The Time in Thailand: Narrative structure, time, and meaning in Apichatpong Weerasethakul's ดอกฟ้าในมือมาร [“Mysterious Object at Noon” (2000)]

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Preface

This past spring in my neighborhood in New York City, a large film production company arrived unceremoniously and remained for a week or so. There were numerous large vehicles, including the type large enough to handle the enormity of the project that slowly unfolded and displaced the normal rhythms of the daily life of the community. A small team of electricians, key grips, lighting technicians, and assorted personnel carrying various authoritative electronic communications devices were soon at work, laying thick cable connections that snaked along the sidewalks conspicuously. There were vehicles brought in to handle catering, and there was a neat row of white, narrow trailers that provided cosmetic and costuming functions for the actors and actresses. Several large Klieg-type lights soon surrounded a building across the street that had largely fallen into disuse and disrepair. A former school, the building was now vivified with a flood of artificial lighting provided by the enormous lamps that were strategically arranged around the exterior and set up on a tall platform, the kind typically employed by construction crews.

Since the scenes were interior shots of an ersatz office setting, the actors and actresses were largely invisible to the community, which, in every sense, went about its daily rhythms unimpeded by, and mostly disinterested in the production process. There was something remarkable in this indifference and the contrast that the film production represented. It was a deliberate intrusion into the workaday routines of the urban patterns of this particular neighborhood, while the project also seemed to possess a kind of simultaneous, internal logic and meta-referential quality to it. For the crewmembers, actors, and actresses this creation of a
“place” constituted the rhythms of their own common routines, processes, and, indeed, traditionally denoted modes of “livelihood” protected by certain standards and expectations that exist in any commercial workplace, from factory floors and sales showrooms, to executive office suites or large government bureaucracies. Indeed, underwriting the prosaic patterns and rhythms of their work was a kind of performative value of the staging process of a motion picture. It seemed almost that the production crew was aware of itself performing its role, carving out of the day to day “reality” of the community an industrially designed and fabricated location that, when it appeared in the finished product, would be likely indistinguishable from the actual location of the neighborhood. Integral to the performative nature of the filmmaking process was an unmistakable assumption that their fiction-making, on such a financially grand scale, was in some way important in a vaguely inflated way. It seemed, in short, that the crew members were somehow aware that they were being observed, that the demystified process of making a movie was laid bare by the humdrum tasks that they set about performing: laying cables, moving equipment, and so on.

The finished product itself would, of course, be exhibited in the various movie theaters around the United States, then, in the lifecycle of popular cinema, be reproduced digitally for home consumption, in many cases streamed directly from a commercial Internet source. The length of time that it spends being exhibited in the theaters around the country would be delimited by a variety of factors, including its earning potential, its appeal to mass audiences, and, to a far lesser extent, its critical reception. Within a few months, or significantly less time depending on the conditions outlined above, the film’s burdensome technical requirements and production efforts would be mostly forgotten while the studio’s accounting team will seek ways to maximize a satisfying return on its investment domestically and overseas. Interestingly, in the
unlikely event that this film achieved a broader global reach in the same way that a science
fiction techno-fable might, or a “superhero franchise” tends to do, then its means of achieving
visual (“special”) effects and so on would become the subject (meta-referentially) of its own
story of how the story was made. This kind of “making of” story might be appealing only on the
grounds that the film achieved spectacular mass success that was attributable, in part, to the
technical spectacle thus created, or the underlying “magic” or essence that a good motion picture
captures.

As the location team dismantled the lights and emptied the vacant building of its stage props,
I briefly puzzled over the labels that appeared on the large metal file cabinets that were used on
the set and were awaiting transport on the sidewalk. The labels themselves, most likely invisible
in the final sequence of the film or overlooked in any event by a viewer mesmerized by the
dreary dialogue of the performers, were painstakingly crafted using a highly-stylized font type.
Someone within the small army that is temporarily assembled for a large-scale feature
production took pains to render these inessential details. Putting aside the notion that a filing
cabinet is rapidly becoming an anachronism (or considering that the film being produced here
may be a period piece or some kind), I mention the detail of the exterior labels for two reasons.
First, to show that the provision of capital at the service of a commercial, mass consumed visual
product is largely totalitarian in scope and ambition: that is, even the minutest detail is
reproduced in the manufacture of an ersatz reality even if such a detail is mostly invisible or
irrelevant in the final product. And second, to suggest that my appreciation of the font type on
the labels of the filing cabinets constituted the convergence of three, possibly more narrative
continuities: the first is the narrative cohesion of the daily rhythms enacted by the community as
it accommodated the film crew and circumvented its activities, the second is the parallel
narrative structure that was in the story or the script of the film (over a period of approximately two weeks, the sequence likely lasts fifteen minutes or so in the final feature), and the third is a contingent narrative of how I internalized, considered and am now mediating the story of the production itself by examining the process as a marginally disinterested scholar/spectator. Were I to take the imaginative process to a fourth level of potential narrative structuring, this largely theoretical and totally contingent, but unintentional narrative may include the imaginative space denoted by the labels on the file cabinets themselves: fictional names starting with a letter, interjected with a hyphen, then closing the field in a second arrangement of letters fictionally configured, or made to signify a name, e.g., “Bel -- Davis.” Thus the cabinet marked “Bel – Davis” contains the individual meta-narrative potential (all fictional, and none of which were likely elaborated in the screenplay) of the supposed files, or subsets of personal stories contained therein. My process of imagining those case files, then, constitutes a level of engagement with the process of making this particular film that its creators could not have plausibly anticipated. This level of engagement is intimately bound with, and confounded by, the mutability of time’s demands as the dominant propellant of narrative storytelling. I will return to the relevance of this description in the following essay.

The title of this essay, “The Time in Thailand” is derived in part from an auditory sense-memory of my own “time in Thailand” (1998-2000). Each morning, shortly after the roosters crowed in the small suburb of Bangkok where I was living at the time, one of the city’s English-language radio stations would play a short musical sequence that evoked feelings of patriotism, not an official anthem but a kind of bouncy antique recording, the clock would strike 8 times, then the DJ would announce the time, “เวลาแปดนาฬิกา” 8:00 AM, followed customarily by the
Thai national anthem. This sense-memory evoked by music inscribes indelibly the ways in which time is demarcated in Thailand, how it is bookended by a similar repetition of the anthem at the end of the day, and how it is proscribed by the kind of narrative intrusion that the radio’s use functions as a nationally representing framing device in the temporal duration of the day. That the national anthem ends the day at 6:00 PM, and that public recognition of this act is compelled by formal observation, helps situate a discussion of Apichatpong’s body of work and his film *Mysterious Object at Noon* with specific reference to its use of such transient sense fragments from radio, his obverted transgression of time, its *atemporality* and its functions as a political expression in transitional historical time, and its relationship with memory at what may be a critical historical time in Thailand’s contemporary history. In many ways, Apichatpong’s films, made in the heart of rural Thailand, and circulated throughout the cities of the Western world, were so compelling and mysterious, that the pleasure they produced as experiences could only be understood by way of a different kind of analysis: one that probes further the reaches of the place where art and philosophy meet, where the architecture of the imagination is composed not of technically simulated monstrosities, or ersatz sound stages erected in the midst of actual communities, but of the rhythms of Southeast Asian life that are fundamentally nourished by the cultural energies, whether rooted in the provincial Thai perspective, or energized by the urban sensibilities formed by more cosmopolitan forms of entertainment.
Table of Contents

