Dominant Masculinities and the Lure of the Rural Idyll in *The King of Bangkok*

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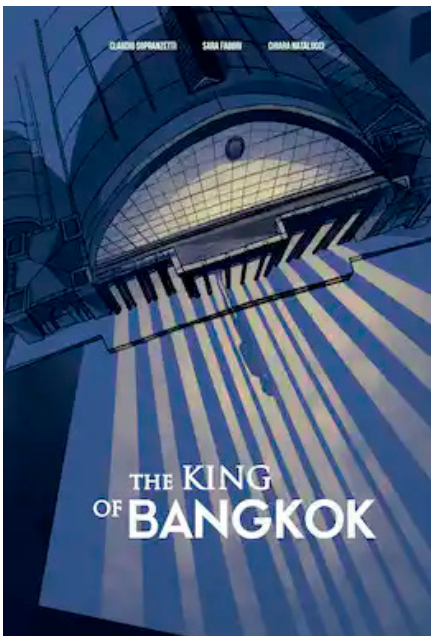
Abstract—This article provides a critical engagement with *The King of Bangkok*, a 2021 graphic novel by Claudio Sopranzetti, Sara Fabbri and Chiara Natalucci. The novel deploys an original mode of presenting detailed ethnographic research, and makes extensive use of contemporary imagery such as Thai movies including Pen-ek Ratanaruang's *Monrak Transistor* (2001). The authors grapple with the complexities of telling a story covering a fifty-year period of Thai politics to a foreign readership outside the academic realm. As a graphic novel, the work falls under the hyper-masculine influence of the "comic book" form, with its traditional emphasis on the male super-hero, including a troubling tendency to personify Bangkok as threateningly female, and to play down the significance of women, especially in the Red-Shirt movement. This stands in contrast to contemporary Arab feminist writers of graphic novels on protest and uprising. Given that the Thai translation of the work as *Ta sawang* (*Open Eyed*, or *Awakened*) was very popular, what does the novel's final resolution imply for the political "awakening" of the mass? And how does this text compare with key Thai fictional radicals and anti-heroes from the novels and short stories of 20th-century Leftist writers such as Siburapha, Seni Saowaphong and Wat Wanlyangkun?



The King of Bangkok by Claudio Sopranzetti, Sara Fabbri and Chiara Natalucci (University of Toronto Press, 2021) is a translation of the 2019 Italian graphic novel *Il Re di Bangkok,* published by Reading Italy, a niche Bangkok-based press focussing specifically on Italian literature in Thai translation. It was also translated into Thai under the title *Ta sawang* (*Open Eyed*, or *Awakened*), which received the accolade of a "Notable Book Award" from sixty Thai publishers as a volume that local readers should read (p. 225), and rocketed to fame, in particular among the younger generations of largely middle-class urbanites. The book clearly resonated with the mood for renewed political protest and social change, that recommenced in 2020. This is reflected in the words of the dedication in the English-language

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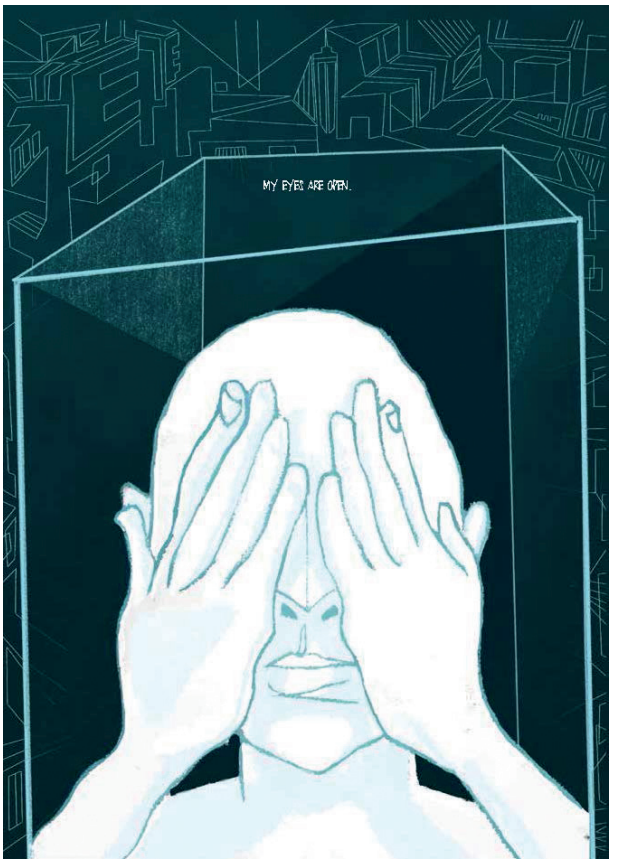

