

# When Art-house Director Enters Commercial Film Industry: A Case Study of the Film "Heart Attack"

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## Abstract

This paper is a study on the film *Heart Attack* (also known as *Freelance Ham Puay... Ham Phak... Ham Rak Mor*) (2015) by Nawapol Thamrongrattanarit which has attained success in the box office despite its alternative filmmaking style to the mainstream. Using textual analysis and intertextuality to study how the art-house director placed himself in the commercial industry with a film that demonstrates both the art-house and commercial elements, results show that the director's understanding on audience demands and his strategy of embodying the art-house spirit underneath the commercial contents have been effectively performed in the film.

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## Introduction

Entertaining commercial films are not surprised to attain box office success. Yet the film *Heart Attack* (also known as *Freelance Ham Puay... Ham Phak... Ham Rak Mor*) (2015) written and directed by an art-house film director, Nawapol Thamrongrattanarit, has been a rare case which topped the domestic box office for two weeks and recorded as the second-highest-grossing Thai film of 2015 (Harvis, 2018). Meanwhile, *Heart Attack* has received most awards in the

Thailand National Film Association Awards 2016 with eight awards in total and it was screened at various film festivals (Thamrongrattanarit, n.d.). Therefore, this paper will discuss how *Heart Attack* attained its commercial success despite being produced in an alternative style and how Nawapol retained his artistic style in a commercial film.

First, this paper will provide a brief introduction of the Thai film history and

analysis on some notable successful films in recent years for understanding the specific demands and major characteristics of the Thai film industry. Besides *Heart Attack* in particular, attention will be paid also on Nawapol's previous work for analysing his filmmaking style so as to discuss the uniqueness of Nawapol's work and his role as an art-house director. Furthermore, comparing *Heart Attack* with both other work by Nawapol and the typical commercially successful films, it could help examine whether the commercial film industry has affected Nawapol's filmmaking style in *Heart Attack* and how *Heart Attack* contrasts the general commercial films accordingly.

The latter part of this paper will be looking deeper into the social and cultural representations behind the drama of *Heart Attack*, thus, to explore the potential relationship between audiences and the film and review the potential factors for the success of *Heart Attack*.

Overall, this paper manages to give a clue on how art-house directors could place themselves in the Thai film industry when facing a difficulty in finding domestic audiences. Or conversely, the possibilities of redefining the border between commercial and art-house films, like a return to the 'New wave' of Thai cinema in late 1990s to early 2000s.

## Literature Review

Most of the research on contemporary Thai cinema could be divided into three main categories: The 'New wave' cinema, the independent cinema, and

international influence on commercial Thai films in the 2000s.

Thai cinema has had a significant change since the 'New wave' period which started from the late 1990s with notable directors like Pen-ek Ratanaruang and Nonzee Nimibutr. These former advertisement directors became jobless under the influence of the 1997 Asia Crisis and therefore, they decided to pursue artistic goals instead (Baumgärtel, 2012). Although during the 'New wave' period, films could be both commercially and artistically successful (Lewis, 2006), it was often mentioned as part of the independent cinema in publications like *Thai Cinema* and *Southeast Asian independent cinema : essays, documents, interviews*. However, Musikawong(2007) regarded the directors as "semi-independent" since they have co-produced with the industry. It has somehow reflected the blurry boundary between art-house and commercial in the earlier days, but after all, these directors are less active in the commercial film industry nowadays.

Still, the 'New Wave' directors did not earn as much focus as Apichatpong Weerasethakul, the most internationally notable Thai director who have numerous achievements in major international film festivals, including the "Palme d'Or" Prize at the 2010 Cannes Film Festival <sup>1</sup> for *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*

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<sup>1</sup> The "Palme d'Or" prize is awarded to the Best Feature Film and its director in the official competition at the Cannes Film Festival. It is recognised to be one of the most significant awards for filmmakers internationally.

(2010), let alone other growing directors. Often, there are studies that solely focused on his work. For instance, the article “Primitive Gazing: Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s Sensational Inaction Cinema” is a case study on the unusual storytelling style of Apichatpong.

However, due to restrictions in language and culture with local-dominated contents, the early mainstream Thai films hardly faced the international audiences (Panyasopon, 2012, p.2632-2637), until the success of *Nang-Nak* (1999) and *Ong-Bak* (2003). Therefore, there started to be research focusing on how Thai films could be sold to international markets and studies on horror and action films in the early 2000s like *Asian Horror* and “Towards a Southeast Asian Model of Horror: Thai Horror Cinema in Malaysia, Urbanization, and Cultural Proximity”.

