



**APICHATPONG
WEERASETHAKUL**

**AGRARIAN
REINCARNATIONS
OF
CINEMA**

BY
HG MASTERS

Populated by ghost-tigers, migrant workers, gay lovers and besotted doctors, the enigmatic films of Thailand's leading director take a closer look at country life.



UNCLE BOONMEE WHO CAN RECALL HIS PAST LIVES, 2010, film still in which the protagonist's long-lost son visits him in the form of a monkey-spirit.

Some years ago, in the mid-1990s, with only a shoestring budget and a small film crew to accompany him, Apichatpong Weerasethakul decided to venture out from Bangkok to the Thai countryside to capture the rural part of his nation. During the three years of filming *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000), from 1995 to 1998, Apichatpong invited people whom he encountered—ranging from a despondent fish-sauce seller whose father sold her for the price of a bus ticket, to a crowd of school children—to invent the next chapter in a story of a handicapped boy, his kindhearted teacher Dogfah and an alien child who falls from the sky in the form of a ball. Inspired by the Surrealist game of exquisite corpse, the filmmaker recorded the people as they recounted their version of the developing events. He also employed actors to play the roles, so that the film often imperceptibly transitions between documentary footage and the fictionalized story. At one point in the rambling, unpredictable work, enthusiastic villagers stage their portion of the story as a musical. In another scene, the actress playing Dogfah scolds the filmmaker: “It’s too much like a game. At least you should have had a script. And why is he crippled?”

More than just a game, filmmaking—as Apichatpong has explained in interviews over the past decade—is his way of leaving his current home in frenetic Bangkok and returning to the places of his childhood in the remote villages and forests of Isan, in northeast Thailand, the setting and inspiration for all of his feature films. The son of two Bangkok doctors who were posted to a rural hospital, Apichatpong grew up in Khon Kaen and studied architecture at the university there. His formal training in cinema came later at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, from which he graduated in 1998. Two years later, his black-and-white *Mysterious Object at Noon* landed on the international film circuit and took critics by surprise with its distinctive production method and its dream-like mood. Four more features have followed since then, along with many dozens of shorts and art installations. Today, the 40-year-old director is acclaimed both in Thailand and abroad for his works that express the nostalgic feelings toward the countryside and folk culture that almost all societies in the grip of rapid urbanization now cherish.

In May, Apichatpong’s latest work, *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010), won the Cannes Film Festival’s Palme d’Or, the most prestigious award in international cinema. Three-and-a-half years in the making, *Uncle Boonmee* tells the story of an elderly man dying of kidney failure who returns to his village in the days before his death. There, he encounters his deceased wife and his long-lost son who reappears in the form of a monkey-spirit, and has mysterious visions, or flashbacks, of his past lives—including one that features a princess making love with a catfish.

The film explores many of Apichatpong’s favorite subjects, including how individuals remember places and past events, and how their memories can feel like relics from past lives. These topics relate to Apichatpong’s own interest in reincarnation, which he variously describes as either an intellectual interest or as a sincere conviction. These topics relate to Apichatpong’s own interest in reincarnation, which he variously describes as either an intellectual interest—“I’m pretty skeptical myself (about reincarnation) . . . I don’t deny it. I just think it’s fascinating, whether it’s true or false,” he told the *Hollywood Reporter* in May—or as a sincere conviction, as in the opening line to a statement about *Uncle Boonmee*: “I believe in the transmigration of souls between humans, plants, animals and ghosts.” Apichatpong clarified his views to *ArtAsiaPacific* in an e-mail in late July: “I cannot say that I believe it, because there is no formula to explain the phenomena,” though the director says the process of working on the film did change his personal views. In the same introduction to the film, Apichatpong explains that his process of making films is “not unlike creating synthetic lives,” that films are like “time machines” and that they can conjure “mysterious forces waiting to be revealed.”