Figure 1. "My eyes are open."

version of the novel: "To all the victims of political violence, those who continue to live with scars, and those who paid the ultimate price."

In its various iterations, this paradigm-shifting, five-chapter "comic book" by three Italian authors/illustrators affords rich opportunities for discussion of both form and content, set as it is amidst the intense socio-political upheavals of the past fifty years in Thailand.[1] The opening page depicts an androgynous human, hands placed over their eyes in seeming visual reference to the well-known Japanese three wise monkeys, "hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil." Yet the text provocatively reads, "My eyes are open" (*ta sawang*, in Thai; Figure 1). This is a story of the end of delusion and the awakening of new, liberated senses, both political and existential. They emerge over the course of the narrative from a starting point at which the key protagonist appears trapped in a maze of concrete blocks, devoured by the octopus-like spread of the city, curiously personified as female. "She has swallowed … She's taken my eyes" (pp. 2-3). So commences the personal history of Nok, a blind *Isan* lottery ticket salesman who first arrives in Bangkok from Udon Thani in 1982, the year commemorating 200 years of the establishment of the city as the national capital.

Chapter One pursues Nok's plight as a naïve country boy, easily exploited by those close to him who have grown hardened by city life. The somewhat culturally conservative tale of the newly-arrived "country bumpkin" to the metropolis is a well-established trope throughout 20th-century socially committed Thai literature (known as *wannakam phuea chiwit*), examples of which readily appear in English translation.[2] It

[1] I draw here on the terminology adopted by Rasha Chatta in her discussion of Arabic graphic narratives (2023): "I employ the term 'graphic narratives' interchangeably with the more commonly-used term 'comics' as an all- encompassing category comprising various sub-genres, or art forms, such as manga, comics albums, graphic novels, *bandes dessinées*, i.e. any kind of sequential art narrative published either in print – in magazines and book format – or online – on websites and blogs" (page unnumbered).

[2] These include the short story collection by Benedict Anderson and Ruchira Mendiones, *In the Mirror* (1985); David Smyth's editions of Ko Surangkhanang, *Ying khon chua* (*The Prostitute,* 1937) and Siburapha, *Behind*

has also been discussed more widely by economists, such as in the seminal work *From Peasant Girls to Bangkok Masseuses* by Pasuk Phongpaichit (1982) on the experience of Thai women migrating to employment in the sex industry in the early 80s; and by anthropologists such as Mary Beth Mills (2014, 2012, 2008, 2005a, 2005b, 2003, 2001a, 2001b, 1999a, 1999b, 1999c, 1998, 1997 and 1995) on the complexities of Thai female migrant labour in relation to globalisation and the need for rural/urban obfuscations.

Figure 2. The blouse: Sadao in *Monrak Transistor;* Nok and Gai in *The King of Bangkok*.

