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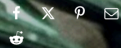
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- BY ANDREW REICHEL

The Movie is Over, the Movie Has Begun: Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Tropical Malady*

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It wasn't his debut or even his first major work, but Apichatpong Weerasethakul's opening credits to *Tropical Malady* deliver perhaps the moment that summarizes everything he's made: a seductive flirtation with the camera, complete with protagonist Keng (Bonlop Lomnoi) occasionally looking away when the supposed eye contact grows too intense. They're hardly the first example of this film dealing in the intersections of different types of gazes, including the distinction between the authentic and the cinematic: it opens with soldiers posing by a dead body and taking photos for their girlfriends (emphasis *theirs*), with a style of unobtrusive watchfulness as it's mentioned that the soldiers are tracking a tiger who is killing the local cattle. Then they leave, and music promptly appears to heighten the mood. The fourth-wall break, however, is the moment that signaled that anything is possible in the world of Weerasethakul, and the titular lovesickness is what makes it so.

It's never quite been settled whether the two parts of *Tropical Malady*, one of many occasions featuring Weerasethakul's commitment to bifurcated narratives, is the same story told in two different fashions or just one story with a drastic tonal shift. Broadly speaking, the first half of the film is about soldier Keng's romantic relationship with the local boy Tong (Sakda Kaewbuadee), while the increasingly surrealistic second half of the film finds a soldier (Lomnoi again) tracking down a tiger shaman's spirit (voiced and played in his human form, of course, by Kaewbuadee) in the wild jungle. It's been further complicated in the years since by an allusion to "Uncle Boonmee," and as anyone with any passing familiarity with Weerasethakul knows, he can recall his past lives. Perhaps the trait runs in the family, perhaps the films exist in the same universe: not really the point, but what is?

Bifurcation in Weerasethakul features isn't just a means to keep things lively, but a consideration of why his films are the way they are. One thing becomes another thing entirely, or perhaps just the other side of the same coin: naturalism and reality becomes surrealism and fantasy, civilization becomes a jungle, the tiger is a killer of bodies and then of spirits, and one gay romance becomes another. It's never quite as binary as that; merely just a matter of how the formula's ratios are carefully shifted and how the echoes wind up reverberating.

Still, it's notable that the seemingly idyllic gay romance between Keng and Tong is really all about refusal, and its carnality is primarily distinctive for being so uncanny. Thailand's complicated relationship with homosexuality was even more so back in 2004, particularly when it came to homosexual men who fell outside the stereotypical domain of the *kathoey*, also known as "ladyboys." Nobody is overtly homophobic to this country boy and soldier, and many in their orbit are accepting, but it's also kept very discreet and there are plenty of allusions to the trickier side of things: a shoe salesman who alludes to impressing girls, a woman who tries to flirt with Tong on a bus, and all those macho soldiers and their girlfriends. Still, this movie doesn't quite exist in the real world, and this movie renders gay male desire queer-as-in-strange. Keng says Tong can have his heart along with a tape of The Clash (Weerasethakul is, after all, a punk of sorts), tries to smell his fingers after Tong urinates, and touches his knee when they go to the movies, but Tong treats it all as playfully as a cat, trapping him and licking him as if he were prey. The chase is such a thrill that we get the pop-cinema joys of a motorcycle ride soundtracked to a particularly sensual love song, but that's the last moment of normalcy in this love story of sorts.

We hear a tale told to Keng and Tong of farmers who swap rocks for treasure, but get too greedy and find their treasures turn to frogs. There's also an attempt to go into the depths of a cave to visit a temple, but they choose to turn back before the film turns into something like Michelangelo Frammartino's *Il Buco*. Mike D'Angelo suggested back in 2004 that the division point in *Tropical Malady* was motivated by the idea that "no amount of artful, naturalistic observation can possibly convey the atavistic turmoil lurking within the human heart. Unexpected though the rupture may be, it arrives precisely at the moment when conventional representation, however inventive, precise and assured, starts to feel painfully inadequate." Said rupture is marked by the most overt homage to Weerasethakul's time in Chicago studying under experimental film legends such as Zack Stiglicz and Shellie Fleming, and especially his stated love for Bruce Baillie's magnum opus of reel change tactics and tricks, 1971's *Quick Billy*. Keng finds a photo of Tong with another man, and we get a flare out and subsequent black that resembles the end of a film reel. The movie is over, the movie has begun again. Now for the part where boundaries are truly crossed.

The roles of hunter and hunted, when applied to love, can bleed into each other, and especially when it's the second half's tale of man vs. beast. Despite all the darkness that suggests what would have happened if they'd gone deeper into the cave depths earlier on, there are still occasional flashes of white from the subtitles that are burned in for elements such as a talking monkey, who warns "Keng" that the tiger will either devour him so he enters the spirit world, or he must kill him to avoid this fate. When the spirit world is represented by something as breathtaking as a tree lit entirely by fireflies, and the tiger in its branches looking right into the eyes of our lonely soldier on the ground, why would anyone not give in to the potential of leaping into the void of passions? The only problem is that it means the film has to end, since some worlds are beyond ours. We're left with gazes into the camera that have finally been reciprocated, and a Buddhist cave painting of a human and tiger in spiritual communion: perhaps we don't really need cinema for this type of greater truth.