

## ANIMISM AND THE PERFORMATIVE REALIST CINEMA OF APICHATPONG WEERASETHAKUL

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Animism makes real the permeability of human and nonhuman worlds. As a structure of perception and framework of experience, the relevance of animism to the theme of cinema beyond the human lies in its conception of the self as porous with respect to a multiplicity of life forms. In the animistic universe, the movement of *anima* creates duration characterised by untimely appearances and the cyclical trajectory of rebirths and returns. This chapter approaches the recent films of Apichatpong Weerasethakul, primarily *Sat pralaat!/Tropical Malady* (2004) and *Lung Boonmee raleuk chat/Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010), as presentations of animism's historicity.

The fundamental attraction of Apichatpong's films lies in their combination of sensorial intensity and temporal reflexivity. We perceive non-synchronicity of time and indeterminacy of space through juxtapositions that stimulate our senses of hearing and touch as intensely as sight. This is the main reason why Apichatpong is being canonised as a filmmaker whose works exemplify aesthetic contemporaneity in world/art cinema. I want to build into this critical contextualisation a terminology that has so far been somewhat bracketed; and that is realism.<sup>1</sup> Both *Tropical Malady* and *Uncle Boonmee* embody certain characteristics that Thomas Elsaesser classifies as typical of contemporary world cinema's 'contractually secured' ontology of realism (Elsaesser 2009: 13). Rather than privileging sight, in accordance with the paradigm of monocular perspective and its epistemological assumption of human centrality, this realism stimulates spectatorial perception through sound and tactility. There is a corresponding shift towards presenting as real or 'normal' altered or existentially uncertain states. This last element resonates with the underlying structure of Apichatpong's films. The logic of his formal assemblage can be understood as realist in a sense that parallels Elsaesser's contractualist description, a terminology that seems better oriented towards mind-game or puzzle films. For our purpose, the ethnographer Ashley Thompson, writing about spirit

possession in Cambodia, has proposed a highly suggestive definition. Animistic practices of possession and mediumship engender reality of a performative nature: 'a reality that vanishes into thin air as soon as it is not experienced as real' (2008: 100–1). This is the same epistemological grounding as that which underscores Apichatpong's layering of diegetic worlds in which material immaterialities are perceived as real.

Exploring Apichatpong's practice within the framework of animism entails a different starting point from classical film theory's investment in cinema as a perceptual training ground for a reenchanting relationship with the world (Epstein 1988). For Jean Epstein, it is the camera that allows us to perceive that quality of *photogénie* that the naked eye cannot see, and in this sense his conception of cinema's capacity of revelation overlaps with the affective and epistemological investment in the camera's indexical power (Doane 2002: 226). The property of the film image as a trace, or a material record of contingent details in excess of the narrative system, allows the spectator to perceive the world as in constant flux. As Mary Ann Doane (*ibid.*: 228–29) points out, underlying this idea of trace as the sign of contingency is a utopian desire which relates cinema's capacity to index an outside, an excess, with the possibility of overcoming modernity's destructive systematisation. Yet the fragmented quality of Apichatpong's films and installations suggests the fruitfulness of an approach that first identifies an overall pattern of textual assemblage. Adrian Martin's (2011) recent redefinition of cinematic *dispositif* as the arrangement and articulation of elements of form according to a work's internal textual logic is especially useful in this regard.

## An Intermedial Topography

In proposing *dispositif* as a methodology of film analysis characterised by a renewed attentiveness to the process of assembling various levels and layers of formal elements, Martin (2011) emphasises the overlap between this approach and the notion of cinema as an intermedial art. This point goes further than simply recognising that films absorb, mix and refer to different media forms, texts and influences. Cinema, and more specifically contemporary world cinema, is intermedial due to its tendency to assemble disparate elements without fusing them into a seamless whole. Rather than picturing a film as a representational machine that sutures various elements into a coherent fictional world, the emblematic image is of the film as a 'catalogue' of references, citations and allusions – an ensemble that presents within itself

a diverse array of preexisting media, texts, myths, stories, rituals and other communicative practices. Meaning can be produced from the intervals between parts and from the way that distinct fragments resonate within a particular logic of arrangement.

