

A Semiological Analysis of Anti-traditional Elements in Chalerm Wongpim's Absurdist Films¹

Ongart Hanchanawong^{a*}, Niyom Wongpongkham^a and Homhuan Buarabha^a

^a*Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Khon Kaen University, Khon Kaen, Thailand*

^{*}*Corresponding Author. Email: ongartpix@gmail.com*

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Abstract

Absurdity can be a tool to express a rejection of tradition. It draws upon a display of comical actions based on confusion and marked by irrationality. This article reports on research conducted to examine semiotic patterns found in absurdist films by the late Thai director Chalerm Wongpim. The samples were four of Chalerm's films: *Heaven's seven* (2002), *Heaven's seven II* (2005), *Dynamite warriors* (2006), and *Navy hero* (2010). The authors also conducted in-depth interviews with the director himself and analyzed the data using concepts related to semiology and postmodernism. The findings show that Chalerm Wongpim's absurdist films present anti-traditional elements through three strategies. First, power relations are reversed. That is, characters of a higher social status are belittled for their physical defects or traumatized experiences. By contrast, characters of a lower status possess a special bargaining power with either their technologically-advanced weapons or their superhuman powers. Second, foreignness is applied together with elements of local wisdom into objects of dark humor. One example is the juxtaposition of locally available items and imported weapons, including a missile bamboo rocket and a cowboy gun made with a banana rope. This essentially symbolizes equal access to knowledge. The third strategy involves a parody of famous fictional characters, which is a blatant distortion of historical facts. All of these are playful reinterpretations of preexisting materials for the purpose of satirizing the centralization of powers.

Keywords: anti-traditional signs, absurdist films, Chalerm Wongpim

Introduction

Rejecting traditional customs, expressing hostility towards mainstream popular values, and deconstructing modernism are key postmodern practices. Postmodernism is a critical process that aims to challenge modern mainstream values. Its tools in artistic practices include transcending cultural boundaries, emphasizing local identity, and transforming publicly shared elements into new interpretations (Akkabootara, 2005). According to Fredric Jameson (1991), the expansion of late capitalism destroyed boundaries, allowing for global interactions. Information thus spewed over in all directions. Signifiers began to overlap without the whys and wherefores. This new vision is a peculiar one resulting from confusion over the loss of original meanings of things (Sangkhaphanthanon, 2016). It paved the way for the emergence of postmodern aesthetics. According to Doughty and Etherington-Wright (2018: 141-155),

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postmodernism is characterized by a lack of distinction between high and low cultures, a rejection of trust in grand narratives, the belief that meanings can constantly change, a distrust in perfection, an overlap between reality and simulation, the recycling of old material for new purpose, an irrational mixture of things, a parody of the sacred, and the creation of the irrationality. These features influence all art forms, especially film.

Chalerm Wongpim was a Thai director whose works featured postmodernism. He was praised by the media as an Isan director who successfully mixed imagination and historical accounts. His notable works are action-comedy films with fight scenes featuring Thai kickboxing. Isan cultural elements are visible throughout his films. However, he was also criticized for displaying excessive imagination, irrational plots, and characters with erratic behavior (Rotten Tomatoes, 2008). Despite these criticisms, Chalerm produced nine films between 1997 and 2020. His greatest accomplishment is *Dynamite warriors* (2006). Stories from various legends are incorporated into this action-comedy film. The main character is a local warrior who used a bamboo rocket as a weapon to hunt down an evil spirit (dubbed “Pop”) that killed his family. He teams up with a traveling buffalo trader whose business suffered after farm tractor vendors started importing tractors as a result of the Bowring Treaty, signed between the British Empire and Siam (the former name of Thailand). This film helped Chalerm win the 2007 national film award Golden Royal Swan in the Best Director category; the film was later shown in U.S. theaters. Distributed by Magnolia Pictures, the film grossed USD 483,737 worldwide (IMDB, 2007). On creating local Isan characters, Chalerm once noted, “I want to make Isan people superheroes, not clowns” (Wongpim, 2019).

Chalerm Wongpim was born on October 26, 1971 and passed away on May 25, 2022 at the age of 51. He was born and raised in Khon Kaen province in Isan, the Northeast region of Thailand. Growing up, he enjoyed watching Kang Fu movies. He was inspired by Hong Kong action movies directed by John Woo. Chalerm went to Kaennakhon Witthayalai high school. There he developed an interest in art, and went on to study at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Chulalongkorn University. He had the opportunity to work on movie sets as an art director before taking the role of director for the first time in 1997 for the film, *90’ Shock*. The film is a crossover involving comedy, action, and horror genres. It was adapted from ghost stories told on a radio program called *The shock*, which was popular at that time. He became famous and produced another film, *Extra legal* (1999). The plot is about a bodyguard with high moral standards who ends up protecting a politician who is secretly involved in national high-profile drug trafficking. His highest-grossing films were *Heaven’s seven* (2002) and *Heaven’s seven II* (2005). This film series is about seven Thai soldiers who go on a secret mission to fight against foreign soldiers who had military bases in Thailand. Both films have wars as their historical backgrounds. The first one features a battle with the U.S. army during the Vietnam War; the second one, a combat against Japanese soldiers during World War II. Another war-related action-fantasy film, *Navy heroes* (2021), features a naval officer who goes on a secret military mission, disguising himself as a *krathoey* (translated as “ladyboy” throughout this article to maintain its original sense of meaning) trying to stop a gang of ladyboys who are planning terrorist attacks.

