



DIRTY PICTURES

Framing Pollution and Desire in 'new New Queer Cinema'

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In an interview to mark the release of *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010), Apichatpong Weerasethakul told Steve Rose that:

His next project involves his heroine, Tilda Swinton. It concerns the Mekong river, he explains, and will address the relationship between man and water, the catastrophic flooding which is blamed on Chinese dams and diseases spread by industrial-scale pig farming. None of which particularly brings to mind Tilda Swinton. 'It's definitely not going to be a film that will just have a foreign movie star for the sake of it. It's going to be an exchange of ideas, of images, of . . . I don't know. It's like a game for me: the river, the pigs, and Tilda Swinton'. (Rose 2010)

This chapter is a foray into Apichatpong's 'game'. Both politically and critically, it addresses the urgent question of pollution, considering why Apichatpong's films, along with those of contemporary filmmakers Tsai Ming-liang, Lucrecia Martel and Sarah Turner, formally frame meditations on pollution through hybridising cinematic genres, mingling or doubling timelines, letting the camera roll for irregularly framed long takes that revivify Antonioni's 'dead time', and creating leaky and unstable sound spaces. Environmental pollution is paralleled in each film with what could be called human 'pollution': the presence of marginalised human characters such as economic migrants, indigenous people, and lesbian and gay people. The filmmakers share multiple connections: through their (marginal, in contemporary cinema) concern for the natural world; through their marginal location as arthouse/festival filmmakers; and through their marginal identities as gay men and lesbians. B. Ruby Rich informally grouped Apichatpong, Tsai and Martel as practitioners of a transnational, queer, affective 'new New Queer Cinema' during a presentation at the *Screen* conference in 2007 – an insight that makes sense of the presence of Swinton, talismanic icon of queer cinema as Derek Jarman's muse, in the muddy waters of the Mekong.

Queer sexuality suffuses the work of Apichatpong – not only through male characters engaging in flirtations, but as an attitude towards boundaries. In *Uncle Boonmee*, as every critic has noted, a princess has sex with an animatronic talking catfish (possibly Boonmee in one of his former lives), while in *Blissfully Yours* (2002), the film I focus on here, young lovers Min and Roong are nibbled by ants before they nibble each other. This desiring relation between all elements of the immanent world has been related by critics such as Tony Rayns (2007) to Apichatpong's Buddhism, but it is equally a feature of the avant-garde urtext of queer cinema, *Flaming Creatures* (1963). Desire dissolves boundaries of gender, age, era, species and dream across Apichatpong's oeuvre, and its dissolutive power is often analogised, visually, by water: the catfish and the princess commingle under a spectacular waterfall.

Critic Kai-man Chang (2008a; 2008b) has noted the boundary-dissolving properties of water in the films of Tsai Ming-liang: in *The River* (1997) and *The Hole* (1998), water breaks down constructed boundaries between individuals. While this appears destructive, tearing down the house in *The River* erases walls of secrecy and shame in the heteronormative family (and, in parallel, in the paternalistic state). In Lucrecia Martel's films, there is a similar move towards dismantling the white European bourgeois family imported to Argentina, as polluted swamps and flooded dams bring tensions and crimes to light in *The Swamp* (2001) and *The Headless Woman* (2009). In both films, a specific instance of water pollution creates an opening through which a desiring relationship across ethnic boundaries (Hispanic and indigenous) between women, which are also class and age boundaries, could alter the dynamic of the family (and analogically, of the state). Water dominates the soundtrack of Martel's films, as Eleanora Rapan (2007: 45) discusses in her reading of *The Swamp*, where she notes the sonic continuity of 'water – contained in different ways or coming from the sky in the form of rain'. Martel's liquescent soundtracks include the unsettling liquid sounds of a theremin in *The Holy Girl* (2004), which ends with the two teenage female protagonists afloat, fully clothed, in a hotel swimming pool.