Nevertheless, in recent years, the film industry of Thailand has been rapidly evolving. When *Ong-Bak* has been one of the icons of Thai cinema in the eyes of the international audiences, now this kind of films have almost gone in the domestic market. Instead, as Kitiarsa (2012) suggests in her study of two Thai comedies produced in 2005-2006 with a social science perspective, “Although scholars have examined the different generations of Thai cinema, none so far has focused on Thai comedy film of any period despite the fact that the comedy genre has remained in the mainstream for far longer than the so-called ‘New wave’ and other generations” (p.205). Ainslie (2018) points out a similar view as well, “Comedy and romantic comedy draws largest crowds nationally and the biggest box office takings,

it is highly popular in the domestic market while under explored on both a popular and academic level” (p.169-170). However, since the book *Thai cinema: the complete guide* is ambitious in creating an overview of the full history of Thai cinema which is composed of plenty short film essays, it is believed that there could be more in-depth research on the recent Thai film industry.

Yet *Heart Attack*, which falls under the “Comedy /Romantic Comedy” chapter in *Thai cinema: the complete guide*, has combined art-house spirit and achieved successful results on both sides (Chaiworaporn, 2018). However, there is seldom detailed published work on the film. Currently one has focused on the young adults’ lifestyle reflected in the film (Rusmeeviengchai, 2018a; 2018b) but conducted in Thai language. As for Nawapol the director, part of Promkhuntong (2018a)’s work is the only study on his work and the main discussion is on how his earlier independent work *Mary is happy, Mary is happy* (2013) paid homage to Wong Kar Wai.

When Pen-ek says he has often been “complaining” by the local audiences since his recent films are difficult (Baumgärtel & Ratanaruang, 2012), Apichatpong struggled to find domestic funds and audiences as well (Baumgärtel & Weerasethakul, 2012). This has reflected how Thai independent or art-films are generally not welcomed in the domestic market.

Therefore, Nawapol and *Heart Attack* are definitely worth a compelling discussion on how they have taken the balance in-between art-house and commercial, thus attaining success on both sides.

## Methodology

Textual analysis with supplementary reference and intertextuality will be the main method for conducting this study.

In order to understand more on the evolving commercial film industry, this paper will first briefly analyze the main characteristics of the box office hits in recent years. Then, other text related to the consumption habits, culture and lifestyle will also be taken as reference to examine the relationship between the local audiences and box office hits. Nevertheless, it is essential to clarify that this is merely indicative for understanding the commercial industry and there could be many other factors influencing box office performance.

Next, Nawapol's notable feature films *36* (2012) , *Mary is Happy, Mary is Happy* and *Die Tomorrow* (2017) will be in focus on both its content and filmmaking techniques for looking into Nawapol's art-house spirit.<sup>2</sup>

In the end, this paper will put the findings from the above methods together with *Heart Attack* for further analysis and compare the condition of commercial industry and independent cinema

by PEST (Political, Economic, Social/cultural and Technological) analysis so as to investigate how the film could have been affected by or have taken the balance in-between the different external factors.

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<sup>2</sup> Despite *Die Tomorrow* being produced later than *Heart Attack*, it has presented concepts similar to *Heart Attack* and therefore, it will also be discussed

## The Commercial Industry

### Major Characteristics

Overall, the highest-grossing Thai films in recent years (See Appendix A) shows that the genre of comedy and romance have been playing a significant role in the domestic box office. *Pee Mak* (2013) which falls under the category of horror, romance and comedy and adapted the story of a well-known folk "Mae Nak Phra Khanong" in the country has topped the list of the all-time box office record. In fact, the folk has been adapted for numerous film versions previously, but none of them were presented in a focus of the romantic story between the protagonists like in *Pee Mak*. Instead of paying attention to "Mae Nak", the ghost wife, which other films that adapted the folk does, the film used "Pee Mak" , the name of the husband, as its title, implying that it is an alternative presentation of the folk as well. The success of the *King Naresuan* series is although remarkable, history does not emerge to be a strong genre in general. As for *Nakee 2* (2018)'s record, it is believed that being a successor of the TV drama *Nakee* (2016) has more or less contributed to it.

