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WORSHIP

A film by Uruphong Raksasad

Diversion presents

a Lanna Cinema Workshop production

WORSHIP

A Film by Uruphong Raksasad

2021, 100 minutes, Thailand, 4K 1.78:1, Color,
5.1 Sound, In Thai with English subtitles

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Synopsis

Crisscrossing geographical and spiritual latitudes of Thailand, **WORSHIP** is a rapt sensory immersion into the ritualized power of faith and how it shapes the courses of people's lives. From North to South and East to West, the documentary wraps us in the cloud of incense smoke as it explores Buddhist rites, animist rituals, shamanistic divinations, processions of flagellants, and guru monks' vibrant and eccentric blessing ceremonies, and along the way investigates the fine line that separates devotion from superstition and transcendence from decadence. Farmers, villagers, monks, mediums, temple hustlers and devotees of all stripes make up this honest anthropological portrait of Thailand's at its most faithful and hallucinatory.



Director's Note

In my previously-concluded ‘rice trilogy’, I paid homage to our country’s most basic and noble profession: the farmers. Theirs is a life filled with simple joy, but also with immense hardship. Farmers and villagers around the country live hand to mouth, perpetually in debt and with hardly any prospect of a better future for their children. Yet one thing poor people everywhere never cease to do – even those who are not strictly Buddhist or even religious – is to pray to holy spirits and make donation to their local temples and shrines, for a glimpse of a brighter life. Or more specifically and as is often the case, a lucky lottery number at the next round. This is especially telling because for poor Thai people, the only possible way for them to gain better wealth is not through working hard and saving up, but only by winning the lottery. It is a bittersweet portrait at the injustice of the way a nation is treating its people.

Spiritualities and animism make up an integral part in Thailand’s culture of worship, where countless inanimate objects can become associated with supernatural powers, through religious texts, folklores, urban tales and even just from pure word of mouth – from Buddha statues to holy relics, amulets, figurines, sacred objects, miracle sites, historical or mythical figures, past kings and queens, legendary monks, divine animals, spiritual mediums, haunted buildings, sculptures, natural attractions, rare plants or even unusually-shaped rocks.

This is one of the subjects that most international visitors have always found relentlessly fascinating about Thailand, for many reasons. And for locals, it has simply become a part of everyday life. A very usual sight that could be easily found all over the country is its place of spiritual worship, easily distinguishable by the multicolored charmeuse tied around the nearest poles, the flowers garlands and candles laid out in front of a small altar, and rows of red soda bottles as offerings.

Also, in almost every Thai countryside village, it is always usual to find a colorful worship ceremony of local spirits, some are set up in an especially elaborate way and require huge budget and manpower to create a real spectacle that also became major touristic draw. But in a way, it is also a device designed for the farmers to be occupied during their free months from harvesting season.

It is for these reasons that I am interested to make this film. While I am not personally a believer, several people around me are, including those whom I am very close with, to my astonishment. I do not really intend to make a political film, even though admittedly politics is inescapable from everyday lives in Thailand nowadays, but while the project is on one level a criticism at the way our country is heading, it is also a celebration of the people's way of life, of the way people yearn to seek their ephemeral joy, in respite from everyday hardship, into what they believe in. Even if for just an ephemeral moment.

The intention of the project WORSHIP is to explore – in a mix between documentary and fiction – the culture of spiritual worship in contemporary Thai society. A colorful, vibrant and relentlessly fascinating aspect of Thailand, albeit one with also a dark tinge of melancholy and secrets.

Also, as the country is right now facing one of the most uncertain and pivotal periods in its recent history, it seems to be more in need of protective spirits than ever.





Director's Biography

Uruphong Raksasad

Born in 1977, Uruphong Raksasad grew up in a small rice-farming village of Terng, in the far suburb of Chiang Rai, north of Thailand. He studied filmmaking in Bangkok at Thammasat University. The majority of his films revolve around the lives and hardships of Thai farmers and villagers, who form the backbone of the country's agricultural industry and amidst the country's recent vast economic, social and political transformations. His works often explore the boundary between fictions and documentaries, and are especially known for their striking cinematography. He currently lives in Bangkok and teaches at Thammasat's Film Department. His best-known work is his second feature film, AGRARIAN UTOPIA (2009) which screened at over 100 film festivals worldwide and received 11 international awards. His most recent feature film is THE SONGS OF RICE (2014), the final part of his "Rice Trilogy".

