

## INTRODUCTION. BUDDHIST SEXUAL CONTEMPORANEITY

Apichatpong Weerasethakul's short film *Luminous People* (*Khon Rueang Saeng*, 2007) enacts a funereal ceremony.<sup>1</sup> In this fifteen-minute film a boat moves up the Mekong River, and relatives and friends perform a Buddhist ceremony in which they release a father's ashes into the waters. On the return journey a young man improvises a song about encountering his dead father in a dream. While members of the funeral party relax into sleep, quiet sorrow, and playful teasing, a voice-over relates the story of the encounter again and again:

Last night I dreamed that my father paid me a visit.

Last night I dreamed that my father came.

I was very happy.

I was overjoyed.

Father.

Rather than vocalize a leave-taking from the father, the song describes a continued relation with him. According to Theravada Buddhist doctrine, the funereal ceremony performed in *Luminous People* would be intended to initiate the process of detachment from the dead. Rather than engender such a break, however, the ceremony seems to prompt continued attachment

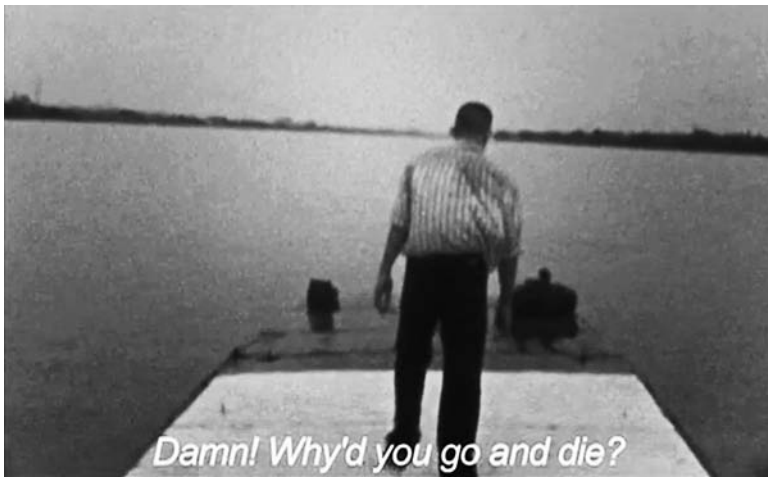
to the deceased. The scene thereby elaborates a psychological model in which relations with the love object lost through death may continue indefinitely. Such continued attachment to the dead represents a prominent, nondoctrinal feature of Thai Buddhism.

What also stands out in Apichatpong's film is that it uses the space of continued attachment to the deceased father to frame the genesis of a new relationship.<sup>2</sup> The song about reencountering the father provides the sonic script for the interaction of two young men.<sup>3</sup> The establishing shot of the film introduces the men facing each other, engaged in a conversation that we cannot hear and sharing music through a single set of headphones. At the end of its second half, *Luminous* returns to its focus on the two men. As the voice-over intones "Father" for the last time, the two men leave the others and climb onto the boat's roof for a further private conversation (figs. 1.1 and 1.2).

That the potential lovers' interaction is situated in a context of loss is typical of the films of Apichatpong and represents a prominent phenomenon in contemporary Thai mainstream and independent cinema. I call this eroticization in Thai film of the sphere of loss *Buddhist melancholia*.<sup>4</sup>

Taking different mobilizations of Buddhist melancholia as my point of departure, I investigate a particular, Buddhist-inflected formulation of the negativity of queer personhood and femininity in contemporary Thai film and video culture. By negativity I mean not only the ways that women and queer persons are marginalized socially; negativity also describes an ontology and psychology of personhood in which the notion of existence is marked by impermanence and desire is always already destined to fail. This Buddhist-informed negativity is vitally connected to sexuality, for it is desire and attachment that exemplify primary instances in which the truth of impermanence manifests. Desire (craving) and attachment (clinging) occupy central positions in a Theravadin Buddhist epistemology of suffering and in a soteriology rooted in nonattachment. In this theory it is between desire and attachment that the chain of affective engagement that leads to suffering must be interrupted.

Contemporary Thai cinema, however, avails itself of this context precisely to flesh out various scenarios of desire. Instead of teaching nonattachment, the space of loss comes to serve as a register of the erotic in contemporary cinematic representation. Were it a Buddhist teaching, the loss of the father in *Luminous People* should have highlighted the impossibility and the temporal disjuncture that marks the son's desire and, in a subsequent step,



FIGURES 1.1–1.2. Conversation between two young men, who then climb on the boat's roof for a further intimate conversation. Apichatpong Weerasethakul, *Luminous People* (*Khon Rueang Saeng*, 2007).

engendered the visceral realization of the fact of impermanence. The doctrinal notion of ontological and psychological negativity thus possesses a temporal dimension: *I want something. I can no longer have it.* In fact temporal incongruity represents a central element of a Theravadin Buddhist pedagogy that uses the occasion of loss to teach about the truth of impermanence and the futility of attachment. By contrast Buddhist melancholia designates all those instances in which persons defy doctrinal temporal logics and delay, stall, or refuse detachment: *I want something. I can no longer have it. Yet I persist in my desire.*

The effect of Buddhist melancholia's nondoctrinal engagement of negativity is that contemporary sexualities are also centrally structured by temporalities other than those of the nation and of capital or those of the secular everyday. Thus Apichatpong's *Luminous People* brings an otherworldly temporality to bear on an emergent queer relationship in the here and now.

*Luminous People* is one of many contemporary Thai films that bring Buddhist temporalities, aesthetics, and notions of embodiment to bear on sexuality, desire, and gendered personhood. I suggest that we understand this and other Thai films after 1997 as delineating a *Buddhist sexual contemporaneity*, a conception in which sexuality is not solely a matter of citizenship and rights, freedom and prohibition, or nationally defined social convention, but is vitally informed also by Buddhist-inflected forms of representation, practice, and affect. At the core of this contemporaneity lies the way in which both secular and Buddhist notions of social, psychological, and ontological negativity come to bear on minoritized sexual personhood. By minoritized, or minoritarian, I mean the gendered positions and sexualities of women, *kathoeys*, and gay men that have in the past two decades come under the purview of state disciplinary campaigns in Thailand and that are at the same time still accorded karmic, ontological deficiency.<sup>5</sup> In the latter, Buddhist-informed interpretation, homosexuality and the state of being *kathoeys* result from misconduct in a previous life.<sup>6</sup> As karmic outcomes of a past life, they are involuntary, and a strain of modern Thai Buddhist thought stresses that these states of being are to be accorded compassion rather than censure.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, however, the enduring validity of vernacular notions of karmic causality is also responsible for the stigmatization of homosexuality and trans personhood as diminished. The persistence of this notion in public discourse continues to mark queer and trans persons as characterized by existential damage.

While Thai sexualities have been studied as effects of geopolitics, traced back to pre-heteronormative models, and scrutinized for their potentially transformative alterity, the fundamental ways in which Theravadin and other Buddhist concepts, stories, and imagery inform contemporary understandings of sexuality have not been investigated.<sup>8</sup> If, however, as Tamara Loos argues, Thai modernity was never conceptualized solely as a secular modernity but always remained also a Buddhist modernity, what does this imply for Thai sexualities and notions of personhood in the present?<sup>9</sup>

While much energy has been invested in asserting the global or local provenance of contemporary Thai sexualities, I concentrate on how both the globally circulating Thai cinema of the 1990s and 2000s as well as recent Thai state and activist sexual politics conceptualized sexual personhood as much in nonorthodox and nondoctrinal Buddhist frames of thought as in the domains of law, policy, and nation. What happens when desire and sexual personhood are rendered neither exclusively in terms of liberalism nor entirely in local idioms purported to be antithetical to liberalism?

In *Ghostly Desires* I investigate how the pervasive engagement with Buddhist-inflected conceptions allows contemporary cinema not only to parse problematics of desire but also to probe the possibilities of agency of women and queer persons as well as to arbitrate the grievances of minoritized persons. This is a deeply historical undertaking, for I examine a turning point in political ideology and cultural production in contemporary Thailand. My analysis focuses on the concurrence of cinema and sexuality during a period marked by the “transvaluation of erotic and aesthetic values” in Thailand after the 1997 Asian financial crisis.<sup>10</sup> What stands out during these nearly two decades is that transnational and local, legal and vernacular Buddhist rhetorics of negativity collude to forge problematic new forms of sexual regulation in the official public sphere as well as novel frames of thinking about minoritarian injury in cinematic representation.

At the turn of the twenty-first century new modes of social and cultural policy that were developed in the context of a postcrisis, refurbished Thai nationalism attempted to regulate the sexualities of urban populations. The 1997 regional financial crisis had prompted renewed engagement with notions of Thai culture and heritage and its profitable integration into political and Buddhist-coded economic programs such as the sufficiency policy. *Sufficiency* (*khwam pho phieng*) designates a Buddhist-coded notion of economic, political, and affective moderation, or a localized notion

of austerity.<sup>11</sup> Invoked in a royal speech in 1998, sufficiency was broadly adapted into post-financial crisis policy. As royally initiated policy, the ongoing, constantly diversifying sufficiency projects are not subject to criticism and receive significant funding. They are promoted by a variety of ministries, government units, and NGOs. Sufficiency finds a parallel in the ongoing attempts in social and cultural policy to achieve moderation in the way that sexuality appears in the public domain. The policies, rhetorics, and campaigns initiated at this time became foundational for all subsequent modes of regulating sexuality.

After 1997 new cultural and social policy took recourse to bodies and sexualities, and national cultural identity and citizenship came to be closely articulated with normative prescriptions for sexuality.<sup>12</sup> Rhetorics of the deficiency of sexual minorities and women derived from psychology, religion, and policy combined in a detrimental fashion. The existing social censure of gender “deviance” in Thailand was thus compounded by the almost unprecedented state condemnation of sexual deviance. In this context homosexuality, the public performance of femininity, and transidentitarian positions fell under the scrutiny of the state in unprecedented ways but also came to stand at the center of new discourses about sexual rights, public personhood, and democracy.

The mainstream and independent cinema and contemporary digital avant-garde that originate in Thailand after 1997 represent powerful imaginaries regarding both sexual cultures and national futures. Occupying a fraught nexus of visual representation, law, and nation, this cinema’s and art’s aesthetics and politics are in part strongly aligned with post-1997 nationalist revitalization. In this study it is primarily Nonzee Nimibutr’s 1999 heritage film *Nang Nak* that appears in such alignment. In contrast the work from the late 1990s and 2000s of the contemporary independent directors Pimpaka Towira, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, and Thunskaa Pansitthivorakul as well as the video art of Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook constitute strong alternative publics that represent sexual personhood in ways that challenge nationalist prescription. In further contrast the Hong Kong–Thai coproduced horror cinema of Oxide and Danny Pang occupies a position that speaks also to transnational aspects of gendered personhood. Thematically post-1997 Thai cinema and video art centers especially on themes of ghostly return, and a large quantum of films address minoritized sexual personhood. The combined focus on policy and cinema in this study allows me to engage the question of how minoritization comes about in a

neoliberal political context that is simultaneously marked by great recourse to tradition and history. Although much of *Ghostly Desires* is devoted also to the study of femininity, in this introduction male homosexuality serves as my example for how notions of gender and sexuality are currently being reformulated.