Water is a complex metaphor for female sexuality and femininity for all three filmmakers; as Gina Marchetti (2005: 118) argues, 'associated with sexuality, yin/femininity, and the sex industry in Chinese thought, water [is] an important destructive and unifying element in all of Tsai's films'. Reading the film of Marguerite Duras's *The Lover* (1992), Marie-Claire Barnaud (2001: 93–94) suggests that: '[A]fter the nurturing fluidity of (fresh) water follows the monstrous (salty) water of the sea which destroys family relations . . . The river gave. The sea shall take back'.¹

The nurturing river and the monstrous sea are both feminised into the figure of the mother/lover in EuroWestern thought. Alluding neither to an originary state of innocence or availability (the nymph embodies both) nor to a nurturing maternity, new New Queer Cinema's water extends the possibility of connection and immersion, while at the same time creating alienation through its threat of dissolution and its elemental difference. In Martel's films, characters chafe at the inland confines of swamps and swimming pools, while in Tsai's *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone* (2006), the Straits of Malacca act as the unseen route for migrant labourers travelling south and air pollution blowing east. The linear narrative and clear dualism of life and death that appear in the European films Barnaud considers are absent in the postcolonial films I read.

Instead, these films exploit the conflicting nature of water, as itself and as an analogy for desire (which is itself an analogy for a liberatory politics): destructive and generative, life-giving and death-dealing, liberating and dissolute, pure and therefore pollutable and polluting.

Sarah Turner's film *Perestroika* (2009) travels towards one of the world's most polluted bodies of water, Lake Baikal, and draws attention to pollution as a function of retention: because of the lake's depth and size and minimal outlets, water molecules reside in Baikal for up to four hundred years. Pollution, in Turner's film, both is and destroys memory, and therefore both drives and dismantles desire. The pollution of the lake, and the signs of climate change in the Siberian landscape, begin to affect and/or are analogised by the protagonist's disintegrating relationship with her female partner, who has joined her on a memorial journey.

The idea of *miasma*, pollution, is central to the narration of the family tragedy as it emerges from Greek tragedy, and again as it is explained by Freud with reference to the Theban plague that prompts Oedipus' self-investigation, and which is allegorical for the infection of sexual desire that runs through the family. Miasma marks the crisis of matter's interdependence, what Judith Butler names throughout *Frames of War* (2010) as injurability and intimacy. Although the scientific theory of miasma as the basis of infection was disproved by the discovery of germs in the nineteenth century, the moral – and quasi-scientific – force remains, influencing environmental anxieties as well as debates on migration and sexuality, and the ways in which they are strategically drawn together by contemporary conservatives. As Jasbir K. Puar (2007: xii) explores in *Terrorist Assemblages*, there are new normative versions of lesbian and gay sexuality 'enabled through "market virility" and "regenerative reproductivity"' that are considered

non-polluting because they reproduce both capitalism and the nuclear family; Marchetti (2005) observes how Tsai's *The River* critiques such globalised formations. The films I discuss here take up, as Butler has done, the possibilities of queerness for modelling a new interrelation, with an emphasis on the integration of new human interrelations and new interrelations between humans and the environments from which capitalism seeks to alienate them.

These four filmmakers begin by disrupting the identification of landscape with white colonial heteronormativity, and in doing so recover, or release, or reinvent a spiritual access to and meaning of landscape predicated not on naturalising the nuclear family, but on erasing boundaries of all kinds: generational, gendered, sexual as well as national, economic and political. While making clear that both physical access, and a metaphysical relationship, to water is currently bounded by class, gender, ability, nationality and sexuality, these films offer a guardedly utopian possibility of a post-capitalist, post-industrial, postcolonial moment in which, through the crossing, renegotiation or subversion of bounded access, water and humanity radically and mutually return to meaning and sanctity. The films *un-screen* nature, through a filmic relocation of the human in the environment, returning to a more intricate, interdependent and diverse ecology.

