Research Article

Buddhism, Copying, and the Art of the Imagination in Thailand

By

J. Taylor, Department of Anthropology

jim.taylor@adelaide.edu.au

University of Adelaide

<h1 style="text-align:center">R e s e a r c h A r t i c l e</h1>

Buddhism, Copying, and the Art of the Imagination in Thailand

by

Dr. Jim Taylor,

Department of Anthropology, University of Adelaide

jim.taylor@adelaide.edu.au

Abstract

This article theorizes new urban religio-scapes in metropolitan Bangkok, a city space of contradictory modernities. Here, I look at two contrasting Buddhist monastic spaces of sanctity from periods of fieldwork between 1998 and 2002. Firstly, as found in the modern semblance of order and discipline at the radically neo-conservative Dhammakaya Movement (lit. "Body of Dhamma"). Secondly, the chaotic, disordered flamboyant and kitsch space of the Sanam Chan Monastery on the outskirts of the ever-expanding Thai post-metropolis, which has similarities with the consumerist contemporary "Buddhist" feature art of the arcades and shopping centres. I argue that Wat (Monastery) Sanam Chan is a postmodern representation of sanctity; it is a response to modernity, while Dhammakaya, aside from its immense spectacle, reflects more the essentialist conditions inherent in modernity. Nevertheless, it is clear that both spaces of sanctity challenge the established religious hierarchy, its perceived orthodoxy, legitimation and the ethical bases of civic religion in Thailand

As I have argued elsewhere (1), new religions in Thailand, as in other cultural contexts, are not so much a return to (an-Other) interpretation of perceived tradition, as recognition of new relativizing possibilities that are latent in the sentiments and experiences of modern everyday life. It is individual life worlds that are being reshaped by the social processes of modernity. Religion is an integral part of these interactive, complex and richly articulated social processes where we see a complex move towards hybridity and the challenging of conventional boundaries and spaces of sanctity. The global experience of Buddhism in the west is another hybridizing domain that has been well researched in recent years .(2)

As cultural hybridities(3) new religious practices in Thailand express a mix of reality and non-reality or mythic elements, which Foucault (1986) defined as "heterotopias." At the same time, while clearly situated and localizable, they are outside the conventional hierarchy of places. As "third" or "Other" representational spaces that are both real-and-imagined, these are potentially radically transformative relying heavily on images and symbols .(4) Indeed, "Other" alternatives (as ways of thinking, feeling and acting) are not restricted to binary opposites such as center-periphery, subject-object, nature-culture, local-global, monastery-village/town, and spaces such as private and public, domestic and social, leisure and work, and so forth (Soja 2000: 198-9). In everyday life these modern "sanctified" oppositions, where the sacred is continually hidden,

continue to regulate our lives and determine social relations and the way we think about history and (remembered) tradition (Foucault 1986: 23).

As specific divergent sites that embrace both the material and immaterial, in varying degrees most hybrid religions are disturbing places of incongruity and difference. These are cultural counter-sites that ideologically and symbolically contest and potentially invert existing arrangements in the wider social order (Foucault 1986: 24). It is here that we see the articulation of marginal or divergent and contested ideas and practices. At these counter-sites, where there is engagement of the fusion of values, we also need to somehow capture the variety and dynamics of social change and the relationship among various religious forms, such as that seen at the Sanam Chan and Dhammakaya (5)monasteries both in differing ways open to imaginative "Other" (or "Othering") local possibilities (Soja 1996: 7). (6)

Simulation and the reproduction of Buddha-images

Before looking at case studies, I turn to some theoretical ideas associated with reproduction and imitation as these resonate with new urban life worlds and religiosity. In particular, I am interested in representations and attenuated contexts of meaning in the Buddha through iconography. This has been particularly controversial in the case of Buddha-images constructed by both Dhammakaya and Wat Sanam Chan. Non-canonical works give little value to the image as such except as a reminder of the self-achievements and marks of a "great" epochal human. However, Swearer (2004) has shown how popular Buddhism is often diametrically opposed to such views as the image has taken on purely devotional characteristics, including offering protection and imparting boons on believers. This paper is little concerned with these inscribed meanings as in image reproduction, and the aesthetics of modernity.

Baudrillard (1983, 1994) provides some considered openings in his flamboyant conceptualization of simulation, akin to a recurring pretence that tends to blur what we consider to be real and imagined (Ibid.: 1994:3). Today's world, arguably, presents the ultimate in copying and reproduction; even as simulacra or copies with no connection to an original order or reference point. This may undermine the actual distinction between copy and the original or model (Deleuze 1983: 52-53), blurring reality or object of exchange and its representation or sign (Schoonmaker 1994: 171). The resemblance to the real is merely a surface effect, an illusion (Deleuze 1983: 48-49). Indeed, it is only illusion that is considered sacred as today's world favours copies to originals, representation to reality, and appearance to the essence of things. It has been argued that sacredness and, correspondingly, illusion to sacredness, are increased in relation to the decrease in truth (Feuerbach 1957: xix). This argument may be extended to question the nature of the real as original things, images and representations of the lived world. Simulation then eliminates the objective referent where images may be similar but without any claiming to be the model of the others. The real, or conventional truth, is only a seductive illusion (Baudrillard 1994: 160-164).

I argue that in much the same way it is possible to talk about specific Thai Buddhist simulacra as the new cultural domain of (post-) modern urban Thai religion. This requires another reading or "translation" of representational practices that are part and parcel of the proliferation of

"alternative Buddhisms" (Morris 2000: 54). Foucault and Baudrillard's ideas on an increasingly hyper-real (postmodern) world may suggest, in the case of the reproduction of Buddha-images in Thailand, that we are "seduced" into a completely new feeling or intensity of religiosity that calls to question certain truths. For instance, in an iconographic representation of the Buddha how do we determine what is the real/original order of Buddha images? The real is not simply embedded in the technologies of mass reproduction and the economies of exchanging (Morris 2000: 14). It can be argued that it is that which is already reproduced; it is surface allegory, an extended metaphor of the (original) model, as in the case of the new "Superman" Buddha image at Wat Sanam Chan (discussed below).