*Ghostly Desires* investigates contemporary Thai sexualities through a different conceptual lens than the prevalent modes of analyzing the politics and geopolitics of sexuality and desire in this location. Tracking the motif of the predominantly female ghost through post-1997 Thai cinema and video art, I examine how Buddhist-coded anachronisms of haunting figure struggles over contemporary Thai sexualities, notions of personhood, and collective life.

Rather than as “the claim that something out of kilter with the present really belongs to a superseded past,” I use *anachronism* as a comprehensive, nonevaluative term that designates the coexistence of two or more divergent temporal elements in a given moment or period of time.<sup>13</sup> Anachronism comes to bear on this analysis in several foundational and interconnected ways. As I said, it informs the temporal architecture of Buddhist melancholia; here it comes to the fore on a psychological level in scenes that highlight the temporal incongruities of desire. In close connection, anachronisms so pervasively structure contemporary imaginations of sexuality in the Thai context that we cannot think the present without them. In this sense anachronisms also inform Buddhist sexual contemporaneity, a term that designates the multifaceted conceptual makeup of sexual personhood in Thailand in the present. Throughout this study I use the term *Buddhist-informed*, or synonyms thereof, to indicate the mediated nature of the examples under review and the fact that contemporary cinema and video art do not necessarily reproduce doctrinal Buddhist notions. Rather than suggest that Buddhism structures sexuality in a pervasive, transhistorical way, I am concerned with the invocations of Buddhism in cinema and the deployment of Buddhist notions in policy.

I use the term *liberal* as shorthand to describe an Enlightenment-heritage political perspective on sexually minoritarian personhood that conceives of sexuality as a component of citizenship and a question of rights.<sup>14</sup> A liberal activist agenda locates its primary hope for the amelioration of grievances suffered by sexually minoritized persons in law and policy as well as in social reconciliation within a national framework. I examine liberalism in the Thai context against the background of critiques in cultural and political

theory that have pointed to the limitations of liberalism's reparative claims. Thus Wendy Brown argues that claims based on the pain, loss, and injury of sexual minorities reinscribe rather than ameliorate the subordinate status of minority subjects, and Lauren Berlant critiques a liberal model of national sentimentality in which a politics of feeling comes to replace political struggle and locks into place social inequalities rather than fostering structural change.<sup>15</sup>

When national-cultural identity became increasingly sexualized and minoritized sexualities attained newly politicized significance in the Thai public sphere of the 1990s and 2000s, artists and filmmakers also devised new approaches to representing sexual minorities. Thus while official politics articulated especially homosexuality with sociocultural decline and with notions of existential damage, mainstream queer-themed films focused on the question of how the social suffering or injuries of sexual minorities could or should be made to "count politically."<sup>16</sup>

When women and sexual minorities emerged into the public sphere as diminished citizens *and* as hypothetical subjects of rights in Thailand, their concerns were thus in part strongly articulated with notions of injury, as well as with its alleviation through legal means, in activist and official politics as well as in cultural production. In the realm of a reviving commercial cinema, Yongyoot Thongkongthun's popular 2000 comedy *The Iron Ladies I* (*Satree Lek I*) was the first to engage the liberal notion that justice for sexual minorities is to be achieved through legal intervention and national reconciliation. *The Iron Ladies'* establishing scene sets up queerness as a question of national import when it presents the rejection of a queer player from selection to a volleyball team slated to enter national competition. The remainder of the film is devoted to rectifying discrimination based on gender and sexual orientation. In this story resolution is achieved over an educational, sportswo/manlike engagement with the transphobia and homophobia of representative persons like referees, teachers, and athletes. The drama finds its culmination in a resolution that highlights a human rights discourse, articulated at the time of a nationally televised showdown in which the queer team triumphs. As an avenue for achieving justice for sexual minorities, however, the model of inclusive national coherence espoused by *The Iron Ladies* is limited, relying as it does on exceptional achievement on the part of the minoritized person and insight and benevolence on the part of the nation.



If, across several global locations, conceptions of justice for minoritized sexual personhood at present remain overwhelmingly defined by notions of injury and redress in this manner, how does this scenario play out differently in a majority-Buddhist society and a modernity that was never defined solely as secular? Even when Thai political and artistic contexts invoke the rectification of injustices suffered by minoritarian persons in seemingly standard liberal formulations, this does not merely parallel mainstream approaches to gender and sexual inclusivity in other countries. Instead such invocations must be situated in an environment in which contemporary state sexual politics are further complicated by the fact that they draw also on Buddhist notions of personhood, sufficiency, and community. Thus when working on feminist, lesbian, gay, and transgender concerns, activists and artists had to contend with a social negativity that was simultaneously undergirded by a new policy rhetoric that devalued queer and female personhood, by the idea of psychological aberrance as well as by enduring notions of the existential, karmic inferiority of sexual minorities. How, then, did progressive queer politics and art use or refuse rhetorics of loss and injury in a public sphere that was replete with narratives of loss concerning not only culture, economy, and sovereignty but also psychology and ontology?

Framing its stories of queerness by using defamiliarized Buddhist motifs, tales, and images, the independent cinema of directors like Apichatpong Weerasethakul makes a departure from the liberal focus on justice achieved through national reconciliation. I argue that this director's work displays the keen recognition that what is at stake for queer politics in the current moment is the narrow choice between illiberal repression and the reduction of a Thai queer imaginary to a standard liberal frame of policy-oriented activism.

Apichatpong's cinema illustrates how, precisely at a time when minoritized sexual personhood becomes a distinctly national issue and a matter of injury and recompense in the Thai public sphere, independent films after 1997 invent a cinematic, affective, and political language that moves the question of nonnormative sexuality beyond the frameworks of national reconciliation, legal emendation, and good citizenship. Borrowing from Theravadin and other Buddhist imaginaries to describe an alternative Thai sexual contemporaneity, independent cinema mobilizes karmic, soteriological, and other Buddhist tropes of negativity. Manipulating Buddhist

pedagogy's central focus on impermanence—or on the suffering that ensues from the fact of constantly impending loss—this cinema deploys Buddhist tropes, stories, and images to move queerness beyond binary notions of liberalism and illiberalism.

Apichatpong's short film *Morakot* (Emerald, 2007, Thailand and Japan) offers further insight into the constitution of Buddhist sexual contemporaneity and indicates how the arbitration of the injuries suffered by minoritized sexual and gendered persons might be addressed differently. Based on a Danish Buddhist novel, *The Pilgrim Kamanita*, the film's "protagonists are reborn as two stars and take centuries to recite their stories to each other, until they no longer exist."<sup>17</sup> Three people who remain largely invisible throughout *Morakot* recount memories of desire as the camera slowly surveys the interior of a derelict boom-time hotel, focusing especially on empty beds. Feathers that slowly float through the abandoned rooms lend the film nostalgic contours.

Thematically *Morakot* engages temporal incongruity in the Buddhist-inflected stories of past desires that its protagonists tell. At the same time, the film invokes another kind of temporal disjuncture by embedding these recollections in a contemporary outside, interspersing shots of a busy Bangkok intersection (fig. 1.3). Apichatpong describes the *Morakot* as "a derelict and defunct hotel in the heart of Bangkok that opened its doors in the 1980s: a time when Thailand shifted gears into accelerated economic industrialization. . . . Later, when the East Asian financial crisis struck in 1997, these reveries collapsed."<sup>18</sup>

Drawing into relation a Buddhist time of desires threading through lives and afterlives and the post-1997 political and economic context in Thailand, *Morakot* presents contemporary sexual personhood as defined by multiple, divergent constituents and elucidates the workings of Buddhist melancholia further. Aiming to instruct us in the basic unavailability of our objects of desire, Buddhist teachings provide fine-honed tools that parse the incongruities of desire: *I want something; I can no longer have it. I have a desire for someone; it is not reciprocated. Even if I do gain access to the object of my desire, it will no longer, not yet, or not for long be what I want it to be.* Buddhist pedagogy thus relies on temporal discrepancy to underwrite the imperative to detach and takes its most extreme form in examples in which the object of desire is already dead. The Buddhist melancholia of contemporary film improvises on these tools; however, it generally does so for purposes other than those of religious instruction.



FIGURE 1.3. The view from the window shows a busy Bangkok intersection. Apichatpong Weerasethakul, *Morakot* (Emerald, 2007).

In *Morakot* Buddhist melancholia describes a process in which a chain of events that have to do with desire is arrested in its conventional tracks, as the film zooms in on and draws out a particular moment. Thus the reflections of one of the protagonists on a long-ago desire take up the better part of the narration. Instead of relegating this desire merely to a moment in her life, the duration of desire is expanded exponentially as *Morakot's* protagonists “take centuries to recite their stories to each other.”

As in *Luminous People*, Buddhist melancholia typically catches attachment at the point of its greatest futility—at the point of loss or impossibility—and takes a closer look. In many instances this kind of intervention in contemporary film pushes desire—and narrative—in a different trajectory than it would conventionally take. In this sense Buddhist melancholia infuses the domain of desire with an additional quantum of mobility.

*Morakot* further intimates that the question of the *arbitration* of minoritarian grievances can be approached differently than in a film like *The Iron Ladies*. This is in part due to the fact that *Morakot* is an experimental film, but I nevertheless want to consider its conceptual potential in comparison. *Morakot* does not directly frame the speakers' queer sexual personhood as a

politicized issue. The speakers' desires are, however, presented in the frame of a problematic, appearing as something that awaits resolution.

The shift in scope that Buddhist melancholia effects lends itself to thinking about the arbitration of minoritarian grievances. Its counterfactual perspective allows for thinking about the "what could have been" and "what could still be" of both psychological and social contexts.<sup>19</sup> While *Morakot* does not conclusively settle the problematic of the desires at hand, it tunes us in to the fact that in the cinematic and artistic archive under investigation, the arbitration of the problematics of desire will occur both on a political-economic as well as on a psychological-philosophical level. Rather than provide a patent solution, *Morakot* outlines a number of factors that come to bear on arbitration that include history and the economy but also engages the dimension of Buddhist cosmological time.

What *Morakot* begins to outline is that the deployment of Buddhist elements in contemporary cinema lets arbitration, or the resolution of problematics related to sexuality and desire, proceed differently. A further effect of such Buddhist framing is that *agency*, or the possibility of the minoritarian subject to maneuver within her or his respective positioning, is also conceptualized in unique ways.

Moving from an analysis of commercial films intended to appeal to broad audiences to independent productions that aim for radical intervention into contemporary sexual politics, my analysis focuses on how Buddhist melancholia provides a different switch point of resolution from that of legal emendation or national reconciliation. It is important to emphasize that the Buddhist fantasy that pervades this cinema is by no means depoliticized. On the contrary, in each of the films reviewed, fantasy comes to stand in close connection to trends and events in national politics.

