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The Jungle as Border Zone: The Aesthetics of Nature in the Work of Apichatpong Weerasethakul

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In Thai cinema, nature is often depicted as an opposition to the urban sphere, forming a contrast in ethical terms. This dualism is a recurring and central theme in Thai representations and an important carrier of Thainess (khwam pen Thai). The filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul offers a new take on this theme. Significant parts of his work are set in the jungle, a realm radically different from the agricultural sphere that the mainstay of Thai representations tends to focus on. In Apichatpong's work, the wilderness becomes a liminal space, on multiple levels. This paper focuses on how this liminality translates into Apichatpong's aesthetics of the jungle and on how this aesthetics and the films' narrations negotiate Thai nationhood via the perception of the spectators.

Keywords: *Film Studies; Thai Cinema; Identity Politics; Cultural Studies; Thailand*

Im thailändischen Film wird Natur oft im Kontrast zu Urbanität gezeichnet. Dieser Gegensatz wird dabei auch auf eine moralische Ebene übertragen. Er ist ein wiederkehrendes, zentrales Motiv in thailändischen Repräsentationen und ein wichtiger Träger der sogenannten „Thainess" (khwam pen Thai), der nationalen Identität. Der Filmemacher Apichatpong Weerasethakul nähert sich diesem Motiv anders an. Zentrale Passagen seines Werks spielen im Dschungel, der einen gänzlich anderen Bereich darstellt als die domestizierte Natur der üblichen Landschaftsdarstellungen. Im Werk Apichatpongs wird der Dschungel auf mehreren Ebenen zu einem Grenzbereich. Dieser Artikel untersucht, wie sich dieser Grenzstatus in Apichatpongs Ästhetik widerspiegelt und wie diese filmische Ästhetik und Narration das thailändische Konzept des Nationalstaates kommentieren.

Schlagworte: *Filmwissenschaft; Kino; Identität; Kulturwissenschaften; Thailand*

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Introduction

In an article on the Thai director Apichatpong Weerasethakul's film *Tropical Malady*, film critic Graiwoot Chulphongsathorn wrote about his impressions after the film's premiere:

> *After the credits ended, I wanted to embrace the film and slowly melt into it. Momentarily, I did not exist and felt no different from the wind in the middle of the jungle at night. Every time I close my eyes, the images of the jungle still haunt me (Graiwoot, 2006).*

It is characteristic for Apichatpong's work that this vivid, sensory experience described as dissolving into the film takes place during a scene set in the jungle. Landscapes and nature play a pivotal role in his films, especially the jungles and forests of Isarn, the North-East of Thailand. This border region has long had a status of marginality and otherness in relation to central Thailand, the seat of the capital, the nation's centre of power and the region that defines the official version of national identity.

Among the various figurations employed to establish and reinforce this sense of state-proposed national identity and locality, nature is an important, recurrent trope. In state-approved, conservative mainstream representations, nature is typically depicted as domesticated or as exotic. The jungle, on the other hand, stands opposed to this mode of representation. As Arjun Appadurai has pointed out, localities, in the sense of relational, contextual communities, are made up of neighbourhoods as social forms. These are often defined in opposition to their other:

> *The production of neighbourhoods is always historically grounded and thus contextual. That is, neighbourhoods are inherently what they are because they are opposed to something else and derive from other, already produced neighbourhoods. In the practical consciousness of many human communities, this something else is often conceptualised ecologically as forest or wasteland, ocean or desert, swamp or river. Such ecological signs often mark boundaries that simultaneously signal the beginnings of non-human forces and categories or recognizably human but barbarian or demonic forces. Frequently, these contexts, against which neighbourhoods are produced and figured, are at once seen as ecological, social and cosmological terrain (Appadurai, 1996, p. 183).*

In this sense, the North-Eastern jungles in Apichatpong's films form a cultural and political other to the centralised state power and the nation. Their liminality is aestheticised and narrated in a way that offers an experience of liminality to the viewer, positioning him or her in a decentred way, producing an alternative point of view to

the official one conforming to central Thai state authorities.

