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# *Subverting the master-narrative: An analysis of Isan's role in Apichatpong Weerasethakul's cinema*

*Loong Boonmee raleuk chat*, 2010, Kick the Machine.

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## Introduction

Apichatpong Weerasethakul (1970-) has been one of the most prominent and influential independent directors of the past decade. His work has divided audiences and critics alike and has received its share of critical acclaim, culminating with his victory of the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival in 2010 with his film *Loong Boonmee raleuk chat*/*Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010). Even though he was born in Bangkok, Weerasethakul grew up in Khon Kaen, located in the northeastern province of Isan, where both of his parents worked in a hospital. After obtaining a bachelor's degree in Architecture at the Khon Kaen University he went on to earn a MFA in filmmaking at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, before returning to Thailand where he would make his first feature length film. He has written and directed all his work himself and although the credits for editing in his films go to Lee Chatametikool, Weerasethakul is usually involved with the editing process himself as well. He has been working with the same crew for the past two decades, doing research all over Thailand before writing and shooting his films. In several interviews he has stated that he makes films for and about Thai people, and I believe his work can be seen as a reflection of his ambiguous relationship with Thailand and an exploration of his own memories as well as those of his crew members and other people living in Thailand.

His work has been characterized by a lack of classical narrative structures, the ease with which he seems to overthrow cinematic conventions (such as opening credits appearing halfway throughout the film) and the vague distinction between reality, dreams and memories, all of which make his films difficult to grasp and interpret. Added to these aspects are many distinctly Thai elements such as homages to local soap shows, traditional songs and the presence of Thai myths, superstitions and religious rituals, which are more often than not shown without accompanying explanations and therefore difficult to interpret for most non-Thai audiences. In the analysis of his work, two recurring trends can be observed. Critics and scholars such as James Quandt, Tony Rayns, Tilman Baumgärtel and Lorena Cancela have mostly praised the formal qualities of his work, noting how his films defy traditional structures and toy with the medium and its conventions, and praising them for their dreamlike quality, labeling them with terms such as 'visual poems', 'dreams', 'mirages', and often simply as 'Mysterious Objects', in reference to the English language title of his first feature

length film *Dokfa nai meuman/Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000).[1] On the other hand, several other critics and scholars such Kong Rithdee, David Teh and Benedict Anderson, have put more emphasis on the political and social dimensions of his work, but their work has been scattered and sparse.[2] As a result, several elements playing a key role in his films have been underexplored or even largely ignored so far.

This thesis will seek to overcome some of those shortcomings through exploring the unique function the space of the province of Isan, which is located in the north-east of Thailand and borders Laos and Cambodia, has in his work. All of his films so far are - at least partly - set in Isan and the region's history with(in) Thailand allows for it to be used as a space that enables Weerasethakul to restage, re-construct and even reimagine the past, giving it a central and crucial role in many of the concepts explored and challenged in his work. In this thesis I will analyze how Weerasethakul uses this place for more than ethnographic purposes, utilizing it as a space to explore his country's past, its collective memory and its borders, addressing issues ranging from nationalism, national identity and homogeneity to the role of minorities and immigration, among others. At the same time, through exploring often obscured (hi)stories and narratives in this region, his films challenge and subvert state-constructed or -approved versions of history and reality and manage to question topics such as the self-evidentiality of the nation-state. I will return to these topics after discussing the literature that has appeared on his work over the past fifteen years, which includes essays by film critics, film scholars, and scholars from different fields as well.

My sister, who is arguably more intelligent than me and has seen her fair share of art house films as well, went to see Weerasethakul's latest film *Rak ti Khon Kaen/Cemetery of Splendor* (2015) when it was released in theatres earlier this year**.** Unacquainted with Weerasethakul's previous work, she went in without any preparations or expectations, apart from knowing the interest I took in his work. When I asked her what she thought of the film afterwards**,** she told me she did not understand the meaning nor the motivation behind many of the - in her words 'bizarre' - scenes. Her only possible explanation was that the main character of the film was either crazy or very lonely and the whole film probably took place inside her head. She did

[1] For a more detailed analysis of this trend, see James Quandt, "Resistant to Bliss: Describing Apichatpong" in *Apichatpong Weerasethakul* (Vienna: Synema Publikationen, 13-104, 2009), p. 14

[2] Kong Rithdee has written about Weerasethakul's cinema on several occasions as a critic for the Bangkok Post, David Teh's work has appeared in *Third Text*, but focuses mainly on Weerasethakul's installations and Benedict Anderson's essay has appeared in the same book as James Quandt's essay. I will return to their work later.

not dislike the film though; she was just puzzled by much of what she saw. I do not want to attach too much value to one example, but I think her reaction is telling for some of the problems many audiences (cinephile, scholarly or otherwise) face when they watch Weerasethakul's work.

Endless variations of similar reactions to his work can be found on online (film) discussion platforms and I have experienced similar responses while talking with several Film Studies graduates about his work. One of the apparent results of this is that most of the writing by (usually foreign) scholars has focused on elements that present them with fewer struggles. In "Resistant to Bliss: Describing Apichatpong", film curator and programmer James Quandt is fully aware of much of the shortcomings of both scholarly study in general and his own writing on the work of Weerasethakul, as he argues that his own earlier articles "resort to the tactics of much writing on the director", namely "an automatic default to locutions of bafflement, of succumbing and surrender, the invocation of cosmic enigma and poetic unreason, of the indeterminate, ineffable and oneiric […] seemingly to stanch or forestall the hard work of interpretation."[3] In this essay Quandt attempts to overcome these shortcomings, and challenges several earlier interpretations of Weerasethakul's work. He argues that his work "combines and ethnographic impulse, affectionately recording Siamese superstitions, folk ways and popular tales, with a modernist sense of every tale being *made*, of the ambiguity, the unreliability of truth."[4] Despite his effort, he still falls in the same traps he recognized in the beginning of the essay and continues to try to classify his work in terms of Western categories, genres, art movements and comparisons to other directors. This is exemplified by statements such as "post-modernism […] can hardly be avoided in discussion of Apichatpong"[5], even though he later states that he believes the term to be too vague and overused. While the essay itself is an interesting and surprisingly self-aware reflection on both his work and the critical response of it, the title of the essay itself is telling, as Quandt limits himself to simply describing what happens scene after scene. To venture much beyond *describing* what we see in his films and how it affects us is apparently a challenge most Western film scholars have not dared to face. Quandt asks himself at the end of his analysis of *Sang sattawat*/*Syndromes and a Century* (2006) "I wonder, too, if the many comparisons that have been made between Joe and others […] suggest a kind of critical impasse, an attempt to

[3] James Quandt, "Resistant to Bliss: Describing Apichatpong" in *Apichatpong Weerasethakul* (Vienna: Synema Publikationen, 13-104, 2009), p. 14
[4] Ibid., pp. 18-19
[5] Ibid., p. 24

describe the ineffable by an accumulation of equivalence."[6] I am inclined to agree with him here.

