

The play *Theater* (1984) presents an unlimited number of characters (of all races and languages), and the setting ranges from a room to the entire universe. The author even added a postscript in which he writes that if one doesn't wish to begin with a male character, it is possible to replace him with a dog and change the setting and dialogue. If one isn't fond of dogs, it can be replaced with some other animal, and if that idea doesn't appeal, the character can be eliminated altogether. There is very little dialogue in the play; instead, there is a long monologue. The author may have intended to show that in this world, there is no such thing as love between people, and that no one has any real concern for anyone else.

The eleventh and final act is the best evidence of true originality. It consists of a dialogue between the left and right sides of the body of a god who pokes fun at technology:

Eleventh Act

(In those cases where it is determined that the tenth act shouldn't be the end, one can carry on with the eleventh. And if you don't care for this act, then you must end with the tenth.)

The two sides of the body, each observing what is happening in the universe.

The left side: OOOOOO...

The right side: AAAAAA...

The left side: OOOOOO...

The right side: AAAAAA...

The author uses a code not unlike computer code, which is incomprehensible to the reader. In fact, he probably had no wish to communicate; it is a way to rebel against the very concept of communication. It is a more sophisticated technique than that employed by Philippe Soupault and André Breton in *Please* (1921), where the dialogue remains generally comprehensible but is peppered with certain surrealist features. The sense is made incoherent by the author's insertion of strange imagery derived from dreams and the subconscious. In Keo's case, it is clear that he was fiercely determined to rebel against the traditional and conventional model, as well as the grammatical system of communication, and the institutions of the family and religion. It is not the use of poetic language that makes this work original, but rather its satire, a sample of which can be seen in the questionnaire at the end of the final act:

How long has this play been on?

How long has it lasted?

Exactly how many characters are there?

To whom do the author's rights belong?

Do you find it entertaining?

- a) very
- b) not at all
- c) a) and b) are true
- d) a) and b) and c) are false

- *Suwat Sricheua*

Suwat completed his studies in architecture at the Technical College in Nakhon Ratchasima (Korat), site of a large American military base during the Vietnam War. He still recalls the roar of the B52s taking off and landing. His work is a reappraisal of social institutions, the military government and American imperialism. His criticisms can be seen most clearly in two remarkable books which appeared in 1975, one a collection of short stories entitled *War in the Tombs* and the other a collection of plays, *Out of Control*, which brings together the author's theatrical works written between 1971 and 1975. Both books are satires and ferocious attacks against society. The writer makes use of a number of symbols to criticize people who have become slaves to technological progress and money, regardless of the political system in which they live.

The plays *Out of Control* and *Prime Minister Category 2* best illustrate Suwat's views, though with some subtlety. The first play satirizes the way in which we have become enslaved to computers; the other is a satire of socialist regimes. To create an ideal prime minister, the body parts of the four best people in the country are cut off and reassembled to produce a politician. But despite his origins, the new prime minister still falls prey to the lure of corruption.

Suwat also makes use of eroticism as a tool to produce a crude type of satire and black comedy. His goal is to show how men live in conditions of hopeless despair, constantly threatened by the possibility of war (*The Sperm Warrior*) and the dangers of pollution (*Breath of the Century*). In this latter work, the author, most likely inspired by sci-fi films, presents a shocking image to suggest the seriousness of the pollution problem: a young girl falls dead on the corner of the street, vomiting blood and black smoke which she has swallowed while passing a car. What is striking is the use of eroticism as a means of creating humor, as for example in the dialogue between Mister 390/71 and Mister 875/25.

Mister 875/25: In my office there are a lot of women to play around with (laughter), but I never feel like making love to any of them. It isn't worth the bother of unzipping the clothes on my body eleven times and doing the same thing for them (laughter) [...]

Mister 875/25: A woman's love propulsion system may have broken down. A woman with an atomic heart, she's never serious about anyone.

Mister 390/71: It's possible. Her heart (made up of the propulsion system, electrical wire, and atoms) tells her when she has to unzip my clothes, but she never responds to my desire.

