin divested the station to the State-owned Singaporean company Temasek. The divestiture was perceived as a selling of a public Thai asset, though Thaksin reiterated that Thai investors would retain a majority share (51% Thai investors, 49% Temasek).

Pinyo Traisuriyathamma’s short story “Bangkok/Paris, Jiang and Cindy: On an Old Road that Brought Us Together” (2009) suggests that the divestiture led to the 2006 coup by mobilizing national support against the global reshaping of Bangkok. Though iTV was initially conceived response to television censorship during the Black May crackdown of 1992, the station had slowly become dominated by game shows and dramatized “reality” series. Its “truth” mandate had been violated, necessitating, according to the newly formed military government of 2006, a take-over of the station as a return to truthful and objective reporting. After the 2006 coup, iTV was replaced by Thai PBS under the pretext of a national values campaign ushered in, said the military junta, as an attempt to combat the moral decadence of TITV’s switch from objective news reporting to entertainment broadcasting.

Thai PBS and the Public Broadcasting Act represent the continuation of Thailand’s longstanding televisual battles. From the late 19th century to the present, media forms transitioned between monarchical control and subsequent military dictatorships. After the 2006 coup, television and film were increasingly directed by military regulation which is where, according to Friedrich Kittler, all technologies begin and end. On February 27th 2007, five months after the coup, Thailand’s only “private”
television station, iTV, became poised for takeover as the interim government announced the termination of its license due to Temasek’s refusal to pay unreasonable penalty fees.

In February 2008, a month after the military junta passed the Public Broadcasting Service Act, Thai PBS went on air in its mission to restore “the truth.” Future PBS projects would increasingly turn to video journalism to bring the nation inline with global standards through a strange interplay between a groundbreaking documentary work. Under the PBS Act, Thai PBS demonstrated the return of real ‘documentarian’ news. However, truth is a regulated phenomenon that falls specifically within the domain of cultural governance. Section 43, Article 5 of the Public Broadcasting Service Act stipulates the journalistic integrity of public information within a “content and values” clause. As such, the content must exists as…

...[a] program that promotes Thai identity, multicultural society and social harmony as well as a program that enables disadvantaged persons to present their views or information. (“Thai Public Broadcasting Service Act” 2008: 13)

The programs must also convey “good social values or uplifting public aesthetics”.

Since going on air in 2008, Thai PBS has changed its name to TV Thai, the name of the first television broadcasting company in the 1950s burned to the ground during protests in the 1970s. Thai PBS is about media and its mode of representation. Most importantly, it is primarily a visual operation complimented by the truth-making of

53. Some examples of the station’s documentary content include the use of nuclear power in Thailand, an inside look at the National Science Museum Rubik Speed Contest, and other issues that appeal to middle class values of urban audiences.
talking heads. Below I show how the short film medium interacts with the discourse of unity promoted by Thailand’s public television campaign. Specifically, television is enabled by its ability to subsume other aesthetic mediums, and provides an entryway into the variety of contemporary communication routes in Bangkok. Short film work can counter the visual dominance of television with sound design. However, in the Thai case, short film can be filtered back through public television and ultimately evacuated of its auditory politics.

**Short Film and the Soundscape of *Sawasdee Bangkok* (2010)**

Short films arose at key political moments in Thailand’s political history as adversarial modes of resisting dominant visual representations of unity. In 1992, artists like Hamer Salvala directed expressionist renditions of Black May using the short film form. The fragmented short format pursues aesthetic experimentation over narrative coherence and is perfectly suited to present multiple views of any particular place. In the fall of 1996, Chulida Uabumrungjit and longtime film archivist Dome Sukvong began organizing the Thai Short Film Festival. The festival would afford a public presence to short film, as it blossomed amid a surge in new creative technologies. The Thai Film Foundation, for example, provided equipment to aspiring independent film-makers so that exhibition at the Thai Short Film Festival was a foreseeable reality for those who couldn’t afford the

54. Patsorn Sungsri (2004) writes on Thai national unity as a narrative web that triangulates Thai identity within the three pillars nation, monarchy, religion. The greatest obstacle to these causal mechanisms is the appearance of contemporary forms of a Thai cinematic modernity. Here she includes the short films of Hamer Salwala after the Black May events of 1992.
technology. In 2001, as independent film became fashionable, the most widely regarded of short films made between 1997 and 2000 were incorporated into a September global trends issue of A Day Magazine. Collecting the short films of the previous four years, the magazine aligned new directors with its other lists of books to read, music to listen to, global politics to observe. Short film at the beginning of the Thaksin era was rooted in national disagreements and global trends, and contested any single unified picture of national identity because of their incoherent ‘short’ form.

Sawasdee Bangkok is a collaborative short film project that utilizes sound design amid the landscape of urban spontaneity, anonymity, encounters with other cultures, and the cinema’s documentarian feature of capturing real events within fictional worlds. The project includes many of Thailand’s more well-known contemporary directors who had made their name during the first phase of the short film scene. The Sawasdee Bangkok series was announced in the spring of 2009 and funded by the Thai Public Broadcasting Service. The announcement coincided with the stand-off between the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) and the Thai military in the streets of Bangkok. Anyone who would film during this time would surely capture the sounds of street protest if only by accident. This intersection between street politics and film projects shows up in Pen-ek Ratanaruang’s “Silence”, which documents the political tensions through the noise of background radio programs. Sawasdee Bangkok ran first in the fall of 2009 at the

55. Around the same time Bioscope Magazine provided the profiles of global auteurs in pocket-sized issues, and Thai Film Journal brought academics together to theorize its contemporary relevance.
Bangkok International Film Festival as well as the Toronto International Film Festival with favorable reviews.

However, when the short films aired on Thai PBS for public viewing in the summer of 2010, each was preceded by the expanded commentary of a video journalist (VJ). The young and hip VJ would preface each of the weekly short film screenings with an elaboration of its Bangkok setting. The role of the VJ is central in informing a viewers approach to ensuing images. Vivien Morgan’s *Practising Videojournalism* (2008) outlines how this works by attending to the growing dominance of broadcast journalism. Apart from local TV VJs, freelance VJs, and print VJs who use video as a companion to conventional written stories, the Thai PBS VJ works in the tradition of broadcast journalism by its desire to exemplify the most professional of documentary work. We listen to the VJ, as Morgan notes, as his/her assumed professionalism filters through a “camera person and sometimes a soundperson as well”. At one level, video journalism is a collaboration between image and commentary, i.e., image and an interpretation of onscreen visuals through sound. But more importantly, the soundperson’s recordings accompany the voice of the VJ as a means of capturing the sonic real time of the landscape.

For the broadcast of the *Sawasdee Bangkok* (2009) short film series, the VJ’s description aims to rework the fragmented landscapes of Bangkok into a unified history of Thailand. Like the urban variety projected by each of the film’s reflection on Bangkok space, the “making of” documentaries that accompanied each televised short film presented Thailand as different but unified. Such was the politicized imaginary set out by these introductions, VJ-ed into the government’s campaign of national reconciliation.
following the violent turbulence of the previous months. In an opening montage of the
city, the program’s introduction pieces together various landscapes of Bangkok in order
to dictate how the stories should be positioned within these spaces. The VJ, a young
handsome urban dweller decked out in the latest fashions, introduces the audience to the
middle class space of Prachaya Pinkaew’s “Bangkok Charm” through the “New City”
youth havens of Siam Square, which he notes “has pretty much everything you could
want.” Because Siam Square is also he central hub for the city’s light rail system, the VJ
iterates its importance to the national economy dependent on efficient modes of
transportation. The commentary also assures the viewer of a national pride that
accompanies the city’s 2006 (pre-coup) “Number 1 Tourist destination”. Siam Square
was, against the use projected in the voice of this VJ, a key front between the PAD
protests of 2006 and the military crackdown on the UDD in 2010. The same VJ provides
a lead in to the Thai PBS broadcast of “Silence” in which he is set against an establishing
shot of the Democracy Monument in Bangkok’s Old City. Whereas “silence” underpins a
breakdown in communication in Pen-ek’s film, the VJ fails to mention the contentious

The VJ wields influence by ‘framing’ the context, and filmmakers understand
how framing works. Prachaya’s “May Our Happiness Return” music video, at the center
of a government policy aimed at framing harmony, worked along similar lines. As noted
above, Prachaya blue-screened a variety of well-known celebrities into the actual
landscape of protestors-torched buildings and violent disruptions in Bangkok during May
2010. Soldiers were projected as good-willed, and arrived on the scene to restore a serene
and jovial past fractured by animal-like protestors. Toward reconciliation, “May Our
Happiness Return” aired on Bangkok’s densely populated Skytrain in repetition during the summer of 2010 and is nothing less than the sort of conformity that framed protestors as responsible for scenes of violence.

Prachaya’s contribution to Sawasdee Bangkok, “Bangkok Charm,” thus unfolds in the documentary tradition of ethnographic film, where an anthropological narrator closely analyzes behavioral adaptations within a monstrous urban jungle. The sound of the God-like narrator always rings louder than the city itself in order to fix what images mean. Like a visual citation to the traditions of urban architects like Haussmann and Le Corbusier, the Gods-eye view of Bangkok is that of the urban planner. The God’s eye is always above the traffic. And like the portrayal of singers and celebrities in “May Our Happiness Return” standing amid burning buildings torched by the invisible hand of poor people, his camera assumes the objective position of mere innocent witness to some truth about the city. The urban animal has grown cold, and the “City of Angels” has transitioned from images of amulets to those of pornography. In mockumentary format, the 25-minute film moves from morning to evening to demonstrate signals and rhythms that underpin the absurdity of the city. Instead of goodwill, people argue over parking spaces, swindle their way out of paying traffic tickets, and adapt to new technologies that exacerbate social indifference within the city. The “political animal” that Aristotle admired due to the human’s desire to communicate with one another has turned to urban beast that utilizes “logos” to manipulate others. Only the middle class and cosmopolitan residents of Bangkok adapt and civilize the “charm” of the city’s disorder through a harmonious karaoke ontology based on their urban pliability and vocational agency. Nothing about Prachya’s film raises strong objections to this order. The underclass of the
city, or those who constitute its actual majority, make short cameo appearances as beggars and drunks—part of the director’s theme of urban spontaneity. In the end, the narrator continues, “the small things called charm will carry you forward” before the final scenes of people dancing in the streets cuts to the smiles of Bangkok shoppers. Pinkaew’s film provides a well-crafted scenario transferable across the desires of tourists and middle class patriots alike.

