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Title: Projecting Films to Spirits: on shrines as conjunctural space and the ritual economy of outdoor cinema in Bangkok

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Abstract: This article is concerned with the ritually embedded character of open-air cinema in Thailand. It draws on ethnographic fieldwork in Isaan and Bangkok and interviews with different actors within the ritual economy of open-air cinema at shrines and temples. Outlining different ritual actions through which cinema is sponsored, it then focuses on a particular practice: pledging film screenings to spirits and deities at shrines. Looking at a specific site, a Daoist shrine in suburban Bangkok, it foregrounds the implications of a disjuncture between the personal nature of the spiritual transaction and the public character of its fulfillment. It considers these implications through an analysis of the spatial conjuncture formed when a projector casts its light in a particular setting, which is then appropriated by those customarily excluded by the institution of cinema in its commodity form.

Keywords: outdoor cinema, conjunctural space, ritual economy, spirit shrines, sacred sites, Bangkok

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A small crowd of thirty to forty people gather in a narrow strip in-between two buildings beside a highway in suburban Bangkok. Predominantly men, they have come alone, grimy from building sites or days spent hawking on the streets. They sit in silence, wearily light cigarettes, and recline on the ground. Arrayed around them on plastic sheets and mats are

bundles of clothes, plastic bags, and the detritus of street food. The space is illuminated by a large light-reflecting screen at the furthest end opposite the road, to which the bodies of those assembled are casually oriented, and by the red glow of the Chinese lanterns that hang from the eaves of the shrine flanking one side. A cone of light bisects the space, its source a film projector positioned on the pavement. Adjacent to the projector a row of motorcycle taxi drivers relax in between jobs, and food vendors lean forwards on their vehicles watching the unfolding action. Pedestrians on route to the 7/11 shop a few buildings down the road pause, momentarily distracted by the images on the screen; they look down, check their phones and move on. At midnight the projector is switched off and stowed away, the screen and the space around it falls dark and the small crowd gradually disperses, leaving few traces of the site's functioning as an improvised outdoor cinema. Tomorrow morning, the site of this makeshift cinema will again be a car park.

Scenes such as this, involving the regular but ephemeral after-dark appearance of cinema as a temporary spatial intervention, take place at a number of shrines dedicated to powerful spirits and deities around Bangkok. They also occur elsewhere in Thailand, notably in the northeastern province of Isaan. This article is concerned with this geographically dispersed, improvised cinema, a makeshift cinema without walls, which is institutionally embedded in an array of ritual practices and exchanges, occurring in places and before, if not for, publics that the commercial business of cinema has abandoned as it seeks larger profit margins. Outlining the ritual practices through which outdoor cinema is sponsored in Thailand, the article makes a distinction between film screenings provided in the context of communal rites and festivities, and those which take place at shrines and temples in fulfilment of an individual devotee's pledge to a spirit or deity. While the former can be considered a form of gift, intended to address a known community of invited guests, the latter is a personal transaction, a kind of bribe or payment, addressed to a powerful spiritual personage in return for their favor.

The article focuses on a specific site, a Daoist shrine in Bang Wa in suburban Bangkok, where film screenings are regularly offered to the deities which inhabit the shrine (figure 1). It suggests that when personal acts of devotion to the shrine's deities result in film screenings, in contrast to a more discrete form of offering, these have wider, temporarily transformative consequences for the site as a whole, providing the basis for an ephemeral practice of public space. The article makes an argument for addressing the space that is

created at that moment, as uninvited bodies gather on the street beside the shrine. As a conjunctural space (Chattophadyay 2012), a contingent space brought precariously into being through the presence of light projected across space, within a specific spatial configuration of walls, surfaces and roads where bodies mingle, this shrine screening is shaped by other needs than those that sponsored it. Central among these, I argue, are the need for repose among strangers in a socially inclusive public space, the need for a breathing space that is relatively un surveilled that affords an uncoerced occupation of the street by those who are instrumentally dependent on it, living and working in its proximity day after day. Fieldwork was conducted between December 2014 and May 2015 and involved following projectionists on the job and observing screenings at shrines and temples in Khon Kaen, Nong Kai, and Bangkok. Working with a team of Thai researchers and translators, my analysis here is based on ten in-depth interviews we conducted with individuals directly involved in the ritual economy of outdoor cinema as projectionists, shrine attendants, film distributors and hosts. We supplemented these interviews with informal conversations with individuals at the various sites.



Figure 1. *The Expendables* screened next to the Tiger God shrine on Petkasem Road, Bangkok. Photo by Watcharapol Saisongkhroh.

