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THE METAPHYSICAL WORLD OF APICHATPONG WEERASETHAKUL'S MOVIES

*The Thai director knows how to find the visually uncanny in
the mundane.*

By Hilton Als

January 10, 2022

Apichatpong Weerasethakul, at home, in December, is contemporary cinema's preëminent poet of place and of dislocation. Photograph by Harit Srikhao for The New Yorker



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In mid-September, 2017, the Thai director Apichatpong Weerasethakul flew to Chicago to see how a world that he'd made had been remade: the School of the Art Institute of Chicago had installed the first large-scale retrospective of his non-feature-film work: short films, videos, photographs, and ephemera. The show, "The Serenity of Madness," which was organized by the curator and scholar Gridthiya Gaweewong, and occupied the institute's cavernous Sullivan Galleries, had begun a seven-city tour in Chiang Mai in 2016. Now it was making its first American stop.

An admirer of Weerasethakul's films, I had also flown to Chicago to immerse myself in his world. Entering the gallery, I meandered through an

eerie, darkened space with something approaching fear. Images of boys and landscapes and fire jumped out at me, like figures in a haunted house. And although what I saw in those still photographs and on video screens, large and small, was unlike Weerasethakul's movie work—they were fragments and meant to be seen as such—I couldn't fail to recognize his deep commitment to visualizing the uncanny. I was especially taken with a video of Weerasethakul's then partner, Teem, a beautiful young man, sleeping, and with "Fireworks," a video made in the dead of night at a spectral temple in Thailand, in which shots of stone skeletons lit by flares, ghostlike human forms, and mythological animals are followed by images of Thai politicians and activists. Time passing, time passed, the distance and the unknowability of the love object, the myth and the reality of politics—it was all there in "The Serenity of Madness," as it is in Weerasethakul's landmark feature films.

I had arranged to meet Weerasethakul outside the exhibition, and when he saw me he clapped his hands, saying excitedly, “You came!” We sat in a lounge area near the gallery, and he opened his shoulder bag and pulled out a package of freeze-dried shrimp paste. “For you,” he said. In Thailand, it’s considered polite to bring a gift to someone’s home. America was my home, and he was a guest here.

Weerasethakul, whose ninth feature, “Memoria,” starring Tilda Swinton, opened in New York on December 26th, is about as tall as the tallest boy in grade school—around five feet six—and thin but sturdy, with large, beautiful hands. His dark eyes, which don’t register delight in the way that his slow smile does, rarely stray from his interlocutor. Like a number of sensitive people whose first language isn’t English, he has a way of listening that makes you struggle to hear yourself. Although Weerasethakul was happy to be back in Chicago—he earned an M.F.A. in film from the School of the Art Institute in 1998—he was disappointed, he said, with the

acoustics of the space where the show had been installed. “I know the potential of this work,” he told me in a soft voice tinged with pique. “This place had a lot of bleeding. You have the sound of the air-conditioner and the heater. The sound is so beautiful in its proper space. We show it in Thailand, and it’s supernice. It’s like walking through a dream. Here it’s O.K.”

Of course Weerasethakul, who takes great care with sound and framing in his movies, would pick up on any fissures in his work which he didn’t put there himself. At fifty-one, he is contemporary cinema’s preëminent poet of place and of dislocation. Like that other poet-filmmaker before him Jean Cocteau, Weerasethakul, who goes by the nickname Joe, produces a cinema in which dreams and politics converge. But, where Cocteau’s work is driven by Western ideas about structure, sound, and acting, Weerasethakul’s draws on Buddhist tradition and Thai folklore to create stories that—like life—often change direction, stop abruptly, or become something else altogether.

For Weerasethakul, movies are the perfect medium through which to convey life's continuums and interruptions. His mid-career masterpiece, "Tropical Malady" (2004), for instance, opens with soldiers in a field of tall grass, posing with a corpse. Posing and laughing: even in the presence of death, Weerasethakul seems to be saying, we pretend for the camera, for our friends, the better to feel included—but in what? The brutality of living? The action shifts to Keng (Banlop Lomnoi), a soldier in a rural community in northeastern Thailand. Keng meets Tong (Sakda Kaewbuadee), a sweet, younger man, a civilian, and the two begin a relationship against a backdrop of big Thai sky and dark, breathing jungle. Weerasethakul develops a new choreography for the dance of love, the malady of love. There are no sweeping violins or roiling surf. The depth of the men's intimacy is shown in the way their knees play a game as they sit in a movie theatre, in the way they caress and lick each other's hands.



*"I'm so glad it snowed. I haven't
socialized this much in
months!"*



Cartoon by Emily Flake

About an hour into this splendor, the screen goes dark. For a beat. Then another beat. Then another. When the screen is illuminated again, we're in an entirely different story. Maybe we're in the same jungle, maybe not. Now we see another soldier (Huai Dessom). He's tracking a tiger; the villagers have complained about missing livestock. On the hunt, the soldier grows weary; perhaps Weerasethakul needs him to be tired in order to make him more susceptible to what he sees: a naked man in a clearing who behaves like a tiger, rubbing his body against a tree. Is he a man or a tiger who has taken on human form? What

makes a body? Flesh and blood? History? The spirit world, which collapses time and place? Eventually, the soldier is attacked by the man who may be a tiger. Later, the creature wanders the lush landscape, sobbing—for lost love or lost companionship, or for his lost Eden, which is now soiled with blood. To live in Weerasethakul's world, you have to surrender to the dream, whatever it may be and wherever it may take you.