Filmography

Features

2014

THE SONGS OF RICE

75 minutes

Festivals:

Rotterdam, Singapore, Taipei, Jogja, Cine-Totoo, DMZ Docs

Awards:

- FIPRESCI Award, International Film festival Rotterdam
- Best Documentary & Best Cinematography, Thai National Film Awards

2009

AGRARIAN UTOPIA

122 minutes

Festivals:

Rotterdam, Hong Kong, Singapore, Jeonju, Munich, Brisbane, Vancouver, Viennale, Yamagata, Mumbai, Bangkok, CPH:-DOX, Mar Del Plata, Taipei Golden Horse, Toronto Reel Asian, Bratislava, Festival des 3 Continents, Kerala, Pune, Fajr, If Istanbul, MoMA Documentary Fortnight, San Francisco, Robert Flaherty Film Seminar, Wisconsin, Minneapolis/St.Paul, San Diego, Dallas, Flahertiana, Five Flavours Warsaw...

Awards:

- NETPAC Special Mention Award, 38th International Film Festival Rotterdam
- NETPAC Award, 18th Brisbane International Film Festival
- UNESCO Award for Outstanding Contribution to the Promotion and Preservation of Cultural Diversity through Film, Asia Pacific Screen awards
- Best Film, 2010 If Istanbul
- Best Narrative Film, 13th Toronto Reel Asian International Film Festival
- Golden Hanoman & NETPAC Awards, 4th Jogja-NETPAC Asia Pacific Film Festival
- Special Mention Award, 11th Barcelona Asian Film Festival
- Special Jury Award, 2010 Millenium International Documentary Film Festival, Brussels
- Best Film, 2010 Asian Hot Shots Berlin Festival
- Grand Prize, 19th Earth Vision Tokyo Film Festival
- Best Director & Best Cinematography, Thailand National Film Awards



2005

STORIES FROM THE NORTH
88 minutes

Festivals:
Rotterdam, Jeonju, Viennale, Vancouver, Torino, Festival des 3 Continents, Taipei, Hong Kong, San Francisco, Lyon, Bangkok, Spokane

Awards:
- JJ*Star Award for Digital Film, Jeonju International Film Festival
- Public Awards, Festival des 3 Continents
- Special Mention Jury Award, Taiwan International Film Festival

Shorts

2017

CITIZEN BOONMA
29 minutes
- R.D. Pestonji Award for Best Film, Thai Short Film and Video Festival

2011

VANISHING WOMAN
33 minutes, co-directed with Jesper Just
- Part of Dox:Lab initiative by CPH:DOX Film Festival, Denmark

2010

DAD’S PICTURE
8 minutes
- In Competition, Clermont-Ferrand International Short Film Festival

2005

THE LONGEST DAY
13 minutes
- Tampere Short Film Festival

MARCH OF TIME
13 minutes
- Tampere Short Film Festival

Cinematographer 2016

WANDERING (Director: Boonsong Nakphoo, 121 minutes)
- Best Cinematography, Thai National Film Awards

Shooting Locations



Kam Chanod Forest Udon thani

A forest island in the middle of a northeastern lake which is believed to be haunted by the spirits of a mythical giant underwater serpent. Villagers believed that the lake is a gateway to the underworld. A local shrine was built and has become popular with visitors praying for good fortune. Another favorite ritual is to rub on the giant gongs, the traditional music instrument, to send the prayers to be heard in heaven.



'Brutal' Naga Ordainment Chaiyaphum

A local ordainment ceremony in a Thai northeastern town where young men who are to become Naga, a first step of ordainment before monkhood, are put to an endurance test. They are carried in a palanquin and marched around the temple, where the palanquin is to be violently shaken around in a dangerous and 'brutal' manner. Nagas who fall down to the ground will not be allowed to become monks.



