

Thai social context in apichatpong weerasethakul 's films

Pison Suwanpakdee *, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University Bangkok, Thailand.

Suggested Citation:

Suwanpakdee, P. (2016). Thai social context in apichatpong weerasethakul 's films. *Global Journal of Arts Education*, 6(2), 46-52.

Received December 07, 2015; revised February 14, 2016; accepted April 16, 2016.

Selection and peer review under responsibility of Prof. Dr. Ayse Cakir Ilhan, Ankara University, Turkey.

©2016 SciencePark Research, Organization & Counseling. All rights reserved.

Abstract

This article studies about the Thai social context in Apichatpong Weerasethakul 's films. Apichatpong Weerasethakul is a Thai filmmaker who won the highest prize in Cannes Film Festival 2010. He has generated acclaim on the film festival circuit ever since his 2002 debut "Blissfully Yours," which he followed up with "Tropical Malady" and "Syndromes and a Century." Apichatpong Weerasethakul is a Thai independent filmmaker who combine between film and art. Hhis works were shown at the museums and theaters all over the world.

The story telling in his films sitting in his home town Khon Kaen, a province in the northeastern part of Thailand. His film criticizes melodramas in TV, radio and Thai social context with non professional actor, narrative style and symbolics about dreams, nature, sexuality (including his own homosexuality). There are many years Apichartpong 's films has been well received in many countries that they were released. But in Thailand, some of his works were banned and unreleased such as Syndromes and a Century (2006). Although this film was the first Thai film accepted in competition of the 63rd Venice Film Festival, it is interesting to study his film with the Thai social context of what he conveyed in his works and why the filmmaker who succeed on the world stage, but for his country, he has not been widely recognized.

Keywords: film, Thai, social context

*ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: **Pison Suwanpakdee**, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University Bangkok, Thailand.
E-mail address: pison.su@ssru.ac.th

1. Introduction

The year 1896 is considered to be the origin of Thai's film since King Chulalongkorn (King Rama 5) was the first one who saw Thomas A. Edison's invention, a peep-hole device called Kinetoscope. It led to the history of screening for the first time in Siam (former name of Thailand) on June 10th, 1897] (Sukvong 2013). After this event, Thai's film has been grown up until a present day. Then, the narrative in Thai's film was developed through cultural and social contexts of Thailand. Until October 14th, 1973, there were important events of political change in Thailand. Thai people and students rose to reclaim democracy from military dictatorship. In the seriously event in Thailand, a new wave of Thai filmmaker rose to present the reflection of the social aspect in Thailand through the film with piquant. The powerful of narrative in Thai film started to criticize social context in film from this event until now. In the year 2002, Apichatpong Weerasethakul released his 2nd feature film, "Blissfully Yours" in Thailand. The love story of a migrant laborer with a Thai girl who work in a factory. This film narrates in realism and was shot in countryside and the forest in Thailand. It also included a non professional actor who was in a leading role in this film. The film "Blissfully Yours (2002)" was a new visual of contemporary film in Thailand and this film was brought to glbal stage. Apichatpong has become the new wave filmmaker and his film is a milestone of the independent Thai filmmaker which has been recognized by film festivals around the world.

Apichatpong Weerasethakul is a singular and distinctive artist and filmmaker. All of his films and artworks are set in his native Thailand. They are oftenly in non-linear with a strong sense of dislocation. His works deal with memory, subtly addressing personal political and social issues. According to his working independently of the Thai commercial film industry, he is active in promoting experimental and independent filmmaking through his company named Kick the Machine (Animate Project, homepage on the Internet).