Apichatpong's exploration of human-pig-water interconnections may focus on the conflicts over usage as documented by UNESCO's report on water conflict and cooperation in the Mekong Delta (White 2002), a cinematic location that resonates with a specific (and highly cinematised) political conflict: the Vietnam war. Apichatpong's films are never apolitical, often adopting the tangential strategy of locating current events and conflicts within the Thai landscape. *Blissfully Yours* can be read as a romantic comedy, but, in siting the second half of the film in Khao Yai National Park, Apichatpong overlays his young lovers not only with archetypes of Eden and Arden, but with a complex national and transnational history. Khao Yai is in the centre of Thailand, halfway between the capital city of Bangkok and Apichatpong's home province of Khon Kaen, encompassing vital catchment areas for four river systems that stretch across the country. As a network, a river system undermines the duality of margins and centres: the border is connected vitally to the centre of the country by river systems. The drainage systems also cross national boundaries: the Takhong, running north-east into the Mekong, connects Thailand to Laos and on to China; the Saraburi ultimately runs into Burma. The 'artificial nature of geopolitical borders influences water quality and water scarcity. Many of the important water basins of the world straddle political borders'

(Donahue and Johnston 1998: 2). Water seemingly reinforces but materially undoes national boundaries, highlighting their permeability – emphasised by Min’s illegal migration via a river. Khao Yai is a national(ist) symbol, but the film points implicitly towards interdependence, as well as to the significance of the natural for the national. Khao Yai was the first national park in the country, established in 1962 by the resonantly named Boonsong Lekakul (Boonsong is the name of Uncle Boonmee’s son in *Uncle Boonmee*, who becomes, through love, a monkey ghost).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the centre of the forested area was settled by up to thirty households of the Ban Tha Dan people and the Baan Tachal people from the Nakhon Nayok Province to the south. Although formally recognised by the government as a subdistrict known as Pak Ple, the area, due to its distance from the capital, became a refuge for those criminalised and displaced by central government, leading to the cancellation of its subdistrict status and the community’s forcible relocation. Pak Ple sounds like a classic temporary autonomous zone, an area that – in its marginality – exceeds government control. Apichatpong’s young lovers and their older female colleague/friend Orn certainly travel to Khao Yai to locate themselves beyond the state and corporate frameworks that control them from the opening of the film, in which Orn is trying to convince a doctor to provide both medical care and naturalisation for Min, who is a Burmese economic migrant; Roong works in a factory producing outsourced Disney merchandise. Yet the national park is not innocent ‘nature’ beyond the reach of legislation and capital: it was established by law on land taken from the Ban Tha Dan and Baan Tachal indigenous peoples. Vandana Shiva notes that:

Tracing the shift from cultural space to territorial space in Thailand [Benedict Anderson] shows how, between 1900 and 1915, the traditional words *brung* and *muang* largely disappeared because they imaged sovereignty in terms of sacred sites and discrete population centres. In their place came *prathet*, ‘country’, which imaged it in the invisible terms of bounded territorial space. Laws of nature and their universality were replaced by the laws of a police state which dispossessed people of their original homelands to clear the way for the logic of a world market. (Mies and Shiva 1993: 105–6)

While the film is attentive to the lushness of the natural world made possible by national park status, it also unsettles viewers by marking the presence of territorial space and the market through an incessant mechanical whine, eventually located as machinery belonging to illegal loggers, and which directs the viewer to listen *against* the noise and

for water. As Diana James (2006: 88) remarks: '[I]n modern industrial society water becomes a noun and losses [sic] its power as an active verb. Its verbal nature, its voice, is lost in the modern mechanised hum'. Between the aural pollution of illegal logging and the foregrounded sounds of the river and insects (intensified in the edit studio in Bangkok) is Min's voiceover, which reveals that he is an economic migrant and that his skin rash may be caused by hiding from police in a septic tank.² His voiceover repeats a 'pollution' of the frame: text and drawings from his diary that are superimposed on the image. Min is thus a figure of pollution in the supposed purity of Khao Yai. The film ends with the two women bathing him in the water in which he has recently ejaculated: the multiple and contradictory relations of purity and pollution as they are identified with the 'natural' and the 'human' float through the film.