Preface ............................................................................................................................................. 2
Introduction ..................................................................................................................................... 8
Apichatpong’s Malady .................................................................................................................. 15
Once Upon a Time ........................................................................................................................ 19
Apichatpong’s Exquisite Corpse ................................................................................................... 20
Movement and Metaphor .............................................................................................................. 26
At Noon: Modalities of Consumption, Locality, and the Apichatpong Cinema of Experience ... 34
The Time in Thailand: Conclusions and Observations ................................................................. 39
Works and Films Consulted .......................................................................................................... 44
Introduction

The implicit expectations of what has been called “art cinema”, or even “experimental” film, designations that are distinct from the financially-driven commercial enterprises that define cinema as an expressive medium, yet still ambiguous enough not to have any meaningful definitions within film studies itself. While the word “experimental” posits the possibility of failure in an artistic sense (as it does in a scientific one), or a less-structured intentionality, a kind of visual adventure, it nonetheless is often ascribed to art that confounds standard expectations of what a work of art exactly is. The definitions have changed dramatically over the past decade as global (art) cinema circulates more widely than ever before. With such expectations diverging along national (domestic) and international lines, the ways in which to categorize and assess films on their own aesthetic and cultural terms have become more complicated by mutable theories of globalization and general trends within academia that seek ways to situate world cinema within the shifting paradigms of national cinemas and the development of corresponding public spheres the heart of which is the circulation of new modes of artistic expression and discourse. Indeed, in many ways, the categorization of the “foreign film” already presumes an aesthetic that is beyond the general public’s interests. The complex factors affecting interpretation of international art cinema are based in part on the ways (and the cinematic methodology) that filmmakers have been projecting far more complex pictures of world cultures that, prior to the circulation of representations of national cinemas by way of ever-widening circuits of exchange, most notably the film festival circuit that now spans major cities around the world from Europe to Asia, were often typically presented simply as hybridized versions of

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formulaic Hollywood films, or as Disneyesque props in old newsreels and simplified or overtly
exoticized geographical renderings for children and mass audiences in the West. In other words,
the cinematic products of Thailand or much of the developing world for that matter were rarely
circulated outside of the closed systems of the national cinema of Thailand, and their domestic
productions typically mimicked Hollywood’s melodrama usually toward some prescribed
socially moralistic end. National cinemas viewed as such also served as a generic way to
characterize films based in part on the narrative prerogatives of the nation. This is to say nothing
of the often wildly inaccurate or exaggerated appearance of Siam or Thailand in western films
and other media which provided the type of fodder that easily provoked charges of Orientalism
(as Edward Said has described it) or even accusations of the casually manufactured racism of
Hollywood for which obvious anecdotes abound.

Without a narrative tradition that formally defines the Thai cinematic aesthetic, or at least
one that includes a range of alterity, discordant worldviews, visual experiments, and the
subversive tactics and “playfulness” of art cinema and experimental video, the only “natural”
position for the artist in Thailand, and perhaps similar nations of Southeast Asia, from which to
articulate un-regulated, in a sense of “irregular” or unorthodox stories, is cinema. From hand-
painted temple murals, to the whimsical designs and colors of Buddhist temples themselves, to
the display of neon across the urban night spaces of the region, Thai sensibilities are
fundamentally shaped by the dominant visual narrative idioms encountered in the diverse
localities of Thailand’s landscape: from electrically alive cityscapes, cluttered with electrical
wire and patchwork architecture and neon signage, to idyllic agrarian “utopias” of silence and
regressive time. This idiom, or visual vocabulary, is generally characterized by sense impression,

2 See, for example, the early films of Prince Chatri Yukol, including Dr. Karn (1973) and Angel Hotel (1974).
indirectness, and encounters within the \textit{sensorium} that rely, in part, on the difference between the “gaze” and the “glance.”

In many ways, the surface of Thai imagery, the superficial textures of its “amazing” visual qualities, reflects the illusory nature of experience itself in the spirit of the Buddhist concept of \textit{anicca}. Nonetheless, Thai art history has a long and enduring tradition that is difficult to undermine by confrontations with other artistic influences, either from Europe or other parts of Asia. There is certainly a categorical Thai aesthetic, whether glimpsed briefly in a rural temple mural, or within the ersatz interior of a Thai restaurant in Los Angeles, certain images can evoke place quite strongly, the nation, its ethos.

While the tempo of nature, the predictive cycles of the monsoons, the natural rhythms of rice cultivation fundamentally inform the rural Thai imagination and its own measurements of time and find expression in performed rituals according to lunar and religious cycles, in many ways, these cyclical \textit{timescapes} are in violent conflict with the ambient noise of \textit{techne} (Deleuze), the encroachments of technology’s omnipresent spatialization of time, and interactions with the machinery of technology’s dissemination and subsequent refraction or disarrangement of what Walter Ong called “secondary orality” \footnote{Walter Ong. \textit{Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word.} (London: Methuen, 1982). P. 136.} and Anderson referred to as “print capital.” \footnote{Anderson, \textit{Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism. Revised edition.} (London and New York: Verso, 1983, 1991), p. 37, chapter 3, “The Origins of National Consciousness.”} It is no longer possible to discount the fundamental ubiquity of capitalism’s narrative reach via variants of secondary orality and print capital, its multiplying methods of narrating its own self-referential stories, the stories within stories and their determination to mirror consumption patterns and posit dubious moral codes that are self-disclosing, its history and its self-justifications, to a point whereby for many kinds of visual products in popular cinema and Internet-human interactions, the agency of the spectator in the seemingly infinite forms available is reduced to, as Arjun
Appudurai has suggested, “at best, a chooser” while econometric predictors help furnish the back-story of consumption patterns that underwrite the narrative impulse itself. Arjun has written:

Global advertising is the key technology for the worldwide dissemination of a plethora of creative and culturally well-chosen ideas of consumer agency. These images of agency are increasingly distortions of a world of merchandising so subtle that the consumer is consistently helped to believe that he or she is an actor, where in fact he or she is at best a chooser.⁵

In other words, Hollywood productions, television and the Internet’s surrender to the power and compulsion of advertising, have become the simple projections of the econometric measurements that predict whether the consumer chooses Coca-Cola over Pepsi, whether she is predisposed to purchase (econometrically) a Coach or a Luis Vuitton fashion accessory, or whether the spectator identifies with (or aspires to) the consumption patterns displayed by Vaudevillian, parodist conceptions of the upper-class signifiers (and symbols) of wealth: see, for example, any film within the James Bond franchise for specifically male notions of wealth and sophistication, or the Sex in the City franchise for women. Indeed, franchise becomes the commercial word frequently employed in describing multiple iterations of films that show the same characters in different settings, but largely identical stories. (See, for example, the latest example of the Hangover franchise, which makes Bangkok its second setting of unimaginative depravity in its own cartoonish and distorted version of Thailand itself.) In effect, a traditional narrative structure in film, what some writers call “diegetic time”, has largely become a commercial one, in which the main objective of the narrative drive is the temporary satisfaction of a commercial sensation or identification with a particular consumption pattern.

Product placement or the commercial aesthetic in Hollywood cinema is not new. What is especially disturbing is the ways in which consumerist narratives have all but eliminated the need for the fictions of the film that at one time in cinema’s history were predicated on the desire to provide escape, or to simply entertain. Digital effects have all but eliminated the organic aura of a story simply told, while dubious techniques like “3D” have further created a video-game like projection that engages the audience’s eyes, while neglecting the active and interpreting mind altogether by merely stimulating the senses with spectacle. In response to recently diminishing audiences in the United States for these “3D” spectacles, the director, Michael Bay, of Transformers 3, a film with a budget of US $195 million, defended the appeal of 3D digital recording and projecting techniques and is quoted as saying: “If this was having my name on it, I was determined to make it technically perfect. We’ve spent an enormous amount of time making sure the eye is transitioned from shot to shot.” (Italics mine).