Screens and the production of social space beyond the cinema

The early history of projected moving images involved itinerant exhibitors adapting public venues used for other civic, educational, religious, or commercial entertainment purposes. Viewing moving images projected onto a screen as opposed to a rival apparatus such as the individual ‘peep-hole’ inevitably had spatial and architectural ramifications. Friedberg writes that venues used for the projection of light images “had definitive requirements: (1) They must be dark enough to allow for the projection of light from a mechanism at one end to a screen surface at the other; (2) they must have room to accommodate a collective number of immobile (preferably seated) viewers; and (3) the view of the screen must be clear of pillars and posts” (Friedberg 2006, 164). In Friedberg’s account, projection venues require darkness, space for a group of people to assemble and unobstructed sightlines towards a projection surface to which people are physically oriented, ideally seated. But beyond these minimal requirements, she writes, the projected image “demanded its own distinct architecture,” a demand that was met only with the consolidation of a profitable and regulated exhibition industry. In this teleological account there is a necessary relationship between cinema and the commodity form; cinema *demanded* a space of its own that only industrial commercial logics could provide. As the industrial model of film exhibition became established it left its mark on urban landscapes around the world, in the form of a global network of purpose-built cinema theatres, as a more or less standardised and durable architecture of spectatorship, albeit one which in actuality was shaped by locally contingent social practices and the socio-spatial hierarchies in which these were embedded (see Hansen 1994; Larkin 2008; Mazzarella 2013).

But what of the history of projection apparatus in adapted or makeshift spaces? The cinema theatre, a space of commodified leisure temporarily accessed for the price of a ticket, is only one part of the story of cinema, albeit an iconic one that tends to eclipse the diversity of presentation beyond its walls.¹ Brian Larkin’s account of the development of cinema in colonial Nigeria focuses in part on the itinerant film units organised by the state which travelled around the country temporarily setting up their projectors and screens for free, open air performances next to municipal buildings. Mobile cinema as an institution offering mixed programmes of instructional short films for the purposes of political education of the citizen constitutes an alternative genealogy of the emergence of cinema in the region. Larkin makes a case for the relevance of this form of political mobile cinema as an example of a much wider phenomenon of film practices in societies where “the power and role of commodity

culture is one element among several making up the social configuration of society” (2008, 81). In colonial Nigeria, the commodity form “articulated with colonial rule, Islamic and Christian religious orders and sustained animist practice” (Larkin 2008, 81).

The itinerant performances discussed here occur within a social formation in which religious discourse and practice from a diverse and dynamic constellation of religious traditions constitute the ground on which cinema not only emerged in the past but continues to operate. Larkin argues that cinema in Nigeria followed two distinct trajectories, each with different modes of distribution and exhibition: cinema theatres showed entertainment films on a commercial basis, in contrast to the state sponsored mobile cinema circuits established under colonial rule which engaged in political instruction. Much effort was made by promoters of the latter to distinguish this cinema practice from the former. In contrast, the ritual economy of outdoor screenings in Thailand points to a more closely entwined relationship between industrial-commercial cinema institutions and those of itinerant makeshift cinema. In terms of the films that are shown, the performances are, with minor additions discussed below, made up of popular commercially produced genre films from the United States, China and Thailand. Sourced from commercial distributors, and allowing for the temporal lag of secondary distribution circuit, the films are indistinguishable from those found in the cinema theatres.

The Ritual Economy of Outdoor Cinema

Permanent purpose-built cinema theatres have been disappearing from residential neighbourhoods across Bangkok for at least a decade and a half. The cinema screen as an apparatus institutionally embedded within commercial entertainment has been in long-term retreat from street-accessed, single screen, single purpose buildings into the multiplexes of large-scale shopping malls. Major public infrastructure projects, such as the extension of Bangkok’s mass transit system, lead to rocketing urban land values that put pressure on existing businesses and uses of urban space. Added to which competition from successive waves of informal distribution formats have contributed to the erasure of a particular built form, the urban cinema theatre.² A remorseless trend towards market concentration in the Thai cinema exhibition business also accounts for the shrinking geography of commercial screens. A technological shift in the standardised industry distribution format from film prints to digital projection has further strengthened the position of the dominant commercial exhibitors, with the prohibitive costs of conversion functioning as an inducement to exit for

small-scale and economically marginal cinema operators. The migration of screens into enclosed, privately owned and managed spaces of consumption has been accompanied by a promotional rhetoric addressed to an affluent bourgeois public which trumpets the luxurious, ‘world class’ character of the auditorium, and the sumptuousness of seating and facilities (Ingawanij 2007). Swathes of the urban population living on low incomes, precariously employed or part of the informal economy are, in effect, excluded.