Although these plays contain new elements never before seen in the Thai theater of the time, they are far from what could be called surrealist works. First of all, the driving force behind the creation of these plays is external (socio-political), something neither automatic nor subconscious. Furthermore, the stories are realistic and refer explicitly to the social circumstances at the time. Finally, not only does the language not reflect surrealist techniques but the imagery and figurative language are not intended to evoke in the reader any type of odd or unusual emotional response.

Short Stories

- *Pisanu Supanimit and Suwanni Sukonta*

Pisanu, a painter, writer and instructor in the Faculty of Painting, Sculpture and Printmaking at Silpakorn University, has referred to surrealist paintings in several of his short stories. For example in “Our Contentment and the Discontentment of God,” he describes the spiritual state of a character as “sad and alone in the night like surrealist images.” In the short story “Illusion” his description recalls Max Ernst’s painting *The Eye of Silence*:

This slice of old, rotten wood in front of me seems full of legends. It shows me a city, as mysterious as in another world. Its thousands of eyes look at me and look all around. I think of the painting by Max Ernst. Yes. The painting of the roots of a tree. There is an old cave, people and an assortment of demons. Now I am actually confronting them. I am flying off into this slice of wood. It seems to me that I am leaning into the cave and chatting with the ants and termites. There is a pleasant breeze. I drift off to sleep.

In the short story called “Love at the Sea” by painter and author Suwanni Sukonta, the blue of the sea is compared to Chagall’s blue:

I close my eyes. I only dream of the blue in the paintings of Chagall. I see flowers of different colors. I see myself and my friend floating in the blue and green of the sea.

It is clear, therefore, that surrealist paintings added depth to the literary works of these writer-painters, even if only to a small degree.

- *Suchart Sawatsi*

Suchart takes to task those materialists with a passion for automobiles. In a short story called “Autobiography” (1971), he uses the religious terms *nirvana* and *sawan* (paradise) to refer to top-of-the-line model automobiles, which, to Buddhists, amounts to a form of blasphemy.

Nirvana and *Paradise* are twin, four-cylinder, safe, fuel-efficient luxury automobiles; replacement parts are easy to find; the interior is sumptuous, and the seats luxurious. The *Paradise* is beautiful and well suited to those difficult jobs, the *Nirvana* is superb, an ideal family car. At those prices, I could do worse than to buy them both!

The short story “Out of Obscurity” is a satire of modern technology in the form of a reflection by someone riding on a bus:

Life in a big city, no matter who you are, when you move, you have to accept the violence and go as quickly as possible. Machines and technology make you less sad and help you to move fast. Your body and your soul can always be connected there like sex organs of all sizes. Machines and technology will lead you along, will carry you away like the wind; they will stir up the waves of the sea and make your heart pound like when you experience sexual

pleasure. Then, not long after, they will lead you to your destination amidst shouts and shaking that resemble orgasm.

- **Suwat Sricheua**

Suwat admits that he enjoys looking at surrealist paintings, especially those that depict violent or erotic scenes, as in the works of Magritte and Dali, and claims that he employs their techniques as he sees fit. In the short story called “Operations Center in the Pit of the Brain” (1974), Suwat uses humor to take aim at those on both sides of the political spectrum with a striking image: “Your armored vehicles come out of your eyes! Close them quickly before all your power is destroyed!” At the end of the story, he applies Darwinian theory to create an irony intended to shock the reader:

I’m in a hurry to get back to the street to tell the demonstrators the whole truth about the intellectuals and the activists. But when I finally get there, something happens that I never would have anticipated: I find thousands of pairs of feet, cut off at the ankle. These feet are milling about on the road, each of them wiggling their toes. The intellectuals have left their brains on their lecterns loaded with books, the combatants have left their arms on the armored vehicles. And all of the demonstrators leave their feet to mill about. I also find some lovers at the end of the group: they have only one organ, very large and covered with black hairs; it moves on a bed, from left to right, penetrating what remains of the prostitutes.

In this way, Suwat gives himself over to a type of erotic humor similar, although not identical, to that which characterizes the surrealists, for his intention is entirely different. Suwat is motivated by external circumstances (socio-political) rather than by some internal, unconscious impulse.