The jungles of *Tropical Malady* and *Uncle Boonmee* allude to an otherwise disparate range of local forms and references: oral stories and legends, modern and pulp fictions, the obsolete aesthetics of plebeian cinema and other entertainment media in Siam, and the significations, tales and photographic discourses that are part of the country's violent modern politics. The literary figuration that begins the jungle quest in *Tropical Malady*, and continues throughout this part of the film in the guise of the intertitle narration, is an explicit gesture of intermedial layering. The credit title that appears halfway through the running time announces the textual source of inspiration for this part: the *Long phrai* series of jungle adventure stories written by a leading writer of mid-twentieth-century Siam. The Thai-language title of the film, *Sat pralaat!* (strange beast!), is the same as a chapter title in one of the novellas in the series.

Noi Inthanon's novella is itself a reflexive take on Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World*, and features a hunter who goes into the jungle in western Siam in search of a man-eating tiger. *Tropical Malady* extends this genealogy of jungle adventures by obliquely reconfiguring elements of character and time in Noi Inthanon's tale. Its presentation of the soldier Keng's experience of temporal alterity in the jungle both alludes to the hunter's adventure in the lost world, and reworks the tale's underlying assumption of time as modernising speed and



**Figure 5.1** *Tropical Malady*. Once upon a time there lived a Khmer shaman

mankind's forward marching. The hunter's adventure ends up catapulting the temporal rhythm of Peking Man's secret world into the accelerated pace of man's nuclear age. He thereby destroys the invisible corridor linking the modern to prehistoric time-space. In contrast, the soldier at the end of the film turns into an acutely sensate creature who moves like a wild animal.

The pre-modern cosmology rooted in what is now South East Asia posits the forest as a space into which the essence of self takes flight. The forest is the domain of wild nature and malignant spirits, but it is also a zone in which *anima* finds shelter. In her work on Khmer folk tales and Cambodian history, Penny Edwards characterises the forest of the pre-modern tales as 'a place of transformation and transition' whose cosmology implies 'different notions of boundaries to those formalised in the colonial period' (Edwards 2008: 138). It is the place where human beings' metamorphosis into animal form signifies the possibility of freedom or the preservation of the essence of self (ibid.: 144). This conception of forest cosmology and topography differs from those European fairy tales that represent the transformation of human characters into animals in the wild as a loss of humanity, impelling an ending whereby the characters return home and revert to human form. In one of the Khmer tales, three daughters go into the forest and over time acquire the physical appearance of birds, which releases them from their previous existence with their abusive mother. In their transformed state, the sisters communicate in birdsong but still understand human language, and so they have become both less and more than human beings (ibid.: 146). The ending of this tale is similar though not identical in its implication to that of *Tropical Malady*, whose last shot shows the beginning of Keng's metamorphosis into 'neither man nor beast'.

The nature of the space at the edge of the forest is a historically determinate matter. Its modern conception as a boundary separating the cultivated from the wild is a palimpsest; below this persists the remaindered reality of a porous zone that challenges colonial or auto-colonial demarcation. As we shall see, the intermedial characteristics of the forest in *Uncle Boonmee* allude to this zone at the 'edge' as the site of creaturely subjection to state terror during the Cold War. The film is the centrepiece of the *Primitive* art project, which was an oblique response to a national political climate of escalating anxiety about a dying king and the ensuing resurgence of reactionary forms of royalist nationalism. With this film, Apichatpong adopts the day for night technique to shoot the sequences that take place in the forest. The addition of the lens filter turns the real forest into an explicitly 'manmade' surface that references a disparate range of aesthetics and events.