Since the première of his extraordinary first feature, the black-and-white documentary “Mysterious Object at Noon,” in 2000, Weerasethakul has produced a string of culturally significant movies marked by a multitude of meanings, nuanced camerawork, and long stretches in which the protagonists say little or nothing at all. “Mysterious Object at Noon”—which is, in essence, a game of exquisite corpse, played and sometimes acted out in rural and urban locales across Thailand—is Weerasethakul's noisiest film; to watch it alongside his later works, such as “Tropical Malady” or

film; to watch it alongside his later works, such as “Tropical Malady” or “Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives” (2010), which won Cannes’s Jury Prize and Palme d’Or, respectively, is like trying to compare Broadway’s “Hamilton” to Vespers performed in a remote village: there is no useful comparison. But the essential elements of “Mysterious Object at Noon”—long shots depicting space and time, an acute ear for the intricacies of Thai speech, and an interest in community and how it is maintained or sometimes vanishes altogether—reappear in various forms throughout Weerasethakul’s body of work. He is a proponent of “slow cinema,” which is to say, movies that inspire reflection because they are unhurried but fluid, clear but framed by mystery. Still, despite their surface-level solemnity, his films are very often about the cinema as a place of play.

When “Mysterious Object at Noon” hit the festival circuit, many seasoned programmers didn’t know that there was even such a thing as a Thai art movie, let alone one as idiosyncratic and artful as Weerasethakul’s. This may

be due partly to the fact that most Thai films before then had been shot on 16-mm. color-reversal stock, with no original negative to print from. (If you can't make a print, you can't get your movie to the West, which remains the superpower when it comes to distribution.) With "Mysterious Object," Weerasethakul opened our eyes to a new wave in film and rebooted the idea of world cinema. In his movies, he doesn't treat Thailand as an exotic, untroubled**, ** monarch-ruled outpost—the better to sell it, and, by extension, himself, to a Western audience. Instead, he captures a Thailand that is as complicated and familiar as home, because it *is* home—Weerasethakul's. "The work speaks to us because it reveals the layered complexity of our everyday lives," the filmmaker Daniel Eisenberg, one of Weerasethakul's former instructors, said in a 2017 talk. It's the remarkable nature of the characters living those everyday lives—"spirits that enter and leave the room as naturally as family members, animals that speak, and shamans who ultimately inhabit human and animal form," in Eisenberg's words—that convinces us that life is more than what we allow ourselves to

see.

Dennis Lim, the director of programming for Film at Lincoln Center, and an early supporter of Weerasethakul's work, said that although the films are "steeped in local culture, local folklore, local politics," what captivates him is "the openness, their open-endedness." "There's not necessarily one way to interpret them," he said. In "Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives," for instance, the titular hero is a widower (beautifully played by Thanapat Saisaymar) who has kidney failure and is preparing for death in the wooded mountain valley where he lives. The oppressive natural world is all around, with its insect sounds and its thick nights. Boonmee is not alone. There to help him get his affairs in order are his sister-in-law, his nephew, and his primary caregiver, who is from Laos. The group is joined, at dinner, by Boonmee's beloved late wife, Huay (Natthakarn Aphaiwonk), who simply appears, as does their long-lost son, Boonsong (Geerasak Kulhong), who materializes as a man-size monkey with glowing red eyes. The film can

be seen as a kind of ghost story, in which the dead return to share a meal with their living relatives and a beast with a heartbreaking light in its eyes lurks in the tall grass at night. At the same time, the dead are eating and the beast is lurking in a real place, with a sociopolitical background that is as important to Weerasethakul as the fantastical products of his imagination.

“Uncle Boonmee,” like all of Weerasethakul’s films before “Memoria,” was shot in rural Isaan, in northeastern Thailand, the director’s childhood home. Although he was born in Bangkok, in 1970, he grew up in the provincial northern city of Khon Kaen, where his parents, Aroon and Suwat, both ethnically Chinese, worked as doctors. The area, as the scholar Lawrence Chua observes, is “a historically obstreperous place . . . the site of several anti-state rebellions,” which is still rebellious “due largely to its historical isolation, poverty, and lack of infrastructure.”

“I am from this region that is very looked down on from the center,” Weerasethakul told me. “So there is this feeling of—how do you call it?—that you’re like a second-class citizen or something.” As the child of doctors, though, he enjoyed relative privilege, including annual family vacations to other parts of the world. The economic disparity between his family and their neighbors was clear. The youngest of three children, Weerasethakul says that his parents raised him and his siblings “very free and very openly—partly because they’re so busy in that hospital with not many doctors. I remember, like, three o’clock in the morning, there’s someone knocking at the door to call my mom to go.”

Weerasethakul was a reader of science fiction and fantasy (Ray Bradbury’s “Fahrenheit 451” was a special favorite), and of magazines about “the lifestyles of Buddhist monks.” He also loved cinema, and saw—in addition to films from Hong Kong and India, and pro-monarchy propagandistic

Thai extravaganzas—the big American movies that made it to the East, Spielberg and disaster movies such as “The Towering Inferno,” “The Poseidon Adventure,” and “Earthquake.”