On the other hand, Santi Taepanich’s contribution to Sawasdee Bangkok, “Beloved Bangkok,” restores audibility to Bangkok’s marginal narrators by departing from the collective distribution of a city visualized by an indifferent middle class. Fundamental to the upkeep of Bangkok, these narrators come from an elsewhere. But instead of a simple assemblage of songs and laments of home, the short documentary inserts these marginal voices as fundamental to the sophistication of Bangkok’s diversity. While Prachaya’s music video and short film exemplify the same fantasy of a historic Thai imaginary embellished with charm, a time before the dominance of the urban technoscape, Santi’s “Beloved Bangkok” projects a city of co-existing temporalities. A young man rides around the city dressed as a “cyber punk,” envisioning the time of the future where all speech resonates from the body through an attached mouthpiece. In another scene, a beat boxer exhibits his chosen art form for donations at a crowded outdoor market, a media he chose because it didn’t require a microphone (which is also why Jean Jacques Rousseau called the human voice the most

56. The film opens with a cameo appearance from Chinatown politician and massage parlor tycoon Chuwit Kamolvisit. While Chuwit’s comparison between Bangkok and a “salad bowl” open the film’s theme of diversity, the move from prominent narrators to marginal ones constitute the film’s auditory politics.
democratic of art forms). A transvestite go-go dancer narrates her transition from Bangkok slums to unstable night jobs while the sounds of competing bars play in the background. A tattoo artist, missing home, sings a letter to his parents. The short documentary also follows a blind woman who relies on others to describe the monuments of her Bangkok landscape, creating the allure of images for those who cannot see (in this case the WWII statues of soldiers at the Victory Monument). Her existence relies on sound. These subjects reset the landscapes, asking the audience to consider the variety of possibilities in hearing the images of the city.

“Beloved Bangkok” then introduces a character who seems to exist in another time of the urban landscape. This man who calls himself Garbage Dump Hero is a Lumphini park dweller who lives in the pre-history of the city. In reference to Bangkok’s 18th century founding, the old man shouts “Bangkok is not as good as Thonburi. King Taksin’s army is ready now.” The man has, like the cyberpunk and beat-boxer, become media by playing back other times of Bangkok. In folk song tradition, Garbage Dump Hero sings “Whoever said the world is round and sound, please see how distorted and sad it is for me.” The documentary’s marginal urban subjects sing of a place they once departed en route to the city, and of new hardships, through a voice enabling them to express their different experiences. In another street-side shot, along Phra Athid Road in Bangkok’s Old City district, a young man plays his electric guitar on the sidewalk singing as one would to a punk rock anthem.

Whatever you wanted, you got it
So why shock me like this?
Out loud you called me “worthless”
You don’t love me, stop pretending
You don’t love me, so why pretend.

The young man’s electric guitar continues as the camera moves to a nearby park. In the park, the old City’s Sanam Luang, an elderly man lives homeless in Bangkok’s most political and historic green space. The scene cuts between images of the man recounting his experience of living in the park and his off-screen speech over his crayon-based drawings. In one of the drawings soldiers beneath a Thai flag carry machine guns into nature. In this way, each scene moves into the next accumulating the differences and tensions of a city that cries out with dissonance. Garbage Dump Hero concludes “You may see Bangkok as heaven, but don’t trust the hallucination.”

In soundscape terms, Schafer asks the urban recorder to note the relationship between machines that emit signals and nature that resonate in keynotes. According to a politician’s introduction to the film, the film’s characters exist within the multicultural “salad bowl” of Bangkok. In common, the cyber punk, Garbage Dump Hero, the blind lady at Victory monument, the Phra Athid Road guitarist and the old man in Sanam Luang exemplify significant elements of the soundscape. They become audible as urban signals, often combining machine and nature (most dominantly in the cyber punk and the electric guitarist) to trigger the meditation or reflection of others. They are all victims of Thailand’s televsional memory that has been reproduced at the level of military coups and the predominance of the visual image.

Preceding the film on Thai PBS, the VJ stands amid Bangkok’s central Chaopraya River with polarized spectacles to provide adequate protection from the sun. Over the next 10 minutes he provides a brief history of the river and the way it has connected the
various groups of people that live along its [communication] routes. He then draws a parallel between this river-based multiculturalism and the alienated subjects of Santi Taapanich’s film which he calls “lak lai” (lit. diverse) so as not to refer to any of these groups directly (e.g., as the primary transgendered, rural, homeless, and punk identities juxtaposed by the director). The documentary about a documentary (i.e., the VJ’s commentary on the landscape of Santi Taapanich’s film) is aimed to eliminate its primary affect: to illustrate the fractures of the city in place of any attempt to synchronize them.\(^57\)

The interplay between the middle class mockumentary of Bangkok Charm and the documentary realism of marginal figures rendered audible in Beloved Bangkok underlie a significant relationship between fiction and non-fiction. Jacques Ranciere (2003), comparing the difference between aesthetic experimentation and representational convention, explains political critique as the contest between cinematic “reel” space and the “real” dramaturgy of those in power.

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\text{[I]t is in the moments when the real world wavers and seems to reel into mere appearance, more than in the slow accumulation of day-to-day experiences, that it becomes possible to form a judgment about the world.}
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Sound designs in films are central to the landscapes of cities because they offer audibility to an otherwise silent visibility. In other words, sound design highlights marginal voices through specific signals. Films make the city readable by “sounding” the landscape. On the other hand, the silenced image attempts to dominate the landscape

\(^{57}\) In his only feature length narrative film, Bangkok Time (2007), Santi had employed scenic landscape shots on the Chaopraya River to exacerbate the emptiness of Bangkok’s marginal characters.
visually where, as a result, Bangkok’s others remain without audibility. It is not about freedom, or, simply put, that marginal narrators are oppressed and sad, but that they contribute something about landscape differences in their recordings.

*Sawasdee Bangkok*, for whatever intentions the Thai PBS had in mind, critiques the dominance of visual images through its close mediation on sound.⁵⁸ Pen-ek Ratanaruang’s “Silence” brings all of these themes together in a fictional story of a high society clubber whose car breaks down beneath an urban no-man’s land of highway ramps. In the final shot of the film, the protagonist breaks down into tears.⁵⁹ The film itself is about a “breakdown” in communication.

“Silence” starts when a young female clubgoer is invited to go home for a presumable one-night stand with another man in the club. Eluding male authority she exits the main room to find her female friend vomiting in the bathroom. During these two shots, occasional sound bits about the contemporaneous April 2009 protests, which ground the scene according to a national “breakdown” in communication. The main character assists her inebriated friend back to her car whereby the two clubgoers part ways. As she proceeds home along the expressway sounds of the protest news coverage play over the radio leading her to make a detour away from the central Bangkok (Din Daeng) protest sites. But her Mini Cooper subsequently stalls, and “breaks down” along an abandoned landscape of Bangkok due to engine failure. She pulls to the shoulder of a

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⁵⁸ Also see Aditya Assarat’s contribution, “Bangkok Blues”, which follows the day in the life of a man (played by Anada Everingham) who records his surroundings in order to replay them for fear they may be forever lost (i.e., silent) in the future.

⁵⁹ This sequence comports well with what Linda Williams (1988) has called a “No man’s land” (109), where gendered otherness is figured by her placement in an abandoned section of the Bangkok landscape.
highway underpass to find a disheveled homeless man who begins, uninvited, to open the hood of her car. However, his attempts to fix her car remain unclear to the protagonist and are thereby construed as a self-serving plot to take advantage of her in some way. Berating the man with lines such as “you smell like piss”, the plot seems driven into a simplistic class distinction. It is a “break down” of communication at the personal level.

But this layer is developed further in the film’s final exchange when both marginalities are exposed in a moment of equality. Concealed from her vantage point, the homeless man fails to respond to her questions and derogatory remarks as he carries on with a series of hand movements under her hood. After the young woman realizes he has fixed her car she attempts to reimburse his efforts with a 500 baht (15 USD) bank note that he refuses with gestures of humility. When she insists he take the bill he writes a sentence on it and walks away into the darkness. Overcome by the written message, she breaks down into tears. It reads “I only wish I could hear you say thank you.” Connecting the theme of silence with dissonant jazz, a homeless deaf man, and actual radio clips of April 2009’s UDD confrontation with the Thai military at Bangkok’s Din Daeng intersection, the film brings real and ‘reel’ worlds into a conversation on Thailand’s fractured political landscape. But the film also juxtaposes the relationship between the mute homeless man and the silence of the female in a patriarchal militarized society. The no-man’s land of her expressive emotion counters a nation muted by authority. “Silence” records time with sounds layers that add depth to images.
Conclusion: Koichi Shimizu and the Soundmarks of Bangkok

In April of 2007, when Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s *Syndromes and a Century* (2006) met the ire of a cultural moratorium, one of its most controversial scenes included a monk playing a guitar.\(^{60}\) In a previous scene the monk had mentioned that he would rather have been a DJ, the ultimate provocateur of sound culture. Monks are viewed as either silent or the proxy voice of reason, but never the sonorous mixture of popular culture. But in the world of this director, where identities are consistently transgressed, the monk exceeds the representational conventions of his saffron robe. It is only in the city that these disordered musical motifs of provincial scenes in the first half of the film are transformed into a cacophony of industrial noise in the film’s closing sequences. The closing shot of *Syndromes and a Century* projects a disordered group of dancing Bangkokians ordered into the metronomic guidance of an aerobics instructor. Interpreting this final scene within the context of hospital regimentation, this rhythmic harmony is understood to be repressive.