Films by Chalerm Wongpim have garnered the attention of not only film critics, but also of researchers. Chaiworaporn (2016) analyzed *Heaven’s seven* (2002) and *Heaven’s seven II* (2005), defining them as films driven by absurd humor which prevents the protagonists from embodying the ideal heroic figure. In reality, they exhibit the characteristics of an anti-hero (Chaiworaporn, 2016). A *New York Times* review (2007) describes Chalerm Wongpim’s movies as prioritizing comedy and action over character development. According to the article, because of Chalerm’s skillful direction and elements of strangeness

throughout the movies, viewers are more likely to feel entertained rather than bored. Similarly, *The Hollywood Reporter* (2007) pointed out how *Dynamite warrior* (2006) is full of oddities and lack of coherence, which are key elements of films in this genre. Additionally, a research article (Na Nongkhai, 2017) examined the characterization of protagonists in *Heaven's seven* (2002), *Heaven's seven II* (2005), and *Dynamite warrior* (2006). It observed that these action-adventure films were influenced by the heroic traits seen in foreign cinema, and blended with Thai cultural values and local beliefs to create hybrid Thai heroes. These characters demonstrate an adaptation and cultural fusion between international cinematic hero archetypes and Thai societal elements, such as legends, local beliefs, and traditional notions of masculinity. Moreover, these hybrid heroes reflect the impact of globalization on Thai society and the process of localization as a creative response to global cultural influences. Thus, the distinctive hallmark of Chalerm Wongpim's filmmaking, evident in his works from 2002 to 2010, is his portrayal of protagonists with exaggerated, almost supernatural abilities, and his use of absurd humor as a driving force in storytelling. These elements have been widely recognized and discussed in the reviews and studies mentioned above.

For the above reasons, the authors examined indexical signs in Chalerm's films between 2002 and 2010 by using the following four examples: *Heaven's seven* (2002), *Heaven's Seven II* (2005), *Dynamite warrior* (2006), and *Navy hero* (2010), based on analysis of absurdist elements through the lens of aesthetics of resistance.

Literature Review

This research was conducted in three phases. In the first phase, concepts related to absurdity and semiology were used to explore indexical signs in the target films. In the second phase, the concept of cinematic geopolitics was used to classify and pair up parties to the conflict in question. In the final phase, postmodernism was used to investigate forms of aesthetics of resistance. The following section gives an overview of key theoretical concepts.

Absurdity

In simple terms, the word "absurd" refers to nonsensical, irrational action beyond any logical frames of thinking, or anything marked with conflict, nonsense, and meaninglessness. From a philosophical perspective, Bandasak (2008) describes an existential reason for absurdity. That is, human conscience understands life in a self-conflicting way. On the one hand, people go in search of serious matters. But on the other hand, they have doubts about very serious matters, such as love, money, and power. Therefore, they place a great deal of importance on matters not yet fully explained with logic. In other words, their lives go on amidst irrationality. This view is consistent with notable modern existential thinkers, like Albert Camus, who argues that existence precedes essence. The notion of self is determined by each individual searching for things to complete his or her essence (Chukhanhom et al., 2019). From literary philosophy, this view became influential in acting.

The philosophy of theater in the past focused on acting for pleasure, and entertainment for the purpose of relaxation. Theater, thus, featured graceful movements, colorful costumes, and spectacular sets in order to celebrate ideals and the perfection of life. By contrast, modern-day theater aims to reflect social problems by simulating visuals that prompt the audience's contemplation and criticism. Consequently, these days, theater often reflects philosophical views on chaotic society, pointing to the dark side of society

and the meaninglessness of life. Coupled with existentialist views, today's theater shows that old values, including belief in God, have perished. People became liberated from old restraints and are free to choose their own paths. Particularly, the *theater of the absurd* (or *absurd drama*) points out how nonsensical, ridiculous, and pitiful are people, who exist in this meaningless world full of repetitiveness, despair, and hopelessness (Sajjapan, 2016). Thus, absurdity in theater is created by a disconnect between different theatrical components, for example, a lack of shared elements between the characters and the setting, an unusual atmosphere, an unprecedented situation, a plot with no logical sequences, and strange behavior unexplainable by commonly accepted logic.

Semiology

According to semiology, the study of symbolism, signs are literally referred to as tools used to refer to something else. Ancient Christian thinker St. Augustine stated that signs or symbols are something that provoke the image of another thing in the mind of the audience. Semiology grew out of works by linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (Bunmee, 2015), which were compiled in a collection of his lectures on linguistics. These works were later developed and expanded further over the years. Roland Barthes (1972) analyzed everyday objects and activities, such as wrestling, travel brochures, stripteases, soap, laundry detergents, and even photographs of political candidates, through semiotics. All of these are constructed as elements of what is called "mass culture." Barthes' analysis focuses on the process of using language to convey figurative imagery. This view aligns with the perspective of the American scientist, mathematician, logician, and philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce. Peirce proposed that the analysis of the relationship between the signifier (or medium) and the meaning of the sign can be categorized as follows: if there is resemblance, it is called *an icon*; if it is a causal relationship, it is called an *index*; and if it is a representative image in society, it is called a *symbol*. In other words, a sign refers to the societal acceptance of something as a representative of that thing (Peirce, 1955). Particularly, in the view of American literary critic and theorist Robert Scholes (1974), cinema is seen as the ideal unit for semiotic research because it encompasses images, light, sound, music, actions, performances, and narratives, all of which can create meaning. Thus, this theoretical tradition has been employed to analyze forms of communication other than verbal language, as people are able to communicate through diverse means (Bunmee, 2015). This approach distinguishes five modes of signs based on their functions as follows:

1) Icon. This mode uses resemblances between the signifier and the signified, as typically seen in a representation of a person. Examples include statues, sculptures, monuments, amulets, paintings or even gestural imitation.

2) Index. This mode refers to any communicative method that indexes (points to) a certain meaning or phenomenon. Examples are the hand of a clock (indexing time), a solar position (indexing a time of day), a stock market index, and an electrocardiogram machine.

3) Signage. This mode uses a flat object for a display of status of something or someone. Examples are shop signs, signs in department stores, warning signs, traffic signs, no-smoking signs, police rank insignias, title sashes, and graduation gowns.

4) Signal/code. This refers to signal-based communication in order to foretell what is to come, mostly according to what has previously been agreed upon. Examples include Native American tribes' smoke signals, traffic lights, flag signals in sports events, train whistles, traffic whistles, sports referees' whistles, and Morse Code.

