

Brainwashed - Phi Ta Khon: Ghosts of Isan

Written by Matthew Amundsen

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Robert Millis and Richard Bishop ventured to the Isan region of northern Thailand in June of 2004 to document its annual psychedelic ghost festival. They let the cameras run with little interference, immersing viewers in endless processions of outlandish costumes and spontaneous, hypnotic music.

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The festival itself, which translates roughly as “ghosts with human eyes” or “ghosts follow people,” is a tradition of obscure origin that combines Buddhist, Hindu, and animist beliefs into a three-day bacchanalia. The participants become ghosts and through rituals, music, dancing, supernatural offerings, and numerous phallic totems, hope to bring rain and fertility to the region. During this festival, they also manage to consume vast quantities of rice whiskey, beginning in the morning and continuing well into the night.

The visual pace of the video can be slow at times, and at others overwhelming. What holds everything together as it veers between these states is the music. In fact, the music itself is just as enjoyable with or without the accompanying footage. While some archival recordings purchased on location are inserted into the film, much of the music was recorded in the streets. The locals frequently break out in music during the festival, both with and without vocals, playing instruments that sometimes appear homemade or else have seen their fair share of use over the years. In addition to standard instrumentation like drums, keyboards, or electric bass, they also play the khaen and the pin, the former a mouth organ with a unique, deep timbre, and the latter a small, three-stringed Thai guitar. One group parades down the street with a friend pushing a car battery-powered generator that supplies electricity for their amps, while another group takes up residence on a truck with another generator and loaded with speakers that blast over the crowd. Not everything is amplified, however. There is plenty of music erupting from acoustic instruments as well. The musical styles vary from droning organs to slow, hypnotic

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rhythms to electric psychedelic music that could be Thailand's version of the blues.

Apart from a few intertitles with basic information about the festival, the footage has only a basic structure and doesn't provide a lot of detailed explanations of the unfolding events. However, this makes sense, for it is intended to be experiential venture rather than an academic one, and the lack of formal documentary tactics do this concept justice. Yet it was hard for me to just sit still and watch while everyone onscreen had such a good time. It made me want to participate, wander the streets, and absorb the nuances of the festivities for myself. There was so much of interest that I couldn't help yearn for a tactile counterpart.

Included as a bonus is the short "Spirit House," which shows the many miniature homes used to signify the spiritual dwelling places of ancestors. Many are inhabited by eroded figurines and are in disrepair themselves. It's an eerie snapshot that complements the festival of ghosts perfectly, reminding viewers to seek merriment while they may.