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The Possibilities of Graphic Ethnography

An Interview with Claudio Sopranzetti[†], Sara Fabbri^{*}
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ABSTRACT | Claudio Sopranzetti, Sara Fabbri, and Chiara Natalucci are the team behind the new graphic ethnography *The King of Bangkok* (University of Toronto Press 2021). *The King of Bangkok* tells the story of Nok, an urban migrant from Thailand's northeastern region as he moves back and forth from his home village and attempts to build a life in the country's capital across periods of massive economic growth and collapse and periods of democratic expansion, state violence, and political closure. Structured around a series of flashbacks, *The King of Bangkok* shows how these historical events shaped Nok's life and how Nok's life came to shape those events. The book was originally published in Italian (Add Editore, 2019) and was subsequently translated into Thai as *Taa Sawaang* (Awakening, อานอิตาลี 2020). In this interview we ask Claudio, Sara, and Chiara about their experience creating this text, its relationship with more traditional ethnographic genres of writing, and the effects their project has had in Thailand. We are delighted to feature a small section of the book following the interview.¹

Keywords: Anthropology; Graphic Novel; Visual Ethnography; Story Telling; Thailand

CE: What was the motivation behind this book and what is its relationship with more traditional academic ethnography?

Claudio Sopranzetti, Chiara Natalucci, and Sara Fabbri: The idea of this comic was born out of Claudio's desire to bring the stories he had collected during his ten years of research in Thailand to a public beyond academia. This desire became even more urgent after the 2014 military coup in the country, in which the government actively started to erase the memories of the political events Claudio had studied in his research. As often happens with authoritarian regimes, controlling the past and its memory becomes a way of determining the present. Our intention was to do something, however small, to keep these stories alive and bring them to an international audience.

What was most lost and buried in academic or news jargon, were the stories of the amazing, courageous people he had met. This project is driven by those people, by an attempt to put them and their stories at the centre. With this in mind, Claudio started to discuss the project with his school friend, Chiara, who, at the time, was working in publishing in London. Chiara's proposal was to create a graphic novel due to their growing popularity and narrative potency.

The next challenge was to find an artist with a distinctive aesthetic style but also a willingness to be involved in a collaborative project. This meant, on one side, questioning the usual division of labour in collaborative comics: breaking down the distinctions between writer, scriptwriter, editor, and visual artists. We also needed to find an illustrator who would be open to go beyond a stereotypical or fixed perception of Thailand. The first thought was to contact local artists. Many of the Thai contemporary comic artists we talked to had a middle-class background and tended to represent the lives we wanted to narrate through archetypes, using stock characters like the noble villager or dangerous migrant.

After a few frustrating attempts, we decided to change our approach and to look for an artist who did not have previous experience in Thailand. A common friend introduced us to Sara's work and showed us some of her sketches. While the subject of her work was far from the stories we wanted to tell, something in her drawings intrigued us. We sent her some pictures Claudio had taken during his research and asked her to give us her own interpretation. What came back was a set of striking black and white sketches, which were just what we were after. Not only did her drawings convince us, but Sara immediately started to research Thai visual culture, interior design, and architectural style, proving we had found the right person.

Once we assembled the team, the main challenge became how to preserve the in-depth and theoretical force of a traditional ethnography while taking fully advantage of the affective power of a graphic form. In other words, we had to simplify, without becoming simplistic, a traditional ethnographic approach while exploring the medium of a graphic novel not simply as another form but as a tool that allowed a different way of constructing narratives eliciting an emotional response from readers.

CE: How did you structure your work?

CS/CN/SF: After completing preliminary sketches and research, we received a fellowship from Oxford University, where Claudio was completing his postdoc. We used the fellowship to travel to Thailand. During our stay, Chiara and Sara entered into Claudio's fieldwork with four different objectives in mind:

First, we carried out the work of location scouting, typical of film productions. Starting from Bangkok, we travelled to the northeastern part of Thailand to visit a few countryside villages and then to Koh Pha-Ngan, an island in the Gulf of Thailand where many of Claudio's informants worked during their lives. Our purpose was to be exposed to Thai images, colours, shapes, sensations, feelings and atmospheres and select the specific locations in which our story would take place, creating an initial visual archive.

We had previously decided to base every line of dialogue on Claudio's real interviews because we wanted to tell the story from the point of view of a set of local characters. Consequently, the second component of our research was more properly ethnographic. Practically, we spent a lot of time interviewing and living in close contact with the persons whose stories we wanted to tell and with whom Claudio had developed friendships and collaborations over the previous years. We ended up eating live shrimps on a floating boat in a remote village in the northeastern part of Thailand, spending long boring afternoons at a motorcycle taxi station in Bangkok, and hanging around the barracks of construction workers on a Thai island. In this phase, Claudio was conducting interviews and translating for Chiara and Sara, while they were archiving material, sketches, travel diaries, photos and videos.