Michael Sicinski argues that this lack of concrete analysis of Weerasethakul's work and the celebration of its 'ethereal' and 'dream-like' qualities in both the writings of scholars and film critics is more understandable if we accept the proposition that Weerasethakul, in his unique approach to narratives, is "essentially an avant-garde filmmaker."[7] He compares writing about his films to writing about the work of experimental filmmakers such as Stan Brakhage and Nathaniel Dorsky and analyzes the formal qualities of Weerasethakul's films (mostly focusing on his usage of light and sound) that make them "feel like dreams or ineffable hallucinations."[8] Trying to venture beyond merely describing his work, Sicinski does suggest that part of the qualities and the reason for admiration of Weerasethakul is that he is able to "harness and manipulate the "dreamlike" and the "ineffable" for distinctly political ends."[9] However, Sicinski fails to elaborate or even to return to this argument during the rest of his essay and exactly what political ends he had in mind remains unclear. He concludes that Weerasethakul's films offer various challenges to critics and scholars and that it is 'our' responsibility to take these challenges on.[10] On first glance, the 'our' here seems to refer to film critics, scholars, or anyone writing about film, but Sicinski talks about a 'we' and 'us' throughout his essay, and briefly tries to explain himself in the beginning: "I'm afraid I'll need to be a little vague here, although I don't mean to be. It's a perennial question, one of esthetic, sociological, and political import, exactly who the self-identified "we" who love films like Apichatpong's really are - "cinephiles," "film geeks," "the festival set," or perhaps just "the rarefied world of the film cognoscenti"".[11] Although he does seem to recognize the implicit significance of this kind of framing, Sicinski sort of jokes around the topic and does not really comment upon it. Although I do not doubt his good intentions, I believe this usage of a 'we' and 'us' here seems to presuppose a sort of audience Weerasethakul's film are intended for: a Western, educated audience which attends film festivals and film houses. Although such an approach from critics and scholars towards cinema from non-Western countries (and especially towards films not intended for large distribution in their own

[6] Ibid., p. 99
[7] Michael Sicinski, "Dreaming in Cinema: Capturing the Imagination of Apichatpong Weerasethakul" in *Cineaste* (New York: Cineaste Publishers, Inc., 36:2, 2011), p. 27
[8] Ibid., p. 27
[9] Ibid., p. 28
[10] Ibid., p. 29
[11] Ibid., p. 26

country) has received its share of critique, it remains prevalent in (Western) film criticism. This is tied to both a larger debate on the use of terms such as world cinema and third world cinema, as well as a related discussion on the term 'third cinema', which I will return to towards the end of this introduction.

In "Cinematic Past Lives: Memory, Modernity, and Cinematic Reincarnation in Apichatpong Weerasethakul's Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives", Anders Bergstrom explores the way Weerasethakul's film deals with human memory through its exploration of reincarnation. He suggests that "the film points to the way that memory offers a connection to other temporalities and histories through the exploration of reincarnation and incarnation of human and animal subjectivities."[12] Drawing largely upon Andre Bazin's exploration of the photographic image as a manifestation of the desire to defend against time and overcome death, his essay touches upon several interesting points. Bergstrom suggests that the themes explored in *Loong Boonmee raleuk chat*/*Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* include "the construction and deconstruction of identity, and how cinema as memory addresses the breakdown of legitimated histories and identities at the same time that it offers the possibility of their recuperation."[13] While this creates an interesting angle from which to explore his work, Bergstrom is more concerned with how cinema itself functions *as* memory or as a representation of memory, or - drawing upon Russell Kilbourn's exploration of the concept - as a meta-archive.[14]

Comparing his films with those of Andrei Tarkovsky, Bergstrom seeks to place his films in a "long line of films about memory that explore the processes and problems of cinematic narrative and how memories mark their presence upon characters' identities."[15] He focuses extensively on the contrast between the material world (modernity, exemplified by Bangkok) and the spiritual (i.e. Buddhist) world, suggesting that Weerasethakul's cinema helps overcoming this dichotomy through juxtaposition of both realms.[16] While this provides an interesting angle to his work, Bergstrom is overly concerned with trying to place and explain every detail within a Buddhist framework. And although I do not disagree with his conclusion

[12] Anders Bergstrom, "Cinematic Past Lives: Memory, Modernity, and Cinematic Reincarnation in Apichatpong Weerasethakul's Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall his Past Lives" in *Mosaic* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba, 48:4, 1-16, 2015), p. 3
[13] Ibid., p. 3
[14] Ibid., p. 5
[15] Ibid., p. 3
[16] Ibid., pp. 8-10

that his films "illuminate the paradox of contemporary Thailand, where rapid modernization and traditional spiritual practices live side by side."[17], I think this is only a small part of the subjects touched upon of this film, and this is an observation from which analyses could depart, rather than an actual analyzation of his work. For all his interest in the identity, history and memory of the people the film portrays, Bergstrom's description of the place where the film takes place (which I would say is at least as much a part of the characters identities and histories as any of the other elements he explores) does not go beyond "the mostly-rural northeastern region of Thailand."[18] Still, his essay offers several interesting angles to approaching Weerasethakul's work which makes his contribution worthwhile.

In her essay on Weerasethakul's first two films, Lorena Cancela mainly focuses upon the stylistic characteristics of his work as well, describing the soundtrack and applauding the formal qualities. She traces how both *Dokfa nai meuman/Mysterious Object at Noon* and *Sud sanaeh/Blissfully Yours* (2002) share similar concepts and ideas with films of Michelangelo Antonioni, Jean Renoir and even with the painting of Édouard Manet, and pays homage to the act of cinephilia itself.[19] Despite all the elements she traces back to European films of the twentieth century, she concludes that his combination of "consciousness and unconsciousness, fantasy and reality, image and symbol, is something that only a few Western film-makers have achieved."[20] Other scholars have even less to say about the places and histories informing Weerasethakul's work, often dismissing it with stereotypes usually associated with the region such as 'poor' and 'rural'.

As the examples discussed here show, most scholars and critics have focused on the aesthetics of the work (describing it in terms such as mirage-like) and have sought to categorize his films in terms of western concepts and (art) movement and to trace the influences of Europeans art house directors, American avant-garde artists such as Andy Warhol and sometimes well-known East-Asian directors such as Hou Hsiao-Hsien, all of which Weerasethakul was exposed to while studying in New York. However, there are several elements in his work, some of them hinted at in the discussion above, which have hardly received any serious attention from scholars and critics. Few scholars have sought to dig

[17] Ibid., p. 13
[18] Ibid., p. 4
[19] Lorena Cancela, "The Films of Apichatpong Weerasethakul: Towards a Wiser Cinema" in *Metro Magazine* (Melbourne: Australian Teachers of Media Publishing, 138, 122-125, 2003), p. 123
[20] Ibid., p. 124

deeper into his films and analyze how they utilize space and the various histories, discourses and narratives they offer, and their significance as a, to paraphrase David C.L. Lim, site of cultural interpretation or intervention.[21] Still, there are some exceptions to the pattern I have sketched above. Most of these are either Thai (such as film critic Kong Rithdee) or scholars from different fields of specialization, such as Benedict Anderson. In his illuminating essay "The Strange Story of a Strange Beast: Receptions in Thailand of Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Sat Pralaat*", Anderson sought to challenge several persistent assumptions surrounding his work, such as the claim that Weerasethakul makes films for a foreign audience. In order to do so he researched the local reception of *Sud pralad/Tropical Malady* (2004) by interviewing people. I will return to his results in the next chapter.

The most insightful analysis of his work I have come across so far however, is offered by art critic, curator and scholar David Teh, who focuses on his installations (and his first feature length film) and analyzes their conversation with contemporary politics in Thailand by placing them in a history of narrative and artistic traditions in Thailand. While analyzing his work, Teh also criticizes the ahistorical survey and commentary on his films by other scholars and critics so far which, in his words, "at best […] affords a survey of his filmography in terms of Western art cinema aesthetics" and "at worst […] descends into mystification and exoticism."[22] David Teh criticizes both cinephile (in the form of film critics) and scholarly approaches to Weerasethakul's work so far, arguing that the work often "goes uncontextualised, disengaged from the place and time, and the culture, that inform it."[23] He is critical of most of the contributions to the book on his work edited by Quandt as well, accusing them to "prefer to riff on what is ineffable about his style, rather than venture any historical context, a shortcoming typical of the commentary to date.".[24], arguing that they merely focus on formal qualities of the work (applauding his unique style) and obscure non-Western influences (this includes both the influence of South East Asian History, and of Thai films and other works of art). Rather than tracing Western film influences, Teh explores similarities with other Thai artists that preceded Weerasethakul.[25]

[21] David C.L. Lim "Introduction" in *Film in Contemporary Southeast Asia: Cultural Interpretation and Social Intervention*, eds. David C.L. Lim and Hiroyuki Yamamoto (London: Routledge, 1-22, 2012), p. 3
[22] David Teh, "Itinerant Cinema: The Social Surrealism of Apichatpong Weerasethakul" in *Third Text* (London: Routledge, 25:5, 595-609, 2011), p. 595
[23] Ibid., p. 598
[24] Ibid., p. 598
[25] Such as the work of Vasan Sitthiket, Manit Sriwanichpoom and Sutee Kunavichayanont.

