

Love, death and laughter in the city of different angels: S.P. Somtow's Bangkok Gothic

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Abstract

S.P. Somtow's novel *The Other City of Angels* (2008) portrays Bangkok as a Gothic metropolis: a city stuck between illusion and reality, where dreams and nightmares come to life, simultaneously backwards and modern, spiritual and material, and full of peculiarities that make one doubt whether such a place exists at all. It is a temple to consumerism filled with fortune tellers and high society serial killers that for Somtow, a composer himself, can best be expressed through the jarringly haunting sounds of Béla Bartók's music. *The Other City of Angels* (2008) is a modern retelling of the Gothic tale of Bluebeard's wife and her fatal discovery of her husband's dark secret, and – true to its Gothic origins – it is filled with romance, terror, and laughter. This paper focuses on the novel's comic dimension and discusses Somtow's use of dark humour and the Gothic grotesque as a strategy to exoticize Bangkok for foreign readers by simultaneously reinforcing and defying Western stereotypes of Bangkok as the Oriental city, once (in)famously described in the Longman dictionary as the city of temples and prostitutes (*Independent*, 6 July 1993). The paper also explores the way comic elements are used to offset the critical commentary on class division and social inequality that are seen as ingrained in the fabric of Thai culture and further aggravated by the materialism and consumerism characteristic of contemporary Thai society.

Keywords: Thai literature, Gothic novel, Gothic laughter, grotesque, Orientalism,

Introduction: S.P Somtow's Gothic landscapes

Writing exclusively in English, S.P. Somtow¹ is arguably one of the most internationally popular Thai authors, although he remains oddly unknown in his native Thailand. He is also one of the very few who openly admit their connection to Gothic and has achieved a certain degree of recognition with the genre's scholars and audiences due to his earlier American-published monster books. Outside of Thailand, he is particularly well known for his vampire chronicles, or "Timmy Valentine novels" – *Vampire Junction* (1984), *Valentine* (1992), *Vanitas* (1995) – described by Ken Gelder as "flamboyantly irresponsible...contemporary vampire fiction at its most ambitious and its most excessive" (2001, p. 136). Gelder observes that the fiction of Somtow articulates Peter Brophy's concept of "horrrality," providing the readers with a haphazard collection of "horror, textuality, morality, hilarity" (Brophy quoted in Gelder, 2001, p.136). This certainly can be said of Somtow's Bangkok-themed works, most notably *The Other City of Angels* – a novel that originally appeared as a series written for *The Nation* newspaper during the 1990s, was first published in book format in 2003 as *Bluebeard's Castle*, and five years later reprinted under its current title.

A globe-trotting writer, composer, and media personality, Somtow shares his life between two Cities of Angels: Bangkok² and Los Angeles, and likes to stress his cosmopolitan orientation. Born in Thailand to an entitled family,³ educated at Eton and Cambridge, Somtow undoubtedly views Thailand from a privileged vantage point. Even though his immersion in contemporary Thai culture may come across as somewhat superficial, this does not necessarily make his cultural commentary invalid. Somtow's depiction of Thailand draws on the Western obsession with "making sense" of the Thai world in order, as he puts it, "to deal with [his own] cultural schizophrenia" (2002, p. 4). To do so he frequently employs foreigners and hybridized Thais as his protagonists. A Thai expatriate himself, Somtow toys with images of estrangement familiar to foreigners trying to "rationalise" Thai culture. But while the self-Orientalising gesture of "explaining" Thai culture affirms its otherness, the fact that Somtow's rationalisations commonly fail shifts the power balance towards the Asian Other, demonstrating the pointlessness of East/West-type dichotomies and replacing the binary with the multilateral.

¹ S.P. Somtow is the pen name of the Thai writer/composer Somtow Sucharitakul.

² The Thai name of Bangkok: *Krung Thep Maha Nakhon* means "the city of angels."

³ Somtow's grandfather's sister was a cousin and consort of King Vajiravudh of the Chakri dynasty.

Although he was born in Thailand, Somtow's first encounter with Thai culture took place in the early 1960s when he returned to Bangkok as a stranger to his own country, unable even to speak the language. In his accounts of this early confrontation (most notably in his autobiographical novel *Jasmine Nights*, 1994), Thailand appears in the guise of a Gothic monster, seductive in its exuberant otherness but also threatening to (and threatened by) the Western *logos* and its values. Ironically, the texts describing Thailand of the 1990s and early 2000s do not differ much from those early impressions, particularly those focused on the monstrous city of Bangkok: the city of transgressions and excess, where contradictions collapse and give way to the rule of relativity, reverberating with hollow gothic laughter at the expense of its inhabitants. Such an urban setting forms a perfect background to the stories where supernaturalism does not contradict modernity and the characters are steeped in what Gina Wisker calls "an everyday Gothic, a parallel set of behaviours and beliefs as necessary as eating and going to work" (2003, p. 65). While the works of Somtow can be seen as a product of cultural hybridization epitomized by the author's nostalgia for the idyllic image of the Thailand of his childhood and his obsessive need for reevaluation and justification of Thai culture through Western eyes, it is his choice of the Orientalist Gothic narrative as a vehicle for his creative ideas that is of main interest for this paper.

