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Above: *Ghost of Asia*, 2005. Below left: *Ghost of Asia*. Below right: *Second Love in Hong Kong*, 2002. All images courtesy: Christelle Lheureux & Apichatpong Weerasethakul

MASTER POET: AN INTERVIEW WITH APICHATPONG WEERASETHAKUL

BRIAN CURTIN



A New York film commentator told me that Apichatpong Weerasethakul is "as big as Madonna" in France, with people swooning at the mere mention of his name. Another informed me that the Thai auteur has been anointed a 'master' in Japan. Since Apichatpong's appearances at Cannes in 2002 and 2004, when he won the Grand Jury Prize for *Tropical Malady* (*Sud Pralad*), he has been lavished with critical plaudits internationally and his reputation has become nearly inassailable. 'Bewitching', 'uncanny', 'a transnational poet' are typical descriptions. What has drawn attention is the capacity of his films to spellbind, as he diffuses local preoccupations and personal memories through a cinematic language somewhere on a continuum with Warhol, Pasolini and Tsai Ming-liang.

Apichatpong is currently shooting *Intimacy*, a film commissioned for the New Crowned Hope festival in Austria to celebrate Mozart's 250th anniversary. The film will premiere at the end of this year.

BRIAN CURTIN: How would you characterise your interests as a filmmaker?

APICHATPONG WEERASETHAKUL: I am interested in Buddhism and I try to find ways to represent the effects of this belief. Buddhism affects in many ways and I try to convey ideas of impermanence and never-ending suffering, but I don't mean the latter in a negative way. It is just how things are. It is also to look as things happen, be aware of them but not become attached. This is something that I am trying to do, but it is impossible. To be a filmmaker is to become attached, especially for me, to memories, to the beauty of events. Being aware of this aspect and its effect on life is what I try to put in my movies. However, I don't want my movies to be seen as Buddhist preaching movies. It is more a question of how the whole film is structured, how you feel this aspect of life when you leave the theatre.

BC: How do you understand the trajectory of those interests from early films to now?

AW: I don't know. I cannot analyse this. I think my interests are always the same.

BC: Please discuss the decisions you have made about filmmaking: the collaborative nature of *Mysterious Object at Noon* or *Ghost of Asia* and the surreal but self-reflexive quality of *Tropical Malady*?

AW: I like the collaborative process – it is something that you cannot directly control. It depends on the projects. *Tropical Malady* and *Blissfully Yours* are films that lead to a high point with certain emotions, so the actors needed strong direction. But if I had no financial limits, I would prefer to just go with the actors and shoot a lot of footage.

There are many directors that inspire me. American experimental filmmaker Bruce Baillie is a big figure. His *Valentin De Las Sierras*, shot in the 60s, is still a big influence. It is like he was trying to capture a dream, and explore the spiritual side of being human, but without telling you stories. Andy Warhol is also one of my favourite figures.

BC: Do you have significant influences outside film?

AW: I like landscapes. I am inspired most of the time by travelling and, of course, visual arts. But sometimes seeing too much contemporary art is not so healthy. So I try to travel more.

BC: You present work in art galleries, as video installation, alongside filmmaking. Can you discuss how, if at all, you understand differences between both?

AW: My video pieces are sketches for me. Sometimes they explore my feelings about a feature film because making films is more restricted. Video is a way to loosen up.

BC: Please discuss your latest movie *Intimacy* and why you have chosen to make this movie now?

AW: *Intimacy* is a film about good memories. The film was commissioned by the city of Vienna for the 250th anniversary of Mozart. We do not want to use Mozart's music in the film; instead we are focusing on the theme and spirit of his compositions. As I am Thai, my take is based on our landscapes and my

memories (or shared memories of my parents). This is a Thai film inspired by his music. There are themes – magic, the emergence of a new era – that inspired me to make this film. I see living everyday life as a magic we should treasure. I want to make a film without violence and hatred. It's a real challenge in this contemporary time to talk directly about something positive, not in a cynical way.

BC: Distinctions between what can be considered 'Thai' and what can be considered 'international' are prevalent in Thailand. How conscious are you of this?

AW: 'Thai-ness' in the media is mostly a façade. People don't see beyond the physical aspects of, for example, traditional arts and they repeatedly abuse them to the point that they diminish the value of those arts. Sadly, for people who are in charge art is not related to life. They watch lots of soaps on TV. They gossip about some pregnant actress more than politics. How interesting their lives are! I think life is art in that way, but they cannot accept that their contemporary lifestyle is art. Only something historical like the Grand Palace is!

I just do films that reflect my surroundings – the people and places. I like Thailand's reality: sometimes it is beautiful and sometimes ugly. Ugly architecture, loud music, mass behaviour, senseless nationalism, stupid rules, and so on: these things can be beautiful. Much of the messiness in society is, for me, very Thai and very charming.

People can have a preconception of what film is. They need polished entertainment. The Hollywood standard is a fixed idea for most of the film industries worldwide. I don't mind as I love Hollywood films. For me I have my audiences. However, it is upsetting sometimes when Thais accuse me of not making a Thai film, while the bulk of Thai movies in the Cineplex are just bad versions of Hollywood products. You just add elephants and it suddenly becomes Thai. It surprises me that we are living in 2006 with this ultra-conservative attitude. But from another angle, this is also the charm of living here. You have a strange government which sometimes issues unthinkable policies, but you also have the masses who wholeheartedly accept them. Why don't people make more films about these issues?

I am conscious of Thailand in terms of how to reflect my memories, people's gestures, landscapes, and moments that I like. But my films are not really deep psychological studies, I am more of an observer and don't aim to dig deep into contemporary notions of Thai. But one day my interest may shift that way because living in Bangkok is bugging me.

BC: The independent filmmaking scene in Thailand appears to be growing very strong. Your studio Kick the Machine, which has supported the production and promotion of experimental film and video since 1999, has undoubtedly played a significant role in this. Can you give me a general opinion on emergent Thai filmmakers and video artists? Further, what attracts you to the projects that Kick the Machine supports?

AW: I think local video-makers are producing far more interesting work than local filmmakers. Sometimes the Thai film industry appears hopeless but then you see some great videos and you realise the future is not so bad. I care a bit less about whether or not there are good Thai films in the theatres. Let the ghost films stay there peacefully. Thunskana Pansittivorakul and Sompot Chidgasornpongse are young promising directors. They have their own style and they think more complexly than the older studio filmmakers. I believe their works reflect Thai society more – this is the simple reason Kick the Machine supports their work. Another interesting guy is Uruphong Raksasad. I sometimes think that these videos are a reaction from the new generation of image-makers towards all bad studio works. They balance things out. But Kick the Machine also tries to play a role in mainstream projects as well, in a subversive way. Like *Adventure of Iron Pussy*, a film that will hopefully have a sequel, or a comedy project which deliberately uses clichés. It is great fun for us to infiltrate the local system in its own language. We see these works as experimental.

BC: The films of Sri Lankan director Vimukthi Jayasundara, who won the Camera d'Or at Cannes 2005, have been compared to yours.

AW: I haven't seen *Forsaken Land*, but have become friends with the filmmaker. We went to see ago-go boys together last night.

BRIAN CURTIN IS AN ARTIST AND FREELANCE WRITER BASED IN BANGKOK