

The Cultural and Filmic Elements that Contribute to the Popularity of the Thai film *Nang Nak*

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the cultural meanings and filmic components that contribute to the popularity of the 1999 Thai film *Nang Nak*. Using semiotics as the primary analytic theory, and in-depth key informant interviews as well as focus group interviews as the means of data collection, the cultural meanings and filmic components of *Nang Nak* are analyzed to uncover one possible answer for why this film achieved wide popularity in Thailand despite the fact that Thai audience has, in recent years, devoted a majority of their movie-going hours to mainstream Hollywood films. The results of the research indicate five important features of cultural beliefs and values and five filmic elements that provide one possible explanation for the popularity of *Nang Nak*. In addition to discussing those cultural beliefs/values and filmic elements, this study argues that Western theories can play a meaningful role in the analysis of Asian films.

THE CULTURAL AND FILMIC ELEMENTS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THE POPULARITY OF THE THAI FILM *NANG NAK*

During the past two decades, traditional Thai movies have been in trouble due, at least in part, to the expressed fondness that Thai movie-goers have for Hollywood films and a lack of quality films produced in Thailand for Thai consumption. However, the success of the 1999 film *Nang Nak*, a period movie from approximately the same time in Thai history as *The King and I* (a.k.a., *Anna and the King*), served as the impetus for a rejuvenation of the Thai film industry. Titled *Mae Nak Prakanong* in previous versions of this often-retold Thai story, this most recent version of a tale of two star-crossed lovers promotes Thai cultural beliefs, values, identity, and historical events. The evidence of many awards domestically and internationally (Public Relations, The Tai Entertainment Company, 1999) plus box office receipts lends credence to the claim that, within Thailand, *Nang Nak* enjoyed the same kind of positive reception that Cameron's 1998 film *Titanic* received in the United States.

Despite the abundant number of productions and reproductions of the story *Mae Nak Prakanong* [*Nang Nak*], the telling of this story is still popular. The story seems almost to be a myth that has, through the years, given pleasure to viewers, but the

story also hides old rituals and beliefs that are shared with the unsuspecting audience (Panklang, 1996). Hence, audience members are not only entertained by the story but exposed to a variety of elements of the Thai culture. Panklang (1996) observed that the plot of *Mae Nak Prakanong* in previous versions of the film remained largely unchanged. Only the superficial details were modified, such as the costumes of the characters, and the appearance of the village, the house, and the temple. The theme focused on beliefs about spirits, and the inter-correlation among community members, ghosts, and religion (Buddhism). Basically, the story depicts the efforts of a ghost (Nak) to continue to live with Mak, her still living husband and the reactions of villagers to Nak's continuing (unacceptable) presence within their community (Panklang, 1996, p. 103).

The purpose of this research is to attempt to achieve an understanding of some of the factors that have contributed to this extremely successful Thai film. Using semiotics as the primary analytic theory, the study attempts to identify the cultural beliefs and values communicated in *Nang Nak* and to explore the significance of those beliefs and values for Thai people. As a second objective, this study attempts to identify the filmic elements that have contributed to *Nang Nak's* success.

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Before proceeding any further, it is important to create a sense of a shared understanding concerning the story of *Mae Nak Prakanong* as presented in the 1999 film *Nang Nak*, directed by Nonzee Nimibutr. Following the synopsis, attention will be turned to beliefs and values within Thai culture and to semiotics, the theory underpinning this research effort.

A Synopsis of the 1999 Film *Nang Nak* (Directed by Nonzee Nimibutr)

The story begins when Nak's husband- -Mak- - is away from fighting in a war. Nak is pregnant; she and the baby die during childbirth. She then emerges as a ghost, taking care of her house and her baby. People passing her house hear her sing a lullaby for her baby. Some see her carrying a baby, standing by the canal in front of her house, waiting for her beloved husband. People are afraid of Nak. Mak

returns from the war. Not knowing that his wife is dead and under the influence of magic used by Nak, Mak resumes life as he remembers it and/or wants it to be, living with Nak and his new baby. Mak's friends and relatives plot to get rid of Nak, but Nak strikes back. She prevents the people from taking away her love.

