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หมอนรถไฟ

Mon rot fai

Railway Sleepers

Sompot Chidgasornpongse

Producer Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Sompot Chidgasornpongse. **Production companies** Kick the Machine Films (Bangkok, Thailand), At a Time Pictures (Bangkok, Thailand). **Director** Sompot Chidgasornpongse. **Director of photography** Sompot Chidgasornpongse. **Editor** Sompot Chidgasornpongse. **Sound design** Akritchalerm Kalayanamitr. **Sound** Chalermrat Kawewattana.

Colour. 102 min. Thai.

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World sales At a Time Pictures

The first railway line in Thailand, a sign of progress and wealth, was inaugurated in 1893. Looking out of the train window today, you can still see rice paddies and palm trees. In first class, foreign tourists mingle with rich Thais, toasting one another before retiring to generously-sized couchettes. The wagons at the back are jam-packed, with four passengers squashed on to benches meant for two. People selling food skillfully make their way through the train. Life gets on and off, while the camera mixes with the passengers as if it itself were one of their number. A woman sells cheap novels, children do their homework, armed soldiers conduct their checks, more and more veiled women board the train. These tiny, casually observed portraits of everyday life reflect the mood of a society that doesn't seem to know where it's headed, even if the train has been crossing the country from north to south for over 100 years now. It is a contemplative journey accompanied by the constant rattling of the wheels, giving viewers an insight into an unfamiliar country in surprising fashion.

Anke Leweke

My favourite form of transportation

Thailand was introduced to train travel in 1890 during the reign of King Rama V. It was once a sign of modernity. However, due to corruption and the inefficient operation of the railway bureau, the Thai railway has failed to improve for many decades. From the colonial era on, Thai trains became vehicles frozen in time.

Trains have always been my favourite form of transportation. To me, train travel is a mobile replica of life itself. It brings strangers together. We cross paths as we move ahead in similar directions but with different destinations. The train is also embedded with a history that reflects the development of my country. *Mon rot fai* invites the audience to take a journey along the edge of modernity and nostalgia.

Sompot Chidgasornpongse

“The history, the past, is trapped in the vehicle”

Your film observes passengers on the State Railway of Thailand. We see people from all walks of life riding the train. We see them sleeping, eating, reading, doing homework, making music, talking to each other, looking out the window. They are young and old, men and women, soldiers, Muslims, Western tourists, and together they seem to form a portrait of Thai society. Could you talk about the starting-point of your film? What did you hope to see and find?

Sompot Chidgasornpongse: The starting-point began when I was studying at CalArts (California Institute of the Arts) for my master's degree. I didn't have a car, which made it difficult for me to get around. California is really a car-based city. One day, I had to meet a friend in Los Angeles, so I took a train to visit her. It was in the evening, and as the ray of sun shone through the window and touched my face, I cried. That was when I realised that maybe, deep down, I felt a bit trapped. It was nice to travel out of Valencia, where my school is located. So I took my small camera to record the moment, pointing out of the window. Then suddenly a five-year-old Mexican boy came into my frame. He, too, was admiring the view enthusiastically. He began asking his father many questions in Spanish, which I didn't understand. But I felt like I knew all his questions. I did the same when I was young. 'What is this?' 'What is that?' 'Are we there yet?' That moment made me think of my family and my home back in Thailand. Then it dawned on me that I should travel around Thailand by train and capture these little magic moments during a long journey; kids with their families, and the many others things that happen on Thai trains. Also, the process of making this film would force me to go out and travel more, which I've always wanted to do. I also thought that these moments in everyday life could form something special, something larger than themselves individually. Thai trains have many aspects that, I believe, are good metaphors for portraying Thailand as a whole.

When the Thai railway system was built in the 1890s, it epitomised progress and promised modernity. What was the meaning and impact of the railway system back then compared to now?

Trains were the most important form of transport back then. Thailand (Siam as it was called at that time) consisted of many towns, scattered across many surrounding regions. Siam as a nation wasn't yet fully formed. And we had to face colonialism, especially from France and England. So the train was the

fastest and most effective way to send out troops to protect the country. It was also used to centralise the state's power, as it took months to travel from the centre to the north or the east, but by train, it took only a day or two. It's also the way to show that we are, in fact, a modern country. As a result, Thailand is the only country in Southeast Asia that wasn't officially colonised. And the railway in Thailand was also the most advanced compared to the railways in neighbouring countries back then.