Teh eventually makes an argument to classify his work as Itinerant cinema, and argues that his work ultimately finds its place within a history of resistance, found in Thai culture and arts throughout history, such as the *nirat* (travel poem), which have resisted and challenged the institutionalization of distance. He draws upon Walter Benjamin's essay on storytelling to make the distinction between distance across time (institutionalized in the form history) and across space (institutionalized in the form of fixed places and borders) and argues that itinerant cinema offers "narratives in which what happens next is largely a matter for the nation's under-represented others."[26] This "resistance to fixity and certitude" is exemplified by *Dokfa nai meuman/Mysterious Object at Noon* in the form of "A history without dates, a map without place-names, a documentary without facts."[27] It is an insightful approach towards Weerasethakul's work, which opens up new ways of looking at his films and in the final chapter I will show how his other work indeed challenges several specific narratives concerning both time and space in subtle and indirect manners. Exploring his films from this angle and placing his films within a context of a history of resistance is reminiscent of what Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino argued cinema should aim to accomplish in their influential manifesto on the role of a Third Cinema, which could serve as a counter-cinema against the dominating cinema of the first and second world. When they discuss the political function of Third Cinema, they argue that "there exists our culture and their culture, our cinema and their cinema. Because our culture is an impulse towards emancipation, it will remain in existence until emancipation is a reality: a culture of subversion which will carry with it an art, a science, and a cinema of subversion."[28] Who exactly constitute the 'our' and the 'their' changes from time to time and place to place, but the essence of a subversive counterculture and -cinema against the culture and cinema imposed by those with the power and money to do so remains intact.

Here, I want to conclude with the proposition that there is another reason why concrete and in depth analysis of Weerasethakul's work has been sparse and scattered, a reason that is often unacknowledged (and sometimes ignored or denied), and which has primarily been informed by my own experiences in both Film Studies and Area Studies. It concerns the framework within which many western scholars - seemingly involuntarily and unaware - operate. This framework includes a certain hegemonic vision on both what constitutes film (including film

[26] Teh 2011, p. 609
[27] Ibid., p. 609
[28] Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino. "Towards a Third Cinema" in *New Latin American Cinema* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1969, p. 109

analysis and film history) and what constitutes history. This framework, whether conscious of it or not, automatically translates to a lack of (historical and cultural) knowledge of regions other than the West, and sometimes perhaps the lack of interest in these aspects as well. This influences and informs both the sources people use and the points of view much Western viewers take when confronted with non-western works of art. This is underscored by many recurring elements in the writings on Weerasethakul's films, such as the points of reference used in analyzing his work, which range from (experimental) Western filmmakers to, well, Western filmmakers.[29] Another consequence of this is that films from non-Western countries, including those by Weerasethakul, are often categorized and classified in texts or festival programs 'World Cinema' (and sometimes as 'Third World Cinema'), which sometimes results in all non-western films being grouped together in one section. In contrast to this, the term Third Cinema and the theories connected to it receive far less attention. In the introduction of *Rethinking Third Cinema*, Anthony R. Guneratne argues for the legitimacy of Third Cinema Theory and argues that the lack of reference and acknowledgement towards it in studies of non-western cinema stems primarily from "Eurocentric critical prejudices"[30] and "Eurocentric critical perspectives".[31] The aims of Third Cinema Theory form an effective point of reference to depart from when analyzing Weerasethakul's films, as his films can be interpreted and analyzed as a form of resistance against both national and international forms of domination, both in terms of people portrayed in cinema as well as conventional forms of style and structure ubiquitous in both Hollywood and art house films. Even the name of Weerasethakul's own production company, Kick the Machine, invokes associations with resistance and subversion.

David Hanan makes an argument similar to that of Guneratne in his introduction to *Film in South East Asia: Views from the Region*, when he states "Of all the national cinemas of South East Asia featured in this book, only one (the Indonesian cinema) received any discussion in the recently released *Oxford History of World Cinema*".[32] Aside from the fact that the Indonesian film industry has not nearly been as productive as those of several other countries in the region, the claim to present a history of *world cinema* while excluding many non-

[29] This is, of course, an exaggeration, but one that is certainly not too farfetched. Sometimes the influence of well-known East Asian directors is remarked upon, or a small acknowledgement of other contemporary Thai directors is provided, but rarely anything else.
[30] Anthony R. Guneratne. "Introduction: Rethinking Third Cinema" in *Rethinking Third Cinema*, eds. Anthony R. Guneratne and Wimal Dissanayake (London Routledge, 1-28, 2003), p. 9
[31] Ibid., p. 10
[32] David Hanan, "Introduction" in *Film in South East Asia: Views from the Region*, ed. David Hanan (Hanoi: SEAPAVAA, 14-31, 2001), pp. 14-15

western countries itself is telling. This neglect is even more striking if we delve into the rich history of the film industries of some of these countries or consider the fact that the Filipino film industry has been one of the most productive in the world. Hanan follows this statement by, rightfully, challenging the hegemonic Western view of film history that continues to dominate much thinking and writing about film. Not much has changed since Hanan and Guneratne wrote their introductions over a decade ago, and I believe this same hegemonic view continues to inform (unconsciously or not) much of the writing on cinema today, including the writing on Weerasethakul's work. As both a graduate in Asian Studies and as a 'Westerner', I feel it is the task of this thesis to make an effort to, even if only on a very small scale, challenge this hegemonic view in the West as to what constitutes both film history and film analysis. In order to accomplish that, I feel it is necessary to provide an account of some key elements in the modern history of Thailand that will both provide us with a richer context and framework in which we can place Weerasethakul's films and make it easier to understand several recurring elements in his work. This thesis will consist of two chapters, each informed by these two (separate) fields of research. The first chapter finds its base in the field of Area Studies. The second chapter utilizes elements from this field as well, but is equally grounded in the field of Film Studies.

The first chapter will start with a short elaboration on the geography and the formation of the national borders of what is now known as Thailand, a historically constructed and clearly outlined place which we can find in any atlas. Subsequently I will dedicate a small section to explain the concept of *Khwampenthai* (Thainess) and its construction and finally I will provide a short elaboration on Thailand's recent history, focusing on the province and population of Isan in particular and elaborate on some of the consequences both Thailand's geography and the concept of Thainess have had for minorities. For this chapter I will draw both on concepts developed by Benedict Anderson, Arjun Appadurai and Homi K. Bhabha and on Thongchai Winichakul's influential case study *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (1994). I am indebted to Martin Platt's *Isan Writers, Thai Literature: Writing and Regionalism in Modern Thailand* (2013) as well, in which he explores how comparable issues I am dealing with here have been challenged in literature from the same region.

In the second chapter, I will analyze Weerasethakul's four latest films and discuss several scenes in order to show how the films relate to the concepts discussed in the first chapter. I

will focus on three aspects in this chapter: the way Thai people are portrayed, the use of language and dialogues and the subtle social commentary we can find in them, and finally, the formal structures of these films. I will show how these three aspects relate to Thailand's present and past, the relationship between Isan and Thailand and how they are both informed by the topics discussed in the first chapter and explore how these issues still affect the lives of people living in Thailand today.