In Rancierian terms, dissonance is a political revision, a cinematic “reel” that establishes an aesthetic disagreement with official representational harmonies. Sound designer Koichi Shimizu assisted in creating the sound world of “Silence,” and two crucial montage sequences from Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s *Syndromes and a Century*. In both cases, his work creates a dissonant, if not ominous, tone—it is a funneling of images through tunnels of sound. Thai film critic and *Bioscope Magazine*

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\(^{60}\) The other scenes to be cut included several white robed doctors drinking in the basement of a hospital while on the clock, a scene showing one of these white robed doctors having an erection while kissing his girlfriend in his office, and a scene of monks observing a remote-controlled flying saucer in a Bangkok park.
editor Kraiwoot Chulaphongsathorn describes Shimizu’s contributions to Apichatpong’s *Syndromes* in the following way:

Part of the persuasive power of this scenery is carried by the fact that there is nothing technologically advanced in its construction (to the point of redundancy) as in the Hollywood spectacle. All is glued beneath the soundtrack of Koichi Shimizu in order to create this mysterious world. The image and sounds of Apichatpong come together as “touch”, a moment of potentiality for the movie theater spectator.” (122)

Shimizu’s role in the sound design of Thai films has unfolded through listening. In a discussion with Apichatpong, he gained an idea of what was possible at the stage of post-production, shaping the “feeling of the film”. This is what Apichatpong told him:61

I always thought that “going natural” was best. But even to manipulate it in the right way can be more natural, or “hyper-natural” because it talks into your heart more than what you normally listen to. Because when you listen to nature it’s like you’re throwing a net into a big environment…but when you tell the audience where to listen and what to look at it’s like helping the audience to understand more the beauty of certain sounds. Ambient sound has the quality to extend the duration in a way…if you keep it long and you keep it simple, you allow the audience to explore more into the image and into themselves, looking at the film…to have the audience realize that they are watching a movie. [I am concerned with]

61. The following quotes come from video recordings sent to me by Koichi Shimizu and/or dialogue exchanged via email correspondence. See (Shimizu 2010).
how you make it authentic and really have it speak for the film’s feeling rather than just the form.

Shimizu had worked with ambient sounds of the city and used several samples for the film. I opened the relationship between sound and image with the film’s two most significant montage sequences, which I interpret as sound inserting a temporal-political mood into the interior and exterior spaces of a Bangkok hospital. The first sequence begins and ends with the low angle shots of royal statues outside of the hospital. The second sequence begins in an underground level of a room filled with artificial limbs and ends in smoke-filled shop room where injured workers undergo physical therapy using factory equipment. Both sequences convey the “affect” of the film through the deployment of dissonance, where ambient sounds orchestrate the industrial production of the urban landscape. To obtain this ambience, Shimizu re-appropriated a sound previously used in “Ghost Transmission,” an installation about abandoned buildings in Bangkok. The sound is of a ship whistle recorded from the top of one of those buildings, filtered through a sampler, looped, with a pitch stretched in real time. In other words, a political critique of the city has been replayed, i.e., extended through a convergence between real landscapes and the reel space of film. If Foucault’s heterotopia was likened to a ship, a space of the “Other” touching numerous global ports, the reel space of
Bangkok circulates ship whistles through celluloid where the viewer is touched sonically.  

Shimizu creates masterful noise, formulaically guided by layered sounds. His work as a music producer behind the control boards allowed him to experiment with “sound and its depth” as he explains it. “My job was to provide clarity in the audible details by adding depth to their songs…and to make the guitars louder!” From the serenity to the monk playing a guitar in Apichatpong’s *Syndromes* to the industrial noise of a ship whistle, to the signal interference in the soundtrack to the *Syndromes* trailer, Koichi’s work leaves a lasting imprint on the political sound design of film. The primary confusion for viewers unaccustomed to the films of Apichatpong resides in its narrative division into a series of episodes, sometimes with multiple credit sequences. Continuing this division, *Syndromes* can be read as a combination of two short films where the harmonious sound of a guitar in one part dissipates into the noise of the city. As sound designer, Shimizu provided the sound and score for Pen-ek Ratanaruang’s “Silence,” a dissonant jazz undertone spliced with radio broadcasts that comports well with the director’s emphasis on sound. In a personal video conversation between Shimizu and Pen-ek, the director engages a politics of listening:

The music actually wraps the film in your head…when you have the rhythm of the film in your head…and for me to establish that rhythm before shooting I usually listen to music. I don’t know if anyone told you

62. In 2009’s *Bodily Fluid Is So Revolutionary* (Ratchapoom Boonbunchachoke 2009, 41 min), a metatextual play on the commodification of film festivals a series paintings appear on walls of the various rooms that appear in the film, including one of a ship.
but in my case when I’m shooting my films…I don’t even look at the monitor. I put on the headphones and listen to the conversation they make and I close my eyes…But it’s all about the rhythm of how people talk. For some strange reason I respond to sound; perhaps more than visuals…When it cuts to total silence it becomes another piece of music almost.

A month and 6 days after the political events of May 2010, Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s *Uncle Boonmee who can recall his past lives* (2010) opened at Emporium, on a single screen housed in Bangkok’s most exclusive of shopping malls. The theater is 15 steps from the Thailand Creative and Design Center (TCDC), the government’s instructional center of a growing creative culture and part of Thaksin’s national initiative to expand exhibition space of the nation. Between critical acclaim and national political tensions, the film won the Palm D’Or at Cannes Film Festival two days after military death squads extinguished the lives of over a 100 victims in May. *Uncle Boonmee* proved less inhabitable for a nation-based creative culture when Apichatpong remarked, "Thailand is a violent country. It is controlled by a group of mafia. Our governments, present and past, have been such a mess". Through sound, the film emitted the signals of ruptured landscapes and oneiric screens that ruled Bangkok only a few short months previous. Still, Culture Minister Teera Slukpetch waged a national claim to the aesthetic work: "This kind of victory is what we really need at this time of crisis". Such sound bites reassure the nation by resurrecting a mythical Thai past untouched by modern political tensions.
But *Uncle Boonmee* is the flipside of the reconciliation, just as sound is the flipside of dominant images. Here, the violent history of the film’s protagonist is attached to Koichi’s eerie and ambient soundtrack. During the film’s key moments, ethereal noise tracks are slowed to suspend time, as if the present state of the nation (figured in Boonmee’s impending death) exists in limbo. Boonmee’s regrettable role in fighting communists in the 1960s parallels the suspension of his offspring. In a flashback, Boonmee’s son appears within a scenic landscape amid the pulsing technoscape of Koichi Shimizu’s sound design. There, Boonsong’s photographic search for truth leads to his conversion into a ghost. His optic desire to capture the image leads to him becoming imprisoned by it. In the second of the film’s primary montage sequences, a photomontage, the viewer views a series of still images accompanied by Uncle Boonmee’s voice-over of a recent dream. The viewer observes soldiers taking pictures with young villagers, as if the “real” world has intruded the cinematic “reel” of celluloid. In the montage, a departure into the non-diegetic ‘framing’ of the film set, soldiers take pictures with Boonsong’s costumed character while *Uncle Boonmee* recalls a dream where the projection of images “in the future city” can “make people disappear.” In the film’s final scene, two of Boonmee’s relatives disappear from their hotel room shortly after images of soldiers entering the city appear on television. They then reappear in a karaoke bar to the sounds of Penguin Villa’s pop song “Acrophobia” (2009) as if suspended in an afterlife mediated by song rotation.

These stories are national stories, not because they convey a sameness of experience, but by bringing together common sonic routes of the nation at a single point in time. Within the duration of the film, these aesthetic relationships do not reconcile.
national pasts, but superimpose a series of temporal disagreements. These sounds may originate in a rural province, as is the case in *Uncle Boonmee*, but its destination is the street where political ruptures need analogues. The intersection between soundscape and sound design shifts from the sound bites of institutional politics to films, television, and the politics of reconciliation. This expanded audiovisuality of the street can be aimed toward better shaping our political inquiries as a way of getting beneath the visual discourse of events. The analysis of sound (whether in short film or its experimental analogues in film parts or literary parts) is a readily accessible resource.
Montage 6: Time

Films say a lot about a city. In January 2008, Santi Taepanich’s *Bangkok Time* (2007) screened at Lido in Siam Square for a one week running. There were far of an indie thron than at the internationally renown *Tropical Malady* almost four years previous, even though *Bangkok Time* had one of Thailand’s most visible film stars. Ananda Everingham volunteered to be in the film for free based his faith in the director’s artistic vision. The artistic vision is noticeable from the outset, if not by its title, quickly calling attention to the relationship between film as a medium and the city as an aesthetic. These dimensions are illustrated in terms of time.

Each character’s disordered relationship to the city is visualized by mixing up the linear trajectory of the plot. In two theatrical viewings of *Bangkok Time*, I attempted to make sense of the disordered narrative events by taking note of each temporal cut in a notebook and then trying to piece it back together to form the proper narrative tapestry. The film reminded me of a poem by Siriworn Kaewkan (2005) that reads “narrate the self through the city, narrate the city through the self,” which reminded me of Victor Burgin’s connection between cities and time: “My aim is less to record traces I have left in some cities than it is to recall some traces some cities have left in me” (2003: 7). My experiment in ordering the actual time of the film proved counter-productive to what the film says about the actual disorder of the city. The film unfolds as a memory of Bangkok with its time replaced by temporal rhythms—the protagonist watches old television shows, the night darkens the landscape, and the black markets, hospital scenes, and hotel rooms do not clarify the “when” of events. In the film, the cityscape is ordered through cuts between Old and New city sites: for example the informal economies of the New City street in Lumphini Park and Silom Road; and the river prehistory of Bangkok at Pin Klao Bridge, and the film’s boat transport sequences along the Chao Phraya River. The disorder of the characters, in other words, is heavily impacted by travels between Old City and New City. The new cityscape is alienating, the television screen is a nightlight, the bridges are clocks that characters pass over at certain times, and dialogue is almost completely eliminated. One leaves the theater, as I did in January of 2008, to enter the new city of Siam Square with few clues that it would be turned into a battlefield in the coming years. *Bangkok Time* exposes the disordered times of the city, a lack of linearity, the disjuncture between what images show and what sounds suggest, and the way each of these characters are material projections of the city itself. Cities all have established and identifiable moments telling of when they were put together. And yet both urban space and media space reel into the found-footage of an era.