The trope of the disloyalty of a relative who welcomes the newcomer to Bangkok and fails in their duty of care as the result of the city's corrosive effect on their morality is also a common one in Thai literature and film alike. Nok's first exposure to exploitation comes at the hands of his cousin Boon, who takes a cut of the pay Nok receives for the job that Boon has found him. It marks the first of many similar experiences of exploitation by those in positions of power over him, until the scales finally fall from Nok's eyes at the conclusion of the story. This early life lesson in urban depravity echoes the plot of *Ong Bak* (2003), the Thai martial arts blockbuster in which the *Isan* village kickboxer Ting (played by Tony Jaa) is repeatedly manipulated by a relative who has dyed his hair blond and insists on calling himself George! The betrayal of the country boy "fresh off the boat" is similarly the mainstay of novels such as the late Wat Wanlyangkun's tour de force *Monrak Transistor* (first published in 1981), subsequently reinterpreted in cinematic form by Pen-ek Ratanaruang's 2001 movie of the same name. Sopranzetti, Fabbri and Natalucci reference the film directly on p. 71 where we see the newly-weds Nok and Gai almost re-enacting the opening scenes in the idyllic union that precedes the trauma of inevitable migrancy and separation. The pregnant Gai is depicted on p.73 wearing the same design of blouse that the hapless anti-hero Phaen buys for his wife

the Painting and other stories; translations by Susan Kepner (1996, 2005); and my own translations of the veteran Thai short story writer Sidaorueang. The theme has also been extensively explored in English-language academic stuies, such as Ellen Bocuzzi, *Bangkok Bound* (2012), marketed as "the first book to examine this body of literature and to distil the messages conveyed by Thai migrant writers about their experiences".

Sadao in the film version of the story, an item of clothing that fades and grows tattered as a metaphor for their damaged relationship (Figure 2). This detail is testimony to the replication of dominant Thai narratives of the city/country divide, both conservative and Leftist, as well as to the extensive research into imagery that was undertaken for the production of *The King of Bangkok*, discussed in the interview with the authors in Appendix II at the close of the work.[3]

Nok's marriage to Gai takes place in Chapter 2, following a period back in his home-village in Udon Thani. Once things have looked up for him with work in Bangkok, we see him buy a motorbike and travel back to *Isan* to reunite with his father. Nok has a serious road accident en route, though this seems to play no further significant role in the story, other than as a pretext for meeting Gai, who nurses him. Despite the visual emphasis on opening eyes immediately after the accident, this is not, however, the moment when Nok loses his sight, which comes at a much later incident, in which he is injured by a bullet fired at him in Red-Shirt street protests in 2010.

Gai is initially reticent to return Nok's amorous advances because he talks so incessantly about the wonders of Bangkok – setting up a necessary, though oversimplified, binary tension between city and countryside that is the flavour of so much Thai popular culture of the 20th and 21st centuries. Eventually, however, she acquiesces and when Gai falls pregnant with their son Sun, Nok chooses, like so many in his situation, to fulfil his financial commitment to the family by becoming a migrant worker. As Sopranzetti, Fabbri and Natalucci explain, the character of Nok, and all others who appear in the book, is a composite, constructed from the stories and interviews Sopranzetti collated as an anthropologist in over a decade of fieldwork in Thailand. His research focussed primarily on the lives of Red-Shirt motorcycle taxi drivers in Bangkok in the years of political upheaval prior to the 2014 military takeover, and is published in his *Red Journeys: Inside the Thai Red-Shirt Movement* (Silkworm Books, 2012) and *Owners of the Map* (University of California Press, 2017). While both these texts are aimed primarily at an academic readership, *The King of Bangkok* is intended, according to its authors, to reach a wider audience, beyond the university. Although the graphic novel format and certain elements of the narrative support this mission, the accessibility of the text is in some sense also limited by its publication in an ethnographic series by a university press (Toronto) and, not least, by its daunting price tag.

The question of intended audience is one of two key issues that, in my view, troubles *The King of Bangkok*; and it is a question that the authors address to some extent in the interview section of the text with the necessary degree of humility and caution. How do three Westerners (*farang*) fulfil the complex task of presenting material from the bottom up as an accurate, yet nevertheless mediated, reflection of the subaltern Thai experience to a non-Thai readership with no presumed understanding of and exposure to Thai Studies? How can the authors avoid falling back on stereotypical framings of Thailand through the Western lens while still making it accessible to a Western readership?