## Chapter 1: Institutionalized spaces: Isan vis-à-vis Thailand

### 1.1 *The production of history and borders*

Even though scholars such as Benedict Anderson, Thongchai Winichakul and Arjun Appadurai have questioned and challenged the sustainability of the current nation-state as the dominant global form of community and have proposed that nations will eventually dissolve or disappear and make place for new types of (perhaps global) communities and communal identities, nations and nation-states (and related concepts such as nationalism) continue to exist among the most powerful and influential constructions in modern society today. Although Thailand is often referred to as the one South East Asian nation that was not colonized, many elements found in current day Thailand are results of colonial presences in South East Asia, usually of interactions with the British (in the neighbouring countries of what are now Myanmar and Malaysia), the French (in what are now Laos and Cambodia) and the many smaller, local kingdoms that used to make up the area before the boundaries were drawn as we know them today. As Winichakul has shown in his acclaimed study of the creation of the geographical body of what is now called Thailand, the creation of the borders as we know and acknowledge them today has been the result of very complex history. It is a not just an outcome of struggles for power and possession between Siamese overlords, local kingdoms and British and French interests, but also a combination of a number of arbitrary decisions, clashes, different ideas about what constitutes sovereignty and/or borders, misunderstandings based on language and translations, and a clash between Western views of administration and registration and traditional overlord tributary states and areas, to name but a few elements that played a role. As Winichakul states: "The definition and domain of nationhood are not given. They are constructed, carved, inscribed, fabricated. Nor is its unity given."[33] In other words, a nation's geography, its borders, its national language and many of its other aspects are not a natural given, but an arbitrary (and relatively recent) construct, and they are partly the product of modern technologies such as mapping. It is not surprising that within the borders of Thailand a variety of ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic groups exists, all with their own ambivalent relationship with both the concept of Thailand as one (homogeneous) nation and standardized Thai as the national language. Similarly, it is not surprising that it is not a natural given for people living within many of the border regions to

[33] Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), p. 173

identify as Thai, and that the way they perceive their own identity might clash with Thai identity as it is perceived and projected by the state. I believe this complex relationship is one of the key factors that inform Weerasethakul's films and I will return to it in the next chapter.

In his introduction to *Nation and Narration* Homi K. Bhabha talks about the "ambivalent margin of the nation-space", he elaborates:

> To reveal such a margin is, in the first instance, to contest claims to cultural supremacy […]. The marginal or 'minority' is not the space of a celebratory, or utopian, self-marginalization. It is a much more substantial intervention into those justifications of modernity - progress, homogeneity, cultural organicism, the deep nation, the long past - that rationalize the authoritarian, 'normalizing' tendencies within cultures in the name of the national interest or the ethnic prerogative.[34]

It is exactly on such an ambivalent margin that Weerasethakul's films are located. They can be seen as an intervention, an alternative narration of (his) nation. I believe it is somewhere between these two realities, between the centralized, homogeneous and 'natural' Thailand that is projected outwards by the state, and the everyday reality as it is lived and experienced by local people, in the various regions each with their own variation of minorities, languages and (often largely obscured) histories, that Weerasethakul's films find their voice. These margins can be located anywhere, but in the case of Weerasethakul's cinema it is located in the space of Isan, a region which has been either obscured or stereotyped in national and international representation. Using both the space and the rich history Isan offers, Weerasethakul's film challenge, subvert and undermine the sustainability of strong ideologies such as ethno-nationalism and the self-evidentiality of the nation-state. Through alternative memories, stories and narratives, they challenge the validity of one, state-approved version of history and, ultimately, truth and open the way for marginal, multi-faceted stories, identities and experiences and give voice to some of the realities and stories that have been actively and necessarily obscured or erased in order for Thailand to be able to exist in its current state. For, to quote Ernest Renan: "Forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation".[35] These films can be seen as an intervention, an alternative narration of Thailand. But anything with political connotations is difficult to address in Thailand, especially if you want your films to be shown in Thailand itself as well.

[34] Homi K. Bhabha "Introduction" in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha. (London: Routledge, 1-7, 1990), p. 4
[35] Ernest Renan. "What is a Nation?" in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 8-22, 1990), p. 11

Therefore, any commentary has to be either very subtle or symbolic. In order to subtly address such issues, one can opt for several strategies. Weerasethakul has already made it a little more obvious for foreign audiences by the English language titles under which his film have been distributed abroad, which he has chosen himself and are rarely direct translations of the Thai titles. For instance, the Western distribution title *Tropical Malady* refers to his idea of the Thai military as a disease for the country, while the original title, *Sud pralad* translates as *Strange Beast* or *Strange Monster*, which refers to the mythical monster Keng encounters in the jungle in the second half of the film.[36]

Another tactic is to invent new forms and structures through which one can address such issues. And rather than simply praising these structural inventions as beautiful and ineffable dream-like mirages, we can also explain their purpose through a quote from "Towards a Third Cinema": "The possibility of discovering and inventing film forms and structures that serve a more profound vision of our reality resides in the ability to place oneself on the outside limits of the familiar."[37] These films also allow themselves to be read as allegories. Aijaz Ahmad has suggested that rather than thinking in national allegories, as argued by Frederic Jameson, we should "start thinking of the process of allegorisation not in nationalistic terms, but simply as a relation between private and public, personal and communal".[38] He later argues that "Literary texts are produced in highly differentiated, usually very over-determined contexts of competing ideological and cultural clusters, so that any particular text of any complexity shall always have to be placed within the cluster that gives it its energy and form".[39] I believe this is true for any text (in the broadest sense of the term), and it is such a context that I try to, if only partly, unpack in this chapter. That is why it is important to look not only at Isan, but at its relation with both the rest of Thailand (usually represented in the form of Bangkok) and its neighbouring countries as well.

Weerasethakul himself has made no secret of his troubled relationship with his home country, arguing for instance that Thailand is "peaceful but full of violence"[40] and that "Coming from a

[36] Benedict Anderson, "The Strange Story of a Strange Beast. Receptions in Thailand of Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Sat Pralaat*" in *Apichatpong Weerasethakul* (Vienna: Synema Publikationenen, 158-178, 2009), p. 158
[37] Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino. 1969, p. 125
[38] Aijaz Ahmad. "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory" in *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 95-122, 1992), p. 110
[39] Ibid., p. 121
[40] James Quandt. "Push and Pull: An Exchange with Apichatpong Weerasethakul" in *Apichatpong Weerasethakul* (Vienna: Synema Publikationenen, 158-178, 2009), p. 186

small town, I understand well the discrimination that is prevalent in Thailand. […] It's almost as if it's a way of life".[41] In several interviews, Weerasethakul has recalled how he was confronted with his Isan background upon arriving in Bangkok for the first time, and how this has influenced his relationship with the city, recalling how people would laugh when he told them he was from Khon Kaen and how this became, in his words, "a chip on my shoulder" and "something I disliked about Bangkok".[42] Being far more outspoken in interviews than in his films, he has also said he has become more and more dissatisfied with the current state of affairs in Thailand, arguing for instance that he feels "this military is raping the country in the name of national security" and "I feel hope for cinema, but at the same time, I feel hopeless for the country."[43] Recently, he has even toyed with the idea of relocating to a different country for future films, partly because he does not feel comfortable making films in the post-2014 coup environment, stating "It's tough, it's suffocating" and "Of course I'm scared."[44] Considering such statements, it is not a coincidence that his relationship with Thailand and his Isan (and Khon Kaen) background has informed his work. In sometimes subtle and unexpected ways, this ambivalent stance towards his home country makes his works challenging and subverting. I will return to the region of Isan in more detail shortly, but there is one other concept that needs explanation first.