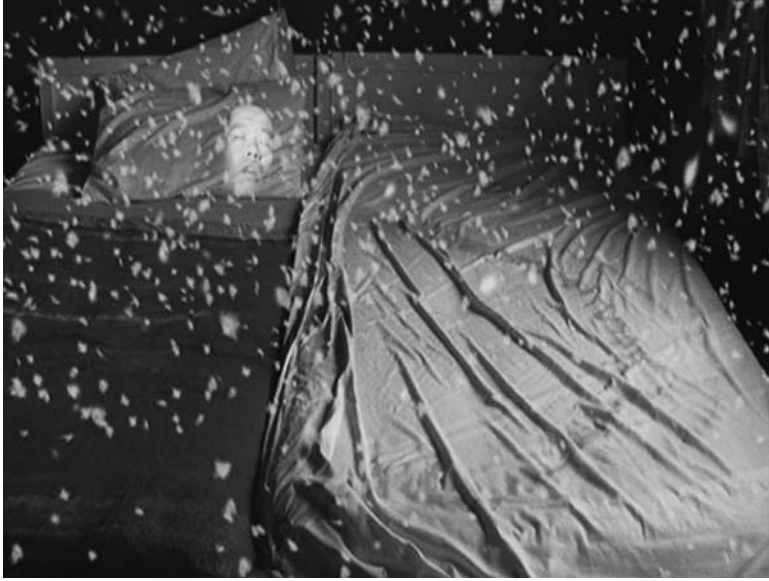
Invocations of Buddhism occupy a broad spectrum in Thai cinema. In *Ghostly Desires* I am concerned especially with the ways in which Buddhism becomes an element of fantasy and an element of argument. In this context Buddhism is at times severed almost entirely from purposes of religious instruction or philosophical speculation. In some cases it may function merely as a special effect. Buddhism's role as an element of fantasy becomes especially clear in *Morakot*. With its disembodied voices, colorful floating feathers, and superimposition of visuals, *Morakot* occupies the register of fantasy. When viewed in conjunction with these sonic and visual features, the film's invocations of Buddhist reincarnation and cosmological time may be understood as constituent elements of fantasy.

*Morakot's* only visibly queer moment occurs when the heads of two men are briefly superimposed on two adjacent pillows (figs. 1.4 and 1.5). Rather than merely showcase same-sex desire, however, Apichatpong's film presents a more expansive account of queerness. It is an older woman, Jen, who takes the lead in telling the story of her desire, and the conversation oscillates between three persons: Jen and two younger men. Queerness in *Morakot* thus includes same-sex desire but is refracted by a cross-gender sociality and comes to stand more broadly for as yet unrealized or impossible desires. This is also the sense in which this book undertakes the investigation of queerness.

The term *queer* is a cognate in academic Thai; in addition a plethora of slang terms, neologisms, and older Thai designations differentiate desiring positions and kinds of gendered embodiment.<sup>20</sup> However, I pursue a queer analysis that seeks to transcend the concentration on *categories* and the supposed plasticity of genders that has dominated writing on minoritized sexual and gendered personhood in Thailand. Queerness in this study thus stands more broadly for counternormative or as yet impossible desires. As an idiom of counterfactual possibility, the trope of haunting lends itself particularly well to such an analysis.

What is more, rather than take into account only self-evidently gay, trans, or lesbian cases, I investigate the broader contours of foundational new paradigms of sexual normalization and prohibition instated by disciplinary campaigns in the early 2000s that transformed the logics of regulation in the Thai public sphere. Thus while the first chapter does not examine a story of same-sex desire, it vitally details the parameters of the new sexual normativity. Subsequent chapters place homosociality in relation to an issue of historical accountability and investigate a primarily feminist manifesto of desire. While retaining a focus on the critique of gendered embodiment, sexuality, and desire, I thereby open queerness up to wider, urgent political concerns.

Against the background of contemporary sexual regulation, *Ghostly Desires* examines the possibilities of agency of women, trans people, and gay men both in the political arena and in the cultural imaginary constituted by contemporary cinema and a digital avant-garde. If Thailand has been characterized both as the site of limitless erotic possibility and as a space of severe restrictiveness for women and queers, how can we conceive of the agency of minoritized sexual and gendered persons in this location?



FIGURES 1.4–1.5. The head of the first man is superimposed on a pillow. The head of the second man is superimposed on the pillow to the right. Apichatpong Weerasethakul, *Morakot* (Emerald, 2007).



Rather than derive interpretations of state and societal attitudes from isolated incidents of prohibition, I base this study's conclusions on long-term policy and media analyses as well as ethnographic data. In my film analyses I focus on films that proved formative for Thai cinematic production throughout the 2000s. These films hail from five representative genres, each of which becomes salient for a different aspect of the sexual politics of the present. In the first chapter I investigate the role of femininity under the new parameters of sexual normalization in the heritage genre (Non-zee Nimibutr, *Nang Nak*, 1999). I relate this film's presentation of iconic national femininity to official policies of *social ordering* and *cultural monitoring*. I focus on the film's novel, Buddhist framing of the popular ghost legend and on how the anachronisms of Buddhist haunting may be made available to a feminist analysis. In the second chapter I examine the implications of transnational Chinese femininity and female homosociality in a Hong Kong–Thai coproduced horror genre (Oxide Pang and Danny Pang, *The Eye* [Thai, *Khon Hen Phi*; Cantonese, *Gihn Gwai*], 2002), in which Buddhism functions as a trans-Asian idiom through which we can understand women's historical agency. I then turn to the cultural and political interventions that artists and activists have developed in opposition to nationalist projects of sexual regulation and investigate how the trope of Buddhist melancholia is reconfigured in independent cinema and video art. Thus in chapter 3 I analyze the reimagining of male homosexuality in the independent cinema of Apichatpong Weerasethakul (*Tropical Malady* [*Sat Pralat*], 2004), and in chapter 4 I examine the elaboration of a queer-feminist ideal in the contemporary video art of Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook (1997–2006). In the coda I tweak the investigation of Buddhism vis-à-vis liberal formulations of sexuality in one additional direction by examining the depiction of queer interethnic intimacies in the documentary genre (Thunskas Pansitthivorakul, *This Area Is Under Quarantine* [*Boriwen Ni Yu Phai Tai Kan Kak Kan*], 2008).

I place this primary archive of popular, commercial, and independent films and videos in relation with the visual and literary sources that it appropriates as well as with shifts in social and cultural policy, radical political writing, other materials from print and electronic media, and ethnographic materials that relate to the new sexual aesthetic and political spheres. I cull theories of minoritization from the Thai-language materials and bring them into conversation with critical work on haunting, social negativity, temporality, the nation, arbitration, the ordinary, trauma, and assimilation.

## The Buddhist-Liberal Synthesis

*Ghostly Desires* pursues neither a Buddhist philosophical investigation nor the study of a socially engaged Buddhism. Rather I examine a vernacular, quotidian, and frequently entirely nondoctrinal Buddhism in its role as a framework for fantasy and advocacy in the domain of sexuality.<sup>21</sup> In the films under review Buddhism does not stand in opposition to liberal understandings but rather merges with these to enter different kinds of Buddhist-liberal syntheses.

I consider instances in which both liberalism and Buddhism appear in at times contradictory and highly defamiliarized guises. I use the fact that imaginations of sexuality are concurrently anchored in Buddhist-informed understandings and in frames of thought that conceive of sexuality as a question of rights as an occasion to probe the mobility of the valences of liberal ideologies as well as the variability of meaning of Buddhist-coded representation and political discourse in Thailand. My analysis centers on the problematic effects that the Buddhist-liberal synthesis has engendered for women and for gay, lesbian, and transgender people as well as on the radical possibilities that it opens up. Ultimately I am especially interested in how artists and activists deploy Enlightenment-derived notions of freedom and rights as well as Buddhist images, stories, and concepts to wholly unorthodox, in part radical ends.

While I undertake a critique of liberalism, my perspective and object of research depart from studies such as Saba Mahmood's examination of a religious women's movement that operates outside of the confines of liberalism.<sup>22</sup> Instead I argue for the inseparability of liberal ideology from other Thai conceptions of rights, arbitration, and justice. Rather than make a distinction between the religious and secular-liberal domains, I investigate how Buddhist notions, however mediated, interact with secular, liberal concerns.

Frank Reynolds has outlined the intersections of secular law and Buddhism in his examination of a civic religion in which Buddhist concerns inform the secular domain of politics in contemporary Thailand.<sup>23</sup> Reynolds delineates a public sphere in which Buddhist notions inform ethical discourse and activism. In contrast I am concerned with a different intersection of the secular and religious. Rather than examine Buddhist teachings that are directly applied to social or political concerns, I investigate more mediated and frequently counterdoctrinal forms of Buddhism.



## Anachronism: Haunting as a Register of Negativity and Social-Historical Critique

The study of Buddhist melancholia contributes to discussions of sexuality and negativity that have occupied much of queer theorizing in the past two decades. In *Sex, or the Unbearable*, Berlant describes negativity as “the self-cleaving work of the drives, being socially oppressed, and being non-sovereign, affectively undone by being in relation.” Together with Lee Edelman, she expands this definition as follows: “Negativity for us refers to the psychic and social incoherences and divisions, conscious and unconscious alike, that trouble any totality or fixity of identity. It denotes, that is, the relentless force that unsettles the fantasy of sovereignty.”<sup>24</sup>

My invocation of negativity may seem to parallel this and other studies of negativity in queer theory that draw on psychoanalytic approaches and combine these with biopolitical questions. The notions of negativity mobilized in my analysis of contemporary Thai cinema indeed correspond with some of the elements of negativity outlined by Berlant and Edelman. In particular my study investigates aspects of Buddhist-derived conceptions of negativity that impact the notion of individual sovereignty and agency. In addition I am vitally concerned in *Ghostly Desires* with the social positionality of minoritized persons. However, my analysis is not weighted toward investigating “psychic . . . incoherences,” nor do I vitally draw on psychoanalysis. Moreover I primarily focus on the spatially and historically specific domain of Buddhist-inflected formulations of queer personhood and femininity in the contemporary Thai film and video culture of the past two decades. I ask two main questions of this archive: If in such formulations negativity describes an ontology that foregrounds the impermanence of existence, how does this understanding of negativity translate into contemporary logics of minoritization? If negativity includes an understanding in which desire is always already destined to fail, how do artistic materials reinhabit this notion?

My film analyses further focus on a domain of deferral rather than on the radical instantiation of negativity. On one side of the debates over queer negativity stands the radical, affective formalism that Edelman first proposed in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. His work undertakes the thorough dismantling of a future that is always already coded as heterosexual and is iconically embodied in the figure of the child. In rejection of such futurity, he suggests the notion of “a homosexuality distinctively

abjected as a figure of the antibiotic, a figure opposed, in dominant fantasy, to life and futurity both.”<sup>25</sup> In this context Edelman mobilizes the death drive as an uncompromising instantiation of negativity.

The films under review do not disavow the full obliterating capacity of Buddhist notions of negativity, which could be understood to operate in parallel to a notion like the death drive. However, in contradistinction to Edelman’s radical formulation, their emphasis does not lie on negativity’s exhaustive instantiation. In a sense these films are more concerned with the cracks in the totalizing force of Buddhist conceptions of negativity and focus on phenomena in the anteroom of impermanence. In this context Buddhist melancholia operates as a trope of mobility. It infuses prescriptive affective trajectories, in which attachment is the mere foil to inevitable expiration, with elasticity. This particular mobilization of Buddhist negativity is situated within a distinct temporal framework.

Detailing the complex notions of time in Theravada Buddhist canonical texts, Steven Collins explains that the ultimate soteriological goal in this tradition is to transcend the status of existence in time and to reach nirvana, a state that is free from time. According to Collins, time represents an essential element of suffering, or of the “unsatisfactoriness” of existence.<sup>26</sup> How closely considerations of time are linked to sexual desire in Theravada Buddhism also becomes clear in Collins’s description. To elucidate the different meanings of the Pali word for time, *kāla*, Collins uses the example of a goddess who attempts to induce a young monk to abandon his abstinence. In this example the core ontological quality of time-as-unsatisfactoriness is vitally tied to sexual desire.<sup>27</sup> The young monk refuses to be seduced and thereby signals a path out of the unsatisfactoriness of existence.