Commercial cinema is distinctive as a cultural commodity insofar as access is granted on the basis of payment from individual audience members to the exhibitor. Payment buys access to look and listen to a performance of fixed duration without the exchange of a material object.³ Within the formal industry film is a commodity twice over. The film is a commodity protected from unlicensed reproduction by copyright, but each performance of a film is also a commodity with access sold to the audience (Garnham 1990). By contrast outdoor screenings in Thailand are sponsored rather than sold to an audience, as such they tend to be characterised by free and unrestricted access to the performance by audiences. While a more complete history of the emergence of itinerant and open-air cinema in postwar Thailand remains to be researched, what needs to be sketched in broad outline are the distinct infrastructures of sponsorship that have driven its development.⁴ Itinerant cinema circuits developed in tandem with the expanding road network during Thailand’s ‘American-era’ (Anderson 1985), its postwar period as a cold war client state of the US. As such the first framework for sponsorship is linked to the function of persuasion; film shows were not sold to their audiences but sponsored by political and commercial agencies. Alongside its military presence in Thailand, the US operated cultural programmes which used mobile cinema units to disseminate anti-communist propaganda. Itinerant cinema, like the US-funded roads on which it travelled, was a manifestation of the extraordinary reach of the United States bureaucratic administrative power which went hand in hand with its overwhelming strategic military presence. To domestic manufacturers of new commodities like branded food goods and modern pharmaceuticals, mobile cinema units provided one of the few means to reach dispersed rural communities and expand their markets in the postwar years. A projectionist we got to know from the northeastern city of Udon Thani told us he worked for the mobile projection unit of a fish sauce company. A convoy of two vehicles would make its way from village to village, one carrying the projection equipment, the other bottles of fish sauce to sell. The fish sauce company operated its mobile promotion units until the late 1990s when it

went out of business, at which point he brought the projection equipment off them and set up his own mobile unit.

A second context for the sponsorship of itinerant cinema in Thailand during this period, and one which persists today, are the numerous festivals centred on the Buddhist temple, as a sacred and communal focus. These are occasions in which ritual merit making and festive merry-making and entertainment are intertwined, and in which performers of music and dance were traditionally hired by temple committees or by wealthy individuals seeking an opportunity to exercise their generosity and gain merit by gifting performed entertainment. From at least the 1960s onwards film shows appear to have been readily incorporated into the space time of collective annual rituals and festivities. As performances, film shows, both in the cinema theatre and outdoors in the various contexts of itinerant cinema, bore a close kinship during this period with established modes of popular theatrical performance. What May Ingawaniij calls the plebeian dispositive of postwar cinema in Thailand involved live voice performers mediating, or ‘versioning’ the onscreen images (Ingawaniij 2012, 100-101). Both popular cinema and vernacular theatrical entertainments such as *Likay* or *Mor Lam* could be said to belong to a common ‘cultural paradigm’ whose ‘taproot’ was deft oral improvisation which directly addressed the assembled audience and invited their response (Ingawaniij 2012, 108).⁵ Although the dispositive of itinerant cinema no longer incorporates live voice performance, the practice long since replaced by dubbed soundtracks, film shows occupy a place within an ecology of festive entertainment prominently featuring live performance attractions. Projectionists and sponsors reported that the advantage of film screenings was not only that they were substantially cheaper than *Mor Lam* but also that they were deemed less likely to provoke outbreaks of fighting among drunk youth in the audience.

Film shows are also sponsored by families on the occasion of funerals and ordinations into the monkhood. Both events involve ritual sequences mediated by monks intertwined with communal feasting and celebration and provide opportunities for a donor to acquire merit through the provision of entertainment to guests. Unlike the centrally organised networks of mobile film units that functioned under the rubric of persuasion, the itinerant operators who make their living supported by the infrastructure of festive Buddhism are autonomous small-scale entrepreneurs, dealing directly with the sponsoring hosts. This aspect of their work is seasonal, peaking in March and April during the traditional period of annual harvest rituals and the new year water festival and tailing off with the onset of the rainy season.

The third form of sponsorship providing an income for outdoor cinema businesses and projectionists are film shows initiated and paid for by a 'host' (in Thai, *jao paap*) and offered to a guardian spirit or deity at a shrine. The offering may be made in fulfilment of a pledge made on a previous occasion or a form of inducement to bring prosperity and good fortune. In this case the film show is itself a medium of exchange and ritual action; it is the vehicle through which a ritual transaction is conducted with a powerful supernatural being linked to a specific sacred place where the screening occurs. In his classic ethnography of Thai Buddhism in a northeastern village, Stanley Tambiah (1970) made a distinction between offerings to the Buddha statue (or monks) made in the temple and offerings to guardian spirits and other supernatural personages made at shrines, regarding these as distinct, coexistent and complimentary modes of ritual action indicative of contrasting approaches to the supernatural. What was at stake was a difference in the form of ritual transaction and the expectations of reciprocity between humans and the supernatural realm. Offerings to the Buddha were rationalised as 'free gifts' made to honour and pay respects. Reciprocity existed in the expectation of a transfer of merit (and therefore prestige) as a consequence of making an offering.⁶ By contrast offerings to other supernatural beings such as guardian spirits were typically made in the form of a bargain or bribe involving two ritual sequences. The first when a devotee makes a request for supernatural intervention to achieve specific ends, striking a bargain in which they agree to pay a fee or bribe on condition the guardian spirit uses its powers as requested. The second occurs when the pledge is fulfilled and the 'fee' paid by the host. The Thai word *bon* is used both to describe this form of ritual action and for bribing a worldly official. The relationship between humans and supernatural personages is therefore conceived as one of power, instrumental interests, and potential manipulation (Tambiah 1970, 342).