One day, while cooking, Nak stretches her long, ghostly hand to the ground to pick up a lime, and Mak, seeing this unnatural act, realizes that Nak is a ghost. He runs to a local temple to ask the monk for help. Nak follows him there. The abbot tells Mak to stay in an area surrounded by a white sacred string held by Buddhist priests while they chant to keep Nak's spirit from reaching Mak. Nak becomes so mad that no one can get rid of her. Somdejputtajarn Tow, a skillful priest who senses the seriousness of the situation, comes to Prakanong (the district in which this story unfolds) and convinces Nak to leave her husband. The priest hypnotizes Nak's spirits so it will stay in her forehead bone and then tells a young novice to cut the bone so the priest can carry it away with him. Nak no longer haunts people. The film ends with the notation that, to this day that, today, nobody knows where Nak's forehead bone is (The Tai Entertainment Company, 1999). This one hour and twenty-minute film, set in Thailand's cultural life of the 1870s, was first screened in August 1999, and has since become the highest box office grossing Thai film in history (four million US dollars).

Having provided this overview of the film, attention can now be turned to the beliefs and values that characterize Thai culture. The selected central framework (semiology) will then be examined as will be the work of scholars of popular culture. With that discussion as a foundation, the research questions that guided this effort will then be established.

Beliefs and Values in Thai Culture

Thai culture and the beliefs present within society are influenced by primitive ideas of the native, as well as the precepts of Buddhism and Hinduism. Beliefs about Buddhism, gods, spirits, and other religions are adjusted to Thai minds and environment (Sriratanasomboon, 1991). Some Thai folklore scholars (Boontip, 1988; Jitham, 1983; Muthametha, 1997; Satawedin, 1984; Sriratanasomboon, 1991) classify the dominant Thai beliefs into categories as follows: beliefs about sacred things and animism, such as god of rain; beliefs about ghosts and spirits; beliefs about religions, such as Buddhism and Hinduism. In Buddhism, if the mind becomes peaceful, one will be able to see any trouble clearly and overcome it through one's insight (Phradhampidok, 1995).

Scholars (Komin, 1990; Supap, 1993; Wanprasert, 1979) have identified and examined some of the general values in Thai society, describing Thai values as including: (1) love and loyalty to the King;

(2) nationalism; (3) social harmony; (4) seniority, obedience, and respect. In general, Thais respect the elderly. Buddhist monks are revered for their important roles in the fields of education, the economy, and socio-cultural spheres; (5) merit-making. This value is influenced by a Buddhist concept which dictates good deeds result in a good life in the future; (6) forgiving. In general, Thais are peaceful and avoid contradictions. They tend to forget bad things easily. This might be due to a Buddhist concept. One believes that sticking one's mind to revenge can become a never-ending circle of hurting or destroying oneself; and (7) calmness. Knutson (1998) mentioned that Thais desire smooth interpersonal relationships. They remain calm and controlled in their emotions even during difficult circumstances.

SEMIOTICS

Semiology or semiotics is a theory and method of textual analysis directed at uncovering how meaning is generated in texts and in stories. Texts are regarded as languages that make a story meaningful (Berger, 1998; Chandler, 1994; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Concepts such as signifier, signified, icon, index, symbol, codes, signification, denotation, connotation, myth, paradigm and syntagm, metaphor, metonymy, simile, and synecdoche are used by many semiotic scholars to investigate how a story is narrated in a film (Barthes, 1967; Berger, 1998; Chandler, 1994; Fiske & Hartley, 1978). In applying semiotics to the film media, the kinds of camera shots act as signifiers, with meaning signified by each shot (Berger, 1998). Other elements, such as music, sound, lighting techniques, and the use of color are also signifiers, assisting viewers in interpreting what they see and hear (Berger, 1998; Thasanabanchong, 1991).

In order to comprehend human culture, society, and the message, one needs to study four dimensions of that message: (1) the existence of the message, including what the message is and how frequently that message is presented to an audience; (2) the priorities of the message, that is, what is significant and how certain factors or elements are positioned as vital/central; (3) the cultural values conveyed in the message; and, (4) the relationships depicted in the messages, including what is connected to what and the structural meanings of the message (fiske & Hartley, 1978; Sriratanasomboon, 1991). As this project focuses specifically on values and culture, the latter two dimensions are of primary interest.

Many scholars, using historical and critical methods as well as semiotic analysis, have conducted research focusing on cultural values in multinational films and television. However, research based on semiotics has belonged primarily to Western cultures; few studies have been carried out in Asian cultures in

general or in the Thai cultures specifically (as two exceptions to this claim, see, for example, Avrutin, 1998; Ram, 1999). Panklang (1996) examined ghost generative meanings in the four Thai productions of *Mae Nak Prakanong* from 1978 to 1989. The main concepts in the four films were non-abstinence from sensual pleasure, a ghost story, and life after death.