Sopranzetti, Fabbri and Nattalucci clearly assert that they did not wish to tell a tale

[3] For further discussion of the tensions between conservative and radical agendas at play in the depiction of the city/country divide in *Monrak Transistor*, see Harrison, 2005.

of Thailand, "Virgil-like" (p. 218), through the eyes of the Western narrator or traveller – a formula impossible to avoid in the Hollywood depiction of Thailand, evidenced in movies such as *The Beach, Anna and the King, The Impossible, Brokedown Palace* and the egregious *Hangover Part II.* As the authors explain in the interview section of the text:

> From a graphic point of view,… the main challenge was to re-create local atmospheres and scenes without relying on the orientalist stereotypes that often dominate the Western gaze and associate Thailand with mysticism, Buddhism, pristine nature, or criminality, stressing the distance between "us" and "them". (p. 223)

Despite this, however, the uninformed Western reader's experience of Thailand is inevitably largely shaped by popular Western cultural values – expressed through cinema, documentaries, novels, magazine articles, news reports and popular music alike; and it seems impossible for *The King of Bangkok* to entirely circumvent this in its aim to appeal to such a readership. This is demonstrated, in my view, by an over-representation of the *farang* tourist in the novel that appears at times contrived. Nok, the blind lottery-ticket vendor, appears to do an incredulously roaring trade with tourists, as one Italian character exclaims to his Thai girlfriend, "Bellezza, oggi mi sento fortunato. Prendimi un biglietto." (Hey gorgeous, I'm feeling lucky today. Buy me a ticket.) (p. 82). "Over the years, tourists became part of my life," Nok reveals, "Now they are just people I sell my tickets to or another background noise I use to orient myself" (ibid.).

Similarly, although Sopranzetti assures us that many of his informants had worked as migrant labourers on the tourist island of Koh Phangan, this is perhaps not the most obvious site of employment for *Isan* construction workers; nor is Koh Phangan renowned for a particularly large number of high-rise, luxury hotel complexes, unlike Samui, Phuket, Khao Lak, Krabi and other popular beach locations, let alone Thai intellectual travellers on the boat to the island reading So Sivaraksa's *Siam in Crisis* in English! (Figure 3). What Koh

Figure 3. Nok travels to Koh Phangan.

Phangan does boast, however, is the notorious Full Moon parties that many Western readers may have heard of – just as they will have heard of the tsunami of 2004 which makes a fleeting appearance in the story (p. 143) for no apparently important reason that directly affects its protagonists, and about which Nok strangely reads in English in the *Bangkok Post*. We are further required to suspend disbelief at the stage of the story (Chapter 3) in which Nok, Hong and other Thai workers join the tourists at the Full Moon revelry as apparent equals, just as we do the scene in which Hong seduces a vodka-swilling Russian tourist who invites him to "dance" on the boat out to the island. This echoes what I see again as a Western misrepresentation of Thai sexual practice referred to in Chapter 1 of the novel, when Hong and Nok go seeking sexual pleasures in one of Bangkok's red-light districts and are clearly depicted drinking in a go-go bar traditionally the preserve of foreigners rather than less wealthy local Thai clients (p. 34). What Thai ice-factory workers could afford such a costly night out?

More convincing, by contrast, is the narration of Nok's dependency as a hard-working construction worker on amphetamines in order to sustain his efforts. When he loses his job, like so many others, in the Tom Yam Kung economic crisis of 1997, rather than return home to his wife and child, he remains on the island wallowing in addiction. Again, we are reminded of Phaen, the protagonist in *Monrak Transistor*, trapped amidst the forces of globalisation and unable to find his way back. At the close of Chapter 3, Gai arrives to tell Nok, in her frustration, that their relationship is over: "For a long time … I thought you had a new family. But it's worse than I imagined. I came down here to tell you face to face that this is over. … We are done" (p. 113).

Figure 4. Nok and Gai meet General Sae Daeng.

