



**Exclusive interview** with  
**Apichatpong Weerasethakul**

*By Matthew Hunt*

Apichatpong Weerasethakul is Thailand's most celebrated film-maker. He was associated with the Thai New Wave from the late 1990s onwards, and his films have won numerous awards at Cannes and other international festivals. Apichatpong's Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives won the Palme d'Or at Cannes, the first Thai film to do so. Here, in a wide-ranging interview, he discusses his entire career, his views on contemporary cinema, and his future projects.

Q : You made short films throughout the 1990s, several years before your first feature film. Were you always intending to become a feature-film director?

A : Not really. I wanted to make experimental shorts, and in black and white.

Q : Some of the short films, such as 0116643225059 (a telephone conversation with your mother) are highly personal. Do you consider your films personal, or universal, or both?

A : All personal.

Q : Your parents were doctors, like the characters in Syndromes & A Century. You have also included gay characters, as in Tropical Malady. To what extent are your films autobiographical?

A : They are autobiographical to various degrees. I don't think we have a fixed character. Memory is also flexible. A straight character in my work can represent me, for example.

Q : Does your sexuality influence your films? Do you associate yourself with 'queer cinema'?

A : Yes and I'm casual about it. For me, the word queer means anything's possible.

Q : The Adventure Of Iron Pussy is rather camp and melodramatic. It's uniquely different in tone compared with your other films. Would you like to make another film in the same style, or was it an exception?

A : I have had enough of Iron Pussy for now. I was having a good time making it but I was not inspired.

Q : You are sometimes linked with the Thai New Wave. Do you feel an affinity with them? And how do you feel about the movement?

A : At that time, the word 'independent' was popular.

I think we were part of that when the studios were broken up and economic and political situations allowed people more capitalist freedom. Film education slowly started here, with more people studying abroad. You can see this happening clearly in Asia, and New Wavers were everywhere. Pen-Ek (Rattanaurang) and Wisit (Sasanatieng) were from the advertising camp while I had just graduated from an art school. We saw new possibilities. Still, for me it is rather awkward to label the film movement here as a new wave. We just dress up the same narratives differently. We are following Americans, Europeans, following traditions. If we manage to create something that cuts away the old submissive forces that prevent our freedom, then I think we will truly have a new wave. Film should be treated like politics.

Q : The documentary Mysterious Object At Noon, your first feature-length film, was screened at various international film festivals though it did not have a wide distribution in Thailand. This pattern has been repeated with your subsequent films. Is it ironic that you are Thailand's most famous director yet your films are not commercially successful at home?

A : It's getting better. We showed the last film (Mekong Hotel) here in theatres and the audience size is decent for this kind of film. Now we have so many channels on cable and websites, I am not worried about finding viewers here. But my concern is I'd like them to experience the films (and their sound design) on a big screen. So we will still push for theatrical release.

Q : Many of your films feature local Thai beliefs and customs. Do local and international audiences react differently to them?

A : Yes, especially to the humour.

Q : You have said before that you are influenced by popular culture, such as classic Thai television dramas. Today, mainstream Thai audiences seem to prefer slapstick comedy and light entertainment.

There was a script but it got changed quite often during the production. The non-actors were fantastic. They were a lot of help around because we were all newcomers.

Could you tell me how you use popular culture in your work, and how your films fit into contemporary Thai culture?

A : My influences are mostly stuff I consumed when I was young: television, radio, comics. And as you mentioned, the Thai entertainment here is very light. Or perhaps it is the same but I am getting older! However, the style has surely changed. It is a copy of a copy of a copy. So I don't watch television except when I am in my hometown to see my family. That's when I see my mom's favourite soaps. So I try to feature these beautiful events as I experience them - the new style replacing old ones, the addiction of the repetitive narrative, the beliefs.

Q : Do you see yourself in any way as a Thai cultural ambassador?

A : I'm afraid not.

Q : *Blissfully Yours*, your first narrative feature, is very naturalistic. Do you script your films completely, or do you allow some improvisation? Do you cast non-actors to achieve a more spontaneous atmosphere?

