Gürsel as a person and Turkey as a personified entity are seen as analogous to each other. Each is endowed with a self that is relational, divided, perpetually caught in the ambiguities of desires mixed with reticence or fear and usually misunderstood. And both hold fortunes that are ultimately unpredictable: “You reach out for this and you turn from it as if you both desire it and reject it,” “You feel misunderstood,” “When you get your wish, it will no longer be what you wished for.” The relationships by which such selves are produced and transformed are imaged after heterosexual romance. The “very, very good catch” and the “very well connected man” appearing in two cups may pertain to either Gürsel’s prospective husband or to Europe as Turkey’s prospective “husband.” Sometimes the marriage game is construed as one in which women have to measure up to men’s standards: “Even if he approves, he never says he approves a hundred percent. You never know where you stand.” Usually, however, it is portrayed as an exercise in egalitarian rivalry which must give place to cooperation: “You are constantly playing tug-of-war,” “You are waiting for him to make the first move, and he is waiting for you,” “To come together, lovers have to make an effort.”

Gürsel’s prospects and those of Turkey are not only analogous, but also intertwined. Her fortune as well as that of the fortune tellers and the Turkish politicians is contingent on the nation’s fortune and more specifically, on the outcome of its relationship with Europe. In turn, however, the latter is contingent on the value people like those who appear in the film place on this relationship and on what economic and political reforms they are willing to bear to secure entry into the EU. Indeed, to the extent that the relationship between fortune telling and Turkey is metonymic, fortune telling is not only a means of prognosticating on the country’s future, but it is also a prognostication on the collective self.

In one scene, a fortune teller looking into Gürsel’s cup says, “There is an image of you in their heads. A single category.” The comment may refer either to the complexity of her identity, which others fail to acknowledge, or to essentialist and Orientalist representations of Turkey as a homogeneous entity. The film itself contests such representations by emphasizing Turkey’s internal differences exemplified by the differences between its protagonists. Turkey’s diversity is also highlighted by the fact that the film’s exterior scenes clearly point to Istanbul, a dazzlingly diverse, complex, and very touristic city, connecting Asia and Europe. In contrast, the interiors may have been shot anywhere in Turkey. Clearly, however, the stories by which the film is constituted are similar. Interestingly, their similarity is due to their shared underlying assumption that sameness and difference do not preclude, but rather contain one another, and that the same holds for singularity and plurality, passivity and activity, elusiveness and clarity, tradition and modernity, identification with and distance from one’s nation, as well as for fortune telling and formal political discourse.

The film effectively challenges Orientalizing views of Turkey or the Middle East, and especially stereotypes that construe women from this region as passive recipients of men’s actions, as lacking interest and knowledge in national and international politics, and as needy of Euro-American guidance toward liberation. Moreover, it is a fine example of recursive ethnography. Rather than engaging with fortune telling as an object of representation, it models itself after the fortune telling sessions by which the film is constituted, activating the viewer as interpreter of narratives against which her own assumptions about subjectivity, agency, and knowledge become visible and relativized. In the tradition of cinema verité or direct cinema, it constitutes itself as a mirror not of reality, but of the parables and metaphors through which people situate themselves in relationships, which enable or necessitate exploring the hidden aspects of reality and imagining the future.

Coffee Futures has been screened at several film festivals as well as political, cultural, and academic institutions in the United States, Turkey, Europe, and Australia. It received the 2009 Special Jury EurActiv Award for Debating Europe Nationally. A great teaching tool, it is bound to enlighten the minds and lighten the hearts of those engaging with visual ethnographic discourse, but also a variety of other subjects, including politics, personhood and subjectivity, as well as gender relations and knowledge practices in Turkey and the Middle East cross-culturally.

Ghosts and Numbers


Stephen Broomer
Ryerson University

Following the crash of the Thai baht, and the accordant 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, many Thais migrated from rural areas to Bangkok. They abandoned farm life by necessity, and some survived by vending lottery tickets in the streets. With portable ticket cases worn around
their necks, the sellers pass from one potential customer to another, usually to be rebuked or ignored. Unfinished buildings stand in the overbuilt metropolis above crowded roadways, and the streams of traffic below imply a perpetual, directionless migration.