Renowned art historian A. B. Griswold earlier looked at the implications in the copying of images, in this case attempting to locate an original model. He noted that, "every image of the Buddha had to be a copy of an older one, itself copied from a still older image, and so tracing back through no matter how many intermediaries to one of the perfect likenesses supposed to have been made during his lifetime, or not long after his death..." Indeed, representatively, how else "could an acceptable likeness be made...?" (Griswold 1966: 37) (7) But, even the most perfect artistic reproduction lacks a "presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be" (Benjamin 1969: 220). The original model dies in its simulation and instead we are left only with nostalgia, an attempt to preserve the signs of the real as copyists attempted to capture and reproduce an "essence" of the perceived original or real in the object itself, including the first order of supranormal powers. In present-day urban Thailand, the religiously real is usually invoked with a correspondingly re-inscribed intensity of meaning so as to be made relevant to the changes in everyday life.

Griswold also noted that iconography "travels from one place to another whenever an image makes the trip and inspires a copy." Imported Buddha images "must have played a crucial role" in the formation of the various schools or sects in early Siam. Each school then reproduced Buddha-images according to their own imagining of the original copy (Griswold 1966: 37-38), which became emblematic of the real. As it was impossible to determine the original image, as in authentic succession from the non-real or substituted (Benjamin 1969: 220) the "safest course was to choose as a model a statue that has already proven itself by its unusual, supranormal powers" (Tambiah 1984: 231). In other words, it had to show this through its own unique charisma and personal history referring only to itself. The process of image reproduction then tends to place the copy of the original beyond reach of the original, which is eventually displaced in the expediency of religio-politics. But, the process of mass reproduction may at least enable the original to somehow "meet the beholder midway" (Benjamin 1969: 221).

Tambiah (1984: 230 ff) noted the travels of the Sinhala Buddha image, linked to trans-national (regional) imaginings. Here localized places were transformed into spaces of universal sanctity. Likewise, Frank Reynolds (1978: 175 ff.) saw the Emerald Buddha-image as enmeshed in complex regional religio-political relations. Both were palladia or first-order sacra for the emergent Southeast Asian Buddhist kingdoms. However, today it is no longer possible to determine which is the original Buddha-image originating from its source in Sri Lanka.

To complicate matters there are five or six unique images located in different towns in Thailand that claim identification with the original in medieval Ceylon (Tambiah 1984: 238). There are also a number of new (postmodern) Buddha-images as contested religious simulacra, as in the case of Dhammakaya's contentious "Parama" Buddha image and Wat Sanam Chan's "Superman Buddha-image." Both of these images have challenged the nature and legitimacy of the normatively real, authenticity (and national identity) and original sacred objects. Importantly, as unique copies they have detached themselves from the domain of tradition, even shattered tradition in their attempts at renewal (Benjamin 1969: 221). This is important, as the uniqueness of the image is quite inseparable from its embedded-ness in the fabric of tradition (Benjamin 1969: 223). This has not displaced religiosity, or the extent of devotion, as Paul Mus noted the normative duality in the Theravada tradition between the canonical "body of Dhamma" (*Dhamma-kaya*) and the "subject-body" (*rupa-kaya*); the latter corresponding to the anthropomorphic images of the Buddha (see also Reynolds 1977; 1978: 175). The Dhamma itself is "timeless" (Pali: *akaliko*) and somehow ontologically shown to be situated beyond history as mundane temporality but linked to tradition. At the same time images and other sacred objects subject to mechanical reproduction are clearly subject to the processes of history, art and tradition.

But, what can we say of the earliest tradition? In early Buddhism, some four centuries after the death of the Buddha, Sukumar Dutt (1978: 237) tells us that rudimentary efforts were made through "legend-makers' imagination" to capture the essence of what he called the "Superman" Buddha-as-person. Although no early texts endorse such conceptualization, this was based on conventional physiognomy of a "great person" (*Mahapurisa*), the thirty-two marks or signs of a Buddha.

In the modern historical context of religious reform and various expressions of fundamentalism (see Nagata 2001), connection with the original (however defined) is always important and in so doing disclose the "real" as first-order truths. In translation, this may lead to a simulated over-coding with espoused truths eventually becoming simulacra. Nietzsche's radical re-evaluation of appearances and his insistence on their "truth", as fabricated cultural constructions of the world, led him to his ideas on the "eternal return" (Chambers 1990: 62). This logic indicates that in a world that we make ourselves, where there are no ultimate bases to nature or being, then there can be no original things or starting point. There is only a continuous stream of copies of copies and, of course, simulacra.

I would argue that New Religious Movements such as Dhammakaya might also be considered as some kind of a religious simulacrum. Its inner dynamism, its uniqueness to represent itself, is quite different from any other (original) model of normative Thai Buddhism and it has only a token and deceptive resemblance to a model of the normative real. It thus clearly affirms its own difference. In attempting to expose the movement and de-legitimate it as some kind of false copy and as a means of incorporation, the state could either further marginalize the movement, or coerce it to be a true copy, effectively resubmitting it to representation and the mastery of the (only true) model: state-sanctioned Theravada Thai Buddhism. History is only what is assumed to be real because it is sanctioned as such as in official royal histories. As I show here, besides historical narratives, it is also the case with the production of conventional sacred plastic arts.

Anything that does not conform to normative state discourse is clearly contentious and even, in some contexts, seditious (C. Reynolds 1987: 11-13).

The very difference between real and the imagined, the signifier and the signified, and true and false is undermined, leading to nostalgia (Baudrillard 1994: 2). Nostalgia causes a desperate reproduction of the real and of the referential. The reproduction of Buddha-images, which stand outside of conventional referents, is not a small problem for the state and its discriminatory, normalizing apparatuses such as the Department of Fine Arts, and Office of National Buddhism, controlling technologies of mass reproduction.