A : There was a script but it got changed quite often during the production. The non-actors were fantastic. They were a lot of help around because we were all newcomers.

Q : You have often worked with the same group of actors (such as Jenjira Jansuda and Sakda Kaewbuadee) and crew (such as editor Lee Chatametikool). Is it important to have a regular repertory group like this?

A : They are crucial. There are also many staff members that I depend on, like the art director, the prop

man, the sound designer, etc. These guys that I have worked with together from the beginning know what I want, and many times they suggest what I don't need in the film.

Q : *Blissfully Yours* includes frontal nudity, which is still rare in Thai cinema. Were you influenced by European arthouse directors? And did you meet any resistance from the Thai film industry because of this?

A : I was thinking more of Hitchcock and soft-core Thai porn. No, there's no resistance from the industry but the government, gently.

Q : Like *Blissfully Yours*, *Syndromes & A Century* was also censored in Thailand. This time, the censorship seemed truly absurd: scenes of a doctor drinking whisky were deemed insulting to the medical profession! Was this censorship political?

A : *Blissfully yours* was self-censored by the distributor. *Syndromes & A Century* was out when the country started to be paranoid about everything, lasting until now. Not only on cinema, the government and a large chunk of the public are turning ultra conservative and nationalistic on everything because the political atmosphere is shaky. The old powers and the elites are losing their control. You can see this pattern in other countries in history: Germany, Poland, Argentina.

Q : You formed the Free Thai Cinema Movement after the censorship of *Syndromes & A Century*, calling for a film-ratings system. A ratings system now exists, but some films remain banned. How do you feel about censorship in Thai cinema today?

A : It is about the people who use the system. They reflect the mentality of the country. So I feel that the movement to change the law might not be so productive, and the movies will still be banned as long as the people are brainwashed on a daily basis. The real movement is the access to information and it is happening through the internet. The Thai government, true to its nature, has been banning scores of websites. But how can you ban everything under the banner of democracy?

Q : *Uncle Boonmee* was part of an art project called *Primitive*, which included several short films and installations produced in Nabua, near the Thai-Lao

border. Your most recent film, *Mekong Hotel*, was also made near there. What attracted you to that area of the country?

A : My hometown is not far from there, and my actress Jenjira is living there now with her new husband. So for the past years I have visited her and the river and was charmed by the landscape, the changes.

ral. When you believe in something it is no longer fiction. It is absurd I know but sometimes I cannot help imagining. So to observe oneself's reaction to nature is very interesting.

Q : *Uncle Boonmee*, like some of your earlier films, was filmed in 16mm. Do you prefer working with celluloid or digital video? How do you feel about the transition from film to digital?



Q : Of all your short films, my favourite is *Phantoms Of Nabua*, which was also part of the Primitive art project. Like some of your earlier short films (e.g. *Windows*), it focuses on the effects produced by light. Is there something special about light in your work?

A : I just love different kinds of light. It is one of the changes. Thailand is full of cold-mood fluorescent lights for our warm climate, and now a lot of LEDs. They are vulgar and cheap and beautiful.

Q : *Uncle Boonmee* and *Tropical Malady* share a fascination with forest spirits and animism. Are you interested in religion and the supernatural? Were those films influenced by *Apocalypse Now* or other movies set in the jungle?

A : We had *Apocalypse Now* as one of the visual references as the greens in that movie are fantastic. Like most people here, my life is affected by the supernatu-

A : I prefer film mainly because I still cannot get used to the digital look. This is a transitional phase where people put grain in digital to simulate film. Digital should be grainless (or have a different nature of grain) and you have to accept that.

Q : Do you regard yourself primarily as a director or an artist? Is there a distinction between them?

A : I think the words are inter-changeable. Many artists direct.

Q : What will be your next project? Will it be *Utopia*, which has been rumoured for several years?

A : It's called *Cemetery Of Kings*. It is at the Mekong River again. Jenjira has a new husband but she is not sure of her heart when she meets a soldier who is down with sleeping sickness. **E**

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