5) Sign/symbol. These tools are used to communicate beyond their direct literal meaning in order to create a perception through feelings, thoughts, and beliefs. They include, for example, the use of colors as symbols: black for mourning, red for danger, white for religion, mathematical symbols (such as, +, -, x, ÷) for mathematical calculation, a set of scales for justice, and a rose for love.

Cinematic Geopolitics

In the process of compiling signs and analyzing them, the authors used the concept of cinematic geopolitics proposed by Michael Joseph Shapiro (cited in Charoensin-o-larn, 2017: 46-150). Previously, this international relations philosopher used photography to analyze the underlying meanings embedded within constructed images. Shapiro argued that photographs function as a type of sign, carrying both explicit and implicit meanings that call for careful attention in order to reveal various myths and ideological constructs (Shapiro, 1988). The concept hinges on critical or genealogical interpretation as a tool to examine powers where powers are not expected to be. He draws on relationships between cinema and philosophy when exploring world politics through the study of films. To do so, three steps are taken.

1) Identification and classification of power structures. Films are where powers reside. Shapiro believes that films are not all about entertainment. They bring politics to the audience's perception through a reinforcement of powers and the system of perceptual categories based on cartographies of violence.

2) Identification of resistance. Film analysis shows methods with which this medium provokes its viewers to think, based on what they observe in scenes involving fighting, whether they are overt struggles such as fist fighting, waging war, hunting someone down, or subtle ones, including colors of clothing and juxtapositions of cinematic objects. Viewers are also encouraged to question the content of the story. Most directors do this by a deliberate orchestration to provoke viewers to have an *image of thought* in their minds.

3) Observation of transitional change. Film analysis in the postmodern tradition places a great deal of importance on "aesthetic subjects." Therefore, focus of the analysis shifts from the film's plot to images or visual representations.

Postmodernism

Postmodernism is a concept not easily defined. Sociologist Charles Wright Mills observed in 1959 that the postmodern period is one in which traditional virtues and scientific rationality are challenged (Charoensri, 2001: 1-16).

One of its key proponents, Jean François Lyotard, opposed the concept of universality. Postmodern thought, therefore, emphasizes the inclusion of multiple small-scale narratives, known as phrase regimens, which rely on the diversity of meaning-making communities. According to Lyotard, these various and often contradictory phrases coexist, ultimately giving rise to new meanings (Lyotard, 1984). Postmodernism is characterized by three features, described below.

1) Anti-modernism. Postmodernism challenges the modernist position that perfection exists. It challenges normativeness. This is elaborated further by Jean Francios Lyotard, who argues that postmodernism rejects the grand narratives. Another thinker, Jean Baudrillard, also sees that postmodernist societies view legends and ancient narratives merely as myths (Charoensin-o-larn, 2017).

2) A postmodern temporal period. This refers to the actual time period immediately after the modern age. It is consistent with Fredric Jameson's classification of three cultural periods as realism, modernism, and postmodernism.

3) Aesthetics of resistance. The concept is realized through different techniques, including telling a story within a story, sequencing events in an illogical fashion, metafiction techniques, such as having characters write their own scripts, conversing with the audience, distorting historical accounts, and remaking of old works (Sangkaphanthanon, 2016). It is said that postmodern art blurs the line between valuable and worthless objects (Santithanyawong, 2017: 215). This is done in order to undermine perfection and to search for other possibilities. Hito Steyerl shows that epistemic disobedience is the process of challenging the three societal pillars: power, knowledge, and art by reversing viewpoints in order to create a new body of knowledge and forms of aesthetics (Suwanmongkol, 2020).

Materials and Methods

The authors divided the research process into three steps. In the first step, the authors identified and gathered signs from the four films under study: *Heaven's seven* (2002), *Heaven's seven II* (2005), *Dynamite warrior* (2006), and *Navy hero* (2010), as well as in-depth interviews with the director. In the second step, the signs collected were classified by identifying them in terms of conflict and resistance. In the final step, the authors analyzed the signs using concepts based on postmodernism and the aesthetics of resistance.

Table 1 Plots of the sample films

Poster	Title (in Thai transliteration)	Synopsis
 Heaven's Seven	<i>Chet prachan ban</i> (2002)	During the Vietnam War, seven Thai veterans traumatized by their past wanted to steal trucks belonging to American soldiers based in the country, thinking that there was gold stored inside. The cargo was actually a biological weapon. A fight ensued that ended with their victory assisted by an ancient cannon.
 Heaven's Seven II	<i>Chet prachan ban 2</i> (2005)	The film is set in World War II, when seven Thai veterans went on a mission to fight against Japanese soldiers stationed in Thailand. They had to battle seven highly skilled <i>samurais</i> and a blood-crazed military captain. But they defeated them with even crazier strategies.
 Dynamite Warrior	<i>Khon fai bin</i> (2006)	In the 1890s the Bowring Treaty was signed. An Isan man, armed with a bamboo rocket, wandered around to hunt down the person who had killed his family. His enemies were a farm tractor dealer, who also made a living stealing cattle, and a powerful evil spirit. He eventually defeated them because a cattle trader sacrificed his life to help him.

Table 1 Plots of the sample films (cont.)

Poster	Title (in Thai transliteration)	Synopsis
 Navy Hero	<i>I-het sot phadet suek</i> (2010)	A special forces captain became psychologically scarred and resentful after being conned into marrying a ladyboy and being raped anally. He was later tasked with a mission in which he disguised himself as a ladyboy in order to take down a ladyboy terrorist group. His mission was accomplished with the help of a woman.

Findings

The data collected were classified into five modes: icon, index, signage, signal/code, and sign/symbol. The details are outlined below.

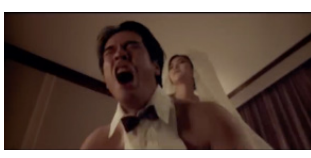
The Icon

Iconic signs based on an analysis of the film characters were of four types: high-profile or high-ranking characters, ordinary people, supernatural characters, and characters borrowed from literary works.