Technically advanced Hollywood films produced as pure spectacle have clearly little or no interest in ensuring that the audience has an engagement with the film in the sense of its story or the potentialities of an internal and hence more impressionistic experience once the image passes the eyes, a purer film experience, particularly those films with enormous production budgets (the budget for Transformers 3 approaches a quarter of a billion US dollars) that spare no expense in devising ways of “transitioning eyes” for commercial purposes. Spectacle that aims to “transition the eye” has the unintended effect of recalling the Ludovico treatment in Kubrick’s Clockwork Orange (1971), in which the graphic procedure of forcing and holding open the eyes of the film’s protagonist was meant to render the subject incapable of acts of violence and sexual arousal responses by coupling the image-viewing technique with nauseating drugs and a

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Beethoven symphony. In this case, however, the director’s desire is to promote the visual advantages of 3D screenings: never mind the fact that in this case the eye “is transitioned” from shot to shot of digitally created, computer-generated robots that fly about and attempt to destroy each other in a predictable and most likely largely unwatchable manner while toppling large skyscrapers in the process. More could conceivably be written about the ironies larded onto the technological processes involved in creating images of technology at war with its own effects, but that is for another paper.

Today’s mainstream films have become, in every sense, extended commercials and justifications for particular ways of consuming, a way of selling not only products, but modes of consumer performance coordinated closely with the rhythms of consumption itself as it continues to map out and predetermine with a fair amount of precision the ways in which we live our lives. For the most part, with few exceptions, mainstream films and entertainment have followed traditional diegetic time in narrative structure simply for the reasons that it is, by and far, easier for expectations to be met.

In the same way that the Thai Royal Anthem (เพลงสรรเสริญพระบารมี) functions at the start of a Thai film, in which the subjects of the king view themselves as royal subjects within a kingdom, a ritual that retains a deeply meaningful purpose in the public ritualistic nature of cinema-going, a typical Hollywood film reflects for an audience that sees themselves not in a special relationship with a revered authority figure, or as part of the “imagined community” of nation, as in the Thai example, but in relationship to the performative activity of consumption itself. They see themselves as “choosers” among a finite subset of consumption possibilities and lifestyle choices based on their demographic. To add to this effect, the experience of attending a screening of a mainstream film in the United States is characterized by having to endure a series
of short commercials even before the trailers of other motion pictures that will soon be distributed in theaters. The main feature film, of course, often functions as its own type of very long commercial.

Indeed, the selection of films screened at any given time in the United States cuts a swathe across class-lines fairly obviously: there is visual spectacle for each econometric consumer group. It is the motion picture industry’s (as well as capitalism’s) systematic way of ensuring that its repetitive cycles of economic circulation across all consumer agents by transitioning the consumer’s eye across a field of empty, yet rapid and usually violent images in order to simulate an experience that is ephemeral, vapid and mostly forgotten when the last image disappears from the screen. Insofar as these kinds of films evoke desire, it is typically a sublimated form of adolescent sexual desire gratified through spectacular violence, inhumane depravity (in the case of gory “slasher” films and the like), obscene comedies and technologically inspired destruction; meanwhile, filmed depictions of sex acts themselves are crudely disseminated, socially marginalized or fetishized in shameful ways, and, in the case of Thailand and most countries of Southeast Asia and the Middle East, simply rendered illegal.

In short, what has been created in popular cinema is a specific kind of debased pornography of consumerism, categorized according to genre and appealing to specifically target market demographics, whereby Eros is supplanted entirely by the satisfaction of images of “conspicuous consumption” and the destructive fantasies and moribund fictions that accompany it in an essentially diegetic time: that is, the characters of film fiction operate within certain logistical strictures the main effect of which is the fulfillment of romantic love, the emotional complications of death, or the dramatic conclusion to some kind of conflict. What, then, specifically constitutes an American cinema in the narrative frame of the nation? It is at least a
representative film that serves commercial purposes and exports a culture of spectacle in the
service of capitalism’s self-referential, self-repeating stories of consumption that offer the viewer
not alternative visions as such, but alternative ways of “choosing.”

**Apichatpong’s Malady**

Apichatpong Weerasethakul has risen to international prominence with films that regularly
challenge seasoned audiences and critics alike, while underscoring the experiential processes and
potentialities that film narrative holds for a more nuanced understanding of some of the functions
of world art cinema. Perhaps it is unfair to even include here an implied comparison between a
huge Hollywood motion picture, its diegesis, and its intentionality with the ways in which
Apichatpong’s films achieve their own “special” effects. There are implications that transcend
aesthetics, politics, and indeed which speak to the fundamental philosophy of cinema described
by Deleuze. To achieve this, Apichatpong’s work has interwoven myriad Thai pop-cultural
references, fictionalized ephemera from various pop media and culture, sociological
epiphenomena, and a strangely compelling global/local worldview that encompasses historical,
cultural, and political intonation facilitated, in the film under review, by the application of a
narrative structure with (Western) Surrealist origins and as it relates to an idiosyncratic literary
memory realized through an intrinsically, organically unique cinematic language.

In this essay, the focus is on the process of how the exquisite corpse technique transgresses
cinematic time in Apichatpong’s ดอกฟ้าในมือมาร, and its relationship to the effect of this
articulation of Thai narrative structure in literature and art generally, or at least at a particularly
important juncture in contemporary Thai history, with observations on the nature of time
distortion, memory, realism and a “national” historical narrative that coheres to the theories of national or regional cinemas. To put it more succinctly, Apichatpong’s choice of narrative experimentation in this film, as well as subsequent structural innovations that are revealed in his entire work of films, is one that is born of several characteristics of a nation at a point of transition. Bringing together critical components of cinematic time, the functions of ambiguity and incoherence, and the history of Thai narrative forms and functions in literature and society, this essay will offer an entrée into Apichatpong’s complete oeuvre in light of his mysterious object at noon: an object that in many ways signifies the very mystery of the narrative impulse in human history, both as a formal literary and as chronological/historical one, its cohesive integrity as a transnational text “object” that “travels” across space and time, and its complicated relationship to modes of reception and understanding; but one that also mirrors the ways in which narrative is consumed in an increasingly fragmented (and highly technologized) world. The mysterious object also travels the terrain of Thailand, a pastiche of images that evoke rural lifestyles, marginalized experiences and the fact that the story of nation is indeed multivalent, contrary to the dominant tropes of historical narrative structure.

