FLEEING THE JUNGLE

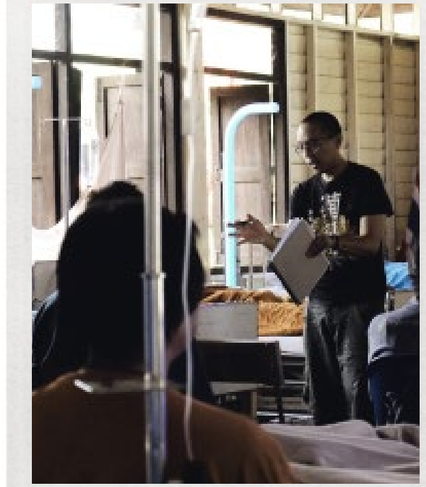
Filmmaker, contemporary artist, national treasure: Apichatpong Weerasethakul has been given many labels. But Thailand's *enfant terrible*? Speaking at his Chiang Mai home, the visionary auteur reveals why, when it comes to his feature films, he's chosen to boycott his own country.

WORDS BY MAX CROSBIE-JONES / PORTRAITS BY CHAKKAPAN IM-AREE

Scenes from *Cemetery of Splendour* (2015), which was shot on location in Weerasethakul's hometown, Khon Kaen; opposite page: Weerasethakul directs a scene in a former school turned makeshift hospital.

Going to meet Apichatpong Weerasethakul to talk about his new movie is a strange experience. He's no stranger to strangeness, of course – his movies are steeped in it. As baffling as they are beguiling, they are are unlike anything else out there: languorous and non-linear cine-poems that draw their tranquil lyricism, animist spiritualism and psychogeography from the Thai north and northeast; oneiric mirrors onto the lives of the politically marginalised in which the magical calmly intersects with the mundane and plots tend to hover into view, lull you in, then vanish like fireflies in a forest.

But this is not the strangeness I feel while heading to meet him at his house in Chiang Mai. It's not the disorientating but ultimately restorative sort some of us feel while watching his ethereal, entrancing, indescribable movies, but a strangeness of an altogether more mundane sort. It's a sort I've never felt before and probably never will again. It's the kind you feel when you go to meet a filmmaker to talk about his new work, one that's set in and inspired by his homeland but, for absurd political reasons that have nothing to with the film's intrinsic quality, not being released in it.



Yes, Apichatpong Weerasethakul is back – sort of. Fourteen years after his *sui generis* filmmaking and the emotional-philosophical headspace he explores with it began attracting international attention, and five years after he won the Palme d'Or and thanked "all the spirits and all the ghosts of Thailand" in his acceptance speech, Weerasethakul has a new flick out. Shot on location in Khon Kaen, the city in the northeast where he grew up, *Cemetery of Splendour* is his seventh full-length feature. Ostensibly a tale about a group of soldiers who, having succumbed to a mysterious sleeping sickness, are laid up in a makeshift hospital, it has already been well received at film festivals from Gwangju to London. The reception was especially positive at Cannes back in May, where it got a rapturous 10-minute standing ovation when it was premiered in the Un Certain Regard section (in which he won the top prize back in 2002, with the torrid jungle romance *Blissfully Yours*). Cineastes in many parts of Europe have already had the chance to see it; it will be screened in Singapore this month; and there will be a wider global release early next year. But as for a release date in Thailand, there isn't one. "I cannot show this movie there," he told *Indiewire* in Toronto on September 30th.

With Weerasethakul describing it as a "rumination on Thailand" and unquiet ghosts of the country's past emerging from beneath its tranquil dreamscape surface (the hospital sits on a mythic ancient site), it's clear why he might think delaying *Cemetery of Splendour*'s domestic release indefinitely is a good idea. The history speaks for itself. Back in 2007 the Thai Ministry of Culture's censorship board cut six scenes totaling almost 15 minutes from his languid homage to his doctor parents, *Syndromes and a Century*. (He responded by releasing the film in Thai cinemas with blacked-out screen spliced in where the scenes should have been; the film had been emasculated but a ballsy, passive-aggressive statement made. Today a playlist of the offending scenes – a monk playing guitar, a doctor kissing, etc. – is up on YouTube for the whole world to see). And other films have been banned or trimmed since then, most recently a Buddhist-themed horror film by one of Thailand's top film studios, Sahamongkol Film International, that dared to depict the contemporary realities of life as a monk.