By contrast the films and videos discussed in this book do not primarily aim to transcend desire or being-in-time. Rather than focus on a canonical notion of time, I therefore focus on a particular slice of Buddhist time as I concentrate on the proliferation of Buddhist-coded haunting in Thai cultural representation. The films and videos analyzed pause at the very moments that are supposed to point us toward nonattachment. Resisting the imperative to take such moments as occasions for learning about detachment, these visual texts mine moments of Buddhist melancholia for both pleasurable and conceptual possibilities.

In the cinema of Nonzee Nimibutr, Pimpaka Towira, Danny and Oxide Pang, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, and Thunskā Pansitthivorakul as well as in the video art of Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, each case of ghostly return

draws on temporal incongruity to negotiate problematics of desire, sexual personhood, history, and the vicissitudes of attachment. This use of Buddhist anachronisms sounds promising, as though the activities of the ghost will, as a matter of course, furnish alternative models of sexuality for the present.<sup>28</sup>

Much contemporary theory uses haunting as a critical trope that allows for the surpassing of conceptual and political impasses. Bliss Lim's study of temporality in film is the most incisive account of the critical potential of ghostly return vis-à-vis historical injustice. *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic, and Temporal Critique* investigates individual historical occurrences, while at the same time focusing on the injustice of a particular temporal regime more broadly. Lim's analysis is particularly trenchant because it brings a "visual-ontological" critique that draws on Henri Bergson's philosophy of time into conversation with a "historical-postcolonial" critique.<sup>29</sup> From this novel theorization of temporality emerges the assertion that the past is never left behind but persists into the present and remains coeval with it. In Lim's theoretical framework this notion enables the survival of temporal alterity, the persistence of demands for historical accountability, and the disruption of the empty, homogeneous time of the nation.

A vital part of Lim's argument centers on the notion of the immiscibility of different temporal registers: "Fantastic narratives, I argue, have a propensity toward temporal critique, a tendency to reveal that homogeneous time translates disparate, noncoinciding temporalities into its own secular code, because the persistence of supernaturalism often insinuates the limits of disenchanted chronology. I refer to traces of untranslatable temporal otherness in the fantastic as immiscible times—multiple times that never quite dissolve into the code of modern time consciousness, discrete temporalities incapable of attaining homogeneity with or full incorporation into a uniform chronological present."<sup>30</sup> The question of multiple temporalities takes on further significance when viewed in the framework of colonial histories. Tracing anachronism's role in colonial rationality, Lim emphasizes that it becomes a tool of the "temporal management" of difference. She explains, "The modern dynamic of contemporaneity and its antinomy, anachronism, is a strategy of temporal containment. It attempts to manage a recalcitrant 'field of differences' by presuming a totalizing historical movement applicable to all peoples and cultures and labeling certain forms of difference as primitive or anachronistic." Engaging with the work of writers such as Dipesh Chakrabarty, Reinhart Koselleck, and Johannes Fabian, she reminds

us, “This temporal management of troublesome heterogeneity under the rubric of modern homogeneous time is the imperial move that postcolonial scholars vociferously refute.”<sup>31</sup> This is particularly important because the deployment of anachronism, as detailed by Lim, persists into the present.<sup>32</sup> Lim suggests that the “refusal of anachronism, of a past left behind” becomes an imperative in this context.<sup>33</sup> The rectifying intervention Lim makes counters the devaluation of temporal difference by focusing on the alterity of the temporalities of haunting and mobilizing the immiscibility of these temporalities as a historically reparative factor.

A refusal of anachronism in the sense of the devaluation of cultural-temporal difference also motivates my desire to account for the ways that Buddhist elements structure sexual personhood in the present. The notion of resisting anachronism in this sense becomes most explicit in chapter 2, where I investigate a historical case of temporal resilience and critique a transregional politics of temporal difference in the present, and in chapter 3 and the coda, where I consider the imbrication of Thai sexualities with transnational discourses. My study further converges with Lim’s account in that it scrutinizes the ghostly as a terrain of critical force. Thus I investigate the impact of defamiliarized Buddhist temporalities on problematics in the domain of sexual personhood. I ask how the temporal incongruity instantiated by Buddhist melancholia provides an expanded framework for thinking about minoritized sexual personhood.

However, *Ghostly Desires* begins with the analysis of a situation in which the anachronisms of haunting create a more ambiguous terrain. In particular I examine a context in which tropes of haunting are vitally anchored in folkloric and Buddhist figures. These two domains are currently so thoroughly occupied by conservative, nationalist discourses that mobilizing them for political and historical critique is a task fraught with obstacles. I thus include in this discussion an adverse perspective on the critical potential of the comingling of divergent temporalities. Harry Harootunian picks up on the notion of *noncontemporaneous contemporaneity*, a concept with a rich history of analysis, but reviews this trope in the context of “the historical present.”<sup>34</sup> What is significant for the purposes of my study is that Harootunian’s analysis situates the idea of the comingling of temporalities in the frame of a history that, to an extent, abrogates its critical potential. Investigating global changes in understandings of temporality after the Cold War, Harootunian describes anachronism at this time as a temporal breakdown, a collapse of the tripartite conception of past, present, and future

into the time of an enduring present. This account of anachronism highlights the unprecedented compression of historical time into a “boundless present” after the Cold War: “Severed from its historical past and indefinitely deprived of a future,” this present is marked by the coexistence of multiple, differing temporalities, but their critical relationality is largely impaired.<sup>35</sup> The resultant political implications of this “historical present” are dire, since it no longer allows for the possibility of a left, progressive future; that is, resolutions envisioned by socialism, human rights, or even liberalism are largely invalidated. What Harootunian describes, then, is a comingling of times that is devoid of the chafing that would bring a critical effect to bear on the present. I cite this work not to affirm its global applicability but to account for the fact that in certain cases temporalities, such as Buddhist ones, that should to all evidence enter into a critical relation to the present forgo their alterity.

We can see how the critical potential of ghostly return might be undermined by a present that subsumes all temporal difference into the undifferentiated time of an endless now. The image of a ghost straining against the elastic yet unyielding bounds of this endless present may convey better the difficulties of progressive historical and political revision. If this collapsing of past, present, and future characterizes the Thai present at least in part, then the historical correction that haunting aims to force into being cannot easily come into evidence as radical temporal difference. My analysis of ghostly femininity in the heritage film *Nang Nak* in chapter 1 argues that certain kinds of contemporaneity in Thailand make critical intervention into sexual normativity difficult. For one, I refer to the willful temporal recodings, or anachronisms, that contemporary policy brings to bear on bodies and sexualities. Likewise I investigate a case in which the Buddhist-coded time of haunting in part relinquishes its alterity. This initial analysis constitutes the background of dominant policy and cultural rhetoric against which other films’ treatments of haunting must be calibrated.

Yet the progressively transformative impact of anachronism is by no means foreclosed in the Thai present. Anachronisms provide for critical opportunity in the majority of the material under review in this book. Valerie Rohy, Elizabeth Freeman, and Carolyn Dinshaw have argued for the critical potential of queer anachronisms, or the strategic affinity with sexual minorities across time.<sup>36</sup> In her essay “Ahistorical,” Rohy claims the “strategic possibility” of a “critical intimacy with the past.” Writing against a dominant “historicist” bias in queer literary history, she convincingly details the

way that historical work is always already anachronistic.<sup>37</sup> Rohy argues that a pervasive *Nachträglichkeit*, or belatedness, always already informs perception, psychology, and historical inquiry. She urges us to make critical use of this inherent *Nachträglichkeit* as well as to plumb the temporal alterity that historical texts themselves suggest, for instance, through their narrative structure. Most notably she advocates the use of a critical strategy modeled on “anamorphosis, the optical effect in which a meaningless blot assumes its true form when observed from a certain oblique angle.” As she explains, “The anamorphic form appears through a lapse of attention; it is unintelligible when sought directly. Only in hindsight can one recognize [it].” When applied to readings across time, this mode of reading “would make visible a textual shading not available to the direct gaze, an anamorphic afterimage visible to those who turn back in narrative sequence and historical time.”<sup>38</sup> Drawing on modes of argumentation rooted in psychoanalysis, theories of literary form, and queer historical analysis, Rohy’s work thus usefully makes anachronism available to multiple queer reading strategies. In chapter 1 especially I bring a similar reading across time to bear on the analysis of a hagiographic Buddhist text in conjunction with a contemporary film.

In summary, the critical potential of the anachronisms of Buddhist-coded haunting in the films that *Ghostly Desires* reviews lies in how they determine the duration and pacing of suffering and pleasure, redefine frameworks of resolution for cases of minoritarian injury, and reimagine trajectories of attachment.

Throughout this study *anachronism* figures as a comprehensive term that allows for the study of different psychological and historical aspects of temporal comingling. In the conceptual landscape delineated thus far, anachronisms designate building blocks of contemporaneity rather than marking contemporaneity’s opposite. As outlined earlier, anachronism emerges as a highly elastic figure in the temporal order and neoliberal political configuration of the present. Possessed of significant ideological mobility, anachronisms may either signify the temporalities and features of an imagined sexual past forcibly dragged into the present (as in new state sexual politics) or designate the creative irruption of temporal and sexual alterity into the present (that is the hallmark of independent cinema).

I use *anachronism* as nearly synonymous with *temporal incongruity*; both describe the temporal operations of Buddhist melancholia. Buddhist melancholia thus brings about transformations of scale, such as temporal dilation or prolongation. The notion of *contemporaneity* refers to the simul-

taneous existence of two aspects of sexual personhood on the same temporal plane. It highlights the coevalness of Buddhist elements with other features of sexual personhood, while *synthesis* designates individual ideological formations that result from the interaction of Buddhist and liberal elements.

### Global Sexual Contemporaneity

The notions of contemporaneity and anachronism come to bear on Thai sexualities in yet another way. The question of how to situate Asian genders and sexualities in time has not entirely been adjudicated. The work of Tani Barlow, however, explains the uneven temporalities of sexualities and genders in Asia through the colonial histories and complex adaptations of Enlightenment thought. Throughout her work Barlow stresses the contemporaneity of Asian gender and sexual politics when she shows that Chinese feminisms, for instance, are not derivative or Western but represent prescient and primary ways of centering women.<sup>39</sup>

In the same manner I investigate Thai sexualities as contemporaneous with other sexualities in the world rather than as sexualities that remain before prohibition or lag behind liberation. This is of particular concern because, as Rosalind Morris points out, “few nations have been so thoroughly subject to Orientalist fantasies as has Thailand. Famed for its exquisite women and the pleasures of commodified flesh, the Thailand of tourist propaganda and travelogues is a veritable bordello of the Western erotic imaginary.”<sup>40</sup> It is in this context that contemporary cinema’s invocations of a Buddhist sexual contemporaneity contribute to a reparative, postcolonial resituation of Thai sexualities in time.

