

# Transcoding *Nang Talung*: An Animated Adaptation of Thai Shadow Play

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## Abstract

This article explores an animated adaptation from a cultural heritage source. It discusses the source, approaches and technical aspects in my animation – NUNUI (2013). *Nang Talung*, the southern Thai shadow play, offers unique, simple characteristics as a creative resource for Thai animation. The puppet uses jointed parts, which can be animated separately. This study aims to synthesize the ancient and modern by integrating *Nang Talung* folk puppetry with contemporary animation. Following the original source, most of *Nang Talung* animated adaptations relies on conventional stories, plots and the use of dialogues as shown in original performance. I argue that not only similarities, but also differences, are important for the dialogue between the two art forms. This study allows animators to open to change and embrace the other creative possibilities that 'new' media enable. It also offers an animator the opportunity to experiment with *Nang Talung* puppet's movement and to expand its limitations with computer graphics (CG).

## Keywords

*Nang Talung*, shadow puppets, animation, animated adaptation.

## Introduction

Thai animators are searching for distinctiveness in their work. This study employs *Nang Talung*, the southern Thai shadow puppetry, as a source for animation. *Nang Talung* is the small puppet form of shadow theatre. It is a traditional performance in the southern regions in Thailand. *Nang Talung* is performed in an open-air area. The puppeteer manipulates the puppets' jointed parts, silhouetted behind a screen. In *Nang Talung*, there is only one puppeteer who is the leader of the troupe. The puppeteer is called Nai Nang, literally master of puppets. The traditional local *Nang Talung* performance is a rare occurrence nowadays. I conducted a field trip to the southern region of Thailand and was able to witness an excerpt of a fifteen-minute performance at Suchart Sapsin museum in Nakhon Si Thammarat province. *Nang Talung* storytelling mainly presents four archetypal characters: the hermit (Rue-Si), the main actor (Phra), the main actress (Nang), and folk characters such as Tua Talok or Clowns. The clown character is indispensable to

*Nang Talung* performance even though only few characters persist nowadays. The most-seen clown characters in modern performance are Nunui and Ai Theng.



Fig 1. A collection of folk puppets at Suchart Sapsin museum in Nakhon Si Thammarat, Thailand. (Source: compiled by this study).



Fig 2. *Nang Talung* shadow play, 2015. Nunui puppet is on the right. Ai Theng is in the middle. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CPDrKB3JOHE> [Accessed 15 December 2015].

Linda Hutcheon (2006) used the word 'transcoding' for an announced extensive transposition of a specific work(s) in which a shift of medium can occur. [1] For

this study, the transcoding involves a shift of *Nang Talung* shadow puppet theatre to a computer graphics animated film. This article will discuss a process of adaptation – how the theatrical folk art performance (source) is transformed into cinematic form of digital animation (result). Conventionally, animators have focused on similarities between the source and the adaptation. As a result, they use modern media to imitate quality of the folk art. This not only suppresses the ‘aura’ (Benjamin, 1936) [2] of new media, but the adaptations are also treated as being secondary to the original source. Ironically, they become a replica to the original folk art. Opposed to the traditional approach of a one-directional transformative process from the source to the result, which tends to focus on fidelity to the source, this article highlights a dialogic relation between the source and the result. This emphasizes the act of “(re-) interpretation and then (re-) creation” proposed by Linda Hutcheon (2006, p.8) [3].

Looking through the lens of Avant-Garde adaptation, it not only welcomes the adaptor’s interpretation of the original source, but also the appearance of new properties of the new medium. Understanding media helps animators decide what kind of work they want and how much control they can exert. Therefore, the capacity of the new medium was taken into account if this could expand any limitations in the traditional art or the original source. This paper will thus discuss both aesthetic and technical aspect of the animated adaptation from non-literary, shadow puppet performance. ‘Transcoding’ *Nang Talung* into computer graphics animation involves a process of selection and transformation. I shall investigate this transformation in the animation NUNUI (2013) which includes exploring similarities and differences between the original source and the animated adaptation. In addition to the contribution to the distinctiveness of Thai animation, this article could also serve as a case study in innovation for the sake of preservation.