Wat Sanam Chan's "Superman Buddha-image" has appropriated the real through a despotic function of over-coding (Deleuze and Guattari 1985: 210), a real that is nothing but stage-managed simulation. As we have seen, in this line of argument the image not only substitutes but also contests the real (Baudrillard 1994: 3-7). Indeed, this may well account for the active state resistance to alternatives that are repositioning themselves as first-order sacra.

Tambiah (1997), working on sacred amulets, incorporated Benjamin's spatial logic noting that, with the secularization of an art object over time, authenticity displaces the cult value and aura (and necessary distance) of the traditional work. The value of the amulet is intrinsically related to tradition, to originality. He argued that in contrast, relative to the efficacy of sacralized amulets and their wide distribution, there is a necessary dialectical connection between the two modalities aura and distance, and the secularized and readily available closeness of mechanically reproduced copies. It is a tendency Benjamin (1969: 223) noted, for the masses to get closer to an object, by way of its likeness, its reproduction. In the case of amulets, Tambiah (1997) further remarked that their original features or markings and their likeness to the original or first-order object ensure aura and sanctity. Similarly, since the nineteenth century, there was a capacity to reproduce these sacra from original first-order materials and the monk's bodily capacity to sanctify these objects for mass distribution (Tambiah 1997:557-8). This is the antithesis of the art of copying and commodification of a cult object (Benjamin 1969: 224). The practice of the mass reproduction of amulets and the progressive and unlimited division of relics along with the potency attached to the authentic images and relics, inevitably leads to the processes of copying the original and the manufacture of mass consumption. Tambiah (1997: 558) added, following Benjamin, that the more attenuated from the original the less the aura and power were possessed by these objects.

"Superman" and the Carnivalesque at Wat Sanam Chan

I now turn to Wat Sanam Chan to show how particular social practices have been remaking place and sanctity. The monastery is situated in Chachoengsao Province to the east of metropolitan Bangkok. It was the contentious casting of the kitsch, hyper-modernist so-called "Superman" Buddha image of Wat Sanam Chan that created so much controversy in the post-1997 economic crisis in Thailand. In 1998 the Thai education Minister said the statue "is inappropriate and should be destroyed" (BBC, 1998). At this monastery the Buddha appears more as a Nietzschean "Overman", one who has overcome modern values and human weaknesses, gazing down on the world of imperfection; rather than the compassionate representation of the conceived historical

Buddha most familiar to Thais. The abbot, the elderly former creative art student named Phra Khruu Sophitsutakhun, remarked that he made the decision to capture the potentially unlimited devotional consumer market and construct a hyper-modern Buddha image in a standing pose with right foot on a large globe and right hand raised high over the head in a victory-poise.

The controversy, which has now abated, was intense in mid-1998, when I first visited the monastery. As reported in one newspaper article, "some curators, academics and Buddhist followers consider the work unorthodox and a deviation in that it symbolizes aggression" (Bangkok Post, July 14, 1998). A Thai Buddha, as a western-inspired Super-hero, cast in "aggressive" globally dominating pose, clearly contests conventional or normative representations. Art Professor Santi Leksukhum commented that the statue does not fit any of the "sixty recognised positions" of the Buddha and is in "contradiction" with conventional Thai Buddhism (BBC, 1998). It is kitsch, irreverently eclectic, subversive and destructive of hierarchies as it transgresses normative boundaries and celebrates "surface or allegorical values" (Olalquiaga 1992: 41-42). In other words, this is a distinctive feature of hybrid Buddhism and, more generally, postmodernism. The elites expressed disbelief and outrage at such irreverence.

There is no doubt that financial returns to the monastery from the many visitors to this spectacle, and other commercial sacra of consumption such as the automated sacred-water (*nam-mon*) dispensary, were considerable. This was an important issue for state apparatuses in attempting to control this culturally subversive place (Sanitsuda 1998). In its first opening, the monastery raked in donations of around five thousand dollars (Tunya 2001). During my follow-up visits to the monastery in 2000, the monks reported that clientele had decreased significantly since the media had taken an active interest and news coverage was decidedly negative. The so-called "Magic Water Park", included many-catalogued shelves filled with "holy water" that were sold to devotees at around ninety cents per bottle, supposedly sacralized by various special monks. These were not selling as fast during a subsequent visit because, as one monastery resident said, this showed the influence of the western-inspired Thai print media, as part of its state-sanctioned blitz on such bizarre popular religious sentiment.

The monastery expresses a kitsch-ness where secular images and objects have invaded the sacred and the sacred has invaded the secular in a spectacular arrangement. These hybrid objects, while distinct in one sense – either inside or outside the monastery – take on the ability to support often-contradictory discourses (Olalquiga 1992: 38). As a means of compensating for a loss of emotional connectivity to real place/things, in a vicarious identification with the world of mobile signs, bodies attempt to search for the excitement of the unusual. It is through recourse to the emotion that religious imagery and kitsch tend to merge (Olalquiga 1992: 40).

Wat Sanam Chan is indeed a bizarre assemblage of religious ideas and practices, a residential ritual spectacle involving the participation of both monks and laity, with resonances of alternative, utopian social arrangements (Shields 1991: 91). Most of the laity interviewed at the monastery considered their participation as simply an-Other religious site among a repertoire of alternative religious sacra available in contemporary life. The casual observer visiting the monastery will notice a certain visual aesthetics, with generous use of colour and a comic exaggeration of figures.

Located here, we see the Mahayana Goddess of Mercy, Kwan Im and her Chinese servants, various Indic-Brahmanic gods, such as the ever-popular elephant-headed Ganesha (*khanet*), Indra, and even Brahma, the Creator, himself. There are huge fortune telling wheels and fortune sticks with numbers; bizarre, quixotic and surreal wall murals intended to provoke the senses (inferring both binary opposites of sensuality and asceticism); otherworldly celestial beings (*thewa*) and a three-dimensional history of the ubiquitous Thai locality spirit, *San-phra-phuum*. It is a total, entrancing cultural maze; a simulacrum, another kind of reality made out of a plurality of signs.