A number of scholars (see, for example, Heffernan, 1997; Pumasawat, 1985; Rowe, 2001; Sriratanasomboon, 1991; Thasanabanchong, 1991) have conducted research directed at uncovering the elements or factors present in television dramas and films that make those dramas/ films attractive to an audience. Many factors from the research conducted by these scholars, such as aesthetic elements, technological dimension, and cultural forces, have been identified as influencing a film's popularity. *Nang Nak* is a popular film for most Thai people because this drama reflects Thai culture with an emphasis on pleasure, comical elements, and historical details. Apart from cultural aspects, there are some other filmic factors such as sound effects, beautiful scenes, and the presentation of a new love scene that arguably contribute to the popularity of the film. The scene of Mak having sex with ghost Nak might be interesting to some Thai audience. This is a scene that was not incorporated in previous versions of *Mae Nak Prakanong*. Interpersonal communication about this fascinating film might affect the popularity of the film as well. Thasana-banchong (1991) stated that going to a movie is a social activity. If an audience member loses an opportunity to see a film, he or she probably misses something.

As mentioned earlier, the overall purpose of this study is to explore the cultural and filmic elements that contributed to the popularity of *Nang Nak*. Semiotic theory is an appropriate tool for framing the following research questions.

1. What are the cultural elements that have contributed to the popularity of *Nang Nak*? 1a. Why are those cultural beliefs and values significant to Thai audience member?

2. What are the filmic elements that have contributed to the popularity of *Nang Nak*?

METHODS: TEXTUAL ANALYSIS AND SEMIOTICS AND IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

Qualitative, textual analysis (Lindlof, 1995; Tucker, 1995) and in-depth interviews (Berger, 1998; Fontana & Frey, 2000; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Morgan, 1988) were employed to explore the representation of Thai culture in *Nang Nak*. Scholars in communication have not only issued increased calls for the use of multiple methods but also indicated the importance of the methods used in this research for understanding the ways in which culture plays an important roles as a communicative system.

Unit of Analysis

In analyzing the text (i.e., the film itself), scenes or units of examination comprising two or more shots showing continuous action were observed according to syntagmatic analysis. Sentences, words, and phrases were explored as well. With respect to the interview portions of the research, prior to conducting any interviews I wrote out a full description of my own experience of *Nang Nak*. The purpose of that exercise was to enable me to bracket my own experience, achieving greater clarity as I compared my own judgments with the judgments of the interviewees.

Participants

There were two kinds of interviewees: key informants and two focus groups representing the "popular" audience and the "elite" audience. With respect to this research, a key-informant was defined as any individual who had read or seen or experienced *Nang Nak* and might have also seen previous versions of the story. A minimum of ten people were solicited to volunteer for the key informant interviews. I continued interviewing key informants until a "saturation point" was reached.

The popular focus group consisted of twelve members. The interview session lasted approximately ninety minutes. The participants included both males and females. Their age ranged from eighteen to sixty years old. There were two people from both genders in approximately the same age group, for example, eighteen, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty and sixty. They came from different educational backgrounds, such as business, computer sciences, fine arts, communication, and so on. Their careers were also diverse, such as a graphic designer and an office worker.

As for the elite group, they came from the upper class of Thai society and had higher educational backgrounds, including advanced university degrees. The number of participants in the elite group was approximately eight people. They have all seen *Nang Nak* and some of them had seen at least one version of *Mae Nak Prakanong*.

Data Sources

My researcher role involved watching a commercial video tape of *Nang Nak*, which lasts about one hour and forty minutes. I watched the video tape of this film numerous times, taking detailed notes as needed for my analysis, collecting documentary materials (i.e., newspaper and magazine articles concerning *Nang Nak*), and conducting research interviews and focus group interviews. These processes took over a year.

Data Analysis

As an overall perspective, I worked from an inductive analytic framework committed to three general flows of activity: reducing the data and identifying its source, creating thematic categories, and drawing conclusions (Nelson, 1989). In the first phase of analysis, I utilized a semiotic approach, analyzing both cultural and filmic textual signs and the transcripts from key informants and members of the focus groups. In reviewing this data, I looked for any recurring themes concerning or revealing beliefs, values, and cultural/filmic elements that might account for the film's popularity. In the second phase of analysis, I looked at the ways in which key informants and interviewees' descriptions, whether conveying implied or specific meanings, displayed logical evidence in support of or contradiction with my own analysis of the film. In this phase, I looked for additional themes that emerged from the participants.

