

Institute of Contemporary Arts

Follow the Sparrows: Anocha Suwichakornpong's *Mundane History (Jao nok krajok)* (2009)

The old mansion in Bangkok has an air of entropy. Its owner, the widower and academic Thanin, carries himself ramrod straight. His bearing signals a kind of zombified power, chiming with the appearance of the house, built in the vernacular modern style of the preceding military authoritarian age. We see his only son, Ake, brought back home on a stretcher, paralysed from the waist down. Enter Pun, a domestic migrant worker and male nurse trained in a regional university in northeast Thailand. He starts his new job in a house that he finds soulless, caring for the young man with expressionless eyes.

Anocha Suwichakornpong's debut feature film *Mundane History* is an elliptical portrait of the old house, and the relationship forming and dying in it between Ake and the two older men: the biological father and the son, the son and the not-quite servant, the son and the not-quite father.

Performing a biographical gesture, Anocha often says that she was born in 1976, shadowing her time on earth with the year of the massacre of communists and leftists in the Thai capital and with the defeat of the Thai left. With that gesture, she clears the ground for staking out a minority position: a feminist Thai independent filmmaker carrying the burden of an aborted promise of egalitarian social relations and freedom from an ordained fate. The ground she conjures into being through her filmmaking is a nascent one which promises to grow with the humility and expansiveness of the favoured life forms in her films: the *nok krajok* or lowly yet untameable sparrows of the Thai title for *Mundane History*, and the fungi of her second feature film, *By the Time It Gets Dark (Dao khanong)* (2016), which responds to living in the shadow of the Thai left's defeat. The form of that film is a *mise-en-abîme* whereby multiple personifications of the female filmmaker make images referring to photographs of the massacre of 1976 while staring into the abyss of not knowing.

Before that, with the impending death of the country's god-king existentially unravelling a caste already threatened by the electoral enfranchisement of a northeastern majority, *Mundane History* uses the matter and symbolic material of an old house and the bodies of three male characters to confront forces of change. The film isn't exactly about the existential anxieties of the Yellow Shirts and the emergence and persecution of the Red Shirts in the past decade, nor is it an all-too-easy to read allegory of the twilight of the last reign. Anocha responds to Thailand's deep political fracture, the massification of politics since the late 20th century leading to the privileged caste's nostalgia for non-electoral authoritarianism, and the earlier defeat of radical praxis, by using the formal possibilities of cinema to think about scales of change. Change takes place, somehow, even in the face of a political petrification that seems all-consuming, terrifyingly spectacular and blinding in its denial of the inevitable.

Thanin comes and goes from the mansion, more often than not driving out beyond its gate in his vintage Mercedes. He may or may not be the cause of his son's recent devastating accident, an event with no named cause or culprit that has made his only son captive to the imploding mansion.

Pun sleeps in the servants' quarter in the downstairs annex to the main house but spends his days upstairs caring for Ake in his bedroom. On the first evening of his arrival, he joins the meal table in the open-air kitchen at the back of the house. This is the domain of Kaew, the cook from the Northeast whose earthiness and preparation of spicy food for the household staff Pun enjoys. Soon after his arrival, however, he is instructed to dine upstairs with the father and son. Among the staff, Pun and the haughty housekeeper Somjai are the only ones permitted in their respective roles to move to and fro between downstairs and upstairs, outside and inside. Somjai is loyal to the decaying world of the mansion's owners. She has seen Ake grow up, and the film intimates that she and Thanin are in a sexual relationship. Compared to her, Pun, like the cook, may soon leave. The professional nurse's service to the son and father is an affective form of labour that gradually leads to a provisional and platonic intimacy of some sort with Ake. Yet, despite the growing intimacy, Pun's possibility of leaving remains. His relationship to Ake stays within a logic of market transaction rather than a residual form of intimate feudalist bind. As the cook, Kaew is lower down the pecking order in the hierarchy of household inhabitants, but she has an uncanny way of conjuring a cosmological imaginary vaster in scalar magnitude than the mansion's miniaturised and petrified world.