Itinerant projectionists are heavily dependent on *gae bon*, bargaining with the spirits, for their livelihoods. Interviews with projectionists yielded numerous examples of devotees sponsoring film shows after making requests for supernatural intervention to help divulge winning lottery numbers, find a romantic partner, and conceive a child, although a projectionist may not know the reason they have been contracted. A projectionist operating at the Khon Kaen city pillar shrine who revealed that nearly three quarters of his business comes from the fulfilment of pledges made to spirits told us about a regular client, a wealthy merchant who had recently asked the shrine's guardian spirit for help making 300,000 baht

(\$9000) profit in his wholesale grocery business (figure 2).⁷ When he had successfully made the amount requested he fulfilled his pledge by sponsoring a 5000 baht (\$150) film screening and offering a range of other typical devotional goods including a pig's head and fruit. On a more modest scale, the same projectionist who also operated regularly at a site adjacent to a shrine on Khon Kaen University campus, was regularly contracted by students seeking the guardian spirit's help passing their exams who, for the still considerable sum of TB2000, could book two films, an evening's entertainment (figure 3).



Figure 2. A film from the *Twilight* trilogy projected from a mobile projection lorry at the Khon Kaen City Pillar shrine, Khon Kaen. Photo by the author.



Figure 3. The screen and mobile projection van set up in a clearing opposite the shrine to a guardian spirit on the Khon Kaen university campus. Photo by Tanatchai Bandasak

In recent decades, coinciding with Thailand's turbulent incorporation within the global market economy, there has been an efflorescence of creative ritual practice characterised by the instrumental pursuit of wealth and material good fortune through speculative, bargaining transactions with a diverse constellation of supernatural personages. These practices have been defined by Jackson (1999), drawing on the work of Roberts, as "prosperity religions:" forms of popular spirituality and ritual action focused on wealth acquisition rather than other worldly salvation. A common feature of Thailand's prosperity religions is "personality-based devotionalism," oriented towards a multitude of spiritually powerful personalities including animist 'place' spirits, Daoist and Brahmanic figures, living and historic Buddhist monks and royal personages. As Jackson writes "spiritual practice centres on establishing a strong personal relationship between the devotee and that personality" (1999, 252). Devotional practices focused on wealth and prosperity have historic precedents in Thailand where popular religion has been shaped by waves of migration which have fostered a creatively syncretic, improvisational approach to ritual practice. Wealth enhancing rituals feature

prominently in the religious practices of the southern Chinese who migrated to Thailand and are also found within Theravada Buddhism, exemplified by the practice of monks blessing material objects and spaces associated with commercial enterprises. Nevertheless, Jackson argues that conditions of rapid economic change during the 1990s transformed prosperity religion from a minor to a dominant mode of religious expression, impacting on Buddhist practice in the process (1999: 264).

Two aspects of these transactions with spirits oriented to securing prosperity, fertility and fortune, which provide a material basis for outdoor cinema, bear reiterating. Firstly, these ritual actions are personal appeals and negotiations that do not require the guidance of a religious intermediary. They do, however, depend on market agents supplying votive goods and services at diverse prices. Secondly, these transactions are site specific. Pledges are made and fulfilled at sites linked to the presence of a specific supernatural personage. Below, I explore the way the personal negotiations of those striking bargains with the spirits acquire public significance in relation to the sites where they are fulfilled. Screenings are offered to spirits; these are occasions that neither invite nor exclude a human audience. Whether or not an audience gathers, and the significance that might be attached to such an assembly, is a function of the contingencies of a specific site. Respecting the logic of site-specificity manifested in this practice, the following focuses on a single field site in Bangkok, a shrine with a long history of fulfilling pledges with film shows.