Inside another section of the building there is also a figure of the ubiquitous beckoning female figure of *Nang Kwak* (a Thai 'goddess' of commerce, depicted in kneeling posture with an outstretched beckoning hand) and rack upon rack of cassette tapes with various incantations and religious paraphernalia. There are, as to be expected, a number of images of the Thai-Lao magical monk Luang Phor Khoon (Kuun)(8) and other assortment of famous local magical monks. Crisscrossing the large enclosed building is sacred white thread linking the various images to alter, which in turn "drain" their sacred "charge" into ritual containers for collection, like some bizarre sacred chemistry laboratory.

The whole scene at Wat Sanam Chan also has resonances of a country fair, loudspeakers blaring out an incessant mix of music forms, combining popular notions of religion, colour and carnivalesque, with the flavour of the market place. As in the carnival, visitors to the monastery may encounter a temporary and rather superficial suspension of hierarchies, a sense of freedom intermingling among the utopic images, a timelessness that perpetually regenerates the varieties of everyday life and culture (Bakhtin 1968: 10, 33-34). The carnival atmosphere at Wat Sanam Chan clearly "belongs to the borderline between art and life" (Bakhtin 1968: 7); it is an expression of life itself, the desire for renewal and revival, rather than a mere detached spectacle. At another level, the monastery appears as a temporary movie prop; a parody of humour in its varied array of cheap plastic art objects. It is depthless, amusing, an inter-textual lived space of multiple surfaces (Jameson 1984: 62).

In stark contrast to Wat Sanam Chan (and many postmodern urban monasteries like this), Dhammakaya has redefined social norms and desire for simplicity, rationalism, humourlessness, austerity and taste. The movement has struck a cord (in a sense of feeling) with many urban Thais, especially among the new rich, small to medium entrepreneurs and educated elites seeking an alternative to the Buddhist extravaganza of Wat Sanam Chan. The Dhammakaya movement has tapped into a dominant consumer culture where, rather than express a tendency to increasing secularization of modern society (contra predictions of Marx), in common with many new religious movements it is an expression of re-invigorated "healthy evolution of the forms of religious life" (Dawson 1998: 138). I now look at the Dhammakaya controversy that has permeated so much of media attention over the past twenty years in relation to its production of sacra, and the distinctive and controversial simulacrum Buddha-image.

Dhammakaya was formed in March 1970 as a challenge to the religious status quo in Thailand over its new interpretation of Thai (Theravada) Buddhism and praxis. The movement claims to be fundamentally different to other Buddhist monasteries in that it has adapted "traditional values to

modern society" (Taylor forthcoming). This is an important underlying theme to the movement's religious ideology.

The spiritual leader of the movement has effectively drawn on the global resources (and commodities) of capitalism, along with his own intuitive, homespun interpretations and selective use of orthodox teachings. It has also established a sophisticated incentive (merit-making) pyramid marketing strategy within its dense and complex corporate-like system. The resultant assemblage derives much of its power from historic tensions since the beginning of the nineteenth century between the monastic community and the secular apparatuses of the state. The king at the time was Mongkut (Rama IV), a monk himself for twenty-seven years he became dissatisfied with the prevalence of superstitious accretions in Thai Buddhism. He launched a campaign to purify religious practice and place it on a more rational and intellectual foundation. The ramifications for this, in conjunction with the changes in education and monastic practice (see Taylor 1993: 41 ff.), was a reform in the presentation of religious imagery to remove any residue of magical aspects and portray the Buddha in plastic arts more simply as a special human being, without visual representation of supernatural properties.

However, in common with many new religious movements, Dhammakaya presents a sharp break with the past. As one supporter of the movement told me, it is "a religion of the present time" and a "safe haven" in disparate and chaotic world in need of order (see Zehner 1990: 419). Indeed, it is within the context of these sentiments that the new religion is packaged and marketed among its mostly urban supporters. The "safe haven" is articulated as a need to associate with "good" Dhamma friends (Pali: *kalyana-mittata*) and an important motivating reason for maintaining a strong, segmented and cohesive following. The movement has established international networked "houses of good Dhamma friends" as integral focus of mobilising followers. Devotees nevertheless told me that they go to the monastery simply to be among "good friends," though more in terms of extended fictional kindred as a new moral community. (9)

In contrast, most of the patrons interviewed attending Wat Sanam Chan, aside from the many curious outside passing Thai tourists, were urban working classes. As one informant said, after I asked why he came to the monastery: "because it is fun/enjoyable (*sanuk*) and I can also make merit (*tham-bun*)". Many of patrons were from surrounding semi-industrial zones, housing estates that were former villages and now consumed in the capitalist enterprise. These people wanted to tap into its residual magic and, with luck and associated ritual devotions, a change of personal fortune. Wat Sanam Chan devotees simply pass through; it is a mediated transitional site for Thai religious tourists with its commodified display of sacra. The monastery's mass appeal rested on its momentariness, its melange, contesting bizarre images and experiences. As a carnivalesque, dream-like place, it draws people together irrespective of social hierarchies, a "crowd" (Benjamin's term) gathering – if fleetingly – while remaining socially abstract, detached and private (see also Hannerz [1980:105] "traffic relationships").

However, clearly Dhammakaya is considered more worrying for the state in its sheer scale, politico-religious ambitions, sophistication and its financial clout, as it attempts to uproot and recode some pre-determined foundations while producing and disseminating religious alternatives.

The movement, now estimated at around one million followers worldwide, has established a considerable power-base acquiring stock, land, businesses, people and access to media resources. It is a product of a materialistic modernist cultural and new political identity embedded in simplistic binary codes (good/evil, self/community, capital/labour, heaven/hell, etc.). In some sense, contrasting with the quixotic postmodern spatiality of Wat Sanam Chan, it is seen as rationalistic, predictable, and even "trans-modern" as it tries to bring together essential elements of modernity and traditionalism (Hammond and Machacek 1999: 127).

