

MEMORY, PHOTOGRAPHIC IMAGES AND MEMORIES IN THE FILMS OF APICCHATPONG WEERASETHAKUL

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I. INTRODUCTION: AN EXPLORATION OF APICCHATPONG WEERASETHAKUL'S CINEMATIC UNIVERSE

Apichatpong Weerasethakul is considered one of the most influential directors in contemporary Thai cinema thanks to the profound impact he has had on independent filmmaking in Thailand over the past two decades. He receives what was probably his biggest accolade at Cannes in 2010, when he won the Palme D'Or for his film *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (Loong Boonmee Raleuk Chat, 2010).

In all his films, Apichatpong tries to reproduce what could be described as a pattern of memory that is not just individual but collective, in an approach that has become one of his main hallmarks. According to Codó, "all of Apichatpong's films in reality form a single work, the product of a creative continuum" (Codó, 2015: 82). He has created his own universe on the boundary be-

tween fiction and Thailand's reality, which is why his work has garnered interest beyond his country's borders.

At the same time, he has developed a contemplative film style that is heavily based on the conception of or search for spirituality, but with an approach that is not steeped in Buddhist orthodoxy, but that draws on syncretism and popular folklore, both interconnected with the narrative lines that articulate the stories told in his films.

With *Blissfully Yours* (Sud sanaeha, 2002), *Tropical Malady* (Sud pralad, 2004), *Syndromes and a Century* (Sang sattawat, 2006) and the aforementioned *Uncle Boonmee...*, Apichatpong has created a series of films centred on Thailand's mysterious rainforest, in another of the director's signature themes. This choice of topic draws on the filmmaker's own memories, as he grew up with his parents, both of whom were doctors, in the city of Khon Kaen in Thailand's northeast, a region that historically has been marginalised by the nation's

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political authorities. His work has attracted the interest of a wide range of critics and scholars in the fields of history and Thai studies, who discuss the portrait it offers of identity, the body, and geopolitics (Promkhuntong, 2018: 21).

Miranda argues that his films present Thailand as if it were an ecosystem whose inhabitants are ultimately narratable facts. “More than history and memory, the aim of all these pieces and films is the evocation of a habitat whose metabolism is imagination” (Miranda, 2015: 111). Apichatpong conceives of his films as personal diaries. He often inserts facts taken from the lives of his actors into his characters’ stories, and he may even completely change a character based on the actor he decides to cast to play that role (his casting method sometimes involves looking for peculiar individuals in bars and restaurants) (Codó, 2015: 81). Moreover, as the filmmaker himself argues: “My films are an extension of my memories. I even try to include the memories of making the films themselves into my films. I try to capture what I have experienced. While shooting, I also try to capture some of the awkward moments the actors feel in front of the camera.”¹

In an interview with the director, when Tony Rayns asks him: “Memory is the central impulse in your filmmaking?” (Rayns, 2006), Apichatpong replies: “It may well be the only impulse! Everything is stored in our memory, and it’s in the nature of film to preserve things... But I’ve never set out to

recreate my memories exactly. The mind doesn’t work like a camera. The pleasure for me is not in remembering exactly but in recapturing the *feeling* of the memory—and in blending it with the present” (Rayns, 2006). This idea clearly explains the relationship that Apichatpong establishes with his work, in both cinematographic and artistic terms, where the pleasure lies in being able to get the feeling of the memories and knowing that memory itself is the impulse behind these recollections in the present.

Apichatpong speaks of the feeling of memory as Veronica O’Keane defines it: “memory brings what we know and what we feel together and becomes the medium through which we filter present conscious and non-conscious experience” (O’Keane, 2021b: 22-23). In Apichatpong’s case, he films this experience, as he plays with sensory memory through the sounds and images he combines in his films, transporting the viewer inside that memory. The memories may even be therapeutic, as Fernández and Vicens argue that this filmmaker uses “memory and memories as a means for achieving healing” (2015: 59).