Vegetarian Festival Phuket

An offshoot of the Chinese Nine Emperor Gods Festival, the southern Thai island of Phuket holds a popular celebration every October to cleanse the bodies and minds. The participants – known as ‘mediums’, or ‘servers of Gods’ – will dress in white and abstain from eating meat for 9 days. Believing in the purity of their soul, the mediums pierce sharp metal objects on various parts of their bodies to show how they are becoming invincible to pain. The piercings have become very elaborate in recent years, with about 10-20 people hospitalized from injuries annually.



Khao Khitchakut Chantaburi

A mountain in eastern Thailand near the Cambodian border with an unnaturally large piece of rock is perched on top, creating an optical illusion that the rock is floating in the air, and believes to contain a Buddha’s footprint. It has become a popular pilgrimage site opened for two months a year and welcome countrywide visitors, who travel up the dangerously steep hills by pick-up trucks 24 hours a day, to pray for miracles.



Wat Saeng Kaew Phothiyan Chiang Rai

A northern Buddhist temple whose abbot’s unorthodox teaching style, bordering on the occults and focusing on giving donations, attracts a large and devout following. The temple’s ornate and undocumented wealth has also been a subject of national controversy after the image of the abbot wearing 24K golden crown circulated widely on Thai social media.



‘Giant’ Sermon Chant Father Dang’s Body, Suanpai Monastery Phetchabun

A forest monastery where the holy, non-decomposing, body of a local monk who passed away 30 years ago is kept in a glass casket. The body used to be subject of dispute between different temples belonging to the monk’s sons, and was stolen twice. The monastery also holds the annual ‘giant’ sermon chant to wade off evil spirits, where participants usually claim to have a vision of the divinity or ‘possessed’ by spiritual forces.





Production Company

Diversion is a Thai production and sales company, working closely with artistic collective Mit Out Sound Films and founded in 2014 by Mai Meksawan. The company's first title is Jakrawal Nilthamrong's VANISHING POINT (winner of Tiger Award, 2015 International Film Festival Rotterdam). Its recent success includes MANTA RAY (dir. Phuttiaphong Aroonpheng), winner of Orizzonti Award for Best Film at 2018 Venice Film Festival; COME HERE (dir. Anocha Suwichakornpong), 2021 Berlinale Forum; and ANATOMY OF TIME (dir. Jakrawal Nilthamrong), 2021 Venice Orizzonti. The company's upcoming projects include Patiparn Boontarig's SOLIDS BY THE SEASHORE and Phuttiaphong Aroonpheng's MORRISON.

Filmography

2020 ANATOMY OF TIME

Director: Jakrawal Nilthamrong

Coproduction: Damned Films (France), Sluizer Film Productions (Netherlands), M'GO Films (Singapore)

Festivals: Venice Orizzonti, Hamburg, Busan, Tokyo FILMeX, Taipei Golden Horse, Singapore, Rotterdam...

COME HERE

Director: Anocha Suwichakornpong

Festivals: Berlinale Forum, Hong Kong, Jeonju, Taipei, Las Palmas, New Horizons, Karlovy Vary, Chicago, Sydney, Montreal Nouveau Cinéma...

2018 MANTA RAY

Director: Phuttiaphong Aroonpheng

Festivals: Venice, Toronto, San Sebastián, Busan, Vancouver, Pingyao, Mumbai, Thessaloniki, 3 Continents, Films from the South, Stockholm, Tokyo Filmex, Marrakech, Macau, Cairo, Minsk, Singapore...

Awards: Orizzonti Award for Best Film, 75th Venice Film Festival

2015 VANISHING POINT

Director: Jakrawal Nilthamrong

Festivals: Rotterdam, Hong Kong, Singapore, Taipei, New Horizons, Moscow, Tokyo FILMeX, Malatya...

Awards: Hivos Tiger Award, 2015 International Film Festival Rotterdam

Cast & Crew

Director, Cinematographer, Editor

Uruphong Raksasad

Producer

Mai Meksawan

Sound

Teekhadet Vacharadhanin

Nopawat Likitwong

Music

Terdsak Janpan

With appearance by

Adun Boonmano

Pajjai Chiamjai

Sirima Chiamjai

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