As an expression of new modernity, Dhammakaya espouses the rationalism and meta-logic of market capitalism with its need for ordering nature, social world and self (Bauman in Featherstone 1995: 148). It is a regulated religio-capitalist machine produced by the bourgeoisie articulating the needs and aspirations of the new bourgeoisie. It possesses an ingrained essentialism and homogeneity in its social hierarchy, religious orientations and worldview. Conversely, the movement eschews disorder, criticising the aureate and satirical mimicry style of monasteries such as Sanam Chan and even conventional mainstream Thai Buddhism, which it sees as being weak, eclectic and socially unresponsive to the needs of the new bourgeoisie. But it is precisely the mimicry, seduction and parody found at Wat Sanam Chan that has its mass appeal and a potential at the margins to radically disrupt and transform lived space (Soja 1996: 22).

Moving easily in a world of new global capitalism, Dhammakaya reflects a new imagining where reality is increasingly mediated by symbolic representation. As spectacle it produces specific illusions and pseudo-forms that are abstracted and clearly enticing for its followers. These illusions are linked to the singular domination of a regulated system of consumption (Debord in Best 1994: 47-49). It is basically all about appearance – in which look, style and possession operate as signs of social standing – secular and religious. The movement in fact is both producer and consumer of images; as a product of the new white-collar urban classes and it produces its own consuming religious discourses while simultaneously appropriating selected outside representations. Dhammakaya then reworks endogenous (national Buddhism) and exogenous ideas and practices (Taiwanese evangelical, humanist Mahayana Buddhism) as religious *bricolage* – marrying selected orthodox references to contemporary cultural referents.

These new cultural referents are calling to question the nature of lived religion, rationality, and the role of the state in nurturing contemporary religiosity. It is the profound sense of disenchantment and loss of the present time, as perceived by many followers, which Dhammakaya has so effectively tapped into through its religious marketing campaigns. An absence or loss of personal wholeness and moral certainty, a sense of historical decline, and the disappearance of meaningful social relationships indicates this. These are nostalgic markers defining a postmodern condition.

Nietzsche's "death of God" syndrome – or rather the erasure of the Buddha in cultural tradition, or the historical Buddha and his simulated replacement – and the corresponding loss of moral coherence felt by the modern individual have been effectively used in attracting followers. To its followers, the movement ensures much needed discipline, moral authority and a new founded sense of "homefulness" (Turner 1987: 150-1). At Wat Sanam Chan, religious sanctity, as respondents noted, is purposely disruptive and somewhat disturbing. Although this monastery can be

discounted, as irreverently eccentric, even amusing, Dhammakaya is more discursively problematic and challenging for modern Theravada beliefs. The movement has made the Buddha permanently embodied and eternalized.

Although there is no substitute for the "real" (historical) Buddha, New Religious Movements such as Dhammakaya have to establish new affirmative values, "which would express, rather than deny the body, feeling, and emotion" (Turner 1994: 125). In relation to both contested sites of religiosity, the "death of god" theme for instance, which runs throughout much of Nietzsche's writings, expresses a profound sense of cultural crisis, a moral vacuum waiting to be filled as he observed the multivalent modern world as chaotic, meaningless and disenchanted (B. Morris 1987: 56).

Modernity is marked by increasing (hyper–) rationalization and cultural secularization, as in the "death of God", a loss of a sense of contextual kammic retribution, and the disintegration of traditional approaches to salvation (Bell in Turner 1994: 126-127). These are linked to wider societal changes including increased mobility and urbanization. Now, attention is turned instead to instinct rather than reason, with gratification, pleasure and bodily desires as truth (Bell in Turner 1994: 127). It is against this cultural frame that the movement affirms its signification.

Dhammakaya Cetiya (Stupa) as Symbol of Modernity

The movement's artistic centrepiece is the supra-modern religious monument situated at its monastic centre on the outskirts of Bangkok. This monument, and its surrounding land, covers one square kilometer. It is a clear and visible marker of its symbolic significance. From the air, flying in from the north, a vast cleared circular area is noticeable around a massive golden dome. This creates a dazzling spectacle in the late morning sun. In contrast to Wat Sanam Chan's outlandish melange, the neat, tasteful but exuberant lines of the massive temple-*cetiya* complex are its spectacle. It seeks, as one follower told me, to reach out, to extend its skein over what it sees as the remnants of anachronous Thai Buddhism. Indeed, the geometric scale and wealth of this monument is itself considered by some as problematic in a country where these characteristics are indicative of total prestige and power (and thus visibility of merit).

This multi-million dollar monument (estimated costs given range from 230 – to a massive 500 million dollars (10)) is part of the World Dhammakaya Centre, which it claimed is "a long dreamed of focus for world Buddhist vitality" (www.geocities.com/Tokyo/Pagoda/9353 /). The centre, like Bangkok's extensive feature park "Dream World" and other fantasy places will "make dreams a reality, on a scale that is not limited by national boundaries" (www.geocities.com/Tokyo/Pagoda/9353). It will be a new internationalized sacred space where meditators around the world "can practice together even though they may be separated by thousands of miles" (Dhammakaya in Taylor 1999: 176).

At Dream World, as at the Dhammakaya centre not far away, happy endings are guaranteed (and non-refundable). Dream World, as in Disneyland, is "presented as an imaginary" in order to convince that everything else is real (Baudrillard 1994: 12). In the case of Dhammakaya, its

monastery is another inversion; another simulated mirrored reality, an imaginary world of tomorrow, situated here and now. Its hierarchical structure and monument stands as a religious icon of modernity, to simplicity, elegance and visual affluence. As a space of heterotopia it connects individual bodies (situated out there) and their imaginings to a materiality, another real (or not unreal) space, meticulous, familial and reassuring.