1. High-profile or high-ranking characters

These include Phya Sirikorn, a noble with the royal title *Phya*, but with a cleft lip-cleft palate, resulting in his having trouble speaking. People thus call him the “Harelipped Nobleman” (*Dynamite warrior*, 2006). Another example is a character named Captain Ong-At, a special forces squad leader who is often teased and bullied by his subordinates (*Heaven's seven*, 2002; *Heaven's seven II*, 2005). Suriya Ebata, a stoic Japanese secret agent, has to put up with childish tactics that the Thai soldiers use against him (*Heaven's seven II*, 2005). The last example is a character called Captain Meuangman, a ranger squad leader who is traumatized by an anal rape (*Navy hero*, 2010).

Table 2 Examples of high-profile characters with inferior traits

Captain Ong-At	Suriya Ebata	Phya Siriko	Captain Meuangman
			
Teased and bullied by his disrespectful subordinates	Has to put up with childish tactics by Thai soldiers	Suffering from a cleft lip	Traumatized by an anal rape in the past

2. Characters representing ordinary people

Characters who represent the ordinary are found in all four films. For example, Sergeant Dap Champaw is a retired soldier who is so busy professing his love of the nation that he has no time for his own family (*Heaven's seven*, 2002; *Heaven's seven II*, 2005), while Saengdao, his daughter, is a student leader in the protests against the establishment of U.S. military bases in Thailand (*Heaven's seven II*,

2005). Chom, the sergeant's girlfriend, passionately makes a pair of red trousers for him, yet she sleeps with Japanese soldiers for money and the power to help save her family's business which is about to be taken over. In addition, there is Tang Kuai's father, a Chinese opera theater owner who secretly helped Free Thai agents (*Heaven's seven II*, 2005). Other characters include Chek Ku, who took buffaloes stolen from villagers to a slaughterhouse (*Dynamite warrior*, 2006); Pa Thanom, a Thai merchant who secretly ran an illegal gasoline business with an American soldier (*Heaven's seven*, 2002). One of the most curious cases is that of twins, both of whom resemble a female movie star. However, one is male and the other, female (*Navy hero*, 2010).

3. Supernatural characters

An example is the Bamboo Rocket Bandit. The central character is a young Isan man named Siang, who carries a bamboo rocket as a weapon, wandering around looking for his family's killer. Pop Dam (literally "Black Evil Spirit"), the one responsible for the murder of Siang's entire family, is a powerful, immortal spirit, who cannot not be exposed to sunlight (*Dynamite warrior*, 2006). Another character is Golden Flower, a male with half of his face looking female, the other half, male. His voice also alternates between that of a man and a woman as if he had a double personality. He is the leader of a liberation army of ladyboys. Golden Flower's childhood was filled with bad memories; out of hatred toward homosexuality, his own father tucked him into a suitcase and threw it in the water (*Navy hero*, 2010).

Table 3 Middle- and lower-class characters with supernatural powers

Sergeant Dap Champadaw	Bamboo Rocket Bandit	Rice Basket Bandit	Golden Flower
			
Skilled in firing guns with both hands	Having a bamboo rocket as a weapon	Becoming more powerful when hungry.	Being an eloquent spiritual leader

4. Characters adapted from literary works

The Rice Basket Bandit was created out of a character from an Isan tale. This new character is a convict who killed his own mother in a fit of hunger-related rage and is later hired to rob farmers of their cattle. Chan the Curved Mustache Man was a character from the *Legend of Bang Rachan*. *Singha the magic man* was adapted from the Isan, "Legend of the Cattle Trader" (*Dynamite warrior*, 2006). In both *Heaven's seven* (2002) and *Heaven's seven II* (2005) there are seven veterans, namely, Sergeant Dap Champaw, Mat Choengmuay, Tangkuai Sae Lee, Akkee Mekyan, Dan Mahittha, Kla Talumpuk, and Juk Beawsakul (in the second film, Mat Choengmuay was replaced by Maw Choengmuay). The films were adapted from two actual films produced several decades ago by a famous director, the late Soh Asanachinda. The original films were *One to seven* (1958) and *Heaven's seven* (1963). The characters in the new films were unlike typical male protagonists because they were addicted to gambling, and were greedy, obscene, untrustworthy, deceitful, and physically abusive towards women. Kobori, a Japanese character from a popular novel, *Doomed love*, was parodied with a new name, Kobota. In *Heaven's seven II*, Kobota and his love Angsumalin were conned into losing all their money in a gambling card game. In the same film, characters from Japanese stories were also mocked; a *samurai* father of a newborn baby weaponized his

baby stroller with an automatic rifle, while a *ninja* skilled in camouflaging died foolishly from an accidental gunshot by his fellow *ninjas* (*Heaven's seven II*, 2005).

The Index

This mode features repeated indexical elements or behaviors. Four strategies in this mode are found: poking fun at other people's suffering, instigating pain on someone more powerful, obsessing with the anus, and referring to historical accounts in a tongue-in-cheek manner.

1. Poking fun at other people's suffering

And example is Captain Ong-at, who is often belittled by his subordinates. They pull his shirt, smack him in the head, tie him up, and once lured him into stepping on a landmine. They also laughed at him when he went on an undercover mission as a dessert vendor and an Indian beggar (*Heaven's seven*, 2002; *Heaven's seven II*, 2005). In these films, scenes depicted Thai soldiers putting a cigar-shaped bomb in the mouth of a gang leader whom they had captured earlier before jumping away with joy. The bomb then blew up, shredding his head into pieces. Such enjoyment came the same way as setting off a firecracker tucked in a ball of modeling clay. In another scene, the seven soldiers circled around and slapped a beat-up Japanese soldier on the head before tying him up on a running motorcycle, increasing the speed, locking the accelerator, and letting the vehicle run off the cliff only to explode down at the bottom of the valley. In another scene, they forced a foreign captive to strip himself naked, telling him he needed to disguise himself with new clothes, but in the end, they banished him with no mercy and laughed about it. In Juk's mother's funeral, the characters were having a great time making fun of one another. At one point, one of them accidentally tossed a cigar bomb during the cremation ceremony; the explosion propelled the corpse of Juk's mother up into the sky (*Heaven's seven II*, 2005).