### 1.2 *The production of Thainess*

Since the administrative reforms of the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, which were modelled partly on those of the Dutch and the British, one of the key projects of the then Siamese kingdom has been the creation and regulation of an official national identity. This is an ongoing project which can still be observed today. Any national identity comes with assumed, imagined and usually unquestioned inherent qualities. In Thailand, these qualities come together in the idea of *Khwampenthai*, roughly translated as Thainess. While an exact definition of this concept does not exist, it is assumed that every

[41] Ibid., p. 183
[42] See "Only Light and Memory" http://www.criticine.com/interview_article.php?id=34 (accessed 28th of September, 2016)
[43] "See Apichatpong Weerasethakul Talks 'Cemetery of Splendor'" http://waytooindie.com/interview/apichatpong-weerasethakul-on-cemetery-of-splendor/ (accessed 22nd of September, 2016)
[44] See "A Homeland Swansong: Apichatpong Weerasethakul on *Cemetery of Splendor*" http://sensesofcinema.com/2015/feature-articles/apichatpong-weerasethakul-interview (accessed 30th of July, 2016)

Thai citizen is aware of its existence and its ancient, inherent virtues.[45] Out of both necessity and simplicity, Thainess is usually defined by what it is not. Apart from qualifications stemming from the most obvious identifiers such as nation and ethnicity, Thainess can be identified through other qualities it does not possess as well, such as religion (with 'Muslim' as the most apparent example) or political conviction (communist), even though people identifying with these groups do live in Thailand.[46] Furthermore, what has been included and excluded from this concept has differed from time to time. More important than a strict definition of a concept however, is the belief in the existence of the concept, i.e. the strength of its (imagined) construct. In order to maintain Thainess as a strong construct, it is constantly regulated (and reshaped) by instances such as The Commission for National Identity and the Border Patrol Police.[47]Although officially responsible for border security, Winichakul argues that border has to be seen as a symbolic term here, and not as a signifier of a geographical entity. The border they patrol is the figurative border of Thainess.[48] In extension, television and radio stations are obliged by law to strengthen and promote national identity through their programming choices.[49]

Over the past centuries ethnic, religious, regional and other differences have been necessarily obscured and rewritten to serve national representations, such as those found on TV or in papers. In "The National Picture: Thai Media and Cultural Identity", Annette Hamilton shows how national broadcasting in Thailand has played an active part in the construction of a shared Thai identity through its programming. She argues:

> [The broadcasted programs] provide a central sense of shared national identity to people all over the Kingdom, irrespective of their local histories and differences. To be Thai is to know and understand the significance of certain kinds of narratives and to be able to interpret them in meaningful ways that are incomprehensible to outsiders. The Thai state, by promulgating a national television policy that rests on

[45] Winichakul 1994, p. 3
[46] Depending on the purpose/aims, various qualifications have been highlighted as 'not being a part of Thailand and/or Thainess' throughout history. See Winichakul 1994, p. 5-6
[47] For an explanation of the commission, see Winichakul 1994, p. 4, for an explanation of the BPP, See ibid., p. 170
[48] Ibid., p. 170
[49] Annette Hamilton, "Rumours, Foul Calumnies and the Safety of the State: Mass Media and National Identity in Thailand" in *National Identity and Its Defenders: Thailand, 1939-1989*, ed. C. Reynolds (Clayton: Monash University, 341-379, 1991), p. 357

local production, has successfully created a distinctive sense of identity that poses "Thai people" against "foreign others".[50]

However, this state-regulated form of Thainess does not conform with many un(der)represented minorities and the way they experience everyday life in Thailand. Hamilton argues that local identities find their expression in "a wide variety of local practices, rituals, places, and shared histories that seldom if ever appear on television"[51] Where useful, such local rituals and histories have been appropriated and transformed to serve as expressions of national culture. In different periods a variety of minorities (ethnic, religious, etc.) and their expressions have fallen under the strain of nationalist tendencies and the creation of one national identity.[52] In order to obscure or deny the backgrounds and realities of many minorities not corresponding with the concept of Thainess, several laws and policies have seen the light in the past centuries. A telling example of this occurred in 1941, when a new state prescription was implemented which stated that regional and ethnical diversity was to be ignored and every Thai citizen was to be referred to as Thai, irrespective of their background.[53] Such claims and regulations go back all the way to before Isan was officially a part of the Siamese kingdom.[54]

### 1.3 *The consequences for minorities*

Such a concept is not unique for Thailand and is deeply connected to the concept of the nation-state. An explanation to the persistence of this arguably problematic concept is offered by Appadurai. In "The Offending Part: Sacrifice and Ethnocide in the Era of Globalization" he explains how modern nations suffer from what he calls an *anxiety of incompleteness*.[55] Here, Appadurai argues that minorities remind majorities of the thin line that lies between their current status as a majority and the accomplishment of a national whole with a pure and

[50] Annette Hamilton, "The National Picture: Thai Media and Cultural Identity" in *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain*, eds. F.D. Ginsburg, L. Abu-Lughod and B. Larkin (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 152-170), p. 166
[51] Ibid., p. 166
[52] For several examples, see Chai-anan Samudavanija, "State-identity Creation, State-building and Civil Society 1939-1989" in *National Identity and Its Defenders: Thailand, 1939-1989*, ed. C. Reynolds (Clayton: Monash University Press, 59-85, 1991), pp. 67-73
[53] Winichakul 1994, p. 165
[54] A similar example would be a state policy in 1892 that forbade the specific usage of the term Lao for people of Lao descent living in Siam, claiming that they were actually Thai in order to weaken the French claim and influence over the region, see Martin B. Platt, *Isan Writer, Thai Literature: Writing and Regionalism in Modern Thailand* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2013), p. 14
[55] Arjun Appadurai, "The Offending Part: Sacrifice and Ethnocide in the Era of Globalization" in *The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition*. (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 85-99, 2013), p. 91

untainted national ethnos. In some occasions, this *anxiety* translates to violence and ethnocide, as in Appadurai's example, but in most occasions, it translates into regulations, censorship, prejudices, oppression and exclusion, examples of which can be found everywhere in the world. Without wanting to limit myself to regionalist interpretation of his work, I would like to shift our focus to Isan here, The region were all of his films so far are, at least partly, situated. As I have argued before, I believe that in order to analyze his films, it is crucial to have at least some knowledge about the region and its complex history that informs many of the ideas and elements present in his work. Isan is enclosed by the Mekong River on the north and east, neighbouring Laos, and enclosed by mountain ranges on the west and south, respectively bordering the rest of Thailand and Cambodia. The name Isan derives from a Pali-Sanskrit word which literally translates to *northeast region*. It is the largest and poorest region of Thailand, although presently it is Thailand's fastest growing economy.[56] It was during the period of the reign of King Chulalongkorn (1868-1910) that both the history and the future of this region was to be changed and shaped more than in any other period, due to various new state policies, clashes, treaties and agreements between Siamese overlords and the French along the Mekong and what is now the border between Laos and Thailand, in ways that are still continue to carry influence today.[57] Some of the key changes in this period were the prohibition of local scripts and languages, the establishment of authority of central Siamese monks over northeastern monks and educational reforms including Bangkok-approved versions of history, politics and culture. Platt argues that in this period "the ethnic identity of the inhabitants of Northeastern Siam was simply erased and replaced with a geographical identity defined with respect to Bangkok and the whole country."[58]

To give an idea of the strength and persistence of the ideology behind creating one shared national identity it might help to take a look at the nation's approach towards language. Language, as one of the key signifiers of a national identity, is a logical target of censorship informed by Appadurai's *anxiety of incompleteness*. With the Thai national language functioning as one of the key signifiers of Thainess, all other languages actively used can be interpreted as undermining the (symbolic) unifying power of Thai. However, above 80 percent of the population of Isan is ethnically Lao, and most of the remaining percentage in