S.P. Somtow's novel, *The Other City of Angels* (2008), is a contemporary Gothic romance adapting the tale of the wife-murdering Bluebeard and his castle with rooms full of dark secrets to the exuberant setting of the 1990s "miracle economy" Bangkok.⁴ I argue that Somtow adheres to the Gothic formula very closely in the novel, and his attempt to "tropicalise" Gothic and adjust it to the Thai Buddhist-animistic worldview, while at the same time oversaturating the text with highly conventional themes, motifs, and references, can be seen as both validating it as a Gothic romance and turning it into a parody of one. This paper proposes to read Somtow's exoticization of Bangkok and its inhabitants in terms of a self-Orientalising gesture used as a strategy to offset the critique of social inequality inherent in Thai culture and further aggravated by a materialism and consumerism characteristic of contemporary Thai society. While the Orientalist perspective is not uncommon in Gothic texts, here I argue that Somtow's self-Orientalism is predominantly a comic technique, as it appears in combination with dark humour and the Gothic grotesque. The discussion incorporates Edward Said's concept of Orientalism and Bakhtinian carnivalesque grotesque, and is informed by relevant Gothic criticism.

⁴ I have discussed Bangkok as a Gothic metropolis in several earlier articles, most notably in "Beyond the vampire: Revamping Thai monsters for the urban age" (2017) and "The temporal city: Spectral topographies and the ephemeral performance of Bangkok" (2014).

***The Other City of Angels* as a Tropical Gothic Romance**

In his seminal work, *The Literature of Terror* (1980), David Punter enumerates three major dimensions of Gothic: its fascination with the barbaric and the uncivilized, placed in opposition to the “classical” and rational Enlightenment model; its preoccupation with the taboo; and its adoption of a “paranoiac structure” in which the readers are invited to share in the fears, doubts and uncertainties that permeate the story (1980, pp. 404-405). In European Gothic, the notion of the barbaric most often manifests itself as the fear of untamed chaotic wilderness, the fear of the past and its feudal hierarchies, or the fear of racial degeneracy caused by exposure to the racial Other. Taboos deal with themes and topics that are commonly seen as offensive and generally avoided for the sake of social and psychological harmony, as they frequently question assumptions of a natural and divine hierarchy of life (1980, p. 405). Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick points out the formulaic aspect of Gothic and its insistence to adhere to a narrow set of conventions which results in the production of a spatial model in which the world and the self are divided, separated, isolated, or prevented access to something that should be accessible (1985, pp. 12-13). Some of the most common Gothic conventions include untamed landscapes, labyrinths and subterranean spaces, places of confinement, oppressive religious institutions, dark family secrets, dysfunctional social and familial relations, physical and mental incapacitation, trans-temporal and trans-dimensional supernatural visitations, transgression, insanity, violence, and death (1985, pp. 9-10).

The Other City of Angels adheres to the above requirements quite closely, so closely in fact, that it can be read as both a Gothic text and a parody thereof. Inspired by Béla Bartók's opera *Bluebeard's Castle* (1911), which in turn was based on a seventeenth-century French folktale about a woman who discovers that her wealthy husband has a penchant for murdering his wives, the novel tells the story of Judith Abramovitz, a Jewish-American socialite, who hastily married to Cricket, a mysterious Thai billionaire (who may or may not be a compulsive wife murderer), finds herself thrown into the excessive and ostentatious world of Bangkok's high society – where nothing is what it seems. Alone, at the mercy of a dead shamaness, unpredictable gods, and her possessive mother-in-law, she has to redefine herself to confront a serial killer and survive the monstrous city of Bangkok. Set against the backdrop of 1990s Bangkok at the time of the city's enormous growth due to the economic boom that briefly transformed Thailand into one of the Asian Tiger economies, the narrative offers a dual perspective, simultaneously foregrounding the otherness of Thai culture and challenging Western-centric rationalism as the preferred model of evaluating the world.

The novel engages with the Gothic form on an intertextual and metatextual level through its persistent invocation of well-established Gothic and Horror models. Apart from the most obvious reference to *Bluebeard's Castle*, it quotes an abundance of literary and cinematic texts that have come to represent the Gothic canon, from Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* (1899) to Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* (1976), through *The Perils of Pauline* (dir. Gasnier & MacKenzie, 1914) and early Universal monster movies like *Frankenstein* (dir. Whale, 1931) or *The Mummy* (dir. Freund, 1932), to Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) and Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982). There are also frequent mentions of real and imaginary serial killers like Jeffrey Dahmer, Ed Gein, Ted Bundy, John Wayne Gacy or Hannibal Lecter, as well as references to the Orientalist fantasies of *Lawrence of Arabia* (dir. Lean, 1962) and *The King and I* (dir. Lang, 1956). Judith is not impressed with her accommodation in a tower of a huge mansion, and compares herself to the Little Princes murdered in the Tower of London, and Rapunzel. She remarks on the mythical dimension of her story:

Because my story was also a story of a woman who had no self, adrift in the New Age Ocean of Encino, towed to a strange new shore by a prince of a distant land, shoved into the labyrinth of an alien culture to confront the minotaur of madness, and finding, in the end, that she has become herself for the first time. (Somtow, 2008, p. 325)

The most prominent Gothic conventions used in the novel include live burial (Judith is sewn into a jade burial suit as part of sex play), subterranean spaces (from Cricket's sex dungeon to an underground passage that contains a collection of macabre tableaux displaying the corpses of his previous wives accompanied by a rather distasteful evaluation of their sexual skills), dreams, visions and deathlike states (Judith's consciousness frequently seems to migrate to another spiritual plane), apparitions from the past (these include the ghost of the shamaness, the reanimated body of the dead mother-in-law, the spirit of Judith's unborn daughter who was turned into a *kuman thong*⁵ amulet, and the spirits of all the dead wives), the madhouse (the entire city of Bangkok is originally likened to a mental institution), and the unspeakable (the inability to reconcile the American and Thai culture that leads to a breakdown in communication). Given the text's mention of the Jewish origin of the heroine, we can also compare her quest for spiritual epiphany to the motif of the Wandering Jew who seeks forbidden knowledge.