2. DIFFERENT TYPES OF MEMORY AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH CINEMA

In scholarly literature, memory has been an object of study and debate in the humanities, social sciences and biology for some time; however, approaches from the perspective of film theory are quite recent. This article draws on studies of cinema and memory by Radstone (2010) and Kilbourn (2010), on the classification of different types of memory found mainly in the theories of Assmann (2008) on individual, social and cultural memory, and on Landsberg’s concept of “prosthetic memory” (2004).

For Kilbourn (2010), “memory” is used as a catch-all term for the process of recollection or recovery, for the form or *place* where the content of memory is stored or lost (the archive), and for the

mnemonic content itself, commonly expressed in the plural (“memories”). This vagueness is further exacerbated by the confusion and fusion of *natural* personal memory with forms of collective cultural memory. In most cases it is another way of referring to *history* (2010: 3). On this point it is important to bear in mind, as Burgoyne (2003) suggests, that memory in the traditional sense describes an individual relationship with the past, a physical, corporeal relationship with a real experience that is significant enough to inform and colour the subjectivity of the person who remembers it, in a way very similar to what Apichatpong does in his films.

History, on the other hand, is traditionally conceived of as impersonal, in the realm of public events that have occurred outside the archive of personal experience. However, in contemporary media culture, the most significant *historical* events are transformed into experiences for individual viewers. The mass media are constantly representing the past, replacing the impersonal phenomenon of history with an *experiential* collective memory (Burgoyne, 2003: 225). This is a trend in which cinema plays a crucial role.

Landsberg (2004) emphasises the way that mass culture makes particular memories more widely available, “so that people who have no ‘natural’ claim to them might nevertheless incorporate them into their own archive of experience” (Landsberg, 2004: 9). She refers to this idea as “prosthetic memory”, whereby the new technologies of mass culture and the capitalist economy open up a world of images outside a person’s lived experience, creating a portable, fluid and non-essentialist form of memory.

Landsberg also highlights the capacity of cinema to create “images available for mass consumption” (Landsberg, 2004: 176). Bergström (2015) explores this idea to argue that understanding cinema as cultural memory emphasises the role it can play in the transmission of collective histories and even in tradition, in terms of both its indi-

vidual impact and its cultural functions. For this author, “cinema fulfills many of the same roles in modernity that spiritual practices—such as rituals, visions, conceptions of the afterlife, prayer, and meditation—have fulfilled and continue to fulfill across a wide spectrum of societies, serving as a connection between the individual and a larger, even transcendent, view of the world” (Bergström, 2015). Apichatpong is aware of the value of cinema for expressing experiences, memories, and even stories taken from his country’s folklore that can transcend the borders of Thai culture and even transcend reality.

In her analysis of cinema and memory, Radstone (2010: 334) points out that theories of “prosthetic” memory do not need to be related solely to experiences conveyed by the mass media because, as Ben Roberts suggests, the whole of human history has occurred in the realm of a technical evolution “in which it is impossible to separate the living being from its external prosthetic technical support” (Roberts, 2006: 56). Apichatpong uses the camera to capture sounds and images in the awareness of the fact that its function is similar to the act of remembering and memory, and he also introduces photographs into the discourse of his work to serve as mnemonic elements.

Radstone (2010) divides her study of cinema and memory into four sections: memory as cinema; cinema as memory, cinema/memory; and future directions. The section of most relevance to this article is cinema/memory, in which she draws on ideas introduced in the work of Annette Kuhn (2000) and Victor Burgin (2004), who explore the perspective associated with interdisciplinary approaches to film theory and the incorporation of subjectivity into the cultural experience of watching films. With reference to these ideas, Radstone points out that the cinema/memory relationship does more than merely facilitate conceptions of memory and its processes in order to enhance our understanding of cinema, or simply shed light on memory with recourse to our understanding of

cinema: “In place of formulations that give primacy to the cinema or to memory, what emerges is a liminal conception of cinema/memory, where the boundaries between memory and cinema are dissolved in favor of a view of their mutuality and inseparability” (Radstone, 2010: 336). Cinema can thus be understood as a memory machine, driven by the persistence of sound and vision, as Apichatpong reminds us in his films and his commentary on them.