[56] For some additional information on the background and the formation of the region, see Charles F. Keyes, *Isan: Regionalism in Northeastern Thailand* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1967), pp. 4-13
[57] See both Winichakul 1994, pp. 109-113 and Platt 2013, pp. 14-15
[58] Platt 2013, p. 15

the province is ethnically Khmer.[59] In the whole of Thailand, the percentage of people speaking Lao (or one of a group of Lao-dialects) as their first language lies above one third of the population, which is higher than the percentage of people speaking any other language, including central Thai, as their first language.[60] This means that, technically, the group speaking Lao or dialects of Lao as their first language is not a minority. In reality however, the situation is different. The main languages spoken in Isan are not officially recognized as dialects of Lao. Instead, they are referred to as 'Isan Thai' (or 'Isan language'), an artificial construction designed in order to be able to label these language as dialects of central Thai, actively propagandized by the state in order to obscure the fact that these languages are dialects of Lao and to serve the myth of Thai homogeneity in favor of linguistic (and ethnic) differences.[61] Isan as an identity designation is a relatively recent construct as well. It was first used by people from other regions to identity people living in the northeast of Thailand and since the second half of the 20th century increasingly by people living in the region themselves to indicate their identity. However, this is still mixed with identifications such as Lao, Khmer, 'Native', Thai and other ethnic groups depending on the situation.[62] As we shall see, these linguistic and ethnic issues are explored in Weerasethakul's work as well.

When Isan is featured in media, it is usually depicted as rural, either stereotyped as being backward and underdeveloped, inhabited by ignorant country folk, or as a sort of utopian place, where traditional values are still intact and where famers live happily with their families, free from daily strains of city-life and without its expectations and materialism. This stereotypical depiction of the region is comparable to the one we find in the description offered in other articles on Weerasethakul to describe the space in which his films take place. Of course, such an image fails to represent actual life in the region and hardly does justice to the place. He has stated himself that growing up in a hospital where villagers daily came in for treatment, he "saw that their lives weren't like the idealised image of agricultural society, and that they weren't ignorant and naive in the way the Thai media continues to portray them."[63] Aside from farmland (rice being the main product of the region), the region is home to a variety of rivers, mountains and jungle as well, of which mainly the latter plays an

[59] Ibid., p. 5
[60] Anthony Diller, "What makes Central Thai a National Language?" in *National Identity and Its Defenders: Thailand, 1939-1989*, ed. C. Reynolds (Clayton: Monash University, 87-132, 1991), p. 97
[61] Platt 2013, pp. 6-7
[62] Keyes 1967, p. 3
[63] See "Only Light and Memory" http://www.criticine.com/interview_article.php?id=34 (accessed 28th of September, 2016)

important and returning role in Weerasethakul's work and as we shall see, Isan is depicted as neither of the usual stereotypes in his work.

In this chapter I have tried to provide a somewhat brief overview of several events in modern Thai history that have influenced several key elements at play in Thai society today and in the past that I believe to be, if not challenged head on then at least touched upon in Weerasethakul's work. The scope of this essay is too small to go into more detail here, but all the topics discussed in this chapter have found their way into his films in some way, and I think it is in their subtle exploration of these issues that his work finds its unique voice. Before moving on to the analysis of his work, we have to keep in mind that historical occurrences such as I have discussed here are by no means unique to Isan as a region, nor do I wish to claim that Isan is unique as such a border region or that the larger issues touched upon here are specifically a (South East) Asian or even a Thai phenomenon. Comparable effects of nationalism on border areas can be found throughout the world.

## Chapter 2: The cinema of Apichatpong Weerasethakul

In this analysis, I want to discuss several different ways in which Weerasethakul's work explores how the issues I have addressed in the previous chapters still affect the lives of people in Thailand today. In order to do so, I have taken a closer look at his four latest films: *Sud pralad/Tropical Malady* (2004), *Sang sattawat*/*Syndromes and a Century* (2006), *Loong Boonmee raleuk chat*/*Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010) and *Rak ti Khon Kaen/Cemetery of Splendor* (2015).[64] Some of the elements I discuss here are diegetic, which relate to immediately observable elements in the narrative, such as characters, dialogue and events that take place. Others are located on a more structural level and are more concerned with how the films are layered and structured - which is what these films have been mostly praised for - and demand a somewhat closer analysis. The different elements recurring throughout his work I want to focus on here are the way Thai people and (their) experiences are portrayed, the subtle social commentary that can be found in the use of language and dialogues, and finally the manner in which multiple spaces, realties and (hi)stories are juxtaposed.

### 2.1 *The portrayal of people and (their) experiences*

Among the people portrayed in Weerasethakul's work are various characters belonging to different minorities, both ethnically and linguistically, which are often left out of official representations of Thai citizens (and therefore mostly absent from both mainstream and most independent Thai cinema as well). Aside from the various ethnic groups the population of Isan belongs to, some other noteworthy characters in his work include Min, one of the three main characters in *Sud sanaeh/Blissfully Yours*, an illegal Burmese immigrant and Jaai, a Lao immigrant in *Loong Boonmee raleuk chat*.[65] Added to this variation in represented characters is an exploration of how these people experience daily life in Thailand, a type of representation which is usually left out of state-regulated media as well. To understand the contrast between the representations of people in these films and in 'official' media, it is useful to take a look at manner in which characters are depicted throughout these works. There is one example in particular which proves to be very insightful in this case: the portrayal of Buddhist monks. There is significant difference between the way in which monks

[64] For the sake of simplicity, I will refer to these films with their Thai titles for the remainder of this chapter.
[65] It is not revealed whether Jaai is in Thailand legally or not, only questioned.

are usually portrayed in media and official representations, and the way they live their lives on a daily basis. The state censors or even forbids the portrayal of monks in any manner that does not correspond with their official guidelines. In Weerasethakul's work however, they are portrayed in a more naturalistic manner, which has resulted in several clashes between him and the Film Censorship Board (FCB), as they requested him to remove scenes containing 'inappropriate conduct'.[66] For example, in *Sang sattawat* a monk confesses he was naughty as a child and that he eats too much chicken. In a later scene, another monk is portrayed visiting the dentist, meanwhile confessing that he used to dream of being a DJ or owning a comic book store. In other films, monks can be seen smoking, undressing in order to take a shower, strumming a guitar and just having fun in general. Such representations are not in accordance with the Thai law and this has resulted in these films being censored and even banned form cinemas in Thailand. The clashes and issues Weerasethakul has had with the FCB have even led him to voice his concerns in an essay.[67]

**Figure 1** Monk visiting the dentist in *Sang sattawat*, 2006, Fortissimo Films.

[66] See for instance Weerasethakul's remarks in Gary Maddox, "Critical of Thailand's censorship, visionary filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethkaul is looking to Latin America" http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/movies/critical-of-thailands-censorship-visionary-filmmaker-apichatpong-weerasethakul-is-looking-to-latin-america-20160320-gnmzhs.html (accessed 10th of August, 2016)
[67] See Apichatpong Weerasethakul, "The Folly and Future of Thai Cinema Under Military Dictatorship" in *Apichatpong Weerasethakul* (Vienna: Synema Publikationenen, 158-178, 2009), p. 178