⁵ Literally a "golden child." In Thai magic, the *kuman thong* are protective amulets traditionally produced through an elaborate procedure of grilling human fetuses and entombing them in a pot. The amulets are believed to contain a powerful child-spirit bound to protect the household of their master.

This overabundance of Gothic tropes and conventions, which themselves can be seen as dramatic or exaggerated, pushes the text towards the surreal and the absurd, and enhances the overall concept of Bangkok/Thailand in the novel as the domain of “non-sense”: opposite but also complementary to Western “sense.” Thus, many of the Gothic themes are never thoroughly explored; they are included purely to sensationalise the plot, or treated ornamentally, woven into the fabric of the text. The macabre décor of Cricket’s mansion is nothing but a gimmick and another example of the hodgepodge architectural design characteristic of the 1990s Bangkok. His unorthodox sexual practices also fit in with the novel’s descriptions of pansexual and polyamorous Thai society. While Judith is identified as a Jewess, her “Jewishness” is mostly an empty signifier. On some occasions, it could be argued, the text uses this attribute to stereotype her as a shrewd and exaggeratingly anxious person, akin to the portrayals of Jews in Woody Allen comedies, although decidedly less intellectual. For the most part, however, Judith remains simply a generic *farang*,⁶ and the only thing that distinguishes her from other White foreigners in the novel is her lack of local experience and know-how. By the end of the story she becomes a fully assimilated expat.

Gothic conventions are further problematised in the novel as they are given a full make-over when taken out of the usual Christian context and adjusted to the Buddhist-animist worldview characteristic of Thailand. Take for example, ghosts, spirits, and shamans, which may be seen as threatening or terrifying but in animism, are also very much part of the everyday, co-existing with humans. By the end of the novel, Judith experiences a radical shift in perspective as she achieves enlightenment and begins to perceive the spatiotemporal reality as a multidimensional continuous whole. Such a perspective eliminates the distinction between life and death, self and other, reality and illusion, and makes one experience the past, the present, and the future as one and the same. This revelation makes us question the initial portrayal of Judith as a typical victimised Gothic heroine. While she is certainly introduced as such and consequently presented as abused, manipulated and objectified by monstrous others, the resolution of the story strays from a typical Gothic scenario where the victim is either rescued by a hero or rises up as a feminist avenger, and instead presents another alternative, where victims, abusers, heroes, and avengers are different aspects of the same whole. At the end of the novel Judith is no longer a victim, not because she has been saved or successfully resisted, but because she has transcended reality and learned how to exist

⁶ The Thai term *farang* is used collectively to describe White foreigners and has a mild negative connotation.

simultaneously as human and non-human, dead and alive, victim and redeemer, *farang* and Thai.

To dissolve such binaries, however, the text first has to introduce them. The novel is, therefore, preoccupied with the division between the barbaric and civilised, covers a range of social and psychological taboos in its plot, and allows its audience to experience paranoia through identification with its main character. While on the surface, the barbaric is represented by Thailand and Thai culture portrayed as inferior to Western, or American culture, this division can be further split into several other complex binaries that point to value differences; for example, between Thais educated abroad and Thais who never left the country, high-society Thais and commoners, or Sukhumvit⁷ and the rest of Bangkok. The division is chiefly economy and class-related. Throughout the novel, Thailand is repetitively designated as “a third world country” in contrast with the American first world, and “civilised” Thais are singled out from the crowd by their extraordinary wealth and aristocratic connections. The internal structure of Thai society is explained to Judith by one of the expats:

In all of Thailand, only Bangkok matters; and in all of Bangkok, there are only one hundred families who matter; and those hundred families are so heavily interconnected by marriage that they might as well be one family. (Somtow, 2008, pp. 92-93)

The list of taboos the novel addresses is impressive. The most obvious ones deal with issues of sexuality and the relations between sexes. Judith’s new husband, Cricket, indulges in sado-masochistic practices, fetishism and transvestism. More worryingly, he seems to be particularly aroused by necrophiliac fantasies. During the first date he handcuffs Judith to the car. On the plane to Bangkok he molests her when she is under the influence of strong barbiturates, and later instructs her to lie still and “play dead.” More outrageously, his mansion includes a network of subterranean chambers that have been fashioned to resemble an Egyptian tomb, a Chinese burial site, and a Victorian graveyard complete with coffins and mausoleums, where he engages in elaborate role play with his sexual conquests. During one such episode Judith is sewn into a Chinese jade burial suit and left incapacitated for hours. Other sexual taboos include Cricket having sexual relations with a geriatric masseuse, a journalist who demonstrates her unorthodox sexual performance skills as she shoots various projectiles out of her vagina, or the sexual

⁷ Sukhumvit is one of the major roads in Bangkok, considered one of the top locations in the city, even more so at the time when the novel was written

initiation of Judith's twelve-year-old son who acts as a pornographer for his step-father. Then there is the forced abortion performed for the purpose of harvesting the foetus to create a powerful magical amulet. The final reveal of Judith's friend Emily as a gender-fluid *kathoe*⁸ additionally foregrounds the taboos connected with homosexuality and transgenderism.