In the case of Dhammakaya, media concern was expressed over the construction of its large central Buddha-image (called the "Parama" or "Supreme" Buddha) standing 4.5 metres high and cast from 14 tons of sterling silver. This was caste in 1998 and as explained by the movement's spiritual leader implies first-order things, "the very first" primary characteristics of the a/historical Buddha that appeared before the current epochal Buddha. The implication is that the appearance of this first-order Buddha is due to immense merit accumulation and in turn (as exhorted by the spiritual leader) worthy of the highest merit offerings. The casting is supposedly based on the characteristics of the "real body of the Parama Buddha" and the first time that such a representation has been installed in a Thai monastery (see http://www.kmitl.ac.th).

Problematically for the state, the "Parama" image was made from the movement's own imagining rather than from conventional, normative iconography (as in the orthodox thirty-two personal characteristics and eighty postures of the Buddha) (*Matichon Raaiwan* 1998). A number of critical informants even said it was subtly made in the likeness of the movement's founder. Similar to the hyper-modern Superman Buddha-image at Wat Sanam Chan, as simulacra it also had no conventional referent only those signs which now cease to refer to any external and authorized model, standing only for themselves and other signs: a strategy of the real, the substitution of signs of the real for the real (Baudrillard 1994: 6-7). This of course contests state sanctioned politico-religious ideology.

The monastery includes a massive monument, a religious spectacle of simplicity and taste with a dome of 108 metres in diameter, crowned with 300,000 exact replica gold-plated Buddha-images on the top part of the dome. Each image weighs around 2.5 kilograms, made of silicon bronze with a special casting technology that incorporates three valuable metals. The exorbitant cost of the images was due to the fact that a special alloy material was imported from Germany claiming to withstand the elements for one thousand years. It is thus a means of displaying its difference in the merger of traditional and modern symbols and enticing the movement's educated urban followers (Bowers 1996: 59). Indeed, many followers came up to me during fieldwork wanting to show their new world's centrepiece that boasts the "finest quality" materials (Maha Dhammakaya Cetiya 2000: 28).

The monument is indeed a seductive spectacle situated on a site that has transformed the religious landscape into a new lived space – the future here-and-now where the temporal model has effectively absorbed the real (Bogard 1994: 316). The aura and sanctity of the main Buddha-image in particular is challenged by the ecclesia as not conforming to an original or first order object. But this illegitimacy as simulacra is refuted by the movement who claim that

Sometimes ... newcomers are curious why the Buddha images are not the same as

in other places. In fact, they don't need to be curious, because in Dhammakaya Temple, the Buddha images conform very strictly to… (the normative texts) rather than just following the sculptor's imagination or the traditional (Thai) interpretation of proportions. Even in Thailand, the proportions change in popularity from one era to another...Sometime (sic) the Buddhas have flames or spikes coming out of their heads (11) , which are hardly scripturally supported… (12)

(Dhammakaya, http://www.onmarkproductions.com/Signs-of-Buddha-32-80.htm)

It is a question of textual authority, though even this is contested. Dhammakaya claim an earlier unpolluted authority that antedates the mechanical production of modern state sanctioned art forms. It is a position of power that is hard to challenge outside of tradition and simultaneously it is hardly incontestable. Wat Sanam Chan, on the other hand, makes no such precession of order claims and even throws a glove to the state over its right to reproduce its own artistic representations as pure visual consumption.

Conclusion: Marginality and Difference

Although a few thousand regular devotees at most, Wat Sanam Chan offers a glimpse of a time beyond time, of a non-place almost, as a site of circulation where Thai tourists move-in and move-out. It is a site located between real structured places produced from and reflecting the conditions of post-modernity (Augé 1995: 78). As a labyrinth it involves a temporal loss of coordinates in which one negotiates to find an exit. The time spent at the monastery complex is one of non-stop looking to the point of sensory overload; a collapse almost of temporal and spatial coordinates (Olalquiaga 1992: 2; Jameson 1984: 87) as tourists negotiate their way to the exit.

There is no sense of extended community at Wat Sanam Chan, in stark contrast to Dhammakaya, whose spiritual leader shaped an integrative feeling of family, community and temporality among specific social groups. Thus, affirming this social structuring in terms of "acquired abilities" and the regulation of the body; or as Mauss (1979: 101) puts it, the specific (learned) techniques of individual and collective practices. Dhammakaya's representation of space is of a social order that is neat, structured and box-like, as depicted graphically in one of its publications showing the individual meditator sitting in a box that forms part of a larger box (society). To the right are teachers, to the left are friends, behind are spouse and children, in front are parents, beneath are servants, and above are monks.

Discipline at Dhammakaya is a first principle, from the meticulous presentations of its white-robed look-a-like followers, to its merit-making schemes and corporate recruitment strategies centring on the family unit, to the visual aesthetics of its look-a-like monks with their distinctive demeanour and bright yellow robes. The longer one gazes at the spectacle, the more the "Parama" Buddha-image starts to look like each and every monk. Dhammakaya has extended itself in global proportions; as a religious spectacle and simulacra it has completely occupied followers to such an extent that they no longer see anything sacred but it; "the world one sees is its world" (Debord 1994, thesis 42).

Wat Sanam Chan leaves conceptual openings for its devotees; it is impudent, provocatively kitsch, and emanates what Jameson (1984: 82) calls a sense almost of "placeless dissociation," though temporally satisfying; while its monks, like its devotees, are a desegregated and individualistic grouping who never seem to stay long. Its sanctity is marked by its radical divergence and momentariness, its distraction, superficiality and fleeting images of the unreal. But, both Dhammakaya and Wat Sanam Chan through their production of sacra, especially in representations of the Buddha, may be considered subversive, as they generate marginality through difference and exclusion from the centre. Margins, as "Other", more generally signify much of what centres refute or attempt to contain. They implicitly become "the conditions of possibility of all social and cultural entities" (Shields 1991: 276). The potentiality for bringing about social and cultural change then is loaded in difference.