Depictions such as those discussed above are seldom shown in films and therefore audiences are not accustomed to seeing them. Without any additional explanation, it can be difficult to relate to characters and experiences you have never seen before and are not accustomed to. A good example of this can be found in *Sud pralad.* The second half of the film has baffled most cinephiles since the film was released, and the film was mostly subject of debates on how the second half of the film exactly related to the first half. Furthermore, the film was met with a lot of criticism in Bangkok when it was released, and was dismissed by many as being made for Europeans and for film festival audiences. Benedict Anderson, fascinated by this judgment and curious as to what informed it, took the time to research local reactions (i.e. from people not living in Bangkok) to the film. His results are quite insightful regarding what many interpret as baffling or inscrutable elements in Weerasethakul's work. While not many people in Thailand had seen the film when Anderson asked around in a university (which in itself is no surprise, as the same would be true for any Dutch art house film in our country), Anderson found out the film was both readily available in video stores and rental outlets, and that it did averagely among Thai people. People from all backgrounds requested and watched the film, and it was met by most of them with agreeable reactions. While many Western critics claimed they were deeply moved by the film, even though they did not understand it, the responses from local, up-country people in Thailand appeared to be somewhat different. Anderson relates the response of someone who grew up on the fringes of the jungle of Borneo:

> He had often gone hunting in the jungle, also at night, with his grandfather, his friends, and even alone, and could immediately identify all the animal and bird sounds on the film's soundtrack. "The jungle is where you really have to listen all the time, and keep as quiet as possible. Yes, it can be frightening, but it is like a strange and wonderful world all of its own. You keep wanting to go back. You know you are testing yourself, and learning about yourself too. [68]

This person continues to talk about the mythical were-tiger creature that is seen in the film (which is good in nature, can only be male, and which he believes to have existed in the past). Finally, he concludes: "I can't believe that anyone making a film today could get inside the world in which I grew up, and present it with such perfection. I've never seen anything like it."[69] Other persons related similar responses to the film, claiming it matched their personal experience of walking in the jungle at night when they were younger, which they said could be scary and tense. Looking at *Sud pralad*, its unconventional structure and its critical acclaim

[68] Anderson 2009, p. 163
[69] Ibid., p. 164

through our Western eyes, such statements are unexpected and may seem difficult to believe at first sight. Anderson's final argument is that the average middle- or upper-class Bangkok citizen, so 'brainwashed' by state-controlled media, hardly recognizes any Thai element in this film, since it so different to what he is used to see on the screen. Ask a random person elsewhere in the country though, and you get a completely different response. Anderson argues that, rather than making a film 'about' country folk and their ways and legends, as the average citizen of Bangkok is used to see in the media in what he labels "the Bangkok TV bourgeois manner", Weerasethakul made a film from 'inside' one of those places 'outside' of Bangkok.[70] This is not only applicable to people living in Bangkok however, but to anyone from anywhere watching the film without any interest or knowledge of the context of what exactly we see in the film, whether they appreciate the film or not. Regardless of how unique, challenging or even 'avant-garde' several formal aspects of his cinema may be (which I will return to in the third point), these two diegetic examples (the portrayal of monks and the experience of walking around in the jungle at night) are a good indication of the way various characters and experiences are portrayed in his work. From the way in which the relationship between Keng and Tong in *Sud pralad* slowly develops without directly stating their love for each other, to the extremely banal or even boring conversations characters in many of his films have, such as discussions about the colors of the tiles in their new kitchen, all these representations seem to suggest these films strive for a mode of naturalism in portraying their characters which I have rarely encountered in other (whether independent or mainstream) Thai films. And I believe this is not because Weerasethakul is influenced by neo-realism or some other European movements, as some may propose as an explanation, but because this is his way to give an honest voice to those un- or underrepresented in Thai media and official discourse. This leads me to a second diegetic element I would like to focus briefly on: the use of dialogue (and language) in his films.

[70] Ibid., pp. 165-166

**Figure 2** Keng encounters the mythical creature in *Sud pralad*, 2004, Kick the Machine.

### 2.2 *The use of language and dialogue*

Social commentary is often subtle in Weerasethakul's films, but perhaps the easiest way in which it can be identified is through some of the dialogues. Most articles discussing dialogues in his films tend to focus on the references they contain to Buddhism, reincarnation, superstition and the supernatural, and a number of them express their surprise at the mundane, nonchalant manner in which such topics are discussed between characters. However, some of the statements characters make in an off-hand matter might easily pass by those unaware of (the history of) Thai nationalism and the Isan region I have discussed in the previous chapter. With that background in mind however, they become nearly impossible to miss. Here, I would like to discuss two examples found in *Loong Boonmee raleuk chat. Loong Boonmee raleuk chat* revolves around the final days of Boonmee, a man who is suffering from kidney failure and returns to his house up in the country for his imminent death. Helping him with groceries, cooking and other chores in general is Jaai, a refugee from Laos. At the start of the film, his sister-in-law Jen and her nephew Tong arrive to stay by his side in his final days. Shortly after they have arrived there is a scene where Tong remarks he cannot understand what Jaai is saying because he finds the Isan dialect too hard to understand. However, Jaai is speaking Lao, but the mistake is understandable since the Isan dialect is a Lao dialect after all. When Jen in response remarks that Jaai speaks Lao, not the Isan dialect, she in turn is oblivious of the fact

that ‘Isan dialect’ is actually a dialect of Lao. While the social commentary is still quite restrained in this scene, and some might even doubt whether there are any intentions behind this line of dialogue, the commentary on Thai nationalism becomes less subtle when we take the conversation into account the two of them have when Jaai and Tong are not around, in which Jen turns out to be rather xenophobic and prejudiced. Here, she asks Boonmee if he’s not afraid of illegal immigrants, as they might rob or even murder him. A few scenes later Boonmee remarks that Jaai is single and asks whether Jen knows of a suitable girl for him. In response, Jen comments that Lao people ‘smell’, so there is no chance for him to find a girl here. Here, her character is exposed as being unaware of the fact that she herself shares the same ethnic, regional and spatial background as Jaai. The only reason she is able to create the distinction between her and him necessary to make such a statement is that the border has dictated that she, born on this side of the border in Isan is Thai and Jaai, born on the other side, is Lao. This whole scene becomes even more ironic with the background knowledge that the actress portraying Jen, Jenjira Pongpas (a good friend of Weerasethakul and a regular in his film) is partly of Lao descent herself, as her father is from Laos.

With a few simple lines of dialogue, the film does not only comments upon prejudices and racism, but exposes the arbitrariness of the border between Laos and Thailand and the consequences Thai nationalism has on people from different ethnic backgrounds as well. There is no further discussion however, and there is no additional explanation of any of these dialogues. Much later in the film, about halfway through, Boonmee and Jen are resting after a walk around his grounds and he tells her that his disease is because of all the communists he has killed in the past. Jen’s responds by telling him that he had a good reason to do so: “you killed them for your country”, she adds. Especially with the dialogues from the beginning of the film still in mind, it is difficult to miss the commentary on overly strong nationalism and in this case, militarism as well. Rather than directly addressing it or rubbing it in the viewers face, the film only needs several lines of dialogues, scattered throughout, to deliver its social commentary. This form of subtle social commentary through dialogue is a recurring element in his films, and in other films similar discussions occur between characters. But the films never seem to judge their characters for their statements, prejudices or their ignorance in any way; they simply register it and leave any form of judgment to the viewer. It is a clever way of touching upon the sensitive questions of nationalism, militarism and racism in Thailand. These situations are among the most direct ways these films comment on this, although without any awareness of history of this region it is likely to go past most viewers. There are

other ways, however, in which the films subtly comment on these issues as well, and these are related to the structure of his films.