*Uncle Boonmee* is shot on Super 16 film stock in a gesture recalling the obsolete aesthetics of the 16mm ‘quickies’ that circulated in Siam during the Cold War period as culturally delegitimised popular entertainment. The aesthetic otherness of these quickies is the reference of such compositional arrangements as the usage of frontal shots. A cut suspends the story of Boonmee’s impending death to narrate the story of the union between a princess and a catfish creature. This segment presents an urtext-form of local folk tales of human–animal union. Elements of low budget science fiction and comic books are also present via the figure of Boonsong, the red-eyed ape-man who is Boonmee’s long disappeared son. *Uncle Boonmee* shows other creatures (‘monkey ghosts’) that have the same appearance as Boonsong, figures who silently roam the forest and whose beaming red eyes look out directly from the furthest plane. Arranged there as enigmatic details within a dispersive, fragmented film, they are motifs whose muteness resists transparent signification and yet also invites a look of recognition in return. To develop this observation further entails digressing into a brief account of the particularities of modern political destruction in Siam, which turned the jungle and its adjacent spaces of habitation into historical ruins.

## Ruins

With increasing imperialist competition for territories in the Far East from the late nineteenth century, Siamese kings sought to turn what had been a territory of overlapping principalities into a royal absolutist state. This gave rise to a spatial articulation of power that would eventually render as ‘primitive’ the cosmology of the forest as a site of metamorphosis. The jungle came to be represented as a wild space populated by ‘uncivilisable’ beings, while villages at the edge of the jungle were inhabited by ‘loyal, backward subjects’, of modernising and enlightened royal leadership (Thongchai 2000: 534–37).

Not long after the publication of Noi Inthanon’s adventures, the Cold War in South East Asia intensified, and Siam fell under the sphere of influence of the United States. The trope of ‘culture versus nature’ came to be mobilised to legitimise the authoritarian regime of a succession of military rulers. The most historically decisive of these leaders made development, and the elevation of the monarchy into the sacral emblem of Thainess, the central claim to legitimacy. Over the course of the 1960s development rhetoric and policies became increasingly driven by the anti-communist agenda (Thak 2007: 155–59). The emblematic

initiative of highway construction was designed to consolidate the U.S.'s strategic position, primarily by making the north-east region of Isaan accessible as a military stronghold. Isaan became a flashpoint due to its geographical proximity and archaic cultural ties to an Indochina that was now rapidly transforming into communist states. A highway system also facilitated the surveillance of Isaan's population, especially those who lived around the edges of the forest and the borderland demarcating the separation of Thailand/Siam from neighbouring communist states. These terrains could no longer be left as porous zones of transition into wild nature. Villages were now regarded as spaces to cultivate, organise and police. The aim was to transform the people on the edge of wilderness into subjects of official nationalism through a combination of development incentives and state violence. Cultivation was now meant to prevent people from taking flight into the jungle where communist insurgents were hiding and building their base.

Consequently, during the Cold War the jungle itself became a space of flight, danger and the habitation of spirits in a different sense from previous cosmological associations. Insofar as its density and depth could conceal communists, insurgents and others fleeing the security apparatus, it was at once a space of shelter and a territory of threat. At the same time, the jungle had the awesome capacity to swallow up the lifeless bodies of slain communists, or those accused of being such. Later on, in the unanticipated aftermath of the massacre of students and other demonstrators in Bangkok on 6 October 1976, the jungle also came to acquire another mournful association: the post-Cold War landscape of history's recurring wreckage. After state forces and ultra-nationalist vigilantes had killed, raped and tortured demonstrators dehumanised as communists intent on bringing down the throne, students and radicals who had survived that day's atrocities disappeared into jungles in the north, north-east and south of the country to join the communist insurgency. But a few years later the Communist Party of Thailand itself was on the verge of collapse, and by the early 1980s most of those who had fled into the jungle were making their melancholic outward exodus. In this sense, from the 1980s, as Siam turned to economic globalisation and the incorporation of ex-radicals under the 'end of history' rubric of Thai-style semi-democracy, presided over by a politically and ideologically ascendant monarch, the jungle became at once a topography bearing the silent remains of neo-colonial and nationalist barbarity while indexing the ruins of a radicalism thus far neutralised of its capacity to haunt (Morris 2003).