Most of these rulings predate the military coup, but Weerasethakul has made it clear in recent interviews that he thinks the atmosphere of ultra-conservatism has gotten more overbearing and stifling since it took place in May 2014. "Whatever movies we have produced, we don't want to show it to Thai audiences because in the current situation we don't have genuine freedom," he told the BBC on October 15th while at the London Film Festival. "I don't want to be part of a system where the movie director has to exercise self-censorship." As well as not releasing his latest movie in Thailand, he has also dropped another bombshell: *Cemetery of Splendour* will be, until the situation changes, his last film made in Thailand. (Some took this to mean he's leaving Thailand altogether. But that's not the case, according to his Twitter feed: "So many misunderstandings

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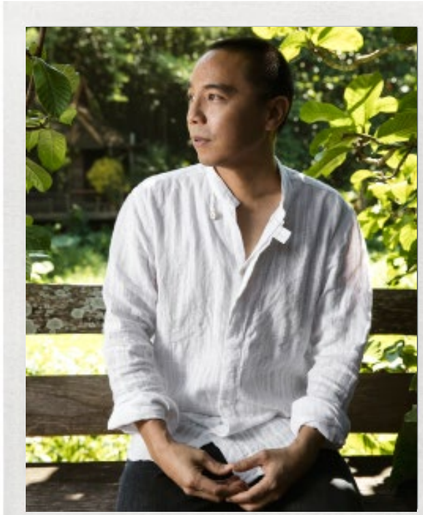
Joe, as he's happy to be called by anyone who meets him, lives in a place of provincial calm and barely disturbed stillness. You'd expect that from this master of slow, reflective cinema and it's abundantly clear that he does.

from the *Indiewire* article. No, I'm not leaving Thailand. I just won't make any feature films here.")

This, then, is the lay of the land when we meet. This, then, is why I feel strange. This interview isn't your usual film junket – there is, for now, no film to see. Instead this meeting is a farewell parade of sorts, a parting shot before he jumps ship, a notice of a directorial boycott. Creatively speaking, Apichatpong Weerasethakul wants out of post-coup, junta-ruled, politically straitjacketed Thailand, and this is his chance to tell us why.



You'd expect Joe, as he's happy to be called by most people who meet him, to live in a place of provincial calm and barely disturbed stillness – and arriving at his home, it's clear that he does.

To the Thai man or woman on-the-street, his is a lifestyle that might be considered bohemian, one of studied tranquility and unsophistication. He lives about thirty minutes' drive north of Chiang Mai city, in lush, leafy Mae Rim district. It's a bucolic spot, yes, but not as remote and untamed a setting as the chattering jungle in which the soldier in his 2004 masterpiece, the dreamy slyvan diptych *Tropical Malady,* encounters a talking monkey while being trailed by a hungry tiger spirit. Signs for a monkey centre, bee farm and cobra show line the road. There are homesteads and rustic resorts and noodle shops nearby. The map he provided also pinpoints a local army camp.

"You're early" is the first thing he says, as he walks up to the gate, opens it, then walks me along a stone path to a weather-beaten teak house that could easily serve as the set for the next remake of *Plae Gao* or some other Thai period-drama set in the countryside. He wears a creased white linen shirt over loose pants. He is polite but seems a little flustered. Which is understandable: I *am* a little early and he isn't quite ready. As he shows me up a staircase and out onto a terrace that overlooks an overgrown lake (the house was formerly a holiday home used for fishing), Vampire and King Kong, two of his four dogs, both excitable Boston Terriers, follow us. Birds can be heard in the background, but not at the heightened, almost symphonic levels often heard in his movies.

Recently returned from promoting his new film on the festival circuit, he talks openly and expansively. "It's very nice meeting new people and friends but sometimes doing festivals back-to-back is pretty hard," he says while getting comfortable on a stool, and with a congenial calmness not unlike that of the characters in his movies, who never, ever raise their voices. Then we talk about one of those friends, the Taiwanese director Tsai Ming-liang, and the midnight talk they did together at the new Asian Arts Theatre in Gwangju. "I'm not a night person so I was in a really sleepy state," he says of the experience, "but it was really good because we were talking about dreams and sleeping and ghosts and both of our works. And he is my big inspiration so it was a very magical moment."