Third, we had decided that our main character would be a blind person. This raised a number of challenges, especially for Sara. To make a long story short, during our stay in Thailand we decided to explore the experience of blindness, both in general terms and in the specific configurations it takes in Bangkok. For the former aspect, we collected all the material we could find on the subject, mixing personal narratives with psychologists' and neuroscientists' treatises on the topic. In Thailand, many blind persons end up selling lottery tickets on the streets. It became important to spend as much time as we could with those vendors, following them in their daily journeys and discussing how they move around a giant and unwelcoming city to understand how they experience urban spaces, weather conditions, means of transport and their interactions with sighted people. We even retraced the path that the main character walks in our graphic novel blindfolded, archiving our own sensations along the journey.

Finally, given that our story takes place over the course of 50 years, we needed to use our time in Thailand to collect as much historical material as we could in order to be able to reconstruct how the country had changed visually over time. Using material from the Thai National Library, the National Archives of Thai Films and private collections of local historians, we created an archive of more than 5000 items from pictures to movies, books, posters, fashion, advertisements and so on. We organized this archive by year starting from 1975 to the present so that whenever we needed to draw a specific year we could make sure that our representation would be faithful.

CE: How did you select the historical events to include in the graphic novel?

CS/CN/SF: Attempting to narrate fifty years of Thai history in a comic book of 200 pages is a titanic enterprise, condemned to imperfection. At first, we created a giant timeline on a two-meter long piece of paper that remained on top of our desks until the book was finished. It was made of two lines: an upper one with the most significant events in the history of Thailand over the period we wanted to cover; a lower one with personal events related to the lives of the main characters. In a way, the former was a representation of History with the capital H, the latter of some of the histories that occur underneath it, sometimes in conjunction with it, other times completely autonomously. To reconstruct History, we based our selection on the works of Thai historians, while for the histories we relied on Claudio's interviews, creating composite characters. We were particularly interested in exploring how the first line, that of epoch-making events, rulers and kings, intersects and intertwines with the everyday histories of migrants and workers, their families, and villages. This is why the prominence of historical events changes over the course of the novel. Initially, our characters are barely involved, or even interested, in large social events. They sort of occur in the background of their lives, broadcast from an old radio or a TV set. As the protagonists grow and become actively involved in the country's economic and political transformations, those events become integral parts of their daily lives, something they discuss around a table and then, eventually, in which they become directly involved. Ultimately, this is a story of political and collective awakenings and how the waves of historical changes lift, engulf, or crush ordinary people.

CE: The novel was published in Italian first then translated into Thai and now in English. How have these different translation processes changed your understanding of the text?

Chiara: *The King of Bangkok* was in fact originally written in English, but it came out in Italian. This happened for a number of reasons: firstly, Claudio's research activity is anchored in the English language. English was what he used to communicate when he first arrived in Thailand; it was the bridge language with which he started to study Thai; and also the language he used to write his academic articles. There was, therefore, a sort of familiarity between the story and this language. Think about when you first meet someone in a foreign country and settle on a common language. Even if that person will at some point learn your own language, it will be rather awkward to switch to it in the communication between the two of you because your brain feels more comfortable in using the language you originally had in common. This is, at some level, what was happening with the material Claudio had collected and shared with us. Secondly, we originally thought that this book would be more appealing to an Anglophone market. The idea was to be published in the UK or the US, then try with other countries. We felt that especially the American audience could be interested in reading a story set in Thailand because of the size of the US market and the historical relations between the two countries. Thirdly, and this was largely unexpected, as we were developing the novel, we received an offer from an Italian publisher focusing on books about Asia. Getting an actual contract was a strong boost for our confidence but at the time we barely had half of the book ready. So, besides translating what

we had previously written, by accepting the offer we had to decide whether to start writing in Italian or proceed in English. We opted for the second. This meant that, besides continuing to work as a shadow editor, I also had to become the translator of the text, from English back to Italian, a language all of us are native in. Once again, a challenge.

Within this linguistic context, we had to deal with some issues typical of any translation. Regardless of the English or Italian language, the most complicated aspect was how to present faithfully some distinctive Thai features to Western readership. For instance, if you want to offend someone in Thailand you call him snake or animal or, if you really are mad, lizard: insults belong to the semantic field of animals. In Italian or English, this wouldn't sound as strong as in Thai, taking away some of the significance of these words, but we decided nonetheless to preserve this Thai peculiarity and maintain the animal universe anyway. Therefore, we selected the option that sounded most offensive in each language: goat or beast in Italian, buffalo or simply animal in English, sometimes in combination with the word "stupid" to add more emphasis.