The scope of this analysis takes into account the critical acclaim of Apichatpong’s vision, its appeal to a wide range of specific genotypes of audiences across the globe, and the ways in which cinematic art is being reproduced across mediascapes that are defined by (or in reaction to) nationalism’s tenacious grip on a formerly closed gallery of global images with their own implicit agendas. It is nearly impossible to compose such an essay without attention to Walter Benjamin, the German scholar who, had he the opportunities to witness firsthand the permutations of electronic technology’s ascendance in its relationship to the mechanical reproduction of art, would have marveled no doubt at the complexity that is represented by ever-
complicated networks of meaning, potential meaning, meta-reference, and the myriad ways of
telling stories, while seeing many of his ideas refracted in the blinding bits and bytes of digital
transmission that occurs every millisecond on the Internet. Nor is it quite possible to articulate
some of these observations without a rudimentary knowledge of Deleuze’s work on cinema and
the “deeper” readings that his philosophy of cinema sounds. Deriving ideas and observations
from Benjamin and Deleuze is critical in an analysis of the films of Apichatpong since at the
core of his work, the experience of its consumption and the meditative quality of the narratives
necessitate such discussions. Although it is easy to become mired in French postmodernist
theory, which this essay will seek to avoid, one of the results of the value of Apichatpong’s work
as an artist is that its peculiarities, its deeply experiential aspects, and the ways movement,
image, light and thought all intersect predispose the conversation toward exciting interpretive
possibilities that illustrate that Thailand has achieved a new placement in conversation within the
intellectual field of cinema, as Apichatpong is carving out a new visionary ground for the Thai
visual arts.

I will suggest in this essay that the experience of Apichatpong’s films necessitates a
discussion of the philosophy of cinema that invokes the ideas of Deleuze, specifically about the
“time-image”, but one which also takes into account the enormity of the cultural specificity in
which Apichatpong works. Critics who have analyzed films like Mysterious Object or have
excitedly reacted to Uncle Boonmee in print often struggle with the totality of the films by using
only the tools closest to them: cinema studies based on Western standards, maybe critical
interpretive prose that illustrates unlikely (or stretched) comparisons with other western
filmmakers, or that simply try to convey the sense of excitement that is well-deserved among a
critical community that is, for the most part, “cosmopolitan” and “urbane”.
It is, in fact, exciting to enter a darkened theater in a world city and see something that is at once strange, at times unsettling, but beautifully and temporally crafted to engender in its viewer a meditation, and not a glossy realization of shoddy commercials stitched together with the short-cuts of a quirky soundtrack. Rarely has a filmmaker from what has been called the “developing world” used to such effect the entire palette of experimental filmmaking, as well as installation art, influenced particularly American and European avant-garde of the 1960s, in the service of a nationally (dis)associative body of films. This crossover, then, that includes Thai nationalism’s tangential insinuations into the text of the film, its mediated and fictionalized references, and the narrative devices of alterity that Apichatpong employs, complicates any discussion of Thai cinema in ways that will be enumerated and analyzed here. While European cinema and literary theorists may provide useful touchstones from time to time, it is my hope that they do not overshadow the artistic intent, which is basically and fundamentally Thai, of Apichatpong’s complex vision.
Once Upon a Time

If one were to introduce the story of Apichatpong and his visionary work, the details themselves would confound notions of how cinematic auteurship might develop in a place like Thailand, and the complexities of post-modernity’s capacity to engender and evoke an art that has a broadly global appeal, albeit one that appeals to a specific kind of audience. A son of doctors who defied traditional patterns of internal migration in Thailand by moving out of the primate city of Bangkok and into the rural province of Khon Kaen, where they treated the local population in a provincial hospital, Apichatpong grew up with the vivid contrasts of commercial television and imported movies against the backdrop of a sleepy tropical setting more attuned to agrarian rhythms still imprinted on the Thai landscape by decades, indeed the “centuries” of Siamese history’s narrative memory, while underwritten by the episodic maladies, ailments and disabilities of the rural population, the ailing body politic of a largely non-political yet specific segment of Thai society, whose suffering and illnesses would likely have had a great effect on a young boy with an active imagination.

The characters that populate his films seek medical attention for a variety of reasons: from the prosaic (like skin rashes) to the metaphysical (like revenge-seeking chickens who disturb the dreams of a senior monk thus provoking a “panic disorder” and an occasional fall out of the bed.) From prosthetic devices (which conceal bottles of liquor), various problems with ambulation, the boy’s wheelchair in Mysterious Object, to the self regulating kidney dialysis of Uncle Boonmee, the pathologies of his characters symbolize something far greater than the sum of the diseased (body) parts. The imaginary screen monsters, scaly reptiles, and actors in monkey costumes that influenced his young imagination were (in a very real sense) surrounding him at all times,
perhaps in forms far more disturbing, or indicative of a malaise that Apichatpong hopes to
diagnose (or foretell by way of prognosis) through his unique art. Or consider, too, the
mysterious smile that his characters often project in his films, holding the smile for periods of
time that are slightly unnatural, inscrutable and almost narcotic, but that convey something far
more interesting than the superficial meanings they sometimes hold in Thai society’s “Land of
Smiles”.

Apichatpong’s reliance on a kind of highly personal documentary of memory evokes a pure
literature of Thailand in a way that perhaps Thailand’s contemporary novelists have as yet failed
to do on such a scale in writing. It is useful here to recall that Thailand’s narrative and literary
heritage is based largely on the oral tradition and that the introduction of formal literature
originated from the court and the royal chronicles. It is also highly visual. Thai comic books
remain extremely popular among youth groups, while the *jataka* tales of the Buddha’s life are
vividly painted on the walls of temples as types of Buddhist catechisms, requiring their own
modes of ‘reading’ and understanding, with recurrent symbols appearing within these stories.
Thai literature, as influenced by religion, is also by its very nature episodic. A *jataka* sequence is
often illustrated on the walls of a *wat* in episodic fashion. The *Ramakien*, the Thai version of the
Ramayana, is also an episodic narrative often told or staged in parts.

**Apichatpong’s Exquisite Corpse**

The illness of the body, or in *Mysterious Object*, the disability of the boy who figures
prominently in the mutating story of the film, is a recurring motif in Apichatpong’s work.
Indeed, the entire narrative structure is a technique that refers to the “exquisite corpse” (see
Maladies, ailments, illnesses and corpses all figure prominently in the films of Apichatpong. One possible reading of this particular trope might be profitably recalled from a seminal Thai history called *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (1994) by Thongchai Winichakul. This work highlights the ways in which the Thai nation was imagined and represented from early notions of sacredly bounded space to the cartographic conflicts that resulted from regional colonial ambitions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The “geo-body” therefore is one of the many metonymies that exist within *Mysterious Object*, and that are subjected to illnesses and transmutation in his subsequent work. Winichatkul writes that “In the case of Siam, the body of kingship was not only the biological body either. A passage in *Ramakien*, the Thai version of the *Ramayana* believed to have been composed by King Rama I of Bangkok (r. 1782-1809), says: *All the cities are the body/The king is the mind/Which is the lord of the body.*”  

But there are other possibilities at work here. In *Mysterious Object*, Dokfah’s corpse requires disposal, before that plotline is superseded and she returns to the room having explained that she had been out on an errand. In a memorable scene (the one that occurs atemporally since Dokfah returns after the episode), two young boys (the handicapped boy and the mystery boy who emerged from the object) attempt to dispose of Dokfah’s body by placing it within a flimsy plastic closet liner. The effect of watching the boys struggle with the corpse is hypnotic given the various prohibitions in Thai culture relevant to touching the head, the highest part of the body, as well as the relationships depicted among the subjects. The relationship between a teacher and a student, for example, follows typical patterns of respect and certain *performative* expectations. Watching the boys handle a dead body transgresses the cultural restrictions around touch and

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interactions between adults and children, and evoke the taboos of the head in much the same way as the doctor in *Syndromes* does when she attempts to heal one boy’s chakra via the head, or when the dentist works around the head of a Buddhist monk. In Buddhism, the corpse is typically disposed of via elaborated sacral cremation ceremonies. This is not the conclusion for the corpses in Apichatpong’s films. They are secreted in caves (*Uncle Boonmee*) or chanced upon in and transported through nature (*Tropical Malady*); in most of Apichatpong’s work Buddhism’s role is ambiguous and largely visual. The monks’ robes are identifiable as such, but behavior often countermands or contradicts the visual image.