Other taboos question natural and divine hierarchies and engage with the liminality of boundaries. Despite identifying as a Jew, Judith experiments with a variety of cults and religions, and embraces Thai animistic practices. Shamans are controlled by all kinds of spiritual entities including Ganesh, Jesus, and Elvis. The paragons of Thai society are described as corrupt and morally ambiguous. The privileged live above the rules. Spiritualism and materialism collide. Life is allocated a transactional value and the price is negotiated with those in power (both humans and divinities) who need to be bribed with offerings. The outstanding number of taboos that are addressed and ultimately broken in the novel aligns with the construction of the Orient as an exotic place of danger and debauchery threatening the Occidental moral and rational order. Just as it compromises Judeo-Christian morality, Somtow's Thailand is equally threatening to the Western *logos*. For Judith, Thai culture is inductive of paranoid schizophrenia. At a very basic level, Judith experiences a mounting feeling of paranoia brought about by insecurity about her decision to marry Cricket and be carried away to an unknown far-away land. There is also the very real threat that her new husband, or his mother, may in fact be a serial killer responsible for the untimely demise of Cricket's previous wives and mistresses. She is surrounded by unscrupulous expats whose interest in her is purely instrumental and whose behaviour only fuels her fears. Last but not least, while Judith is consumed by suspicions that her husband, or mother-in-law intend to kill her, she also fears losing the love of her son whose loyalty is being bought with expensive gifts.

On a social level, this mood of paranoia is conveyed through the constant depictions of the city as "starkly dissonant" (Somtow, 2008, p. 107) in its juxtaposition of the ancient and modern, and a place where "the scent of jasmine and the scent of pollution blended into a perfume of schizophrenia" (2008, pp. 107-108). The novel makes much of blurring the distinction between reality and illusion. The concept serves to introduce a crucial difference between the Cartesian worldview that assumes the separation of the two, and Buddhist teachings that view the entire earthly life as an illusion. Somtow articulates this through his descriptions of Bangkok as "the one place in the world where there is absolutely no distinction between illusion and reality" (2008, p. 91). Built on "smoke and

⁸ A Thai third-gender category.

mirrors" (2008, p. 180), Bangkok is supposedly the place where no one should believe what they see. The novel celebrates the irrational, assaulting the reader with its accumulation of the grotesque, bizarre, and illogical that to Somtow amounts to a definition of "Thainess." Aware that this concoction of contradictions is likely to be described as paradoxical, he retorts:

A paradox ... can be resolved by attacking it logically. In Thailand, two contradictory things don't just have to *seem* to be true at the same time; they can actually *be* true! So these things aren't paradoxes at all (Somtow, 2008, p. 169)

In Bangkok the boundaries collapse:

In America, there is a great dividing line – the great Either-Or. On one side of the chasm, man; on the other side, woman. Here black, there white. Republican and Democrat. Gay and straight. Hither shit, yon shinola. Bangkok, on the other hand, is a lover who can fulfil your every fantasy, and makes that fantasy utterly real for the duration of it; it is the one place where you actually can buy love. (2008, p. 91)

As a result, the heroine finally experiences epiphany when she is able to see herself as existing simultaneously on several astral plains – killed and not killed, dead and undead, married and unmarried – and achieves a state of consciousness that in the West would qualify her for confinement in a mental institution, but in Thailand is equivalent with enlightenment. At the end of the novel, Judith meets the blind shaman who has almost caused her demise. No longer a powerful social figure and media personality, he is now a homeless man in an underground passage and he claims he has always been there.

The old man smiles. "Everything in this town," he says, "has always been here. And when it is taken away, then it has never been there. Bangkok is a forever city. Nothing changes, except veil of illusion." (Somtow, 2008, p. 329)

Gothic fondness for the collapsing boundaries has met its match in the Buddhist-animist worldview.

Bangkok, Oriental setting

Gothic exposes the instability of the Cartesian subject and blurs the line between the self and the other, living/dead, human/non-human, reality/illusion, natural/supernatural, civilized/savage, man/machine, etc. This also applies to encounters with racial otherness that becomes “simultaneously strange, distanced and exotic, and yet the site upon which racial, psychological, and sexual anxieties are projected” (Smith & Hughes, 2003, p. 3), and onto which the subject is displaced. And yet, despite its anti-Enlightenment agenda, the early Gothic also absorbed a set of views about the East that served to justify colonialist ideas, reinforcing the stereotype of the Orient as “a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” (Said, 2003, p. 1). Such views contributed to the creation of the Orientalist discourse that has effectively managed and produced the Orient, “politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively” since the eighteenth century (2003, p. 3). Andrew Smith and William Hughes see as one of the defining ambivalences of Gothic “that its labelling of otherness is often employed in the service of supporting, rather than questioning, the status quo” (2003, p. 3), arguing that in effect, the form “debates the existence of otherness and alterity, often in order to demonize such otherness” (2003, p. 3).