It comes as something of a surprise, therefore, that at the commencement of Chapter 4, in 2001, Nok, Gai and Sun are reunited as a nuclear family unit and back living together in Bangkok. It seems as though Gai's words have gone unheeded, and the reconciliation is not described in the novel (though Nok is inexplicably free of his amphetamine addiction and now driving a motorcycle taxi). This brings me to the second, and more serious reservation that I have about *The King of Bangkok,* and one that perhaps reflects the state of the field of Thai Studies more widely: that is, the visibility of women and the audibility of

the female voice. Aside from the supporting role of Gai, there are no other female characters whatsoever in this text. Nok has a father who figures in much of the narrative, even from the grave, but his mother is entirely absent, except by implication.

More importantly, despite the book's important emphasis on contemporary politics and the Red-Shirt movement in Chapter 5, and its regular depictions of Thaksin Shinawatra, it includes not a single image of Thaksin's sister, Yingluck, Thailand's first female prime minister, in office from 2011 to 2014.[4] Sopranzetti, Fabbri and Natalucci's account of the Red-Shirt movement is an overtly masculine one, paying little or no attention to the central role played by women in the organisation and running of street protests. In the scenes in which Nok and Gai are introduced to General Seh Daeng, the Red-Shirt leader (pp. 168–9), not long before the general's assassination in May 2010, he thanks Gai in the most patriarchal of statements: "It's women like you who are doing most of the work, looking after our men and elders" (Figure 4). While this may be a direct quotation of the General's "wise" observations, its effect in the graphic novel is to relegate women to a supporting rather than central role in the protest movement. Coupled with this comes the foreboding presence of the feminine as a negative force through the depiction of dystopian Bangkok as female, at least in the English-language version of this text. The anonymous warning issued to Nok in Chapter 1 that, "She'll swallow you. She swallows everybody. By the time you realize it … It will be too late to leave" (p. 35) appears in unfortunate proximity to the depiction of a female sex worker packing up her clothes and her earnings as Hong lies, sexually spent, in his underpants on the bed (Figure 5). This is sadly the stuff of the luckless American protagonists of Hollywood's corny comedy *Hangover, Part II:* "Bangkok has them now; and she'll never let them go!"

Figure 5. "It will be too late. Leave!"

It is arguably the case that the relative absence of women in *The King of Bangkok* may be due in part to the traditional form of the graphic novel itself. While it is to be

[4] For a discussion of the representation and misrepresentation of Yingluck and the feminine in contemporary Thai culture, see Harrison, 2017.

enthusiastically welcomed that academia in general, and Thai Studies in particular, has embraced this relatively new and innovative form of presenting research findings, its limitations must, however, also be addressed. With its close connection to the hyper-masculine adventure stories of *Captain America* and *Superman*, the graphic novel has tended to focus on the experiences of the all-male hero. As Rasha Chatta explains in her recent work on the Arabic graphic novel (2023, page unnumbered):

> Scholars specialised in North American and Western European comics tend to recognise the overarching predominance of a male-centred focus that has shaped and tainted the field since its inception (Gibson 2016; Aldama 2021; Chute 2010; Brown and Loucks 2014). In the words of Brown and Loucks: 'The comics industry has typically been characterised as a masculine domain. ... Certainly the comic book industry is, and always has been, dominated by men and masculine themes. Men constitute the majority of writers, artists, editors, letters and colourists. Men also serve as the default characters ... and mainstream comic book stories tend to focus on masculine heroic struggles. And male consumers have historically been the largest demographic for comic books.' (Brown and Loucks 2014).

The King of Bangkok, supported by Sopranzetti's ethnographic research on male motorcycle taxi drivers and their link to the political protest movement, thus leaves little place for queens, princesses, female prime ministers or subaltern heroines. Yet there are certainly precedents for subverting the masculine focus of the graphic novel, as Chatta's work (2020, 2023) on contemporary Arabic feminist approaches to the fiction of popular protest reveals. Across the Middle East, female graphic novelists such as Nour Hifaoui Fakhoury, Lena Merhej, Zeina Abirached, Haytham Haddad and Fatman Mansour, to name but a few, are exploring the gendered experience of participating in street protests and their long years of marginalisation in patriarchal societies such as those of Lebanon, Syria, Palestine and Egypt. Chatta refers, by way of example, to the work of Daou et al. (2021), quoting the caption of the opening chapter as follows (in Chatta 2023, page unnumbered):

> The vexing question of how to start a comic on feminism(s) in Lebanon was solved by reality. Soon after we began working on the script, an uprising erupted on October 17, 2019. While participating in various debates and actions related to the uprising, we noticed the clearly gendered power dynamics at play during demonstrations and meetings. How could we not start there?