Chapter 3 traces how a shift in the understanding of the geopolitics of desire and sexuality may register also in the transnational reception of Thai cinema: for the first time Thai queer films—and thereby Thai sexualities—are recognized by some critics as avant-garde cultural products instead of as always only emergent.<sup>41</sup>

### Sexuality

The past two decades in Thailand saw the emergence of novel modes of prohibition that exemplify a quintessentially neoliberal form of regulation. At this time questions regarding the normativity or deviance of sexuality



became firm components of citizenship and national-cultural identity when Thai state agencies initiated a set of disciplinary actions and campaigns. In the context of a refurbished nationalism after 1997, the state developed seemingly moderate disciplinary campaigns that seek to regulate the sexualities of large sections of the population. Most notably the campaigns of *kan jad rabiap sangkhom* (social ordering) and *kan fao rawang thang wathanatham* (cultural monitoring) invented and promoted a new lexicon of sexual normativity. Rather than attempt outright prohibition, these policies, which aimed to streamline the sexualities of urban populations, created a unique combination of regulatory measures and discriminatory rhetoric that persists into the present. In the context of these struggles over exemplary Thai sexualities, sexual minorities were forced into a novel kind of publicity and—as newly outed *citizens* in need of reform—were no longer able to remain under the radar of the state. What is the significance of the invocation of same-sex desire in a film like Apichatpong's *Morakot* in this political climate? (The case of male homosexuality remains my example for the ways the new logics of minoritization operate. In chapter 1 I look more closely at how femininity figures in contemporary policy.)

Homosexuality ambivalently haunts the political and aesthetic present in Thailand, on the surface primarily as a trope of diminution—as a thing that uniquely instantiates either cultural loss or minoritarian injury—but ultimately also as a figure of creative talent, potential economic productivity, and affective abundance. On the world map of homophobia, Thailand represents something of an anomaly. Activists and scholars have long struggled to reconcile evidence of high tolerance and visibility of sexual minorities with the deep-seated antipathies and notions of homosexuality as diminished personhood that are also evident in the country. Finding expression in a few manifest legal ways, Thai homophobia more pervasively takes countless subtle and roundabout forms. Both in the national and the international imagination, Thailand—and especially its *de facto* national religion, Theravada Buddhism—circulates as a figure of social and political moderation, even where evidence to the contrary exists. Yet the current, seemingly moderate kinds of sexual politics in the country created a potent blend of new discriminatory rhetorics and regulatory measures.

In the 2000s the Thai state's sexual politics resided in a domain of policy and discursive activism that straddled the field of the law and new forms of public speech about sexuality.<sup>42</sup> While attempts at prohibition in the 1990s were understood to effect the exclusion of sexual minorities, the dis-



ciplinary measures of the 2000s created a mixed juridical-discursive form of sexual regulation aimed as much at the inclusion of sexual minorities as at their exclusion.<sup>43</sup> At the same time as sexual minorities emerged into the public sphere as subjects of rights, homosexuality was doubly burdened by rhetorics of loss in official politics and media discourses. My argument in this context is that the government measures of social ordering and cultural monitoring brought into being new kinds of subjection of kathoeyes, lesbians, and gay men while retaining older notions of their existential damagedness. Just as scholars have argued that different conceptions of gender and sexuality overlap in Thailand, we can also understand several modes of stigmatization of sexual minorities to occur simultaneously.<sup>44</sup> Roughly, the literature asserts that in the past two decades forms of stigmatization expanded from the social censure of gender deviance to state condemnation of sexual deviance. However, still more is at stake. In addition the campaigns of the 2000s brought older notions of existentially diminished personhood into problematic relations with new understandings of the necessity of state “care” for and social ordering of sexual minorities.

#### State Sexual Politics: Problematic Inclusion

On June 4, 2004, the deputy undersecretary of the Ministry of Culture, Kla Somtrakul, threatened to eliminate queer civil servants from his ministry and called on the Thai public to “oppose homosexual behavior”: “The Ministry of Culture is serious about mobilizing against homosexual behavior. Although it is not punishable by incarceration or sentencing as in the case of obscene media, I call on the public to oppose it, so that homosexual behavior does not spread further than it already has.”<sup>45</sup>

Kla Somtrakul’s attempt to sideline, and discriminate against, queer individuals within a legal framework that does not in fact criminalize homosexuality encapsulates a distinct trend in the Thai state’s post-1997 sexual politics. In academic writing on homosexuality in the Thai political context, much attention has focused on a singular event of legal discrimination in the 1990s. In 1996–97 the Ratchaphat Institute attempted to ban primarily transgender but also gay and lesbian students from thirty-six teachers colleges across the country.<sup>46</sup> That the ban generated alarm both nationally and internationally was in part due to the fact that the Thai state had until then largely hesitated to intervene in matters of sexual orientation. Thai law historically criminalized neither homosexuality nor male prostitution.<sup>47</sup>

An antisodomy law adopted from British colonial legislation in India seems never to have been implemented and was finally scrapped in 1959. Thai society moreover was widely thought to be tolerant, though not accepting, of sexual minorities.<sup>48</sup>

Due to protests and the fact that some argued it was unconstitutional, the Ratchaphat Institute's ban was ultimately overturned.<sup>49</sup> In the academic discussion the Ratchaphat case was treated as symptomatic of a breach in the relative privacy that the state had previously accorded to homosexuality. I suggest that, more importantly, the Ratchaphat case was a first indication that sections of the administration were preparing to develop systematic conservative-regulatory agendas. These agendas not only represented continuity with older, less-publicized homophobic measures but also sought to establish new forms of inclusion. What occurred in the late 1990s, then, was not the emergence of homosexuality from privacy into publicity per se but rather a shift from one kind of public focus to another.<sup>50</sup>

Following singular attempts at legal discrimination such as the Ratchaphat Institute's were organized, long-term disciplinary campaigns put into effect under Thaksin Shinawatra in the early 2000s, which consciously aimed to align a new sexual order with cultural revival and economic recovery.<sup>51</sup> The campaigns primarily relied on existing laws, administrative change, and publicity work to create new understandings of sexual citizenship and were continued by all subsequent governments.<sup>52</sup> Although seemingly geared toward exclusion and prohibition, these measures also legitimized sexual minorities as national and economic subjects, albeit subjects in need of reform.

In the 2000s Thai state homophobia thus did not primarily present itself on the level of directly discriminatory legislation. What queer activists had to contend with were not antisodomy or age-of-consent laws.<sup>53</sup> Rather state discrimination proceeded on a comparatively lower level of legal applicability (of social and cultural policy) and of modes of institutional classification as well as via the initiation of a continuous defamatory discourse. The former included Thai psychiatry's failure until 2002 fully to endorse and publicize the declassification of homosexuality as a mental illness. Thus activist endeavors against the practice of categorizing kathoey as mentally ill on their discharge slips from compulsory army service (So. Do. 43) continued until 2011.<sup>54</sup>

The declaration by Deputy Undersecretary Kla condenses several elements of new state attitudes toward sexuality: the state's will to instill sexual

order, its desire to intervene in gender and sexual deviance, and its fear of (new) media in combination with the “contagious” character of nonnormative sexualities—but also its relative incapacity to do these things in the context of a strictly legal framework. Yet the greater significance of such statements lay in how homosexuality was sporadically yet repeatedly invoked as antagonistic to culture and nation. With the recurrence of threats such as Kla’s it became clear that the state’s relative oversight of homosexuality had ended. Homosexuality had now come fully under the purview of the state, was continuously brought into negative connections with notions of proper public personhood, and increasingly became a matter of national import. On the other hand, none of the exclusions that Kla had threatened were ultimately put into effect. In fact all state projects to date that sought to ban sexual minorities from the civil service, television, or other institutions were prevented or overturned.

To date, however, the creation of ever-new projects of regulation has not subsided.<sup>55</sup> The Ministry of Culture’s Culture Monitoring Center (now Culture Surveillance Bureau) was formed in the early 2000s and has remained the most active state unit to attempt sexual regulation. The group developed a concept of cultural deviance (*khwaam bieng ben thang wathanatham*) that included, most generally, “the decline of morality in society, undesirable values, and the crisis of language use.” Its mission statement and subsequent public relations documents explain that the group’s “main task is to monitor events of cultural deviance and to warn society about such occurrences as well as to correct and take preventive measures against cultural deviation.”<sup>56</sup> As the group’s director, Ladda Tangsuphachai, confirmed in an interview, cultural deviance mostly refers to activities in the domain of sexuality.<sup>57</sup> The group’s activities are in principle restricted to monitoring electronic and print media and concentrate on infringements of Thai obscenity law, Section 287 of the Thai penal code. As the law forbids only the trade in pornography and does not clearly define obscenity, it remains open to the interpretation of the officials. The group does not possess executive powers but regularly prompts the police to take action. Although academic observers have failed to recognize this, it is precisely actions like the Ministry of Culture’s continuous public reprimanding of sexual and bodily choices that at present constitute a coherent form of policy rather than single instances of interference.<sup>58</sup>

The disciplinary campaigns were framed as communal projects. Thus the social order campaign encouraged the “cooperation of all sectors,”

including the public's participation by watching, volunteering, and reporting incidents.<sup>59</sup> In such appeals the nation was invoked as a strict but benevolent sphere of paternal watchfulness over the intimate lives especially of its youth. In this way the disciplinary campaigns aimed to bring into being a public sphere of authoritarian "care" and prescription regarding the bodily, moral, and intimate comportment of Thai citizens.<sup>60</sup>

Much of the new public discourse on sexuality was conducted as a discourse of loss. Recent transformations in understandings of sexuality are thus closely tied to narratives of cultural decline.<sup>61</sup> In these contexts Thainess is described as constantly on the verge of vanishing and as requiring administrative protection; in the early 2000s this represented a rationale for the establishment of the Ministry of Culture. Michael Connors argues that by then official understandings of culture had shifted from a rigid Thai-centric perspective to a more refined, pluralist—though no less "hegemonic"—conception.<sup>62</sup> It is in this sense that cultural monitoring and social ordering sought also to identify, classify, and administer rather than only to exclude sexual minorities. Homosexuality appeared not only as a figure of diminution but also as a national resource—an unstable figure of talent, potential productivity, and economic abundance.

Despite the fact that it was rooted in dispersed action and largely reliant on the population's internalization of new norms of sexual exemplarity, what is thus distinctive about post-1997 sexual politics is the relentlessness with which it laid claim, at least in policy rhetoric, to a communally monitored and streamlined national sexual community in urban Thailand. Regrettably this was not a passing policy fad: the campaigns conceptualized in the 2000s carried such momentum that they gave rise to and institutionalized lasting discourses and state practices. While the Ministry of Culture's monitoring activities received more regular publicity, the social order campaign had furnished a blueprint for subsequent police actions that continued to target sex workers, sexuality in public, and entertainment venues.<sup>63</sup>

### *Injury, Arbitration, Liberal Thought*

In a liberal framework imaginations of freedom and justice for sexual minorities are largely relegated to two domains: the law proper and the nation. Religion is another prominent domain in which concepts of justice are generated, but one that scholarship is largely unwilling to entertain on

its own terms or recognize as legitimate for establishing criteria of justice.<sup>64</sup> Reliance on the law as the primary remedy for minoritarian injury proves to be a fraught endeavor, however. I review the current shifts in Thai cultural and political imaginations of minority sexual subjectivity especially in light of the still growing body of literature that critiques liberal notions of sexual citizenship. Of greatest relevance within this literature is the prescient critical work that concerns itself with the problematic relationship between rhetorics of injury and emancipatory politics.<sup>65</sup>

With regard to the injuries of those who are designated sexual minorities, Brown and Berlant show that the frame of legal repair is compromised not only in its application but also in its very structure. These authors' critiques focus on the fact that the law always already encodes structural injustice; that the law is uniquely focused on abstracted, universal personhood and therefore only inadequately suited to addressing the specificity of minority injuries; and, most important, that the exclusive belief in the law's reparative potential limits the imagination of justice since the law's conceptualization of justice is by definition restricted.