2. Personal life in Cinematic Work of Apichatpong

The work of Apichatpong and his life are almost swallowed as the same piece. We could get to know the story of his life from his early short film named 0116643225059 (1994). It was the recorded conversations between him and his mother from overseas. This film setting is the room in apartment with superimposed by his mother pictures and the off scene sound of him and his mother on the phone. The conversation was in a nostalgic mood of his mother. In some conversations, he talked about how fun it is to make film in the University of Chicago. And in some conversations indicates that he concerned about his family (Weerasethakul, 2007). The story of his own, was represented in many of his works such as the film "Tropical Malady (2004)" and "Syndromes and a Century (2006)". Syndromes and a Century, the starting point is a tale of tangled human relationships. In this case, the faltering love life of a demure young female doctor in an upcountry hospital in Thailanf. Then, it takes off into alternative worlds, alternative realities, unrealities, surrealities. The same scenes are played again, in different settings, with different people (Rapold, 2015). He always gave interviews to tell about memories of his homeland in the past which was full of nature and to tell about the experience of watching movies in childhood at a stand-alone theater. His memories were represented in his jury prize film "Tropical Malady". It expressed his memories in a romantic scene of gays. Many scenes in this film are like dreams, memories and his ideal world. "Tropical Malady" in the final scene, was opposed to the first part of the film. For the final scene, the soldier looked through the vexing spirit. There was the off scene voice started : "I saw my own mother, I fear, sadly, it's very realistic. Like real life ... until I have" (Bradshaw, 2007).

The narrative is like the own diary of Apichatpong. Even the golden palm film of The Cannes Film Festival's "Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives (2010)", the character of Uncle Boonmee is suffering from a long time illness and Apichatpong who is in real life lost his father from cancer. The

equally clear issue in his work is to convey the critical society, political concepts and Thailand where every piece of his work were hidden. It is more concentrated on the work later. The wheels on the social and political Thailand truly wants a solution. Apichatpong was interviewed in A DAY magazine to despair in politics and society in Thailand by connected with the latest work at Cementery of Splendour (2015). "I never cried with my film but this one film, I see I was crying because it matches the emotions we feel about Thailand society at present is sad." (Mahancherdchuwong, 2015).



Figure1. Stand-alone theater scene in Tropical Malady (2004)