Rather than providing a starting point, the popular uprising of the Thai Red-Shirt movement and its subsequent dissolution serve instead to conclude the plot of Sopranzetti, Fabbri and Natalucci's *The King of Bangkok.* Chapter Five of the novel depicts the two-stage demise of the street protests: firstly with the violent suppression of demonstrators in May 2010, when Nok's long-time friend Hong is shot dead by the Thai military, and Nok himself loses his sight from a bullet lodged in his brain; and secondly, two years later, when the exiled Red-Shirt champion, Thaksin Shinawatra, addresses a

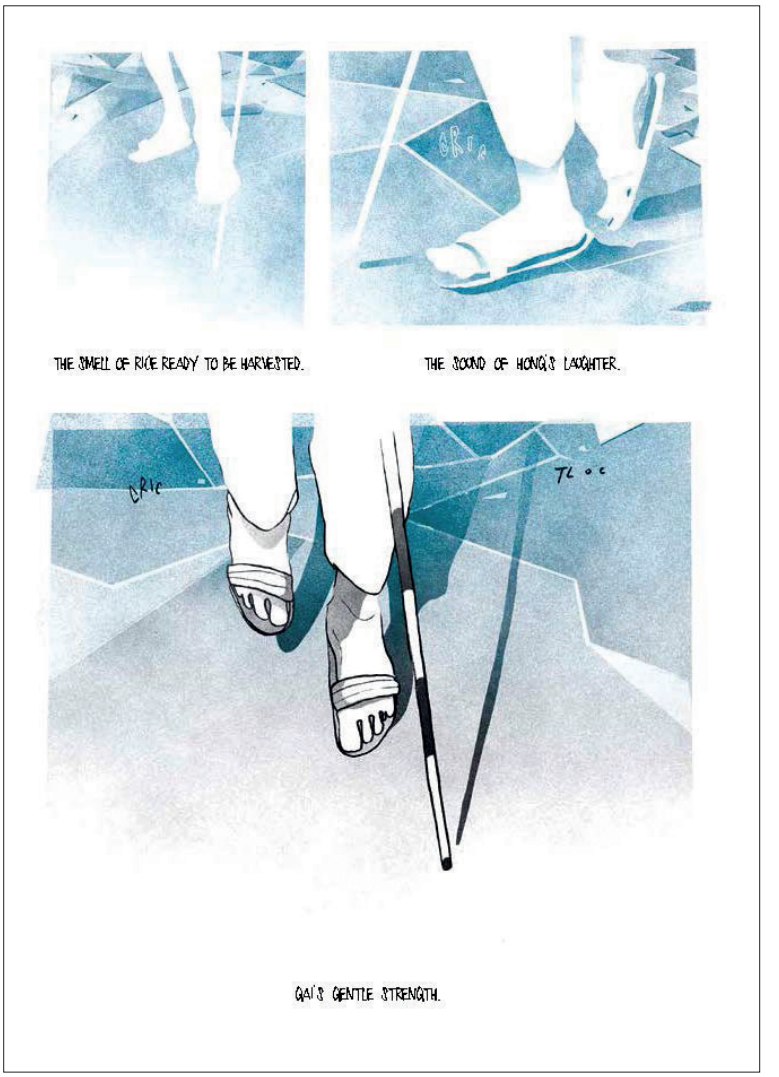

Figure 6. "The smell of rice ready to be harvested."

commemorative gathering of his supporters and calls for an end to all further protest in order to peacefully contest a forthcoming election. For Nok, this is the ultimate betrayal in the long list of betrayals that shape the narrative arc of the novel from its opening in 1982. What, then, remains for its hero in the closing pages?

