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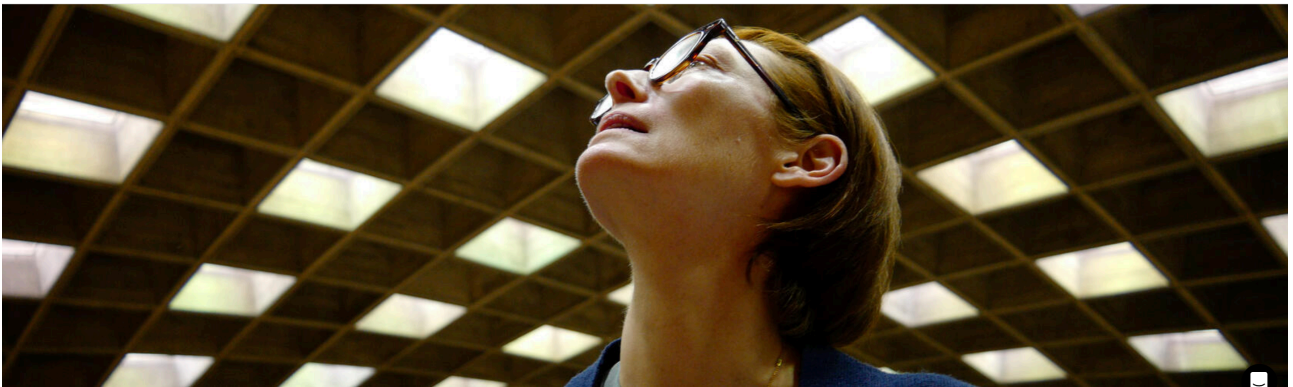
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Apichatpong Weerasethakul on Why Cinema Should Be Communal

As *Memoria* opens across the UK, the acclaimed Thai director talks to Rory O'Connor about casting Tilda Swinton and the power of the big screen

BY RORY O'CONNOR IN FILM, INTERVIEWS | 19 JAN 22



Rory O'Connor: The central conceit of your latest film *Memoria* – which premiered at the 2021 Cannes Film Festival, where it won the Jury Prize – was inspired by your personal experience with Exploding Head Syndrome [EHS], a sensory condition in which people hear loud noises in their sleep.

Apichatpong Weerasethakul: My symptoms began in 2016 but disappeared during the shoot. I miss having EHS: it was less traumatic, more curious and dreamlike because nobody else could experience it. I don't know why I decided to make a film about EHS, but the fact that it kept following me to different cities meant that I started to look at it like a companion and something that may be worth exploring.



Tilda Swinton and Apichatpong Weerasethakul during filming of *Memoria*

ROC: The lead character, Jessica Holland, is played by Tilda Swinton. It's the first time you've worked with someone so famous. Did this change your approach in any way?

AW: Tilda and I have known each other for a long time, so it was actually comforting to have her with me while we were filming in Colombia, which was a new country for me, with a different language and culture. It was almost like traveling with a friend. Of course, it was the first time that I had to work very consciously to get what I wanted – natural settings, where people don't stare or point at the actors – while maintaining a low budget. Even though we went to small villages, people still recognized her.

ROC: Sound is central to the film, and not only in terms of Jessica's EHS.

AW: Rendering audible the sounds in Jessica's head puts the audience in touch with her senses. We become her because we feel her. This, in turn, makes them aware of their own senses, enabling them to reflect on the artificiality of cinema and how their senses are being controlled by a director and a sound designer. It's about illusion.



Memoria, 2021, film still

ROC: Jessica describes what she hears as being like a rumble from the centre of the Earth. There is a sense of something subterranean in the film: the archaeological dig Jessica visits, the skulls. I wonder whether you see a political aspect to this in terms of buried history, or even trauma?

AW: While I was in Colombia, I felt a strong connection to my native Thailand. The more you find out about the country and the more you talk to people, the more you start to see that, behind the bright colours, lies something unresolved from the past.

ROC: Can you talk more about the similarities you see between Thailand and Colombia?

AW: I think both countries are trying to move ahead but are stuck in the past. In Thailand, there is a complicated political situation whereby people who were murdered or ‘disappeared’ by the military regime still haven’t been recognized, while the people that were responsible for their murders are now in positions of authority. Colombia has experienced similar chapters in its history. However, I told myself from the outset that I could not make a political film, only a personal one, so I pursued the things that interest me most, like people’s memories and medical environments.



Memoria, 2021, film still

ROC: In *Memoria*, this takes the form of the Bogotá hospital where Jessica is visiting her sick sister. You often return to medical settings in your work, and also to the jungle. What draws you there?

AW: The medical settings come from my childhood: both of my parents were doctors, so hospitals in Thailand were my playground. Time is different there, and it has a unique smell. It's a place where I feel at home.

I don't know when my interest in the jungle started but, for me, it's a place of liberation and mystery. In the culture of Buddhism, there is a deep connection with spirits and animals. Even though I don't believe in spirits, I think the idea of them has shaped me in some way. When you go to the jungle, there are so many lives. It makes you think about the abundance of things you don't know.

ROC: One scene takes place in a research centre where Jessica picks up a skull and, for a moment, puts her finger through a hole that was made to release evil spirits. Do you have a sense that objects carry a history as well?

AW: At the time, I was trying to work through my own issues about love, separation, death and illness. In the old days, people believed that there were evil spirits trapped inside your head that needed to be released. When you have EHS, it can feel like you need to crack your head open and let out whatever terrible things are inside. I wanted the audience to feel that same sense of urgency.



Memoria, 2021, film still

ROC: You shot *Memoria* in 2019, before the onset of the pandemic. Do you think people will engage differently with the film now than you originally intended?

AW: I didn't feel any connection to the pandemic until the screening in Cannes. The film is about disconnection, about not even being within your own body – Jessica is quite out of herself – and the film reflects on that idea of solitude. But then, surrounded by thousands of people watching the film together, two years of isolation were triggered inside me.

ROC: Your decision to release the film one city at a time in the US has been controversial. What prompted you to do that rather than release it nationally and/or for online streaming?

AW: It was a statement: I think film-watching should be a communal activity, not something done on a laptop. Also, it's about reaching a bigger audience. When you open a film in the normal way, it's quickly forgotten and only people living in major cities would have seen it.

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Memoria, 2021, film still

ROC: Were you surprised by the backlash?

AW: I thought audiences would love watching movies on the big screen as I do, but I forgot that people now want to have everything immediately, that instant gratification is part of contemporary life. Their reaction only emphasizes that point. I'm thinking of taking the same approach to releasing the film in Thailand because I want to work with local cinemas. Being in dialogue with the community is important to me.

Memoria is currently available to watch in select cinemas in the UK and the US.

Main image: Memoria, 2021, film still