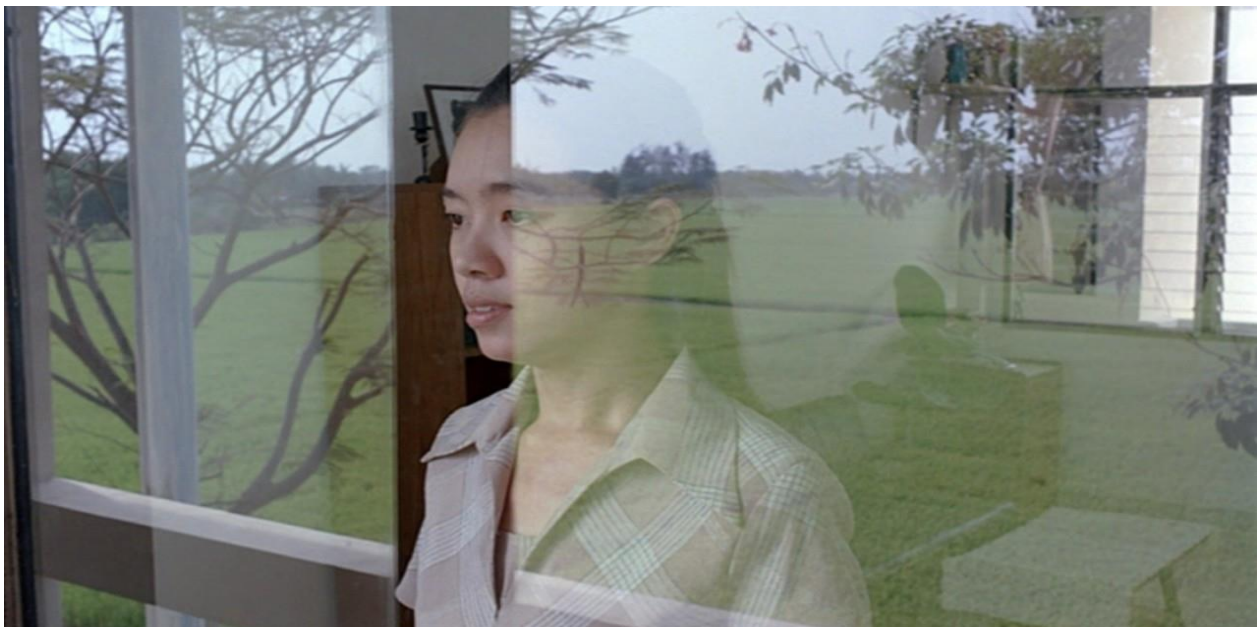


Figure 2.The shot of Syndromes and a Century (2006)

3. Apichatpong Weerasethakul's Film & Thai Social Context

The film *Cemetery of Splendour* (2015) is the film that Apichatpong will not launch in Thailand. Because he's scared that it would fall foul of the ruling military junta. In the premiere of Cannes in May, Apichatpong gave the interview to *The Guardian* that "I am sad to see that I don't have any power or rights to speak, because I know if I speak, harm will come to me." (Child, 2007). A film *Cemetery of Splendour* is not the first time for Apichatpong to be watched as an enemy to the government and the censorship of Thailand. Since his 2nd feature film "*Blissfully Yours*" made him in the same position. Two scenes of this film was cut off before it was released in the theater. He was estranged to the Thai censorship after that situation. And the breaking point between the censorship and Apichatpong was happened on his 4th feature film named "*Syndrome & Century* (2005)". The censorship was cut off many scenes in his film. This event that made Apichatpong become a leader in the fight to the Thai censorship and released his film by decision instead of a scene that was cut off into blank dark image went on screening in theater in Thailand in order to be against the power of censorship in Thailand. And he questioned to the standard of censorship in Thailand about freedom of thought which must be according to a Democratic primary. Apichatpong believes that if the completed film was cut by the people who don't understand the issue that the film would like to tell, this action will take the film disabled and it can't be shown anywhere. He often uses the symbol of power that is not justified by the supernatural scene in his works.

Apichatpong became critical a social context in Thailand since his early work. He created a visual metaphor about people enslaved media satirical TV drama with the concept of the rule of the military coup that looks similar to the recurring nature of soap operas. These issues were reflected in his early work called *The Majestic object at noon* (2000), a documentary that takes characters from radio play to the public in different places in Thailand which try to narrative of the characters in the radio play make the story and send to another one and another places and so on. Apichatpong doesn't control the storyteller, therefore, the stories do not necessarily take into cause and effect. This documentary shows the visualization of the public narrative is dominated by soap operas in Thailand. His later film, he made by the VDO production as *Haunted Houses* (2001). Apichatpong used to select people 66 people from 6 villages be the actors and try to act in film like characters in TV drama. The film's narrative was directly scripted from two episodes of a popular Thai television drama, "*Tong Prakaisad*. The serie mainly deals with love and the problems of the wealthy (MUBI, homepage on the Internet). In this film, we could see the story of people who live in countryside of Thailand. They are slaves of TV drama by the characters of high classed people in the script. It controls the acting of the villagers that they try to act in their role plays, This film established the shots of the common people in countryside that overlay between the real life and the fantasy of soap operas.

For Thailand's politics, there are many problems for decades and they did not meet democratic principle of equality of citizens. This rule does not give full freedom to the people. The takeover by the military several times. This is a serie of events that was reflection by an independent filmmakers of Thailand who intervened this issue in their films by metaphor narrative with a piquant. Even the work of Apichatpong was fielded this point in his later film, such as *Tropical Malady*, *Syndrome and Century*, *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* and his recent film, *Cemetery of Splendour*. And sometimes Apichatpong appear in his film for criticize about the racist of the film production about the power of director and actor were an equal. In his method for symbolic to criticize about human right in Thai society, this method appeared in the films such as *Mekong Hotel* (2012) and the short film *Mobile Man* (2012).