We had a similar issue with how Thai people refer to elders. Among Thai people, as a form of respect, you call an old person "uncle/aunt", including them in a familiar environment even if they are complete strangers. In Italian, the same forms have exactly the opposite purpose – "uncle/aunt" is a sort of slang that young people use to call each other and carry the feeling of an informal conversation. In this case, unfortunately, it wasn't possible to find a convincing alternative in Italian and we decided to use the polite and formal form of "Sir/Madam", while in English we kept the same as in Thai.

Another central issue was how to engage with visual and audio material presented inside the graphic novel. What languages should these be in? After long discussions, we decided to leave all posters, billboards, signs, graffiti and protest banners in Thai in order to give an accurate representation of the country and its visual impact and feeling. To do this, we created a massive photographic archive from the 1980s to the present time, divided by year, that Sara could check any time she needed to insert a specific reference or image in her drawings. For the audio material, on the other hand, we decided to work in translation. Songs, radio bulletins and TV news are functional to the development of the story, they serve to introduce the History with the capital H, they are enriching elements to some important dialogues and scenes and therefore needed to be easily accessible to the readers.

Taking these sorts of decisions about language, however, was only a part of what translation meant in our context. Language is intimately connected to culture and therefore translation doesn't only have to do with the former, but it pertains also to the latter. Behind any language there is a set of habits, values and meanings, culturally constructed and reproduced. Translating for us was not only about bringing Thai words to a foreign public, whether Italian or English, but also narrating the worlds in which those words carry their meaning. This obviously required a different style of translation, not just linguistical but cultural, in relation to the specific context we were translating to. And that, as your question suggests, meant also looking back at the original text or original interviews and noticing new aspects at each turn of translation.

CE: How has the Thai version, Taa Sawaang, been received in Thailand? What were the main challenges of bringing this text to a Thai audience and how was it received?

CS/CN/SF: Being able to get this book out in Thailand for a local audience was an incredible opportunity, made possible by Nuntawan Chanprasert, the editor of Reading Italy, a small press that publishes Italian literature in Thai translation. Because of the content of the graphic novel, and its title in Thai, deciding to publish it was extremely brave on her part. The level of repression continues to be high in the country and a book that narrates these sensitive histories to a larger audience could lead her easily into trouble. So, on one side, there were legal worries regarding the publication. These generated a very long discussion on the thin line that we had to walk between not being open to lèse majesté charges, which could land us, but especially her, into jail, and preserving the narrative and political significance of the book. The solution we finally adopted in Thai was to cover three particularly sensitive sentences with a black line, a strategy used by progressive Thai filmmakers to pass state censorship while indexing its presence and effects.

From another angle, we were personally terrified by the idea of being read by a local audience. After all, we are three foreigners telling the story of contemporary Thailand to a Thai public who have personally lived through it. This fear was the same that had driven our reflections on orientalism, cultural appropriation, and the politics of representation throughout our production process. Nuntawan had read the book in Italian and she was adamant on the importance of bringing it to a Thai audience and this gave us some degree of confidence. Nonetheless when we knew the book would be launched at a Bangkok Book Fair we waited in trepidation.

The result was really unexpected and overwhelming. Since the first days the graphic novel did very well. We started to see discussions and engagements with it on blogs and Facebook groups, then reviews from literary journals and newspapers, and finally endorsements from renowned artists, intellectuals, and political activists. We could not believe our eyes. The book entered the bestseller lists of many bookstores and e-commerce websites in the country and stayed there for weeks. This was incredibly humbling to see that Thai readers were responding positively to the book and to see a graphic novel, a format very unusual in Thailand, on those lists. Even more unexpected, in the summer of 2020, the book received the “Notable Book Award” a prize given by a group of 60 Thai publishers to the volume they think local readers should read. This made us hopeful not just that we had done a good job but also that our book could play a role in bridging comics, traditionally associated with “funny” and youthful themes in the country, and academic and political research.

CE: What difficulties did you find in representing Thailand?