### Related Work

The following examples demonstrate growing interests in integrating the indigenous art with contemporary media. Unruangsi reproduced *Nang Talung* with cinematic narrative in her shadow film *Tale of the Unknown Island* (2010). [4] However, the character movements are limited since the animator chose to maintain original puppet mechanic, where solely the upper part of the puppet figures could be moved. Similarly, Anakule Studio (2014) digitized *Nang Talung* puppets as material culture and heritage objects and used them to produce an interactive game of shadow play. [5] However, the game offers little content and the movements of the interactive puppets are still limited.

Ghani (2011) proposed his Malaysian *Wayang Kulit* puppet in three-dimensional (3D) design. [6] However,

the outcome had its shortcomings in aesthetic features and shadow effects of traditional shadow puppet. In GuanZe Liao’s *Journey to the West* (2012), the animators maintained the two-dimensional look of the flat puppets. [7] This aesthetic choice of keeping flatness of the characters is similar to the approach used in NUNUI (2013). However, in Liao’s animation, the animator keeps the flat characters on entire 2D backgrounds whereas the flat characters in NUNUI interact with both 2D and 3D environments. This artistic style of combining 2D characters in 3D backgrounds in NUNUI is more similar to that of *Si Lunchai* (2014). [8] However, the animated films from Liao and Rall were adapted from Chinese and Indonesian national folk tales. Consequently, the films heavily rely on verbal narrative. This differs from NUNUI (2013), which is independent from dialogues and narration, and focuses solely on visual-led narrative.

### Contemporary Practice

Traditional cut-out puppetry has been revitalized in digital cut-out animation. A variety of digital programs have been offered to simulate the medium. Manovich (2011) pointed out two types of software techniques to simulate the traditional media. The first type is a generative technique, which “offers [a] high-level automation of creative processes” (p.5); the second type comprises low-level automation, which requires a level of manual control from its users (Manovich, 2011). [9] In the animation NUNUI (2013), three basic software programs for multimedia designers: Photoshop, Flash and After Effects were employed to refashion the shadow puppetry, as well as to re-mechanize the movement of *Nang Talung* shadow puppets. Flash was adopted to do an animatic (timed and moving storyboard) for reviewing the rough drawn movement before collaging the cut outs in Photoshop. I did not solely rely on Flash, which could offer an all-in-one solution to cover all the aspects of the animation production. This is because the program cannot support texture elements as much as Photoshop. Moreover, it cannot generate and render lighting as effectively as After Effects. The benefit of using Flash and Photoshop is it gives a feeling of working with traditional or manual processes of animation. According to the program’s low-level automation, the interface is simple to learn. This allows animators to focus directly on the artwork without facing many technical problems, as they would occur in high-level automation software such as 3D Max or Maya. In other words, this approach of using low-level automation in software simulation ensures animators a degree of controllability of the aesthetic elements. The downside is the absent function of inverse-kinematics, which is not available in Photoshop program. Therefore, this can consume more time in animating and texturing.

However, the approach is suited to animators who are familiar with a traditional production pipeline.

### NUNUI (2013)

The story is about two characters Nunui and Ai Theng who meets on the way whilst searching for their way out.



Fig 3. *NUNUI*, 2013, Chanya Hetayoithin, 2D computer - graphics animation.

In *NUNUI* (2013), I focused solely on the clown characters and adopted Nunui and Ai Theng – the famous puppets which most *Nang Talung* theatre production have. My interpretative act of adaptation emphasises subjective decision-making rather than solely concern the issue of fidelity. This engages a double intention behind the animated film *NUNUI* (2013). On one hand, I followed the original design of *Nang Talung* puppet as closely as possible, which creates a considerable similarity between the original source and the adaptation. On the other hand, not only I challenge and break with tradition in terms of the mechanics of movement and narrative, but I also follow other media's artistic strategies such as those of cinema. Therefore, a dialogue between *Nang Talung* shadow play and the animated adaptation occurs, creating a distinctiveness in the animation. The dialogic relation between traditional *Nang Talung* and the animated film is made through the following set of aesthetic elements which comprises: puppet; animation mechanic; lighting and textures; screen, and narrative structure.