This paper explores the ways that Apichatpong's films as aesthetic and narrative systems create a liminal experience for the viewer. It starts out by sketching a background of more current, compliant modes of landscape and nature depictions found in Thai mainstream cinema, that contrast with Apichatpong's idiosyncratic depiction of the jungle, continuing to examine the cinematography and framing, the plot structures as well as the depiction of the supernatural. The main focus is on the feature films *Tropical Malady* (*Sud Pralat!*, 2004), *Blissfully Yours* (*Sud Saneha*, 2002) and *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (*Loong Boonmee Raluek Chat*, 2010). My interest lies in the way this liminal positioning of the viewer reflects and comments on various figurations of the border zone: the mindscapes of the characters, the aesthetic design and its sensory implications, and the region of Isarn. I conclude by asking about the implications of the spectator's positioning as enabling transgression of official nationhood and citizenship and as creating an alternative locality and identity.

Idealised, Domesticated, and Exotic: Nature in Thai Mainstream Cinema

The idiosyncrasies of Apichatpong's depictions of nature become more evident when seen in the context of Thai mainstream nature representations. As a starting point, I shall therefore sketch out two modes of prevailing landscape representations to provide a backdrop to the following discussion.

The aestheticised depiction and description of nature is a recurrent figure in various Thai intellectual and artistic traditions. A frequently employed motif is that of country life and the agricultural, often depicted as rustic paradise or utopia. The bucolic abundance and purity of nature are opposed to the sphere of the metropolis. As Thai scholar May Ingawanij explains in her study on this topic, the Bangkok-rural divide is

> *a fundamental contrasting trope in Thai intellectual, literary, and artistic traditions . . . . In modern Thai cinema, this contrast has above all been articulated in ethical terms: through devices such as characterization and mise-en-scene, the ideal of inherent rural goodness, morality and beauty is configured as a limited form of ethical critique of the metropolis (May, 2006, p. 81).*

In the moral dichotomy formed by country life and the urban sphere, the city is typi-

cally equalled with materialism, capitalism, human coldness, Westernised modernity, and ecological decay; it is usually a vile and corrupt place lacking basic human values. Country life, on the other hand, is shown as a peaceful, idyllic, holistic way of being, where humans exist in harmony with nature. The rural village is an idealised home, characterised by moral goodness, egalitarian cooperation, and simplicity of life. Nature provides for the humans who clearly position themselves at the centre of this innocent and pure world; the natural is idealised and domesticised.[2]

The appeal of the motif of rural utopia has turned it into a feature employed in various ideological discourses, even by some as opposing as radical left-wing intellectuals and royalist-nationalists (May, 2006, p. 81). It has become an essential cornerstone for the construction of *khwam pen Thai*, the sense of national identity usually translated as Thainess. In its official, state-propagated, conservatively nationalist version, this identity often evokes the mythic rural ideal, used as part of a retro rhetoric to conjure nationhood. In this 'heritage' discourse, also found in modern cinema, the idealisation of country life is linked not only with patriotic love of the land but also with the fantasy of self-sufficiency and autarchy.[3] It nostalgically re-imagines a pre-modern past and constructs it as an element of 'authentic' Thainess, as opposed to hybrid cultures of globalised modernities. In this narrative, the imagined ideal Thai village represents the idealised nation state, characterised by unity and traditionalism.

Another mode of nature depictions often employed by modern Thai cinema is the self-exoticisation of landscape. As Yinjing Zhang has observed about so-called world cinema and its position in the global film market, the visual beauty of landscape has become an important selling point of non-Western films to a Western audience (Zhang, 2002, p. 32.). This development goes hand in hand with the commodification of landscape and nature for tourism that has come up since the late 1960s, with the rise of mass tourism and traveller culture. Accordingly, Thai films often revel in the country's natural beauty, presenting iconic images of beaches, palm trees and paddy fields that seem to cater to the gaze of foreign tourists. According to Rachel Harrison, many Western films on Thailand