Weerasethakul wasn't initially interested in making films himself. Drawn to the work of the deconstructivist architects Zaha Hadid and Peter Eisenman, he studied architecture at Khon Kaen University. But even before he earned a B.A., in 1994, his attention had turned to film. What he loved about architecture—a sensitivity to light and space—was also what he loved about cinema. And he came to realize, he told me, that he would be “miserable” as a practicing architect. “I think to be an architect you need a certain discipline. And, to be quite realistic, I’m too dreamy,” he said. There weren’t many film schools in Thailand, so Weerasethakul applied abroad and was accepted, on the basis of his architectural portfolio, at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Before joining the School’s graduate film department, though, he had to spend a year in the undergraduate program learning the rudiments of filmmaking.

Classes at the Art Institute turned him on to such great avant-gardists as Maya Deren, whom he admired “because she is dreaming,” Kenneth Anger, Michael Snow, and, especially, Bruce Baillie, whose 1966 masterpiece, “All My Life,” is one tracking shot, less than three minutes long, of fenced-in flowers, set to the sound of a young Ella Fitzgerald singing the title song—elemental cinema the length of a koan. Equally important to Weerasethakul was the “explosion” of Iranian cinema that was taking place at the time. “But another film that really stuck with me,” he said, was Coppola’s “The Conversation.” “The sound design. Just the whole mood of it. The idea of claustrophobia. The confusion of Gene Hackman. I was, like, Whoa! Imagine me, a kid from Thailand.”

The years he spent in Chicago were pivotal. “It was a shock of many things—of freedom,” Weerasethakul said in a lecture that he delivered at the Art Institute in 2017. “There were no grades, and there’s no assigned topic for your film. No length restrictions. You can make a one-minute film. You can make ten minutes. So this freedom, this lightness, is really heavy, because you can get lost. This place forced me actually to find a way to find myself.” But staying in America after graduation would, almost inevitably, have meant capitalizing on his difference—which is to say, building a career based on his so-called exoticism. Instead, Weerasethakul returned to Thailand in 1999. In a recent e-mail exchange, he told me that he liked living in the United States because of “the access to all the arts.” “There was a boom of the American ‘indies,’ films of Kevin Smith and the likes,” he wrote. “I love that idea of having a small crew and captur[ing] ‘reality’ like in Cassavetes films. There hadn’t been such a movement in Thailand. I also liked to experiment with structure like the classic avant-garde.” Still, he concluded, “Thailand was the place I could try out these approaches.”

In Bangkok, Weerasethakul founded Kick the Machine Films. Part art studio, part production company, Kick the Machine was his way of keeping his work independent of the Thai film industry. Weerasethakul was making shorts, but he wanted to try his hand at a longer film. “The big break came when I got funding from the Hubert Bals Fund, in the Netherlands,” he told me. The financing helped him make “Mysterious Object at Noon.” The Hubert Bals Fund also premièred the movie at the International Film Festival Rotterdam. Because “Mysterious Object” was not your typical Thai genre film—not a ghost story or an action flick or a caper movie—and was shot in black-and-white, it didn’t stand a chance of being shown in cinemas in Thailand. After the screening in Rotterdam, though, it was picked up by other festival programmers. Reviewing the film in the *Times* after its New York première, in 2001, Elvis Mitchell wrote:

Early on in this hybrid documentary, made in Thailand, a young woman who is not an actress relates a horrible incident. Her father, short of money to get home from a trip, sold her to her uncle. As she gets through the story, questioning her own worth, the off-camera director asks her a peculiar question: “Now, do you have any other stories to tell us? It can be real or fiction.”

She wipes tears from her cheeks and mutters, “What else can I tell you, real or fake?” Is the filmmaker trying to distract her from her horrible tale, or does he have something wholly different in mind?

Whatever his agenda, Mr. Weerasethakul’s odd request leads him across Thailand, where a cross section of people pick up the new story the girl invents and add their own details. The movie is like a combination of the gossip game and the old fable “Stone Soup,” in which suspicious villagers toss contributions into the pot of a wanderer to make a stew unlike any other; the wanderer’s intent is to bring them all together. And that’s the best way to describe what “Mysterious Object” will do for audiences. It’s a film unlike

what “Mysterious Object” will do for audiences. It’s a film unlike any other, complete with a title that sounds like a remark that would result from a U.F.O. sighting.

Reviewers of Weerasethakul’s work in the early years often commented on the “strangeness” or “U.F.O.” quality of his movies, and I wondered, then, if this was a kind of code for the “strangeness” of Weerasethakul’s ethnicity. Other great Asian directors, such as Hong Kong’s Wong Kar Wai and the Taiwan-raised Hou Hsiao-hsien, have made work that’s deeply rooted in their own cultures, but they also borrow enough from Western cinema, with its propensity for action and character development, to be recognizable to Western audiences. Weerasethakul does not. With his second feature, “Blissfully Yours” (2002), he planted his feet even more squarely in Thailand—and in unconventional ways of thinking about form.



“Of course we haven’t got dragons, but only because we’re hypervigilant.”