Bodily fluids are part of the transformative, immersive ecology of Apichatpong's films, most notably in *Tropical Malady*, where the film's dual/blended narrative hinges on a scene in which Tong urinates by the side of the road and Keng – a soldier who has been stationed in the countryside near Tong's family house – smells Tong's fingers in their first moment of sexual intimacy. In a post asking what queer writing can do and identifying its radical, corporeal force, Lucas de Lima (2010) asks: 'What if piss, not mind/body dualism and the Enlightenment, provided our radiant stream'.³ In foregrounding carnal nature through a moment of sexuality that is perverse, non-reproductive and homosexual, Apichatpong bodies forth a natural carnality not aligned to Genesis/genetic accounts of heterosexual reproduction, or the heteronormative Romantic sublime. Not only do Apichatpong's films model an ecology (at once Buddhist and postmodern queer) in which humans return to nature through the body, but his films proceed through the 'lovely replicative baroque of ferns and invertebrates (such nice organic prophylactics against heterosexism)' rather than linear cause and effect (Haraway 1991: 150). Temporality and causality are challenged by repetitions, unmotivated shifts of location, doubled characters, absurdist interactions (such as Orn's with the doctor), and the languorous reveries of fixed shots, often accompanied by what one could call the glocal-alia of Thai pop music.

Tsai Ming-liang's films share several of these qualities. *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone*, in particular, shares its dual narrative structure hinging on a repeated character with Apichatpong's *Syndromes and a Century* (2006). Both take up the shifting relation of centre and margins in industrialising South East Asia: *Syndromes* depicts the same characters in different scenarios at two hospitals, one in rural Khon Kaen and one in

Bangkok, while *I Don't* casts the same actor, Tsai's frequent collaborator Lee Kang-sheng, in two divergent roles and differently classed spaces in a single moment in Kuala Lumpur. In one, he is bed-bound in a family home; in the other, he is Hsiao Kang, a Chinese migrant rescued from a beating by Rawang, a Bangladeshi migrant labourer who shares his only possession – a mattress – with the stranger. Hsiao Kang's precarious life (to take up Judith Butler's phrase) in its ecological as well as intimate dimensions is symbolised by the butterfly that alights on his shoulder, but also by an early scene in which Rawang helps him to urinate. The stream of urine produced collaboratively continues, in a sense, to pour through the film (just as the water leaks continuously in through domestic structures and the city in Tsai's *The River* and *The Hole*), manifesting finally in a deep pool of water on which Rawang, Hsiao Kang and Chyi (who has been nursing the bed-bound man as well as having public sex with Hsiao Kang) float out of the film, slowly past the bottom of the frame and into the film's margin.

The pool is a site of the 'kind of unregulated permeability [that] constitutes a site of pollution and endangerment': it both defines (and undoes all definition of) the margin (Butler 1990: 32). Tsai (cited in Chang 2008a: 45) stated that he 'will continue to be interested in people who are blue-collar, marginalised and subjugated'. Ian Johnston (2007) notes a visual manifestation of this concern with the marginalised and/as permeable, arguing that the mise-en-scène of *I Don't* shows that, 'Tsai loves the old, the dilapidated, the derelict, as if these fragile, crumbling, damp structures are representative of their inhabitants at their most vulnerable, needy, and authentically human'. The title of Chang's article 'Drifting Bodies and Flooded Spaces' (2008a) suggests a parallel between these marginalised characters and the marginal spaces they inhabit, as well as the marginal sex acts located there.

Writing about cruising *al fresco*, David Bell (1995: 306) comments that 'the sex act . . . is taking place in *public space* . . . But in terms of the identities of the participants, their knowledge of each other, and the wider "public" knowledge of the activities that go on in a particular setting, public (homo)sex can be very private . . . far removed from notions of sexual identities, sexual communities and sexual politics'. This privacy is delinked from the privacy of home, which excludes queer sex. Tsai's films suggest a new formation of home/privacy that is contingent and temporary, but also located in relation to others through the world. Anne-Marie Fortier (2003: 129) suggests via Avtar Brah's concept of 'homing desires' (in *Cartographies of Diaspora* [1996]), that 'homing desire also refers to a longing to belong, and as such, it suggests that "home" is constituted by the *desire* for a "home", rather than

surfacing from an already constituted home, “there” or “here”. In this sense, home is produced through the movement of desire’.