Said’s argument that Orientalism is the expression of the flexible positional superiority which privileges the West over the Orient, driven by a logic “governed not simply by empirical reality but by a battery of desires, repressions, investments, and projections” (2003, p. 8), is relevant for a reading of Somtow’s novel. This superior attitude manifests itself early in the story when Judith’s best friend, Roberta, is ignorant of the fact that Siam and Thailand are the same place, or when Judith assumes that everyone in Thailand must know everyone else. Such reactions suggest that to these American women Thailand is an insignificant country, not worth paying much attention to. Thrust into a more personal relationship with Thai culture, all the Western protagonists simultaneously engage in the production of fantasies of the opulent, mysterious, and exotic Orient while rejecting the uncomfortable parts of reality that expose their fantasies for what they are. Their discursive production of Thailand as the domain of the irrational and the uncivilised is paralleled by a similar distinction made by high society Thais who use it to distance themselves from their less privileged compatriots.

Judith’s expectations of her new home are largely shaped by the modern Orientalist discourse that constructs Thailand as a holiday destination for Westerners filled with “gold-clad pagodas” and “impossible beaches” (Somtow, 2008, p. 12), where she imagines her son “sitting around on the floor with a gaggle of topknotted princes, being sung to by Deborah Kerr” (2008, p. 45), a clear reference to *The King and I*, coincidentally a film that remains banned in Thailand on the grounds of its “unrealistic” portrayal of Thai

history. Roberta, similarly indulges in an Orientalist fantasy: “Oh, the sapphires, the silk, the crocodile shoes, the decadence, the sex, the –” (2008, p. 54). Even Judith’s twelve-year-old son, Jason, is impressed with his new step-father because he probably “knows *muay thai* and shit” and can “hook [him] up with a bitch” (2008, p. 34). For this sociopathic teenager, very likely named after Jason Vorhees from *Friday the 13th* (dir. Cunningham, 1980), the fantasy-Thailand incorporates images of its pop-cultural appropriation, as seen in films like *Mortal Kombat* (dir. Anderson, 1995), or *Year of the Dragon* (dir. Cimino, 1985). His evaluation of Thai culture is thus naturally simplistic: “Massage parlors, kickboxing – they got *everything*” (2008, p. 34) and his wildest desire is to hold his *bar mitzvah* in the Oriental Hotel, the location memorialised in a film scene where “all those mafia dudes are staring across the river at the Temple of Dawn” (2008, p. 35).

The novel establishes Sukhumvit as the prime location in the city despite the fact that for an outsider the reason for such promotion may be elusive. Judith’s first impression of the place is far from flattering:

This has to be some kind of grisly slum. Where, I wondered, were the Siamese equivalents of those gang-bangers one hears about, who roam the obscurer districts of the San Fernando Valley, purveyors of drugs and drive-by shootings? My fears were soon justified. I saw a man leaning against a banana tree, jabbing himself with a humungous hypodermic.

“How long till we get out of this seedy neighbourhood?” I said.

“No seedy neighbourhood!” said Driver Number Three. “This Sukhumvit – best neighbourhood in Bangkok. This like Beverly Hills.”

“Hardly,” I said, as the driver turned into a side alley so narrow I couldn’t believe we were actually squeezing down it. This was kind of like *Heart of Darkness*, except that we were awash in searing, unforgiving light. The clarity of the day was an illusion behind which hid a tangled labyrinth of desolation and bewilderment. (Somtow, 2008, pp. 76-77)

Once again, Judith’s patronising attitude is rooted in her expectations modelled on the familiar American setting, where narrow streets, overpopulation, and heightened visibility of local inhabitants who appear to be loitering in the streets for no reason, mark the area as undesirable and socially inferior. Her classist partitioning of Los Angeles reflecting the social and material standing of the city dwellers is reflected in a similar division of Bangkok, although the criteria singling out certain areas as desirable appear to be reversed. When Judith’s Thai friend, Emily, agrees to accompany her to visit a shaman,

whose headquarters are located in one of the suburban shopping malls, she is not impressed with the place:

“Oh,” you said “where we’re going is a hideous place – all the nouveau-riche live there – tacky”.

It didn’t seem that tacky to me. Far from it. Looking over the vista of well-planned cityscape, with real tree-lined avenues and upscale mansions, with glassy towers and avant-garde sculptures, I almost thought I’d died and gone to ... well, Beverly Hills, anyway ... I mean we’d left the chaos behind us, more or less, and even the smog seemed thinner.

“How anyone can want to live here!” you said, smirking as you surveyed the spectacle. “It’s just so damn far from civilisation.” (Somtow, 2008, p. 210)

This example clearly demonstrates that while both cultures designate “civilisation” as a marker of superiority, this does not necessarily mean that they conceptualise it in the same way. Since the economic boom of the 1980s, Thai culture has frequently been described as a slightly dysfunctional hybrid of local and Western lifestyles, but this dynamics between resisting and slavishly appropriating Western ideals is not particularly new. The popular nineteenth century Thai notion of *siwilai* (a bastardised form of “civilised”), which appeared in the reign of King Mongkut, adapted and acculturated Western ideas and practices within the Siamese setting rather than simply conforming to the foreign model. In fact, as Peter A. Jackson observes

siwilai was a constitutively multiple creation that borrowed enough from Western sources to create a performative “effect” of modern “civilization” in the eyes of foreign observers, while also drawing sufficiently from indigenous paradigms to make it recognisable to the Siamese populace as a local form of power linked symbolically with the country’s past. (2010, pp. 198-199)

Somtow resorts to a similar technique in his novel, in which the Orientalist assumption of the superiority of Western norms and cultural practices is largely performative and serves to reaffirm the local hierarchy of power while simultaneously creating opportunities for satirising both cultures.