Making Cinema at the Tiger Shrine in Thonburi

The Tiger God Shrine in Bang Wa, Thonburi, is a Daoist shrine located adjacent to a major highway, Petkasem Road, running from Bangkok to the south of the country. The highway was constructed in the late 1950s under Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat as part of a major program of US supported infrastructure development and modernisation. The legend of the shrine's origins, reproduced on a display board at the site, goes that careless road workers disturbed and paved over a small dirt shrine under a monkey apple tree. When the road was completed the area where the shrine had previously stood became a notorious site of traffic accidents and fatalities.⁸ A local man, Prasert Thamma, was moved to rebuild the shrine to host a powerful deity, a warrior governor from the Thonburi period (1767-82), who appeared to him several times in a dream. A statue of the warrior governor is now situated at the shrine along with a statue of the Daoist warrior emperor Xuan Tiang Shang Di (referred to as the Supreme Emperor of the Dark Heavens), portrayed with sword in one hand, the other giving

a blessing. Shrines to the emperor are referred to as Tiger God shrines after a legend naming the tiger as the warrior emperor's assistant. Over the years the shrine has grown thanks to donations from, among others a powerful Sino-Thai politician and former PM and his wife.⁹

How and when film screenings became established as a popular pledge to offer the two spiritual personalities associated with the Tiger God Shrine is difficult to establish. The projectionist, Suthep Fuengkajorn, referred to by his nickname Rom, told us that he had been working at the shrine since 1985 (figure 4). Before he arrived films were screened at the shrine by mobile operators with projectors mounted on vehicles but they could not meet the demand for films, risking the shrine's reputation. The owner of the shrine then took the step of investing in three 35 mm projectors used on rotation to ensure devotees a regular service. Although the shrine had once had an opera stage, over time this had been lost due to lack of space. Aside from being a fraction of the cost of staging Chinese opera (approximately 9000 baht (\$265) for one film show compared to 100,000 baht (\$3000) for an opera, according to Rom), film screenings had the advantage of being an ephemeral occupation of space requiring no permanent structure. Who is pledging film screenings at the Tiger shrine? In his ethnography of Bangkok's suburban nature spirit shrines, Johnson (2012) provides a profile of devotees as predominantly made up of migrant workers from Northeast Thailand and Laos: taxi drivers, vendors, construction workers and labourers in the informal economy. Buffeted by the uncertainties of precarious employment, he argues, these devotees seek to exercise a form of control over their lives by negotiating with capricious nature spirits (2012, 776). However, for precariously employed devotees the 9000 baht (\$265) price of an evening's film show could easily be a month's wages, well beyond their means. Devotees give according to their means and shrine vendors are usually found selling food items associated with the deity or spirit of the shrine. Film screenings are more likely to be offered by relatively prosperous, middle-class devotees whose spiritual bargains are business-focused. Among the more extravagant offerings mentioned by Rom was eight days of film screenings pledged by a wealthy real estate agent.



Figure 4. Suthep Fuengkajorn (Rom) preparing for a screening at the Tiger God shrine. Photo by Watcharapol Saisongkhroh.

Rom's breakdown of where the sponsor's 9000 baht goes provides a sense of how the shrine's regular pledge screenings operate in the grey zone between formal and informal modes of film distribution and exhibition. Between 1500 to 3000 baht (\$45 - \$90) is allocated for the costs of renting three film titles, an evening's offering. Rom deals with a film distributor who prices their catalogue of film prints according to the age of the film from the date of release, recent films being more expensive. Unlike screenings at funerals or ordinations hosts rarely choose the films that comprise an evening's offering, leaving the selection of films to Rom to make based on the fixed price. By comparison, outdoor film projection businesses in the northeast are less reliably served by film distributors and where formal distribution structures break down, informality operates in the form of illegal downloading of digital files. Against expectations, perhaps, the transition from celluloid to digital projection has occurred in territories furthest from the metropolis, albeit on an entirely informal and illegal basis. Nevertheless, in the absence of a formal license, permission to screen on the land adjacent to the shrine has to be negotiated informally with a cut from the screening fee for this purpose. As Rom explained: "We have to give police officers who visit

the shrine 200 baht (\$6) each. Sometimes the municipal police come to us asking for money and food. There is also a large amount paid to the superintendent every month.” Although it is left somewhat ambiguous in the projectionist’s account, it would seem that this is an instance of what Lobato refers to as the production of informality through an absence of regulation, one that provides opportunities for individuals at various tiers of law enforcement agencies to profit (Lobato 2012, 42).

Ambiguities of address and the conjunctural space of the shrine

Projection technology, both digital and analogue, throws light across physical space from a source to a reflective surface. As Matthew Buckingham puts it, “the focal length separating apparatus from projection measures out a space for the viewer” (cited in Turvey et al 2003, 79). He adds, “even when you are alone, there is a social implication that doesn’t exist...in other types of image display” (2003, 79). Pledging a film screening to a spirit or deity is for the most part a personal rather than collective transaction with a spiritual personality initiated by an individual devotee. But if and when the pledge needs to be fulfilled as a result of material assistance from the spiritual realm, the screening takes place not in private but either on the grounds or adjacent to shrines, spaces which can be accessed freely and from which no-one is excluded. Although the pledge is addressed to a spirit in an act of prayer conducted at the shrine, its fulfilment using projection technology measures out a space for the viewer and has a social implication. An ambiguity or semantic dissonance arises from the fact that a personal transaction is fulfilled using a media apparatus in which the production of social space is a key affordance and occurs in an urban space to which people are (temporarily) given free access. Such a dissonance does not occur when the object offered to the spirit is food, drink or a miniature animal model placed at an altar, which even when it occurs in a public space preserves the character of a personal transaction between a devotee and a spirit (figure 5).