We talk about how when not on the road he's the quiet, retiring sort, content to stay home and read non-fiction books such as Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit's *A History of Thailand* ("I always enjoy reading it"), *Packing for Mars* and *Cambodia's Curse* (a history of Cambodia that's "about this violence really similar to Thailand's but a lot worse"), or watch TV series, or listen to podcasts (his favourite: *The Skeptic's Guide to the Universe*). He talks also about how he's a big fan of the Thai artists Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook ("She's like Ozu – brutal in her gentleness") and Rirkrit Tiravanija ("He's more cerebral and makes you think about what art is, and I think his work is less about Thailand and more about human beings"). And about his fascination with spaceships – they crop up in his work regularly – and his desire to make a sci-fi movie, a simple and very personal one set in a "fictional somewhere." The northeast, or Isan, a region he regularly makes inspirational sojourns to, also crops up, namely its latent human potential and "rebel spirit."

His interests are diverse, and so, too, is the breadth of his image-making. Though known as a movie director, Joe – cropped hair, a warm,

Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives (2010).

Tropical Malady (2004).

soft face that belies his 45 years on the planet – does more than just write, produce and direct feature films through his production company, Kick the Machine. A large part of his time is also spent creating installations and short films that fit under the banner of contemporary art, most of them commissioned by festivals, galleries and museums. He does so many, in fact, and to such acclaim, that a forthcoming private museum in a converted Chiang Mai warehouse, the Mai Lam Contemporary Art Museum, will open with a retrospective of them in mid-2016.

There is a pragmatism to why he does so many. "It's impossible to always be making movies with big budgets, especially personal films," he says, "so more and more I'm attracted to these more abstract ways of expression." But they aren't mere wallpaper; they are intrinsic to his creative process, both inspiring his movie-making and feeding off it. "To make a movie I need to do an installation of so-called visual arts to have as a guide," he says. "They're emotional research and real research and I think they coexist really well."

This has been the case with all his films, but *Cemetery of Splendour* is the first to coexist with a performance element. In the past, the closest Joe has gotten to doing something live was VDJ'ing for a concert – an experience he has been quoted as saying he found nerve-wracking – but recently he signed up for a theatre show. "Normally I'm not into theatre," he says, "because I think anything live is too scary." But a curator at the Asian Arts Theatre talked him round. "I hesitated at first but she was so open that it ended up more like expanded cinema," he says. What transpired, a show entitled *Fever Room*, was a sensorial blitz of footage featuring the actors from *Cemetery of Splendour*, light and smoke, the aim being to put the audience in a hypnotic state – much as his sensual, idiosyncratic films have been known to do.

Cemetery of Splendour, the mysterious-sickness premise of which was inspired by real-life events, also marks a number of other firsts. It was the first time he shot on digital, not film. And it was the first time he worked with the Mexican director of photography Diego Garcia. He's unsure when asked whether working with him changed the way he works, then adds: "But I'm really happy with him; he managed to capture the balance very well in terms of light, because I worry about digital. I don't like digital at all but he convinced me it can be done. And he integrated well with the Thai crew."

It was also the first time he shot in Khon Kaen, the fast-growing city in the Northeast where he grew up breathing the antiseptic air of the hospital and doctor's clinic in which his parents worked. It was "unusually smooth" he says. "Everything went as planned, and I discovered a lot of talent and got a lot of support from the city. If the political situation was not like this I would be really inspired and want to inspire people to shoot more outside Bangkok."

Fireworks (Archive) (2014), an installation based on an inspirational sojourn to a rogue Buddhist sculpture park in northeast Thailand.

Ah, Thai politics – we talk about that too. Of course we do. Its specter hovers over the interview like a storm cloud (so much so that by the end of it he apologises for the gloomy tone).