CS/CN/SF: From a narrative point of view, we wanted to tell the story of a country largely unknown, or superficially known, to our readers. We therefore tried to let the country speak in its own voice. This meant allowing the dialogues between our characters to lead the readers, using local media (whether newspapers, radio or TV) as the narrators of historical events, and reducing to a minimum an

omniscient external voice. This way, we thought, the complexities and ambiguities of everyday lives in the midst of historical transformations could be preserved, without needing to express a moral commentary on them. From a graphic point of view, instead, the main challenge was to recreate local atmospheres and scenes without relying on orientalist stereotypes that often dominate Western gaze and associate Thailand with mysticism, Buddhism, pristine nature, or criminality, stressing the distance between “us” and “them”. Finally, from a linguistic point of view, the risk was almost the opposite one, that of making the language too familiar and “English,” erasing some of the linguistic and semantic peculiarities typical of Thai. On this front, we decided to translate local terms while preserving the semantic universe to which they relate.

CE: Colours do a lot of communicative work in your novel. How did you choose them?

CS/CN/SF: Colours play a pivotal role in this book, both in the presents and in the flashbacks. In the former, bright colours are opposed to the black and white to narrate visually the protagonist’s blindness. In the flashbacks, instead, we chose specific colours for each chapter, the results of the impressions that our residence in Thailand left on Sara. And yet colours never play a descriptive function, they operate as psychological levers. Each chapter tells a phase of Nok’s story and the colour we selected helped us to make his inner world more incisive and evident. For instance, the cold colours of the city make it rigid and repulsive, or the deep red of the countryside soil gives it a sense of warmth while winking to the Red Shirts movement. Generally speaking, the colours structure the story as a visual palindrome to stress the circularity of the narrative. In the flashbacks, in fact, we start from a city depicted with cold colours and we end up, right at the end of the book, with the same palette. This suggests a continuity in the feeling of Bangkok but also a dimension of change, represented by the colour red, the colour of the protest. Green and red, instead, connect the second and fourth chapter in which personal relationships play a central role, whether between Nok and his father, Gai and Nok or with their newborn. The central chapter, on the other hand, has a different colour structure, the acid tone of the island. This palette is not repeated as it represents the turning point of the story and the character’s development. In this sense, colours become the symbols of the change of time and the storyline, in particular the diachronic dimension of the narrative. On the contrary, the black and white sections not only represent blindness but also have the synchronic function of depicting the here and now of Nok’s new life.

CE: Why did you choose a blind protagonist?

CS/CN/SF: The decision was almost a natural one at first. The blind person who inspired the older Nok is an incredible person. Claudio has known him for many years but was never able to write academically about him, probably because his personal story is simply too fascinating to butcher with an academic axe. It was he, first, who talk to Claudio about his blindness as a metaphor for the dark times that Thailand is living. He is a person of incredible sensitivity, able to think and interpret the dramatic events he lived as collective occurrences. Blind people in Thailand, as in many other places, are often seen as having acquired another type

of sight, as able to see beyond, and the person behind Nok is truly able to do so. We thought a lot about the right title to tell his story and originally the title Claudio had in mind was based on a concept the real person behind Nok always used to refer to the new sight he acquired: Taa Sawaang. Literally, this means “bright eyes” but is used to refer to an awakening, both in the Buddhist sense of the term and in the sense of obtaining a clearer vision of the political reality of contemporary Thailand. Over the last years, opponents of the monarchy started to use this term to refer to the moment in which they realized that the monarchy was not what they thought it was and did not have people’s interests at heart. It is not uncommon, behind closed doors, for people to ask each other when they became Taa Sawaang. This was for us a very interesting semiotic and semantic node: blindness, new visions, and awakenings.

CE: *What does the graphic novel make possible that traditional ethnography does not? What are its limits?*

Claudio: The only way I can answer this question is to compare the graphic novel to my own monograph *Owners of the Map*, which came out with University of California Press in 2018. A lot of work had gone into moving from field notes to dissertation, and then from the dissertation into a book—a work of narratives checking events, transcribing interviews, engaging with theoretical traditions and existing literature, building narratives, developing characters, and editing to a maniacal level in order to be as faithful as I could to my informants’ voices. I was quite satisfied with the tone of the book and its focus on characters, rather than theories, and yet I continued to feel that even in my research of realism something profoundly real had been lost. Paradoxically what was missing was both the utterly mundane and concrete—the materiality of spaces, the smell of foods, the slugging of time at street corners—and the profoundly abstract—the feelings of a sunny afternoon on a porch overlooking dry cracked fields, the rage and impotence felt after the protest was dispersed, the mixed sense of inferiority and pride felt every day at street corners, the warmth of endless conversations in the dark—both elements that my words could only feebly and partially evoke. Rendering these two elements—the utterly concrete and the profoundly abstract—is, I believe, the main contributions that a graphic form brings to traditional ethnography.