2. Instigating pain on someone more powerful

Characters in these films inflict pain on their superiors or someone more powerful either deliberately or inadvertently. For instance, Dun Mahittha bombed his village's sacred shrine because his romance-related wish was not granted (*Heaven's seven*, 2002). As he was defecating, Muay Choengmuai unknowingly spilled pieces of his stool on the face of a *samurai* who was lying in wait to murder him. Captain Ong-at was dragged off an airplane when his subordinates thought the plane was too heavy even though he was the pilot (*Heaven's seven II*, 2005). There were scenes in which the mother of the main female protagonist was punched in her mouth because she explicitly expressed sexual desire, while the character's grandmother took advantage of a man by stealing a kiss from him. Consequently, a band of soldiers, who were traditionally regarded as men of honor, ganged up and stomped on her.

3. Being obsessed with the anus

In one scene, Japanese soldier Suriya Ebata was sodomized to death by the seven Thai soldiers, who took turns plunging their index finger into his anus (*Heaven's seven II*, 2005). Likewise, Captain Muangmaen, leader of a ranger squad who was anally raped by a transvestite early in the film, was abducted by a group of homosexuals who sexually violated him in the middle of the film, and later gang-raped by a group of LGBTQ+ in a movie theater (*Navy hero*, 2010). In one scene, a male soldier and a ladyboy engaged in a competition in which they take turns kicking each other in the groin. The male soldier ended up losing the competition because he could not take the unbearably sharp pain, while the ladyboy won because she had undergone sex-change surgery, resulting in her not feeling pain in the groin (*Navy hero*, 2010). Similarly, in one fight scene, an American soldier lay on a tarp while sliding along the road after

a delivery truck. Upon seeing this, a Thai soldier rolled a ball to hit his crotch before throwing rocks repeatedly at his crotch, hitting both the testicles and anal area, inflicting great pain (*Heaven's seven* 2002). Finally, there was a scene in which Thai soldiers were secretly watching women using a bathroom, peeking through a hole in the bathroom wall, but when an elderly woman entered the room, she passed gas right through the hole. The force was so strong that it blew Captain Ong-at against the wall (*Heaven's seven II*, 2005).

4. Referencing historical accounts in a satirical manner

This was shown in various scenes. A reference to the time period in which the Bowring Treaty was signed showed that at some point in the past, Siam/Thailand was doing business with foreign countries and gave credit to Phya Sirikorn as the first to import farm tractors to the country (*Dynamite warrior*, 2006). A reference to cave paintings was made to legitimize a fabricated story that ladyboys have long existed since the ancient days, citing the fact that purple was the color of the cave paintings (*Navy hero*, 2010). Referring to World War II when the Japanese army set up bases in Thailand, the novel *Doomed love* was parodied. An important scene in the original story was mocked in which Kobori was injured and faced impending death. In the film, Kobota was gang-stomped to death. Tangkui's father and Captain Ong-at were abducted and enslaved to build the bridge on the River Kwae in Kanchanaburi province (*Heaven's seven II*, 2005).

Table 4 Examples of the index mode

Shot	Using senselessness to relieve emotional tensions	Shot	Referencing historical accounts in a satirical manner
	Inflicting pain on someone superior		Referencing the Bowring Treaty and the first imported farm tractor
	Bullying someone weaker		Referencing World War II to poke fun at the classic novel <i>Doomed Love</i>
	Being obsessed with the anus		Referencing an archeological site and using cave paintings as evidence

Signage

The study identified three types of signs carrying meanings: identification signs, orthographic letters, and uniforms.

1. Identification signs

They directly or indirectly “identify” places, businesses, individuals, or titles and ranks. Examples of identification signs in the films include an animal checkpoint sign, Phya Sirikorn’s “Sirikorn Motor” business sign, the Rice Basket Bandit’s use of a royal-patterned shirt as a cloak (*Dynamite warrior*, 2006), a Japanese secret agent’s “Photo Studio” business sign (*Heaven's seven*, 2002), fresh market shop signs, an Ao Manao police station sign, and a wanted poster (*Heaven's seven II*, 2005). Insignias on army and police uniforms, the Thai national flag, as well as the Japanese military flag were also identification signs found in these films.

2. Letters and orthographic symbols

These were featured in several scenes. For instance, the Bamboo Rocket Bandit ripped his opponents' shirts open to see whether they had a tattoo on their chest because he remembered seeing that the killer of his family had one. These symbols also included tattoo images of spiritual powers on fighters' bodies, such as the Immortal Tiger, the Swiftly Monkey, and magic letters of various designs (*Dynamite warrior*, 2006). Also found were writings on signs in student protests demanding the expulsion of American troops from Thailand (*Heaven's seven II*, 2005) and writings on the blackboard during a tactical military training (*Navy hero*, 2010).

3. Uniforms

A wide range of uniforms or uniform-like outfits were found. They included royal court outfits, official government uniforms, nightgowns, Superhero-like cloaks, and veils (*Dynamite warrior*, 2006). In *Heaven's seven* and *II* (2002, 2005), there were uniforms of foreign troops, *Samurai* outfits, and warrior outfits. Navy uniforms and cabaret show costumes worn by the gun-toting ladyboy army (*Navy hero*, 2010).

Table 5 Examples of signage

Shot	Genuine reference	Shot	Parody/Satire
	Animal checkpoint sign		Superhero-like cloaks and veils
	Protest signs in demonstrations against American troops		"Sirikorn Motor" tractor company sign owned by Phya Sirikorn
	Ao Manao police station sign		Letters written on the backboard during a tactical training by a ladyboy trainer

Signals/Codes

These elements communicate certain meanings. They are of two types: movement-based and item-based signals.