Nok may be physically blind, but in another key sense the scales have fallen from his eyes and he has finally gained new (in)sight (*ta sawang*) into the cause of his suffering in the city. This insight plays out as a rejection of the entanglements of Bangkok, with its all-engrossing female tentacles, and a (re)turn instead to the "purity" of the countryside. Nok's revitalised longing for: "The smell of rice ready to be harvested. The sound of Hong's laughter. Gai's gentle strength. Sun's unpredictable future" (pp. 204–5; Figure 6) sees him step into the iconic entrance of Hualamphong Station, undoubtedly bound for *Isan.* "It's to them I now want to return" (pp. 106–7), he says, as the novel promises happy family unity through the final image of Nok and Gai, arm in arm, backs to the viewer, walking into the distance.

The King of Bangkok thus ends on a somewhat well-trodden path of Thai socialist-realist convention; its resolution of a return to the countryside and its privileging of the bourgeois family unit were classic features of socially committed filmmaking of the 1970s and 80s. It is redolent, for example, of Prince Chatrichalerm Yukhol's 1984 movie *Thongphun Kokepo, ratsadorn tem khan* (marketed in English as *Citizen II*), which in turn inspired some of the neo-conservative explorations of a cultural return to the rural in the aftermath of the 1997 financial crisis, following in the footsteps of the late King Bhumibol's advice to "walk backwards into a *khlong*" under the ideological aegis of the self-sufficiency economy (*sethatkit pho phiang*). Films made during this latter period – such as Pen-ek Ratanaruang's *Rueang talok 69* (6ixty-Nine) – consciously replicated *Citizen II* in having their key protagonists bring an end to their existential and financial plight by a departure from the cruelty of Bangkok and a return to their homes of rural origin. So, too, are we back in the territory of Pen-ek's reinterpretation of Wat Wanlyangkun's *Monrak transistor,* in which Phaen finally realises that his dreams of success in the city are but unattainable fantasies that pale in comparison to the simple promise of the pastoral. As such, although the awakened protagonist of *The King of Bangkok* is depicted in a somewhat ghostly form – "I am awake" (p. 5) – he is far from the fully embodied and menacing spectre represented by the peasant revolutionary Sai Sima in Seni Saowaphong's 1957 novel *Pisat* (The Spectre/The Ghost), who makes the legendary speech to the assembled elite guests at a high-class Bangkok dinner party: "I am a spectre brought forth by time to haunt the people of the old world who have old ideas. Nothing can console you; nor can you stop the march of time that will bring forth yet more spectres" (Seni in Chusak, 2015). Nor is Nok a direct descendant of the Marxist heros of Siburapha's novels and short stories, such as "Lend us a Hand" (*Kho raeng noi thoe*) and "The Awakening" (*Khao tuen*), despite the similarity of the latter title to the sense of *ta sawang* (see Siburapha, 2000).

Rather, Nok bears a much closer resemblance to Wat Wanlyangkun's defeated anti-hero Phaen, a character created by the author in 1981, along loosely autobiographical lines, as a reflection of his desperation at the failure of the Octobrist political movement to evince any real political change.

It is perhaps surprising, therefore, that in its Thai translation as *Ta sawang,* Sopranzetti, Fabbri and Nattalucci's *Il Re di Bangkok/The King of Bangkok,* became such a sensational icon of the burgeoning youth protests of the 2020s in the Thai capital, except in the sense that such protests were built on the ashes of the largely rural Red-Shirt movement, and in the wake of its return to relative oblivion in the provinces. As Sai Sima assures his terrified fellow diners, and the readers of *Pisat,* it is impossible to stop the march of time that will bring forth yet more spectres.

The characters that Sopranzetti, Fabbri and Nattalucci have brought to life in this powerful graphic novel reveal their hopes and disappointments to a new readership in Thai Studies – a gift to the field and an inspiration to further presentations of academic research in this exciting format.

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The Impossible (2012)*,* dir. J.A. Bayona