For Radstone, investigations of cinema/memory seek to answer the question: “What binds together images and sounds in personal memory with images and sounds in collective memory?” (Radstone, 2010: 336). As will be discussed below, her conceptualisation of “collective memory” is relevant to Jan Assmann’s (2008) studies of communicative memory and cultural memory.

According to Assmann (2008), there are various levels for identifying different types of memory. The first of these is the inner level, where memory is a matter of our neuro-mental system, like Apichatpong’s personal memories of the past in the case studied here. On the social level, memory is a question of communication and social interaction, enabling us to live in groups and communities, which in turn allows us to construct a memory. In this sense, Apichatpong’s work, with the exception of his most recent film, forms part of the memory of the Thai people. The third level is that of cultural memory (Assmann, 2008: 109), which can also be related to his filmography. Assmann uses the term “communicative memory” to mark the difference between Halbwachs’s concept of “collective memory” (2010) and the un-

derstanding of cultural memory adopted in this study, as a form of collective memory in the sense that it is shared by a group of people and transmits a social (i.e., cultural) identity to those people. This is why Assmann argues that in the context of cultural memory, the distinction between myth and history dissolves (2008: 113).

In Apichatpong’s films, it is evident that there are no boundaries between myth and reality, as the two are interwoven in a narrative that thus becomes a form of collective, cultural memory, offering the viewer information about the past, however mundane or inaccurate it may be. That past forms part of the memories of the actors, of Thai folklore or of the director himself, while also blending elements of fantasy with real aspects of Thai culture.

As Burgoyne (2003) suggests, contrary to expectation, cinema today appears to have strengthened its cultural claims on the past. The cinematic rewriting of history has accrued an extraordinary degree of social influence and power in the contemporary cultural context. Film seems to evoke the emotional certitude associated with memory because, like memory, it is now associated with the body; it “engages the viewer at the somatic level, immersing the spectator in experiences and impressions that, like memories, seem to be burned in” (Burgoyne, 2003: 223). Apichatpong’s films have been described as contemplative and immersive in the sense that the user/spectator perceives the space through sensory stimuli.

Based on this analysis of the main conceptions of memory and its relationship with cinema, this article explores the direct connections between Apichatpong’s filmography and the study of memory from different perspectives, ranging from the sensory memory present in his work through his choice of sounds and images to his dabbling with biographical memory and event memory and his contributions to collective and cultural memory as a subjectification.

**INVESTIGATIONS OF CINEMA/MEMORY
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3. FROM EVENT MEMORY IN MYSTERIOUS OBJECT AT NOON (2000) TO COLLECTIVE-CULTURAL MEMORY IN MEMORIA (2021)

3.1 Event memory and biographical memory

Event memory could be described as referring to the recollection of moments, places, emotions and details that have taken place in a person's life and that can be evoked clearly. For O'Keane, "event memory involves a bringing together of disparate sensory information in the dynamic living world. It is memory for what happens" (O'Keane, 2021b: 70). It could be argued that with *Mysterious Object at Noon* Apichatpong attempts an experiment based on the event memory of the Thai people and on audiovisual language itself. It is a film that straddles the line between documentary, fiction and pseudo-documentary. The filmmaker attempts to construct the film using a kind of "exquisite corpse" method, choosing people with no apparent connection to each other from all over Thailand to continue a particular story.

In his description of this film, Quandt observes an observational and notational quality in his portrait of different people, young and old, whose spoken, sung, written, and filmed responses to Dogfahr's story reveal both the rigour of popular oral storytelling and the knowledge of a modern narrative, resulting in a film that functions simultaneously as document and fiction, a portrait of a country and of its collective dream world (Quandt, 2009: 35).

One of the unique features of this film for the director's creative continuum is the way that it borrows from one of the stories told by a child to the camera. It is the story of a tiger-witch that has nothing to do with the rest of the narrative told and/or shown by the film, but that will be a prominent element in *Tropical Malady*, where it will be represented in the forest as a kind of recollection preserved in Thailand's collective memory through its native folklore.