These beliefs inform both the plots and the mercurial structures of Apichatpong’s films, in which recurrence, remembrance and

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reinterpretation are central elements. His third feature, *Tropical Malady* (2004), for example, is divided into two halves: the first of which depicts a romance between a soldier and another man, and the second a soldier who searches for a tiger-spirit—played by the same actor as the soldier’s lover. There are numerous implied connections between the two stories, such as a scene at the end of the first half featuring the two lovers staring at each other and passionately, almost animalistically, licking each other’s hands and a scene at the end of the second half in which the soldier stares at the tiger in the moments before the beast devours him. Apichatpong’s next feature, *Syndromes and a Century* (2006), is also divided into two halves, each of which opens with a nearly identical scene of a job interview, except that the first occurs at a rural hospital and the second in a hospital in Bangkok. Links between his films are even more subtle, and surface unexpectedly. At one point in *Mysterious Object at Noon*, a woman sitting in a village hut tells a story that—watching the film a decade after its release—sounds very much like the premise of *Uncle Boonmee*. She tells the camera: “Daddy! Daddy! What did you dream about?” I asked. ‘Daddy, can’t you tell me?’ He didn’t want to tell me that his dead wife visited him at night.”

In notes included in *Apichatpong Weerasethakul* (2009), a monograph about the director edited by film scholar James Quandt, Apichatpong traces his own conscious conception of *Uncle Boonmee* to an incident just several years ago following a visit to a temple near Khon Kaen, where a monk gave him a book about a man called Boonmee who while deep in meditation could recall his past lives “playing behind his closed eyes like a movie.” Traveling across the provinces near the Mekong River that divides Thailand from Laos, Apichatpong tracked down relatives of the man, recently deceased, including his two sons who provided further accounts of their father’s life.

While searching for more information about Boonmee, Apichatpong visited the village of Nabua in the Renu Nakhon district, which he decided to use as the setting for *Uncle Boonmee*. Apichatpong also depicted the village in a related project entitled “Primitive” (2009), a suite of seven short films that comprise his largest art-installation project to date. The films debuted at Munich’s Haus der Kunst in February 2009 before traveling to the Foundation for Art and Creative Technology in Liverpool. Together the “Primitive” works explore the region’s legacy of communist ideology and political repression, albeit in an indirect manner.

Nabua was the site of a battle between the Thai military and communist farmers in 1965, and for the next two decades was occupied by the army. Most of the farmers, suspected of being insurgents, fled into the jungle, leaving behind only women and children, many of whom were raped and terrorized by the soldiers. Instead of interviewing those who were victimized by the army or who remember those years, Apichatpong focuses on the descendants of the village’s farmer-communists, idle teens who hang out, go swimming, do wheelies on motorcycles and style themselves like Korean or Japanese pop stars. They are too young to remember the ideological and armed battles of the previous generation, but Apichatpong draws them into evocative situations nonetheless.

The two-channel work *Primitive* (2009) shows a truck-sized, egg-shaped structure made of bent wood, which Apichatpong had villagers construct on the pretense that he was filming a science-fiction film. The ship sits in a field after dark, with teens sleeping inside its curved, red-painted interior as a male voiceover talks about arriving from the past in a time machine and witnessing his friends being abducted and held in a large hall, from which they disappeared one by one. On the other screen while this is playing, teens are shown launching fireworks and military flares—recalling the tactics that the Thai military used to hunt the teens’ forebears, hiding in the woods. Apichatpong told *AAP* that he chose to paint the interior red because: “It was a forbidden color during the 1960s and 1970s. In some places, the army would come to your house and search for anything red. Even a plain notebook with a red cover would be burned.”

At first elliptical and nonsensical, the presence of the ovoid spaceship



Still from **PRIMITIVE**, 2009, in which the village of Nabua is visited by an egg-shaped wooden spaceship. Two-channel video installation, video: 29 min 34 sec.

and the story of the time machine begins to make sense as a device or facilitator to discuss the repressed history of this politically charged village. The sci-fi film is a ruse to uncover historical truths about the village, to remember indirectly or evoke sentiments long repressed. In a filmed interview made for an exhibition in May at the British Film Institute’s (BFI) Southbank gallery in London, Apichatpong explained, “My work is about memory. I want to trace back the memory of the region of the northeast of Thailand . . . Because of our forgiveness, or our repression of memories, or other propaganda through the media, we repeat our mistakes.” The timeliness of Apichatpong’s project about a repressive military, and his comments about Thailand repeating its mistakes cannot be ignored in the context of the country’s recent political unrest, as many of the Red Shirt protestors who were occupying central Bangkok from March to May hail from northeastern Thailand. Primarily urban and rural poor, as well as left-leaning pro-democracy advocates, the Red Shirts oppose the current military-installed government, which came to power after elected president Thaksin Shinawatra was deposed in a 2006 coup d’état. This current conflict, often violent, is a product of the same rift in Thai society that 40 years ago pitted soldiers against farmers in Nabua.