Cartoon by Victoria Roberts

“Blissfully Yours” is set at a clinic in northeastern Thailand. Min (Min Oo), a Burmese immigrant, is suffering from psoriasis. His girlfriend, Roong (Kanokporn Tongaram), is Thai and thus belongs, as does her friend and co-worker Orn (Jenjira Pongpas Widner). The women talk to a doctor about Min’s condition while he sits silently, his skin cracking with the stress of difference, with the fear that he could be deported at any moment. The framing is unusual. In one scene, a father and daughter sit across from a doctor, and it’s as though we were

crawling on the floor, between them, wading through their complaints about each other. (This was the first project on which Weerasethakul

about each other. (This was the first project on which Weerasethakul collaborated with the brilliant cinematographer Sayombhu Mukdeeprom, who has worked on many of his subsequent features.) Forty-five minutes into the film, the credits roll to the rhythm of a bouncy samba. Flintstones figurines are on a dashboard. Min and Roong are driving into the country. There, amid the thick, verdant greenery that shows up in all Weerasethakul's Thailand-based movies, the lively Roong attempts to kiss Min, but he is uncomfortable with touch: psoriasis and difference can make you feel that way. Meanwhile, in another part of the jungle, Orn and her partner make what I call factual love: no bells and whistles, just unceremonious screwing. Once done, Orn takes a walk and sees Roong going down on Min. We can hear the natural world all around them, and what is occurring is natural, too: desire fulfilled in this garden of delights.

The originality of “Blissfully Yours” was recognized with the Un Certain Regard prize, at Cannes, in 2002. With awards come producers and film companies eager to work with winners. Finding financing became less difficult for “Thailand’s leading (Thailand’s only?) experimental filmmaker,” as the critic J. Hoberman referred to him in the *Village Voice*. Not that Weerasethakul’s budgets were huge. His movies shot in Thailand generally cost less than half a million dollars.

When “Tropical Malady,” with its unusual two-part structure, was shown at Cannes in 2004, some audience members booed, and the film got a thumbs-down from *Variety* (“As exceedingly strange as its predecessors . . . but even more incomprehensible, ‘Tropical Malady’ . . . will sorely try the patience of most arthouse viewers”). Despite the criticism, Weerasethakul was now a figure on the international cultural stage. In 2006, he became associated with Vienna’s New Crowned Hope Festival,

spearheaded by the avant-garde theatre director Peter Sellars. The festival's film programmers, Simon Field and Keith Griffiths, curated the screenings, and also executive-produced Weerasethakul's "Syndromes and a Century," which premiered at the Venice Film Festival that year.

What Weerasethakul hoped to capture in "Syndromes and a Century," a movie inspired by his parents, was the thunderclap of loss. In preproduction notes for the film, he wrote about a visit to his parents' former clinic and the impossibility of returning to the past:

As a filmmaker, I have been fascinated by the spaces of a small town and its landscape. But I had never really looked at the place where my family lived. Now, with my hometown changing rapidly and becoming more like Bangkok, my memories of the lost spaces seem even more distant. With the waves of globalization . . . my desire to make a real personal recollection has become more intense.

“Syndromes and a Century” has a scene in which a doctor, Dr. Toey (Nantarat Sawaddikul), sits with his female beloved, Dr. Nohng (Jaruchai Iamaram). They are outside, and nature is as present as the couple and this moment of love. Toey wants to know if Nohng has ever been in love before. She doesn’t quite understand the question, so Toey describes how he feels, how love has set his heart aflame. What’s remarkable about the scene is the manner in which the dialogue is spoken: slowly and softly, with pauses and no predictable reactions. Were this a Western film, Toey would be exclamatory, insistent, while Nohng might cry or look away, blushing, as music swells in the background. Instead, the only music we hear is the whispering of the trees. In Thailand, raising your voice is not only considered rude; it’s a sign that you’ve lost control. It was Weerasethakul who taught me to hear how the cinema of another culture might sound.

The intensity of loss is a hallmark of Weerasethakul’s next three features, too: “Uncle Boonmee,” “Mekong Hotel” (2012)—a spare, hour-long film

made, in some sense, to commemorate Weerasethakul's father, who died in 2003, and whose ashes were scattered in the Mekong River—and “Cemetery of Splendour” (2015), which is a kind of coda to “Syndromes of a Century.” Instead of looking at the world through the objective eyes of doctors and scientists, it focusses on the sick. Weerasethakul builds illness or death into his narratives partly to show the limitations of the body, as compared with the mind or the spirit. The story, set in Khon Kaen, follows Jen (Jenjira Pongpas Widner), a volunteer at a clinic where a group of soldiers have come down with a strange sleeping sickness. Jen bathes a handsome soldier (Banlop Lomnoi), who eventually awakens and sits up to have lunch with her and the other soldiers who have woken, some of whom fall asleep again during the meal. (“Cemetery of Splendour” reminds me very much of our Southern Gothic writers—Carson McCullers, Katherine Anne Porter, Flannery O'Connor—in whose stories symbolism is powerful,

but worn lightly.) Outside the clinic, a bulldozer is tearing up the earth; it looks like a monster devouring or releasing earthbound souls. Meanwhile, life goes on: a mother hen and her chicks walk into and out of the clinic; a doctor teaches his staff to meditate. There are no beginnings, no endings, in this region, just the spectacular and calm quotidian.

When Weerasethakul and Simon Field were casting “Cemetery of Splendour,” they thought of Tilda Swinton—in 2012, she and Weerasethakul had co-curated Archipelago Cinema, a film festival off the coast of Thailand—but they feared that her fame would make the movie feel imbalanced. If she and Weerasethakul were going to work together in that way, it would have to be somewhere other than Thailand.