Apart from the genre, a number of these box office hits have also shared several basic characteristics.

### Film Content

**Urban Worker Settings.** No matter in *Bangkok Traffic (Love) Story* (2009), *Atm Er-Rak Error* (2012), *I Fine.. Thank You Love You* (2014), *Bikeman* (2018) or *Brother of the Year* (2018), characters in these films are office workers from the

middle-class (or its wanna-be) and the plots have always reflected the realistic concerns of the citizens.

**Fantasy of Protagonists.** Reflection of social reality is a tool for the audience to get themselves involved in films, yet sometimes it is also important to go slightly beyond with a scent of imagination. For instance, in the plot of *Bad Genius* (2017), the protagonists have obtained success in helping the others to cheat in school exams, thus leading them to launch a business to help more students to cheat in an international exam. Such a fantasy although is imaginary, under a rather feasible setting, it could still make the incident seem to be ‘possible’ and looks appealing for the audiences.

**Local Elements.** Local jokes, wordplays, habits and character images are frequently found in films, often for comical effects. For instance, the habit of taking public transports like BTS, the skytrain in the Greater Bangkok Metropolis, in *Bangkok Traffic (Love) Story* and Motorcycle Taxi in *Bikeman*, as well as the feminized male or queer characters in *Tootsies & The Fake* (2019). As a medium of reflecting its culture, sometimes the films also feature other cultural themes, like the Karma belief in *Pee Mak* and a plot about monks in *Joking Jazz 4G* (2018).

**International Outlook.** While the above characteristics might also be commonly found in commercial films from other regions, international outlook is believed to be a more specific characteristic for Thai films. Not only are there scenes filmed outside the country like *Hello*

*Stranger* (2010) which presented a romantic story when the protagonists travelled to South Korea, there are often plots involving foreigners too. For instance, the female protagonist in *Brother of the Year* has married a Japanese-Thai male and built her family in Japan. Moreover, the plot in *I Fine.. Thank You Love You* has reflected the concern of urban Thai workers in English learning by depicting how the protagonist tried to improve his poor English for getting more chances in the workplace instead of merely a romantic story between the English teacher and him. There is also often a desire of the protagonists to work overseas or in an international company.

### *Filmmaking Techniques/ Strategies*

**Narrative.** Overall, these films used a chronological narrative order so that the general audiences could follow. Besides, first person narration by protagonists are frequently used as demonstrated in *Atm Er-Rak Error*, *Bikeman* and *Tootsies & The Fake* to get the audiences involved and understand the plot easily, particularly at the beginning of the films.

**The Use of Silence.** The comedy is not merely created through actions or dialogues, but also a moment of silence with static shots. For instance, in a scene of *Atm Er-Rak Error*, the workers were gossiping about their boss. Then when their boss came out from the room, there was immediately an awkward silence moment with the embarrassing yet calm faces.

**The Use of Popular Songs.** Instead of original songs for the film, it is more common for Thai films to have previously

released hit songs to feature in the films. For instance, in a scene of *Mr. Hurt*, the protagonist sang “Miss You” by GiFT My Project to express his sadness after breaking up with his girlfriend which helps the audiences relate to it. Likewise, “Kid Mak (Thinking too much)” by PALMY is featured in *Friendzone* (2018) as part of the film plot and “Kai Kai (Chicken)” by Nong Cha Cha Cha is featured in *Tootsies & The Fake* for comical effect. Meanwhile, the songs are believed to serve as a promotional function for the film and create a co-creation value for the songs.

Another main characteristic revealed in the list is that many of the box office hits are produced by the leader in the film industry, GTH studio.<sup>3</sup>

### The Film Market and its Audiences

When *Bad Genius* has surprised the international audiences and even broke the box office records of Thai films in a number of foreign countries, the domestic box office performance is impressive, but yet to the extent of stunning. Apart from the production quality and film content, it is believed one possibility of the great international success of *Bad Genius* might be that it has broken the stereotype of Thai films which are only specialised in contentless action or horror films, a scene that have been changed for a long time. In fact, the international icon of

Thai cinema, Tony Jaa and his films *Ong-Bak 3* (2010) and *Tom-Yum-Goong 2* (2013) are no longer successful as the earlier work, especially for the domestic market. It is believed that the local audience has a different demand in the film market, especially for local contents, when they could watch other international films with the same price.