Now though, the Thai railway is the only state enterprise that is not making a profit. Its development has been very slow due to the lack of competent management. The train is really slow and rarely follows its schedule. It always runs late. However, it's still a necessity for many Thai because that fares are really cheap (and even free for some routes). But those with more money prefer to use buses, planes or private cars. Some use the train for nostalgic purposes, 'slow life' as they say. It's quite unfortunate and ironic that the Thai railway nowadays looks pretty much the same as it did during the Second World War. That said, however, many wonderful things also happen on the train because of the slow development. You see 'real life' happening on board.

A high-speed train has been an on-going debate throughout many of our fast-changing governments. The plan was proposed and cancelled many times. Some think it's not worth it. Now under the military coup, they decided to let the Chinese take charge. But the plan was yet again on hold, as the junta government think that maybe we should just do it ourselves. So now the future of the high-speed train seems uncertain.

You bring past, present and future together in Mon rot fai in a very surprising and original way – an almost imperceptible blending of different times and places is happening, and ghosts from the past seem to be appearing. How was your approach to bringing different times together? And does it in a way connect to the intrinsic contrast of train rides – immobility (of the passengers) vs. movement (of the train)?

You're right. When the train was first invented, it created a very exciting experience for the passengers. You sat still but the view outside moves past you very quickly. It was quite shocking and disorientating. In the film, you're on the train the whole time and almost always on the move. Moving signifies changes, the passing of time, and most importantly, progress. But the Thai railway doesn't really move anywhere, figuratively. It's 'frozen in time'. The history, 'the past', is trapped in the vehicle. If the Thai railway were a person, he or she would have a lot of stories from the past to tell.

Your film is structured as a train ride lasting two days and two nights, assembled from footage you took over the course of several years. We don't get any information where exactly we are while riding through different landscapes.

It was my intention to try not to show any signs that can pinpoint the exact locations. I wanted the train to travel to an unknown destination (going nowhere, or going in circle). I saw it as an on-going journey of the Thai railway itself and of life. The two days, two nights structure came about when I was editing the film. I had almost 140 hours of footage and it was a challenge for me to come up with the structure. It could be anything because the film has no concrete storyline

to follow. It's snippets of life stitched together. I felt like I was playing jigsaw. In the end, I decided to use time itself as a linear thread. The film would move through time, day and night. Time is the main character, especially when you travel a long distance. But towards the end of the film, I disrupt the linearity of time a bit and play with it. Time can be linear, but it can be an illusion as well.

The point of view of the camera is on the train and mostly directed at the passengers and details of the train. Sometimes we get to see landscapes, train stations, markets. On the soundtrack the distinctive and repetitive sound of the running wheels is very present and adds to the contemplative atmosphere of the film.

I would like the audience to feel as if they were also passengers. I am hoping to transform the cinema into one of the train carriages. The audience is travelling together with the passengers in the film. They look at the views outside the windows or at other passengers through the camera lens. As for sound, it is extremely important for me. When you see with your eyes, the image works on the level of your brain, but sound is more visceral, it works on your body, your heart, or even your soul. When you think about trains, you hear the rhythmic sound. Recreating such an ambience in the film can make you feel like you're really on board. When you fall asleep on the train (or in the cinema), you hear the sound. It nourishes you. The sound of the train engine is like a heartbeat.

Interview: Annette Lingg, January 2017



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Sompot Chidgasornpongse was born in Bangkok, Thailand, in 1980. He studied Architecture at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok from 1998 to 2002, and Film/Video at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) from 2006 to 2010. Since then, he has worked several times as an assistant director to Apichatpong Weerasethakul, and has made fourteen short films. He took part in the Berlinale Talents in 2014 as a director and editor. **Mon rot fai** is his first feature-length film.

Films

2003: *Auad Dee* (10 min.). 2004: *To Infinity and Beyond* (11 min.). 2005: *Bangkok in the Evening* (16 min.), *Andaman* (17 min.). 2006: *ABC* (3 min.), *Naoko is trying to teach me how to make „Tonkatsu“ in 1 minute* (1 min.), *8241.46 miles away from home* (6 min.). 2007: *Landscape 101 01 1101 01...* (28 min.), *Physical Therapy* (1 min.). 2008: *Yesterday* (13 min.), *Diseases and a Hundred Year Period* (20 min.), *The Act of Repeating as a Basic Life Lesson* (4 min.). 2009: *Storytelling* (5 min.). 2010: *Home Video (Made in Thai Town)* (21 min.). 2016: **Mon rot fai / Railway Sleepers**.