#### 4.1 Puppet

The important clown figures – Nunui and Ai Theng – were adopted from *Nang Talung*. According to its historical background, these puppet figures were derived from a real man (Nawigamune, 2003). [10] In the traditional play, Nunui is Ai Theng's buddy and has the opposite type of character. Regarding his character profile, Nunui is silly, does not catch on to things easily and always follows Ai Theng. Both characters not only have a unique look for viewers who have never seen the southern Thai shadow play, but are used as a referential point to the original shadow play for those aware viewers who know the play, since Nunui and Ai Theng often

feature together in the performance. However, in terms of story content, the relationship between Nunui and Ai Theng was reversed from the original play; in the animated adaptation, they become unknown and strange to each other.

Simplicity is considered to be a distinctive quality of *Nang Talung* clown puppets. This is a reason I have chosen the clown puppets for the animation. The simplicity is also an advantage in animation. This is because animators have to read form and visualize its movement before they animate. Therefore the simpler the forms the animators have, the more easily they can read their movement. With clown characters, I can focus on the character's body movements without spending too much time on decorative elements. Moreover, *Nang Talung* always opens to new designs or ideas regarding contemporary influences. The open-ended design of *Nang Talung* opens up ways to foster creativity and opportunities to exploit the fashions, and social and cultural influences of a particular period. The hybridity between tradition and modernisation in *Nang Talung* comes through the process of adaptation. This not only reflects cultural change, but also gives the southern Thai puppet a distinctive look, separating it from other shadow puppetry in different countries.

#### 4.2 Animation Mechanic: Re-Mechanizing Puppet Form and Movement

The process of re-mechanizing demonstrates how the animation medium can extend the movement capabilities of shadow puppetry. The limitations of movements in *Nang Talung* have been investigated as follows. The southern Thai shadow puppet only allows the characters freedom of movement above the waist. Therefore, new joints need to be added to augment movability, especially, in the lower parts of the puppets. Thus ankles, knees, legs, wrist and neck joints are created, whereas the joint positions of the shoulder, upper arms and lower arms from the original model are retained.



Fig 4. Scanned puppet - Nunui clown figure, 2013. (Source: compiled by this study).

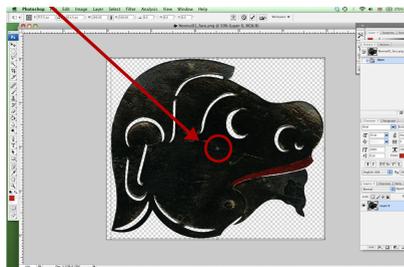


Fig 5. Re-Mechanizing puppet's head, 2013. (Source: compiled by this study).

After re-engineering, every part of the puppet can be animated. This 'breaking-tradition' approach of extending puppet movements has also been adopted in the animation - Si Lunchai (2014) which allowed the puppets' parts to move freely. In Si Lunchai, the animators maintained the aesthetic of shadow puppetry by portraying a single view of characters and employed a flipping method to present the characters as they turn. However, in NUNUI, I mixed both cut out and conventional 2D approaches. Consequently, the characters were presented in a single view such as side view, but they could also turn around for other views as in conventional 2D animation. This 'turn-around' approach in NUNUI is distinct from the flipping method in the animation Si Lunchai.



Fig 6. NUNUI, 2013, Turn-around model. (Source: compiled by this study).

#### 4.3 Lighting and Textures

Computer-generated lighting by Adobe After Effects was employed in the animation. There is also dilemma in choosing digital media to refashion traditional shadow puppetry. Despite computer graphics' capabilities to light and texture, its digital image still lacks tangibility. Concerning tangibility in CG representation, I had engaged puppet textures in computer graphic production by scanning the texture from a real puppet as an

alternative way to maintain tangibility. The tangible texture of the Thai puppet - caused by its hide texture and the use of translucent paint - can offer unique characteristics to the animated characters. In performance, this aesthetic quality is blurred out on the cloth screen once the puppets' shadow is solely presented. Therefore, I chose to highlight this somewhat hidden quality of the puppet's texture besides its shadow in the animated film.