Isaan is the region where the story of the dying of Boonmee takes place, and the fact that its once-stigmatised language is spoken in the

film is a political point readily grasped in the context of the film's domestic reception. It is an Isaan of the present in which the barbarity of anti-communist nationalism and the promises of communist and socialist ideals alike have been dead for around three decades, yet their ghosts and creatures endure. More precisely, their creatures and ghosts remain but are suspended in a state of silent waiting: they cannot haunt as yet but neither have they become permanently erased. The logic of assemblage of *Uncle Boonmee* evokes this quality of untimeliness-without-haunting, a stranded temporality.

### Performative Reality

It is useful in this context to differentiate Apichatpong's performative realism from the genre of the fantastic that, at first glance, appears to encompass both *Tropical Malady* and *Uncle Boonmee*. The fantastic is a 'drama of disbelief' played out as a wavering between the competing perspectives of the marvellous and the scientific. The former accepts that there are events in the world which defy rationalist explanation, while the latter seeks to unveil supernatural events as illusions that can be scientifically accounted for (Lim 2009: 29–30). In contrast to the fantastic's hesitation, the diegeses of *Tropical Malady* and *Uncle Boonmee* present worlds in which characters knowingly inhabit non-synchronous time and respond readily, through verbal and gestural acknowledgement or bodily immersion, to appearances, presence and events of a marvellous nature. Often this is also where the charm and deadpan humour of Apichatpong's films lie.

Consider, for instance, how the human characters receive the return of Huay, Boonmee's ghost-wife and Jen's elder sister. Appearing in the frame as a see-through, superimposed silhouette, the spectral shape gently acquires density and turns into an elegant, womanly figure, seated almost facing the camera on the spare dinner chair next to Jen's friend Tong. At the sight of the apparition the three human beings are initially stopped in their tracks, and Tong backs slowly away to stand behind the seated Boonmee. At this point all three humans are in the frame and the ghost is offscreen to the left. Looking quietly startled, Jen gently asks, 'Is that you?' and upon hearing the ghost's response Boonmee calls out her name. This brief hesitation is immediately broken when Tong, the urbane visitor from Bangkok, whispers to Auntie Jen, 'Is that your younger sister?' Her age-sensitive response is the film's humorous way of alluding to the notion that ghosts do not age while mere mortals do, and at the same time Jen's very human



**Figure 5.2** *Uncle Boonmee*. Tong's gesture of hospitality to the ghost

flash of indignation augurs a rhythmic shift. The scene continues in the rhythm of affectionate urgency; long-lost loved ones have much to catch up on. Tong is now seated again next to Huay. Boonmee then hands Tong a glass of water to pass on to her. This is at once a gesture of mundane hospitality, an expression of deep love and care for the ghost-wife who, as the ill man says, must have travelled far to be here with them, and a verification of Huay's material presence through acknowledging the possibility of her maintaining the bodily sense of taste. Tong overcomes his hesitation and gingerly places the glass of water in front of the figure.

Not long after this gesture there is a cut to a medium shot of Tong turning his face to offer a charming smile of friendly recognition to Huay offscreen – a shot held for a surprising duration. Jen asks her sister whether she has been receiving the offerings she has been making to her, a question referring to the Buddhist-animist ritual of making food and other offerings to the dead to ensure that their *anima* does not lack the necessities that would nurture them in the indeterminate time-space of waiting for reincarnation. Huay confirms that she has been receiving the offerings and tells them that she takes comfort in hearing the voices of Jen and Boonmee communicating with her. For the ghost the sound of their voices across the threshold verifies the continuation of her loved ones' attachment to her.

The figuration of Boonsong calls to mind science-fiction iconographies and the intermittent science-fiction (SF) ambient in other works by Apichatpong. It would be stretching the point to distance the critical



enframing of his films from the fantastic only to shoehorn them too closely into SF. They are much less concerned with presenting SF's speculative tendency than with alerting spectators to the motion of otherwise imperceptible life forces in the existing world. But one connection is useful to articulate, insofar as it concerns Apichatpong's presentation of human movement in the jungle. I am thinking here of Vivian Sobchack's classification of low-budget American SF movies of the 1950s and 1960s as movies that attract and disorient spectators by subverting existing landscape and making the familiar appear as alien, thereby creating diegeses in which human beings find themselves 'truly lost in space' (2004: 113).