There and here are confused in *I Don't* both textually through the syncretic globalised soundtrack, featuring such appropriative impurities as the Canto-pop version of ‘Sing a Song of Sixpence’ played by buskers near the start, and paratextually in the knowledge that Tsai is Malaysian-born Chinese but lives in Taiwan, both ‘at home’ and a stranger in Kuala Lumpur. The mattress and the industrial pool are produced as home through the movement of desire towards interconnection between humans, and between humans and the natural world – which is also a movement away from the bourgeois family home/state, and rhetorics of exclusion and pollution.

The moment that links the dual narrative of *I Don't* is the 2005 emergency declared in Malaysia due to airborne pollution from the annual forest fires that occur across the Straits of Malacca in Indonesia. Air currents, like the river systems in *Blissfully Yours*, act both to isolate the characters and remind us of their global connections on circuits of migration. As Johnston (2007) notes, ‘in a radio broadcast [towards the end of the film] we hear the blame for this shifted onto migrant workers and the supposed illegal fires that they light in Kuala Lumpur’.⁴ Politically, the haze is polyvalent, available for re- and mis-interpretation; Tsai uses both his characters and cinematography to undermine politically expedient blame, and redefine migration and pollution as a product of necessarily permeable boundaries in an interdependent ecology. ESCAP (2000: II: IV: D: 2), a UN development agency, notes that it is the lack of state infrastructure in Malaysia, and particularly the neglect of vulnerable poor and migrant communities, that has created the circumstances for waterborne and airborne pollution in Kuala Lumpur, circumstances that inform the urgent melancholy of *I Don't* and its closing embrace of/on the polluted waters/communities of the city.

The politics of pollution are the invisible controlling narrative of Lucrecia Martel’s cinema. While Amy Taubin (2009), among others, has written perceptively about the class and race politics in her films, and their oblique but powerful reference to repressive state politics under the junta, there has yet to be an analysis of the politics of water in Martel’s films.⁵ Martel was born in Salta, northern Argentina, where her three films are set. Regarded as provincial by metropolitan Argentineans, Salta, bordering six provinces and three countries, is both nationally and transnationally a margin-at-the-centre, a border-in-the-middle like Thailand’s Khao Yai National Park. Historically, Salta represents the southernmost extent of the Incan empire. Like Tucumán, which it

borders, Salta was one of the first provinces to have its water supply privatised under the conditions set by the World Bank after Argentina's economic crisis in the mid 1990s. In Tucumán the international consortium led by French Compagnie Generale des Eaux, 'immediately faced sustained protest from water users throughout the province [as . . .] citizens felt that their rights had been violated and opted for a strategy of civil disobedience, refusing to pay their water and sewage bills', leading to a high-profile court battle between the province and the consortium (Giarracca and Del Pozo 2005: 91). The public-private partnership (PPP) with a local company in Salta, however, was considered an economic success by the World Bank, whose report on the project (Saltiel and Maywah 2007: 3) noted that 'a virtuous cycle of improved service leads to increased support to the PPP which results in political willingness to grant tariff increases'.