To justify its designation as “uncivilised,” Thailand is, furthermore, represented as chaotic, superstitious, immoral, corrupt, and undemocratic. Judith experiences the chaos firsthand upon awakening in the car to the nightmare that is Bangkok:

I was in the back seat of a Mercedes stretch limo, perched on the topmost level of some kind of madcap freeway interchange. We were stopped. Around me – it was about a four-lane highway, but we were at least ten cars abreast – was a lot of traffic, and it was at a complete standstill. Peering out of the window, I saw several more highways, twisting and twining this way and that, each one equally jammed with cars, all of which seemed to be belching exhaust. Beyond the sea of cars was a sea of skyscrapers, and I don't mean an orderly array of skyscrapers, with ranks and files and neat little numbered avenues, I mean a sea. They were not the most tasteful of skyscrapers either. Some were rainbow-colored, some were art deco, some had bizarre murals; one resembled a gigantic circuit board. The airconditioning was going full blast, but from our wintry little cubicle I could see that the world was burning up outside and the sun was a few shades brighter than the Hiroshima bomb. A little boy was climbing up the windshield with an armful of flower garlands. A Bartok piano concerto was blasting from the stereo speakers, but it was almost drowned out by the screech of motorcycles as they zigzagged through the stalled cars, and the relentless pounding of pile drivers from every side. In the distance, a temple with pointed eaves rubbed shoulders with a Pizza Hut. The little boy clambered across the roof and poked his head, upside down, in my window, proffering a garland. (Somtow, 2008, p. 70)

The first thing we notice about this paragraph is its length (much longer than the average paragraph in the novel) and a sense of urgency with which the description attempts to involve all the senses of the reader. We see the multitude of cars and garishly colourful buildings, we hear the music muffled by the noise of the traffic, we smell the scent of jasmine mixed with the exhaust fumes, and we feel the touch of the scalding sun on naked skin. A few paragraphs later we are also invited to taste the snacks sold by a street vendor to car passengers on the road. Chaos is also present in the randomness of Bangkok's architectural forms and its lack of discrimination between old and new, Thai and Western or global. The novel frequently juxtaposes images of golden-eaved temples with icons of global consumerism like McDonalds, Pizza Hut, Sony, or Samsung.

The inferiority of Thai culture is further suggested by its apparent immorality, corruption and lack of democratic ideals. The most obvious evidence of the Thais' low moral standards is the existence of a complex sex industry catering to the customers' every desire, no matter how perverse it may be. But Thai morality is also questioned when the text brings up lax attitudes towards the institution of marriage, marital infidelity, polygamy, gender-bending, and public expressions of intimacy between members of the same sex. Moral condemnation is also extended to include easy access to drugs and counterfeit goods. The scions of Thai society are described as corrupt, involved in organised crime and prostitution, and building their fortunes on legal and illegal businesses alike. Justice is never served where money is concerned. Even the socialite serial killer is merely isolated by her family rather than brought to court. Last but not least, important decisions are made at the discretion of the chosen few. Judith gets married without being aware of this fact and undergoes abortion without being asked for permission, or even being informed of her pregnancy. On a more cosmic scale, the ending of the novel also suggests that the Earth is just a battlefield of deities, and humans are denied choice because their lives are karmically determined.

Through Somtow's self-Orientalising gesture, Thailand is reduced to a set of images, ideas, personalities and experiences that not only stand in stark contrast with the West but also discursively construct the West as positionally superior, testifying to the fact that "the relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of complex hegemony" (Said, 2003, p. 5). At times, however, the process is reversed and it is the Western subject who becomes an object of scrutiny, redefined as the racial Other. This momentary victory of the "barbaric" East over the "civilised" West is often seen as an excuse to introduce humour into the narrative, as if to apologise for entertaining such a preposterous idea.

Gothic laughter in the Land of Smiles

For Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, the comic has always been an intrinsic part of Gothic's hybridity and a legitimate response in the presence of terror or horror (2005, p. 2). It should not, however, be dismissed as merely "the hysterical laughter of comic relief" (2005, p. 2) but rather treated as "an exploitation of the stylized theatricality of the Gothic device, which is always teetering on the edge of self-parody" (2005, p. 12). They write:

it is perhaps best to think of Gothic writing as a spectrum that, at one end, produces horror-writing containing moments of comic hysteria or relief and, at the other, works in which there are clear signals that nothing is to

be taken seriously. The comic Gothic turn self-consciously uses Gothic's propensity to bare the device in order to allay the reader's learnt response of fear, horror and anxiety when encountering certain plots and tropes. Nevertheless, it still functions within Gothic as a critique of modernity. (Horner & Zlosnik, 2005, p. 4)

Horner and Zlosnik argue that "the comic within the Gothic foregrounds a self-reflexivity and dialectical impulse intrinsic to the modern subject" (2005, p. 4). Gothic texts frequently engage with self-parody and resort to intertextuality and metafiction to respond critically to various aspects of the contemporary world (2005, p. 12). Fred Botting notices "the capacity of Gothic formulae to produce laughter as abundantly as emotions of terror or horror" (1997, p. 168), seeing that the predictability of Gothic themes makes them susceptible to parody. Somtow's novel simultaneously adheres to the Gothic formula and distances itself from it by consciously parodying its conventions and responding with laughter whenever their absurdity is exposed. As Botting explains:

Laughter, activating a diabolical play that exceeds the attempt of sacred horror to expel or control it, is associated with the play of signs, narratives and interpretations, a play that is itself ambivalent in the way it is constructed as either rationally open and liberating or devilishly, anarchically irreverent. (1997, p. 172)

The Other City of Angels employs a number of formulaic conventions that allow us to identify the text as a parody of Gothic. For starters, there is the Gothic heroine swept off her feet by a mysterious stranger, whose perverse sexual habits make him a likely candidate for a villain. From the moment they meet our heroine appears to be in constant peril: conned into marriage, abducted to a foreign land, separated from her friend and her son, sexually abused, abandoned at the mercy of a possessive mother-in-law, robbed of her pregnancy, constantly lied to, and stalked by a serial killer. Even if the above are mostly treated as a joke, the culprits are exonerated *post factum*, and Judith's final enlightenment radically alters her conceptualisation of selfhood, this does not change the fact that she is frequently identified as a victim. The construction of Cricket as a Gothic villain is more problematic. On the one hand, he is a mysterious, exotic man with apparently inexhaustible riches and dark secrets. He has unhealthy sexual appetites, a collection of dead wives, and an appropriately Gothic family mansion with labyrinthine passageways, lush tropical gardens, a tower for the princess, and a morbid set of dungeons where he plays out his necrophiliac fantasies. On the other hand, his characterisation as a chubby, short man, his diminutive nickname, and the fact that he is

consistently portrayed as a spoilt brat, accumulating gadgets, pranking everyone around him, and scared of his mother, make him decidedly more comic than sinister. Additionally, the actual villain is revealed to be Judith's Thai socialite friend, Emily, who apparently is transgender and also happens to be possessed by the spirit of a shaman, himself an incarnation of another spiritual being. This, as it is easy to see, greatly complicates the attribution of guilt.

Gothic laughter in *The Other City of Angels* serves to counterpoint the appearance of the uncanny, to alleviate the terror experienced by the heroine, and to alert the audience to the absurdity of the situation. Laughing in the face of danger is a legitimate response to fear, a complex combination of a physiological reaction meant to relieve tension, and a daring attempt to regain control over the situation through defiance. Humour also significantly increases the ambivalence in language and affects its directionality, allowing for a creative expression of concerns and criticism that would have otherwise been deemed too harsh. Much of the comic effect is achieved through the employment of the grotesque, which often aims at provoking laughter. Justin Edwards and Rune Graulund elaborate:

Laughter can be light-hearted, cathartic, regenerative, liberatory or good-humoured; it can signal hilarity and excitement. But it can also have a dark side: laughter can be ridiculing, alienative, inclusive/exclusive and hierarchical; it is sometimes associated with intoxication or even madness, as in hysterical laughter; and it can include scathing wit, the politically-charged weapon of irony, the blatant attack or merely condescension. At one extreme, laughter can be a response to horror and a means of survival deeply rooted in a literary and visual culture preoccupied with terror and surmounting its effects. (2013, p.93)

Edwards and Graulund argue that the grotesque "offers a creative force for conceptualizing the indeterminate that is produced by distortion, and reflecting on the significance of the uncertainty that is thereby produced" (2013, p. 3). They discuss a number of theoretical approaches, among them the Bakhtinian notion of the grotesque actualised within the transgressive, liminal spaces of the carnival. Somtow's novel utilises this model of the grotesque to articulate the apparent monstrosity of Thai culture embodied in the text's portrayal of Bangkok: a deformed, paralysed city, site of carnal abandon, lacking "proper" culture, and steeped in superstition. The grotesque serves here to differentiate between the normal (the West) and the abnormal (Thailand) while arguing the fluidity of these boundaries at the same time.

Edwards and Graulund maintain that the grotesque has the power to eliminate borders, as it reveals the fluidity of the distinction between what is “normal” and “abnormal” (2013, p. 9). This quality makes it a useful instrument in resisting normalisation since “a grotesque figure can disrupt notions of normality in favour of conceptualizing and recognizing broader varieties of being and expression as dignified and respected” (2013, p. 10). As the grotesque “violates the laws of nature” (2013, p. 4) through breaking down clear-cut classifications and depends on a conflict brought about by the juxtaposition of opposites (2013, p. 9), it shares certain attributes with the uncanny and can similarly provoke a number of responses “from alienation and estrangement to terror and laughter” (2013, p. 6). One dimension of grotesque laughter is its expression of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, where it serves to offset the official seriousness and expose the artificiality of the authority (2013, p. 104). For Bakhtin, the carnival is an embodiment of “heteroglossia” – the denial of a single authoritarian voice in favour of a multiplicity of voices, the dialogic interaction of which contributes to a continuous production of meaning. By overthrowing authority and resisting normalisation, the carnival embraces the grotesque as “a space where conventions are overturned or eradicated” (2013, p. 25).