## Metamorphosis

Keng sets off into the jungle on the trail of a tiger that has been causing the disappearance of villagers and their work beasts. The figure's apparitional form is of a naked human figure with tiger stripes painted on his body. It looks like Tong, who we encounter in the first half of the film as the young man that Keng desires. The camera tracks the body of the actor Banlop Lomnoi in order to record his constant movement, and the editing cuts between long shots of his alert, purposive march into the thicket in the far plane, and close-ups of his face and hands as he pauses to listen to rustling sounds from unseen sources, or crouches to sniff and touch signs of the tiger's presence. The effect is both to maintain Keng/Banlop's body as the focal point in the frame, and also to visualise this body as one that is still acting upon nature as if it were a passive object of his search. The formal arrangement at this point evokes his separateness from the physical environment of the jungle.

This state begins to unravel when he comes face to face with the creature, and shortly afterwards is pulled into rough physical contact with it in a fight. As the film drifts towards the ending there is a greater mobilisation of static shots in close-up and medium distance. What transpires as a consequence of this compositional shift is the concentration of small, irrepressible movements upon the surface of Keng/Banlop's body.

*Tropical Malady* presents a human being's metamorphosis as magnified reflexes leading to the physical learning of new actions. Keng's voyage is similar in this sense to the astronauts who learn to move in the spaceship of Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). Of the latter, Annette Michelson (1969: 59) writes that its exploration of the astronauts' learning to function in the Discovery creates a space, 'somewhere

between screen and spectator', characterised by a heightened awareness of one's physicality, implied to be the epistemic ground of consciousness. In Keng's case, the more bruised and poorly equipped he becomes, the more receptive he is to the darts and tremors of things and beings inhabiting the jungle's shadows. Having come into direct contact with the tiger creature, his body becomes a porous surface rather than the deliberative figure of an observer or searcher. In this duration the soldier hears the message a monkey channels to him. The monkey's chatter, charmingly translated for us via the subtitles, tells Keng that he must either kill the creature or let himself be killed by it in order for the two to be united as 'neither beast nor man'. As the monkey utters its message Keng backs away but does not take his eyes off it. The look of deadly, haunted concentration that intensifies on his face tells us that he fully grasps the animal's counsel.

Inhabiting this same topography of Keng's transformation is a wandering *anima* recently unmoored from the dead body of a cow. Approaching this same point of death-transition as the cow-being, or so it seems, Keng whispers '*ror duay*' (wait for me) to the animation figure, then slowly falls on his hands and feet and begins to mimic the gestures and noises of beasts. During the closing minutes of the film, the movement of time onscreen distils into such transient things as the flickering light of wandering fireflies, and the slow formation of perspiration on the soldier's face as he comes face to face once again with his soulmate, which now has the objective appearance of a tiger on a tree. The close-ups make powerfully perceptible the thickening film of sweat on his face. Tears slowly well up in his eyes in a close-up that shows



**Figure 5.3** *Tropical Malady*. The tiger is a hungry and isolated spirit

– on this surface of taut muscles, glistening sweat beads, and chattering teeth – the time of nascent metamorphosis into another life form.

## Waiting

Keng's metamorphosis feels like a happy ending, one that situates *Tropical Malady* as a redeemer of anarchistic prehistory: the flight to freedom of the pre-moderns in upland and other historically ungovernable refuge zones in South East Asia. In an implicit contrast to this ending's radically nostalgic invocation of primitive origins, *Uncle Boonmee's* presentation of the jungle voyage alludes to another kind of primitive past: those historical experiences of state brutality that have yet to be publicly voiced in Siam. In particular, it points to the presence of one such type of creature stranded among a nation's ruin. These are the lost souls that have neither become, in representation, subjects of the official nationalist narrative that contains loss and impunity within the discourse of the heroic preservation of the throne in the face of the communist threat, nor been articulated as victims of anti-communist brutality in the discourse of the trauma of October 1976, which only began to surface from the mid 1990s. The latter's historical subjects are predominantly those who had been student leaders and activists as the atrocities were committed, and its themes have tended to revolve around ambivalence, silence and the melancholy of the intellectuals (Thongchai 2002). In comparison, Apichatpong makes another ethical gesture of training his gaze lower and further on the ground.