The institutional relationships of Bangkok “time” were heavily altered during the tenure of Thaksin Shinawatra. Thaksin became the signal of global time as one nation’s official exhibition; a manager of global processes, and unintended curator of Bangkok. Buildings and other large-scale infrastructure projects, like the Baiyoke skyscraper and the Skytrain, would expand the exhibition of the Thaksin years to seal his reign. Towering above the city, these structures exude the depoliticization of a time by their very distance from the street—where in 1973, 1976, and 1992, hundreds of thousands of...
people stopped traffic to command democracy with art, megaphones, and presence. In Bangkok’s tall buildings, elevators sound-off stories about urban development, and the Skytrain screens play nationalist music videos. The canonical urban theorist Lewis Mumford observed that such vertical development would make “sky the limit” (430). Mumford further remarked how these developments would de-politicize the pedestrian away from “the flexibility of mass movements” in the street (431). But for all of Bangkok’s push toward the sky, the streets exploded in dissent at the end of Thaksin’s time.

Eras, like stories, often end where they began. Such is the case with Bangkok Time (2007), where we know little more about the characters than we once knew, except where they spend time in the city. We don’t know what will happen to its alienated characters, though one is pregnant. We know they cross paths on certain streets and that the city will rule over their actions through its dominating rhythms. In this way, the film establishes a rhythm of the city, an expression of future possibilities and anticipation, the way in which time travels in many directions. It was screened at a New City section (Siam Square) that the Skytrain re-centered, near a theater destroyed by fire during the military crackdown of 2010. Protestors, perceived as loyal to Thaksin, were charged with setting fire. “Bangkok time” had progressed beyond the carefree coming-of-age melodramas of the 1990s that narrate the verticality of the city, into a period of disruption and indecision. The film is, simply put, a de-figuring of time.
Fig. 6.1 The Baiyoke Skyscraper as figure (Personal photo, 2008)

Fig. 6.2 Baiyoke skyscraper: God’s eye view. (Personal photo, 2009)
Fig. 6.3 Skytrain station billboard for vertical living
Fig. 6.4 Skytrain station and urban fictions
CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSION: BANGKOK TIME
These people on the street are as important as celebrities or politicians. (Panu Trivej 2005: 38)

What time is it?

A “prominent” figure in Thai politics is one who commands attention to a particular time. In Thailand, one knows what time it is when one stands at attention while the national anthem plays, especially along the streets of Bangkok. At 8 am and 6 pm each day, park joggers stop, walkers along Bangkok’s “sky bridge” slow to a halt, and tourists stop to take picture of the spectacle. In various Thai representations of national culture, such as in a scene from the Pen-ek Ratanaruang film Last Life in the Universe (2003), even characters stop and give attention when the auditory stream of these daily activities. The exercise intrudes the visual field of the city twice a day, and this culture of the street manifests itself in the “reel” power in fictional mediums. The demonstration of pedestrian allegiance explains the need for networked speaker systems in different parts of the city, such as Siam Square, Lumphini Park, or Ratchadamnern Avenue in the Old City. But it also shows how urban subjects embody the times of national figures at the intersection of media and the street. Time is constituted and registered by “attention.” The national anthem exists as a legacy of the military dictatorship of General Phibunsongkram who, in 1939, made it law to stand at attention twice a day.

In Imagined Communities, Benedict Anderson observed that power exists as an audiovisual field. “We are faced with a world in which the figuring of imagined reality was overwhelmingly visual and aural” (22-23). He was speaking of pre-modern forms of
authority, like absolute monarchies, which remain symbolically relevant in Thailand. But power, as the above example suggests, is not simply “imagined” but performed through a command of attention. To whom are these urban subjects paying attention? Toward whose time does their attentiveness submit? According to Thai media scholar Duncan McCargo (2010), contemporary perceptions of national time in Thailand are dictated by attentiveness to the “late reign” of King Bhumibol. Who will become his successor and what will become of the monarchical institution, which wields symbolic power through a network of loyal affiliates? How will the unbroken legacy of the monarchy, a continuous historical past, proceed? These questions belong to a particular kind of time, which I will call the time of the “figure”.

The hierarchal time of figures is only threatened by an attendant, i.e., one who draws attention away from the established audiovisual field. But Thaksin, the adversarial center of power gossip in Bangkok, is no attendant to the monarchy. He is simply another version of figural time. Former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, ousted by loyalist forces in a 2006 military coup, counter-balances the historic continuity of national conventions with the global newness of his policies. Though he resides outside of Thailand as of 2012, popular discourse represents him as a threat to the monarchy.

On both sides, street protesters, relatives, and powerful allies pull strings “off camera” while the visibility of these two networks command attention toward the legitimacy of each side. Jonathan Crary (2001) conceived of visuality as a discourse where regimes of “attention” command power. But this kind of attention is anticipatory, where outcomes are siphoned through a filtered set of possibilities. Crary observed: “The roots of the word ‘attention’ in fact resonate with a sense of tension, of being stretched,
and also of ‘waiting’” (10). To critique this visual economy of attention, in this sense, is to divert attention away from this discourse of waiting, prevailing, and limited futures that scholars provide. Creative media often engages in audiovisual tropes as a politics of fiction that warns against the figural time of the nation.

At a very literal level, institutional power is organized around prominent “figures”: the daily time requested by the nation, the late reign of an ailing monarch, the time of Thaksin. Prominent figures convey time, and unify subjects through the attention they command. Figures may be harmoniously unified in conventions, narratives, messages and other “coded” elements of viewing that direct the reader or viewer toward a certain kind of anticipation. On the other hand, films and fiction do not command attention but “attend” these figures through a variety of antagonisms between sounds and images. In his gloss on the paintings of Francis Bacon, Gilles Deleuze (2004) observed how contemporary art “deforms” the expectations of viewing by the intensities that pull apart preconceived unities (what he called “figurative givens”). Creative mediums provide new “sensations” and “frames,” which encourage a shift in reading, hearing, or registering an event. This is the transformation from fixed subject to what Deleuze calls “attendants.” An attendant is not set to a fixed point in a unified landscape, but instead leads its viewer to register multiple ‘felt’ intensities that move from one audiovisual field to another.63 The attendant encourages critical observation outside field of dominant

63. Marco Abel (2008), using Deleuze’s commentary on Francis Bacon, indicates that the disorganization of affect (of sensation and ‘the felt’) “is presubjective: it is what constitutes the subject rather than being a synonym for an already constituted subject’s emotions or feelings. (6)” Abel continues that Deleuze’s attention to the affect of a scream, for instance, “is a matter of
figures. The street is a central field of disruption, where attendents threaten the organic unity of figures.

The question of figures and attendants raises several key questions about Thai politics at present. The first question revolves around how Thaksin Shinawatra, Thailand’s most prominent figure of the past decade, commanded a new kind of attention in Thai society, especially in the aftermath of the Asian Financial Crisis. How did this kind of attention, toward a revised New City symbolic of his prominence, comport with creative regimes of viewing? Second, the image of Thaksin didn’t simply command attention toward the sky in the manner of monarchical figures who first modernized the city, or military generals who ruled it during the dictatorship period. Thaksin, and the continuity of prominence in Thai society, brokered a new regime of attention through his investment in new visual technologies and his motivation to reach for the sky. The question of figure and attendant, or prominence and politics, is this question of street and sky in urban Thai society.

Fictionalizing the Figure

It is not dangerous simply because it is figurative, but because it claims to reign over vision” (Deleuze 2004:12).
Thaksin is a prominent figure in Thailand, though he remains exiled in Abu Dubai as of 2012. His autobiography exudes elements of the ‘self-made’ hyperreal, whereby a desire for a particular kind of story propels individuals to consume it. His is virtually a fictional figure, not experienced except though the mediation of any number of screened images that map his global coordinates outside Thailand. During the violent protests of March through May 2010, Thaksin talked about his travels through other historic global cities. At the end of March 2010, he wrote on Twitter: “Tomorrow I will travel to Saudi Arabia at the prince’s invitation. The prince has invited me to join him in constructing a new city near Mecca” (Mydans 2010). On the very same day as the ‘tweet’, his supporters stormed a satellite uplink station on the Northern edge of Bangkok after their signal transmission was cut by government forces. Thaksin is himself a signal cut by these same forces in an ongoing struggle for ‘air time’.

Thaksin gained notoriety as a figure for Thailand’s media path. In the late 1970s and early 1980s Thaksin, hailing from the Northern Thai province of Chiang Mai, began his first business ventures in Bangkok by refurbishing an Old City movie theater and distributing Thai films back into the provinces (Baker & Phongpaichit 2009: 40). His story develops the figure of the outsider propelled into Bangkok during Thailand’s modernization miracle of the 1980s where industrialization and urbanization blend into securitization. Business opportunities, and entrepreneurs, had to filter through either military or police arms of the state. Thaksin chose the latter. After gaining a doctoral degree in criminal justice in the U.S., he became a police officer and used his network to gain a government concession to install IBM computers into its national offices. A 2001 Bangkok Post election guide reports that in 1987 Thaksin felt “burned out” by police
work and retired to produce a melodramatic romance film called *Baan Sai Thong* (“Thaksin” 2001). Clearly, Thaksin was observant of the mass consumption of images and the developing technologies of image transmission.