Let me start from the former and then move to the latter:

When I started to transform my research into the script for *The King of Bangkok*, I realized that so much of my previous ethnographic writing, in fact of any of my writing, had been descriptions of everyday elements. Bounded by the limits of words, a lot of my energy (and words) had been directed to an endless yet doomed attempt to get my readers to sense the smell of a city, feel the heat of its concrete, or get lost in the flow of its traffic. In a graphic novel all of this was superfluous; images would do the heavy lifting, projecting the reader into a sensorial world that did not need to be filtered discursively. At first it was really hard to shift my writing exclusively to dialogues and let Sara’s visual imaginary lead the reader but, as Sara and Chiara insisted I let go of my descriptive voice, a profound sense of satisfaction settled in. Something I had been struggling to render was taking form in front of my own eyes, as it would for my readers: a materiality of spaces that I could not achieve with words.

And yet, the narrative potential of this format did not stop there. The choices that Sara was making about the page were not exclusively about representing reality graphically but also to set a mood and a feeling—something I always felt was lost in my pages—with the camera movements, the choices of perspective, or the setting of a page. This was to me one of the main conceptual and narrative opportunities provided by this format to ethnography: that of creating an emphatic and emotional engagement with readers by directing their attention to a simplified version of reality. Scott McCloud, one of the main theorists of comics, has called this process “amplification through simplification.” Comics, for him, are the result of a process of abstraction and simplification, and “when we abstract an image [...] we’re not so much eliminating details as we are focusing on specific details by stripping down an image to its essential meaning.” (McCloud 1994: 30, italics mine) As a result of this process of stripping down to “essential meaning”—a process that occurred through long conversations in which I would start with an ethnographic moment and, with the help of Chiara and Sara, distil its significance—readers are allowed to project themselves both imaginatively and emotionally onto the characters, focusing more on the message rather than the messenger. My previous frustrations were assuaged by this approach: a reduction of my cumbersome presence, another way of representing the concretely mundane, and a pathway to the emotive and affective dimensions of life in the field. Paradoxically, however, this was not obtained, as I had tried in my academic writing, through a form of ultra-realism but rather by a stripping down details and taking a step toward fictional writing and drawing. One page in particular brought this point home for me (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Over the next few years, the city continued to grow...and us with it.
(Sopranzetti, Fabbri, and Natalucci 2021: 44-45).

This is a page from our first chapter, one mostly built on oral histories I collected during my research and on photographic material coming out of the archive we built during our residency in Thailand. Here we wanted to narrate a phase in which Nok and Hong, two young internal migrants who had struggled for years to get accustomed to life in Bangkok, were living in sync with the economic and urban boom of the late 1980s, growing together with a city that felt more and more comfortable. Many of the people I interviewed had talked to me about Bangkok as an entity that welcomed, embraced, and fed them at times, while for others the city crushed and hollowed them. This was the “essential meaning” I wanted to convey—this tension between a city too big to call home and a period in which the characters themselves felt in possession of it. While I pushed for a literal representation, one that would be realistic in the architectural and material representation of the city based on our archives, Sara proposed a lyrical interpretation, one in which the city would become this shrinking entity in which the two growing bodies of our protagonists almost struggled to fit. The result was this image in which each of the buildings, the billboards, and the companies’ names are historically faithful while the composition suggests a dreamlike dimension, one maybe factually inauthentic, yet emotionally true. In the words of Benjamin Dix and Raminder Kaur, “as a distillate or reconstructed realism, truth was less about getting to authenticity but appreciating the possibilities to imagine and re-create a sense of authenticity” (Dix, Kaur, and Pollock 2019: 107).

What this page brought home to me is that in this format we could aim for a higher regime of truth, compared to part of my academic writing in which I was referring to the same processes, a truth that gets to what I personally experienced in my fieldwork and the emotions that people were expressing to me and to each other. My academic writing has often been limited to a kind of formalistic truth, built through a careful composition of details, with the purpose of convincingly depicting my experience of “being there” while, in my view, failing to represent in honest and profound ways what it means to “live there.” Here, on the contrary, details get erased and selected, reduced and condensed, while lyrical images, profoundly unreal, allow us as readers to project ourselves in the characters and their surrounding and inner worlds, while also seeing them as emblematic figures at the nexus of processes of migration, class discrimination, economic transformations, and political awakenings. This was ultimately the main discovery of this process, a realization most clearly spelled out by Alan Moore in his graphic novel *V for Vendetta*, that “artists use lies to tell the truth while politicians use them to cover the truth up” (Moore 1981).

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Notes

1. *The King of Bangkok* will be available in English from University of Toronto Press. It is currently available in Italian as *Il Re Di Bangkok* from Add Editore and in Thai as ตาสว่าง from อ่านอิตาลี.

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