2 On the imagined ideal Thai village, see Hirsch (2002, p. 262).

3 On the heritage discourse and heritage films, see May (2007).

> *incorporate a . . . set of fantasies in their exploitation of a view of Thailand that has been lodged in the Western imagination and fostered by the Tourism Authority of Thailand's promotion of an "Amazing Thailand": one of exotic landscapes, verdant nature, vibrant colours, serene spirituality, explosive cuisine, balletic martial arts, bucolic peacefulness, total relaxation and sensual pleasures. As Thai cinema of the 21st century seeks increasingly to appeal to international audiences, it is this set of images which it perforce takes as the necessary ingredients for their entertainment (Harrison, 2005, p. 326).*

The self-exoticising representation has been a feature of Thai cinema since the 1970s, when Thai cinema first travelled abroad to European festivals, and is found in the work of directors such as Vichit Kounavudh and Cherd Songsri. Apichatpong describes the impact of the landscape depictions by these directors as follows

The two directors used scenes from the Thai landscape beautifully. Even when they filmed buffalo, they were beautiful. When they filmed the villagers, some fully clothed, some not, you could smell the earth. It was as if I was seeing the beauty of this jungle where I lived for the first time (Apichatpong, 2009, p. 107).

Thus, nature becomes a signifier for Thainess in this representation mode as well, not only for a foreign audience and market but also for a domestic gaze. Although landscape is, in these films, typically shown as savage, primitive and exotic, it is at the same time semi-domesticated, being commodified and made accessible by the tourism industry.

Isarn and the Nation's Borders

Apichatpong's films are set in a geopolitical border zone: Isarn, the North-East of Thailand. The region has a complex history of migration. Before the definite establishment of the border at the beginning of the twentieth century, the borderline was not mapped out and thus more fluid. After the definition of the border in the 1893 treaty between Siam and French Indochina, the region was annexed and became Siamese territory, forming a buffer zone toward the French colonies. Its inhabitants were now newly identified as Siamese, regardless of their ethnic or regional background (Thongchai, 1994, p. 165). Thus, the newly demarcated border created a frontier area with a new identity and a new classification system for its population.

The process of incorporating the region into the nation state continued throughout the twentieth century. In a campaign for 'Thaification' during the 1940s that aimed to homogenise the nation's identity, while omitting the diversification of eth-

nic origins, Isarn's Lao origins were 'deemphasised': the central government forcibly replaced the Lao language and alphabet with Thai. At the same time, the region remained socioeconomically underdeveloped and, being an agricultural area with harsh climate conditions, very poor; the building of infrastructure was neglected, and Isarn people were discriminated against by the population of the central regions.

As Thongchai Winichakul has pointed out, the Thai border is not only a demarcation line between nations but also becomes a symbol of separation between a constructed we-self and otherness, a system of binary oppositions that have at their centre the dichotomy of internal and external (Thongchai, 1994, p. 164 & p. 169). Due to its remoteness and its closeness to the external, the North-East was seen as a critical region in terms of opposition to the centralised power in Bangkok and of resistance in terms of the defence of local identity (Baker & Pasuk, 2009, p. 173). During the Cold War, Isarn was perceived as a breeding ground for communism by the government. It served as a hiding place for members of the Communist Party who fled from state repression to the North-Eastern jungles. In the official discourse propagated by Thai state authorities, communism is situated as belonging to the other, as external, since it is perceived as a major enemy of the state and of Thainess (Thongchai, 1994, p. 169). Regarding communism in Isarn, the 'external' was, in fact, perceived as internal and the region as a potentially dangerous place for the nation's unity. The Border Patrol police and the army oppressed local communities, suspecting them of sympathising with communism

> *[In rural areas,] the term "border", as it turns out, signifies the demarcation of otherness from Thainess, rather than signifying a geographical definition. The discourse on the geobody provides an effective figuration to equate the subversive elements within the Thai society with the external threat. Thus the Border Patrol is the force to safeguard the border of Thainess against the enemy – who are definitely outside such a border, no matter where they really locate. As it happens, this police force can be found operating anywhere from the border areas, among the minorities . . . in a village of Thai peasants well inside Thai territory . . . to an urban centre like Chiangmai. . . . The "external" may not really be external; the "internal" can be made alien or external. In every situation, the discursive domain of Thainess remains homogeneous and unified. In turn, moreover, the terminology of the geographical discourse, terms such as border, becomes ambiguous. It may signify something other than space or geography (Thongchai, 1994, p. 170).*

Until today, Isarn retains the status of backwardness, marginality and potentially renegade. While it is not as disconnected from the perceived unity of the nation as to be considered non-nation, it nonetheless is often perceived as not-quite-nation, as a

region of otherness separated from the official Thainess of Bangkok and the Central region.