However strong the political subtext of Apichatpong’s work—in a charged atmosphere such as Thailand’s at the moment it is almost impossible to avoid—he has not abandoned his avant-garde ambitions. Shot at night, the 11-minute *Phantoms of Nabua* (2009)—one of two other short films made in Nabua on the same subject that are not officially



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Still from **NABUA**, 2009, in which explosions resembling lightning strikes repeatedly hit the town of Nabua.
film still, film: 10 min 56 sec.



Still from **UNCLE BOONMEE WHO CAN RECALL HIS PAST LIVES** (2010) in which Boonmee is nursed by the spirit of his deceased wife Huay. Courtesy the Match Factory, Cologne.



Still from **UNCLE BOONMEE** (2010) in which a character named Thong and Boonmee's family are visited by the spirit of Boonmee's deceased wife. Courtesy the Match Factory, Cologne.

part of the "Primitive" series—depicts a projection screen in the middle of an open field ringed by trees and illuminated by a lone fluorescent street light. The screen displays Apichatpong's footage of explosions that resemble repeated lightning strikes. From the darkness emerges a posse of young boys kicking a flaming soccer ball. They knock it around until the ball collides with the fabric screen, which quickly goes up in flames, revealing a projector behind it. The purpose of this sequence, in Apichatpong's words, is "to make you realize that the projector behind you is very important, to not really let the audience be so passive, to be active in their awareness of being in the theater or gallery." These interruptions to the film-viewing experience are more than just a method of creating a new aesthetic; they are connected to a larger critique of global culture. Apichatpong says in the BFI interview: "When I look at cinema nowadays it is becoming very unified. Like other things in Thailand and all over the world, it's becoming a monoculture. It has a certain pattern or logic, like the boring three-act structure in cinema . . . I'm not doing something revolutionary, but I want to continue to create more choices and possibilities about what cinema can be."

As the projects from Nabua reveal, there are many Apichatpongs. He is an avant-gardist in the formal sense, as when he breaks basic cinematic rules, such as introducing the credits halfway through his second feature *Blissfully Yours* (2002), or leaving in clips of actors chatting casually off script and off camera. As a recorder of the minority Isan culture and dialect, he has become an advocate and anthropologist of cultures facing extinction. He has also taken up the subject of immigration: in *Blissfully Yours*, Apichatpong sympathetically portrays an illegal Burmese immigrant named Min who struggles to find work. The director is also an icon in queer cinema for his portrayals of homosexual love. Along with the gay couple in *Tropical Malady* and some suggestive flirting between

a dentist and a monk in *Syndromes and a Century*, Apichatpong directed *The Adventure of Iron Pussy* (2003), a campy action-film written by and starring artist Michael Shaowanasai as a transvestite secret agent. Another effort to subvert the monoculture portrayed by Thai studio films is his work as a producer. Since the late 1990s, his company Kick the Machine has fostered independent Thai cinema and worked to create an autonomous distribution system in a country where theaters are monopolized by the film companies.

Perhaps by necessity, Apichatpong is also a vocal critic of censorship in Thailand. His own films have been repeatedly censored and remain largely unscreened to the general public in his home country. Several scenes were removed from *Blissfully Yours* when the film was screened in Thailand and from the government-approved DVD, including a long (and adulterous) love-making scene and one in which Roong, Min's lover, strokes Min's penis into erection. Most famously, Thailand's film review board requested that four scenes be excised from his feature *Syndromes and a Century*. The scenes in question show a monk playing a guitar, monks operating a remote-controlled UFO, a female doctor drinking alcohol in the hospital and a male doctor kissing his girlfriend. The review board also pronounced the film "devoid of artistic merit." In protest, Apichatpong refused to release *Syndromes* in Thailand and during a limited run of private screenings in 2008, he blacked-out but did not cut the offending scenes. In 2007, as the controversy was ongoing, Apichatpong entered into the debate over Thailand's new film rating system by publicly criticizing the new law, which essentially kept the censorship system in place (prohibiting negative depictions of the state, monks, Buddhism and the king, as well as outright depictions of prostitution and antisocial behavior). Ladda Tangsupachai, director of the Ministry of Culture's Cultural Surveillance Department during the junta-appointed government's reign, made now-notorious comments about Thai citizens' average primary-school-level education as evidence that Thais are "uneducated" and are "not intellectuals—that's why we need ratings." She also dismissed Apichatpong's films, saying, "Nobody goes to see films by Apichatpong . . . Thai people want to see comedy. We like a laugh."