Joe has called *Cemetery of Splendour* his most personal film yet. That might well partly be because, as Justin Chang writes for *Variety*, "in one sense, the film is about nothing more (or less) profound than the sights and sounds of his childhood, whether it's a field where kids play ball in the distance while a bulldozer rips into the earth, or a local cineplex showing some delirious-looking Thai schlockfest." But in a recent interview Joe has hinted that the movie's personal nature stems as much from its being an "expression of hopelessness" as its resonant sense of place.

When asked to describe that hopelessness he gives an earnest, serious answer, one that suggests the sleeping sickness of the comotose soldiers may symbolise not just the thinking (or unthinking) of the Thai army, but the nation as a whole, weaned as it is on a rote-taught, white-washed version of nationalist history from a young age. "I think it's mainly politics," he says. "And about the realisation of how I as a person had been shaped in the education system here, because there's a set of narratives that have been taught in schools until now." It wasn't until he hit his 30s, he adds, that he had this realisation and the hopelessness started setting in. "I just started to look at Thailand's history seriously

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and then I discovered that I was not the person I thought I was, or that I don't want to be that person. It was pretty sad for me. I started questioning a lot of what happened in the past and how it contributed to the present in terms of the power shuffling that we are not part of."

There were direct references to the communist history of Isan in *Uncle Boonmee Who Recalls His Past Lives*, and all of Joe's movies are arguably political by dint of their not being about the sorts of people that most Thai movies tend to be about. Compared to what's come before, though, the political undercurrents in *Cemetery of Splendour* seem to surge stronger. And yet the version being released is the toned-down one. There was going to be a monster, he reveals, a "crazy grotesque but cute monster made up of human genitals and with big sleepy eyes" that emerges from Khon Kaen lake. They shot a scene in which "this guy from the city comes out with a knife and slashes it. And out came blood and flowers, chrysanthemum flowers – the yellow ones that people use when they go to an ash scattering ceremony. And it's beautiful – red blood and the yellow flowers came out." In the end, though, Joe left this expensive scene out, deemed it "too violent."

Jenjira Pongpas – Weerasethakul's go-to actress and 'memory bank' – in *Blissfully Yours* (2002)

You don't need to understand any of this – the metaphors, the colour-coded Thai politics – to enjoy *Cemetery of Splendour*. Joe is keen to point that out. "If you want to look at it from a political angle, yes you can," he says, "but I think most people, even some Thais, don't. For me too, sometimes I don't look at it through that lens."

He cares more about making us feel something, anything, than about communicating a deeper anguish. He wants to make potent films that "have their own life and can touch people." He knows that some people think his films are unwatchable – he's profoundly aware of this – and this makes the moments when other people come up to him, send him an email, or stand up in a talk or screening to tell him that they are not only watchable but things they take refuge or find solace in – films that matter on a deep, existential level – all the more rewarding.

He is, after all, an artist, not a polemicist, one who plays an inordinate amount of time and attention to creating atmosphere. In the new movie, for example, doctors place healing lozenges of florescent light beside the beds of the sleeping soldiers. While their use is based on Joe's research about an MIT professor who manipulated brain cells into reenacting certain memories via lights, they serve an artistic purpose too. They shift almost imperceptibly between red to white and green, creating an effect that one critic has called "intoxicating and ominous." Images of Khon Kaen city also shift from red to blue, so that "people are suddenly thrown out of reality and become aware of the artificiality of cinema," he explains.

Helping Joe to do this sort of thing – to achieve the tonal unreality of his films, to elevate them to the level of mesmeric art, and even to find and refine his themes – is his "second family": the regular crew and actors he uses. They get his ticks and his rhythm. Of the sound designer who helps him artificially layer ambient sound ("my instruments are insects or winds or birds"), he says, "we have an unspeakable understanding about the tone and range of sounds we use." Of his lighting crew, he says they get what many colourists and DOPs working in Thailand don't – that "the light is very different here." And of his regular actors, he says they inspire him with their memories, especially the female actress Jenjira Pongpas, with whom he has worked since *Blissfully Yours*. "She has this amazing ability to remember everything," he says, "and become my memory bank for the past 14 years."

"I would have made a miserable architect," he says, laughing at one point, referring to the vocation he trained in initially, before he left Thailand in the mid-90s to study at the School of Art Institute Chicago, before he discovered experimental film. "Architecture is very real and really about the end user experience, but for me I like to experiment, and with architecture it's hard to experiment much because you have to weigh the practicalities. So that's why I went into film."

