

Film brings shame upon Thai society

http://nationmultimedia.com/2006/04/30/opinion/opinion_30002874.php

EDITORIAL

April 30, 2006

That 'Ghost Game' was even made shows the shocking lack of sensitivity in today's consumerist culture

Training in cultural sensitivity should be made compulsory for all schoolchildren in this country so that they grow up to become broadminded, culturally aware and well-adapted international citizens in a globalised world. The controversy over a Thai horror film based on a notorious Khmer Rouge death camp is the latest example of cultural callousness that is still commonplace in this society.

Most people who flocked to see "Ghost Game", which opened on Thursday, would have left the theatre thinking nothing of the thinly veiled reference to one of the world's worst genocides of the 20th century, under the Khmer Rouge's reign of terror in the late 1970s. They would probably have felt a sense of exhilaration and considered the film good, clean fun, no different from any other horror flick, game show or other frivolous entertainment.

That is because most Thais now have either forgotten or are still ignorant about what happened just across the border in the neighbouring country to the east during those terrible years, when the worst kinds of crimes against humanity were committed.

The movie tells the story of 10 contestants in a reality-television game show who volunteer to stay in a haunted prison - instead of a plush mansion - where they must confront the atrocities that happened there in order to win a huge cash prize. The problem is that the prison featured in the film - shot entirely in Thailand - has an uncanny similarity to the Khmer Rouge Tuol Sleng torture centre in Phnom Penh, also known as S-21.

The Khmer Rouge used Tuol Sleng, originally a high school, as torture chambers, interrogation rooms and detention cells for thousands of people considered enemies of the brutal regime. It was at this prison that confessions were extracted from people through the most grotesque means of torture imaginable before they were exterminated in the nearby killing field in Choung Ek.

The concept of "Ghost Game" is that the contestants must provoke the wrath of all the vengeful spirits supposedly inhabiting the former torture compound. The contestant who manages to endure the nerve-chilling atmosphere the longest and still stay sane walks away with Bt5 million. In one of the most offensive scenes, contestants provoke the spirits of genocide victims by smashing up skulls and skeletons (artificial, not real ones). Again the piles of skulls and skeletons depicted in the movie are eerily similar to those on exhibit at Phnom Penh's Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum.

Earlier this week, the producers of "Ghost Game" offered a heartfelt apology to the Cambodian people following protests and criticism from Cambodian authorities about the glaring insensitivity of the movie's theme and settings and the lack of respect shown to the memory of genocide victims and their surviving families. They did not, or to be more precise, could not, deny the fact that the film's setting was modelled on Tuol Sleng. Movie producer Tifa Co had sought the Cambodian government's permission to shoot "Ghost Game" in Cambodia last June but was refused on grounds of cultural insensitivity. That did not stop the company from going ahead and shooting the movie in Thailand without any alteration to the theme or setting.

In offering the apology, the movie's executive director Napat Pavaputanont said that all those involved in the making of "Ghost Game" were sorry that the film had offended the Cambodian people. He said they had not given the subject enough serious thought.

Apology aside, it became obvious that they still wouldn't mind making a lot of money from the movie, to recoup their investment and to line their pockets. Never mind the insult to the historical memories of the Cambodian people by this thoughtless horror flick in bad taste that panders to the ignorant, culturally insensitive masses.

A Thai society that fails to teach its people cultural sensitivity should hang its head in shame. We could certainly do better by teaching the younger generation not only historical facts but also a sense of good taste and cultural sensitivity to counter the consumerist culture that values brainless entertainment featuring 20-somethings vying against one another in a get-rich-quick scheme as the supreme form of entertainment. To succeed in doing that, we must catch them young.