Apichatpong's films address the liminality of this region: The rural setting, the distance from the nation's centre, and the cultural otherness are mirrored in various elements of the films such as the importance of local beliefs, the characters' accents, and the departure from official state order. The world of his films is that of small provincial towns with idiosyncratic everyday culture: The style of restaurants, temples, and open-air shows indicate a clear distance from the nation's centre.[4]

The fluidity of the nation's border in this region is present as well in Apichatpong's work. In a scene at the beginning of *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*, the protagonist Boonmee and his sister discuss the region's language and its Lao roots as well as the fact that it is hard to understand for central Thais. The border issue reappears later in the film when Boonmee visits migrant workers from Laos employed on his farm.

In *Blissfully Yours*, Min, an illegal Burmese immigrant, is a figure of otherness. While he spends peaceful time with Roong, his Thai lover, the border between the nations seems to dissolve.

Of all of Apichatpong's films, perhaps *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* touches on the issue of Isarn marginalisation most directly. It is shot in Nabua, an Isarn village with a history of violence: During the communist persecutions of the 1960s and 1970s, its male population was tortured and murdered by state security forces. This traumatic past is echoed in the film's location, in Boonmee's memories of fighting against communists as well as in the fact that the film was made in the context of a larger project called 'Primitive' that touches on the subjects of remembering and reconstructing the brutal treatment of the Isarn population during this period.

The presence of nature is a pervasive topographical feature of Isarn. Sparsely populated, the region is a rural area spotted with provincial towns and scattered villages. In Apichatpong's films, nature is highly visible – neither as an agricultural landscape nor as the iconic tourist spots that often figure in Thai film but in the form of the jungle.

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4 On Apichatpong himself as an Isarn native and a liminal figure in the global film industry, see May & MacDonald (2006).

Splitting Storylines: The Jungle as Sphere of the Other

In Apichatpong's work, the jungle becomes crucial for action and a key element that sets the very tone of the films. It is a radically different world, populated by spirits, mysterious beings, and half-animals. It is the realm of dreams, the non-rational, of secrets and desires. Whoever enters it leaves the safe communal space of the town or home and faces the unknown. While Isarn is a liminal region, the jungle appears as an extension and intensification of this liminality; as the sphere of small towns is still ruled by societal conventions and communality, it is in the jungle that individuality becomes foregrounded.[5] As Apichatpong (2009) explains in an interview, "emotions are revealed by the jungle, it becomes a kind of mindscape. Sometimes it is a character. It is also a stage" (p. 126).

Apichatpong's cinematographic framing depicts landscape as a territory utterly unmarked by civilisation. There are frequent panoramic shots devoid of humans and of any icons of civilisation such as telephone poles, cross-country roads, or distant farmhouses. The countryscape appears as a wild, pre-modern land not yet staked out as anyone's territory. Its unspoiltness is of a much more untamed nature than that of the agricultural rural idyll discussed previously that centres on humans; landscape here is savage, autonomous, and sprawling without a centre.

The narrative structures emphasise the jungle's otherness. In some way or another, the films all feature a shift from a town, a house or a village – a domesticated space – into the wilderness, or vice versa. These shifts structure the films, breaking them into halves and changing their mood. Besides being a change of setting, the shift is also a move into irrationality, into a radically different space where the familiar order of society is no longer valid.