Of course, his experiments in film were short lived, but must’ve instilled a sense of the aesthetics of image-making. Such skills would serve him well during times of national crisis, especially as his fame arose as a unity un tarnished by the crippling destruction of the Asian Financial Crisis which had pulled apart national banks, television stations, newspapers, and the general image of the nation (McCargo 2003). Baker and Phongpaichit (2001) trace the political prominence of Thaksin to 1997 when the entrepreneurial survival of Thailand’s business elite depended upon pooling resources in a climate of financial loss. Thaksin and the Charoen Pokphand (CP) company, two of Thailand’s largest competitors, became intimate allies through a new business monopoly pooled the spoils of the crisis into an extended network of political contacts. 1997 was a tragic year for Southeast Asia, entailing a decade and a half of unbridled modernization brought to a halt. While abandoned construction projects spawned ruins, graffiti, and the suicides of failed bankers, the void demanded a political renewal. Out of these fragments, a new kind of figure came into being. In 1998 Thaksin launched a new national political party called Thai Rak Thai [“Thai love Thais”], entered candidacy for Premiership, and gained significant financial backing from CP. Thaksin was both businessman and a government crony, a consolidator of capital amid the forces of the Asian Financial Crisis (AFC), and a populist who “bought” into ailing media institutions.

The Asian Financial Crisis was so devastating to the national image that prior images of neoliberal glory gets easily bypassed in the historical record. The early 1990s
teen melodrama serves as case and point. These films centered the nation through the coming of age of popular celebrities, who used these films to market popular music and moral norms, and acclimated national audiences to global newness. Walter Benjamin observed how film worked as a technique of mechanical reproduction that cushioned urban audiences against the traumatic shocks of modernity. The film *Long June* (1996) aptly projects some of the shocks of this period by positioning its orphaned protagonist, a real-life Thai pop star, as moving from a provincial outsider into a refined Bangkokian. Reuniting with his entrepreneurial father in Bangkok, and earning his father’s trust by expunging his provincial exterior in a private school, he is climactically placed in charge of a construction project likely acquired through concession. In the home office of his father’s Bangkok suburb, the father/boss adorns his desk with an American flag—casting aside post-1992 claims that America’s geopolitical influence had dissipated. In *Romantic Blues* (1994), a film of similar genre and using the same actor, Bangkok itself appears under-construction. The film shows that a contemporary regime of attention is itself a new vision of the sky, organized through views from on high where numerous cranes line the cityscape in a sequence of establishing shots that capture a quickening modernity.

The figuring of the city is not unlike the rise of prominent celebrities, entrepreneurs, or political figures. Both are unfinished sites of anticipation, where virtual networks join with infrastructural developments to command audiovisual attention about the future. These scenes do not simply take place in a “geography of globalization” underpinned by a new assemblage of global cities constituted by their “work cultures,” “information economy,” or “electronic” cultures (Saksia Sassen 2000). Instead, these films register the development of the city by integrating new dimensions of seeing and
listening into the figures of their stories. Movement through the city is thereby informed by the actual materiality of these melodramas: neoliberal architecture, elevated freeways, suburbanization, and mass transit. All of these new developments raised people above the street, or beneath the monstrosity of neoliberalism’s “cathedrals” where a re-directed urban perception eliminated other sensory fields. Thaksin successfully managed these global processes during the period, but the characters of Long June and Romantic Blues are not as lucky. Some are injured by falling construction materials, others remain mired in class inequalities, and even the privileged are destined to leave their country to be exiled, like Thaksin, for an indefinite period. Stripped of their prominence, they can be perceived differently, i.e., as critical attendants of the roles they are assumed to be fictionalizing.

After the Asian Financial Crisis these teenage melodramas came to be perceived within a critique of neoliberalism, especially as they expressed an audiovisual turn toward the New City. This figuring of the New City was a threat to older orders of visual expression because it departed from national iconography. Teen idols lacked the “baramee” (i.e., prestige) of heroic national figures. But did such teen films lack history, or were their global tropes simply rolled into a post-Asian Financial Crisis blame game as the co-sponsors of a global façade? In one establishing shot from Romantic Blues, high school students stand against the backdrop of a 19th century French cathedral in Bangkok. The Assumption Cathedral, completed in 1821, is located on 23 Oriental Avenue, along the New Road. The Cathedral is one of many symbols along the New Road that linked the Old City to a network of Western cultural importation into the city, including a large printing press. These films complicate the city as a pure national space, a unity in the
visual field. But conservative Thai critics treated such “teen” films as aesthetically devoid of politics. The establishing shot might be read as a “crypto-colonial” signal of pre-national discourses of civilization, but film viewers bypassed the coming globality of its visual field.64

Instead, Thai film critics and academics, waged a conservative turn toward an imagined national past in order to anticipate the direction of the future. One might say that the traditionalist campaign against the rising appeals of Thaksin-like characters began before he ever took office. May Adadol Ingawanij (2006) shows how “heritage” films like *Suriyothai* (2001) attempted to forge a national consciousness in response to the AFC but, in doing so, fictionalized the figures of Thai history. *Suriyothai* follows the personal sacrifice of a 16th century queen to defend the Siamese kingdom against foreign Burmese invaders. Those who championed the heritage film did so by attacking the genres that produced films like *Romantic Blue* (1995) and *Long June* (1996). Ingawanij concludes that their “dislike of a derivative film style became all too easily expressed as alarm for the apparent cultural weakness of ‘the nation’s future’” (161). They disliked the global, neoliberal, and “cool” surfaces of the film genre. And Hollywood welcomed this move by co-producing the coherent export of nationalized films.

Amporn Jirattikorn (2003) reiterates the importance of organizing “time” in the aftermath of the AFC in her critique of *Suriyothai*. She observes that the film works in

64. Michael Herzfield (2002) defines “crypto-colonialism” as “the curious alchemy whereby certain countries, buffer zones between the colonized lands and those yet untamed, were compelled to acquire their political independence at the expense of massive economic dependence, this relationship being articulated in the iconic guise of aggressively national culture fashioned to suit foreign models” (900-901). The issue of “crypto-colonialism” is more recently addressed in a series of articles edited by Rachel Harrison, Peter Jackson and Dipesh Chakrabarty entitled *The Ambiguous Allure of the West: Traces of the Colonial in Thailand* (2010).
the economy of attention with a “captured audience” subjected to an “active role in narrativizing the past” (296). Alonside other so-called nostalgia films (see Rachel Harrison 2007), such as Bang Rajan (1999) and Tears of the Black Tiger (2001), Suriyothai circulated in global film festivals, not only as a sign of a “Thai film renaissance” but as a sign of film’s primary role: of organizing national time.

But in the year 2000, Thaksin’s themes were not aimed to recover a unified past but to imagine possible futures. He thereby campaigned under the slogan “Think New, Act New for every Thai” (Baker and Phongpaichit 2009: 78). The crafting of visual attention became a discourse of anticipating, waiting, and prominence. The ambiguous intersection between fictional characters and real life outcomes accounts for obvious reasons why national audiences are consumed with the melodramatic journeys of prominent figures. This is the way a figure, removed from any subject experience, is internalized as the visual domain of the everyday urban resident. Crary (1990) develops his own approach to viewing practices around two regimes of power: of the spectacle (Debord 1994), where an outside object is internalized by a subject; and, of surveillance (Foucault) where the subject is objectified by the unseen gaze of power. However, Crary continues, each of these regimes “neglects the new forms by which vision itself became a kind of discipline or mode of work” (1990: 18) Crary’s work on the technologies of attention demonstrates how subjects are not just seen, but motivated toward a particular kind of perception—that of internalization of images removed from their source. But hasn’t the figure of power always been dislocated from its source? Thaksin was the media, not just the financial source through which media control could be managed. Thaksin’s strength lay in ability to command the imaginary that, during the height of his
prominence, amplified in media institutions rather than the technologies of production themselves.

The media management of Thaksin, or any other prominent figure, was never total. In fact, as national hero worship trumps global forces of individualism, even critical institutions of academia wage questions of prominence in terms of an either/or binary. But their neglect of one time, at the expense of another, encourage a different kind of reading that finds their single common thread: fiction. Fiction always plays a role in the mobilization of a collective national consciousness. However, the works treated below show that this unity of time is no longer possible. Significant media figures, political leaders, and empowered discourses organize time, but the figures of fiction and film enlist attendants that pull these frames apart.

In the Thaksin-era film *Goal Club* (Kittikorn Liewsirikul 2001) ocean waves appear in the background of several jovial teens kicking a ball alongside the ocean, in slow motion. They take turns holding a camcorder and call attention to its ability to capture “real life”: on-screen they proclaim, “we’re making the Thai Blair Witch Project” (Yue 2001). Meanwhile, violent forces in a fast paced Bangkok await their imminent return. In the end of the film, the characters are “captured” by veterans of the city’s

65. Benedict Anderson’s treatment of the Filipino fiction writer Jose Rizal in *Imagined Communities* (1983), and his analysis of Thai literature in *In the Mirror: Literature and Politics in Siam in the American Era* (1985), attempt to show how different parts of the modern nation are linked together by a “simultaneous” perception of time. Literature promoted popular time, away from the sacral languages of the past and into a modern system of intelligibility. Where as “sacred silent languages were the media through which the great global communities of the past were imagined” (1983: 14) more direct modes of collective identification were spawned by the emergence of a standardized media. These standards and conventions included recognizable characters, city sites, collective pronouns, and the community imagined by readers. Such references linked “the world inside the novel with the world outside” (30).
unseen underworld where legal authority does not exist. Observing the “capture” from an unseen point, a fragile teen storms the scene with nothing but a stick in the attempt to rescue his friends. It is a collective position bound to fail. He is swallowed up by corrupt overlords of the Bangkok streets in a spray of bullets. The theme of disenfranchised youth was popular in 2001. *Goal Club* was the Thai version of *Trainspotting*, exposing the contradictions between myth-making and urban realism. These were new images of “real” grit and street life marking a shift in the relationship between Bangkok and it’s presentation.