Another of the themes present in this film that will be repeated in all of the director's subsequent feature films is the medical examination (although in *Tropical Malady* it takes a slightly different form, as a veterinarian examination). These scenes are the product of the filmmaker's childhood memories as the son of two doctors. In every case the scene posits the dilemma between medical science and the shamanic beliefs or home remedies, associated more with superstition than with science, that appear to be quite common in Thai culture. In the medical examination in *Memoria* (2021), as the film is set in Colombia, the ancestral home remedies are replaced with solutions associated with Christianity. These scenes may form part of their director's biographical memory. As O'Keane argues: "Going back to one's childhood home is like exploring childhood memory, what Gaston Bachelard called 'psychogeography'" (O'Keane, 2021b: 121). In this case, Apichatpong goes back to a place that is familiar to him and of which he has certain memories. "The magic resonance of place-evoked emotional memories goes on and on, and back and back... back to the earliest memories of the childhood home" (O'Keane, 2021b: 132). In *Syndromes and a Century*, this return to a familiar place is even more accentuated with a theme that revolves around two hospitals, one rural and the other urban. Suttisima echoes this idea when he suggests that most memories in Apichatpong's films are based on autobiographical memory considered as memory with time territories connected throughout a generation, especially by establishing a moment of his childhood as the foundation for his stories (Suttisima, 2016: 28).

3.2 Sensory memory and bifurcated time

With *Blissfully Yours*, Apichatpong tackles a completely different theme, which may possibly make it the film that has the least to do specifically with memory. The focus instead is on geopolitical issues affecting Thailand through an exploration of marginalised characters, in what is more a met-

aphor for the country's political situation than a story of the Thai people.

With this film, the director began what some authors have identified as a trilogy of bifurcations of time (Codó, 2015: 74) or temporal ruptures (Sicinski, 2018: 197). *Blissfully Yours*, *Tropical Malady* and *Syndromes and a Century* all have a clear forked structure, splitting off into two halves that function as dualities.

Set in a small town on the Burmese border, the first film tells the story of the relationship between Roong, a young woman who works in a factory, and her lover, Min, an illegal Burmese immigrant. A third character, a middle-aged woman named Orn, is also important to the story. Min suffers from a serious rash, and when the two women fail in their attempt to get him treatment at a local clinic, they prepare some home remedies to help soothe the itching caused by his condition. The first half of the film portrays the daily struggles of the three protagonists with the authorities. In the second half, the characters travel to the rainforest for a break from the pressures of their daily lives. This idyllic getaway allows them to escape their ordinary routines in a realm halfway between the sensory memory and the cultural memory that Apichatpong typically explores in his films.

Ferrari (2006) offers a comparative analysis of *Blissfully Yours* in ethnographic terms, based on the concept of "liminality" developed by Arnold Van Gennep in his book *The Rites of Passage* (1960) and subsequently taken up by Victor Turner (1964).² According to this theory, the characters exist on a boundary, in neither one place nor the other (much like the border region that provides the film's setting), either physically or mentally (Ferrari, 2006: 36).

Tropical Malady was partly inspired by Thai novelist Noi Inthanon's jungle adventure stories, and also by popular Khmer folk tales that are well-known throughout much of southeast Asia. These stories create various narrative threads in Apichatpong's film, fusing elements of Theravada

Buddhism, Hinduism, animism and ancestor worship (Lovatt, 2018: 221), all of which form part of the collective memory of the Thai people.

The story is divided into two separate but interrelated parts. The first follows a romance that develops between Tong, a young villager, and a soldier named Keng. However, halfway through the film, Tong disappears without explanation. The tone of the story then changes: the setting moves to a dimly lit rainforest in a setting filled with ambient sounds of animals, insects and birds. Keng is tracking down a shaman who has taken the form of a tiger, and as he plunges deeper into the darkness of the woods he finds that he himself is being hunted.

By breaking the horizontal axis of narrative screen time and presenting these two discrete narratives as parallel worlds, Apichatpong challenges the viewer to interweave and relate them "by imagining them as co-existing 'vertical' dimensions linked temporally through circuits of desire, memory and affective associations (Mercer, 2012: 207).