1. Movement-based signals

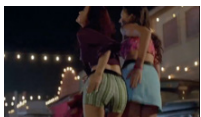
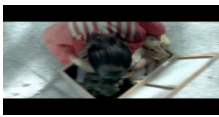
These signals come from gestures and actions, which symbolize particular meanings. A main character ripped his shirt off to show the Immortal Tiger tattoo on his chest as a display of his magical powers. When cornered, he often held a hand grenade up high to scare off his enemy (*Heaven's seven*, 2002; *Heaven's seven II*, 2005). In *Heaven's seven* (2002) firing a gun into the sky was an expression of bravery. A hired gunman had to keep his hands in his pants pockets because, he claimed, having his hands out would mean someone would be dead. In another scene, a prostitute slapped her bottom while telling an American GI that a lack of money was a lack of opportunity (to be with her) (*Heaven's seven*, 2002). The Bamboo Rocket Bandit had his arms up as a defensive guard as if he was a *muay Thai* kickboxer in order to stop or fend off his enemy. His physical force also grew to be particularly destructive when he was hungry. Phya Sirikorn would burst out laughing whenever he had an evil thought. Likewise, putting

one's palms together or mouthing magical mantras symbolized the use of magic; blowing on the forehead of someone with such magic tattoos as the Immortal Tiger and the Swifty Monkey resulted in the person shaking uncontrollably as a result of the magic (*Dynamite warrior*, 2006). Other signaling actions included a character kissing his own fist as a display of enormous physical power before hurling himself at the target, crushing it through a wall, and breaking someone's jaw with just his bare fist (*Heaven's seven*, 2002).

2. Object-based signals

These were found in different scenes. The famous red pants were a signal for readiness for war (*Heaven's seven*, 2002; *Heaven's seven II*, 2005). Upon leaving on a dangerous journey, Bamboo Rocket Bandit gave his girlfriend a necklace with a Buddha image pendant as a signal for worries (*Dynamite warrior*, 2006). A father's stuffing his son into a suitcase before dumping it in the water signaled extreme disapproval of male homosexuality (*Navy hero*, 2010).

Table 6 Examples of the signal/code

Shot	Showing confidence	Shot	Concealing fear
	A prostitute mocking an American soldier by slapping her own buttocks		Superhero-like cloaks and veils
	Reciting and blowing black magic		Tearing off a shirt to show off magical tattoos to opponents
	Phya Sirikorn's laughter when he had evil thoughts		A father stuffing his son into a suitcase because of his hatred of homosexuality

Signs/Symbols

Items or things are used to communicate something beyond their literal meanings. They are classified into three categories: single-object symbolization, two-object symbolization, and symbolization based on juxtaposition of opposite objects.

1. Single-object symbolization

This was seen in several scenes. Wearing red expressed self-confidence. Foreign-made furniture represented expensive, luxurious items and status as a member of the elite. Star kites represented Siam as a country. The sound of a *khaen* (bamboo mouth organ) symbolized merriness. Alcohol was a symbol of an immoral person. Milk represented an innocent person. Chinese merchants represented greedy merchants. *Samurais* symbolized Japan. Japanese soldiers were cruel. American soldiers represented modern and able warriors.

2. Two-object symbolization

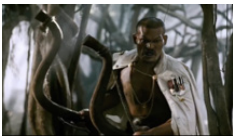
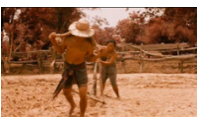
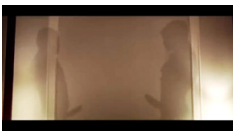
Symbolic meaning of this type was derived by blending meanings of two complementary objects or items. Several examples include a cowboy's gun that was held in place by a banana rope, a cigar-bomb that a character had all the time in his mouth, a whistle-sounding policeman (because he had a whistle lodged in his throat), shredded tobacco used as a cannon fuse, a *samurai* with a newborn baby

traveling around with a machine gun-mounted stroller, a bamboo rocket missile, a bamboo rocket with a turbo engine as a parody of a race car, a man-instead of a beast of burden-yoking himself to a plough, a gigantic banana on a cruise ship.

3. Juxtaposition of opposite objects

This symbolism made use of a clash in meaning of two opposite objects. Examples included an ancient *Bang Rachan*-era cannon fighting against an American soldier's modern weapon, lighting a cannon fuse with a Zippo lighter, using dual handguns against a gun mounted on a warplane, a farm tractor crushing a dung beetle, *Bang Rachan*'s Chan the Curved Mustache Man being pathetically killed by the Rice Basket Bandit out of hunger-induced rage, a thief using a royal-patterned shirt as a cloak, "a bride" with a penis larger than her husband's, and a navy officer trained by a ladyboy.

Table 7 Examples of signs/symbols

Shot	To strengthen the force	Shot	To undermine sacredness
	Lighting a cannon's fuse with a Zippo lighter		A farm tractor crushing a dung beetle
	Bamboo rocket with a turbo engine mounted on an ox-drawn cart		Rice Basket Bandit wearing a royal-patterned shirt as a cloak
	A man carrying a yoke as if he were a beast of burden		A shadow of a bride whose penis was larger than her husband's

Discussion

Chalerm Wongpim's films express anti-traditional elements through three strategies: reversal of hierarchical expectations, adoption of foreignness to reinvent local wisdom with an added twist of dark humor, a satire of popular legends and literary works, and a playful distortion of historical accounts.

Reversal of Hierarchical Expectations

Such reversals were achieved giving flaws and physical defects to members of the elite or ruling class, and positive physical attributes to those of the middle and lower classes. This is consistent with Hito Steyerl's concept of epistemic disobedience in that challenging established powers in governance, knowledge, art, views and expectations are reversed in order to create a new body of knowledge and aesthetics (Suwanmongkol, 2020: 166-167). This reversal can be done in three ways: devaluing ranks and titles, challenging established beliefs, and behaving against traditional expectations.