Figure 5. Throwing light across physical space from a source to a reflective source: A screening at the Tiger God shrine. Photo by Watcharapol Saisongkhroh.

In keeping with the transactional character of these screenings, the hosts who sponsor them rarely attend in person, their obligations are fulfilled when they visit the shrine to pray on the day of the screening. Screenings are not overdetermined by a host's need to witness or be co-present with a supernatural being. As Rom puts it, "the hosts have made their vows, now they need our (the projectionist's) help to fulfil them." Every film screening at the Tiger God shrine begins with a short film which depicts the eight immortals of Daoist mythology descending to earth from the heavens (figure 6). If there is time at the end of the evening this *Ba Xian* film is repeated. This practice appears to be widespread as a defining feature of the screening as spirit offering. A projectionist in the central province of Samut Prakan told us that a host would be justified in withholding payment if they discovered that the *Ba Xian* film had not been shown. Just as the host very seldom selects the films to be shown, so they do not seek to assert their influence or symbolic ownership over the screening itself. The host is not usually a visible presence at the screening, and apart from the *Ba Xian* short film there are no other means by which a screening is marked out as an act of pledge fulfilment. The actual screening is not explicitly stamped by its origins in a personal pledge and audiences who gather at the site are neither aware of who has sponsored the occasion nor their reason for doing so. They are not so much active participants in a ritual action as incidental

beneficiaries. As such these screenings become malleable, open to being experienced in ways disconnected from their originating intention. Understanding how these shrine screenings are experienced requires that we consider the specific site on which they occur and how it is transformed by the presence of a projector, screen, and audience.



Figure 6. The *Ba Xian* short depicting the eight immortals of Daoist mythology descending from heaven to earth screened at the Tiger God shrine. Photo by Watcharapol Saisongkhroh.

During the day the site where the Tiger God shrine film screenings take place is a tarmac vacant lot off the main road. Markings indicate its regular daytime use as a car park when access is regulated by a moveable barrier (figure 7). At the far end of the site, a scaffolding frame six meters high topped by a row of flags indicates the orientation of the screen. At around 4pm on the day of a screening Rom sets up the projector, moving it from the shrine where it is stored, to a position on the pavement to one side of the entrance to the site, opposite the screen. When the projector is started at dusk the street becomes a makeshift cinema but its former function is still visible in the parked cars bunched underneath the screen.



Figure 7. The screening space next to the Tiger God Shrine during the day. Photo by Yanin Pongsuwan.

The screening remakes an everyday urban setting, exemplifying the process by which the street becomes what Chattophadyay calls a “conjunctural construct” (2012, 120), which is to say a space not permanently determined by the hard contours of its physical infrastructure, its configuration of roads, sidewalks and buildings, but one which reveals itself through the contingencies of a practice. Following de Certeau (1984), who focused on the indeterminacy of walking as a practice in which space is altered from moment to moment, Chattophadyay urges us to see the street as a conjunctural space, a contingent space assembled out of disparate elements within a specific envelope of time. In her arresting example, the cricket match played at a street junction in Kolkata “lifts out a fragment of the city and imbues it with bodily affect” (2012, 119). She continues: “This spatial fragment of a neighbourhood is, however, not already in place – out there – to be occupied. It has to be actively constructed with minimal alteration of the physical attributes, a construction that dissolves itself after a short duration of a few hours. It belongs neither to the everyday nor to the exceptional” (2012, 119). The attention given here to the ephemeral alteration of urban space provides a useful frame through which to see street cinema as a space momentarily changed by the

projection of light and by the uninvited presence of viewers, their bodies attracted and oriented to the screen. The conjunctural space that the meeting point of street and shrine becomes when it is made into a cinema for an evening might best be contrasted with that of the architecturally bounded and purpose-built space of the cinema theatre.

The cinema theatre is a space apart and enclosed. As Casetti observes (2015), the purchase of a ticket to a cinema theatre marks the crossing of the threshold which is simultaneously economic, physical and symbolic, the departure from daily life and the reorientation of attention around the spectacle onscreen aided by the artificial condition of darkness. Fundamental to the 'classic' cinema experience, Casetti writes, was "leaving a customary territory and confronting an 'other' world" (2015, 142).¹⁰ The makeshift cinema that occurs at the Tiger God shrine entails no such journey across a threshold, no dramatic departure from the everyday, from the street, and no distinct spatial boundary. The space between the projector and the screen is continuous with the pavement and the road behind it and the projectionist could recall packed screenings in the heyday before the 1997 financial crash when workers from the local garment factories would be watching, crowded onto the traffic island in the middle of road and on the far side.