Weerasethakul had been hitting a wall in Thailand for some time by then. In 2007, in a brilliant essay titled “The Folly and Future of Thai Cinema Under Military Dictatorship,” the director described how he had taken part

in a seminar with members of the Ministry of Culture and other groups to discuss the content of Thailand's new Film and Video Act, which would replace one that had been passed in 1930. Weerasethakul, who had just been told by the censorship board that he needed to cut four scenes from "Syndromes and a Century," was, he wrote, "enthusiastic to read the draft of the new law, which was supposed to represent our new hope for freedom of artistic expression." But that hope was soon dashed. Reading the new Film Act, Weerasethakul said, he came across "a number of issues" that disturbed him, including the stipulation that "filmmakers must not make films that undermine social order or moral decency, or that might have an impact on the security and pride of the nation." Weerasethakul wrote:

My view is that the new Film Act is not a step forward. The underlying mentality of the law remains to exert control over our thoughts, the only difference being that this power to decide what is acceptable and what is not will be transferred from the police to a new agency to be set up under the Ministry of Culture. . . . This

government will never give freedom to the people. We are making a pact with the devil. If you're reading this, prove me wrong and I'll kiss your feet.

He wasn't proved wrong. Anti-royalist protests picked up steam in 2013, only to be effectively quashed the following year, when General Prayut Chan-o-cha, the commander of the Royal Thai Armed Forces, staged a coup and established a junta. Disturbed by his government's shaky situation, Weerasethakul felt that he needed to get away. When we met in Chicago, he told me that he was eager for a new challenge. "Partly because I'm getting older, coupled with the fact that Thailand has become a dictatorship," he explained. "There's many things I want to do in Thailand, but, at the same time, they won't let me. Maybe it's time to go somewhere." By then, he had travelled in South America, where, as he said in a 2015 interview that appeared on IndieWire, "the history, the brutality, the chaos" felt familiar to him. Still, he added, "if I move there, maybe it'll feel less

dictatorship,” he explained. “There’s many things I want to do in Thailand, but, at the same time, they won’t let me. Maybe it’s time to go somewhere.” By then, he had travelled in South America, where, as he said in a 2015 interview that appeared on IndieWire, “the history, the brutality, the chaos” felt familiar to him. Still, he added, “if I move there, maybe it’ll feel less personal because it’s not my home. I might feel less judgmental.”

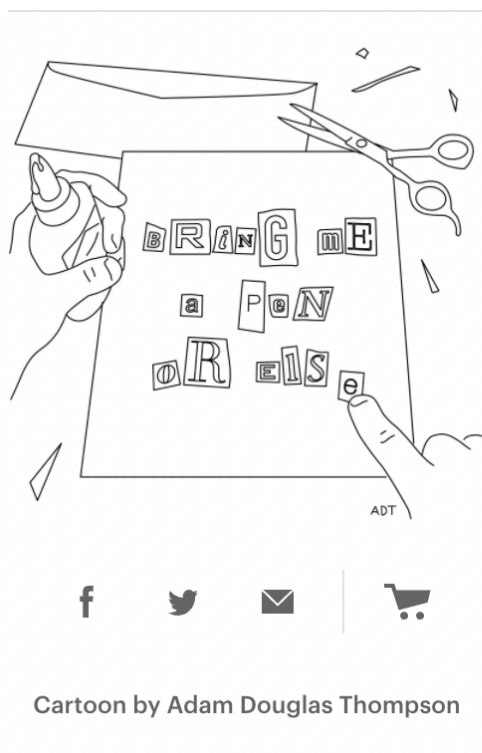
In early 2017, Weerasethakul was invited to the Cartagena International Film Festival by the producer Diana Bustamante, who wanted to show his films. After attending the screenings, Weerasethakul said, he felt “old,” with a long career behind him, and knew that he had to do something different. He stayed on in Colombia and became a resident at Más Arte Más Acción, a nonprofit cultural institution in Bogotá. During the two months that he spent there, a story began to take shape in his mind and he became convinced that Colombia was the place to shoot it. At the time, Weerasethakul was suffering from exploding head syndrome, a sleep disorder that causes the sufferer to hear explosive noises when transitioning into or out of deep sleep. For an artist who tries to build as much sleep—and thus dream—time into his schedule as possible, this was a challenge. Writing about the syndrome in an essay called “Colombian Short Stories,” Weerasethakul said:

Weerasethakul said:

This morning I heard the sound of a gunshot, bang, bang, bang, bang! I have heard this sound again and again, being in bed in many countries. The noise resounded and resonated in my skull. I started to become very interested in the sounds as they intensified during my trip to Colombia. Most times I listened to them just before dawn. Sometimes I listened to them in my dreams. I was walking through a restaurant and I could hear bang, bang!, for example. I knew it was a dream because I thought to myself: when I wake up, I'll write it down.

I told this to a psychiatrist in Cali while we talked about the hallucination. She told me that maybe the sound came from the veins behind my ears, that maybe it was an internal pressure before dawn. I thought if there was a symptom called "ghost ears" or maybe I was possessed by the sounds of the past.