Out of the blue, while enjoying an occasional smoke in the night breeze, Kaew mutters an old Buddhist-derived saying, which the subtitles translate as 'humans are subject to their own karma.' Her barely audible utterance could be an opiate, a mediumistic divination of an impending collapse, or an aged northeastern woman's curse to hasten the decline.

Anocha says that a source of inspiration for *Mundane History* is a scene in a novel written by the Thai Marxist intellectual and novelist [Seni Saowapong](#). First published in the 1950s, the book's Thai-language name *Pisat* drew its inspiration from Karl Marx's spectre. This particular scene narrates a conversation between the heroine – the youngest daughter of an aristocrat during the age of the degeneration of her class – and the driver and family retainer who saw the heroine grow up. He tells her that all he knows is this life of serving her father. There is no future for him; he is too old to leave the house and he will die grateful in it, but he will do whatever it takes to ensure that his daughter will not be like him. At the end of the novel, the heroine rebels against her own father and class by leaving home to start a new future in the impoverished northeastern frontier. She will make this future with the educated men and women of her generation.

Seni's *Pisat* is a helpful compass for thinking about the significance of *Mundane History's* reflexive form. The novel narrates a causal chain of events and

coincidences leading to the heroine's life-changing decision. It anticipates the future, and figures that future in territorial form as a new frontier within the nation-state boundary that purposeful young men and women can travel towards. In comparison, *Mundane History* narrates its story out of sequence. The encounters and interactions in the house that Pun experiences lose temporal and spatial coherence, with each presented in dispersed fragments assembled nonchronologically so that we see the end, so to speak, before the beginning. Anocha's nonsequential montage turns Pun's arrival at the house into a filmic gesture of repetition. We do not learn the cause or the consequence. Pun's question to Ake about how the accident happened goes unanswered.

Shortly before he died, Benedict R O'G Anderson, the essayist of cosmopolitan nationalism, wrote a beautiful and strange [essay](#) using *Mundane History* to wonder aloud how one is best to live as a man. He notes two images in the film that enact brief utopian flights. The first shows Ake and Pun lying side-by-side on the lawn in front of the main house, looking up at the sky. The second is the only scene of Pun outside the house, wearing the same beige polo shirt he did on arrival, releasing caged sparrows. Anocha's use of nonsequential montage creates a virtual plane differentiated from narrative forms that actualise causal, fatalistic or revolutionary inevitability. The potential for freedom to which *Mundane History* gives visual and animate form comes in the form of the fleeting durations of the contingency, anonymity and expansiveness of Pun's movement – no more and no less.

In Lucrecia Martel's feature film debut, *The Swamp (La Ciénaga)* (2001), the adolescent girls who dance, drive and test their own erotic and instinctual capacities are figures of vitality and possibility in an imploding farmhouse in Argentina's northwest. Anocha's debut pairs beautifully with this film, of course. And in imagining this virtual double bill, the surprisingly mystical forcefulness of *Mundane History*'s image of change becomes clearer to grasp. Staking out her ground as a female, independent, intellectual filmmaker in the ruins of her country's radical intellectual endeavour is no doubt a lonely task, made lonelier still by the absence of a Thai feminist artistic and intellectual tradition with which this quietly formidable artist could connect and carry forward. This is perhaps why we can't yet see adolescent girls who move wildly and whose curiosity and resourcefulness embody flight from the entropic force of the old Bangkok mansion.

For the time being, Anocha has to make do with creating images of change as immanence by vertiginously shuttling scales of cosmic forces. An awesome scene in this visually and rhythmically powerful film is a slow, abstract phantom ride into outer space. The non-human camera eye moves towards a glowing white spherical mass that revolves and gradually turns yellow, orange, red, and then explodes. Later on, towards the end, Ake speaks over another montage, telling of the life and luminous death of big stars, the supernova. The closing scene of *Mundane History* comprises footage shot inside an operating theatre. An

incision is made along the length of a mother's stomach. The doctors' hands reach inside and gently ease out a creature. Its crown emerges, then its body appears. The baby is covered in blood and thickly smeared with creamy whiteness. Once fully out of the mother's womb and the umbilical cord cut, it kicks and howls with primal force. Gaspings, struggling, taking gulps of air, another life enters the world. It is symbolically significant in this case to name that moving, screaming mass of life a baby girl.

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