At a time when sexual majority-minority relations are being reframed in Thailand, these critiques of the law as the sole proponent of justice are of great relevance to political struggles in Thailand. The currency of injury in political struggles remains uncertain, however. The aftermath of state violence against the 1973, 1976, 1992, and 2010 popular uprisings against military politics was overwhelmingly marked by the factor of state impunity. This adds complexity to the question of whether injury-based claims constitute viable oppositional politics.<sup>66</sup> Concurrently the reluctance (before 2010) to make historical traumata, losses, and injuries into political factors is also documented.

On the other hand, the notions of injury and recompense represent integral parts of Thai civil law. The processes of drafting the 1997 and the 2007 constitutions further attest to the fact that the concerns of sexual minorities were articulated with notions of damage and injury in official politics.<sup>67</sup> The political efficacy of claims based on the pain, loss, or injury of sexual minorities nevertheless remains ambiguous. At present the grievances of kathoey, lesbians, and gay men still frequently fall between a failure of protection through the law, on the one hand, and accusations of transgressions of Thainess, on the other. Notions of loss moreover currently inform official nationalist rhetoric in a way that allows for little recognition of minoritarian claims.

In “Wounded Attachments,” Brown draws attention to the deployment of pain as a problematic that fundamentally troubles identity politics. She describes how the valence of pain in identity politics is subject to a logic rooted in liberalism that must ultimately defeat the object of emancipatory politics. She writes, “Certain emancipatory aims of politicized identity are subverted not only by the constraints of the political discourses in which its operations transpire, *but by its own wounded attachments.*” According to Brown, a politics that is premised on specific minoritarian injury can ultimately only work to reinscribe that wounded particularity. Hence emancipatory projects predicated on claims of loss and injury find themselves in a deadlock of never-complete and nontransformative remedy of that injury, on the one hand, and the affirmation of the primacy of the normative ideal that they were excluded from, on the other. Brown explains that the way identity politics pursue a politics of *ressentiment* thus works to perpetuate subjugation rather than to overcome it. In order to surmount this impasse, she suggests replacing the politics of “I am” with that of aspiration, a politics of “I want.”<sup>68</sup>

In the Thai context this state of affairs is further complicated by the country’s history of state impunity, the fact that the state’s new, prohibitory gaze on nonnormative sexuality itself vitally relies on rhetorics of loss, and that older, distinctly local rhetorics of loss also factor into public discourses on homosexuality. In a political context in which whole administrative bodies were created to bolster a national culture supposedly on the brink of disappearance, both queer politics of identity (“I am”) and of demand (“I want”) are always already hampered by pervasive discourses of loss regarding tradition, religion, the monarchy, and other elements of Thainess.

In her critique of the politics of pain, Berlant sheds light on the detrimental function of the notion of national reconciliation with regard to minoritarian injury. She critiques a political model of “national sentimentality” in which subaltern pain becomes the true index of subjectivity and the assumption of its universal intelligibility the basis for its (national) adjudication.<sup>69</sup> She locates the detrimental effects of the deployment of claims based on pain in minority politics in the fact that “questions of social inequity and social value are now adjudicated in the register not of power but of sincere surplus feeling.” Berlant moreover argues that *adversity* is a more appropriate term than *trauma* for the conceptualization of modes of continual suffering that mark minoritized existences.<sup>70</sup> This distinction between trauma and adversity is of particular relevance for Thai activist poli-

tics. The fact that Thai state and social homophobia largely rely on subtle yet pervasive forms of denigration rather than on outright violence or prohibition has long presented a major difficulty for conceptualizing both academic analysis and counterpolitical actions. *Adversity* thus better captures the experience of minoritized persons under the seemingly moderate yet comprehensive forms of discrimination prevalent in the country.

At the same time arguments derived from Theravada Buddhism continue to be mobilized in public debate in Thailand and mark vernacular perspectives on homosexuality as diminished personhood. Historically, local discourses about homosexuality and transgender positions were already strongly marked by rhetorics of loss, ascribing karmic determinants especially to the condition of kathoey. As Peter Jackson has shown, Theravadin Buddhist arguments were habitually advanced to procure compassion for transgendered people, but in the recent past also to legitimate the outright rejection of homosexuality.<sup>71</sup> Most frequently a transgender identity was thought of as a karmically induced condition and therefore remained beyond religious reproach. As Jackson notes, being transgendered was not thought to accrue any more negative karma; that is, it was not designated a misdeed in the present.<sup>72</sup> Transgender identity therefore bore a stigma but drew no additional religious-political censure. The condition of being kathoey neither required nor permitted change. As a result the notion of social obligation toward kathoey included elements of lenience and sympathy, or *metta-karuna* (mercifulness). While karmic explanations still have currency, such reasoning has been augmented by discourses about sexual acts as social acts. Official discourses now depict homosexuality and transgender positions also as (volitional) *social vice*. Conversely, in sexual rights discourses homosexuality and transgender positions are now figured as *social suffering*. With the declining credibility of the explanation of karmic determinacy, however, transgender positions and homosexuality lost the relative legitimacy that this explanation conferred while retaining some of its stigma.

#### Liberalism and Sexuality in Thailand

The multiply constituted model of minority personhood, adjudication, and belonging that *Ghostly Desires* investigates bears out the elasticity of the meanings that liberal notions of personhood and freedom take on across geographic locations. While the book's greatest focus is on the ways in



which contemporary Thai sexual politics and cinematic representation exceed liberal positions, I nevertheless argue for the need to assess with precision the effects of liberal claims in a given legal and social context. Likewise my analysis seeks to prompt a discussion about which facets of liberal, Enlightenment-derived thought to retain in progressive sexual politics. In addition this analysis of the politics of artists and activists in Thailand might open anew the question of how to delimit the radical from the liberal.

The study of Thai political justice and arbitration is constrained by the fact that the majority of scholars do not question the desirability, legitimacy, or universality of liberal law as such, do not look for liberal thought outside of the operations of the legal and administrative systems, and only decry liberalism's imperfect application.<sup>73</sup> To overcome this constraint I argue that liberalism must not be positioned as extraneous to the operations of state, law, and discourse in Thailand. Instead it is necessary to recognize liberalism's relevance within the structures of the state and legal system as well as in oppositional discourses.<sup>74</sup> Without ignoring the failures of the Thai legal system, it is imperative to not merely designate Thailand an illiberal state in which proper application of liberal law would resolve the problem of injustice.

In their study of a series of tort cases in Thailand, David and Jaruwat Engel argue persuasively that liberal law has little relevance in the daily lives of people in Thailand.<sup>75</sup> The Engels do not, however, analyze the inherent shortcomings of liberal law. Instead they evaluate the situation in Thailand as representing a failure on the part of the state to guarantee adequate legal proceedings. Similarly much recent critical work has designated the Thai state illiberal and set it in opposition to the supposedly liberal operations of Western European states.<sup>76</sup> Such a juxtaposition not only fails to recognize the postdemocratic nature of Western states but, more importantly, elides the urgent question of the universality and desirability of liberal assumptions.

In opposition to dismissals of the relevance of liberalism in Thailand, I contend that it is not solely the workings of the legal system that we have to take into account but also the important position that liberal thought occupies in discourses about rights and justice. In the domain of sexuality activism—as in that of democracy activism—in Thailand today, liberalism furnishes a vital language of oppositional politics. Liberal notions of injury and recompense strongly mark public discourses on sexuality, if not always actual legal practice.



As the state began to conceptualize sexuality as a problem of Thai citizenship, its regulatory programs prompted activist and artistic responses in the liberal idioms of law and policy. With the new logics of minoritization promulgated by the state came the desire on the part of activists to organize and once and for all to step out of social negativity, both as it had been entrenched and as it was being newly defined. That the legal sphere is engaged for this endeavor is not a mere reiteration of mainstream Western LGBTQ activism, however. First of all, the context in which the liberal law is held out as a promise remains vital for any assessment of its impact. Thus an activist symbol, demand, legal proposal, or measure that seems merely assimilationist in one context may take on radical meaning in another.<sup>77</sup>

When we consider oppositional sexual politics also in the context of Thai democracy's as yet unrealized emancipation from military politics, the sphere of the law continues to hold out the promise of radical amelioration. In her critique of liberal belief in the law, Brown persuasively details how the law is structurally compromised and disadvantages those who need its intervention and protection most. Yet in "Rights and Identity in Late Modernity," she concludes her rigorous critique with the insight that the legal sphere is nevertheless able to outline a horizon of possibility for justice.<sup>78</sup>

Not only does the liberal-legal domain furnish an idiom of political possibility in Thailand, but queer activism also systematically designed a mode of engagement with the legal sphere that was suited to the Thai political and social context. A large number of lesbian, gay, and trans activist endeavors in Thailand thus prioritize depathologization across a variety of institutional, legal, and social domains. This differs from what is frequently characterized as merely a demand for upward social mobility in the context of North American and European mainstream activism. Rather than aspire to inclusion into privilege, as this mainstream activism does, Thai queer activism largely focuses on destigmatization.

With a queer feminist approach to intervening in local and translocal rhetorics of stigmatization, the lesbian activist group Anjaree has taken the lead in public representation, political protest, and policy work concerning issues of homosexuality and transgender rights in Thailand since 1986. In 2001–2 the group took up Thai psychiatry's failure to fully endorse and systematically publicize the declassification of homosexuality as a mental disorder. The taxonomy of homosexuality as a mental disorder had originally been adopted from American classifications of abnormal sexualities.<sup>79</sup> However, although Thailand followed suit after the American Psychiatric

Association and World Health Organization revoked this classification, Thai psychiatry did not publicize and implement this decision effectively enough to affect policy and public perception. Activist projects aimed at the declassification of trans positions as mental disorders continued into the 2010s.

Anjaree aimed to counter a notion of diminished personhood that was of transnational origin yet had become firmly established and blended with other local beliefs about gays, lesbians, and kathoey. The push to revoke the classification sheds light on Anjaree's adaptations of a rights framework to the specific demands of the Thai situation as well as on the group's relation to a politics and "logics of pain."<sup>80</sup> The relative dearth of directly discriminatory legislation such as antisodomy laws in Thailand led Anjaree to conclude that rights advocacy in general also had to address the more diffuse forms of discrimination prevalent in the country. When Anjaree began to lobby the Department of Mental Health to revoke the classification of homosexuality as a mental disorder, the group relied on activities targeting policy and on media work, educational activities, and action-research projects intended to bring about broad changes in public perceptions of sexual minorities.<sup>81</sup> Having identified the source of injury in the juridical domain, broadly defined, as well as the social domain, Anjaree did not anticipate accomplishing its repair only through the law. While activists strategically engaged the legal sphere, the liberal belief in the law as the sole purveyor of justice was absent from their agendas, and Anjaree's politics addressed the psychological, vernacular Buddhist, and social negativity of sexual minorities in combination.