An important characteristic of a venue like a sporting arena or a cinema theatre, as Chattophadyay reminds us, is that of a circumscribed space which bears the hallmark of authority (2012, 97). Entering a venue subjects us to legal provisions, by-laws, regulations and more or less codified audience conventions that have as their objective the control and management of behavior. This is most starkly demonstrated in the case of commercial cinema theatres in Thailand in which audiences are compelled to stand for the duration of the royal anthem that precedes the main feature. Refusal to do so risks repercussions. Even representing this scene of royalist subjection remains taboo.¹¹ The venue as a bounded rule-bound space marked by authority can be contrasted with the contingent and informal condition of the semi-authorised screening in an openly accessed public space, where the street meets the shrine, a screening initiated by a pledge but not overtly shaped by that ritual act. No anthem is played at this site and the short *Ba Xian* film does not command any specific form of attention or respect.

Whereas venues provide uniform rows of raked seating directed at the screen or the performance, architecturally consolidating the distinction between acting and spectating, as

the screenings at the shrine are not intended for a human audience there are no seats. Seating offers comfort but it also, in a sense, disciplines and constrains the body, limiting movement and privileging unidirectional sightlines to the screen above other bodily interactions with the space and with others. Visitors who gather next to the shrine are free within the physical peculiarities of the setting to choose where to sit or lie, how close to sit to their neighbor and the posture and orientation of their body. The atmosphere is one of repose and relaxation, tired bodies sprawled out on the floor, heads propped up, or spread out on the steps leading up to the shrine. Some sit on their shoes or sandals, some on flattened packing boxes, others have brought threadbare mats. Amongst the thirty to forty people gathered, there are a number surrounded by bags that contain their belongings, markers of homelessness. Others appear to be construction workers and laborers, their clothes dusty and soiled from work. It is reasonable to speculate that in addition to the homeless the site attracts the inadequately housed, migrant laborers, mainly men, living in crowded rented accommodation, preferring to be outdoors for a little while longer and using the screen as an alibi to linger.

Screenings at the Tiger God shrine no longer draw the huge after work crowds that the projectionist could recall from the economic boom years twenty years ago. Where they used to be nightly events they now occur less frequently, perhaps ten a month, meaning a screening at the site is not guaranteed on any given evening. Cheap, widely available pirated distribution formats for domestic consumption, DVDs and VCDs and more recently illegal downloads mean that there are small screen alternatives to a screening in a public space for those who want to be entertained by the latest films but cannot or will not cross the threshold to the multiplex. The public that congregate on screening nights at the shrine is a subaltern public who share a proximity to the street, those who make their living on the street or who might find remaining on the street a more appealing option compared to the discomforts of home: motorcycle taxi drivers, migrant labourers, hawkers and food vendors, and the homeless.

Conclusion: The Screening as Breathing Space

Another way of thinking about the conjunctural construct of the shrine screening is in relation to contrasting and competing practices and conceptions of public space. Geographer Don Mitchell sketches out two sharply contrasting ways of seeing public space (1995). The first implies an amenity provided by an authority accessed by the public but conditional on authorised and orderly use. In the second definition, there is no such conditionality: public

space comes into being through free interaction and the absence of the kind of constraint or coercion that comes from an explicitly designated, legitimate use. As Mitchell notes, these diverging conceptions of public space correspond to the distinction Lefebvre makes between representations of space, “planned, controlled and ordered space,” and representational space, “appropriated, lived space, space in use” (Mitchell 1995, 115; Lefebvre 1991). Thai language terms relating to public space, including *satharana* and *luang*, lean decisively to the first of these definitions (see Koonphol 2001). *Satharana* is a word etymologically linked to what is ordinary or common but typically signifies an official construction of the public and is used to designate bureaucratically administered and state owned space. It is not a word in everyday use, although there have been attempts to rearticulate the term in relation to more civic conceptions of publicity. Similarly, *luang* is an intrinsically hierarchical term that designates what belongs to the ruler and is used as a root in terms for crown or state property.

The concept of conjunctural space when applied to the screening of a film at a shrine retunes our attention to the contingencies of public space as something made not given, ephemeral rather than permanent. It registers the desires, interests and conditions that coalesce to shape this practice. That a seemingly anachronistic form of cinema happens periodically at sites like the Tiger God shrine in the suburbs of Bangkok is, in part, a consequence of the relative autonomy of the sacred economy of shrines. Although they operate within a competitive sacred market place, shrines host spiritual personalities whose powers, if sufficiently well-established within the sacred economy, ultimately transcend a commercial calculus of profit and loss, and who are therefore relatively resistant to displacement by the pressures of commodification. This autonomy is fundamental to the origin stories of many such shrines. These are spaces that are *relatively* protected from the turbulent creative destruction that characterises urban space in a mega city like Bangkok.