My own examination of the cultural and filmic elements evident in the film revealed themes of (1) love, (2) social role due to gender, (3) community roles (such as helping and depending on each other such as asking for help from monks), (4) respect for the elderly or those having social status, (5) concepts based in Buddhism (such as beliefs about impermanence), (6) beliefs about ghosts and spirits, (7) the nostalgia for desiring to see traditional Thai ways of life, (8) and filmic elements leading to the film's popularity such as the immortal love myth, the explicit theme of the film, many beautiful scenes, touching music, and good casting. By comparison, the primary themes the participants illustrated were (1) love, (2) Buddhism, (3) beliefs about ghosts and spirits, (4) nostalgia for traditional ways of life of Thai people, (5) social role, (6) the new interpretation of the film and presentation of the film, (7) the story and the clear-cut theme of the film, (8) beautiful scenes with lighting and color, (9) music, sound, and song, (10) costumes and props, (12) film-editing and camera angles, and (13) the new-look of Thai films as compared with movies from the West.

RESULTS

The first research question asked: what are the cultural elements that have contributed to the popularity of *Nang Nak*? A sub-component of that question asked why those cultural beliefs/values are significant to Thai audience members.

My interpretive analysis led me to conclude that there are five cultural elements that contribute to the popularity of *Nang Nak*: (1) the value of romantic love, (2) beliefs about ghosts and spirits, (3) the concept of nostalgia, (4) beliefs about impermanence, and (5) the value of depending on each other for help. Why those cultural beliefs and values are significant to Thai audience members will be discussed after my analysis of each of the five items.

The Value of Romantic Love

Tresidder (1997) observed that "love is the most complex and important of all human emotions. Unhappy love, frustrated love, doomed love or lost love are dominant themes of the novel, drama, classical ballet and opera; they have also been recurring favorite of the cinema" (pp. 9-10). Kinder (1999), a professor of critical studies at the University of Southern California, School of Cinema and Television, stated about the 1997 film, *Titanic*, the most successful film in box office history, grossing \$ 1.2 billion internationally, that "rather than Cameron's dazzling special effects, here it is Bigas Luna [the director's] imaginative metanarrative intricacies that drive a contrived romance to new heights of emotional giddiness and financial success" (p.35). Kinder remarked that the heart of the movie's popularity, and hence its success at the box office, seems to rest in the loss of the lover and the emotional deadlock driving passionate Leonardo DiCaprio fans to the theater for more. Likewise, the financial and filmic success of *Nang Nak* is evident in its box office earnings around the world and the festival prizes it has earned (Somsri, 2000; Southeast Asian Studies, Ohio University, 2000).

To me, the key point of interest in *Titanic* the film is akin to the doomed love of Mak and Nak. Ghost Nak received compassion from many fans for her grievous role. The film's overall theme is so emotionally charged that it might bring some viewers to the point of tears because of its tragic ending. Who would dare to say that the most beautiful thing in life is not love? Unlike other previous versions, Nak was portrayed as a female ghost with sincere love. Similarly, Mak was a family man who dared to fight with the sorcerer who hurt his beloved wife's body. My key informants and participants in both focus groups confirmed that recurring touching romantic love of the film persuasive.

Beliefs about Ghosts and Spirits

The film is not about love between humans but the passion of a human and a female ghost. The theme of ghost and spirit in *Nang Nak* or *Mae Nak Prakanong* has become such a meaningful love myth that no other Thai ghost story is superior. This is true in part because of Nak's character as a good honest wife and virtuous mother. Wright (1989) asserted that no other Thai ghost story has been as impressive as *Mae Nak Prakanong*. I believe that the beliefs about ghosts and spirits has been deep-rooted in the minds of Thais despite the existence of Buddhism. Panklang (1996) stated that

"Ghosts and spirits were in Thais' minds from the past to the present in spite of the fact that we have moved in the globalization society. People are still afraid of ghosts. Ghost film are needed in the market and gross high box office. Therefore, Mae Nak will not vanish from Thais' memory. This ghost film has been existed more than 120 years." (p. 2)

As one can see, some Thais worship the spirits of households and give alms to monks as a form of making merit for their late cousins or ancestors. These activities are not Thai pure Buddhism (Klausner, 1981; Ramitanon, 1994: Rajabhat Institute, Suan Dusit Campus, 2000). The popularity of *Nang Nak* can be seen in the reproductions of the ghost love story as well as through the evidence of history, legend, and the statue of Nak at Wat Mahabutr Temple in Bangkok. *Nang Nak* or *Mae Nak Prakanong* was produced to please viewers (Laen Nang Nak, 1999; Panklang, 1996). Nonetheless, Laen nang Nak (1999) stated that *Nang Nak* presents a different image of Nak from that of the avenging ghost depicted in other versions. This was confirmed by a key informant who stated, "Audience members wanted to see other details that were altered."