Apichatpong's first fiction feature *Blissfully Yours* sets out in a provincial town, showing Min and Roong, an illegal Burmese immigrant and a young Thai woman, preparing to leave town for a day trip. After various errands and preparations, they drive to a nearby forest where they spend the day wandering about, eating, swimming, and having sex. With this transition, the film shifts in setting, and the mode of togetherness between the protagonists changes. The forest enables their being to-

5 For an in-depth discussion of liminality and the jungle in *Blissfully Yours*, see May & MacDonald (2006).

gether without having to hide Min's illegality; it becomes a space where lovers from two different sides of a highly problematic border – the Thai-Burmese one – can be together without restrictions (May & MacDonald, 2006).

Tropical Malady is evidently split in two parts. The first half of the film focuses on the budding love story between Keng and Tong, two young men living in a provincial town. After more than 50 minutes, this storyline abruptly ends, and a new part begins, clearly marked with a black shot, credits, and a title (*The Spirit's Path*). The film now follows a young forest ranger (who might be Tong) in search of a tiger spirit (who might be Keng) in the jungle. During this search, he gradually assimilates to the jungle, gradually losing his soldier's clothes, his weapon, and his sense of identity. Finally he confronts the tiger spirit: Shaking with fear, he recognises his own self in it and surrenders, or succumbs, to it.

The split is equally remarkable in *Syndromes And A Century* that sets out in a provincial hospital, depicting a series of episodes. After roughly the first half of the film, the mood and tone change suddenly, as does the setting: Another hospital appears, this time technologically up-to-date and with modern decoration. While some of the characters and dialogue echo the first part, the episodes change. The lush verdant exteriors of the first half are substituted by the stark white interiors of the modern hospital. In this sense, *Syndromes And A Century* reverses the shift from civilisation to nature found in the other films.

Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives tells the story of a dying elderly man who returns to his farm in the countryside to spend his final days there. After encountering the ghost of his wife, who passed away years ago, and his son, who has turned into a monkey spirit, he wanders into the nocturnal jungle in their company and lies down in a cave where he dies. The shift into nature here marks the beginning of his transition from life to death.

Inner Wildernesses: Obscurity and the Soundscape

The shift from a space of communality and civilisation into the space of nature is a break in the storyline, not merely in terms of geographic relocation; it also marks an inner shift of the protagonists' mental and emotional states. Leaving societal conventions behind and immersing themselves in solitude, the jungle becomes a bor-

der zone where the protagonists access their inner worlds and open themselves to changes. They experience various kinds of existential borderlines: Boonmee meets supernatural beings and confronts death; Min and Roong from *Blissfully Yours* each open up to someone from a foreign country and escape the societal restrictions this relationship faces (May & MacDonald, 2006); in *Tropical Malady*, the ranger follows his obsessions, fears and desires, looking into his own soul.

In these physical and psychic transgressions, the jungle is at once a catalyst and a mirror of inner states. As Apichatpong explains, this idea stands at the very centre of *Tropical Malady*.

> *Everything is a part of the landscape, the jungle. The jungle leads us beyond social and cultural codes, to a state of nature where humans must confront themselves to find themselves. Society increasingly makes us forget our inner lives and concentrate on the outer ones. In the second half of the film, the jungle is omnipresent, darkness reigns, and the heightened awareness of the soundscape lets mental images arise. In the first half, daylight and the sense of sight dominate. This coexistence of two very different, incompatible spheres and the tension between them is the idea behind and the topic of the film, it shows in its structure. (Mandelbaum, 2004, p.21;* translation by N. Boehler*)*

Darkness is in fact a remarkable feature in the jungle scenes. There are many night shots and even in broad daylight, the dense foliage filters the light. The murkiness of the images makes it hard to discern the action at times. While sight is the primary human sense and the sense most addressed by the medium of film, Apichatpong's cinematography in the jungle scenes seems to subvert this primacy. Its obscurity makes us rely much more on the aural than on the visual. As if entering a different sensescape, the characters and we as spectators must adjust to the darkness, letting our awareness shift to the soundscape.