## Buddhism

*Ghostly Desires* tracks the way a vernacular, quotidian Buddhism comes to bear on cinematic fantasy that relates to sexuality as well as on contemporary national politics. Most scholarly writing on Buddhism and sexuality focuses solely on the issue of toleration and its obverse, prohibition, and directs little attention to the relation of Buddhist stories, teachings, and images to sexuality as fantasy.<sup>82</sup> With the argument that Buddhist elements directly inform notions of sexuality and desire, I extend Justin McDaniel's claims about the counterdoctrinal qualities of Thai Buddhism into the sphere of sexuality.<sup>83</sup> More than foregrounding its counterdoctrinality, however, my concern is to emphasize that Buddhism is not only brought to bear on sexu-

ality in a regulatory manner. Rather the cinema and art I examine bring into play a synthesis of ghostly return with Thai Buddhist motifs to elaborate the affective dimensions of sexual desire. Buddhism not only permits or inhibits sexuality here but itself plays a part in the constitution of desire. Thus the Buddhist-coded stories of Apichatpong's short films, *Luminous People* and *Morakot*, do not primarily impart a teaching about nonattachment; these defamiliarized Buddhist tales perform a kind of political advocacy and provide a framework for fantasy in the domain of desire.

Buddhism in this study denotes a broad spectrum of beliefs and practices that include Theravadin Buddhist orthodox forms as well as magic practices and popular Buddhist conceptions. I am less concerned with Buddhism as an ideological system that furnishes ethical precepts than with Buddhism's vernacular, quotidian, pedagogical, and pop-cultural forms. Thus my analysis primarily tracks the work that Buddhism performs outside of the domain of religious instruction. This focus enables a perspective on the largely nondoctrinal work that Buddhism performs within the everyday realms in which sexuality becomes a question.

While others have examined Buddhism's vital role in the production of national modernity and the institutions of state, *Ghostly Desires* takes into account how Buddhist-coded notions of loss currently strongly inform cinematic and artistic imaginaries, vernacular attitudes, public policy rhetoric, and activist interventions regarding sexuality in Thailand.<sup>84</sup> What further requires explicit articulation is that, from their historical constitution until the present, Thai national subjects have been understood as Buddhist subjects. In the Thai context the notion of "Buddhist subjects" thus always implies also a dominant conception of national subjects and subjectivities. This feature of Buddhism comes to bear on the analysis in the coda of inter-ethnic intimacies in the documentary *This Area Is Under Quarantine*.

Theravada Buddhist concepts of attachment are rooted in an ontology of impermanence (Thai, *anijjang*; Pali, *aniccā*), or of constantly impending loss. To illustrate the futility of desire under these conditions, Buddhist pedagogy privileges the female body and horrific depictions of its constitutional impermanence.<sup>85</sup> In this context Buddhist hagiographies as well as contemporary teachings and visual representations deploy anachronism as their preferred pedagogical trope. In this pedagogy women and stories about their malleable, decaying bodies are exemplary of the impermanence of objects of desire. One is supposed to understand from these examples the fundamental incongruity of desires and objects of desire and, in the

final instance, that attachment is as such futile. While women are always already karmically diminished, the notion of existential, ontological negativity also applies to gay men and kathoey, whose desires and embodiment are in vernacular Buddhist discourses understood to be the result of unfavorable karma.

At the same time, contemporary Buddhist writers and activists deploy Buddhist notions for the purpose of advocacy. In “Ke-Lesbian Wibakkam Khong Khrai?” (Gays and Lesbians—Whose [Karmic] Adversity?), the monk and author Chai Warathammo criticizes the pervasive tendency to attribute adverse karma to gays, lesbians, and trans people. In an inverse move to such ontological diminution, Chai skillfully redeploys karma discourse to speak about social injustice, shifting the burden of *wibakkam* (adverse karma; Pali, *vipāka* and *kamma*) from stigmatized groups to a discriminatory social environment and faulting its oppression of sexual minorities.<sup>86</sup> He argues that karma cannot uniformly be connected to identitarian criteria (male, female, gay, etc.) but rather represents the results of individual action and intention. Chai instead attributes karmic burden to a society that discriminates in action, word, and thought against sexually diverse people. He argues that assessments of karma should shift their focus from phenomenologies of gender and sexuality to appraisals of the communal, beneficial value of actions and intentions.

Using Buddhist arguments to advance feminist-queer discourses, Chai reconfigures especially the key Theravadin Buddhist notions of karmic causality and impermanence. In “Phrang Chomphu Khatha” (The [Buddhist] Tale of Private Pink) he uses the concept of *anijjang* (impermanence) to adjudicate controversy over transgendered students’ dress and instead deconstruct notions of sexual difference as such. With his redeployment of Theravadin Buddhist concepts, Chai reformulates both traditional and contemporary as well as local and transnational notions of diminished personhood.<sup>87</sup>

While the institutional home of the pedagogical trope of femininity-as-impermanence is the temple, popular cultural adaptations of it abound. The contemporary Thai cinema of haunting refuses the detachment that the sight and contemplation of the (predominantly female) dead are supposed to prompt; instead this cinema turns on exploiting the space of deferral that I call Buddhist melancholia. Among the materials analyzed, Nonzee Nimibutr’s heritage film, *Nang Nak*, best exemplifies a contemporary Buddhist nationalist deployment of Buddhist melancholia in relation to Thai sexual subjectivities. In contrast the independent filmmakers Pimpaka and

Apichatpong tweak this predetermination of Thai subjectivities by invoking this and other Buddhist motifs to redefine sexual personhood according to feminist and queer parameters.

### Contemporary Thai Cinema

Thailand is the only state in Southeast Asia that was never formally colonized, a historical detail that singularly determines the state's self-definition and legitimizes its policies—and comes to bear on much post-1997 cultural production. This narrative leaves out the fact that, on the one hand, Thailand's modernization in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries occurred under colonial-imperial pressure and that to an extent this modernity was, on the other hand, “deliberately modeled on the colonial regimes in neighbouring British India and Singapore.”<sup>88</sup> Critical historiography directs attention to the Thai state's semicolonial or autocolonial characteristics as well as to Thailand's status as an imperial nation in its own right.<sup>89</sup> Nevertheless, to this day the state relies on invocations of its noncolonized status to underwrite authoritarian nationalism, narratives of cultural singularity, and political exceptionalism. In contemporary cinema exceptionalist discourse comes to the fore especially in post-1997 heritage productions that recount historical events in a royalist-nationalist format, such as the film *Suriyothai* (Chatrichalerm Yukol, 2001), and also informs Nonzee's adaptation of the ghost legend of Nak.

As Apichatpong's description of his film *Morakot* at the beginning of this chapter indicates, the 1980s and 1990s were characterized by rapid growth as the Thai economy boomed under the influx of transnational capital and the expansion of the manufacturing and services sectors. While journalists, politicians, and intellectuals embraced discourses of *lokapiwat* or *lokanuwat*—the Sanskritic Thai coinages for “globalization”—that situated Thailand centrally in a continuous trajectory of Asian economic ascendancy and cultural parity, commitments to local and communitarian agendas and models also increased in this period.<sup>90</sup> Concurrently the four decades since the brutal crushing of civilian uprisings in October 1973 and 1976 have also been marked by political struggles against both military and civilian-populist state authoritarianism.<sup>91</sup> Rather than resolve these crises, Thai official political culture seems at present to register an increased authoritarianism and the further convergence in the 2000s and 2010s of military and populist forms of governance.<sup>92</sup>

Thailand's growth period ended with the 1997 Asian economic crisis, an event that led to programs for economic recovery and to the reevaluation of notions of Thainess and a resurgence of cultural nationalism. What marks the 1997 regional economic crisis as a watershed for histories of Thai modernity is the perceived loss of national sovereignty on the part of financial and political elites at this time. In the domain of official politics the financial crisis engendered an extensive ideological overhaul of modes of governance. In this context Thai culture functioned as a kind of raw material to be exploited for nationalist revitalization. It is in this environment that we must situate the rise to power in 2001 of the populist tycoon Thaksin Shinawatra, who remained Thailand's prime minister until September 2006, when he was deposed by a military coup. Thaksin tapped into political discontent and class differences in ways that ensured the continued reelection—and repeated overthrow—of his party throughout the 2000s and 2010s. Of special interest for this study, his administration initiated an agenda for Thai capitalist recovery that, although strongly tied to transnational economics, nevertheless bore a distinctly local, national imprint (sufficiency). As we saw, similar formulas also informed sexual policy. Restrictive sexual politics henceforth became a feature of policy of all subsequent governments and are by no means limited to traditional elite regimes or to those aligned with Thaksin.<sup>93</sup>

In this period the media landscape also diversified; new bourgeois modes of representation (such as heritage cinema) emerged in tandem with the return of many regional forms (such as *luk thung*, Thai country music) to mainstream media. The expression of new bourgeois desires and the centering of regional artistic forms coincided with a profusion of discourses about minority identities and desires. Thus while a vocal conservatism asserted its positions on sexuality, the turn of the century also saw a publishing boom of first-person accounts about sexuality by women, gay men, and kathoey. Changes in media production, accessibility, and circulation brought further diversification.

The late 1990s saw the revival of a Thai cinema whose output had previously dwindled because it was unable to compete with Hollywood productions. The revival occurred in conjunction with the international exhibition of Thai films. In Chalida Uabumrungjit's estimation, the participation of Pen-ek Ratanaruang's *Fun Bar Karaoke* in the Berlin International Film Festival in 1997 may serve as an approximate starting date for what is sometimes termed New Thai Cinema.<sup>94</sup> May Adadol Ingawanij details how Thai

directors at this time adopted new cinematic styles designed to increase Thai cinema's appeal to wider local as well as international audiences.<sup>95</sup> Much of the scholarship on post-1997 Thai cinema has focused on the subjects of Thainess and nationalism, while also addressing questions of this cinema's global intelligibility.<sup>96</sup>

I adopt an approximate distinction of genres into popular, commercial, or mainstream cinema; independent or art cinema; and a digital avant-garde. I make these distinctions on the basis of the films' modes of political address and their commercial performance as well as their venues of exhibition, largely within the national context. However, rather than fit neatly into predetermined conceptualizations, contemporary Thai films cross generic divisions, and their generic belonging may also change with exhibition across national borders. That I read the selected films in the national context does not disavow their transnational significance; my engagement with the transnational is accomplished through my focus on how Buddhist notions expand liberal frameworks, my investigation of transnational femininity in chapter 2, and my consideration of international viewership in chapter 3.

### Cinema of Haunting

Much of post-1997 Thai cinema occupies itself with questions of ghostly return and other ways of drawing cultural pasts into relation with the present.<sup>97</sup> Although haunting constitutes the thematic commonality of the films under review, these works do not belong to a single filmic genre. In "The Ghostliness of Genre," Lim emphasizes the considerable tractability and generic mutations of the "Asian horror film."<sup>98</sup> In the films I review the trope of haunting proliferates across the heritage film, transnationally produced pan-Asian horror, independent cinema, video art, and the documentary. In my reading this body of work is internally differentiated by the degree to which it deploys haunting for more or less emancipatory visions of sexuality and gendered embodiment. The task is to find out under which aesthetic and conceptual conditions this trope's critical potential can come to fruition.

If the trope of ghostly return has in the past two decades been closely allied with concerns centering on the Thai nation, *Ghostly Desires* focuses on a period of significant reconfiguration of the national.<sup>99</sup> Highly diverse in its instantiations, this trope remains malleable enough to allow for such



reconfiguration. Depending on their generic distinctions, the films stake very different claims to the nation. At the same time, the trope of haunting affords local (and regional) intelligibility and provides for intrigue in global exhibition.