Apichatpong makes masterful use of editing here to make it seem that what we have seen in the first part of the film may or may not have been a dream. At the halfway point of the film is a shot of a bedroom where Tong is sleeping; the shot lingers a moment and then cuts to a totally different shot of Keng, in uniform, walking around a house until he comes to the same bedroom where Tong was sleeping, where he finds some photographs. Just before the cut, Keng overhears the conversation of some villagers off screen, which, as the last dialogue in the first part, serves as a kind of marker. The villagers are talking about a monster that has been stealing their cows. In one of the photos that Keng looks at, he sees Tong with another young man wearing a shirt marked clearly with the word "infantry". At this point, the screen goes black, followed by a kind of fade to white. This is how Apichatpong plays with the spectator, who is left wondering who is who and what space-time



Figures 1-4. Still frames from the film *Tropical Malady*, 2004.

continuum they exist in. He also begins playing with the characters' memories through the inclusion of photographs that could be interpreted as elements contributing to the memory and the narration.

The scene that follows confirms the definitive rupture between the everyday and the mythical. Apichatpong describes the fissure in the middle of *Tropical Malady* as producing "Siamese [non]-identical twins", and "as a mirror in the centre that reflects both ways" (Quandt, 2009: 78).

A girl approaches a soldier in the woods and asks him for help. The soldier tells her to go home and as she is walking away he sees a tiger's tail poking out from underneath her clothes. At this point it is clear that we are no longer in the world we know, as we have entered a fantasy world. At the same time, this image reminds us of the tiger-woman talked about by the children in Apichatpong's first film.

Another narrative thread emerges when one of the older women who accompanies the couple to the temple asks her friend: "Do you remember my uncle who can recall his past lives?" Here we find the seed of an idea that the filmmaker had on his mind, whose final outcome would be *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*.

There is another connection between the two films, as both include a fable or parable.³ In *Tropical Malady*, it is the fable of the miser while in *Uncle Boonmee* it is the tale of the princess and the fish. As if borrowing the narrative concept used in *Mysterious Object at Noon*, once again Apichatpong inserts a second story into the film's main story. As Suttisima suggests:

The characteristics of storytelling are not limited [to] current stories but expanded to [go] further until they can be woven as the network of the relationship between past and present. The convergence of this place and other places lead[s] to the

basic finding showing that [the] analysis of Apichatpong's films has the perspective on "Memory" surrounding the characters. It is very interesting that such memory is shown [and] in which form, for example, flashback stories, legends, hearsays, dreams, or even the gesture of thinking. (Suttisima, 2016: 25)

WHEN THE EVENTS ARE REPRESENTED THROUGH CINEMA, THEY BECOME SHARED MEMORIES OF THE CREW, THE CAST, AND THE PUBLIC

The film ends with Keng on his knees looking up at a tiger crouching motionless on a high branch of a tree. We hear his inner voice speaking: "Monster, I give you my spirit, my blood, my flesh, and my memories... Every drop of my blood sings our song. A song of happiness... there... Do you hear it?" The protagonist is prepared to give up his soul, his body, and his memories, which means giving up everything he is.

3.3 Between personal memory and collective memory

According to Lovatt (2013), in *Syndromes and a Century* the boundaries between personal and social memories are blurred through the connection of the director's family's story to a broader socio-political context. The film focuses mainly on the preservation of memory after his father's death and is based on Apichatpong's recollections of the stories his parents told him about when they worked as doctors at a hospital before they got married. These interrelated memories constitute the two halves of the film: the first from the perspective of a female doctor named Toey, based on Apichatpong's mother, and the second about an army-trained male doctor named Nohng, based on his father. Each half of the film thus resonates with fictionalised traces and strange reflections of

its real-world source, as Apichatpong's memories based on his parents' recollections form an elliptical, enigmatic story involving flashbacks and circular repetitions—formal devices that are characteristic of the representation of memory in his films (Lovatt, 2013: 73).

In *Uncle Boonmee*, Apichatpong returns to the historical and cultural context of northern Thailand to make a film set in the village of Nabua but dedicated to his parents and to his actors. He chose Nabua as the strategic location for this story partly because, like Boonmee, the inhabitants of this place live with repressed memories. The village was occupied by the Thai army from the 1960s to the early 1980s as a measure to suppress the communist insurgence in the region.