In devaluing ranks and titles, statuses traditionally held with high regard, such as the royally appointed Phya, the military rank of captain, as well as those entities deemed sacred or revered (e.g., a shrine and motherhood) became devalued either by giving them defects or placing them in a situation leading to their downfall. This could be seen in several cases: Phya Sirikorn, who had a speech problem because of

his cleft lip and palate; Captain Ong-at, who was often disrespectfully abused by his subordinates despite being the special forces squad leader; and Captain Muengman, another special forces leader, who was helplessly raped after being conned into marrying a man with a femininely beautiful face. The scene featured his shadowy silhouette on a wall suggesting the size of the “bride’s penis” was larger than his. Such scenes essentially reversed power relations in the traditionally chauvinistic society. High-ranking Japanese warrior Suriya Ebata was mobbed by attackers who, with their fingers, sodomized and left him badly injured. This was a way of devaluing the honorable image of a foreign soldier by ridiculing him with something working-class Isan children often did to their peers.

At the same time, middle- and lower-class characters were given special powers. For instance, Sergeant Dap Champaw was gifted with the ability to simultaneously shoot guns with both hands, to shoot down a jet fighter, and to destroy a cannon with his handgun. Another character, Kla Talumpuk, had such extraordinarily strong fists that he was able to put a dent in metal, to punch through a wall, and to dislocate someone’s jaws with just his punches. Likewise, the Rocket Bamboo Bandit was great at kickboxing with his acrobatic moves as well as skillful in weaponizing bamboo rockets. In some of these films, scenarios were created in which ladyboys, who were traditionally viewed as “weak men,” were endowed with superiority over physically strong navy trainees. A ladyboy was assigned as a trainer for a tactical course designed for special force naval officers who would later disguise themselves as ladyboys on a special mission. Having male navy soldiers trained by a ladyboy portrayed reversed power relations in which the dominant males became subject to suppression by female superiority. Likewise, Dan Mahittha, a warrior with strong masculinity and womanizing traits, was anally raped by a person dressed as a character from a traditional *Like* performance, whose biological sex was male. In doing so, the person showed off her absolute physical power over him.

Challenging traditional faith was also found. A village shrine, which represented long-held spiritual beliefs, was blown up simply because a love-sick man got angry for not having his wish granted by the spirits there. This scene could be interpreted as doubt over the existence of revered or sacred spiritual entities. There was also a challenge to the morality of the main male characters. Main male characters in these films were designed to have radically unconventional traits, such as being addicted to gambling, as well as being greedy, sexually perverted, deceitful, and physically abusive towards women. This was essentially a way of questioning traditional moral perfectionism by arguing that main characters did not need to be “good people” according to a purist perspective.

Acting against traditions was also common. Traditionally, Thai women were expected to be modest and self-restrained when it comes to sexuality, but a challenge to this value was shown through three generations of female characters of the same family. Main character Angsumalin’s mother and grandmother behaved explicitly against this value, as they openly expressed sexual desire towards men. Male expectations were also challenged. In one scene, warrior-like men, who were expected to be protectors of the weak, merrily ganged up to stomp on a woman. This action was opposite to the traditional belief that men had to protect women. These unusual behaviors created an absurd state of affairs. When films portrayed society in a way opposite of what viewers are used to, they had to deal with emotional tension. Such uneasiness was featured to a great degree in a scene where characters were thoughtlessly having fun teasing one another, oblivious to the fact they were at a cremation. Getting too carried away, they inadvertently tossed a cigar bomb into the burning pyre. This caused an explosion that propelled the corpse of Juk’s mother, deserving of respect, into the sky, as the culprits began pointlessly chasing and kicking each other.

These three examples are consistent with the concept of absurdity in that people regard nonsensical things as important, and so they express themselves with no logical explanation for their behavior. They do it to liberate themselves from old ties and give themselves freedom of choice. The characters in these films thus opposed established tradition and customs, depicting lives as nonsensical, comical, and pitiful because of worldly mundanity, and lack of hope in the future (Sajjapan, 2016: 289-291).

Adoption of Foreignness to Reinvent Local Wisdom with an Added Twist of Dark Humor

In the films, various kinds of foreign symbolism were mixed with native items to add a touch of superiority to characters of humble backgrounds. This reflects the concept of equal access to knowledge of Frederic Jameson (1991), who described the expansion of late capitalism as something that dismantled geographical boundaries. As a result, information has flooded the world in all directions, causing symbols to overlap. Absurdity ensues as a result of confusion over the loss of original, familiar symbolic meanings in both belief and cultural systems (Sangkhaphanthanon, 2016: 194). Tools for artistic practices include mixing values across cultural boundaries, emphasizing a localist identity, and assigning new meanings to public objects or entities (Akkabootara, 2005: 266-287). Two tools were found in this research: using widely-accepted international products to justify contemporariness and pairing up objects of different statuses to create dark humor. These two points are discussed in detail below.

The films featured the use of well-known international products to justify contemporariness. A character carried dual handguns similar to those seen in American western films, by tying them to the waistband of his pants with a banana rope, just like what an ordinary villager would use to tie objects together. When a cannon fuse was lighted with a Zippo lighter, an ancient, locally available object represented by this *Bang Rachan*-era cannon became “alive” again with the use of the modern-day lighter. Such appropriation transcended time and made it possible to connect things with no limits. Likewise, in scenes where Isan bamboo rockets were used to shoot at opponents as if they were missiles and were used as turbo engines for an ox-drawn cart, it was a mix of otherwise geographically distant things in an illogical yet complementary manner. Other objects in the films possessed this characteristic. A cloak and veil were modeled after Hollywood superhero films. A Cuban cigar that Mat Chuengmuay had in his mouth at all times was in fact a bomb—a secret weapon borrowed from the faraway land. A folktale character like a *samurai* traveling with his baby had a modern machine gun mounted to the stroller. This is not to mention the whole army of ladyboy warriors who wore uniforms reminiscent of flamboyant cabaret show costumes.