Scenes from Weerasethakul's short films, which often serve as thematic precursors or descendents of his feature films (clockwise from top left): *Fireworks (Archive)* (2014), *I'm Still Breathing (2009)*, *A Letter to Uncle Boonmee (2009)*, *Primitive* (2009), *For Tomorrow For Tonight* (2011), and *Faith* (2006).

In *Cemetery of Splendour,* doctors use coloured light therapy to ease the sick soldier's troubled dreams.

He had been feeling "pretty suffocated" before he left for Chicago, aged 24. "I was suffocated by the rules – you have to have a certain hairstyle, you have to wear a uniform, you need to *wai* elders. I managed to be very rebellious. I skipped a lot of classes." It wasn't only experimental film that he discovered in Chicago, but also true freedom of expression. "It was a life-changing experience. You can do many things without rules. The teachers came in in shorts. And there was no grading – no As, Bs or Cs. So I had to adjust a bit. But I think the most important thing was my teacher, the variety of films that I saw, and literature, too: I was very into Japanese books by Mishima and Kawabata."

Today, he's less rigidly experimental than he used to be. "I used to have lots of rules for myself. No subjective point of view for example. No more than this many close-up shots. The camera shouldn't move more than this. I still do but there are less of them." Now it's less about technique and more about "creating certain feelings through different narratives" and "sometimes very classical story-telling." He adds that the story still comes late – ideas for his movies tend to begin with nothing more than "a location and a gesture" – and still evolves during pre-production and rehearsals, but there is less improvisation during shooting than before. "It's getting harder and harder to get funding," he says, "so I need to give producers a very complete script."

There is an irony surrounding the new film: the people most likely to pick up on its symbolism are the ones not able to see it. And there's another one, too: films that reflect Thailand back at itself – even mystifyingly oblique ones that subtly blend politics, chimeric folklore and personal themes of death, rebirth, memory, love and healing, etc. – are arguably just what the country needs at a time when it is meant to be taking stock, admitting flaws, bringing those with divergent opinions into the fold, and healing wounds in an effort to achieve national stability and reconciliation. However, Joe's adamant that he can't make or release films here for the time being. The climate is not conducive to creativity and he feels restricted. Though he loves living here and will continue to, creatively, it's time to go.

"It's gotten to the point where it's quite difficult to say something," he says. "And I don't want to make comedies or horrors that are far removed from life. I think my movies have to reflect how I live here, how we live here. It's impossible to not talk about politics and what happened in the past few years, whatever colour you are." Though he's sure the people could take the film, he's not sure the authorities can. "If you want support from the government you need to make work that follows this certain mould of morality. I don't want to participate," he says.

He has two countries in his sights, Colombia and Mexico. He plans to spend 2016 researching and hopes to have a movie production in one of them by 2017. It is a gamble, a creative gamble. It could pay off or fall flat. It might result in a masterpiece or a dud, his *Fitzcaraldo* or his *Scoop*. It might win him new fans or turn off old ones. Certainly, it won't endear him to some of his fellow Thais. Already there are those saying on social media, "If you think that you can assert your talent elsewhere, please do. We won't die without you."

It won't be easy but he isn't afraid. And in terms of themes, at least, he will be on familiar terrain. Long fascinated by ancient civilisations and with how they cure sicknesses, he tells me that he wants to "trace back to how people heal through different kinds of chemicals there from plants," particularly *ayahuasca*. A vine native to Colombia and Peru, it has psychotropic properties that create a trance-like state in those who boil and ingest it. It will be a project that "relates to what I've been doing for a while – exploring the nature of perception in cinema and how our bodies react to chemicals and lights."

The brutal recent histories of that part of the world also appeal; they may give him fresh perspective: "I think I'll learn more about Thailand when I learn about similar collective global histories," he says. And so, too, does the pantheon of spirits that belong to South America, a superstitious continent that absorbed Catholicism but never surrendered its primitive, magico-religious practices and animist gods. In other words, there might still be haunting histories and unquiet ghosts propelling his strange, intoxicating movies – they just won't be Thai ones. ※

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