For instance, since the early history in Thai cinema, international modernity has been a significant element due to urbanisation proceeding only in Bangkok which there are often depictions of foreigners and the metropolis in films (Hamilton, 1992). Nowadays, as the country is developing rapidly, metropolis might not seem to be such a great desire like in the past, but influenced by globalisation, the appetite of international modernity never fades out which still affects the tastes of audiences and gets more foreign films competing in the film market. Similarly, as Siriyuvasak (2008) suggests, exotic popular culture could make the middle-class, youths in particular, feel fashionable and modern. Nevertheless, it is also essential to recognise the importance of locality but not over exotic to serve the rurals, a huge group of audiences outside Bangkok growing strong in the domestic market. As a result, it forms a kind of ‘localised modernity’, which does not only taken from exotic but also includes some essential locality, like the realistic middle-class and workplace settings that might not be particularly attractive to international audiences, but a reachable goal and desire for the rurals by winning the hearts of urban workers’.

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<sup>3</sup> GDH559, the joint venture of GMM Grammy and Hub Ho Hin is the successor of the GTH studio dissolved in 2015, which was a joint venture of GMM Grammy, Tai Entertainment and Hub Ho Hin (Rithdee, 2016)

## The Art-house Director

Unlike the prominent directors Pen-ek and Apichatpong, Nawapol's career was developed by working as a screenwriter for commercial films like *Bangkok Traffic (Love) Story* and *The Billionaire* (2011) before getting to direct feature films. However, it did not stop him from exploring his own style and aesthetic in filmmaking. When Pen-ek has mentioned that his films are a bit slow for being commercial and it has left a lot of unsaid and unsentimental (Baumgärtel & Ratanaruang, 2012), many of Nawapol's work have definitely demonstrated such features too. Nevertheless, instead of independent, 'art-house director' might be a more suitable word for describing Nawapol when independent generally refers to financial and the mode of production, rather than necessarily linked to artistic film content.

Despite often being compared to directors like Noah Baumbach and Wes Anderson, Nawapol is actually greatly influenced by Asian Cinema, particularly for films of Wong Kar Wai which he grew up with and discussed in Promkhuntong (2018a), as well as deadpan Scandinavian and realist films (Palmer, 2014; Weeraworawit, 2017). This could be evidenced by some common characteristics found in his work.

## Themes

Through Nawapol's unique insights, 'molecule-sized' daily events could always lead to deeper discussions. For instance, the plot in *36* depicted a story of the protagonist losing data in the harddisk that she used to rely on to record what she saw and what she

has experienced. Thus, tried to question the liability of technology and the digital format as a form of recording memory, then pushed it forward to the meaning of memory and experience. As for *Mary is happy, Mary is happy*, it questions the confusions of youths towards their lives and the oppressive educational system by constructing a story based on the life of Mary, a final year student in college. The idea of *Die Tomorrow* may seem rather simple than the previous ones, as the title itself has revealed, it is about death, but in a perspective of how it appears in our daily lives without omen by depicting the usual day before the protagonists' death.

From the relationship between memory and technology, the uncertainties and oppressive education system youths are facing, to the abrupt yet calm death, these films have demonstrated a kind of "urban realism" with reflection on people's daily lives in the city and the concrete scenes (Promkhuntong, 2018b).

When Promkhuntong (2018b) points out that Nawapol has performed self-reflexivity in *Mary is happy, Mary is happy* by "illustrating the embodiment of himself as a storyteller and a Wong Kar Wai fan" and "construction of characters who have a job/hobby as a writer/ content creator or those occupy their with self-reflection when they are not working" (p. 237-238), other films of Nawapol in fact did so too. Protagonists in *36* are an art director and a location scout respectively which are part of the film crew while the view of death shown in *Die Tomorrow* is a self-reflection on

death from Nawapol and he considered it as his funeral memorial (Piyanan, 2017).

### The Iconic Style

Scenes in the three films are stuck to limited simple locations. No special effects, No grand art directions, everything is just a representation of ordinary daily lives. Moreover, the actors are performed in a deadpan and minimal yet expressive way which seem to have deep minds in their characters. This is one of the greatest features of Nawapol's work. To be realistic in the simple pictures, but also blend ultimate imaginations into it and never bore his audiences.