After that, Apichatpong was extended to question the Communist system in the removal of the set *Primitive* (2009-2010) which consists of a Short Film, Video installation and Feature Film at *Uncle Boonmee who can Recall his Past Lives* (2010) winner of the *Palme d'Or*, Cannes Film Festival 2010. The *Primitive* project re-imagines Nabua, the 'widow town', as a town of men, freed from the widow

ghost's empire, and features. The male descendants of the farmer communists teenagers that will lead a journey, fabricate memories, and build a dreamscape in the forest. [2]



Figure 3. The shot of Blissfully Yours (2002)



Figure 4. The poster of Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives (2010)

4. The Future of a filmmaker, Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Thai Society

Apichatpong decided the production of the last film in Thailand. He decided to shoot his last film in his hometown (Khon Kaen, Thailand). The Cemetery of Splendour (2015) is the name of his last film before he moves to South America to work on his new project. Apichatpong was interviewed in the film comment magazine after screenings of "Cemetery of Splendour" in the Cannes Film Festival. In 2015, he described the operation in Thailand and the final story in a city that "It was the first time I shot a movie there (in Khon Kaen). But it was more personal in the expression of hopelessness for me. It feels like living there (in Thailand) is more and more difficult for me to express things, and to see friends being detained, being put in jail almost like (I'm) waiting for my turn. But at the same time, I did not know that, in working with this fear, if I want to really make a movie, maybe not a movie. But any expression, an interview, an interview, or whatever, I have to censor myself. So I make this film that I hope it expresses these feelings of not being in reality in a state of not knowing what state one's in, whether you are asleep or awake. And at the same time, you really want to know, you want to wake up." [6] Apichatpong has concluded all these interviews for reasons that we can see as blocking the expression of Thailand's prolonged and never had an outlet for it. "It affects your daily life. You ask yourself, are you still an artist, if you cannot speak what you want to say?" The freedom of speech in Thailand is just a daydream in working of the art for Apichatpong. From this point, he keeps many messages in every of his films like scenes of the memories and dreams are haunted by the ghost forever.

This article found 3 aspects in Thai social context themes which were reflected from Apichatpong Weerasethakul 's films as following 1) The memories and personal life in his life and his family (his parents). 2) His film criticizes the political context in Thailand with supernatural scenes. 3) His film told stories of the second class characters in Thailand.



Figure 5. The shot of Cemetery of Splendour (2015)

Acknowledgment

The article would like to give thanks to Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University for giving me the research fund, directions and suggestions.

References

- Animate Project [homepage on the Internet]. Apichatpong Weerasethakul. Animate Projects Limited;. Available from: http://www.animateprojects.org/films/by_artist/w/a_weerasethakul#sthash.smnReUtF.dpuf
- Bradshaw P. *Syndromes and a Century*. Guardian News and Media Limited or its affiliated companies;. Available from: <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2007/sep/21/worldcinema.drama>
- Child B. Apichatpong Weerasethakul: I won't censor my work for Thailand. Guardian News and Media Limited or its affiliated companies;. Available from: <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2007/sep/21/worldcinema.drama>
- Mahancherdchuwong S. (2015, Jury). A Day With A View : Interview Apichatpong Weerasethakul. *A DAY*, 179.
- MUBI [homepage on the Internet]. HAUNTED HOUSES;. Available from: <https://mubi.com/films/haunted-houses>
- Rapold N. *Cannes Interview: Apichatpong Weerasethakul*. Film Society of Lincoln Center;. Available from: <http://www.filmcomment.com/blog/cannes-interview-apichatpong-weerasethakul/>
- Sukvong D. (2013). *A Century of Thai Cinema Exhibition's Handbook*. Thailand: Film Archive (Public Organization).
- Weerasethakul A. (2007). *Unknow Forces*. Thailand : Openbook.