Although, as marginal hybrid religious practices, these monastic centers indicate a sense of exclusion and simultaneously a position of critique and power of the status quo. Through relatively exposing the existing, universalizing values of the centres, of conventional and establishment mass reproduction of sacra and its order, we can see that the more Dhammakaya and Wat Sanam Chan are excluded (by their difference) the more they are likely to gain autonomous power separate from the state. This is one reason, I would suggest, for the state's historical dilemma in its attempt at neutralizing or negating cultural difference.

Literature Cited

Apinya Fuengfusakul. 1993. Empire of crystal and utopian commune: Two types of contemporary Theravada reform in Thailand. *Sojourn* 8, no.1: 153-183.

Augé, M. 1995. *Non-places: Introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity (*trans. John Howe). London: Verso.

Bangkok Post. 1998. "Sangha Council told to tighten controls following outcry over Buddha statue". Tuesday, July 14.

Bakhtin, M. 1968. *Rabelais and his world,* translated by T.F.Rable. Cambridge: Massuchusetts Institute of Technology.

Baudrillard, J. 1994. *Simulacra & Simulation*, translated by S.F.Glaser. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press.

Baudrillard, J. 1983. *Simulations*. New York: Semiotext(e).

Baumann Martin, 1997 "The Dharma has come West. A Survey of Recent Studies and Sources", *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, 4, 1997, pp. 194-211.

BBC News, "Thailand's unsuitable statue", Online Network, July 17, 1998 http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/134631.stm (accessed October 2005).

Benjamin, W. 1969. *Illuminations* (Edited & Intro Hannah Arendt). New York: Schocken.

Best, S. 1994. The commodification of reality and the reality of commodification: Baudrillard, Debord, and post-modern theory. In *Baudrillard: A critical reader*, edited by D. Kellner. Oxford and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers.

Bhabha, Homi. 1990. The third space. *In Identity: community, culture, difference*, edited by J. Rutherford. London: Lawrence & Wishart.

Bogard, W. 1994. Baudrillard, time, and the end. In *Baudrillard: A critical reader*, edited by D. Kellner. Oxford and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers.

Bowers, J. 1996. *Dhammakaya meditation in Thai society*. Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press.

Dawson, L.L. 1998. *Comprehending cults: The sociology of new religious movements*. Toronto: Oxford University Press.

Debord, G. 1994. *The Society of the Spectacle*, translated by D. Nicholson-Smith. New York: Zone Books.

Deleuze, G., and F. Guattari. 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

——. (1985) *Anti-Oedipus*, translated by Hurley R., Seem M., and Lane H.R. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Deleuze, G. 1983. Plato and the Simulacrum. *October 27* (winter): 45-56

Dhammakaya International Society of Belgium, "The Signs of a Great Man",
http://www.onmarkproductions.com/Signs-of-Buddha-32-80.htm
[accessed September 2005]

Dhammakaya web sites: www.geocities.com/Tokyo/Pagoda/9353 [accessed May 2001]; http://www.kmitl.ac.th/~klsomcha/wdc/jd/2540-03-eng.html [accessed September 2005]

Dutt, S. 1978. *The Buddha and five after-centuries*. Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad.

Featherstone, M. 1995. *Undoing culture: Globalization, Post-modernism and Identity*. London: Sage Publications.

Feuerbach, L. 1957/1854. *The Essence of Christianity* (Second Edition), translated by George Eliot. New York: Harper & Row.

Foucault, M. 1986. "Of Other Spaces", translated by Jay Miskowiec. *Diacritics* 16: 22-27.

Gombrich, R. 1988. *Theravada Buddhism: A social history from ancient Benares to modern Colombo.* London & New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Griswold, A.B. 1966. *Imported Images and the Nature of Copying in the Art of Siam.* Essays Offered to G.H. Luce. Vol.2, pp 37-73. Supplementum XXIII, Ascona, Switerzerland.

Hammond P. and Machacek D. 1999. *Soka Gokkai in America: Accommodation and conversion.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Hannerz, U. 1980. *Exploring the city: Enquiries toward an urban anthropology*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Jackson, P.A. 1999. The enchanting spirit of Thai capitalism: The cult of Luang Phor Khoon, and the post-modernization of Thai Buddhism. *South East Asia Research 7,* no.1: 5-60.

——. 1989. *Buddhism, legitimation, and conflict: The political functions of urban Thai Buddhism.* Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Jameson, F. 1984. Post-modernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism. *New Left Review* 146: 53-92.

Lefebvre, H. 1991. *The Production of Space*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Maha Dhammakaya Cetiya. 2000. Bangkok: Master Publishers, Wat Phra Dhammakaya.

Matichon Raaiwan. 1998 (2541). *Pert bantheuk lap kromkaan saasanaa chamlae Dhammakaya phian* ("Secret record from the Department of Religious Affairs exposing Dhammakaya's subversive practices"). Saturday, 2 January.

Mauss, M. 1979. The notion of body techniques. In *Sociology and Psychology Essays*, translated by B. Brewster. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Mettanando Bhikkhu 2006, "TRT and Dhammakaya Temple – perfect match", *The Nation*, September 27.

Mills, M.B. 1999. Migrant labor takes a holiday: reworking modernity and marginality in contemporary Thailand. *Critique of Anthropology* 19, no.1: 31-51.

Morris, B. 1987. *Anthropological Studies of Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Morris, R.C. 2000. *In the place of origins: Modernity and its mediums in Northern Thailand.* Durham & London: Duke University Press.

Nagata, J. 2001. Beyond theology: toward an anthropology of "Fundamentalism". *American Anthropologist* 103, no.2: 481-498.

Nietzsche, F. 1973. *Beyond good and evil*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin.

Olalquiaga, C. 1992. *Megalopolis: Contemporary cultural sensibilities*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Pieterse, Nederveen J. 1995. Globalization as Hybridization. In *Global Modernities*, edited by M. Featherstone, S. Lash, and R. Robertson. London: Sage Publications.

Prebish, Charles S. and Martin Bauman, eds. *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002.

Reynolds, C.J. 1987. *Thai radical discourse: The real face of Thai feudalism today*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program.