Regarding paradigmatic analysis, many elements made the beliefs about ghosts and spirits in *Nang Nak* delightful. First, the iconic sign of ghost Nak was transformed from an ugly rotten face to a young, lovely lady. She had two dimensions: one a good loyal wife; the other a selfish woman. I think Thai viewers like the peaceful ending that Nak could overcome her own mind and decide to leave the human world because Thais are collectivistic and value harmony. Many versions portrayed Nak as one sided- - as a wicked, ugly spirit. In *Nang Nak*, viewers see more of the other side of her as a guiltless, loyal person. One of my elite interviewees said that "it's good that the film depicts her as a loyal wife, and I identify myself an honest wife like her, but I will not take the weak side of attachment."

Second, Thai ghost stories provide pleasures to audience members (Panklang, 1996). I believe that a horrific tale can soften the fright of viewers due to comic elements as appeared in *Mae Nak Prakanong* and in *Nang Nak*. In *Nang Nak*, an example of a comic scene is when the monks of Mahabutr Temple were preoccupied with the fear that dreadful Nak would follow her husband to the temple. They were humans and were afraid of the ghost. The funniest shot, albeit not appropriate in some respects, is that the same young novice, or 'nein joi' flicked the sleeping abbot for a space to sleep owing to his fear of ghost Nak.

Third, one unique characteristics of ghost Nak that makes her so popular is her lengthened arm that other ghosts cannot imitate. Charoongkit-anan (1999) mentioned that *Nang Nak* cannot leave this scene without meaning. Nimibutr, the director of the film mentioned in his interview with Tulapitak that "if the film lacks the scene of Nak's lengthened arm, it is not *Nang Nak*." Thus, *Nang Nak* mixed a horrible theme with a strong message of love. Unlike other previous versions, the interesting point in *Nang Nak* is that the gathered villagers dared to challenge ghost Nak without fear. Suweeranon (October, 1999) a film critic stated, "Mae Nak [Nang Nak] is more inte-

resting than other female ghosts because she has the characteristic of distinctive maternity. I think no one forgets that Mae Nak is a ghost who died in the process of childbirth. That is the most remarkable and cruel one of all spooks" (p.141). For these reasons, the belief about ghosts and spirits is one of the outstanding cultural elements that enhance *Nang Nak*'s popularity and its financial success.

The Concept of Nostalgia

Period Thai movies, such as *Nang Nak*, *Kookram*, *Bang Rajan*, *Jandara*, *Kwan-Riem* (or *Paekao*), *Suriyotai*, and *Khunpan*, are examples of love stories blending together with nostalgia. Thai viewers welcomed these movies due to the desire to go back to simple ways of past Thai life. My participants told me that *Nang Nak* was well-received because of the concept of nostalgia which was the new neatly-done icon that people had not seen in other previous versions. Viewers have never seen any version come close to the history of the story as *Nang Nak* did. Sasanatieng (1999) claimed: "information research, such as hair style, costumes, props, characteristics of houses of the period, rituals, beliefs historical events and relevant people in the story was done for this new *Nang Nak*" (p.8). Osatapirat (2000) stated that, in the view of the producer, choosing to present the images of the past made *Nang Nak* more pleasurable to viewers. Furthermore, the images of the past such as canal life in the country where roads were not constructed in Bangkok today, had disappeared for a long period of time from the screen, probably two decades ago. *Nang Nak* was a nostalgic film that came out at the right time and so it became successful. Key informants told me: "*Nang Nak* mirrored the vivid visions of the past and created a lot of Thai identity which was an amazing story from real life." Also, my interviewees were fascinated by the past, and they lured to examine the past.

The Belief about Impermanence

The truth is provable if we look simply from the case of *Nang Nak* that ghost Nak ignored the law of nature and she attached too much to her love, which led to her unreal happiness. Ghost Nak knew the belief of impermanence, but her stubbornness and selfishness made her life after death more grievous. Her spirit could not live in the human world as ghost Nak cried and said to Mak: "I want to treat you as much as I can. I don't know how many days I can live with you." This is the natural truth for all things; nothing lasts permanently. The only way to heal the loss is accepting the basic truth of impermanence. Nak ignored her being "otherness" until Somdejputthajarn Tow, a holy monk truly enlightened her in the last scene. The last leaf on the tree falling down to the ground on the right side of Somdejputthajarn Tow was a metonymy. The descending leaf was linked to the idea that Nak's spirit needed to follow Somdejputthajarn Tow closely, and behave righte-

ously until she was reborn. Nak had to learn moral knowledge (not frightening villagers) and how to behave (not living with Mak anymore) because her life was changed by death like the symbolic dropping leaf. The concept of impermanence became one element that supports *Nang Nak*'s popularity because the concept is apparent to them both in the film and in their real life. An interviewee supported the concept of impermanence:

"I truly believe in the concept of impermanence. It helps guide us to have self-consciousness. Thanks to the filmmakers, the film is the way to find your true self; it is teaching us not to attach too much in love because lost love or death is certain sooner or later. This is the triumphant issue of *Nang Nak*."