What became clear, though often evaded, in work of many different kinds on attention was what a volatile concept it was, and how incompatible with any model of a sustained aesthetic gaze. Attention always contained within itself the conditions for its own disintegration, it was haunted by the possibility of its own excess—which we know so well whenever we try to look at or listen to any one thing for too long. In any number of ways, attention inevitably reaches a threshold at which it breaks down. (Crary 2001: 47)

In Bangkok during May 1992, bootlegged videotapes drew attention away from the coherent but deceptive narratives of television by showing what happened on the street. Video drew away from the televised broadcast of King Bhumibol and his reprimand of
military general Suchinda Kraprayoon, who led the military’s crackdown on pro-democracy protestors. It problematized the role of military general Chamlong Srimuang as self-appointed opposition leader of the May 1992—in the videos he leads the protestors into the rain of bullets which, Klima (2002) observes, insured a meditation on the corpse of fallen protestors could be used in exchange for power. Video encouraged indexicality and the preservation of memory, but raised the truth-value of images. The raw material of political events could now be materially stored. Video invited the masses back into the parts of the cityscape where life was lost, because this is where videotapes were sold. While television interiorized a certain kind of attention in 1992, through soap operas and depoliticized news content, the videotape led the viewer outside the frame and into a cityscape they knew.

Panu Trivej’s fictional short story “Creative Interview: ‘A Prominent Person on the Street’ Episode 13, October 2004” (2005) speaks to the related issue of commanding attention by exploring three kinds of time. First, the story incorporates time into the text by positioning its “prominent” protagonist in an interview labeled “Episode 13, October 2004”. This figural time belongs to Thaksin, who was Prime Minister at the time the story was written. The story also enlists media time in the sense that the story is about those who ‘script’ television, which attends to the way viewing conventions flow within the frame of a print medium: contemporary Thai fiction. Finally, the story attempts to characterize the time of the street as one which deforms the figure—the street gives rise the “second life” of story characters. The time of figures, media, and street are linked together by a regime of attention.
Specifically, “Creative Interview” raises issues about the archivability of time through video, and the ways prominent television personalities command the attention of viewers. The author, Panu Trivej, recommended this story to me based on my observation of the central role visual technologies undertake in numerous contemporary narratives in Thai fiction. The story aims to deflect attention from “prominent figures” by underscoring the economy of attention within which they wage visual strategies. Power is demonstrated to operate by the “scripting” of the visual field. In the case of this story, a former news anchorman has resigned from his post at a major television channel in order to make documentaries about “everyday” people on the street. These everyday people have an occupational life (e.g., as a pharmacist), but also engage a “second life” on the street (e.g., in daily pick-up soccer games). In an interview with the prominent person, the narrator exposes the deceptive veneer of documentary television shows. The remarkable feet of this story is how it forces the reader to “read” the way contemporary visual technologies command attention. As a story in four acts, the plot encourages the reader to think not of the imagined community of a nation, but the “imagined” visual field of truth.

The first act is a sketch of the visual field through an identification of its parts. Panu’s visual style is evident from the short story’s opening paragraph. The narrator enters into the apartment of the prominent person, who he has come to interview about a new documentary series about everyday people that live two lives. The narrator moves through various parts of the apartment’s interior visual field. In particular, he notes the clutter of audiovisual materials: editing equipment, a clothing closet used for videotapes, and a/v cables. These objects are juxtaposed with a variety of ‘voyeuristic’ (“I peeked a
glance”) observations of the prominent person’s body: pale, red swollen eyes “like someone fixed in front of the screen” (Trivej 2005: 33). The narrator apprehends the visual and aesthetic field of the prominent person as an interplay of parts, and as extensions of his audiovisual world. This layering of audiovisuality is not only the formulaic method of opening the story, but a means to show how prominent figures are literate in the organization of attention.

The second act is one of character identification, i.e., the isolation of the figure within the field of images. The narrator begins his “creative” interview by inquiring into the prominent person’s health. The prominent person responds that he is terminally ill and close to death. With little time remaining, he began to concentrate on off-screen duties “in the background, directing, scripting” and so on. In other words, he began to command the information and images viewers would receive. These new duties led to a reinvigorated energy in directing, yet it also led to the neglect of other parts of his world. Lacking the proper attention, his wife filed for divorce. He then submitted his resignation from his former job. But when the narrator inquires into the central turn of events, the prominent person can’t pinpoint an answer: perhaps “capitalism,” “competition” and strategic maneuvering at work. He continues that there is no direct route to the source of “blame”. “The degradation is no one’s fault, not my fault, and not society’s fault” (Trivej 2005: 35).

The third act of the story repositions the figure into different circumstances in which the streets set the figure in motion by positioning him in different parts of the city. The prominent person tells the narrator that he was inspired to begin a documentary series after discovering the second life of a “friend of a friend” named Nui. Nui, a
pharmacist by day, engages a second life in the streets of Bangkok. Each day, crazy about football, Nui heads to the backstreets and paved parks of the cityscape, unknown spaces where he connects with other anonymous people off-the-clock. The prominent person followed Nui for a month and, in doing so, learned other sides of the city previously unknown to him. “By day Nui sells drugs but by evening he is a star” (Trivej 2005: 36). The prominent person also surmises that everyday people, shy at first, aspire to be interviewed as a path toward prominence. The prominent person commands attention through the complicity of those who aspire to be part of his organization of images. The narrator states that they are not like today’s stars who become known simply because they are the decedents of former stars. “In my opinion, these people on the street are as important as celebrities or politicians. (Trivej 2005: 38)” The narrator/interviewer summarizes. “So you want to esteem those who work hard at something, but [then you esteem] something that doesn’t develop into anything substantial? (Trivej 2005: 38)”

In the fourth and final act, the narrator confronts the prominent person in a more critical tone. He begins to tear into his interview subject, stating his suspicion that the prominent person’s terminal illness is a mere façade for generating publicity. The prominent person, the narrator continues, never resigned but was fired for a lack of interest. Publicizing his illness is a final ploy to gain attention. The narrator is asked to leave, but on the way out he tells the prominent person that he has not encountered the street. He has only enlarged his interior field which he seeks to impose on others: his self-victimization by an imagined ailment will ultimately imprison him in madness in a “castle in the air”. The story’s four acts uses the interviewer as a critical attendant,
accompanying the prominent person in order to highlight the latter’s use of images to command attention.

Contemporary Thai literature critically accompanies the images of prominent political figures like Thaksin. As a metatext, the story uses the interviewer to record the prominent person. The interviewer is the attendant. Moreover, the central figure is pulled apart in the sense that video attends to television, the street attends to the ubiquity of media screens, and so on. The illness itself qualifies the intensity of publicity. “Creative Interview: ‘A Prominent Person on the Street’ Episode 13, October 2004” expresses a desire for the real in a political landscape that functions on attention. The political landscape is the visualization of the cityscape, where streets of the real accompany the reel fictions of video.

The ‘Reel’ Deal: Tracking the Street from the Sky

The airplane began its decent. Even in the darkness I began to see the streets. I saw lines dividing the provinces, the lives in movement, the vast world divided into lanes. (Wyovarin 1998: 11)

The above lines from award-winning Thai author Win Lyovarin explores, even laments, the growing disconnections between prominent figures and the street. These kind of stories enlist their politics by exploring the relationship between media fields of attention and the audiovisual dimensions of the city. This connection between media and city can
be understood by looking first at the development of ‘reel’ images of the nation, and then of the kinds of mobility in the moving image of a ‘real’ cityscape.

Tom Gunning referred to a “cinema of attractions” as cinema in its infancy, which emphasized episodic spectacles rather than the coherent narratives. In the Thai context, early cinematic spectacles carried seismic political consequences far removed from the streets of Bangkok. Scott Barmé (1999; 2002) notes that between 1922 and 1932, when absolute monarchy was replaced by a parliamentary dictatorship, the Royal Siamese Rail Film Unit produced numerous documentary and short film footage in travelogue form in order to bring images of unsettled provincial areas within the visible reach of Bangkok audiences. Barmé notes:

For the first time audiences were brought into closer contact with their fellow compatriots through film which now began to help shape and define the growth of a national imaginary, a consciousness of an emergent Thai nation. (1999: 314)

National audiences, here positioned in the urban core of Bangkok, understood citizenship in aesthetic terms. On one hand the position of bodies within the map needed to be addressed visually. On the other hand, the visual construction of the nation emerged as a body that subsumed the presence of peripheral bodies as mere parts. Barmé continues:

[T]he quintessentially modern technologies of mechanized print and film were integral to the process of constructing and deploying new social

66. See also Wolfgang Schivelbusch (1987) and Lynne Kirby (2008) for relationship between the development of trains, modern perception, and print media.
meanings in Siam, and to the creation of national narratives—that is, stories framed in terms of the nation. (2002: 10)

A year before Thaksin took office, a new “cinema of attractions” arrived in Bangkok when 400,000 people across the city flocked to different stations to experience something new on opening day of the Bangkok Mass Transit System’s (BTS) Skytrain. For the price of a ticket, pedestrians cut through multiple-hour commuter routes in a span of minutes while panning across a continuous establishing shot from the elevated point of view that only cameras know. The Skytrain’s millennial opening harks toward the development of a new Bangkok. Passengers move toward different parts of the city, above the streets where political events once raged. After the post-military dictatorship reshuffle of 1992, i.e. after the pro-democracy crackdown in 1992, the three most significant projects dealt in how to avoid the street by constructing three elevated train systems (Hatton 1995).

The Skytrain raised passengers to a vision from above, i.e., a privileged view of the city. In Thailand, the figure of the sky is very close to the figure of the monarchy, in the sense that both are “above politics”. In the stories below, the sky is used as a departure from the political traditions that streets represent. Queen Sirikit, in the early 1990s, broke the usual distance of monarchy from politics (though this too is a symbolic assumption) by calling upon opposing political camps to resolve traffic problems for the sake of the increasingly populous commuter. Between 1992 and the Thaksin years, when the Skytrain and underground subway finally became functional, “upgrading public transport” created rifts between nation and city, and especially between agencies like the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration’s (BMA) and the Metropolitan Rapid Transit
Authority (MRTA).⁶⁷ These institutional divisions were understandable in the sense of controlling what passengers would see in the city and how they would see. It meant dividing the city, locating new centers, and managing a field of audiovisuality. When Thaksin took office in 2001, Bangkok had become an experience based on new kinds of movement. The new city rose toward the sky as as a sea change from a decade earlier.