At the dinner table Boonsong tells the story of his transformation. His narration prompts a long flashback scene that begins with an interior shot of a young man standing inside a darkroom, whose attention is caught by a photograph. A close-up of the image visible through a magnifying glass shows us the blurred contour of a monkey-like creature captured mid-flight.

Boonsong the creature recounts that he had 'never shown anyone' this photograph, which had then obsessed him. Boonsong's story is like that of the Chinese painter who is so absorbed by his completed painting that he enters into it while beholding it. The capacity of the photograph to show the trace of a thing the youth couldn't quite decipher had him gripped. The jungle that he then entered in search of the enigma is presented to us as a 'picture', which first appears as a film image of a photograph not seen by anyone else in the diegesis, then as a pro-filmic space made pictorial through the day for night technique. Deeper into the jungle Boonsong discovers its secret: the *ling phi* (monkey ghosts)



**Figure 5.4** *Uncle Boonmee*. The photo that Boonsong has never shown to anyone

existing there. As he utters this name, Huay repeats it in a voice that indicates her immediate recognition. Her son confirms that these were indeed the creatures that ‘we had heard about when we were young’. Boonsong the creature now reveals that his transformation was a consequence of the primordial act of mating with a female *ling phi*. The Boonsong who returns is no longer the young man in the darkroom but neither is he really a ghost. In the jungle he became transformed but did not literally die.

The *ling phi* are ontologically closer to the neither-girl-nor-bird creatures in the Khmer folk tale than the ‘neither man nor tiger’ virtuality gestured at beyond the closing credits of *Tropical Malady*. In the Khmer tale, the sisters’ flight into the jungle physically changes them and keeps them from harm. Edwards (2008) observes that in periods of horror such as took place during the civil war in Cambodia, a tale of this nature would have resonated powerfully with personal experiences of unthinkable violence. The transformation and flight of the sisters spoke for experiences of brutality, annihilation, and the desperate search for safety and survival of those creaturely subjects who belonged in peripheral zones ‘at the edge of the forest’. *Uncle Boonmee* echoes this tale in its allusion to the flight of the weak in an interlinked context of terror. The red-colour motif and the figuration of the apes in the style of science-fiction B-movies, the quintessential genre of Cold War paranoia, call to mind Siam’s ‘American Era’. The presentation of a photograph in its evidential capacity, yet one that visualises an enigma and lacks an accompanying caption performing the transparency of

meaning, recalls a contemporary discourse of the photograph in Siam. The brutality of 1976 exceeds representation but it was the first event of political horror in the country that was widely photographed. During the fifteen years or so of silence that followed the accidental discovery of journalistic snapshots of brutalised bodies and frenzied onlookers, which were circulating quite freely but could neither be appropriated for historiographic narration nor propaganda, was a shared experience of shock that impelled the politicisation of the generation that came after. Juxtaposing Boonsong's description of these creatures as beings in local legend with his figuration as ontologically indeterminate (less and more than human/beast/ghost) calls forth past experiences of flight in the Isaan in which the father and son belong. The disappeared come back as 'neither man nor beast' creatures in the jungle that the human protagonists are told about but do not seem to see. Yet, despite their invisibility to the protagonists, these creatures are visible to us spectators and, through their direct look at the camera, engage our look in return.