Another participant said that "impermanence underlines the whole concept in this love story. The film teaches characters and viewers in the proper way and contributes its popularity." Therefore *Nang Nak* is a charming and graceful film that gives clear example of impermanence.

The Value of Depending on Each Other for Help

The value of group cooperation is not limited to Thai communities but exists around the world. Many non-profit organizations help people suffering from HIV virus, famine, and wars. This ideology is essential in every society, probably because people want others to be free from trouble. We need someone instead of living by ourselves in time of difficulties. The value is an example of an impressive message that plays a role in encouraging viewers to empathize with the characters in a film, play, or other production. In *Nang Nak*, the value is displayed throughout the whole film. The depictions include Mak's doing his duty in the war, Nak's consulting the abbot about her beloved husband, Somdejputthajarn Tow's healing after Mak is injured, Earb's efforts to help Nak give birth, and villagers' helping one another in farm work.

One female participant in the popular focus group said, "I liked people helping others in farm works." Another participant stated, "people need to depend on one another so that our society will be better but I don't like the villagers' violence in the film." Viewers accepted this value because Thais do not favor revenge but recognize social harmony and avoid conflict.

The sub-question of Research Question 1 is why those cultural beliefs and values are significant to Thai audience member?

The Value of Romantic Love

Romantic love is one paramount goal of human needs. Both male and female participants considered the romantic love in *Nang Nak* as significant. Kaewthep (2001) mentioned that "the value such as love is terminal value involving good life, excitement, satisfaction with what one has, the world of peace, the world of beauty, and a family" (pp.170-

171). Zastrow and Ashman (1997) mentioned that the ingredients of rational love are goals in life, giving and receiving, showing affection, communicating openly and warmly and so on. Examples of participants about this concept are "romantic love psychologically gives us a good feeling and it is human nature. When we love someone, we want that person to love us too." Or "it is a good image of a warm family portrayed in the film." Therefore, this value is significant to every lover who wishes to achieve a family goal.

Another point is that the value of romantic love allows audience members to reflect on themselves and to identify with their character's love relationship. One female in the elite focus group stated, "my love towards my husband is as honest as Nak's is, but I don't attach too much like Nak because it is painful." Another participant told me that "I think I don't favor a guy like Uum who kicked, and pushed away his wife and yelled to her when she tried to warn him not to challenge ghost Nak. Their relationship is explicitly crude."

The Belief about Ghosts and Spirits

This belief is significant to Thai audience members because of two reasons: (1) creating the spiritual comfort and security, and (2) conforming to Buddhism and Thai way of life. Sirikanjana (1994) mentioned that

"belief in ghosts or spiritualism has belonged to Thai society since ancient time [due to] the close relationship with nature from birth till death. People believed that a good harvest or famine and disaster [was due to ghosts and spirits] influenced those incidents. The belief made people of the past accept their supernatural power by pleasing them or worship them so that ghosts and spirits would decrease danger and benefit people." (p. 6)

Another tradition for each producer of *Mae Nak Prakanong* is worshipping the statue of Mae Nak, or her spirit, for the sake of their spiritual comfort so that nothing bad will happen to the production. Nimibutr did the same thing with his production (Nimibutr, 1999).

The second reason is that the beliefs about ghosts and spirits is common and does not conflict with Buddhism (Ramitanon, 1994). For example, Thais worship their late ancestors, household spirits, and some gods for they believe that those spirits and gods would help them live in peace. Ramitanon (1994) said that in spite of economic, political, technological, and societal changes, the belief in ghosts and spirits is seen in all levels of social class.

The Concept of Nostalgia

The concept was highly recognized among participants. The reasons are (1) stimulating desire to see more history and cultural identity in Thai movies, (2) viewers' acceptance of the real love myth and lack of fear, and (3) viewers' wishing the serenity and beauty of the past.

One key informant stated “monks are important in rural society of today like those in the film. They are close to people and this is a real cultural identity.” Another key informant said, “*Nang Nak* made other viewers want to see more period films, history in films, and Thai cultural identity. Movies can exhibit the director’s talent in conducting research, looking for more information and displaying his or her ability. I become more interested in Thai movies.”