The corpse, the body, or the cadaver in Apichatpong’s work is an important symbol on the surface of the narrative. One could plausibly suggest that it represents the body of the “geo-body” of the nation of Thailand fractionalized by myriad forces that have pressured the agrarian feudalistic society in ways that have yet to be accurately measured by historians or sociologists. Always lying at tension with the visual complexity of his work is this notion of the unseen, the nefarious and image-less state that “disappears” characters in his installation exhibit *Primitive* and in *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall his Past Lives* (2010) and that informs the conflicts of his films. If there is, in fact, a conflict it is largely internal, or unspoken. Desire itself underwrites many of the narrative tensions: but it is rarely realized fully. This is the exact opposite of the mechanics of desire in a temporal film, whereby the desired object is realized to the satisfaction of the audience by the end of the picture.

The *Exquisite Corpse*, also referred to as the “exquisite cadaver” or “rotating corpse” is a parlor game that originated within the European Surrealism movement. It is by way of this second type of corpse that the story of *Mysterious Object* unfolds. The premise is straightforward: a story (or a picture/painting/drawing) is begun, with layers added by
subsequent storytellers until it is unclear where the story diverges, where it returns to a dominant or recognizable plot line, and where the temporal arrangement has been subverted (in cinema, by flashback or flash-forward, for example). There are several examples of the exquisite corpse in the history of Surrealism. These include methods of collage, painting, and literature particularly of the Dada “school”. Writing on the ways in which exquisite corpse games functioned as art, Elza Adamowicz writes:

Conditional or logical relations are posited by the syntactic frame, but are not substantiated by the semantic content. The disorienting effect on the addressee derives from a tension between the euphoric recognition of the formal structure and the disphoric [sic] departure from the familiar in the random semantic filling of syntactic frames. Surrealist games are both polemical weapons which defy rational and stereotypical discourse, and mechanical devices set up to produce metaphors and narratives whose overarching principle is the chance encounter.8

This helpful description of the ways in which the exquisite corpse functions in Surrealism preconditions the overall experience of the Mysterious Object at Noon, and indeed, nearly all of Apichatpong’s films. That they are integrated into an experience that is quite different from the linearity of an expected arc of narrative engenders a reaction in the viewer that requires a surrender to the possibilities of new modes of storytelling that transgress the grand narrative that a nation tells itself, or that it tends to project outward. By upending the dominant tropes and themes of a national narrative, and creating a new “syntactic frame”, privileged stories become less so. In short, Apichatpong’s use here of a Western derivation that has nearly been lost to art history altogether is no mere aesthetic exercise or a film-school gimmick: it is a way of destabilizing the overarching narratives that have been conditioned and rehearsed by a nation as the artist’s way to contest authorial voice as a primary function of history. By subverting traditional narrative structure, and allowing the story to flow piecemeal, the film evokes a new

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modality of the nation’s narratives. It is almost as though, by exploiting the semantic mechanics of filmmaking, by showing the mutability of time in the shaping of historical memory, Apichatpong is reconstituting a pure *temporal memory* unconditioned by the insistent linearity (or the perceptual tyranny) of synchronic historical time.

Secondly, the very idea of an exquisite corpse as envisioned by the Surrealists is one that seems to permeate every mode of artistic expression in the twenty-first century, especially hypertext meta-language, the source code of the Internet, which, through a series of links renders narrative potential in multiple dimensionality: a story now links to a secondary narrative, and so on. It may be that the exquisite corpse structure itself has become, in effect, a default way of telling fictions or elaborating the political language of the nation.

Recalling that the Exquisite Corpse originated as a parlor game among Surrealist artists, it is useful to examine the role that the game in general plays within social and political structures at times of historical flux. In an environment in which open political dialogue faces severe restrictions or culturally-reinforced discretion (as is the case in Thailand), a game that seeks to transgress the bounded space of political rhetoric or discourse may not be recognized as such by a casual viewer who tends to be perplexed, or even mesmerized by Apichatpong’s work. Commenting on the nature of this particular kind of game, one that subverts conventions of language, syntax, or images in the service of a semantic construction that is wholly new (indeed one that is “alien”, to use an image from the film), Adamowicz writes:

The pleasure of transgression is associated with the social function of games, the pleasure of adhering to rules (grammatical and syntactical) while breaking the laws (of association and logic). Games are a concretization of freedom from social constraints, liberating the pleasure principle, analogous to carnival, a time of celebration and renewal in societies, when social taboos are relaxed and primal chaos is re-enacted by a return to origins – strictly controlled however by the social laws
which allow this momentary release, whence the liberating effect of challenging social codes by subverting them from within. External causality is displaced by an internal transgressive causality linked to desire. By promoting the *trouvaille* and the unexpected encounter, a new mode of poetic association is activated, a liberating form of logic akin to the logic of dream-work.⁹

The logic of the dream world is unmistakable in nearly all the films of Apichatpong. Indeed, in reviewing *Mysterious Object*, it is remarkable in its similarity to the ways in which poetry works, non-syntactically, or the ways in which words evoke specific images in an unsettled, associative or non-linear method. It may be said with some clarity that Apichatpong activates a poetic association through a variety of interrelated techniques and effects. The collage effect of *Mysterious Object* achieves a few of these objectives. According to Adamowicz, citing the ideas of European art critic Wolfgang Babilas:

>Surrealist collage cannot be reduced to a cutting and pasting technique, a material practice of collating distant realities. It is also, and more essentially, a creative act of *detournement*, through the subversive manipulation and creative transformation of ready-made elements, forging the surreal out of fragments of the real, suggesting the *merveilleux* through the combination of banal and defunct images, clichés and rewritten texts. It is essentially a semiotic practice of transforming pre-formed ironic or verbal messages.¹⁰

Apichatpong’s semantic constructions, therefore, feature generally a disordering of time sequences. Taken together, these methods transgress formal narrative expectations in order to achieve a polemical transformation of the visual idiom of highly-recognizable traces of the Thai imaginary. Apichatpong, like the Surrealists of the early 20th century, therefore re-energizes the banal transcripts of radio programs, the clichés of Thai culture and the defunct images that appear in stark contrast to the motion of the narrative of the story.

For example, the film opens with an old radio play redolent of melodrama and lost love as a truck of some kind moves through Bangkok; the text of the radio narrative is a symptom of

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⁹ Ibid, p. 57.
¹⁰ Ibid, p. 17.
technology’s mediation of storytelling, it is surely a relic of Walter Ong’s “secondary orality” redolent of melodrama, and it a parallel narrative movement; or it is an antiquated technology inscribing an ephemeral sense memory onto the movement of the film. Or, consider the still shot (figure 1) of the political campaign poster while the fish-sauce vendor tells her heartbreaking tale of being sold by her father as a young girl. The patrician image of the politician is presented here as a historically defunct image of a politics that is semantically separate from the reality of the merchant’s alternative narrative: national narrative, projecting a kind of power, is here totally incongruent with the stories told by the marginal and the poor, the powerless.

![Figure 1 Still from Mysterious Object at Noon](image)

**Movement and Metaphor**

Added to the overarching narrative “non-structure” borrowed from the Surrealists, is the geographical movement of the story (facilitated by multiple subject positions) from the
northernmost part of Thailand to the insular South, where it ends up on an island in southern 
Thailand called Panyi, a small Muslim community which is the site of an earlier film exploration 
that Apichatpong produced as a short experimental work.

