

Critique

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A Useful Ghost: The Dystopian Satire



The cinema of Thailand usually displays some moments of thrilling horror or light comedy, of course not in a compartmentalised way, after which it sometimes fade out of our sight again. But, in the recent years, a new generation has appeared in the world of Thai cinema, which has been able to gage at traditional trends and give cinema a deep medium of society and philosophy. Ratchapoom Boonbunchachoke is one of the most daring and innovative directors within this new wave of Thai cinema.

His first feature film *A Useful Ghost* is not just a film but a multi-layered visual poetry of human emotions, silent politics and existential crisis. The hidden sadness behind the comedy and the multi-dimensional makeup of the socio-political system have established the film as a grand narrative of gender equality and an open protest against the political system. Yet, this ambition also raises the possibility of overstatement, as the

symbolic density put much burden on the emotional clarity of the film, making the political inclination a declared rather than experienced one.

The film's story revolves around Nat (Davika Hoorne). Nat dies in a weird way and unfortunately because of the dusty environment of her house. Upon death, her soul gets stuck inside a red coloured vacuum cleaner. This situation looks funny at first sight, but director Boonbunchachoke has presented it very sensitively. The treatment remains sensitive but often resorts to quirk as an aesthetic sensibility that underplays death and confinement more than it critiques it.

The relationship of Nat's soul and her husband Mars (Witsarut Himmarat) goes beyond the physical world. Mars does not want to lose his wife even though trapped his soul in a machine, he feels the same physical yearning for his beloved wife. Here the director has shown how love conquers even

the impossible. But this personal love story soon becomes a social conflict. Mars's traditional family cannot take this 'unusual' incident easily. Through this, the traditional rules and regulations of the society are questioned which value social mundanity more than personal passions. In the same time, the conflict is sketched with the help of broader strokes, and the social critique is at times simplified, since the resistance becomes an abstract symbol of the family as a tradition rather than a social force that could be entirely articulated.

Class conflict and the philosophy of the 'useful soul' are two of the most significant themes in the film. An important twist in the film is when a poor worker dies due to dust in the factory, which is owned by Nat's family. This event gives a new meaning to the soul of the drama. He decides that since he is imprisoned in a vacuum cleaner, he will clean the factory with the help of that machine and prove himself to be a "beneficent spirit" instead of the traditional ghostly horror image.

This is where the director's scathing social criticism becomes evident. Is it necessary for a person to be 'useful' even when he is dead? In a capitalistic society like this, the value of a man depends only on his usefulness or productive usefulness; even in death, the worker or person must be exploited. A very powerful metaphor of the film is how a web of economic exploitation is created utilizing the innate affection behind this 'utility' of the drama. The political satire is such that the very idea of trapping a man's soul in a machine to make it 'useful' even after his death is the ultimate antithesis to modern capitalist society. Politically, the

culture of oppression and invisibility that has been in the history of Thailand, the director has very tactfully inculcated in it. The spirit of the play reveals that even after death a man can be exploited by the powerful. The mentality regarding the death of workers as a 'technical error' and the commodification of dead bodies paints a dystopian picture.



Without directly raising any political slogans, the film displays how the personal memories and emotions of a common man are sacrificed to the national or economic machinery. The antagonism is not just for the sake of humour, it puts a disturbing question mark on the audience's mind – Are we really free souls, or are we all just a "useful" part of some larger machinery?

Equality between opposites is the central conflict of the film. *A Useful Ghost* is

constantly going through an oscillating situation between two diametrically opposite ideas. For example, life versus death: the relationship between the soul and human existence; modernity versus tradition: the soul in a machine as in a modern fantasy, the family barrier as in an ancient social chain, meaningful versus poor: the difference between the death of a factory owner and a worker.

The director has drawn the picture of a complex society by isolating each of these opposite poles. The pace of the story is sometimes slow and cold, and sometimes it shakes like a nightmare.