In Chicago, Weerasethakul told me that storytelling for him begins with “a lot of notes—I jot down my dreams, memories. So, all these little things together. And then this one main idea will be brighter. And I just grab that.” Exploding head syndrome became the bright idea that, in part, inspired “Memoria.” In the film, Swinton plays a widowed botanist named Jessica, who has “ghost ears.” Scottish but living in South America, Jessica embodies dislocation. Watching the look of contained anguish and sometimes wonder on her face throughout the film is like seeing a stroke patient work through her paralysis: Will she make it? Will we? There is no resolution in “Memoria,” but there is, eventually, release.



I went to Bogotá at the tail end of August, 2019. The air was spectacularly thin. (Bogotá is nearly nine thousand feet above sea level.) One couldn't speak without effort. But there were words everywhere. Graffiti covered so many of the buildings' surfaces, the sidewalks, even some trees: Spanish words and phrases protesting the local government, supporting some branch of human rights, or advertising a rave. The words were as much a part of the city as its wide, often traffic-choked roadways, and the smell of

burning hair as beauticians ran hot combs over the heads of female customers at night in front of salons near the Zona Rosa section of town, with its *farmacias*, fast-food joints, office workers, and tourists. Above it all

was the high mountain, Monserrate, where a Catholic sanctuary stands as a testament to faith and, inadvertently, to the power of violence. In 1537, the Spanish conquistador Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada led a bloody expedition that vanquished the region and made Catholicism the country's dominant religion.

I wondered what Weerasethakul, who has an inherent kindness of spirit, would make of Colombia's violent religious history. But he instructed me not to confuse his gentle demeanor with what lies behind it. "I can't help but think that the gentleness and the smile is an evolution to survive under the oppressive regimes," he told me. "Thailand always promotes itself as a sole country in the region that has never been colonized. But to me the people [have] been operating with fear, in full awareness of the power from above, central government, and even from the invisible forces like ghosts and karma. Living here is a complex compromise. Sometimes you don't even notice that you do [a] particular action out of fear. You sometimes feel

free[d] by the spell, the propaganda, and you are actually happy. But when you ask what you cannot do in this country, the list can be long. Sometimes I feel like I am an obedient dog.”

Growing up in Thailand, Weerasethakul was culturally Buddhist. But cinema was what brought him to embrace the religion in a spiritual way. After he made “Tropical Malady,” he said, Buddhism became “a meditative way of observing my mind, my body, and time, time and memory.” He added, “I feel that meditation and cinema have a big connection. When you observe time, you observe your body; you can feel these metaphysical layers.”

Weerasethakul’s goal in his work is to conjure up a world that closely resembles the scramble of time. (His latest art piece, “Periphery of the

Night,” which was shown at the Institut d’Art Contemporain in Lyon, includes images of a boy sitting on a deck at dusk with colored lights dancing, seemingly, in his torso.) Part of Swinton’s job in “Memoria,” as she saw it, was to allow her character, a grief-stricken widow, to embody the question of time. “Is she really here? Is she really present? Is she really alive? Is she actually a ghost?” Swinton asked. “She’s sort of straddling two worlds. At least two. If not three.”

Weerasethakul knows how to find the visually uncanny in the mundane. On the first afternoon that I visited the “Memoria” set, a couple of production assistants took me from my hotel in downtown Bogotá to the huge Jesuit university Pontificia Universidad Javeriana. Because it was a Sunday, the winding roadway that led through the campus was crowded not with students but with the paraphernalia of moviemaking: a costume van, a food truck, assistants on call for last-minute errands.

When we got there, I entered what felt, at first, like an ordinary office building—white and nondescript—but, stepping out of the elevator and onto the floor where Weerasethakul was shooting, I was astonished by beautiful soft light. Floor-to-ceiling windows lined a long terrace; Bogotá's changeable weather—first clouds, then sunlight, then a brilliantly blue sky, then a pearly-gray one—was reflected in the dark polished floor, as were the squares of light issuing from the windows that overlooked a row of small music rooms in which some of the action was being filmed.

I sat on a big round settee and looked on as the cinematographer, Sayombhu Mukdeeprom, talked to an assistant, who sat behind a camera. Wide but compact, full-faced and behatted, the fifty-two-year-old Mukdeeprom has the faraway look that many great cinematographers have when their eye is not behind a lens. Near a staircase, several crew members crowded around a playback monitor. And then Weerasethakul emerged from one of the music rooms with Swinton, who was dressed in dark colors

and sensible shoes. Her usually light hair was darker now and came down past her ears. They were speaking in quiet tones, and Swinton, who is half a foot taller than her director, walked by his side, tilting her head a little so that she could hear what he was saying. Diana Bustamante, who is a producer on the film, the cinematographer's assistant, and I gathered around him, and what he said to us was that the movie kept shifting based on Swinton's performance. "She keeps changing the frame with just ah ah."

"Ah," I had learned, was not so much a word as a sound connoting a moment of thought or wonderment in Weerasethakul's vocabulary. Other sounds the director makes include "Oooo" (a soft murmuring noise that may be about pleasure) and a gentle humming in his throat that has no linguistic equivalent. He nodded when I told him how helpful it would be for me to read the script. "Ah ah," he said, promising nothing; it was also a

way of not saying no. (“ ‘Fuck it,’ like, ‘Fuck you, don’t mess with me’: I wish I could have the courage to say that,” Weerasethakul murmurs in Connor Jessup’s 2018 documentary, “A.W. A Portrait of Apichatpong Weerasethakul.” He goes on, “Growing up in Thailand is programmed that way—like, this submission. And that’s a terrible feeling. When you want to say, ‘No, I don’t want to do that, I don’t want to do this.’ But then I smile, you know. It’s a crazy reaction.”)