Exemplary of the technological freedom of urban light rail systems, uninhibited by traffic and the bus-riding working class, the Skytrain emphasized horizontal motion through the cityscape. Speeding along its East-West Sukhumvit line or North-South Silom line, the Skytrain carts white collar professionals, tourists, and middle class shoppers to managed destinations and pre-assigned routes that expand every few years. Dominant real estate magazines in Bangkok like to advertise that the Skytrain re-centered the geography of city, which pushes the attention of investors to emerging properties (Barnes 2009). Like the election of Thaksin, movement through the city redefined temporal centers with a geography of newness. The hub of the city became the base station for the Skytrain, built amid the shopping center district in Pathumwan and Ratchathewi (home to Siam Square, Central World and the Baiyoke skyscraper). The shift hinted toward the way power favored those best equipped to connect technology and mobility. A growing number of movie theaters and cyber cafes fortified the verticality of this global ‘rhizome’. Just as Thaksin upheld “newness” in campaign slogans, the New City became the proper measurement of Bangkok time.

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⁶⁷ See (Boyd 1993)
The Baiyoke Tower skyscraper—constructed between 1990 and 1997—is a key architectural motif of the New City section of Bangkok. It is also the epitome of how media and movement arrive at Bangkok’s new centers. Whereas the regulations of the Old City inhibited the ability to overlook other spaces of the city, modeled after similar restrictions following French Architect Eugene Hausmann’s Parisian percements (“drilling”), the Baiyoke Tower indulges the subject within the elevated gaze of the urban planner (Figure 6.1-Figure 6.2). Dislodged from other urban anxieties (e.g., street traffic and canals filled with the fumigating byproducts of multinational investment), if only briefly, the viewer can optically manage the city through the building’s panoramic tour. Part of the tour is reminiscent of Siam Square’s Patumwan Princess Hotel elevator that repeat’s songs from the soundtracks of popular movies about Thailand to leave the tourist’s image of exotic space centered (e.g. The Beach [1999]). The elevator of the Baiyoke Skyscraper points to different parts of the city as a mode of mapping space. On each trip, the elevator plays the following soundtrack:

The tallest building in the kingdom of Thailand is 300 meters from the ground floor. The world’s leading elevator company, LG, has specially-designed this elevator to run smoothly at a speed of…[indecipherable static] the light has been switched off to allow you a better view of the Eastern side of the city, where the most important residential areas in Bangkok are. On a clear day you can see far away, beyond the Chaopraya river to the Gulf of Thailand. Thank you for your visit. Enjoy the magnificent view of the city.
The soundtrack of Bangkok’s most scenic elevator points illustrates a shift in perception in Bangkok. Away from the figural time of the monarchy, away from the Northwestern quarters of the Old City, the sounds direct viewer attention toward “the Eastern side of the city”. Toward the east is another way of saying “away from the river,” which is another way of coding the expansion of streets as a replacement for traditional travel along urban canal systems. It is not a voyage to the streets, but toward a distanced safe image of them. These are also the Eastern locales of the expanding New City where housing campaigns for highrise living take the forms of political expressions like “chun issara [“I am free”]”. A scripted new city began to be readable on billboards along Bangkok’s Skytrain platforms that say “Construct a life, not just a building” and “Stories as well as storeys” [Figure 6.3-Figure 6.4]. These buildings and the processes of ‘scripting’ that called upon viewer attention positioned new parts of the city as visual destinations.

The skyscraper is Bangkok’s most audible architectural discussion before the AFC but also a figurative precursor to Thaksin (Clarke 1995). By centering the city with a new verticality based on global perspectives, the skyscraper exemplified the national perspective (even though it’s foundation was built with the Australian capital of Concrete Construction) (L. Allen 1995). Approximately a year before the crisis hit, The Nation writer Nungsuda Tirawatanawit (1996) described the building as symbol of the nation,

68. The Issara Latphrao is “the tallest condominium” in the area, according to its website domain, which is named after the “I am Issara” slogan. In a protest like manner, these campaigns occupied spaces of the New City on weekends in 2007 in the attempt to register lingering shoppers. (Chan Issara Development Public Company Limited. http://www.charnissara.co.th) In the summer of 2011, Sansiri placed their ad campaign alongside Skytrain platforms. (http://www.sansiri.com).
and “sky high with not a care in the world.” Like the transatlantic modernism that placed nations in exhibition mode in skyscrapers built a century earlier, the “upward” mobility of Asia’s “tiger economies” would be manifested in new vertical developments (Turner 1997). But before it could be completed, the so-called “Asian contagion” (See Smith 2005) stalled construction in the summer of 1997. A shift in financiers and venture capitalists eventually facilitated the building’s completion, which coincided with the “Amazing Thailand” tourism campaign. The campaign sought to market Bangkok as “the bargain basement of the world” where a devalued Baht meant higher purchasing power for foreign tourists. On 28 November, 1998, when the observation deck of the Baiyoke skyscraper opened, a new post-crisis perspective was complete. Project chairmen, Panlert Baiyoke, proudly unveiled his national exhibition.

"If you are on top of our building or dine at our restaurant, you can see panoramic views of Bangkok," Mr Panlert said. "You will acknowledge the beauty of our city and observe the different stages of urbanisation in all directions." ("Skyscraper-scaler" 2002)

On top, plans for an iTV antenna forecasted the intimate relationship growing between media and politicians.69 By the time Thaksin was elected in 2001, Panlert Baiyoke had become both party MP and Thaksin “confidante.” ("Skyscraper-scaler” 2002)

During these Thaksin years, Siriworn Kaewkan wrote the story “About a Navigator on the Roof of the Baiyoke skyscraper” (2004) to reorient the political

69. iTV was a public television station which emerged in response to political censorship during the May 1992 events. As its primary investors ailed during the AFC, Thaksin Shinawatra’s Shin Corp soon bought a controlling stake thereby escaping the station’s public “truth” mandate.
relationship between the vertical site and global audiovisual perspectives. As an old man with ailing sight, a protagonist named Srimin attempts to remake “his” world optically by rearranging a map of the world. Sitting at the top of the Baiyoke skyscraper, his imagination is projected through a series of fragments organized around famous navigators that connected East and West, including Vasca de Gama, Marco Polo, and Captain James Cook. The soundscape of the neighborhood speaks to Pratumwan’s mosques between Ratchathevi soi 5 and 7, and the North African immigrants who occupy the markets below: “the prayer call of the Muslim community and the sound of the Cuckoo’s song came floating through the air.” Srimin imagines “the horizons of East and West but also the way in which urban architecture exists as optic machinery: “The building fronts blinking: 1…2…3…4…” The story ends when Srimin rips a fold-out map of the world in half and realigns it according to his imagined field of view.

The figural distance from the street represented by the sky likewise flowed into other works of Bangkok fiction. Thinakorn Hutangkul, in his short story “Starless Sky” (2005), places five intellectually-gifted high school students in a restaurant on the 78th floor of the Baiyoke Tower where they talk over lunch.

Mintra looked in the direction of Bangkok where the sun began to flare.
She felt as if she was peering out from the window of an airplane.

Phan Dao leaned over to capture an image of cars along the highways below. “The cars look small like toys.”
Kham Rop, the elegant adolescent, tall in stature, black-framed glasses, leaned her head out across Phan Dao, then spoke.

“The view is boring. A street with only cars. Do you know what I’d like to see on the Bangkok streets?”

“What would you like to see?” inquired Jakaphleong, a tall and handsome young man with a small scar over his left eyebrow.

Kham Rop answered, “millions of people spilling out of their homes and into a procession of protest like in the newsreel films of the Black May events in 1992, or in October 1973 or October 1976.

“Protest is the right of the people in democratic countries. But protest movements among students, and other groups is exceedingly rare. In our time of continued absence, that is what I’d like to see.”

The above characters are too young to have experienced the mass protests of the 1970s or the early 1990s; and inundated with new fields of view and media instantaneity that inhibit the possibility of national political consciousness. The story simply shows their political perceptions to be based on a distance from the street. Thinakorn’s “Starless Sky” offers a prophetic observation on an eerie future, where media images inform the naivety of highschool students. They long for a period when clean politicians like Abhisit Vejajiva, who represent an urban middle class, displace the populist—though
democratically elected—Thaksin Shinawatra. The story was written in 2004, a few years before the military would appoint Abhisit as Prime Minister. The story arrives before 2010, i.e., before Abhisit would order a violent crackdown on the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) leaving over a hundred dead, over a thousand wounded, and scores emotionally scarred. The teenager’s panoramic view of the city is simply naive. This distance comports with a larger “view” about politics in Thailand as evacuated from its historic street protest tradition that ended in 1992. This story ends when the students write a letter critical of the current political regime from the computer of a less-intellectually gifted friend. Traced back to the original computer, as a national security concern, their friend becomes the fall guy. He accepts responsibility for the computer crime (a lackadaisical cyberpolitics that can never be collective) so that these teenagers’ college plans at foreign universities succeed unimpeded. Those who exist in the vertical levels of the city exist “in the clouds,” where long-range viewing obscures details. These stories are not mirrors of Thai society, but windows and frames from what one elevator ride declares as the center of Bangkok.

Even if such stories seem to represent a depoliticized re-centering of the Thaksin era by placing the city as complex visual spectacle, they also open toward new political readings of urban space. “Starless Sky” is not about the exhaustion of street politics, but about the historical political identity of the street in Bangkok.

How does one reconnect with the street, or with the people of the street? How does one move from away from an attentiveness of the street from above and into a horizontal connection with others? As is in “Starless Sky,” Thinakorn looks to the sky in a Thaksin era short story called “Taj Mahal.” But this time the Skytrain is used to show
horizontal disconnections. As an expanded spatiality of individualism, Busaba, the story’s protagonist, moves through her daily highschool education by building walls, in the same way that urban planning builds automated doors, elevators, and so on. Her preferred “sound wall” of escape includes a set of Walkman headphones, her compact discs, “television interference,” and nocturnal time alone in her dormitory’s music room when others are sleeping—at which time she still listens to music.