Such scenes open Alan Klima’s *Ghosts and Numbers*. The filmmaker weaves stories of economic destitution with folklore. Images of technological Thai society in financial straits are juxtaposed against impressionistic images that draw from Thailand’s rich spiritual tradition. Motifs emerge: an open cellphone, its backlit numeric pad exposed, flashing pale blue. A distant figure, in soft focus, walks a path through a grassy field in the rain. The sellers talk of their susceptibility to crime, ticket snatching, robbery, assault, of the desperate economic situation that has pushed them into this profession, and the conflict between online ticket sales and their own ticket sales, with the Internet posing a new threat to their labor. Later, the film shifts away from the conditions of the lottery ticket sellers. It focuses instead on the superstitions of lottery participants, who perceive a correlation between spirits and number selection. A caption reads, “The numbers are not unreal/what is at stake is our power to contact them.” Faith becomes a tool of commodity, the means of contacting numbers, as villagers use mysticism and visions to choose their numbers. One villager rationalizes good fortune as the product of a generous past life. She then speaks of her own system: she plays the numbers of license plates from crashed cars, claiming to have foretold their crashes in her dreams.

The film is fragmentary, its episodes tied together by an unseen narrator. Through much of the film, this narrator speaks of spirits and folklore. Tales of haunting and magic overlap scenes of ticket sellers, industrial laborers, farmers, and children at play. Sometimes, the narrator’s voice is audible; other times, when she is inaudible, the narration takes the form of English captioning, the soundtrack hemorrhaging indigenous percussion while the text mixes fact, folklore, and politicized declarations. The effect is a kind of ethnopoetic reportage. The sacred roots of Thai culture are not isolated and treated separately from the commodity culture of the global marketplace. The mystic motif of the cellphone’s numeric pad glowing in the dark might be paired with a more conventional scene found elsewhere in the film, in which young Thais fawn over a crowded cellphone salesdesk. In the latter scene, the objects have no capacity for hosting ghosts; they are merely tools. In the former, with no user in sight, the phone’s glowing registration of an incoming call takes on the meaning of a haunting.

In spite of this discussion of scene and content, what Klima has produced is rhythmic, sensual, and involving. It is a portrait of two elements of Thai culture, the religious and the technological, in a state of uneasy coexistence, and it reflects this unease in formal terms. The film combines digital video with Super16mm and Super8mm film, and one of the effects of this inconstant format is a tapestry aesthetic. Electronic images and television images are repackaged, in close-up and in soft focus. The skipping bars of repackaged playback fit analogously with the narration, as if they were a hypnotic glimpse into the “Nextworld” of which the narrator speaks. Early in the film, the frame is even intruded upon by a horizontal stock ticker, which announces, alongside its numeric readout, “Time left.” This prophetic ticket accentuates the apocalyptic character of the film’s pallid, dissolving images. Its intrusion also places these formally experimental images in the unusual context of televised or closed-circuit professional broadcast.

Although it progresses episodically, *Ghosts and Numbers* is arranged with deliberate juxtapositions. Its penultimate sequence pairs two scenes: in the first, a demonstration is held against George W. Bush’s Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) appearance. A procession of pantomime skeletons and ghouls are shown as a protestor’s call-and-response decrying Bush plays on the soundtrack. This is immediately followed with the introduction of Napporn, a man who has bought three old houses and combined them in a rural community. He now says that his house is haunted, that the ghosts of the individual houses are now united by his own design to torment him. The implied impossibility of change, and irrevocable traces of the past, speak volumes to the grim prospects of Bush’s APEC meeting described by the protestors.

*Ghosts and Numbers* is a studied reflection on the economic and spiritual conditions of present-day Thailand, making it a useful tool in Southeast Asia Studies. It also embodies an approach of formal experimentation and artistic-poetic intersubjectivity that is of value to the study of visual anthropology and modes of representation. It has a specific use in demonstrating alternatives to conventional documentary form, for classrooms in which such formal departures could be encouraged. Klima has used some dominant documentary techniques: interviews, narration, expositional asides. But the film’s enveloping, experimental photography, and the honor paid to spiritual and poetic ways of knowing, within even its aforementioned conventional components, make *Ghosts and Numbers* a unique and valuable demonstration of alternative representational practices. Through the film’s incorporation of poetics and folklore into its perspective, the distance between maker and subject is suspended. This makes the film feel somehow indigenous, reminiscent of autoethnographic films that are likewise invested in adopting local faith and myth into their vision, such as Kidlat Tahimik’s semi-fictional *Perfumed Nightmare* (1979). Tahimik’s film also uses dream logic as a formal
principle as it tells a story that similarly pits regional agrarian tradition against the erasure of technological progress. As a view of global economic disparity, Klima’s treatment of his topic may recall Hubert Sauper’s *Darwin’s Nightmare* (2004), which like Klima’s film was fragmentary and experimental.

