

The Inaugural BALAC Talk by Mr. Kong Rithdee

The first BALAC Talk took place on November 25 from 13:00 to 15:30 in room 105 of the Chulalongkorn Building. The inaugural BALAC Talk speaker was Mr. Kong Rithdee, the long-time renowned film and culture critic at the *Bangkok Post*.

The BALAC Talks are a special lecture series sponsored by the BALAC Program and hosted by the Faculty of Arts, took place on Saturday. The aim of this series is to show the value of the humanities in today's world. By inviting speakers from diverse backgrounds who are distinguished in different fields but are also engaged with the humanities, the talks hope to point out to students a few of the many opportunities for their futures, and to remind the Chulalongkorn University community and the wider public of the importance of studying language and culture in today's world.

Associate Professor Dr. Kingkarn Thepkanjana, Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Director of the BALAC program, opened the BALAC Talks. After welcoming those in attendance, she thanked Mr. Kong Rithdee for starting the series and then wished the talks great success. Mr. Rithdee was introduced by Ajarn Dr. Lowell Skar from the BALAC Program by giving a biographical sketch and list of some of his many achievements.

In his presentation, Mr. Rithdee stressed how misfortunes made him what he is: an voracious, hardworking, insightful, humble and talented autodidact. One great misfortune reading diverse writers was central to his work as a cultural critic and to his way of conveying a distinctive understanding of culture. Appreciating and understanding writers helps readers to gain a humane understanding of a complex, contradictory and multifaceted world full of depth and subtlety. Mr. Rithdee used eight main works – ranging from J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* to Roberto Bolaño Ávalos' *The Savage Detectives* – to discuss how literature affected his view of the world and inspired him in his work.

When he finally turned to discuss film toward the end of his talk, rather than point to many specific films that he critiqued or that shaped his way of understanding film – he mentioned the surrealist classic *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí and a few others – Mr. Rithdee focused on how two film critics, the incisive Pauline Kale and the more populist Roger Ebert, taught him two important approaches to writing about film.

The heart of Mr. Rithdee's talk, however, lay in his pointing out that the main challenge as a film and cultural critic for a reading public is to work out in words a reconciliation of what he feels about the cultural object he is focusing on and the cultural meaning that this object has for the public. His journalism, in short, seeks to negotiate his personal feeling and the cultural meaning of cultural phenomena.

After completing his talk, Mr. Rithdee entertained several questions from the 40 or so people in the audience, and then concluded the first BALAC Talk. As a small token of appreciation, Dean Thepkanjana gave Mr. Rithdee a gift from the BALAC Program and Faculty of Arts

The BALAC Talks series will continue into 2018, with three more talks being planned for January and March 2018.

Lowell Skar

BALAC Talk No. 1

An early misfortune in the life of Kong Rithdee was to be refused from the Art Faculty of Chulalongkorn University. Ironically, it is precisely there that he was invited to be the first speaker of the BALAC Talk series and to share with an audience of students, professors and other interested people about his pathway to success in becoming the renowned film critic he is now. As a self-made but also a humble man who explained about the importance of doubt in his writing, he presented a booklist of stories which were, he says, his teachers in life. To mention a few authors, he discussed about Marquez, Rushdie, Joyce or Murakami. As a skilled cultural critic, Kong Rithdee left his audience with a taste of curiosity for the recommended titles. During the Q&A session, he also gave insightful comments on his idea of subjectivity as an unavoidable feature of humans, but a feature one could observe, analyze and challenge through exposure with culture. An inspiring first talk of a promising series.

Amaël Cognacq, exchange student in the BALAC Program