#### 4.4 Screen

Shadow puppetry is an art form where its basic setting of projector, screen and spectator, a social space, shares an affinity with cinema of the Western world. However, despite sharing a basic setting, shadow performance and cinema (projected animation in this case) use the idea of screen differently, as in the following discussion. Our perception towards the cinema screen is as Hanssen noted: "something always exists outside the frame" (2013, p. 143). [11] This differs from the theatrical frame of the shadow play which is more centripetal and, as Hanssen pointed out, "emphasizes the boundaries of action" (2013, p. 143). [12] Therefore, the energy of the shadow play image is rather directed inwards. Moreover, the idea of using screen in shadow puppetry is straightforward and much less complicated than that in animation making which engages cinematography - shots and camera use. The cinematic approach - a moving camera and continuous shots were also adopted in the animation NUNUI. Camera use can also enhance the story's dynamic, for example, when the character - Nunui - tried to find an exit, or when he was chasing another character. This creates a contrast between *Nang Talung* performance and the animated adaptation.

#### 4.5 Narrative Structure

Traditionally, *Nang Talung* represents an eclectic mix which combined rite, folklores, music, jokes, and farce together. The narrative in *Nang Talung* can be categorised into three modes: verse, speech (dialogue), and music. These three modes still persist nowadays. However, the modern puppeteers tend to use speech (dialogue) as a main narrative device. In brief, *Nang Talung* performance relies on the verbal narrative. This narrative approach is challenged in the animation NUNUI. I adopted the Aristotle's mimetic concept which "conceive of narration as the presentation of a spectacle: 'a showing'" (Bordwell, 1985, p.3). [13] All the story and expressions of the characters were shown through gestures and movement. I proposed a different perspective to the popular belief that *Nang Talung* attracts the audience with the folk characters' dialogue, jokes and conversation. Therefore, I discarded all the dialogue and voice-over in the sequence, and instead focused on gestural expression. This contrasts to the related works where the artists in question employed diegesis, the telling of the story by a narrator and using dialogue as the main storytelling device.

In summary, I chose to maintain fidelity in one aspect - the design of the *Nang Talung* clown puppet, whereas I reworked the puppet movements and challenged the original modes of narrative. Moreover, the original source has been utilized with a set of the aesthetic and technical elements of computer graphics medium, as well as film language. This defamiliarizes the original *Nang Talung* for the viewer to a certain degree. For example, the different mechanic movement injected by the animation medium might be unfamiliar to an aware viewer who knows the original performance. However, this defamiliarization encourages the spectators to look at *Nang Talung* in a new way and seek their own interpretation.

Instead of sustaining fidelity to the original source, my interpretive act of adapting allows differences between the source - *Nang Talung* and the animated adaptation dialogue with each other. This, as Bruhn notes, “dehierarchyzes the relation between the primary and the secondary text, the source and the result” (2013, p.83). [14] As a result, NUNUI can be seen alone as a complete animated short film as well as categorized as a *Nang Talung* animated adaptation.

### Conclusion

The study signifies the crucial idea that we can take on the cultural material or the art of the past and move beyond it to find a new creative possibility in our own emancipated space. “The role of adapters as creators” (Tsui, 2012, p.58) is implied in this article. [15] This argues against a perceived notion some Thai animators have that tradition can be too outdated, or tradition should be preserved in its original form, as well as that the adaptation is secondary to the original art. The study reinforces the idea that the adaptation should be treated as an original work. I also contend that in order to search for distinctiveness of Thai animation, Thai animators should look to their own roots in art and culture to develop their individuality.

This article has discussed animated adaptations that incorporate indigenous art and traditions. It also helps to cultivate the folk art within the modern context. The theoretical concept of adaptation is put into practice and the outcome – the animated film, NUNUI (2013) - demonstrates originality and some of the creative possibilities for the future. Moreover, the study also reflects how Thai local art could be used to expand animation content and a hybrid between the two art forms can also create distinctiveness for Thai contemporary animation.



Fig 7. Still shots from NUNUI, 2013. For the complete animation, please see <https://vimeo.com/68848648> (Source: compiled by this study).

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