Now that Apichatpong has won international cinema's highest prize—no less for a film that the director called "the most political work I have allowed myself to do"—the Thai government's official position on his work has shifted slightly to accommodate a stirring of national pride. *The Bangkok Post's* Kong Rithdee, a film critic and longtime supporter of Apichatpong, quoted the current minister of culture, Nipit Intarasombut, who after praising the controversial director said, "Mr. Apichatpong has been a valuable resource of the ministry for years." (Kong's written response to the minister's comment above was "Huh?") For his part, Apichatpong has refused to let the film's critical success be co-opted by his former detractors or those who would use it for nationalistic purposes. During the Cannes festival, Apichatpong observed that he



Still from **PRIMITIVE**, 2009, in which teenagers are firing flares into the sky.







(Previous two pages) Still from **PRIMITIVE**, 2009, in which a spaceship made by the villagers glows in a forest clearing.
(This page) Still from **PRIMITIVE** in which teenagers are sleeping inside the spaceship.

flew to France from Bangkok “as the city was burning,” and he openly criticized the current state of Thai politics, citing the disparity between rich and poor as the cause of violence.

These utterances aside, the primary way in which Apichatpong’s films operate politically is in their opposition to the artificial monoculture of Thailand promoted by the political and business elite and depicted in Thai studio films. In both his defense of local cultures against Thailand’s creeping homogeneity and the forces of globalization, Apichatpong’s views mirror those of the Slow Food movement, which lobbies against the standardization of global food production and cuisine, and advocates for independent farmers, local production and regional diversity. The philosophy of the Slow Food Movement has been applied to other areas such as city planning and parenting, and is equally appropriate to cinema in the case of Apichatpong’s works. (At present, the term is used in the film community to refer to directors who utilize long shots and slow pacing, which, though Apichatpong does this too, overlooks the social as opposed to merely aesthetic dimensions of the movement.) The resemblance between Apichatpong’s way of imagining his work and the Slow Food movement is evident from this passage from the Slow Food Movement’s founder Carlo Petrini’s book *Slow Food Nation* (2007): “By exploring the ‘margins’ of slowness, you encounter those pockets of supposedly ‘minor’ culture that are alive in the memories of old people, typical of civilizations that have not yet become frantic . . . you sense the potential of different methods and forms of knowledge.” This comment echoes to a startling degree not only Apichatpong’s favorite topics—memory, inherited knowledge, minority cultures—and his search for a less passive cinematic experience, but also the urgency to forge new connections with the people involved in production. Just as Slow Food advocates forming a personal relationship with the farmers that grow one’s food and learning about their craft, so does Apichatpong, in his collaboration with village residents and depictions of remote settings, redefine the role of the director, actor and, in turn, film viewer.

In reducing the division between producer and consumer, Apichatpong, like the Slow Food activist, is seeking to improve the ethics and pleasure of consumption. In fact, he tells *AAP* that for his next project, he is imagining “a city near the Mekong River between Thailand and Laos, with lots of dying animals”—a work that might bridge his two interests in disappearing cultures and natural ecosystems.

For all of Apichatpong’s interest in the ghosts, spirits, reincarnation and folkloric culture of the northeast, which for Thai viewers such as the critic Kong Rithdee are “poignant and peculiar when we spot ourselves—our ancestors, our ways, remembered or forgotten,” his methods and practice as a filmmaker have a broader relevance outside of identity politics. In his incorporation of amateur actors from rural communities—following others such as German director Werner Herzog who worked with local casts in locations from Germany to the Amazon basin—and in his deviance from the rigid conventions of classic cinema (whether Hollywood, indie or international), Apichatpong’s films can feel almost haphazard in their construction. But as viewers become accustomed to this loosening of the cinematic rules and slip into a mind-set that is not entirely one’s own, there are different pleasures—some forgotten and others new. Apichatpong was speaking of the Thai government when he wrote “Isn’t it only natural that, once in a while, we destroy ourselves to be able to mutate and be reborn?” but he just as easily could have meant the viewers of his films.