Somtow’s use of the grotesque in the text derives from his depictions of incongruities between Western and Thai customs and social norms – from the material world of urban planning and architecture, through the incompatibility of Cartesian rationalism and the Buddhist-animist worldview, to the singular behavioural differences between his American and Thai protagonists. His adoption of English language and the Western format of the Gothic novel allocate discursive authority to the Western values contained therein, but the grotesque imagery of the hybridised Thai culture of the affluent 1990s introduces an element of discord and makes one question the legitimacy of such politics. Judith’s son acknowledges the development of Thai civilisation based on an observation. “They’ve got all sorts of culture: Burger King, Mister Donut, Kentucky Fried Chicken, you name it” (Somtow, 2008, p. 46). The ironic equation of American fast-food chains with culture makes one doubt the boy’s apparently superior American education but also sounds critical of the way Thai modernisation has embraced the shallow rewards of American-style materialism. Jason’s comments are motivated by an Orientalist assumption that Westernisation of Thailand is equivalent with improvement. And yet the novel offers also a version of Thai improvement over Westernisation. One of the most vivid examples of which is the description of the beauty parlour Judith finds herself visiting in Sukhumvit.

The salon acts as a symbolic link between the two worlds Judith is a part of because it exists in two locations. The LA shop is originally introduced as a small, quaint and

decidedly “ethnic” establishment that invokes images of illegal immigrants and under-paid labour, only to have that assumption shattered when we learn that the owner keeps it solely for tax evasion purposes. The Bangkok shop is the real money-maker and its unique décor serves to prove it:

There was nothing like this beauty salon in Encino – or in Beverly Hills, for that matter. For one thing, it was located in a humungous shopping mall that stood catty-corner from the Shiva Regency and that shrine where I had spotted the ghost of the shamaness that drunken night. For another, it had Ionian columns, busts of Marie Antoinette, reproductions of mediaeval unicorn tapestries, suits of armor, and a winged Nike in the window. Talk about ostentation! For another, it had a side door which was a sort of private entrance into a Burger King... All the beauticians wore a sort of Thai silk version of ancient Greek costume, in keeping with the décor. An imitation Apollo of the Belvidere [sic] gazed down from a stained-glass niche – I was sure this one was bigger than the real one in the Vatican. He was a shade more buff, too, like someone you’d find on the cover of a romance novel. (Somtow, 2008, p. 115)

The salon is the embodiment of whatever the owner perceives as “desirable” for its aspiring upper-class clientele – from its location and available amenities to its décor – and yet its pick-and-mixed iconography of Western civilisation has been “improved upon” because it did not seem grandiose enough to fit the purpose. While this can be seen as a commentary on the ignorance of Thais who do not comprehend the complexity of Western culture and lack refinement, at the same time this clearly indicates that the notion of the “greatness” of Western cultural forms is localised and does not necessarily appear as such in non-Western contexts.

The novel’s engagement with the carnivalesque grotesque is also visible in its portrayal of Thai culture (and its material manifestation as the city of Bangkok) as being in the constant act of becoming, a never-ending ritual of destruction and creation that gives meaning to life. Bangkok is a city in flux, both part of the universe and the universe itself: “The city’s a shapeshifter. By night, the pile-drivers move in, and by morning the skyline’s a little different – another garish skyscraper, another futuristic shopping mall” (Somtow, 2008, p. 327). It exists as a moment in time but it is also essentially atemporal. Only by grasping this can the novel’s heroine liberate herself from the constraints of the Western *logos* and reach the epiphany of enlightenment, which according to Somtow is necessary to understand the cosmic dimension of all cultures, Thai included. This is also the moment

when Somtow's self-Orientalism gets exposed as a technique in the service of the grotesque.

Conclusions: The last laugh

The Other City of Angels combines Gothic formulae with a parody of its conventions demonstrating that Gothic has a capacity "to produce laughter as abundantly as emotions of terror or horror" (Botting, 1997, p. 168). In this particular novel the element of humour is introduced largely through the employment of the carnivalesque grotesque realised through the juxtaposition of images pitting Western and Thai culture against each other, and describing Thailand as the unruly land of chaos capable of subverting the dominant discourse of Western logic. This is especially visible in the construction of Bangkok as the monstrous city that defies logic and forces its inhabitants to embrace its irrational ways. The grotesque imagery reproduces the Orientalist fantasy of the exotic city of opulence and debauchery only to expose this fantasy as yet another illusion and turn it against itself. Somtow's dark humour, however, goes further than simply ridiculing the foreigners and their assumption of the superiority of Western cultures. Much of his satire is aimed at disclosing the vices of contemporary Thai society, which he sees as marred by corruption, inequality, and consumed by materialism.

The Other City of Angels is not the only text by Somtow which utilises such a strategy. It is safe to say that all his Bangkok-themed novels and short stories feature grotesquery and toy with Orientalist self-identification. They are also internally hybrid Gothic texts blending horror and terror with laughter. In *The Crow: Temple of Night* (1999), an instalment in the multi-author saga of the risen-from-the-dead avenger inspired by James O'Barr's graphic novel, the city of Bangkok is introduced on the cover as the place "where the desires of the living meet the lusts of the dead." Rather predictably, our un-dead vigilante seems much less out of place in Bangkok than in any other metropolis of the world, and his fight against the slumlords, prostitution rings and corrupt politicians culminates in the clash of gods and the rising of hell (*Narok*), ever present under the surface of the city. But while the city of Bangkok and Thai culture in general are initially always depicted by Somtow as monstrous, the texts' ultimate rejection of Western rationalism in favour of a more Buddhist and animist-inspired worldview invite us to make a case for recognising the transcultural potential of Gothic.

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