On his studio's website, Apichatpong makes a statement about this film partly to express his concept for it and the story behind it:

Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives is an homage to my home and to a certain type of cinema I grew up with. I believe in the transmigration of souls between humans, plants, animals, and ghosts. Uncle Boonmee's story shows the relationship between man and animal and at the same time destroys the line dividing them. When the events are represented through cinema, they become shared memories of the crew, the cast, and the public. A new layer of (simulated) memory is augmented in the audience's experience. In this regard, filmmaking is not unlike creating synthetic past lives. I am interested in exploring the innards of this time machine. There might be some mysterious forces waiting to be revealed just as certain things that used to be called black magic have been shown to be scientific facts. For me, filmmaking remains a source all of whose energy we haven't properly utilised. In the same way that we have not thoroughly explained the inner workings of the mind.⁴

Apichatpong's statement perfectly reflects all the types of memory analysed above, with which he identifies in different ways through his work.

The film recounts Boonmee's last days, when he confronts his past as a soldier, father and husband. He is reunited with his long-lost son, Boonsong, who has turned into a monkey ghost, and with his late wife, who comes back as a translucent spirit. For Apichatpong, ghosts were once real but now are not, and this constant shifting between reality and fiction makes them increasingly present in his films as an almost philosophical element (Nascimento Duarte & Bértolo, 2017).

Apichatpong establishes the recollections of Boonsong through photographs, still images that Boonsong took with his camera and that enabled him to understand the art of photography. In addition, there is also an oral tale that is told while we are shown these images, the words of the story giving them meaning; and finally, there are the images mixed in from outside the house.

A number of authors (Quandt, 2009; Fillo, 2012; Codó, 2015) have drawn comparisons between *Blow-Up* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1966), *La jetée* (Chris Marker, 1962) and *Uncle Boonmee* for their use of photographic montages as a key element of the story, as well as an expressive device and a strategy for evoking memories.

The use of photographs in his films to intervene in the story is a technique he has used ever since his first film, where some characters use them to support their stories or look at them while other characters continue with the story within a story.

At the end of the film, Boonmee is in a cave—the same cave where he was born and where he is now going to die. He cannot remember in which of his lives he was born in this place, or even whether he was a human or an animal, a man or a woman. With still images that recall the soldiers taking pictures in *Tropical Malady* (2004), the focus turns to the army capturing the monkey ghosts. Over these visual impressions, Boonmee offers a kind of epitaph-epilogue:

Last night I dreamed of the future. I got there in a kind of time machine. The city of the future was governed by an authority capable of making anyone



Figures 5-6. Still frames from the film *Uncle Boonmee Who Recalls His Past Lives*, 2010

disappear... When they find people from the past, they project a light onto them. This light radiates images of their past onto a screen; images that come from the past to arrive in the future... Once those images appear, the people from the past disappear.

As Bergström argues, *Uncle Boonmee* offers a perfect case study for exploring how cinema, like memory, can offer a form of reincarnation or a continuation of life after death (Bergström, 2015). The photograph is given a special status as a mnemonic device thanks to the persistence over time of the past moment when the photographic image was taken, based on which a story can be reconstructed.

In *Cemetery of Splendour* (Rak ti Khon Kaen, 2015), when a number of Thai army soldiers are struck with a mysterious sleeping sickness,

they are transferred to a makeshift clinic in an old school building. The place where the soldiers are being kept is filled with memories and it becomes a revelatory world for Jenjira, a volunteer charged with taking care of Itt, a soldier who never receives any visits from his family. Jenjira makes friends with Keng, a young medium who uses her psychic powers to help loved ones communicate with the comatose soldiers. The doctors experiment with different techniques to alleviate the men's troubled dreams, including chromatherapy.

According to Apichatpong:

The film is a search for the old spirits I knew as a child. My parents were doctors and we lived in one of the hospital housing units. My world was the patients' ward where my mother worked, our wood house, a school, and a cinema. The film is a merging of these places. I haven't lived in my hometown for almost 20 years. The city has changed so much. But when I went back I only saw my old memories superimposed on the new buildings.⁵

The protagonists of this film do much the same as Apichatpong himself did, remembering the past, its myths and its ghosts. *Cemetery of Splendour* examines how individual and collective memory can

affect our perception of reality and how the stories of the past can influence the present.