Among the costlier items that might be used in transactions with powerful supernatural spirits and deities are films shown using moving image projection apparatus, technology that requires space for an image to be produced. Film screenings that are initiated through a personal transaction with a supernatural being possess the potentiality to make public space. Anyone can make pledges and strike bargains with the spirits, but only people with the resources to meet the price can offer a film screening. The screening itself, however, is underdetermined by the desires for material prosperity that set it in motion: it creates a fragment of space and time which can be animated by other desires and needs. No price is

attached to viewing the films because the event is not addressed to humans: the audience is not invited but, by virtue of happening at publicly accessible shrines, neither are they excluded, their presence is wholly incidental. The space momentarily illuminated at the Tiger God shrine is an interstitial space: it is neither wholly enclosed, set apart from the street, nor a simple thoroughfare, through which vehicles and pedestrians pass. Rather, it is a space with the potential to function as a site of informal assembly of bodies. Light from the projector temporarily provides the alibi for such a congregation.

Raymond Williams once wrote, "when the pressure of a system is great and is increasing, it matters to find a breathing-space, a fortunate distance, from the immediate and visible controls" (1973, 107). He was writing about a very different historical context, the effect of the enclosures of ancient common land that drastically reduced the capacities of peasants to carve out spaces of autonomy from the system of exploitation. But the core insight can be transposed, it resonates with the needs of street dwellers and precarious workers in Bangkok, subject to multiple forms of workplace surveillance and coercion and after work exclusion. Relatively un surveilled breathing spaces do not exist as a permanent resource in this city, they are ephemeral, repeatedly made and unmade. Screening fees paid from time to time by relatively wealthy hosts are used to keep the forces of law and order at a distance, unintentionally buying space and time for others to appropriate. Under these conditions the cone of light thrown by the projector momentarily transforms a fragment of the city into such a breathing space, a temporary release for bodies relentlessly disciplined by labor and by life on the street. As such, an observer at the Tiger God shrine is witness to an ironic juxtaposition of frenetic movement, of bodies in extremis, displayed onscreen and the unclenching, unwinding of bodies in repose that gather in front of it.

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¹ Other valuable sources on itinerant and/or portable cinema include: Wasson (2012; 2013), Acland (2009), Lester (2008), Mahadevan (2010), MacDonald (2016).

² For a valuable photographic archive of the stand-alone cinema and documentation on their extinction in Thailand and Southeast Asia see Phillip Jablon's Southeast Asia Movie Theatre Project website: <http://seatheater.blogspot.co.uk>.

³ As Chanan highlights the business of cinema at the point of its emergence differed in this respect from the commercial practices constructed in relation to contemporaneous 'new' media like the gramophone, where the apparatus required for the reproduction of sound (the gramophone player) and the storage media (the record) are purchased by the individual user (Chanan 1996, 17; Mahadevan 2010, 36).

⁴ The Thai term *nang glang blaeng* denotes film screenings in outdoor sites. Although most open-air film projectionists are itinerant, operating as mobile teams with projectors mounted in adapted vans and lorries this is not always the case, as the example of the Tiger God shrine demonstrates.

⁵ *Likay* is a form of folk theatre found in central Thailand. *Mor Lam* refers to a style of singing practiced in the northeast which is central to a number of song and dance performance genres popular in the region. Both performance genres provide considerable scope for oral improvisation.

⁶ Notwithstanding the rationalisation of the 'free gift' in merit making activity scholars such as Christine Gray (1986) have explored the tight connections between merit, symbolic prestige and material wealth in Thailand and the powerful capitalist and royal actors who thereby profit.

⁷ Most cities in Thailand have city pillars which are housed in shrines which also host the city's ancestral place spirit.

⁸ The Tiger God Shrine's origin story might be compared with that of another suburban Bangkok roadside shrine, the Lady Mother King Cobra shrine on the Rama 2 highway discussed by Johnson. Johnson argues that in their origin stories the nature spirit shrines that fringe the city centre tend to allegorise the casualties of urban expansion emphasising the need to propitiate the spirits disrupted by these processes (Johnson 2012).

⁹ Banharn and Jamsai Silpa-acha. Banharn Silpa-acha was PM briefly in the mid-90s whose backstage machinations in forming coalitions earned him the nickname 'slippery eel'.

¹⁰ What Casetti neglects to mention is that thresholds regulate access. As cinema theatres have left urban residential neighbourhoods and become concentrated within large scale shopping malls attendance requires crossing economic, physical and symbolic thresholds which are intrinsically excluding, thresholds which enact social hierarchies (Lobato 2012).

¹¹ The version of Apichatpong Weerasethakul recent feature *Cemetery of Splendour* shown at international festivals included a powerful scene depicting a cinema audience silently compelled to stand to attention at the beginning of a screening. The scene was lifted from the commercially released version of the film.