There was a break for lunch. I sat in the large university cafeteria with Swinton; her partner, the painter Sandro Kopp; and Weerasethakul, who answered his assistant’s questions while making a halfhearted attempt to eat. Sometimes he would consult the neat pile of papers he kept near him, but there was too much to prepare for the next shot, so he headed back to the set. After he left, Swinton talked about her character: Jessica had run an

orchid farm with her late husband. Now she was hearing a banging sound in her mind and couldn't sleep. "What we're going to shoot tomorrow, which is what happens before what we're shooting now, is she comes to the university," Swinton said. "Her brother-in-law is an academic, and he puts her in touch with this sound engineer who works at the university. And she comes to him and tries to get him to replicate the sound. And what we're shooting now is a scene when I come back to the university to look for him, and nobody knows who he is. So the whole state that she's in—as the sort of spirit of the film—is a dream state."

Less than an hour later, Mukdeeprom was preparing the shot, and Swinton was going through her marks with the cameraman and Weerasethakul. Silence. Swinton walked, tentatively, first to one door and then to another. Offstage, as it were, there was the *plunk plunk plunk* of a piano key, the sound of a piano tuner trying to find the right note. Standing outside a door, Swinton peered in, and suddenly her face flushed as she asked the man in the studio if he was the sound engineer. Cut. Weerasethakul went over and conferred with Swinton. She described what she would be thinking in the next shot. He said, “I don’t mind what’s thought, just as long as I don’t see it.”

While I was on the set, Swinton advised me not to watch her performance directly but to look at it on a monitor as it was recorded. “It’s the frame,” she said, meaning that what mattered was the image that Weerasethakul and his cinematographer were creating on the screen. (“I must find the shape,” she said another afternoon, her torso shifting slightly as she looked for the best way for her body to sit within the frame.) As Jessica, Swinton moved slowly, deliberately, and when I began watching her on the monitor the difference was acute. When I saw Swinton walk down a corridor in the university building, I saw her in real space, which is to say in a university hallway. But watching her through the monitor I saw Jessica, a character in a dream space, the kind of corridor that you might find yourself wandering down in a dream: long and narrow, at once familiar and unfamiliar.

On my last day in Bogotá, I visited the set again. This time, we were in an art gallery, where Jessica, perennially in search of herself, or a self, was looking at black-and-white photographs. Again, what the space had once been—an ordinary gallery—was transformed by Weerasethakul's lighting, his pacing of the scene, and Swinton's look of wonder and anguish into his idea of what it should be. I had brought some fruit from the breakfast room at my hotel, as a way of reciprocating his gift of shrimp paste. But now neither of us was at home; we were both guests in someone else's homeland. I hadn't realized that the fruit was native to Thailand. When I handed it to him, he just stood there for a long time, looking at it in its clear plastic container, saying, "Oooo."

That night, I went to dinner with Giovanni Marchini Camia, a bright young man whom Weerasethakul had invited to keep a journal of the making of “Memoria.” He had worked with Weerasethakul in a similar capacity on “Cemetery of Splendour,” and he talked about how much happier Weerasethakul was to be working in Colombia. “Here he seems much more serene, much more motivated,” Camia said. As he talked, I had a sensation I’ve had often in my life. I was getting “the look”—a deadpan what-is-he-doing-here look—from a table of well-dressed Colombians, who did not try to conceal their disdain for my darker skin color. In order to signal to me and the world how cultivated and superior they were, they switched from speaking colloquial Spanish to French. Witnessing this, I understood that there was very little distance from Barbados, where my family is from, to Thailand or to Bogotá. In a flash, I felt what Weerasethakul had expressed in “Blissfully Yours,” when he gave Min a skin that he could not live in, or in “Cemetery of Splendour,” when he depicted the soldiers who had no control over their own bodies or how they were

perceived, or in “Tropical Malady,” when he imagined the hunting and haunted man: my powerlessness before the unmooring gaze of others.

I did not see Weerasethakul in person again for two years. During that time, you know what happened, and is happening, and the strangeness of it. Sometimes I saw it all through an imagined Weerasethakul frame: a curtain billowing in a still, lonely apartment. Flower pots on the windowsill. A sudden snowfall in March. Bands of people marching almost silently up Broadway. Meanwhile, Weerasethakul was safe and well, back at his home in Chiang Mai. In April, 2020, he responded to a question that Strand Releasing, an independent film company, put to a number of artists: “How are you getting on?”:



"Fetch!"



Cartoon by Brendan Loper

I have a marian plum tree at my home. Previously I didn't pay much attention to it because I was mostly away. A few weeks ago, when I started to spend time at home, I tried the fruit. It has the most satisfying flavor—sweet, sour, fresh—the taste of summer. I now have it every day at breakfast and dinner. I sent a lot of them to my sister, my ex-boyfriend. So far I still haven't been able to deplete the tree of its fruits. It keeps sprouting new ones. I viewed the phenomenon as a mystery verging on magic. . . . Normally, when plants at home produce unusual amounts of fruits and flowers, they tell us that they

are trying to spawn because they are dying. . . . I'm concerned that this plum tree is relaying the same communication, just when I

started to appreciate its value. This thought makes each fruit taste even more exquisite. I honor the conversation by keeping the seeds [to] sow. They will grow very well in the approaching rainy season.