As mentioned before, clashing items of different statuses and values created dark humor. A man yoked up to a plough as if he were a buffalo symbolized Isan people’s hard work. A foreign farm tractor was shown crushing tiny dung beetles on the ground. Dung beetles are one of Isan people’s staple foods. This scene suggested that the advent of technology was destroying nature. The scene where the Rice Basket Bandit used a royal patterned shirt, which was a government uniform, to cover an ordinary villager-convict who was sentenced to death portrayed lower-class people as challenging those above them. Several scenes satirized a taste for foreignness. For instance, Phya Sirikorn’s mansion was filled with foreign imports, especially European-style furniture. These pieces were expensive, luxurious, and indicative of the high social status of the owner. This was a stark contrast with the outside of the mansion, which was an open space with the ground so arid that the air was filled with the stifling heat of the sun and dust. Flying high above in the sky was a star kite, a sight reminiscent of that at the Royal Grounds—the symbol of Siam. This scene depicted drastic social inequality among people living in the same country.

Another scene showed a Chinese cattle trader trying to herd buffaloes, which he had bought from villagers, being stomped to death by the animals. This essentially satirized the greed of typical exploitative merchants. The seven Japanese *samurais*, who represented a class of masterful fighters from Japan, were easily defeated by the childish tactics of rowdy Thai fighters while an American soldier, the image of an able and modern fighter, fell under the sexual spell of a prostitute haunting an entertainment venue who rejected him by slapping her own buttocks and giving him the middle finger.

The examples of dark humor discussed above reflect the aesthetics of resistance, which employ strategies of challenging, annoying, and teasing, done through placing a higher-status object side-by-side with its lower-status or foreign counterpart. Modern objects and indigenous artifacts are used together, resulting in surreal powers arousing excitement. This is consistent with post-modern art, which blurs the lines between classes in the social hierarchy (Santithanyawong, 2017: 214-219). Therefore, when such traditionally “perfect” order is undermined, the viewers find themselves in an unpredictable situation.

A Satire of Popular Legends and Literary Works

The films in the data corpus contained adaptations of accounts from both Thai and foreign legends, fables, folk stories, and even historical events. Such adaptations were marked with parody, satire, and distorted reference. This was done to oppose modernism, which holds that everything can be questioned and deconstructed. Such opposition is consistent with Jean Francois Lyotard’s argument that postmodernism no longer relies on grand narratives (Charoensin-o-larn, 2017: 94). Similarly, Jean Baudrillard’s (1976) postmodern society views legends and ancient stories merely as myths. Reinterpreting old literary texts, therefore, became a narrative within narratives with no regard for rationality. In postmodern literature, this is called metafiction. It is achieved through various methods: having characters write their own scripts, creating a dialogue with the audience, distorting historical accounts, and remaking old works (Sangkhaphanthanon, 2016: 200-210) as discussed below.

A mockery of legends and popular literary works occurred in various scenes. *Bang Rachan*’s heroic character, Chan the Curved Mustache, was killed out of hunger by the Rice Basket Bandit, who was a character from the popular Isan tragic tale of *The little Rice Basket*. This was a parody of a nation-saving fighter, who symbolized the nationalism constructed by the central powers but was defeated by a marginalized Isan man, whose suffering from hunger drove him to lose control of his anger. Likewise, a character from the acclaimed novel set in World War II, *Doomed love*, was parodied. In the original story the Japanese soldier Kobori was injured by a bomb while he was on duty. This scene was adapted to one in which a character based on Kobori called Kobota was gang-beaten by seven Thai soldiers, leaving him critically injured. This adaptation derided nationalism for valuing only the ruling elite. In addition, unvalidated and distorted references to historical accounts were found. A reference to the Bowring Treaty was made to claim that indeed Thailand/Siam was involved in foreign trade, but additional fictional businesses were written in, including the import of farming tractors. A reference was made to archeological cave paintings in order to claim that ladyboys have been in existence for thousands of years, citing the color purple (the symbol of ladyboys) of the paintings as evidence. World War II was referenced to set up a war context after the Japanese military invaded Thailand. This reference explains scenes involving armed struggles and the capture of main characters as prisoners who were later forced to build the bridge over the River Kwae in Kanchanaburi province. This was done to expose the cruelty of the Japanese soldiers. Similarly, a reference to the Vietnam War allowed for the scene in which the characters saw a

truck used by American soldiers to carry biological weapons and mistakenly thought that it was carrying gold. They became greedy and thus schemed a plot to steal it. These adaptations were based on historical accounts, but they were done in a playful way for the sake of a nonsensical, emotional release.

Conclusion

Chalerm Wongpim's absurdist films express anti-traditional elements through Isan-ness. They feature semiological aspects of local wisdom. A direct, visible index is that of ordinary people or those of inferior status having the courage to stand up and fight against the injustice faced by their families. This reflects a stance in support of those deprived of their freedoms, leading to Chalerm's creation of characters with special powers who otherwise are lower-class people. This positive recreation of their identity is a typical feature of superhero films. Moreover, his characters reflect gender diversity; non-binary characters are smart and brave enough to fight to protect the rights of their peers without fear of the powerful. At the same time, Chalerm's films satirize the elite or rulers by making them objects of ridicule with physical and emotional defects. In addition, indirect signs are used to make fun of popular fictions, to distort historical accounts, and to challenge or discard the traditional establishment. All this is done through reinterpretation of things in a playful satire of centralized norms. In other words, the invention of direct and indirect forms of satirical comedy in his absurdist films reveals not only the deep ideological desire of this Isan director to counter-attack the centralized dominance, but also his experimentation with a reinvention of the new Isan, with the same degree of universally accepted human dignity. As Chalerm once said, "I want Isan people to be superheroes, not clowns" (Wongpim, 2019).

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