Yet the PPP was discontinued by the regional government in 2009 due to pollution of the Arenales river. Lomniczi, Boemo and Musso (2004: 65–66) draw particular attention to mercury pollution in the Juramento river water system in Salta, noting that: '[T]he maximum tolerable concentration according to National Law # 24051 of 1 µg/L for drinking water supply, was exceeded in more than 20% at the thirteen sampling points . . . Mercury is one of the most toxic metals, interfering seriously with the human central nervous system'. Both the mysterious origin of the pollution, and mercury itself, are present in *The Headless Woman*: Veronica, the protagonist, works in a dental office whose effluent may be affecting the new local pool, and mercury is traditionally used in dental fillings; Veronica, 'her face frozen in a mask of graciousness', appears to have had both her literal and affective nervous systems damaged by mercury (Taubin 2009: 21). Shortly before the film's release, Argentinean president Cristina Fernandez announced a municipal works funding project specifically for wastewater treatment and flood defences, after serious sustained flooding in the province in 2007 and 2008, to which *The Headless Woman's* flash flood refers.⁶

The characters in *The Headless Woman* are bound together by water, from the opening gossip about the new swimming pool, through the torrential rain that brings Veronica's lover to her marital home, to the corpse in the blocked pipe that connects Veronica's middle-class family to the indigenous village where her sister's gardener lives. Water campaigner Colin Ward (1997: 15) cites and translates Joaquín Costa's nineteenth-century *Colectivismo Agraria en España*, which found that 'water communities . . . are admirable examples of solidarity and social cooperation of a truly marvellous delicacy and perfection, unequalled by the most complex works of precision engineering'. Opponents to

privatised or state water projects 'may form coalitions that cut across class, ethnic, political, and religious lines to protect a water resource that they define as necessary for the continuation of local social and biological life' (Donahue and Johnston 1998: 340).

Such collectivity does not manifest in Martel's films – yet the potential is painfully palpable, always as an unrealised desiring relationship between women, and across a boundary. As Claudia Sosa (2009: 257) notes: '*The Headless Woman* offers one exception to [the] patriarchal machinery of silence. Candita, Vero's 13-year-old niece, is in love with her aunt . . . stress[ing] the non-normative ingredients that Martel attributes to the queer romance'. Candita has an indigenous girlfriend, never named in the film, who shows Vero to, and around, the indigenous village where she is looking for (or looking to erase) evidence that she killed an indigenous boy. Through desire, Candita and her girlfriend extend to Vero a way out of the stifling bourgeois life that has led her to cover up the murder. Candita herself is trapped (symbolically) in bed by a waterborne disease – yet she is the only person who actively swims in the new pool: at once an agent of pollution and a free spirit. 'The purificatory power of water, to wash away all pollution, all sin, all physical filth, is an essential feature in the religious symbolism in societies. This quality does not arise because of its intrinsic purity but because it absorbs pollution and carries it away' (Lahiri-Dutt 2006: xv).

Vero turns away from Candita's ferocious kiss at the end of the film, with its power to absorb pollution because of pollutedness, and retreats to an enclosed world of grown-ups where the 1970s popular Argentinean song '*Soleil Soleil*' both confirms her self-willed bourgeois blindness to injustice (Taubin 2010: 23) and drowns out the water noises that have persisted on the soundtrack from the opening rainstorm. Yet the final shots are through thick, waved glass that submerges Vero and the others at the party in exactly the water – nature, interdependence, vulnerability – whose value they have tried to expropriate (Vero has a European-style lawn garden watered by sprinklers in a semi-arid area), while denying the mutual responsibility entailed in a common resource. Drowning rather than baptising, obscuring rather than clarifying, the watery glass points to water's close relationship with cinema. This underwater blur is an instance of Martel's frequent over-determination of pro-filmic spaces, which make cinematic-as-psychosexual references to Hitchcock and Antonioni; thus, the diegetic world is perceived here through a *film* (water, glass, celluloid itself and cinema history). This parallels the viewer with Veronica as voyeurs disengaged from material experience.

Martel's films ask how, and whether it is possible, to absorb the visual pollutants – including film itself – that maintain the nature/culture dualism and the post-Enlightenment sense of human authority over nature separated into the domain of the visible, and therefore knowable. Her eccentric, irregular framing (often clipping the heads of characters shot in medium close-up), in tandem with her condensed but elliptical storytelling, returns aspects of the world to unknowability and demotes the viewer, like the protagonist, from authority.