Perhaps these silently roaming ape-creatures share a history with Jen's father. Later, in *Uncle Boonmee's* central scene, she mentions the story of his flight during the anti-communist purge, when he received the command from the authority to hunt down communists. To avoid doing so he slipped into the jungle and learned to communicate with animals instead. The flatness of Jen's narration of her father's story is one example of the film's subtle provocation. She cites personal experiences of the civil war that have not been archived: in this case, the flight of powerless locals who wanted to be neither insurgents nor foot soldiers of official nationalism. Through the filmic utterance of Jen's father's story, *Uncle Boonmee* makes generalisable this dimension of personal experience, yet the film does so as if merely wandering into an incidental detail. The same tone is maintained throughout the scene where Boonmee and Jen are waiting for his Laotian carer to turn up for Boonmee's daily treatment. The waiting, and the company of his remaining family member, becomes the duration in which a dying man takes stock of his life. Entirely out of the blue Boonmee mentions that he believes his sickness is the karmic result of having killed too many communists. Jen listlessly tries to reassure him that he did so '*phuea chat*' (for the nation), but Boonmee brushes this response aside with words and gestures that stick in the mind because they are at once so weightless and unresolved. This man must have once been a soldier or paramilitary, a foot soldier of the state who may once have finished off the man who now cares for him. In response to his sister-in-law's half-distracted attempt to give him easy redemption he now mumbles the



**Figure 5.5** *Uncle Boonmee*. For the nation . . . for what?

non-sequitur, '*phuea chat*, for what . . . my waist hurts'. The conversation runs out of steam.

In contemporary Siam, anonymous faces from the Cold War period are represented in national historical discourse via the legibility of two photographic images: either student protestors upholding the Thai flag and the royal portrait, or a bloodthirsty mass. The official nationalist narrative domesticates revolt by linking such images of protestors with the rhetoric of a royalist nation's democratic progress (Morris 2009). There is an iconic photograph of the 1976 massacre. It shows a crowd of mostly young men looking voraciously on while a man is captured in mid-motion gleefully swinging a folding chair at a brutalised corpse that hangs from a branch. This image of a lynch mob out to defend the throne remained illegible until post-Cold War geopolitical shifts made possible the hegemonic articulation of its caption. Thongchai Winichakul (2002) observes that one of the key conditions for partially lifting the taboo against talking publicly about 6 October was the tacit acceptance of the conservative enframing of the event, which associates communist and socialist identification with the mistakes of youthful extremism. It became possible to publicly acknowledge that those who were brutalised and killed were victims only within this rhetoric. The atrocity could now be framed as a fatal combination of youthful extremism and extreme exertion of violence for a legitimate cause, rather than as a state crime. This logic permits a limited form of memorialisation, and discourages efforts to name the truth of culpability and demand accountability at the very top. And within this logic of containment

the shocking photograph hovers ambiguously between an image that evidences the ultranationalist subjectivity of the Cold War period and one that represents the danger of 'political extremism' in general. More recently, during the state persecution and killing of red-shirt protesters, establishment royalists made dire, oxymoronic predictions of a rerun of '6 October' unless the military decisively suppressed the demonstrators. This is an especially perverse example of the conservative appropriation of domesticated old ghosts in defence of an establishment threatened by the challenges of the emergent mass politics of the past decade. Abstracted from the event indexed, the figures visible in the photograph now risk the danger and irony of being translated by royalist nationalism into a physiognomy of the 'tyranny of the mass', their meaning stabilised in terms of a volatile, easily manipulated mass, a dangerous force constantly vulnerable to political brainwashing.

Consider, in comparison, Apichatpong's second provocation in *Uncle Boonmee*. The young fighter Boonmee would have had his place in history secured as one among the majority of murderous though legitimate subjects of anti-communist nationalism, much like the crowd of onlookers in the iconic photograph. But Uncle Boonmee is now a dying man and, as he approaches the finality of this life cycle, the life story that the film enunciates on his behalf both references the image of the murderous mass and subverts the discourse of historical subjectivity that helps secure its continuing reproduction. Boonmee killed communists for the nation, but Uncle Boonmee can no longer remember why he did so. The static shot composition of the film's central scene is such that Jen is seated in profile near the foreground, while the dying man lies on his back next to her and is placed further into the spatial plane. As their strangely insipid conversation grinds to a halt he looks away into the background, and the film cuts to a tighter close-up of his upper body. It holds this shot of a man who can neither remember nor forget; whose face is turned away from the camera to look into the distance. Then there is a cut to a profile shot of Jen as she looks quietly at Boonmee, before she too turns her face away from the camera towards the trees in the background. This is the duration of hesitation. A man no longer wants to commemorate the narrative that was meant to monumentalise his service in action. But neither can he erase the fact that he had killed people once branded enemies of the nation and may be called to account for his action in that indeterminate time-space of transition out of current corporeal form into the unknown.