Many elements of the soundtrack are recorded with a microphone held very close to the objects. This lends the scenes a strongly textured sound quality and a highly visceral feel: the closeness and three-dimensionality of the sound heighten our awareness of the cinematic space and of the corporeal. If, as Michel Foucault has pointed out in *Discipline and Punish* (1977), the dominant, rationalising mode of seeing links the gaze with power, supervision and control, the obscurity of the jungle here can be understood as its Other, the irrational and sensual. Thus, the inner shifting that the protagonists experience also happens on the level of the senses: the soundtrack is accented while the image, which usually is cinema's prioritised level of expression, is obscured, causing visual disorientation. This disorientation is further emphasised by

the soundscape's frequent use of an indefinable, diffuse noise as ambient sound. Its source is unclear, not located in the image. This lends the images an intense depth of space and, at the same time, makes this space highly diffuse and puzzling in terms of orientation.[6] Thus Apichatpong, by realigning the usual channels of sensual perception and confusing spatial orientation, enables us to renegotiate our use of the senses, much in the way his characters renegotiate their sense of self.

Transgressions: Decentred Characters

Being such a different sphere than the characters' everyday world, the jungle requires a slow approach. Getting there is a journey, entering it a transgression from the familiar into the wild and unknown. Accordingly, Apichatpong shows these transgressions at length and with attention to atmospheric detail. A recurrent element of his films is long drive scenes in which the characters' faces are shown in close-up shots, framed by car windows and the landscape zipping by. Typically, these scenes are accompanied by music and have a dreamy feel, evoked by the characters' silence and pensive gazes.

Another typical element is shots of the characters walking into or wandering around in the jungle. The style of these shots is consistent throughout several films: the characters are typically shown from a distance, appearing small amidst the magnificent vegetation. They are framed by the camera in a decentred way – in the frame's corners, along its edges –, adding to the impression of their marginalisation. While classical cinema style basically centres on the human figure, these non-anthropocentric images seem to suggest a decentring of the human world on a figurative level: entering the jungle, the protagonists face a sort of higher being which they are subjected to. The cinematography underlines the characters' marginalisation by painting these scenes in monochrome colour schemes that sometimes even let the characters appear camouflaged. Appearing in brown and green tones and low lighting, the characters seem to disappear into the foliage as if being absorbed by nature or perhaps uniting with it. Both the driving scenes and the scenes showing wanderings in the jungle typically appear hypnotic, almost trance-like.

6 On the use of surround sound as disorienting, see Flückiger (2001, p. 320).

Spirits: The Jungle and the Supernatural

The decentredness of the human character in the frame is echoed in the cosmology that organises the world depicted in Apichatpong's work. In Thai folk belief, which is rooted in local animism, nature is strongly linked to spirit belief: all natural beings have a soul, a spirit, and can thus connect to the human world. Nature and its spirits form a higher order that pervades human life, nourishing and influencing it. The fact that there exist essentially good and bad spirits shows a strong ambivalence towards spirit life. The relationship between humans and nature, and human communication with the spirits of animals and plants are crucial to Thai folk belief and the attitude towards nature: man is not opposed to but assimilated into his natural environment via the spirits, both benevolent and malevolent (Phra Anuman, 2009; Suvanna, 2004a; 2004b).

In this way, the jungle is a liminal sphere where the human and the spirit world meet. The borderline between the natural and the supernatural is fluid; humans can transgress it. The strong connectedness between humans and nature spirits stems from local non-dualist belief systems that originate from before the introduction of Buddhism and its establishment as state religion.

In Apichatpong's work, the jungle is inhabited by spirits and ghosts. Animals and animal spirits interact with humans. In *Tropical Malady*'s second part, the tiger spirit plays a crucial role. He lures the male protagonist Tong through the jungle appearing in various ways: as a human figure with a tiger's tail, a mysterious man-like creature, and a tiger. Besides, Tong meets a monkey during his search that advises him, speaking to him in monkey language, which Tong magically understands – unlike the spectator who must rely on the subtitles the film provides. Later on, Tong is guided along his path by a firefly and by the ghost of a dead cow. Nature seems to watch over and lead him. In *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*, Boonmee is reunited with his son, Boonsong, who has gone missing years ago and now returns to him as a monkey ghost, a half-human, half-monkey character. After telling him about his transformation, Boonsong accompanies Boonmee during his last days and his journey to his final resting place. Another episode in the same film tells the story of a princess who mourns her lost youth and is consoled and seduced by a catfish that makes love to her in a forest pond.