It is inevitable that the focus on the concept of nostalgia has convinced viewers to find the truth of the legend of *Nang Nak*. Sasanatieng, the script-writer, told me that “the image of Mae Nak is more real and did exist in Thai history. Viewers will not get the old icon of Nak’s long hair with a fierce look to it. *Nang Nak* is not the story of a ghost haunting people any more. I believe she existed in Thai history according to available evidence.” Another participant said, “if the love myth were not real, there would not be her statue at Mahabutr Temple. I am not afraid of ghosts any more because she was not mysterious like older versions. It’s like I watch the artistic creation of her life history and her love, but not a ghost story.”

After viewing *Nang Nak*, participants expressed a preference for living in a smaller, uncomplicated, peaceful, and beautiful community like that of the past, with few social problems. One informant stated, “Thai culture such as peaceful society, beautiful nature, and helping each other makes us feel good about our country. I like them all!”

The Belief about Impermanence

The concept of impermanence is significant to Thai audience members because (1) it encouraged viewers to balance themselves in way of living, and (2) it helped solve problems intellectually. Scholars of Buddhism have stated that impermanence, suffering and nothingness belong to the philosophy of Buddhism, and if one learns how to balance oneself, one will know how to live more happily in the world (Buddhatatpikku, 2000; Pawilai, 1993; Phrathammapidok, 1995). One key informant told me that “this dramatic communication stimulates me to be more careful and moderate my life.” From the words of Somdejputthajarn Tow teaching Mak in the film: “whatever happens, use your self-consciousness; everything goes to the law of Karma. Do not attach or you will be unhappy.”

One male folklorist in the elite focus group commented that, “from the film, humans can lose their self-conscious.” That indicates that, apart from knowing the cause of suffering, and learning the law of nature, one should use their intuition and self-consciousness to handle the problems. One key informant stated that “It was the director’s utmost intelligence to use impermanence to make the unity of the film as well as helping viewers see how to solve a problem skillfully.”

The Value of Depending on Each Other for Help

This value shows kindness and generosity and deals with social relationships. The value is meaningful to Thai viewers because (1) it created cooperation for the benefit of society, and (2) it originated interpersonal relationships and friendships. One key informant said, “I like the cooperation of Mak’s friends in farm work and the abbot’s role in helping Mak with ghost Nak. I think this value should be reconsidered by viewers to do something good for the society in which they live.” One male in the elite focus group stated, “despite the changing society, depending on each other is essential because we don’t live by ourselves in society. We need thoughtfulness, trustworthiness, and cooperation to make our society a better place to live.”

It is obvious that helping each other can create interpersonal relationships or friendships. A twenty-year-old male in the popular focus group told me that

“The film shows that monks in the past are essential to people. Monks were guides or leaders. Their interpersonal relationship was close. Mark could run to the temple for help. Friendship in the past looked good to me. People depended on each other. That looked sincere, but it is difficult for us to have that kind of relationship in today’s society. Nowadays, someone is fake, probably our society is bigger.”

The second research question asked: what are the filmic elements that have contributed to the popularity of *Nang Nak*?

From the perspective of the filmic elements, *Nang Nak*’s popularity was due to (1) story, new details, and visual narrative, (2) film editing and camera angles, (3) good casting and the director’s competence, (4) music and sound effect, and (5) costumes and props.

The Story, New Details, and Visual Narrative

According to Wong (200), the story of *Mae Nak Prakanong* has been filmed many times and every version has been a box-office hit. From my interpretive analysis, apart from the classic story itself, *Nang Nak* was popular because of some sensible needs. There was a new phenomenon of research on the story before the production was executed. Sasanatieng gave me an interview: “I spent more than two years in research and I confirmed that I did not newly interpret but went back to available historical sources.”

New details are essential for the old narrative story because viewers can be entertained by a new fantasy. The new details such as historical events, cultural beliefs and values, ways of life in the past and characters are confirmed by Zaza (1993) who mentioned that “story and characters will be the primary elements for generating viewer interest” (p. 109). Also, Kaewnetra (2000) stated that “I think viewers would rather see details of the Thai way of

life and tender love relationship which can't be found in our today society" (p. 249).

Next, a concise visual narrative attracted viewers. From syntagmatic analysis, scenes that used only visual narratives to describe the theme of the story were effective. Waewhong (1999) said that "Khun Nonzee Nimibutr set his own standard that comes from an expert in advertising film. He was trained to produce a concise film that covers all issues for a unity and his objective in presenting visual narratives of the 'product' that is clear in viewers' minds" (p. 71).