After my plans to visit Weerasethakul in Mexico while he was finishing the film fell through (he had to stay put in Thailand), I kept in touch with Simon Field about “Memoria” ’s progress: The movie was nearly finished, but the release date was being delayed by a year. It would screen at Cannes in 2021, and had also been picked up by the New York Film Festival. Neon would distribute.

When Weerasethakul and I met again, in May of 2021, it was on Zoom. We laughed by way of greeting. It had been a long time. He told me that his chances of being vaccinated in time for Cannes, in July, were slight, given how few vaccines were available in Thailand, and he wasn’t comfortable

pushing his way to the front of the line. Had “Memoria” turned out to be a good experience? Yes, yes, with Swinton especially, it was such a new way of working. I asked if he was able to be productive at home. He said that he was doing small things—videos and the like—but that mostly what he loved was reading and being lazy. I asked if he could take me on a tour of his home. He picked up his laptop and showed me his quarters, which were spacious and contained, the walls painted a muted color. Outside the bedroom, I could see big, lush trees, and, below the balcony, his dogs—Boston terriers—were racing around in a kind of courtyard. “I’m crazy about my dogs,” he said.

In the end, Weerasethakul was able to attend the “Memoria” screening at Cannes, where the film was awarded the Jury Prize. In New York, in October, the afternoon before the première at the New York Film Festival,

director and star sat down for a conversation with Dennis Lim. Lim asked Weerasethakul and Swinton how the character of Jessica had come into being. Swinton replied:

Well, we never talked about character at all. I don't think of Jessica as a character. I think of her as a predicament. . . . From the very beginning of our correspondence about this film . . . we knew we wanted to work together in a sort of atmosphere, a sort of dreamscape, which is, you know, as usual with Joe. . . . And so, very soon, we went, O.K., let's place it somewhere where we are both strangers. That was very significant. . . . So it wasn't to do with building a character. It was to do with finding an environment in which she could be as dislocated and as connected—not disconnected, dislocated and connected.

After their talk, I met them at Tavern on the Green, which, with its large windows and its labyrinth of rooms and doors, was not unlike a Weerasethakul set. I was standing by the bar when they arrived, along with two friends from the shoot in Bogotá. Weerasethakul was dressed in a black jacket and a blue V-necked T-shirt. Swinton's hair, which had been brown and limp in "Memoria," was now fair, sleek, and beautifully coiffed. Swinton made a little game of approaching me—could I possibly be real after so long and so much?—and, as we embraced, she pulled Weerasethakul into the circle.

After we had ordered, Weerasethakul received an e-mail from Tom Quinn, the director of Neon. Weerasethakul had written to Quinn in June, proposing that "Memoria" not be released in theatres and on a streaming service simultaneously. How about doing it one city at a time, one screen at a time? he'd asked. Quinn had responded enthusiastically. "As you may or may not know I'm a crazy die-hard crusader for the divine power of

cinema,” he wrote. “So I very much embrace your position and will adopt this as our protocol moving forward.” Now, though, he wanted Weerasethakul and Swinton to be aware of negative responses to the plan on social media, where some were labelling it “elitist.” Weerasethakul sighed, and Swinton excused herself. By the time she returned, she had written a note to Quinn reasserting her support for the plan. She read her message aloud: “We must remember the entirely inclusive experiential magic of live cinema, and the collective thrill of the event. . . . Ours is a (r)evolutionary model that offers something new and empowered and reboots our faith in big cinema.”

Later that night, at Lincoln Center’s Alice Tully Hall, “Memoria” played to a packed house, and, when the lights went up, Weerasethakul and Swinton appeared as startled by the standing ovation as the audience was by the film,

with its melancholy acknowledgment of bereavement, change, and transfiguration.

In Thailand, after finishing “Memoria,” Weerasethakul had made a short film titled “Night Colonies.” As it begins, one sees a bed lit by fluorescent bulbs that give off a strong white light. Attracted to the glare, bugs and other organisms crawl or fly into the frame. The bed is as empty as the bed that the artist Félix González-Torres used to show loss and mourning during the AIDS era. The insects rise and fall on the bed, as if it were a stage on which they were acting out some drama. They hum and hiss and flutter. The only humans in the scene are heard in voice-over. One voice is that of a man at a political rally in Thailand (“I know that you policemen are also suffering”); the other belongs to a woman, who tells a story about a cat bonding with its owner. Sometimes the camera cuts to photographs on the walls. Weerasethakul told me that he and Teem had acquired the images while travelling, when they were still together. They were “a fond memory,

They were “a fond memory, nothing more,” he said. Toward the end of the film, Weerasethakul’s hand enters the frame to brush a dead bug off the bed. The death of that insect heightens the buzzing life that goes on all around it.

As I watched the film, I remembered something that Weerasethakul had said in a 2007 interview about “Tropical Malady”: “While shooting the night scenes for that film, I wasn’t thinking much about the narrative of the guy walking in the jungle. I was thinking more about my love experiences. It was a strange feeling because working like this in the nighttime is like a dream, or a nightmare. . . . It is about being lost in the character’s mind, as he cannot rely on his vision.” If love is a hallucination, how best to express it? In movies. Which, alone among the plastic arts, can shape-shift stories and characters and the imagined and real worlds of a filmmaker. ♦

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