*Ghosts and Numbers* should not be approached as a summary of the Asian Financial Crisis, or the distress and disconnection between the local and global. Klima wisely treats this as a subject too vast to be summarized on-screen, reduced, and communicated through visual cues. Instead, the film is a poetic meditation on a culture in decay. It is an arresting, aesthetic glimpse of the impact this crisis has had on the lives of the poor and on the greater spiritual life of the land.

**Secrets of the Tribe**


*Stephen Broomer*

Ryerson University

In the 1960s and 1970s, the Yanomamö people of Brazil and Venezuela were a hot topic for anthropologists. The opportunity to study a South American people untouched by modern life inspired competition among researchers, forging destructive rivalries that remain bitter today. This was a battle among outsiders with perilous consequences for the indigenous Amerindian tribesmen, who were purportedly subjected to sexual and medical abuses. The preservation of Yanomamö culture and the biological investigation of the Yanomamö became a contest of theories, issued by anthropologists at war with one another.

Brazilian filmmaker José Padilha’s *Secrets of the Tribe* takes on this ostensible victimization of the Yanomamö. Their situation is not universal: as occupants of a remote rainforest border between Brazil and Venezuela, they were protected from external influence until the 20th century. Padilha’s film does not dwell on the present conditions of the Yanomamö. Rather, it is a retrospective look at the controversial behavior and theories of the anthropologists who have involved themselves in the lives of the Yanomamö.

The film follows a chronological structure from the beginning of Napoleon Chagnon’s Yanomamö research in the 1960s to the publication of Patrick Tierney’s *Darkness in El Dorado: How Scientists and Journalists Devastated the Amazon* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000). In his book, Tierney accused Chagnon of genocide, claiming that Chagnon played a role in the intentional exacerbation of a measles epidemic. *Darkness in El Dorado* caused debate when it was released, resulting in Chagnon’s retirement from teaching. Interview subjects include Chagnon, Tierney, and Kenneth Good. The film accounts the reputedly atrocious effect that Claude Lévi-Strauss’s disciple Jacques Lizot had on the Yanomamö, using their children to satisfy his pedophilic desires and introducing what Tierney has called “shotgun-driven prostitution,” trading tools for sex. Lizot declined to be interviewed for the film. We do not see much of the Yanomamö beyond archival footage from Chagnon’s films with Timothy Asch; when Padilha does interview them, their remarks are brief and emotional, in place to reinforce accusations that one anthropologist or another has already leveled against Chagnon or Lizot.

The sordid squabbles detailed herein recall a similarly destructive competition, professional and personal, among Dead Sea Scroll scholars in Qumran from the 1950s through the 1970s, which was the subject of a journalistic exposé by Ron Rosenbaum ("The Riddle of the Scrolls," Vanity Fair, November 1992). It is similar to Tierney’s in its emphasis on the drama of scholarly rivalries. In fertile subjects, where wealth and fame are the expected reward for contributions, research becomes sport. In the case of these anthropologists, as with the Dead Sea Scroll scholars, an internecine fracas emerged around a subject discovered in the 20th century. As a result, the strangeness of the researchers’ sport can be wholly accounted with most participants still living. *Secrets of the Tribe* does not have the stale quality of retrospective history because the situation is of recent enough vintage that almost all accusations can still be responded to by the accused.

Padilha is best known for the success of his feature documentary *Bus 174* (2002), a tense investigation into a hostage taking on board a bus in Rio de Janeiro. He has also made the successful action-thriller *Tropa de Elite* (2007). To his credit, Padilha does not adopt the view of Patrick Tierney’s book, giving the film a necessary distance from journalistic approaches such as confrontational interviewing. Neither Padilha nor Tierney are anthropologists, and theirs are not anthropological investigations. Tierney wrote a polemical, unscientific book that invoked a scandal. Padilha’s film is more evenhanded than this, no doubt because it includes that scandal as a subject, allowing Chagnon an opportunity to defend himself, which he does with suggestions of his own martyrdom. But Padilha’s contribution to this debate is confined within the limits of documentary form. *Secrets of the Tribe* is a narrative-driven documentary, and as such it privileges dramatic contrast over the reinforcement of facts or proof. This approach is in line