Film Editing and Camera Angles

Berger (1998) stated that camera work and editing techniques can be examined simultaneously. Artistic editing and camera angles were effective tools for the viewers. Participants liked the cinematic devices. For example, "lighting, shading, color and camera angles are exquisite, especially camera angles are smooth and beautiful." A female instructor in film studies stated, "I like the editing, flashbacks and appropriate timing of shots, especially the transition by presenting nature images to reinforce the changing time." Overall, the film was popular in part because of the cinematic techniques mentioned. The filmic devices skillfully enabled *Nang Nak* to win Best Art Direction domestically and internationally as well.

Other Filmic Elements Leading to the Film's Popularity

The remaining features such as good casting and the director's competence, music, song and sound effect, costumes and props are oriented to the same conclusion, that is, the five filmic elements I mentioned contributed to *Nang Nak*'s popularity. The descriptions from participants can guarantee the points. For instance, "I really love the guy who performs Somdejputthajarn Tow because his acting and his look makes me believe that he is real Somdejputthajarn Tow." One key informant talked about music: "the music in the last scene made me feel sympathy with Nak's fate. Before, her image was bad but in this film, an aesthetic sad music reflects on her collaborative nature with other people. She agreed to go away from human society. The music from this film helps create the popularity of the film because no viewers heard the music before and thus, *Nang Nak*'s music was popular too because I can hear and recognize right away that this is *Nang Nak*'s music." Or "a lullaby was harmonious with the atmosphere of the country life." Regarding costumes and props, one female in the popular focus group said, "I could not believe that Saai [the leading actress] dared to have her hair cut like that [very short like that of a man]. She looks the same as women I saw in my history books. This is a real Thai identity and I like the movie because the producer gives details and invests a genuine representation of the characters regardless how dramatic or eccentric

the film may be." "the props were persuasive because they are seldom seen nowadays. Those props were very old hair-scissors, an ancient mirror, an antique razor, and four-pronged harpoon that I have never seen before and I thought they were charming."

Reflecting on My Interpretation and Semiotics as Critical Method

Crucial to my analysis is the need for further insight into the implications of this movie. The message sends to Americans, Thais, and international viewers. The interpretation uncovered here provided insight into the popularity of this love myth. Semiotics provides a convenient basis for my understanding how my participants and I decoded the meaning of this entertaining film. From the semiotic perspective, the belief about impermanence is one of the key themes in the film. From paradigmatic analysis, Mak had never experienced physical pain at all in previous versions of *Mae Nak Prakanong*. *Nang Nak* wants to disclose the "deep structure" (as Levi-Strauss (1967) used the term in this sense) of Mak as a common man who can have physical and mental distress. This is the truth of impermanence. Semiotics offers a critical, comprehensive, systematic and synchronous study of communications phenomena as a whole. Semiotics, a theory of the West tells us that we, in any culture, deal with signs and involve in the construction of meaning as it proves to be useful in this Thai cultural study.

CONCLUSION

To make a film popular, a quality film must be neatly done. The combination of a creative story and the skill of a director are obligatory. Target audience should be considered as well. Due to the effective strategy of determining the right target viewers, *Nang Nak* was highly successful. Nimibutr realized that a majority of Thai viewers who were familiar with *Mae Nak Prakanong* were about 30-35 years old, so he put that group as a priority. The second priority was students, and the last group was teenagers (Nimibutr, 1999). Also, people of older generation would want to see the film as one participant wished to compare it with older versions.

My analysis of documentary sources and the information I gained from all participants led me to conclude that a selective, pleasing trailer, repetitive advertising strategies through media, and interpersonal communication influenced the popularity of the film. Thais are collectivistic and generally watch a film with friends and family. They feel pleasure and involvement with each other when they see a film together.

Popular culture has a strong impact on how people view themselves and those around them. All elements of the film, the beliefs, the values, the music, narrative, etc., were analyzed by participants and me and revealed why it became such a popular phenomenon. Although this study could only

comment on the cultural and filmic element of one movie, my interpretation suggests that further analysis is necessary. Future research could explore similar codes employed by other popular films and in other aspects of popular culture. The codes present in films addressing such topics as ghosts and spirits, depending on each other for help, the concept of nostalgia, costumes and props, and other salient issues seem ideally fit for semiotic analysis. Interpretation of these messages is offered in this paper as a contribution to an awareness of a popular film as cultural studies, and this study can be used as a vehicle for intercultural communication.

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