Movement, then, in this film works in several ways. First, it transports the viewer by various 
conveyances through the environs of typical Thai scenes within its geography, or the “geo-
body”: the labyrinthine backstreets of Bangkok, a motorbike whizzing down a narrow alley in a 
rural village, a third-class train compartment traveling south with windows open and shots of the 
track receding in the distance (a way of signifying passing time, but also a “classic” shot that 
recalls early cinema), and even waterways which evoke the historically organic nature of 
historical motility in Thailand: the waterborne Siamese traditions. Movement itself is, therefore, 
a metaphor: a story moves forward, memory recalls it backward; and a clear-cut linearity of time 
is confused by inter-temporal sequences and time manipulation in certain sequences of the film.

The mechanics of film is first and foremost an elaborate collaboration of moving parts: it 
creates an illusion on the screen by recording and projecting film through (as Walter Benjamin 
calls it) the apparatus. Benjamin writes, “The most important social function of film is to 
establish equilibrium between human beings and the apparatus.”11 If one is to understand fully 
Benjamin’s apparatus, in this case the motion picture camera or projector, but in broader terms, 
modifications of broadcast technology and new digital media, or, say, the Internet itself, its 
importance is relational: technology requires an equilibrium (and not in postmodern parlance a 
“negotiation”) in order to advance. One is always “keeping up” with its headlong pace. As 
advances in technology and digital media obtain, this equilibrium becomes nearly impossible to

11 Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media.* 
maintain. The myriad variations of visual representations and potentialities have created a
mediascape whereby the consumer, the spectator is bombarded by images of conflicting intent,
many of which are purely commercial, others sensational or simply appalling. Thus, in
Mysterious Object, these relationships achieve a kind of equilibrium because of the permeability
of generic cinematic forms and their functions. Is the film a documentary, for example? Is it
historical? And in light of recent advances in televisual “reality” manipulations,
“mockumentaries” and the like, has the form itself been subverted stylistically? That the film
neither conforms to principals of documentary or realist expectations of linearity, nor makes an
effort to amplify its fictional subtext using the standard tools of cinematic art, such as special
effects, etc., is a testament to the project of establishing this kind of dramaturgical equilibrium
that Benjamin imagined. The actors and actresses in most of Apichatpong’s films are “non-
actors” who recur in nearly every film, and there is, at the heart of the mysterious object, a
secondary dramatic element: the tension between the Thai localities in their discrete
compositions (in a small room of an old Thai house, on a long-tailed boat, in the small spaces of
moving vehicles), the inescapable presences that they convey, indeed, the plane of immanence
(Deleuze), and the orality of the story itself (especially when children are recruited from an
elementary school to add to the story), which recalls Thailand’s oral traditions and its pre-literate
origins while evoking technology’s narrative impulse through radio and television. Indeed, a
notable sequence from the film shows the story as told by two deaf Thai girls thereby foregoing
oral narrative altogether, and their emphasis focuses on the draw of the city as a place of music,
dance and sexual exploitation.
Figure 2 Still from Mysterious Object

Figure 3 “She sang and danced beautifully.”
And in the final third of the film, when the pantomime of the fictional representation gives way to the stories that parallel the behind-the-scenes telling of the story, i.e., when the director, technicians and the cameras become subjects themselves (in much the same way that was observed in the preface to this paper), the young boy who plays the “magical boy” born of the mysterious object is filmed interacting with the *apparatus* (a camera mount) itself, pretending to capture the film.
While the centrality of urban Thailand is difficult to avoid in most of Apichatpong’s work, *Syndromes and a Century* especially, and its relationship to the provincial settings of the film provides an ineffable subtext that is refracted by references to consumerism, technology and the like, the mysterious object, like the story itself, is impervious to the gravity of the city’s inescapable dominance in contemporary Thai experience. The story progresses from North to South and ends in the watery southern islands in the Muslim south. One could conceivably make an observation to suggest that foregrounding the mysterious object’s journey, and symbolically linked to the exquisite corpse, the entire “geo-body” (to use Winichakul’s oft-repeated term), in this case the *exquisite corpse*, of Thailand itself, patched together by the myriad contributions of its various constituents, farmers, school children, villagers, who rarely find voice in the overarching narrative of the nation or in the glossy horror films or comedies that dominate the nation’s domestic industry; or who serve as handmaidens to the urban center’s capitalist systemic
pursuits and rituals. That the desire that is often expressed in temporal cinema in many ways is replaces by erotic desire, or is sublimated in many of Apichatpong’s films (including Uncle Boonmee, where pleasure is so difficult to discern in the meditative film that its only appearance seems to be the simple enjoyment of raw honey in the bee aviary, or the animistic coupling of a catfish and a story-book princess, or the signifiers of maudlin desire in the final scene in the kitschy karaoke shop.

In the narrative strategies employed by Apichatpong, not just in Mysterious Object, but also the films that would follow it, the focus is one of motion, and how, when syncopated with the effects of lighting (in Mysterious Object the black and white film appears at times overexposed), movement and narrative time. In his book The Horse that Drank the Sky, Murray Pomerance explores the relationship between movement and the narrative, and the ways in which they interact to produce cinema’s remarkable effects. Here he distinguishes between the “glance” and the “gaze” as the differentials involved in narrative motion. He observes: “What I have been calling the cinematic gaze, then, is already a gaze in motion, and also a gaze at motion, a gaze at glancing, the ongoingness of the narrative entirely notwithstanding. Narrative brings in yet one more kind of motion to a moving picture that does not inherently require it, adding a move to a viewing that is already on the move.”12

Cinema is a collage of moving images facilitated by a motile technology. The tradition of narration has always implied movement and time. “Once upon a time”, intentionally ambiguous and a-historical, signifies the beginning of what is often a journey or the movement of a character through the geography of the story’s settings. In many ways, cinema is the perfect metaphor for a child interacting with technology. To preserve the child-like at play sense of the

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game is to introduce heterogeneous time and to dispel the mythos of national historicity’s linearity; *Mysterious Object* indeed ends with a dog chasing a tin can affixed to its own tail, a game that the village’s children have concocted. Returning to the mechanics of filmmaking as integral to narrative structure, Pomerance notes:

> While the gaze of the cinema of attractions presented the viewer with a world organized through the motile agency of the cinema, the storyline of the cinema of narrative integration and the later classical cinema choreographed this opticality and operated more intensively through the glance. With early films, narrative films, the viewer could not but be conscious of the artisanality of the work; with narrative film, as Belton (1985) and others have shown, the cinematic project was to disguise the artisanality of the work as much as possible so as to seduce the viewer’s complicity and engagement; further, the increasingly elaborate mechanism of studio production from 1930 onward meant that artisanality was also being hidden by – indeed transformed into – the systematic mechanical operation of well-organized and interlocking parts.\(^\text{13}\)

> With Apichatpong, therefore, the motile agency of cinema maintains its logic. However, the storyline diverges from temporal lines as generic characteristics cease to maintain an inhering logic. Documentary-like, shot in 16 mm, in black and white, the film defies the entire narrative tradition (diegesis) associated with fictional film (temporal) or even the form it resembles (documentary). We have seen that movement is employed as metaphor, but it is also a direct signifier of technology’s “interlocking parts” that are capable of rendering narrative time in accordance with the imagination, the prime directive of which is the compelling motion into a future, and as we may observe in the early part of the twenty-first, it becomes clearer that the time-image will dominate. As Pomerance observes: “It is not movement that dissipates the gaze and produces the glance; it is the sense of purpose, which is to say, the desire for destinations.”\(^\text{14}\)

\(^\text{13}\) Ibid, p. 29
\(^\text{14}\) Ibid., p 29-30.
At Noon: Modalities of Consumption, Locality, and the Apichatpong Cinema of Experience

Urban space cannot be avoided in Apichatpong’s vision in *Mysterious Object*, and finds its expression roughly half way into the film. It is ambiguous, and later it certainly symbolizes a sinister future form as the dream in *Uncle Boonmee*, and yet seemingly repellant throughout his films that follow. It is nearly always a place of exploitation and a place of commerce: as though these were one and the same for the filmmaker. It is a place in *Uncle Boonmee* of potential anomie and paranoid political malevolence.

