

SYNDROMES AND A CENTURY

Apichatpong Weerasethakul / Thailand 2006 / 101 min

CINEMA OF IMPERMANENCE

by Kong Rithdee

"There are two trees. One represents my father's story. The other represents my mother's story. They grow together, and other stories grow out of them too."

The enigma of Apichatpong Weerasethakul's new movie is the enigma of memories. How they come flooding like happy sunlight on an afternoon by the pond, how they gradually slip out of grasp like when a solar eclipse casts an inevitable shadow on the earth. It's the great enigma of how memories haunt, touch, tease, elate and pain us. How they illuminate life. How they darken life. How they imitate life then become life itself. How they orchestrate the ecosystem of the senses and the biological symmetry of the body, the metaphysics of the soul, the eternal pulsating of the heart—his heart, mine, yours. How they save and obliterate us. How they could be scientifically explained and spiritually questioned. How they hint at the possibility of the past life and augment the prospect of the next. How they appear so solid, so indestructible and at once so transient, so dishearteningly impermanent like the joy that is found and suddenly lost, sometimes forever.

Apichatpong once told me that the magic of memories is in the fact that he could inherit them from his parents, like a family heirloom. You can have the memories even though you didn't experience them, he says, and the elusive nature of what is inherited and what is actually remembered constitutes the enigma of *Syndromes and a Century*, a film in which time is fragmented and memories compartmentalised, in which the scientific and the spiritual dance a surreal *pas de deux* that juxtaposes the present and the future—or the past and the present. The thin, now-you-see-it-now-you-don't storyline is taken from the lives of the filmmaker's parents when they were both working at a rural hospital in Khon Kaen, a province in north-eastern Thailand. Almost the entire film is set in a hospital, warm and wistful in the first half and synthetically clinical in the second, as we meet patients with a variety of syndromes and doctors who seem to be afflicted by a repertoire of invisible maladies themselves. Apichatpong spent his early years hanging around the wards where his parents worked, and in this strange, funny, and affecting film he juggles the unlikely playground of his childhood—where sickness was an everyday spectacle—with the ethereal longing to find universal healing for all human conditions.

By also dabbling into the memories he never had, Apichatpong suggests the possibility of paralleled lives, of dreams that invade reality, probably of the joy and agony of reincarnations.

The Thai title of the film is *Saeng Satawat*—"lights of the century"—and it is the director's ceremonial experiment with lights that gives the film its bifurcated tonalities. In the balmy aesthetics of the first half, the supple rays of natural sunlight always dash the swaying banana trees outside the windows of Doctor Tei's examination room. The physical presence of the hospital seems to demarcate a medical domain that is totally separated from the verdant inferno of green paddies and teeming forests, always dappled by the tropical sun-glare. Through her windows, Doctor Tei stares out at the flora kingdom that is so close but feels so remote, and there's a deep sense of poignancy when we understand that she's trying to grasp her own ungraspable memories. It's the possibility of love that leads her out of the shell of her hospital, and the young doctor's romantic encounters with a botanist, who repeatedly boasts of his rare breed of wild orchid that glows in the dark. These encounters take place in chlorophyll-ised environments of leafy verandas and tree-embraced corners that had once, she's told, fallen into the shadow of a total solar eclipse.

If the interrelation between the technological and the natural, or the scientific and the supernatural, seems possible at first glance as doctors prescribe pills to the patients while the patients prescribe herbal potions to their doctors, Apichatpong proposes another scheme at the film's midway mark and plunges us into the territory of sharp lighting, of artificial fluorescent flares and tungsten illuminations as his camera travels into the bowel of the hospital, where grotesque medical equipments and soul-sucking metal pipes promise both the redemption and the end of human organisms. Here the strong, harsh light and disturbing drone of strange machines suggest a dystopian realm where healing is attempted but not necessarily possible. Because Apichatpong's films always affect us on both the conscious and unconscious level, the real-light-versus-fake-light strategy is not merely a matter of exercise. It is inherent to the fundamental concept of exploring the presence of fleeting memories, real or artificial, that seem so bright and clear in one second and foggy and untouchable in another. (...)