The non-anthropocentrism that appears in the films' decentred framing of the human figure also shows in sequences that focus on animals, casting them as characters and as agents in the films' plots – such as the catfish and the monkey mentioned above. Another animal protagonist appears at the very beginning of *Uncle Boonmee Cho Can Recall His Past Lives*: we see a water buffalo grazing in a field, then breaking loose and running into the jungle until it is finally found by its owner. It is not entirely clear to us how this sequence is linked to Boonmee's story. Eventually, we figure out that the buffalo might have been one of his past lives. However, this is never clarified. This unspecified status of this episode renders it all the more mysterious and establishes the buffalo as an independent protagonist of its own, self-contained short story in which it plays the main role as a non-human agent.

Remarkably, both spirits and animals are integrated into the image and the narration with utter casualness. They seem to inhabit their own space in the narrative alongside human characters, not rivalling them nor being of minor importance, either: the narrative treats them as equal, without the hierarchisation of humans over other beings.

Also, there is a very sparse or sometimes even non-existent marking of the supernatural. The usual filmic codes such as fades, whoosh sounds, shock effects or similar, are hardly employed. Instead, Apichatpong's aesthetic cultivates a kind of naturalism of the supernatural. Ghosts and spirits appear on screen without much spectacle. The tiger spirit in *Tropical Malady* simply emerges, just as the firefly and the cow ghost. In *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*, Boonsong, the protagonist's long-lost son, comes home for a family dinner as if he had never gone missing. It is in the same manner that he is greeted: 'Have something to eat', he is told, and asked, 'Why did you let your hair grow so long?'

By juxtaposing the supernatural beings and the humans, the narratives stress the co-existence of both. The naturalist aesthetics, meanwhile, emphasises the casualness with which the films let their spectator see the invisible, immaterial, letting the spectator partake in the liminal position of the films' characters, human and supernatural.

Being the sphere of the supernatural, the jungle becomes the realm of pre-modern, local belief systems that exist alongside Buddhism, which is by state declaration the official religion and a strong carrier of the state-proclaimed version of national

identity. Forming a sphere different from this identity, the jungle here becomes a carrier for local identity, that of a marginalised region. The jungle and the spirits that populate it transport local cultural memory that returns through the liminality of the jungle.

Conclusion: Alternative Aesthetics, Unofficial Identities

In Apichatpong's work, the jungle becomes the figuration of a border zone on multiple levels. Besides being set in an actual geopolitical frontier region, the films address the border zone between the living and the dead, the human and the non-human, the modern and the pre-modern, and between Thainess and the non-nation. The boundaries between these dichotomies are not rigid but instead appear fluid and at times even dissolving. The jungle as non-domesticated landscape is an in-between space that invites liminality, providing a setting for the transgression of these boundaries. Its role refers to that which is, in official discourse, usually marginalised and othered: obscurity, the irrational, the repressed, and the sensual.

Apichatpong's aesthetics of the jungle emphasise obscurity, the aural, and the decentredness of the protagonists, recreating an experience of liminality through the positioning of the spectator. With this defamiliarisation of nature, Apichatpong creates an alternative mode of representation that resists the conventional gaze on Thai landscape and strongly differs from the aesthetic of nature depictions in recent mainstream cinema, where nature is shown as domesticated, beautified, and anthropocentric, or as exoticised. The alternativeness aligns itself with the status of Isarn as a border region seen as ethnic and cultural other and discriminated against by the central Thai government. In this way, the films confront official Thainess with localness and otherness, making alternative identities visible that are rooted in a pre-modern age before the establishment of the modern Thai nation state. These alternative localities, in Appadurai's sense, revise the concept of the nation from a peripheral perspective, from which the traumas inflicted onto the marginalised by state power become speakable.

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