Reynolds, F.E. 1978. The Holy Emerald Jewel: Some aspects of Buddhist symbolism and political legitimation in Thailand and Laos. In *Religion and legitimation of power in Thailand, Laos and Burma,* edited by Bardwell L. Smith. Pennsylvania: Anima Books.

——. 1977. The several bodies of Buddha: Reflections on a neglected aspect of Theravada tradition. *History of Religions* 16, no.4: 374-406.

Rocha, C. 2005, *Zen in Brazil: The Quest for Cosmopolitan Modernity*, University of Hawaii Press.

Sanitsuda Ekachai. 1998. "Monks are the enemy within", *Bangkok Post*, Thursday, July 16.

Shields, R. 1997. Spatial stress and resistance: social meanings of spatialization. In *Space and Social Theory: Interpreting Modernity and Post-modernity,* edited by G. Benko and U. Strohmayer. Oxford: Blackwell.

——. 1991. *Places on the Margin: Alternative geographies of modernity*. London: Routledge.

Schoonmaker, S. 1994. Capitalism and the code: A critique of Baudrillard's third order simulacrum. In *Baudrillard: A critical reader*, edited by D. Kellner. Oxford and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers.

Soja, E.W. 2000. *Postmetropolis: Critical studies of cities and regions*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

——. 1996. *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and other real-and-imagined places*. Malden, Mass.:Blackwell Publishers Inc.

Strong, J.S. 2002. *The experience of Buddhism: Sources and interpretations (second edition)*. Belmont, CA.:Wadsworth/Thomson.

Suwanna Satha-Anand. 1990. Religious movements in contemporary Thailand: Buddhist struggles for modern relevance. *Asian Survey* 30, no.4: 395-408.

Swearer D.K. 2004 *Becoming the Buddha: The ritual of image consecration in Thailand*. Princeton University Press.

Tambiah, S.J. 1997. Participation in, and objectification of, the charisma of saints. In *India and Beyond: Aspects of Literature, Meaning, Ritual and Thought – Essays in Honour of Fritz Staal*, edited by Dick Van der Meij. London: Kegan Paul.

——. 1984. *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets* (*Study in Social Anthropology*) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Taylor, J.L. Forthcoming. "Glocal Buddhism", Modernity and the Spectacle of Dhammakaya in Thailand. In *Hybridising East and West,* edited by Christoph Antweiler. Southeast Asian Modernities Series, LIT-Verlag, Münster.

——. 2003. Cyber-Buddhism and changing urban space in Thailand. *Space and Culture* 6, no. 3: 292-308.

——. 2001. Embodiment, nation and religio-politics in Thailand. *South East Asia Research* 9, no. 2: 129-147.

——. 1999. Post-Modernity, Remaking Tradition and the Hybridisation of Thai Buddhism. *Anthropological Forum* 9, no.2: 163-187.

——. 1998. 'The Changing Politico-Religious Landscape in Modernizing Thailand: Buddhist Monasticism, the State, and Emergent Religious Hybridities', in *Religion, Ethnicity and Modernity in Southeast Asia* (Eds. Oh Myung-Seok and Kim Hyung-Jun), GIAS Monograph Series 17, Seoul: Seoul National University Press, 1998. (Pp 207-229)

——. 1993. Forest Monks and the Nation-State. Singapore: *Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.*

——. 1993a. 'Buddhist revitalisation, modernisation and social change in contemporary Thailand', Sojourn: *Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, Vol.8, No.1, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, pp 62-91.

——. 1990. 'New Buddhist movements in Thailand: An 'individualistic revolution', reform and political dissonance', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies,* Vol. XXI, No.1, pp 135 154.

Tunya Sukpanich. 2001. "Designer faith racks in millions", *Bangkok Post*, Sunday, March 18.

Turner, B.S. 1994. *Orientalism, post-modernism and globalism*. London: Routledge.

——. 1987. A note on nostalgia. *Theory, culture and society* 4, no.1: 147-156.

Zehner, E. 1990. Reform symbolism of a Thai middle-class sect: The growth and appeal of the Dhammakaya movement. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 21, no.2: 402-426.

Notes

1. See especially Taylor (1990, 1993, 1993a, 1998, 1999, 2001, 2003, & forthcoming) Return to Text

2. See for instance Baumann (1997), Prebish and Baumann (eds. 2002), and Rocha (2005) Return to Text

3. Following Pieterse's critique (2001).Return to Text

4. See Lefebvre (1991: 39); Bhabha (1991); Soja (1996: 22).Return to Text

5.For Dhammakaya see Zehner 1990; Apinya 1993; Suwanna 1990; Jackson 1989; Taylor 1999, and Taylor (forthcoming). Wat Sanam Chan has received some media attention but has not been written about in critical academic forum.Return to Text

6. These 'third' possibilities of religion were not considered by many critical thinkers of the New Left, such as Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 382-3), who only saw (monotheistic) sedentarised religion as a 'piece in the State apparatus' ignoring non-linear, counter-hegemonic or 'Othering' possibilities, as in a 'nomadic' thought in relation to religion. Return to Text

7. In fact, the Buddha was not iconographically depicted until some four-five centuries after his death, or at least around first century C.E. (Gombrich 1988: 124; Strong 2002: 39; Dutt 1978:238).Return to Text

8.See Jackson 1999 on the cult surrounding this monk.Return to Text

9.See also Gombrich and Obeyesekere's (1988) study among urban Buddhist cult groups in Sri Lanka under 'strains of urbanization' and the similar need for a 'surrogate kin group' (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988:85). Return to Text

10. Mettanando Bhikkhu (2006) places the costs as high as 500 million dollars (Bt 18.7 Billion).Return to Text

11.Pali: *usanisa*; cranial protunerance, symbolising the Buddha's endlessly radiant spiritual energy and enlightenment as found among traditional Thai Buddha-images, especially the eloquent *Sukhothai* art.Return to Text

12. In fact, the early images of the Buddha indicated a preference for a 'top-knot', or cranial protuberance (Dutt 1978: 237).Return to Text