Usually, the pictures are fragminitized, without a strong storyline, leaving the audiences to fill up the gap by their own interpretations too. The indirect film language has formed a poetic style too. Such kind of narrative style could be common in other art-house directors, but Nawapol definitely did more than that. Playful formats have always been an icon of Nawapol. Like its title, *36* is composed of 36 scenes based on the idea of 36 frames in a traditional film and its theme of questioning the reliability of digital technology, while *Mary is happy, Mary is happy* formed the story by strictly connecting 410 feeds of the Twitter user "Marylony" into a story. As for *Die Tomorrow*, it is in a style of pseudo-documentary with separated fictional plots based on real incidents reported in news. In addition, there is often a time code and a counter on the number of deaths happening throughout the runtime, based on the

statistics of there is a death in every two seconds.

Another icon of Nawapol is the on-screen citations and captions with white text on the black background. Instead of stating information for the audience's easy-understanding, the text is conversations with the pictures. For instance, in *Die Tomorrow*, an on-screen caption stating a person's death will be either followed by a fictional plot reflecting the director's imagination on what happened before the person's death or inserted after the plots, and the on-screen citation of the twitter feeds in *Mary is happy, Mary is happy* are intertwined with the pictures.

### The Case Study of "Heart Attack"

*Heart Attack* follows the busy life of a freelance graphic designer, Yoon (played by Sunny Suwanmethanont), who has been dedicated to his work wholeheartedly. As a professional freelancer, not only Yoon has to satisfy all kinds of harsh requests from the clients, but also take jobs despite the intensive schedule in order to maintain his prestige position in the competitive industry. Then after once working for five consecutive days, his body started to alert him by strange rashes spreading on his body which brings him to a monthly appointment with the young dermatologist, Dr. Imm (played by Davika Hoorne). By following the instruction from Dr. Imm to stay a healthier life, Yoon has less time for work and the effect of prescription has affected his working performances. In the end, he lost a chance of working for a significant project. Yet when he finally got the chance for a



long vacation, he has realised the joy of leisure which he used to believe was a waste of time in the past.

### **Taking the Balance In-between**

In fact, in-between commercial and art-house or independent productions, there are different external factors to be considered.

Some situations for both kinds of productions are similar in facing challenges from the political environment and lack of support from the government (Thailand Board of Investment, 2014). However, more often, independent directors assert that they concern the concepts, visual and creativity in the films with less concern on many of the external factors except legal and censorship if planning to distribute locally (Baumgärtel & Ratanaruang, 2012; Baumgärtel & Weerasethakul, 2012). Funding is a problem, but it depends on the investors' interest in the ideas which makes it to be a work of finding the right person more than to compromise a lot in the production (Baumgärtel & Ratanaruang, 2012; Baumgärtel & Weerasethakul, 2012). Instead, a greater concern might be socio/cultural factors. It is suggested that the country's lack of education in art awareness and aesthetic discourages the local audience to appreciate art-house or independent films (Thai Enquirer, 2020) which often, the directors might have to seek support from the international audiences, although in an optimistic way, there is little pressure for the revenues and the films could after all attract a certain group of audiences transnationally. Technology in another way might facilitate the impatience of the audiences in art

appreciation as well since they might get used to other media forms in shorter durations and eye-catching, easy understanding contents.

Nevertheless, there is far more to take care when entering the commercial industry. As mentioned throughout the paper, film contents in the commercial industry were found to have certain common characteristics. These contents not only serve worryless for censorship, but more importantly, to fit the economic and socio/cultural conditions of the industry. While investors for independent films are generally more open, the box office is significant for film studios and they have certain control on the production. Moreover, they would have to combat international films which target the similar group of audiences, no matter for overseas or local distribution. Meanwhile, when the lack of education in art appreciation might only seem to be correlated to art-house films, it does impact the commercial industry too by restricting Thai films in general to pursue higher standards in aesthetics and alternative narrative methods. As a result, it forms some norms in the popular films like the common use of first person narrative. Although compared to art-house films, the pace and contents of commercial films could satisfy impatient audiences, other challenges related to technology like piracy emerged to threaten the revenue of the film industry too.

Yet *Heart Attack* was found to be a great balance in-between these different demands or factors, particularly in the aspect of economic and socio/cultural. For the best benefit in revenue, it has fulfilled the

audiences' demands by providing the typical kind of local content, yet the art-house elements, high quality of production and transnational theme of freelance opens its door to be screened at film festivals as well as distributed overseas. Conversely, when the stylish film might keep the general local audiences away and place risk for the film studio, it was compensated by other aspects in the film.