Turner's *Perestroika*, a docu-fiction, creates a similar affective resonance between the protagonist's experience of amnesia at a site of water pollution, and the viewer's imbrication in the cinematic ecology. A documentary record of a journey on the Trans-Siberian Express railway from Moscow to Baikalsk, undertaken by Turner in December 2007 to mark the twentieth anniversary of a similar journey with her friend Sian Thomas, who died in Moscow in 1993, the film begins and ends with the image of smoke rising off the freezing waters of Lake Baikal, at once an ecological nightmare and a profound figuration of the painful, illogical ways that memory arises and transforms us. The representation of Baikal is connected, implicitly, to the dual erasure of histories, as it is to the loss and return of memories of Sian: the Soviet erasure of local, folk and religious cultures, and the post-Soviet erasure of Communist history, in whose last moments Turner initially travelled through Russia.

'Lake Baikal, the Pearl of Siberia or the Sacred Sea, is referred to as "Ye glorious sea, ye sacred Baikal" in an old Siberian song. The lake is indeed old: clay samples taken in 1990 show that Lake Baikal is at least 30 million years old, making it the world's oldest known lake' (Van Allen 1996). Centrally located in the Eurasian landmass, yet further from an ocean than any other great freshwater lake, Baikal is another margin/centre like Khao Yai and Salta. Although there are over one hundred chemical industries along the shore, the pollution of Baikal is primarily caused by a cellulose wood pulp and paper mill; while this cellulose is used mainly for clothing, as cellulose acetate or cellulose nitrate it is one of the two components of celluloid. Baikal is becoming film, polluted by film, even as Turner processes it through her video and digital video cameras. The pulp mill was closed in late 2008, but reopened in January 2010 for economic reasons (Harding 2010). The factory, as the town's only major employer in an area potentially recuperable for tourism, is caught on the hook of economic valuations of the environment that 'reduces the biosphere to a subsidiary of the economy. In reality it's the other way round. The economy, like all other human affairs, hangs from the world's living systems' (Monbiot 2010).

The narrator's memories and emotions 'hang' from Baikal as a living system: in particular, the frozen lake stores and, through the journey towards it, releases memories of Sian.

Most haunting are two musical recordings: a tape of Russian traditional singers that Sian gave to Turner on the first trip, and a recording of the group led by Sian singing a canon in a crumbling mausoleum. In reaching towards folk culture and sacred space, *Perestroika* is not reactionary or conservative, but searching as Winona LaDuke (2004: 11) does to answer the question: 'How does a community heal itself from the ravages of the past? . . . in the multifaceted process of recovering that which is "sacred"'. This does not involve a return to the Romantic sublime, nor a loose appropriation of indigenous symbolism. Chumash poet Deborah Miranda (2002: 144) argues that: 'We [indigenous writers] know that if we use natural landscape as metaphor, we are being predictable, but on the other hand, these are not "just" natural images to us. Often, the natural world contains much religious, culturally specific importance that is impossible to ignore but difficult to negotiate'.

It is this cultural specificity which threads through the representation of ecologies and their pollutants in these films, but also threads together their resacralisation. Water rights campaigners themselves return to the resacralisation of water as a precursor to all and any legislative and representational change. Diana James (2006: 85–86), having worked with the Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytatjara people around Uluru in south-western Australia, acknowledges her guides' stories, 'as being the source of my desire to re-sacralise our connections to land and water . . . Symbolic consciousness is as important for sustainable use of water as technological knowledge and regulations'.