Apichatpong talks about the light treatment that the soldiers undergo in an interview published on his website:

At one point I was reading articles about brain science. There was an MIT professor who manipulated brain cells into re-enacting certain memories, via lights. He said that the findings sort of disproved Descartes' belief that the mind and the body are separate entities. This hypothesis aligned with my thinking that meditation is nothing more than a biological process. Sleep and memory can always be hacked into. [...] The lights in this film vaguely reflect this idea. They are not only for the soldiers but also for the audience as well.⁶

Apichatpong's most recent film, *Memoria*, takes the same ideas found in his earlier work and turns them up to the point that even the title alludes to the filmmaker's idea of bringing cinema and memory together.

In several interviews he gave after the film's release, Apichatpong mentions that while he was working with locals in Colombia to investigate their lives and memories he found that he began suffering from a strange condition known as "ex-

Figure 7. Still frames from the film *Uncle Boonmee Who Recalls His Past Lives*, 2010





Figure 8. Still frames from the film *Cemetery of Splendour*, 2015

ploding head syndrome”, involving the imagined perception of loud noises while falling asleep and flashes of light upon waking up. The film deals with this strange condition, along with the ideas of trauma, suffering and memory.

The film begins with the protagonist, Jessica, suffering an episode of exploding head syndrome. She seeks out Hernán, a sound engineer who is able to help her identify the noise she heard inside her head. But this is just the beginning of an exploration that will take her all over the country. While setting out on her journey, her sensitivity to the noises increases until she meets up with another Hernán, this time in the jungle, who will explain to her how to explore the memory of humans, of the Earth, and even beyond. Drawing on the analysis that Chulphongsathorn (2021) offers of the film, Apichatpong’s oeuvre could be thought of as an archive of memories of the world, in which the history

of humankind is interwoven with the history of the Earth or of the whole universe (Chulphongsathorn, 2021: 543).

Hernán can remember everything, and he is also able to read the memories of things and animals that he comes into contact with. He can even read Jessica’s mind. It is because of this sensitivity that he lives alone in the middle of the Colombian jungle. Sleep is the one thing that allows him to disconnect from the union he has with the world around him. This character is reminiscent of Borges’s Funes the Memorious.

Apichatpong chose Colombia as a setting, far from his homeland, because this country has a story similar to the one he has been telling throughout his filmography: the story of the loss of a nation’s collective memory, a tragic memory that has been blocked out to forget the grim and ill-fated events that have occurred there.

4. CONCLUSIONS: MEMORY IN APICHA TPONG WEERASETHAKUL'S CINEMATIC UNIVERSE

Apichatpong has often said that his films are based on his own memories of Thailand, and on his parents' memories, and even on the memories of his actors or of the people living in the locations where he shoots his films. However, his use of memories is complex and multi-layered, developing with the unfolding of the narratives of his feature films, shorts, and even video installations to form what could be described as a cinematic universe of his own.

His work combines cinema's ability to represent an image as an internal subjectivised experience with the notion of cinema as memory. Because, as mentioned above, film can be conceived of as a memory machine, propelled by the persistence of its sound and vision. It begins with a sensory memory to recreate a space and time—which may be familiar, within the event memory—that turns into a story for spectators through their collective and cultural memory.

His films often explore the nature of memory and its relationship with identity, culture and history, although he may use a non-linear narrative and a poetic style to explore the connections between life in the present and the experiences of the past.

In an interview with James Quandt, Apichatpong continues the analogy between cinema and consciousness, expressing the opinion that the human brain is "the best camera and projector, if only we can find a way to operate it properly" (Quandt, 2009: 178). This is an idea he has repeated in other interviews and even in his most recent master class, which he gave in Peru in June 2022.

Throughout his filmography, Apichatpong has made it clear that individual memories are the basic units of collective memory, although collective memory itself refers to the distribution throughout society of what individuals know, believe and

feel about the past, how they judge it morally and how they define it. And cinema plays a key role in the fulfilment of this mission.