### **“Heart Attack” Vs Commercial Films**

Besides the workaholic life of Yoon, the film has also depicted the ambiguous romantic relationship between Yoon and Dr. Imm. It has the black comedy features too, like Yoon asking for wifi access from monks in a temple when attending a funeral in order to deliver his work and Yoon's answer of “Thinking of new projects” in a serious face when discussing with Dr. Imm on what kind of activities are entertaining. It allows the film to be generally regarded as a romantic comedy, the highly popular genre in the film industry.

*Heart Attack* has performed some basic characteristics found in the box office hits in terms of the film content as well.

### **Urban Worker Setting**

Focusing on Yoon's workaholic life, it could be similar to the situation of the busy urban workers who might be facing the same problem of work-life imbalance. Apart from this, some daily practices of Yoon like consuming food from convenience stores, being socially alienated due to heavy work and queuing up a long time for visiting doctors in public hospitals are realistic

situations for the citizens. Locations are all ordinary without much fancy art directions too. Therefore, it allows the audiences to immerse themselves into the film.

### ***Fantasy of Protagonists***

Usually, appointments with doctors are short and serious which are not likely to be romantic scenes. However, in *Heart Attack*, the protagonists seem to have tried to develop a relationship beyond merely doctor and patient, making the fantasy further fascinating instead of a general fantasy between an ordinary man and a young beauty.

### ***Local contents***

Except for scenes in the temple and public hospital mentioned above, *Heart Attack* has cameo appearances of celebrities including famous directors Banjong Pisanthanakun and Adisorn Trisirikasem, like how other commercial films sometimes did as well. When these celebrities are playing roles that are in contrast with their personalities, it creates a comical impact and makes it for ‘locals only’. Another feature is Suchat the motorcycle taxi driver who always sent Je, a working partner of Yoon, to Yoon's place for taking completed work to clients. As a major transportation in metro Thailand, the role of a motorcycle taxi driver is a very local content for sure. Hence, these could allow the audiences to have a stronger sense of belonging in the film.

### *International outlook*

In *Heart Attack*, overseas clients and jobs from international companies are always considered as prime opportunities. For instance, working for a series of Adidas advertisement placing in Japan's JR train stations was an awaiting chance for Yoon and later when a manager wanted to attract Yoon for taking a job under the insane schedule and requests, he has kept emphasising that Yoon's work will have a chance to be exhibited in New York.

### **“Heart Attack” Vs the Film Market and its Audiences**

#### *Reflection on Social Reality*

According to Vichit-Vadakan (2003), the heard but never seen experience could allow the audience to alienate experience yet it is not a distanced experience like in the foreign films is attractive to the audiences as entertainment. Therefore, it is believed that the freelancer life in *Heart Attack* could serve as an ‘eye-opener’ to the audiences. On the other hand, Suchat the motorcycle taxi driver did not just fulfill the demand of local content, but has also reflected the social reality. Although he has been performing an important duty for Yoon's work, Suchat never showed his appearance throughout the film since he is always with the helmet. Therefore, Suchat is like people that the Thai citizens meet almost every day (motorcycle taxi drivers in particular), but never being known anything deeper beyond their name (“Brother Suchat”, 2015).

### *Marketing Strategies*

Produced by GTH, the leading film studio which its breakup<sup>4</sup> could have partly led to the market share of local productions dropping to just 18% in year-end 2015,<sup>5</sup> the lowest such recorded rate in two decades (Oxford Business Group, 2017), it is believed that the film studio's huge fan base could have contributed a lot to the box office. Besides, starring the popular stars Sunny Suwanmethanont (leading role in *I Fine.. Thank You Love You* and *Mr. Hurt* as well) and Davika Hoorne (leading role in *Pee-Mak* as well), it could be helpful in attracting the audiences. However, the marketing strategy of the film is also significant. Except the usual practice for commercial films like holding events in shopping malls, cinema and attending TV shows, in the trailer of *Heart Attack*, it has been ‘tricking’ the audience that it is a typical romantic comedy with a focus on the interactions between Dr. Imm and Yoon. As for another promotional video, it has included some black comedy scenes depicting the freelancer's life. It has also highlighted the unique personalities of characters in the promotion activities in order to attract the audiences. Overall, these have hidden the art-house spirits secretly.