While this chapter cannot provide it, we require an equivalent of Laura Mulvey's 1975 definitional essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' that dismantles the ways that nature is screened(-off) on film, exactly as Mulvey argues that women are, in order to secure the viewer's 'mastery of vision', the sublime stance that remains mainstream environmentalism's approach to nature. Rather than psychoanalysis, such an essay might draw on the emerging phenomenology of landscape. Social anthropologist Veronica Strang (2004), who looks closely at communities' understanding of water by connecting symbolic and affective dimensions to water use, informs my approach here, triangulating narrative cinema, environmental science and poetics, in an attempt to respond to Rachel O. Moore's provocative reading of fire and its elemental cinema in *Savage Theory* (2000). The biosphere is constructed through our linguistic and imagistic relationship to it, which

are in turn dependent on (and informative of) our relationships with each other. In his note for the Second Run DVD release of *Blissfully Yours*, Apichatpong comments that: 'A few days after the last scene was shot, the setting was destroyed by a big flood. A large tree in the background plunged into the water and the stream turned muddy. We again thanked the forest goddess [for whom the crew left traditional sacrifices] for allowing us enough sun to capture the beautiful images in our film'.⁷ The story resonates with ecofeminist activist Vandana Shiva's (Mies and Shiva 1993: 6) claim that 'an ecofeminist perspective propounds the need for a new cosmology and a new anthropology which recognises that life in nature (which includes human beings) is maintained by means of cooperation and mutual care and love . . . To this end ecofeminists use metaphors', as these filmmakers do, in a materially engaged strategy that situates culture and nature as imbricated and mutually engendered and engendering. The cinematic image, as image, is always a metaphor, and the camera's attention can work to resacralise landscape through its claim to all the complexities and delights of embodiment. The impure, contradictory game of water and bodies is played for real stakes in, to paraphrase Marianne Moore, imaginary gardens.

Notes

- 1 '[A]lors à la fluidité bienfaisante de l'eau (douce) du fleuve, succède l'eau (salée) monstrueuse de la mer qui détruit les relations familiales . . . La mer a donné. La mer reprendra' (Barnaud 2001: 93–94).
- 2 According to Tony Rayns (2009: 70), Apichatpong had AIDS in mind when shooting the scenes about Min's skin rash. While this chapter does not allow space to consider all the implications of this subtext, I note, following Susan Sontag (1991), that AIDS/HIV is the contemporary condition *par excellence* that conflates physical infection (the virus) and moral pollution (gay sex, drug use or immigration status). In *Blissfully Yours*, the septic tank relates this pollution directly to water, to the bodily processes of urination/defecation and the industrial world's desire to disguise, rather than deal, with them.
- 3 Uncle Boonmee has a kidney disease that requires a drain, and several scenes in *Uncle Boonmee* concern the caring attention of first Jaai, his Laotian assistant, and then Huay, the ghost of his wife, as they assist him with the drain, so that the excretion of pollution becomes a gesture of care and connection.
- 4 Johnston (2007) makes a striking connection between the ecological portent of the dark haze and the prosecution of homosexuality in Malaysia, noting that the film's Chinese title has a secondary meaning of 'a black

- eye', a reference to the accusation of sodomy orchestrated by the Malaysian Prime Minister against Anwar Ibrahim, the former Deputy Prime Minister, in which a stained mattress was produced as evidence. Ibrahim appeared in court with a black eye.
- 5 See also Sandhu (2010) and Sosa (2009) for references to the junta in *The Headless Woman*. With reference to *The Swamp*, several critics make a connection to the junta's alleged practice of dumping the bodies of *desaparecidos* at sea from helicopters. While this is a powerful resonance for the amnesiac/revelatory nature of water in Martel's films, and particularly the body found in the drain in *The Headless Woman*, the films make no specific reference to the sea.
 - 6 Retrieved 1 December 2010 from <http://www.bnamericas.com/story.jsp?sector=4&idioma=I¬icia=468571> Problems continue: Eltransigente.com.ar reported a complaint over alleged water contamination in the Argentine province of Salta with demands for around 4.8 billion pesos (\$1.17 billion [U.S.]) to cover damages and recuperation costs from company Aguas del Norte, the local consortium formed to take over from the PPP. (Translation retrieved 13 July 2011 from <http://www.freshfruitportal.com/2011/04/28/argentine-province-in-hot-water-over-contamination/>)
 - 7 Retrieved 1 December 2010 from http://www.secondrundvd.com/release_more_by.php

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