Apichatpong, 36, studied architecture in Khon Kaen and filmmaking in Chicago. (...) Although unintentionally, the structure of *Syndromes and a Century*—when we see the same scenes being repeated with slight variations, as if memories are playing tricks on us—bears a resemblance to the fugue form in classical music composition. Perfected by Bach though rarely used by Mozart,

the fugue form features a melody that keeps repeating itself while also branching off into new melodies based on the original theme. The organized fluidity of Apichatpong's movies may attract the label of (post-) modernism, but it's actually a traditional art form practiced by baroque composers long before cinema was invented. (...)

[D]espite the fact that all his works are firmly rooted in Thai sensibilities, in home-grown melodrama and provincial unsophistication, they also draw their artistic license from the vast pool of Western intellectualism. So the world sees glimpses of Renoir and Bach and Kiarostami in Apichatpong's movies, but we also see ancient myths, jungle yarns and cheap pulp fictions of totally Thai origins. As the world sees lyrical metaphors and mystical conjuring, we see the mundane misery and honest humour patented only to the Thais. (...)

People have thrown one particular question at me countless of times since I first started writing about Apichatpong's works in the 1999: What do his films mean? Or even more sinister: What are the messages? In my early naiveté, I satisfied them by fishing out some hokum-sounding answers, but lately I've been in the habit of giving those inquirers a shrug. Maybe Apichatpong's films are not meant to be explained, but felt. They enrich and wrap us whole in their smothering hugs not because they can be understood but perceived. We receive the images through the eyes and they go directly to the heart. Like great music, his films bypass our critical faculty since they can connect with us on an unconscious level, leaving a languorous swirl of emotions before the brain is jolted into processing the data—if any data-processing still matters after all.

I first interviewed him for my newspaper when he was struggling to finish his first feature-length film *Mysterious Object at Noon*. Apichatpong was still an unknown filmmaker who had just come back from his study in Chicago, though his experimental shorts had generated a certain buzz among a small circle of cinephiles in Bangkok. I wrote a few articles on his next movie *Blissfully Yours*, which was shown in the *Un Certain Regard* at Cannes but was mutilated by local censors when it opened in a single theatre here. And I was lucky enough to be in Cannes in 2004 when *Tropical Malady* was screened in competition and eventually won a Jury Prize, the first time a Siamese movie was honoured with a major international film award.

"Joe"—that's what Apichatpong calls himself in English, though his nickname in Thai is a vowel-twister that's pronounced somewhat like "Joi". Sometimes I'd like to call him "gentleman Joe" (it hasn't entered the mainstream yet!). And from the very first time I interviewed this amiable man, I experienced a mix of curiosity and frustration since it was difficult to understand the description of the film he tried to give me. He knew it and occasionally sympathized by saying: "I know it's hard to understand. You have to see the film in order to [understand]." For most people though, being unable to understand a movie by simply reading its synopsis in a newspaper is unacceptable; and while some people are driven by a mix of curiosity and frustration to see an Apichatpong movie, most viewers feel only the latter. Frustration even transforms into dread, and I'd feel upset with myself when I realize that sometimes my articles on a new film of Joe's often sound like a warning sticker that this may not be a movie for everybody, especially regular multiplex-goers.

"I make films from my personal wavelength, and I know that maybe not many people share the same wavelength as mine, but that's all right," he once said. What I've tried to convince myself lately is that perhaps people don't get Apichatpong's movies not because they are difficult but because they are very simple. In a time when our consciousness is clogged by overexposure to fictions and moving images, stories based on memories and myths—the oldest stories of humankind—might have seemed like something from an alien wavelength. Apichatpong's films always feature nature as the force that affects the biochemical and metaphysical workings of human beings. You could say that it's not easy to understand nature, but then again there is nothing easier. The Thai word for nature, by the way, is *dharma-chart*, whose linguistic root is based on the word *dharma*. In the Buddhist dharma teachings we're told that everything is impermanent. It's just illusion, or dream, or memory. Gentleman Joe's is the cinema of *dharma-chart*—the cinema of impermanence. As he himself is learning how to let things go, to not feel attached, perhaps we should do the same when watching his films. There's nothing easier than to let yourself be swept into the irresistible embrace of nature. Maybe there's even no enigma after all.

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