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<sup>4</sup> See p7 of this paper for a brief introduction on GTH studio and its break up

<sup>5</sup> *Heart Attack* was released on 3 September 2015

**Nawapol Vs Nawapol**

Indeed, *Heart Attack* has fulfilled a number of features of the popular commercial films, but this definitely did not stop Nawapol from remaining his style. For instance, in the scene where Yoon kept working for twelve consecutive days, the camera was following Yoon's action and movements by staying behind him in order to imitate the situation of his dying body, then a long shot with Yoon's deadpan face creating a feeling of approaching death. There are some similarities with Nawapol's previous work as well.

**Themes**

Nawapol's work is always self-reflective and there is no exception for *Heart Attack*. After Nawapol's graduation from undergraduate, he has actually been a freelancer in making short videos for years before getting the chance to write scripts for the film studio (Ruenphinmachai, 2018). The leading character Yoon has a lot of similarities with Nawapol himself too (Table 1). Hence, it could be said that *Heart Attack* is very much based on his personal experience. He has also included some of his views in the film too. For instance, plots of Yoon imagining his funeral and Yoon claiming that he knew death well so he was not afraid of it.

**Table 1.** A Comparison Between Nawapol Thamrongrattanarit and Yoon in “Heart Attack”

Nawapol	Yoon
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● 30-31 years old (when producing the film)</li><li>● Generation and age for beginning to work</li><li>● (Once) A freelancer with little reward</li><li>● Try training himself harshly in film making</li><li>● Have an aim of being a director</li><li>● Rarely talk to his parents</li><li>● Thinks that death is normal</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● 30 years old</li><li>● Generation and age for beginning to work</li><li>● A freelancer with little reward</li><li>● Work hard, harshly and dedicated to his work</li><li>● Have an aim of being successful</li><li>● Didn't mention his father but has a distanced relationship with mother</li><li>● Not far from dying and thinks that everyone will after all die</li></ul>

(Rusmeeviengchai, 2018b) <sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Translated by the author of this paper

### ***The Iconic Style***

Although there should not be financial difficulties under the support of the film studio, ***Heart Attack*** still sticks close to Nawapol's style with limited shooting locations which is mainly in Yoon's home, the hospital and a convenience store as well as the low cost production for commercial (despite the cast with stars).

To fulfill the commercial standard, the film must have a rather strong and clear storyline, but ***Heart Attack*** of course would not be easily compromised. When the commercial audiences would like things to be clearly stated and the films often like to use first person narration as an introduction to the plots, Nawapol pushed it to the extreme: keep using deadpan monologues of Yoon for most of the scenes in the film. What is more, to create black comedy effects through the monologues. For example, in a scene, Yoon tries to sleep early as suggested by Dr. Imm so he submitted his work even though he noted there is a minor mistake at the last minute. However, when he went to bed, there was a voice that kept reminding him of the minor mistake which made him hardly fall asleep. As a result, the use of monologue created an experimental narrative method.

When commercial films like to use silence for comical effects, Nawapol did it as well, but in a serious, a black comedy way. Furthermore, with the silence and slow pace, it makes a series of poetic pictures which allows the audience to observe more details in the film. In return, ***Heart Attack***'s intensive marching style percussion scores help keep the audiences motivated, yet serve

as a creative approach to imitate the busy pace of Yoon in his work.

Of course, Nawapol would not miss out on the on-screen captions and there is one showing up as early as upon the start of the film to state a quote. In the later parts, the captions have shown up to state the days of overnight working and the number of rashes on Yoon's body to indicate the progress of his condition. A similar approach could be found in other films like ***The Pool*** (2018), but not as intensive as in ***Heart Attack*** and one thing that Nawapol made it different is, he also used the date on the appointment slip to indicate the passage of time, as an alternative way for on-screen captions.

When Nawapol's work always carries a playful format, the feature of ***Heart Attack*** which explores the workaholic life of freelancers with a 'sugar coat' of typical romantic comedy is undoubtedly playful. The use of monologue, on-screen captions and the plot of rashes on Yoon are strong stylish characteristics of the film as well.

### **Conclusion**

Restricted by the size of study, this paper serves as a brief discussion in the film industry of Thailand. Still, it has contributed to the under-explored film ***Heart Attack*** as a hybrid of commercial and art-house in terms of its film content and style in a deeper view. It provides an overview of popular Thai films in recent years too. Hopefully, more views on ***Heart Attack*** from the audiences and their demand in the film market would help the research for facilitating a more accurate and further analysis. Certainly, the

success of a film could be sophisticated that could hardly be analysed in a simple way as well.