The dynamics that subtend between urban and rural experience, not only in Apichatpong’s oeuvre, but in many festival-circuit and mainstream Thai films as well, is a critical dramaturgical tension in contemporary Thai art. The city as the engine of economic and political power in Thailand remains a dominant image: the city-image and its relationship to the rural provinces are, in essence, the conflicting narratives of the nation’s history and its potential futures, the tension between progress and traditionalism, and can be conceived of as separate time zones completely. Linguistically, the Thais refer to provincial dwellers as *ban nok*, something almost like the English term “outliers”. This is what marks Apichatpong’s work as a critical mirror of the (possibility of) social and cultural change as it is happening, which is always difficult to measure with evidence in history, diachronically or synchronically, though far easier to record through art’s dystopian nightmares and urban anxieties. Documentary cinema, or the *performative* resemblance of its techniques (which we see in *Mysterious Object*), may come close to offering a glimpse at how cinema interacts with the time-image explored by Deleuze. Ambivalence underwrites the enterprise at every step.
Whereas the body as a recurring trope is ailing, disfigured, or handicapped in the films of Apichatpong, the organs often draining of their vital and life-affirming fluids (Uncle Boonmee’s kidney, scenes of urination in *Syndromes*), it is fruitful to recall that the “body” has been often dismembered and disposed of in Pen-ek Ratanaruang’s *Sixty6Nine9, Invisible Waves*; and even in *Ploy* as a corpse is in the process of receiving final rites by the end of that film at a temple in the heart of Bangkok. Whatever kind of symbol we wish to make of the corpse or the body in contemporary Thai cinema, it is clear that it is not a healthy one, but one that requires the medical attention of the medically-minded Apichatpong and his screen doctors and nurses. Indeed, it is as though the subtext of contemporary films by Apichatpong and Pen-ek Ratanaruang is one of illness: a malaise has gripped Thailand, which on the surface retains its formal undercurrents that characterize its national character. The provinces have been emptied of their essence, transforming Thai experience into what the rural Thais may consider an urban nightmare. But is it satisfying to make this claim?

On the relationship between Asian cities and cinema, James Tweedie and Yomi Braester observe:

The horizon provided to early filmgoers – an alternative sphere based on the privileged position of the spectator and activated by the ‘publicness’ of the cinematic experience – has at once drawn closer and grown hazy, as flourishing screen technologies support portable and private experiences rather than the collective interactions of the theater. The contemporary media ecology has fragmented the viewing public and opened new possibilities for a less concentrated and geographically located community. These emerging forms of cinema and the city, now filtered through digital media and defined by networks connecting widely dispersed global hubs, therefore question the place of the viewing subject and inherited notions of the public sphere.15

While urbanity pre-conditions the reception of film as a cinematic experience, simultaneously serving as a symbol of consumption and postmodernity’s alienating pace as

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15 Yomi Braester and James Tweedie. *Cinema at the City’s Edge: Film and Urban Networks in East Asia*. (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), p 10-11.
kindled by technology’s growth, a place where a national idiom of imagery confluences and sustains itself, and where communal consumption of cinema is still possible, it is in this largest sense of a place where the narrative of nation is most clearly exposed to its adherents. There are two points I wish to make here.

First, the city in its complexity and temporal dislocation from the agricultural rhythms of Thai provincial life, is the main symbol against which Thai art cinema, and perhaps the great majority of effective contemporary Thai art, seeks to “deconstruct”, not in the strict sense of French theorists, but perhaps more so in a way that provides the semiotic basis for all that is possible as seen from without the tyranny of its image. While cinema enthusiasts have yet to see Apichatpong make a film of the city’s chaotic sensorium in ways that Walter Benjamin captured in his role of the 19th century flâneur (most of Apichatpong’s work shows well how the city repels his personal documentary style in this film), his ideas of urban space are made clearer in Syndromes and a Century, where the repetitive narrative structure (presented here in one of his characteristically bifurcated structures) reveals the characters interacting within an anaesthetized environment of monochrome, repetitive compulsions, and anomie.

Secondly, as the symbol of a communal space of individuated consumption patterns and as a place where technology’s ineluctable pace find the most dramatic expression, the very experience of cinema as an internal process, the kind that Apichatpong’s meditations highlight, is becoming fractured and atomized by the sheer variety of digital reproduction and individualized consumption patterns. Individual mobile devices, digitalization and computer screens now dominate the ways in which cinema (or motion pictures and video games) is experienced. This represents a complete historical reversal from the origins of the medium itself, which went from (as Walter Benjamin observed) from individualized to communal.
In a critique of Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, and in an especially pertinent essay on the nature of the “narrative of the nation” titled “DissemiNation”, Homi K. Bhaba notes:

Anderson fails to locate the alienating time of the arbitrary sign in his naturalized, nationalized space of the imagined community. Although he borrows his notion of the homogeneous empty time of the nation’s modern narrative from Walter Benjamin, he fails to read that profound ambivalence that Benjamin places deep within the utterance of the narrative of modernity. Here, as the pedagogies of life and will contest the perplex histories of the living people, their cultures of survival and resistance, Benjamin introduces a non-synchronous, incommensurable gap in the midst of storytelling. From this split in the utterance, from the unbeguiled, belated novelist there emerges an ambivalence in the narration of modern society that repeats, uncounsellled and unconsolable [sic] in the midst of plenitude.16

Ambivalence is at the heart of modernity’s narratives and their variations, and Apichatpong’s work fundamentally reflects this. What does it mean, for example, to have a communally shared narrative experience in an age of atomized and individuated pursuits of pleasure and commercial success? Is there a clear role for the storyteller in a postmodern society that is ever-separating from its agrarian rituals and the consensual values it left behind in pursuit of desire in the urban power-generator that is Bangkok? And what does it mean for art as it is subject to the demeaning and coarsening influences of box office revenue projections, state-imposed or industry-moderated censorship, and diminished critical faculties on the part of public art and cinema critics who mediate public performance in order to reflect idiosyncratic tastes and illusions of what art should look like, all in the service of maintaining an elaborate machinery of “dissemination” or the reproducibility of its own media types? I pose these as questions here though they are difficult to resolve and are part of the problem in composing new understandings of the shifting public sphere.

We can reflect, however, on their importance with some melancholy as agrarian kingdoms and former kingdoms of mainland Southeast Asia struggle to come to terms with a raft of new ways of seeing, being seen or heard or represented, and representing themselves and the narratives they choose to tell all in the service of technology’s unpredictable and relentless ambitions, while simultaneously struggling to develop national resources sufficient to sustain the prosperity of their citizens.