But one night in the music room, Busaba connects with the street in the figure of Schumann. Schumann is a homeless street orphan who Busaba stumbles upon because he has sought a place to sleep in the music room. Schumann is a figure of the street (and a former generation of street politics) and that Busaba desires. It is the figure of politics that other stories in Thinakorn’s collecton desire. The plot shifts between musical episodes between the teenagers, who become lovers, and flashbacks where musical conversations between Busaba and her father represent generational differences.

This latter theme lay outside of the purposes of this analysis, but it connects partly to the main theme. First, “Busaba” is a popular song from the mid 1990s by alternative rock band Modern Dog. The song tells the story of a girl named Busaba who lives an entire life among various flowers, carefully put together in a flower lei. One day she “awakes in disappointment” to find that all of the flowers have disappeared. Rather than give solutions, the song ends with the question of how Busaba, arranging her life around flowers, could remain in a world without them. The song raises another transformation from old to new, but only figurally. For “Busaba” of the Modern Dog song and Busaba of Thinakorn’s short story, the character must change—or simply disconnect.
Busaba becomes pregnant by Schumann, but seeks to terminate her pregnancy in order to keep their relationship secret. The event sets off a climactic chain of events. The first is that Busaba and Schumann stand silently on the platform of the Skytrain following an early morning visit to a medical clinic. She indecisively, but abruptly, decides to end their relationship as she boards the Skytrain, while a devastated Schumann stands crestfallen on the platform. Suddenly Busaba changes her mind, and thinks to rejoin with Schumann on the platform, but the automated ‘horizontal’ doors close. Time is compressed and her indecisiveness carries a cost. When she returns to the music room she finds that Schumann has taken his own life. She decides to follow him to the “Taj Mahal of Mars,” a fictional place that does not exist. The final line reads “Busaba’s eyes slowly closed.” Replacing the material with the metaphysical, the final lines are an analogy to the slow closing doors of the Skytrain.

Time changes how the figures of these stories are perceived. In death, Busaba joins Schumann, a symbol of the street. The death of street politics saw its resurrection in 2006.

**Conclusion:** “The Next Station Is…” (Pariya Phiphathphorn 2002) to Bangkok Traffic Love Story (Adisorn Trisirikasem 2009)

In March of 2010, I observed red shirt UDD protestors in the New City while riding the Skytrain through Bangkok. In movement between the Chidlom and Siam Square stations I looked down at the carnival of red shirts, as if I’d been called to attention by its amplified sounds. The likelihood of a crackdown seemed impossible since train after
train would bear witness to the violence from above. The protestors must’ve felt safe as they watched the passing Skytrain cars from below. But there were other obstacles. People on the Skytrain seemed occupied by other things and focused their attention on the interior field of the car. No one seemed to be looking at events down below. And sounds? Any given day in the city is an explosion of eclectic sonic layers.

Pariya Phiphathphorn’s short story “The Next Station Is…” (2002) explains the experience of the Skytrain rider as one who has entered the sky to be completely subsumed by fiction. Published a year into Thaksin’s tenure as Prime Minister, the story opens with an observation about the Skytrain’s movement through the city. From the point of view of the passenger, the author observes, Bangkok is like New York City, London, Paris, and other cities, “in the way I’ve seen them in movies (82).” Movies display panoramic establishing shots that fail to register the streets. Anyone who’s lived in any of these cities knows she doesn’t believe that they actually resemble each other. But in this modern organization of a panoramic visual character, perception is arranged by a similar kind of distanced movement. “The Next Station Is…” starts at the Mo Chit Skytrain station. Once known as a transitional link between Bangkok and the outer Thai provinces, Mo Chit is now a base of technological advancement and the entry point for passengers with cell phones, notebook computers, and the latest fashions. These simplistic surfaces of newness are significant for constructing the fictions of the story. Mo Chit represents all the tools necessary for “communicating” the interiority of the passenger.

The Skytrain makes its way Southwest toward Siam, and then Southeast toward arrives the hip area of Phrom Phong, where even the sleaziest karaoke bars are named
after famous European artists. Its station is connected to the city’s most exclusive shopping center called the Emporium. This is the setting for Uthid Hemamul’s short story “A Day,” which compares the verticality of the Emporium shopping mall to Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. The story’s characters move up its various levels, exchanging the growing obsolescence of compact discs for new trends, only to return to its inferno of an underground parking garage in the end. This is the rail line track where the famous Thai rock band Modern Dog recorded the interior soundscape of the Skytrain (between Phrom Phong and Thong Lo) for their song “BTS” (2008) in order to speak to alienating forces of modern transit.  

At this same Phrom Phong station, “The Next Station Is…” places a young woman alongside a fellow passenger reading a book by Ernest Hemingway. She asks the man if he’s a writer—an assumption she gauges by his mere appearance, or perhaps it’s because the Emporium houses the city’s largest bookstore (Kinokinaya, which is a Japanese bookstore chain). But these characters are also figures of urban space, scripting new narratives of the city in how they see it. The author says that one of the passengers is a writer, but also insinuates that they are all readers who decode their surroundings based on how they “pay” attention. The visual layering of the scene is carried further when the

70. The same point could be made about the 2005 song “Surprise” by the alternative Thai rock band Penguin Villa. The song starts, “Bored on the Skytrain, at Ekkemai, Thong Lo, Phrom Phong, Asoke, Na Na, then Phleon Chit, Chitlom, and Siam. Looking, at a film coming on. What’s this about? Oh, so that’s her new film.” This is the Sukhumvit line heading West, and the song speaks not only to the interior screens that play film trailers, but to its emotional cartography that isolates/alienates the pedestrian. The song comes from the album Go outside (2005) and also includes songs that figure the interiority of the sky, such as “Airport” and “Fear of heights.” Apichatpong Weerasethakul ended his film *Uncle Boonmee who can recall his past lives* (2010), a Thai political allegory, in a karaoke bar as Penguin Villa’s “Fear of heights” plays in the background.
narrator describes the same ‘Thai’ woman by her ‘appearance’, as one who might be confused as a foreigner. The man who’s reading Hemingway doesn’t actually like Hemingway’s books, but envies the Western author’s lifestyle. His reading is dictated by appearance and the image of a notable Western author—something he may script into his own life. The passengers exit the Skytrain at separate stations, and may never cross paths again. The problem with all of these stories is the interiorization of attention, i.e. their perceptions remain constrained inside of the train, as individuated subjects, thus giving rise to the simplicity of collective identifications.

The possibility of looking beyond the limited field of the interior, and into the exterior cityscape that the train affords, seems exhausted. After the military coup, films like Bangkok Traffic Love Story (2009) demonstrated the possibility of creating an entire film in the space of the Skytrain. Its plot places a Skytrain engineer in a relationship with a young urban commuter. The Thai title of the film is “The Skytrain is coming to you” which is reminiscent of Romantic Blue’s Thai title in 1994, “The whole world for you.” Both are melodramas, one for the figural arrival of global manager called Thaksin and the other for a new order under the military. While the first association is clear, in the sense that Thaksin could directly connect with the neoliberal themes of the pre-millennial melodramas, a military connection with a Skytrain engineer is perhaps not evident. But in the film’s final scene the Skytrain interior goes black to a supposed electric failure and none of the passengers can see. They are near the Siam Square interchange station, near the center of the New City. For the purposes of the film plot, the female protagonist can’t see the engineer. He has disappeared for an extended amount of time, and he has cut the power so he can surprise her. He calls her from an “unseen” location to tell her he’d like
to see her soon. The audience is glad he’s returned from abroad and wants them to reunite, thus consummating all of the disconnections and divisions that constitute urban life. The lights come back on and she turns to find he has called her from the same car. They live happily ever after. But is he not like the military, the engineer who wields the means to interrupt the signals of the city?

The most populous and visible contestation of the nation-state in Thai political history took place in movements between the Old City (Rattanokosin Island) and the New City (Pathumwan/Pratunam) between March and May 2010. But this time verticality played into the hands of military snipers who closed down and occupied the district’s towering buildings to reclaim optimum visual perspectives. During the military death spree, their trucks attempted to play national anthems, unifying pop songs, and even harmonious string arrangements to appease crowds while they tear gassed them. The Skytrain had been closed down so that the crackdown could not be seen. The Skytrain and tall buildings, the most significant infrastructure projects of the 1990s, should have prevented the crackdown on protestors in 2010 because the streets of the New City would be under public view. They were public and collective, new and user-friendly figments of Bangkok’s emergent individuality. But these sorts of projects have, instead, allowed parts of the city to be shutdown and occupied from above creating a field of authority from the Gods-eye view of prominent figures.

At the highest point of modern Bangkok transportation (and this highpoint refers to class, technological, and visibility dimensions), the Skytrain offers a warning against neglecting what happens on the street. It is a figure of literature and film in the way it attends to the city, and in this case, a center guided by its actual track. Alongside the
Skytrain, simultaneous close-up to medium shots are common, a montage of passengers who are visible to each other. Their vision might take the form of a long-shot toward lunch-break soccer matches on the rooftops of corporations. Their view might inquire into buses and automobiles, protestors and other vulnerable subjects gridlocked within the confines of organized chaos at street-level.

The greatest threat to the street, the most significant indicator of political power in Bangkok’s vibrant historical trajectory, is the sky. The sky represents prominence, central figures around which numerous points of the visual field revolve. Most of all, neglecting all of the recent appeals to the real, the sky is a figure of fiction. When the national anthem plays at 8 am and 6 pm each evening, it seems to fall from the sky. People avert the attentive gaze of others by stopping to pay attention to the sonic command. The anthem speaks to the time of Bangkok, between the “late reign” of King Bhumibol and the possible return of Thaksin from exile. In other words, it speaks to a complex field of interconnected references that underpin the unity of the nation. However, it is the distractions that count most as political, since they disrupt the continuity of the field of attention through noise, traffic, and signal interruptions. It is what military forces use when they steal power, and what everyday urban pedestrians attend to in diverse ways. The creative media approaches treated throughout this dissertation provide alternative ways of returning to the street, of exhibiting the city at the historic sites of political power by exploring new ways of tracking through it.
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