- **Keo Laithong**

In the short story “The Telegram from Far Away” (1983) Keo complicates the themes of eroticism and death, of the irrational and metamorphosis. Following on from Suchart and Suwat, he creates images and metaphors that are shaped by the obsessions in his unconscious. The main character is alone in his room. He is bored. Floating in the air, he loses himself in his memories; no sooner does he close his eyes, no sooner does he look into a mirror or a photo, than a young woman comes out of a framed photograph and makes love to him, after which she is transformed into a corpse. His room shrinks to the size of a coffin. Then he hears a knocking at the door. Someone has brought him a telegram sent by a woman. It reads: “You are dead!”

In the following passage, the description recalls the surrealist poets, most notably Breton and Eluard in their attempt to simulate madness in *The Immaculate Conception*. In this work, as well, one sees an interplay between the real and unreal, a mixture of eroticism and horror, and the metamorphosis of the beautiful young woman into a corpse. Perhaps Keo retained the impression of a sexual experience in his unconscious and has expressed it in the form of a hallucination or a nightmare:

I smile unknowingly at the woman in the photograph. It seems to me that she is smiling, too. Suddenly, I watch as a form emerges from the photo which has

turned yellow with age. It gradually becomes larger, until it is clear that this is the woman from the photograph. She grows like the genie of Aladdin's magic lamp, a story I read when I was a young child. When she stops growing, when she is the full-size of a normal woman, she is all in white...a long white dress, walking toward me. Her dress changes color with each step she takes, from white to yellow, then to red, to green, to blue. When she sits on my bed, naked, she leans over to kiss me gently. Her lips are damp and cold. I close my eyes, drawing her body toward mine. She lets out a muffled cry against my neck, like an animal. I lift my head from her breast, staring at her young and innocent face, her brown hair, her large deep black eyes, the mysterious smile that adorns her soft, white cheeks...I hate this smile...I begin to cry, burying my face in her bosom. Her breasts are white (strikingly so), with pink pointed nipples. My tears flow down the furrow between her breasts toward her soft, flat belly, then lower still...Suddenly, her body turns into a corpse, putrefied, rank smelling. Appalled, I push her away forcefully. The four walls of the room begin to close in around me. The cord on the electric light bursts, as does the light bulb. A piece of broken glass falls and cuts my cheek. The blood flows on to my lips. The four walls press down around my bed. Everything in the room vanishes. The ceiling collapses and encloses me in a coffin. My body is plunged into darkness. I let out a loud cry.

What does not classify as entirely surrealist is the lengthy description which leaves nothing to the reader's imagination. What's more, Keo's attitude to love is rather negative, whereas the opposite is generally true of the surrealists. See, in particular, Breton's poem "L'Union libre" (*Free Love*).

In truth, there are no genuine surrealist works in the body of Thai literature. Although a number of writers have been inspired by surrealism, they show no signs of the same attitudes or the same rebellious spirit that characterizes the French and European surrealists.

Keo Laithong and Suwat Sricheua are two such examples. While it is obvious that in his plays for the theater, Keo demonstrates a total lack of respect for traditional writing, preferring a style that resembles that of the surrealists, his works are without any trace of the surrealists' valuation of sexuality or their foregrounding of dream imagery. As for Suchart, while he expresses indignation at society in rather violent terms and portrays sex in a provocative manner, his plays bear only a superficial resemblance to the works of the surrealists.

In poetry, it is clear that surrealist paintings have played an important role in the creation of certain Thai poems. Suchart, for example, was inspired both by Magritte and by Japanese prints showing provocative sexual objects. Angkarn drew inspiration from the paintings of Dali and Ernst, influences also present in the works of Pisanu and Suwanni. But a close examination of their work indicates that this surrealist influence is minor at best.

Clearly, Keo's works (poems, plays and short stories) exhibit a certain rejection of traditional values and literary practices: yet the images and associations derived from the subconscious seem rather cliché, as is often the case with the surrealists as well as traditional Thai literature. Keo (not unlike Suchart and Suwat) often portrays women

as nightmare figures, perhaps as a result of negative ideas regarding sexuality and women. But for the French surrealists, woman represents the eternal feminine and the path to achieving salvation on earth; she is a substitute for religious faith. In contrast, Thai male writers have never given such a central role to women.