For Thailand, and its attendant crises of the past ten years or so, the story’s conclusion is not yet written, the future narratives meanwhile are being woven by storytellers like Apichatpong who has chosen, in the age of the moving image and the digital effects of temporal distortion, the tools that are best able to convey the complexity of this vision, shifting as it does with the movement of time, inexorably toward the finite time in this life (ชีวิตี้) in which technology has pathologized our experience in more ways than we would care to admit, when the organs of our bodies are drained of their essence onto the dusty floor of a Platonic cave in the Thai highlands (as in Uncle Boonmee), our skin deadens and peels, flakes off into clear rivers, our anxieties and nightmares require pills that doctors cannot prescribe, our dark skin requires whitening creams, our ears or legs no longer serve their function, and when the imagination is thus exhausted, and we fall asleep, sexually slated by our dreamy lover (the object of desire thus attained), by the side of a clear stream flowing through a jungle of vital abundance and the ambient noise of life as it surrounds us unattended and oblivious to desire itself. Apichatpong’s tools, for now, therefore, are the analogue records of radio, television, indeed cinema’s fading signals, the film stock itself, as digital media ascends and image-manipulation is something that many can now do in the comfort of their own homes with minimal training.
The Time in Thailand: Conclusions and Observations

Apichatpong’s refiguring of narrative time in *Mysterious Object* and in the complete body of his work generally situates national narrative time in ways that echo new wave cinemas of Europe and the United States in the 1960s and 1970s. David Martin-Jones in his perceptive text *Deleuze, Cinema and National Identity* (2006) observes:

> During times of historical transformation, films often appear that experiment formally with narrative time. The various European new waves of the 1960s and 1970s, for instance, can be interpreted not only as comments on the state of their respective national cinemas, but also on the changing postwar conditions each nation experienced. A jumbled, fragmented, multiplied or reversed film narrative then, can be interpreted as an expression of the difficulty of narrating national identity at a time of historical crisis or transformation. Such narratives formally demonstrate a nation’s exploration of its own ‘national narrative’, its examination of the national past, present and/or future in search of causes, and possible alternatives, to its current state of existence.\(^{17}\)

That these criteria so clearly apply to *Mysterious Object*, with its faux documentary style, its layering of stories, the interjection of atemporal historical narratives that are supported by stock newsreel footage (see, for example, Figure 6, the odd sequence that takes place during the “Pacific War” and that shows the results of Japan’s bombing of Bangkok), and its inconclusive disjuncture by the film’s end all constitute a kind of game with quite serious intent. If, as Martin-Jones notes above, Thailand is exploring its identity at a critical time in its historical narrative, the *duree* that signifies a homogeneous time of historicity, then Apichatpong’s transgressions serve political purposes in the service of cinematic art.

In a footnote to Benjamin’s treatise on *The Work of Art*, he observes the nature of communal experience of visual forms that was called in his time the Kaiserpanorama. Encountering this passage in Benjamin evoked an odd sensation, as though we have come full circle at a moment in technology’s self-generating, transnational history across *mediascapes* where preferences have returned to the personalized consumption of images by way of DVDs, VCDs, Internet streaming, etc., in front of a glowing screen in the privacy of our homes, non-communally consumed, non-“consensual” in the sense of not reinforcing of a broader public sphere, furtively read or glanced, dismissed, deleted, commented upon anonymously, only to be replaced by the next set of images, at faster and faster intervals when even diegetic time, or spatialized time holds less and less meaning.

18 For a brief history of the Kaiser-Panorama, see [http://inthejungleofcities.wordpress.com/2011/02/06/the-kaiser-panorama/](http://inthejungleofcities.wordpress.com/2011/02/06/the-kaiser-panorama/).
Benjamin writes:

30. [A]pparently insignificant social changes often foster a change in reception which benefits only the new art form. Before film had started to create its public, images (which were no longer motionless) were received by an assembled audience in the Kaiserpanorama. Here the audience faced a screen into which stereoscopes were fitted, one for each spectator. In front of these stereoscopes single images automatically appeared, remained briefly in view, and then gave way to others. Edison still had to work with similar means when he presented the first film strip – before the movie screen and projection were known; a small audience gazed into an apparatus in which a sequence of images was shown. Incidentally, the institution of the Kaiserpanorama very clearly manifests a dialectic of development. Shortly before film turned the viewing of images into a collective activity, image viewing by the individual, through the stereoscopes of these soon outmoded establishments, was briefly intensified, as it had been once before in the isolated contemplation of the divine image by the priest in the cella.19

Noting that the Kaiser-Panorama evolved from individualized-quasi public experiences of images (see Figure 7) to the projected image communally enjoyed once motion picture theaters and projection technology evolved, Benjamin sees seemingly “insignificant social changes” that affect the reception of images as ordained by technology’s history. Comparing he individual image viewing to “isolated contemplation of the divine image by a priest in the cella”, it appears that the changes that have modified our reception of images (from theater-going to individualized consumption on the digital screens that proliferate from the workplace to the streets), have come full circle indeed. Benjamin’s equation here with the sacred of course prefigures Anderson’s argument about the detachment of the Latin of the Church to the vernacularism of nationalism. It is instructive to consider the sacral image in this context, then, which has been replaced with the desecrated (or mostly meaningless) image that now has transfixed

our gaze, holding our eyes, if not our attention, propelling us forward into a future of images forever transitioning our eyes forward toward the future city, a city of images, the one so often imagined by Apichatpong.

Figure 7 Kaiser-Panorama (image taken from Wiki-Commons at http://de.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Datei:August_Fuhrmann-Kaiserpanorama_1880.jpg&filetimestamp=20100227154835)

Whether the future city of images is one of our nightmares or our realized commercial desires remains, of course, largely unanswerable. But given the tensions that subsist between agrarian modes of life in places like Thailand, the narrative playfulness and subversion that filmmakers like Apichatpong employ by making use of imported often out-moded techniques of storytelling and reinventing the very language of film, and
the influences that technology and transnational consumerism radiates from the cities, it will surely be a confluence of ideas, politics and aesthetics. Tweedie and Braester note in their introductory essay, “In this new urban environment, it is no longer possible to determine where the city ends and cinema begins.”

In an Apichatpong film, however, it is possible to determine the limitations of the city and technology’s encroachments in the stories that we tell ourselves, stories remembered, or historically narrated. And when one encounters in one of his films a monkey-ghost, which we recognize instantly as an actor in a monkey costume, who appears without the aid of computer generated imagery, and who delivers his lines unaffectedly, deliberately, we are not (and this is possibly the most “special of effects”) dismayed by its fundamental absence of “realism”; we are captivated by its pure referential beauty and its ability to maintain our interest, to engage our imagination: a spectral pair of red eyes glowing in the jungles of Thailand.

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20 Yomi Braester and James Tweedie, *Cinema at the City’s Edge: Film and Urban Networks in East Asia* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), p. 10-11.
Works and Films Consulted


Braester, Yomi and James Tweedie. *Cinema at the City’s Edge: Film and Urban Networks in East Asia*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010.


44


Films by Apichatpong Weerasethakul Reviewed for Essay

**Feature Films**

- *Mysterious Object at Noon (Dokfa nai meuman)*, (2000)
- *Blissfully Yours (Sud sanaeha)* (2002)
- *Tropical Malady (Sud pralad)* (2004)
- *Syndromes and a Century (Sang sattawat)* (2006)

**Short Films and Installation Art**

0116643225059 (1994)
*Like the Relentless Fury of the Pounding Waves* (1996)
*thirdworld* (1998)
*Windows* (1999)
*Malee and the Boy* (1999)
*Emerald* (2007)
*Vampire* (for Louis Vuitton, 2008)
*Mobile Men* (2008)