Nevertheless, to conclude, the success of such a non-mainstream style film in the film industry could be relied on Nawapol's wisdom in knowing the demand of the audiences and getting balance in-between to make a film with commercial content in art-house style. The deadpan tone adopted throughout the film is truly challenging for the commercial industry as in general, Thai films are more expressive and actors in Thai comedies are often overacting, but putting it together with other commercial 'rules' did make it work.

Moreover, the most tricky part is, throughout the film, Nawapol has never clearly stated the relationship between Yoon and Dr. Imm on whether they really have romantic feelings for each other, but he tried to make the relationship uncertain such that the audiences could expect it to be a romantic story. When Yoon noticed that his rashes has all gone after staying a healthy lifestyle, he would not need appointments with Dr. Imm anymore, he said he felt a sense of emptiness, heart-brokening like breaking up with his girlfriend in the past. However, there is no actual answer of whether it is because of missing Dr. Imm, his work or the unhealthy lifestyle. It does not intend to be a typical romantic comedy, but

interpretation of the audience could have made it to be, and *Heart Attack* suggested an alternative approach in making Thai films as well as introduced the audience to a film of different style.

To other directors, commercial audiences could always be obstacles for their productions, but to Nawapol, he instead searches for new possibilities in film and places himself as the middleman to change the perspective of audiences towards film with his philosophy of no indie is all cool nor commercial is all bad, but any film the audiences like would be good (Weeraworawit, 2017).

In the Finale chapter of *Thai Cinema*, Rithdee (2006) suggests that, "At the moment, observers and critics are concerned that there will be no 'Second wave' directors who will arrive on the scene to keep momentum built by the likes of Nonzee, Apichatpong and Peng-ek going" (p.255).

Looking into *Heart Attack*, it could be a risky investment at the beginning, but the box office has proved that it is certainly possible to attain success with a mixture of commercial and art-house. Therefore, if the "Second wave" refers to both commercially and artistically successful films, undoubtedly, Nawapol and his style is believed to have the ability for doing so and earns a significant position in brewing the "Second wave" of Thai cinema.

## Appendix A

### A List of Highest-Grossing Thai Films (2009-2019) <sup>7</sup>

Year	Name of Film	Genre	Film Studio
2013	Pee Mak	Comedy/ Romance/ Horror	GTH
2018	Nakee 2	Fantasy/ Romance	Act Art Generation
2014	I Fine.. Thank You Love You	Comedy/ Romance	GTH
2019	Tootsies & The Fake	Comedy	GDH 559
2018	Brother of the Year	Comedy/Romance/ Drama	GDH 559
2019	Friend Zone	Comedy/Romance	GDH 599
2017	E-san Love Story (Som Pak Sian)	Comedy/Romantic	Bang Fai Film
2011	King Naresuan 3	History	Sahamongkol Film
2014	King Naresuan 5	History	Sahamongkol Film
2017	Bad Genius	Comedy/ Crime/ Drama	GDH 559
2016	Joking Jazz 4G	Comedy	Film Guru
2019	Pee Nak	Comedy/ Horror	MM2 Entertainment
2012	Atm: Er-Rak Error	Comedy/ Romance	GTH
2018	Bikeman	Comedy/ Romance	Raruek Production
2009	Bangkok Traffic (Love) Story	Comedy/ Romance	GTH
2018	Khun Bunlue	Comedy	Bang Fai Film
2010	Hello Stranger	Comedy/ Romance	GTH
2017	Mr. Hurt	Comedy/ Romance	Transformation Films
2011	King Naresuan 4	History	Sahamongkol Film
2018	Khun Pan 2	History/ Action	Sahamongkol Film

**Note:** Order by domestic box office revenue (approximative)

<sup>7</sup> Source: <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/>, except *Bikeman*, *Friend Zone*, *Khun Bulue*, *Nakee 2*, *Pee Nak* and *Tootsies & The Fake* from <http://www.thailandboxoffice.com/>; *Bad Genius*, *Brother of the Year*, *E-san Love Story*, *Khun Pan 2* and *Mr. Hurt* from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dnE5ZmgDGik> (Bangkok Business News Rooms, Nation TV)

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