As has been shown here, the work of this director is generally known for its interest in the nature of memory and its relationship with personal identity and collective history, as well as for its perspective on the history and culture of Thailand. His poetic and contemplative film style has allowed him to explore these questions in a deep and evocative way, often challenging audience expectations and creating unique and moving cinematic experiences. ■

NOTES

- 1 Text taken from the filmmaker's website: <http://www.kickthemachine.com/page80/page24/page25/index.html>
- 2 Turner uses the term *liminal* or *liminal period* to refer to the state of openness that characterises the intermediate stage of a tripartite space-time. This space-time has a *preliminal* stage, a second intermediate stage (the *liminal period*), and finally a *postliminal stage*.
- 3 In both films there is a narrator present in the scene who becomes both an on-screen voice and a voice-over, between intra- and extra-diegetic, depending on the focalisation of the story. While we hear his monologue, the *fictionalisation* of the story is made evident on the screen.
- 4 Text taken from the filmmaker's website: <https://www.kickthemachine.com/page80/page24/page26/index.html>
- 5 Text taken from the filmmaker's website: <https://www.kickthemachine.com/page80/page24/page26/index.html>
- 6 Text taken from the filmmaker's website: <https://www.kickthemachine.com/page80/page24/page26/index.html>

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MEMORY, PHOTOGRAPHIC IMAGES AND MEMORIES IN THE FILMS OF APICHPATPONG WEERASETHAKUL

Abstract

The filmography of the Thai director Apichatpong Weerasethakul is characterised by a constant quest to represent and interpret memory and memories, which constitute the main leitmotif of his films. A case in point is *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010), in which a man is able to remember all his previous incarnations. In all of his films we can find various forms of memory, ranging from autobiographical or individual memory, for which he uses his own recollections in a manner comparable to Bachelard's "psychogeography" (O'Keane, 2021b: 121), to communicative and cultural memory as proposed by Assmann (2008), or Landsberg's "prosthetic memory" (2004). This article analyses some of the films by this director in which he combines cinema's ability to represent an image as an internal subjectivised experience and the notion of cinema as memory.

Key words

Apichatpong Weerasethakul; Cinema; Memory; Memories; Photography.

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Article reference

Expósito Barea, Milagros. (2023). Memory, photographic images and memories in the films of Apichatpong Weerasethakul. *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, 36, 235-250.

MEMORIA, IMÁGENES FOTOGRÁFICAS Y RECUERDOS EN EL CINE DE APICHPATPONG WEERASETHAKUL

Resumen

La filmografía del director tailandés Apichatpong Weerasethakul está marcada por una continua búsqueda de la representación e interpretación de la memoria y los recuerdos, siendo estos el principal leitmotiv de sus obras. Véase el caso de *El tío Boonmee que recuerda sus vidas pasadas* (2010), donde un hombre es capaz de recordar todas sus vidas anteriores. En todos sus trabajos pueden encontrarse varias formas de memoria, desde la memoria autobiográfica o individual, de donde extrae sus propios recuerdos, que se puede asemejar a la *psicogeografía* de Bachelard (O'Keane, 2021: 121); hasta la memoria comunicativa y cultural que propone Assmann (2008), o la *memoria prótesica* de Landsberg (2004). En este artículo se analizan los largometrajes de este director, donde Apichatpong combina la capacidad del cine para representar una imagen como experiencia interna subjetivada y la noción de cine como memoria.

Palabras clave

Apichatpong Weerasethakul; Cine; Memoria; Recuerdos; Fotografía.

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Referencia de este artículo

Expósito Barea, Milagros. (2023). Memoria, imágenes fotográficas y recuerdos en el cine de Apichatpong Weerasethakul. *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, 36, 235-250.

recibido/received: 27.10.2022 | aceptado/accepted: 14.02.2023

Edita / Published by



Licencia / License



ISSN 1885-3730 (print) / 2340-6992 (digital) DL V-5340-2003 WEB www.revistaatalante.com MAIL info@revistaatalante.com