The photographic discourse of political violence returns during the segment of the film where Boonmee goes to die in a cave. As his eyesight dims, he begins to tell the story of his dream about riding a time

machine into the future. Now Apichatpong cuts to a photomontage accompanying Boonmee's voiceover. He arrives at the city of the future ruled by an authority that hunts down beings from the past and makes them disappear by shining a light on their bodies to forcefully externalise their memory images. Unlike the citation of the photograph as trace in the segment that parallels this one, the photographs presented here strike poses that are at once playful and creepy. A long shot shows a field bordered by a wood in the background. In the distance an orange creature seems to be fleeing in the direction of the trees.

In the foreground the youths, who are visible from behind and dressed in army gear, stand with rifles slung over their shoulders. These photographs perform narrative gestures and belong to an earlier phase of the *Primitive* project. They are, in this sense, records of a participatory art process in which local youths are invited to perform an array of narrative gestures, but this form of 'play' took place in a very particular location. The shots were taken in Nabua, the north-east village where the first fighting between security forces and communist insurgents broke out in the mid 1960s. Knowing this extra-textual information transforms the photomontage into what looks like stilled gestures of reenactment, performed by youths who may well be the offspring of local men that had fled from this 'edge of the forest' when security forces turned up to capture communists. Or, they may be descended from those locals who took up arms on the state's behalf in the hope of ensuring their survival and that of loved ones. The stilled poses as gestures of opening towards a collective narration of repressed social memories are arranged to coincide with the duration of Boonmee's



**Figure 5.6** *Uncle Boonmee*. The pose of capture



tale – a premonition of the eternal present ahead. In this advancing present-to-come, the surveillance state drains untimely beings of memory images and secures social control. The hesitation of the dying man comes back as an echo in this assemblage. The segment presents a forking path to collective remembrance and total amnesia and stops short of stepping further down either way.

The question of social context also returns here via an association: the resonance between this duration of hesitation and the air of collective waiting as a country experiences ‘twilight’. The image of a receding light has become an urgent metaphor to describe the anxiety and anticipation that characterises present Siam’s collective waiting for the death of a king. Ultimately this is what *Uncle Boonmee* is about, a fissured formal arrangement that somehow archives for future spectators an atmosphere of suspension as this country looks backwards and forwards, in dread and duplicity, knowing that an end is coming yet not quite daring to imagine change. Cinema is not especially suited to representing causality and as a filmmaker Apichatpong is not one who narrativises consequential relations. In this respect his commitment as a filmmaker is far removed from those third-world intellectual filmmakers of the past who saw their historical role as one of radical education, raising consciousness through narrativising the causes and textures of a hopeless existence for the political hope of change. And to this extent his take on cinema’s nebulous link to the social seems closer to the utopian impulse enchanting its historically popular forms. Change comes apropos of nothing, but it is the sensation of change that cinema can present so well. Following almost immediately from *Boonmee* and Jen’s drifting offscreen looks after their conversation about the past/*chat*/nation runs aground is the story of a princess who trades her jewels for the possibility of change. In the closing sequence of the film the camera pauses on the unreadable look offscreen of the figure that is Auntie Jen, or her double, or her *anima*, as a Thai pop song plays. There’s nothing especially remarkable about this until one listens to the lyrics. In Apichatpong’s filmic universe a young voice beckons that unreachable thing in the sky to come down to his level, for a change.<sup>2</sup>

## Notes

- 1 But see Teh (2011) and Anderson (2012).
- 2 With thanks to the Leverhulme Trust for an Early Career Fellowship that facilitated the research for this work. The chapter forms part of my project on intermediality, history and cinema experience in Siam.

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