The art of the deprived voice of the society within the ambit of the politics of inclusion is a unique feature of the film, in which the charm of strong characterization plays a major role. The director has given place to gay lovers and physically challenged people very naturally in the story. Generally, there is a sympathetic or suggestive tone while showing these people on the screen of the movie, but the dwarfs did not do that. He wants to make it clear that they are not a separate part of society, rather their presence is very human and easy. It is this egalitarian approach that has made the film stand in the line of modern world cinema.

Cinematography and art direction are top notch. The use of colours is very symbolic here. Nat's deep blue dress and bright red vacuum cleaner make a striking contrast. Pasit Tандачанурат embodies a distinctive style in this political sex comedy, using an arriflex camera, a combination of visually rich shots (which elevates it above a horror comedy to the ranks of a human cinema), placing humour and horror in overlapping

positions to portray deep themes of memory, grief, and political trauma. Photography is not just a medium of storytelling here, it is a powerful language in itself. Director Boonbunchachoke's skill takes the audience inside an enclosed and breath-taking environment.

Every frame here behaves like a static painting on a canvas- composed with obsessive precision, yet frozen in emotional stasis. The use of bright colours, especially the aggressive red of the vacuum cleaner and the saturated blue in the decoration of the Nat's, constructs a surreal visual world that feels deliberately artificial. While this glow creates a fairy-tale-like enchantment when viewed from above, the shadows at its core generate an atmosphere of deep gloom and emotional coldness. The camera's long shots are not merely aesthetic choices; they function as a visual strategy to emphasize the isolation, inertia, and emotional vacancy of the characters. The beauty of the images often competes with, and at times threatens to overpower, the human suffering they are meant to represent.

The film positions itself as an exemplary work of Thai neo-noir, yet this stylization risks becoming self-indulgent. In the field of music, the work of Chaibovon Seelukwa is undeniably distinctive. His use of pulsating, old-classical motifs generates a persistent rhythm of uneasiness and panic that grips the audience. However, the music's intensity occasionally dictates the emotional response too aggressively, leaving little room for subtlety or ambiguity. The "memory lab" concept, designed to "relieve" people of depleting memories, is introduced with

striking thematic potential, while Nat is a spirit, ironically detached from the mundane world, serves as a symbolic diagnostic zone. Yet these ideas remain more evocative than fully interrogated, functioning as metaphors that gesture toward depth without always sustaining it.

A Useful Ghost ultimately frames itself as a dystopian narrative, portraying a world in which human memory and emotion are imprisoned within a regulated system. The director explicitly draws upon the shadow of political killings in Thailand since 2000, asserting that the darkness of our imagined future is born from the black history of the past. While this political intent is commendably fearless, the allegory sometimes feels overstated, as though the film is more invested in announcing its message than allowing it to emerge organically from character and narrative. The contrast in reception- its lack of commercial success at home versus its international critical acclaim- reveals a telling fracture in interpretation: Western audiences read it primarily as a critique of capitalism, while Thai audiences perceive it as a mirror of their country's political instability. This duality underscores the film's thematic ambition but also exposes the risk of its symbolism being too broad, too easily repurposed by external perspectives.

This is not merely a ghost story; it presents itself as a philosophical provocation. The film insists on forcing us to confront unsettling questions: Why is love insufficient? How can death transform a human being into a machine? Yet these questions, while powerful, sometimes hover at the level of abstract declaration rather than lived experience. The characters become conduits for ideas rather than fully realized emotional subjects, which weakens the philosophical weight the film strives to carry.

As a trailblazing work of Thailand's new wave, the film stands as proof that art does not exist solely to entertain—it seeks to unsettle, accuse, and disturb the viewer's moral comfort. Still, this ambition is accompanied by a certain rigidity of purpose. The film does not invite the audience into dialogue so much as confront them with conclusions. Its central claim—that until we confront the crimes of our past and the systemic sickness of society, the future will remain trapped in socio-political and psychological falsehoods- is forceful but uncompromising. Like the soul of its own drama, the film traps its audience inside an invisible machine of meaning, compelling us to wrestle with what it means to be “useful” in a world that turns human emotion into a managed resource.

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