The film scholar May Adadol Ingawanij has provided the most rigorous investigations of Thai cinematic genres and their political alignments thus far.<sup>100</sup> Her critique of a post-1997 heritage cinema that is closely connected to bourgeois nationalist interests comes to bear on my analysis of haunting and femininity in *Nang Nak* in chapter 1. May Adadol further uses the term *independent cinema* to classify the works of Apichatpong and his contemporaries in Thailand and in the region. She details the complex position of Southeast Asian independent cinema as dependent on intricate global and state funding mechanisms, logics of exhibition, and the parameters of censorship—much of which precisely detracts from this cinema’s independence.<sup>101</sup> She nevertheless calls the present moment in Thailand a “period of production and circulation of a body of politically radical and aesthetically avant-garde ‘Third world’ films” and claims considerable possibilities for “a radical cinema movement.”<sup>102</sup> For the purposes of this study, I understand as independent those productions that strive for “independence,” or for alternate aesthetic and political worlds as related to the domain of sexuality, such as are envisioned in the cinema of Apichatpong, Pimpaka, and Thunskā.

Jean Ma’s consideration of Chinese art film provides further support in characterizing Thai independent or art cinema. Ma complicates the definition of the global art film by detailing how Chinese art films diverge from classical conceptions of the genre. Her analysis makes special reference to the cinema of Tsai Ming-liang, a director whose work invites comparison with that of Apichatpong. Ma draws attention to the ways in which Tsai’s work expands the parameters of the art film, including its relation to national cinematic traditions and to auteurship: “Rather than attempting to distance himself from the tradition of popular commercial film, Tsai displays a more nuanced and ambivalent attitude toward this tradition, incorporating its conventions, forms, and popular icons into his practice even as he radically departs from its narrative approach.”<sup>103</sup> With regard to auteurship, she notes that “Tsai’s insistence upon an intertextual authorial presence constitutes one more way of reworking a traditional auteur position, by a multiplication and refraction across textual levels.”<sup>104</sup> Thai directors’ borrowings from divergent cinematic traditions and their improvisations on



the notion of the auteur similarly complicate the idea of a global art cinema that merely follows a general template and gradually emerges in different places according to a “developmentalist logic.”<sup>105</sup>

As the surveillance of public expression expands, independent cinema in Thailand is further vitally defined by its role in challenging the limits of cinematic representability. In the years after the 2006 military coup, the increasingly repressive application especially of the Thai *lèse-majesté* law and the Computer Crime Act has had devastating consequences for artists, activists, and other politically expressive—or even politically nonexpressive—citizens.<sup>106</sup> The Film Act of 2008 further inhibited cinematic possibilities of expression.

Although it is mostly sex scenes that catch the attention of cinema censors, the role of sexuality in the context of censorship has not received sustained analysis. We saw that the Ministry of Culture’s Culture Monitoring Center (Culture Surveillance Bureau) tends to compound visual media with virality and “contagion” and that its director associates “cultural deviance” with “obscenity.” Against this background the production and circulation of independent cinema frequently take on an activist component that includes political protests and court cases that center on the banning or censoring of films.<sup>107</sup>

The most organized protest against censorship to date was initiated when Apichatpong’s 2006 film *Syndromes and a Century* (*Saeng Sattawat*) was partially censored in 2007. The censors demanded that Apichatpong delete scenes of a monk playing guitar, doctors drinking alcohol, a doctor kissing his girlfriend in a hospital (while having an erection), and an old monk playing with a flying saucer.<sup>108</sup> Galvanized by the censorship of *Syndromes*, the Free Thai Cinema movement formed to campaign for the liberalization of the conditions for film production under censorship laws that originated in the 1930s and to prevent the new restrictive Film Act of 2008. The ultimately unsuccessful struggles of the Free Thai Cinema movement with the screening (censorship) committee underscored the precarious position of independent Thai cinema. Ben Anderson notes an increase in film censorship after the 2006 military coup and attributes intensified politicization to Apichatpong’s work.<sup>109</sup> May Adadol likewise relates the new, particularly onerous restrictions on filmmaking to the political resurgence of the military and to anxieties regarding the future of the Thai monarchy.<sup>110</sup> I cite this context to underline independent cinema’s precarious imbrication with political expression and to call attention to the constant,

genuine possibility of censorship for several of the independent filmmakers featured here.

My consideration of Buddhism in Thai cinema diverges from that of other scholars in that I do not primarily seek to find literal instantiations of Buddhist teachings in this archive.<sup>111</sup> Rather than assume the concordance of invocations of Buddhism in cinema with Buddhist principles, I pursue what I regard to be the more pertinent question of the political and conceptual functions of Buddhist content and aesthetics that exceed the purpose of religious instruction in contemporary Thai cinema.<sup>112</sup> Crucial to my study is that the Buddhist-inflected imaginary of contemporary independent cinema furnishes an additional idiom for queer and feminist advocacy. Because this cinema delves deep into the social and ontological negativity of sexual personhood, it is able to radically redirect the discussion of injury and arbitration, point beyond liberal impasses, and expand the frameworks in which we think about desire, sexual personhood, and the social.

### Archive

In *Ghostly Desires* I trace current logics of sexual and gendered minoritization through the aesthetics of popular cinema, independent film, and avant-garde video as well as through social and political crises. For my analysis of state and activist sexual politics I rely on print and visual sources and also on ethnographic materials collected during extensive periods of research in Thailand between 1999 and 2015.<sup>113</sup> In order to understand the development of state sexual politics and activist strategies, I draw on data gathered through participant observation in public forums on the subject of sexuality in Thailand. The late 1990s and 2000s saw a proliferation of public “sex forums,” as one event labeled itself.<sup>114</sup> In these conferences, seminars, activist meetings, student forums, and policy recommendation sessions, a diverse public of activists, administrators, professors, artists, NGO workers, students, civil servants, Buddhist monks and nuns, psychologists, and others discussed issues of sexuality, rights, and culture. In addition I draw on information compiled from participation since 1999 in events of Thailand’s primary queer activist group, Anjaree.

This study further relies on data from interviews with artists, writers, film critics, academics, policymakers, practitioners of corpse meditation, patrons of the shrine of Mae Nak, activists, monks, and filmmakers such as

Michael Shaowanasai, Wannasak Sirilar, Nonzee Nimibutr, Pimpaka Towira, Kong Rithdee, Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, and Anjana Suvarnananda. The particular makeup of this archive of artistic materials, literary and scholarly print documents, and ethnographic data and policy research allows me to investigate the composite blend of psychic, social, and ontological negativity that at present defines understandings of sexual personhood in official politics, religious discourses, and vernacular perspectives.

## Chapters

The first chapter of *Ghostly Desires* centers on the concept of Buddhist melancholia. It shows how in Nonzee's 1999 heritage film *Nang Nak* desire and sexual personhood are rendered in the idioms of Buddhist pedagogies and economies of desire. Examining how the core Buddhist trope of the negativity of female embodiment works in present-day cinema and policy, this analysis of *Nang Nak* questions the relations of haunting to historical injury and repair. The chapter shows how new forms of cinematic representation take recourse to Buddhism and parallel the ways that sexual and economic sufficiency policies draw on Buddhist concepts. Thus the trope of Buddhist melancholia furnishes a convention that in mainstream film figures nationalist heteronormativity. The analysis therefore takes into account the extent to which Buddhist understandings of the temporal dimensions of desire in film concur with the "time of capital" and the "time of the nation."<sup>15</sup> Finally this chapter demonstrates how the temporal incongruity of haunting can be made available to feminist interpretation. When Buddhist stories highlight the difficulty of giving up attachment, they also become counterdoctrinal and highlight the persistence of women's desires. Bodies play a prominent role in this chapter, and the malleability of female bodies is shown to be at the center of Buddhist fantasy as well as of policy programs.

The second chapter investigates a historical shift in the intersection of gender, sexuality, and minority Chinese ethnicity in Thailand. This analysis of the anachronisms of haunting in the 2002 Hong Kong–Thai coproduction *The Eye* sheds light on the recent transformation of Chinese femininity from denigrated minority identity to trans-Asian, cosmopolitan ideal. I examine how this filmic text nevertheless mobilizes the moment of cultural revival also for the consideration of Chinese–Thai historical negativity. The film tells the story of an involuntary, Buddhist-coded seeing that occurs when a Hong Kong woman receives a corneal transplant from a Chinese

Thai woman. It is through this motif of prosthesis that the film gauges the commensurability of Chineseness across Southeast Asia and East Asia. In this cinema Buddhism is a transcultural formation that supplies essential knowledge for everyday coping and provides a map for coming to terms with loss across Asia. Notably this formation crosses the boundaries of Theravada and Mahayana Buddhist lines of thought. Rather than being set into relation to activities of the state, in *The Eye* haunting femininity is linked to transnational flows of populations and capital as well as to the migration of loss and concomitant flows of feeling and ideology. Significantly *The Eye* shows minority injury to be a matter of female agency as well as one that has to be approached transnationally. In the film women's desires are largely directed toward historical agency.

In chapter 3 I turn to the analysis of independent cinema. I examine how filmmakers such as Apichatpong make use of the Buddhist notion of impermanence to interrogate the notions of social wounding and recompense that inform liberal discourse on minoritarian personhood. The analysis of *Tropical Malady* focuses on how male same-sex desiring is situated in the rich affective environment of a cross-gender queer sociality as well as in an economic context of relative poverty that nevertheless translates into affective plenitude. The film makes its greatest intervention into the social negativity of queerness in its second half, in which it performs a queering of the Buddhist notion of impermanence. *Tropical Malady* thus succeeds in deploying the anachronism of haunting to proffer a model of how to make social, psychological, and Buddhist-informed notions of negativity available to queer critique.

The fourth chapter undertakes a queer-feminist analysis of the contemporary Thai artist Araya's videos about intimacy and exchange with the dead. From 1997 until the mid-2000s this artist returned repeatedly to a hospital morgue to perform with corpses in different scenes and arrangements. Focusing on conceptual and performative aspects of Araya's video work, this chapter follows the question of how scenarios of loss and invocations of scenes of intimacy are made to relate in the films. It examines how Araya's work defamiliarizes the popular conventions of depicting female death and attachment to the dead female body in Thailand. The modes in which this art engages the trope of femininity as impermanence stand in radical contrast to *Nang Nak*'s. In contrast to previous chapters, chapter 4's analysis concentrates on works in which longing and sexuality are situated in a highly abstracted and dehistoricized domain. Using death as a register

of the sexual, Araya's videos aim to create feminist publics by rooting desire in a very literal form of negativity. They deploy Buddhist melancholia, or the conventions of depicting female death and the erotic, to extend our notions of desire beyond physical possibility and to previously unimagined objects.

The coda tweaks the question of Buddhism's relation to sexuality still further by investigating notions of Buddhist-Muslim intimacy in the independent cinema of Thunskā. *This Area Is Under Quarantine* (2008) was produced in the context of the perpetual state of emergency since 2004 in Thailand's three southern Muslim-majority provinces. The analysis gauges the critical potential of interethnic intimacies in a situation in which violence is continuously perpetrated by a central state that defines itself as Buddhist. The coda thereby probes one additional positioning of Buddhism vis-à-vis sexuality and liberalism.

*Ghostly Desires* thus traces how Buddhist frameworks and contexts inform both normative and queer-feminist ideals of gender and sexuality through the heritage cinema, transnational Hong Kong–Thai coproductions, independent queer cinema, feminist video art, and queer documentary.