### 2.3 *The juxtaposition of multiple spaces, realties and (hi)stories*

Even though not all of Weerasethakul's films are located exclusively in the Isan region, the relationship between Isan and the rest of the Thailand (usually in the form of Bangkok, often symbolizing central, state-regulated Thailand) and sometimes neighbouring countries as well is always present in the background. Formally, all of his films explore both the spatial and temporal relations between Isan and Thailand in some form. Sometimes it is touched upon through dialogues, dreams or memories related by the characters, in other cases, it is explored through the layers in which the films have been structured. Since the films have to get past the censors, it is difficult to directly address sensitive issues and any social commentary is usually symbolic and subtle. The most literal exploration of the relation between Isan and Bangkok we can find in his oeuvre is offered by *Sang sattawat*. In extension, it is also the most literal exploration of the relationship between the past and the present. *Sang sattawat* juxtaposes two similar narratives in similar settings. The first half of the film takes place in a little hospital in Khon Kaen (Weerasethakul's hometown) where Weerasethakul partly grew up, since both his parents were doctors working there.[71] This half of the film is partly fiction, but partly based on Weerasethakul's memories, the memories of the actors and crew involved and on stories told by his parents as well. The second half is filmed in a hospital in Bangkok, but follows a similar narrative and similar discussions. Both the dialogue and the outcome of situations are sometimes exactly the same, sometimes slightly different, and sometimes completely different.

A second layer added to these scenes is that the first part of the film takes place in the past, while the second part takes place in the present. The English title hints at the relationship between temporal occurrences and its effects on people as well: *Syndromes* (indicating the effects things have on people) and a *Century* (symbolizing the temporal dimension). While the usage of the same people and the same dialogues in different time frames clearly hints at reincarnation (a recurring theme throughout his work as well, as many scholars and critics have readily shown), it also shows how occurrences in the past can still carry an effect on the present (or the future). While this might sound like a simplistic karmic phrase, it goes well

[71] James Quandt, "Resistant to Bliss: Describing Apichatpong" in *Apichatpong Weerasethakul* (Vienna: Synema Publikationen, 13-104, 2009), p. 44

beyond that. What we see in the first half of the film not only influences what happens in the second half, but also how we as viewers interpret what we see in the second half of the film. Through fracturing his stories through time and space, the film creates room for multiple discourses that influence each other at the same time. This approach to structure is made even clearer if we take a look at his latest film, *Rak ti Khon Kaen*, which takes the ideas explored in other films even further and can be considered Weerasethakul's most openly critical film to date.

A large part of the film takes place in an old school building in Khon Kaen, which functions as a temporary hospital. In the building, 27 soldiers who have fallen ill to an unexplainable 'sleeping disease' lie in beds and are taken care of. They are only awake for very short intervals and are asleep most of the time. The central storyline of the film is the friendship that unfolds between Jenjira, a volunteer working at the 'hospital', and one of the sleeping soldiers she takes care of: Itt. Even though he is only awake for minutes at a time, she cares for him with extraordinary devotion. For most of the first half of the film we find ourselves in the makeshift hospital. This building, now functioning as a strictly defined space, is revealed to have three different temporal layers affecting it at the same time. Besides the current narrative that the film follows, there are two other narratives that took place in the past in the exact same space, and we slowly understand how they have determined what is happening in the present narrative as the film progresses. These other two narratives never become visible for the viewer though. In the relatively recent past, when it was still used as a school building, the now grown up Jenjira attended school there. She sat in the exact same space as the bed where Itt is lying currently, which determines her choice to take care of him over the other soldiers. Their relationship is what informs the second half, but could not have been possible if he had been in a different bed. The third layer is the most important however, and is revealed a little later in the film. When two goddesses from the lake sanctuary visit Jenjira after she has worshiped at their shrine, they explain to her why the soldiers are suffering from their sleeping disease. It turns out that in the distant past, during a war between local kingdoms, the same space was used as a royal cemetery, hence the English language title of the film. The goddesses tell Jen that the soldiers will never be able to recover from their illness, as the spirits of the dead kings lying buried there are inhaling their energy, using it to fuel their armies to continue the battle with the other kingdoms. Here, the film cuts to the next scene, in which Jen relates this story to other volunteers working there. After she finished her story, her friends are more interested in asking how pretty the goddesses looked than in

exploring the historical context of the school building any further, and the film leaves it at that. These multiple temporal layers influence the reality of the present throughout the whole film and I would argue they symbolize the influence the past continues to bear on the present in Thailand. This is a clever construction that allows the film to explore different (hi)stories in a subtle way without using more than one location. A similar construction is used in a later scene when Jen walks through a forest which simultaneously functions a palace in the past as well.

The fact that the goddesses of the lake sanctuary say they are Lao adds another layer to this particular scene's social commentary. As I have discussed in the previous chapter, the relationship between Thailand and Laos is complex and the ethnical kinship between people living in Laos and the majority of people living in Isan is nearly always ignored or obscured. Furthermore, as Winichakul has shown, the relationship between the borders of the country and the military is a complex one with a long history that has greatly affected present day Thailand and the way ethnic groups have been divided across nations. As borders of spaces are always reified by the army, through whatever means necessary, what more appropriate way to explore these issues than through the portrayal of soldiers forever engaged in a war? As the dialogue in *Loong Boonmee raleuk chat* I have discussed earlier in this chapter exemplified, nationalism and militarism still inform a lot of racism and prejudices in Thailand. It is not a coincident that these elements (the border between Laos and Thailand and the army waging an ongoing war) come together in this scene. In this case however, the Lao goddesses come to help a Thai woman. Only because they are from a different time and realm, they can overcome the nationalist tensions that would otherwise have existed between these characters. Here, the film opts for a different possible narrative, in which Isan is not treated as a place that 'belongs' to Thailand and is differentiated from 'Laos', but instead has its own discourse in which the official borders play no role. This seems to be a way to cope with the wars from the past and the nationalism from the present. While the scene directly refers to the divide between Laos and Isan, it simultaneously symbolizes all the divides that have been created by obscuring local histories and narratives in favour of one master narrative. In this way, the film simultaneously explores the spatial (geographical) dimensions of Thailand as well as the temporal dimensions that have informed them, and the continuing effect they have on people, offering alternative ways of looking at these issues all the while.

**Figure 3** The Lao goddesses (left) explain why the soldiers are sleeping to Jen (right) in *Rak ti Khon Kaen*, 2015, Kick the Machine.

When they are done discussing the appearance of the goddesses, Jen remarks to her colleagues that she is happy to know that the boy she has been caring for is "useful in his sleep". Just as in *Loong Boonmee raleuk chat*, a strong sense of militarism is exposed in one of the main characters. *Rak ti Khon Kaen* feels as a culmination of elements that have been explored in previous films. It is not only the most openly critical and most direct exploration of Thailand's past and its continued consequences on people living in the present, but in my eyes it is also the most outspoken pessimistic film about Thailand within his oeuvre. The expression of militarism in this last dialogue brings me to the final scene within his oeuvre I would like to discuss here. In *Loong Boonmee raleuk chat*, Boonmee relates a dream right before he passes away. He tells Jen that he was in a future city, governed by an authority that was able to make people disappear and to see people's pasts by shining lights on them, relating everything that happened to them until they arrived in that future. They were also able to make everyone disappear at will. While he recalls this dream, we see still images, presumably photographs, of people in camouflage outfits. He continues to tell that as soon as they see the past (which, presumably, is not in accordance with their version of history), those people disappear. Among all the symbolic social critique scattered throughout his films, this scene is one of the few that has stuck with me the most. The act of shining a light on people in order to visualize their past can be interpreted as an allusion to the practice of filmmaking itself, while making people from the past with different stories disappear seem to hint at the

censorship practiced by the government and the lack of different, alternative stories offered by state-regulated media. Different from the other scenes I have discussed though, is that apart from exploring the influence of the past on the present, the scene comments on what influence the present will bear on the future for Thai people as well. In this scene, Weerasethakul seems to literally voice his fears through a dream his main character recounts. With the military coup that would occur four years after the release of this film and the pessimistic tone of his most recent film in mind, this scene leaves the viewer with a bitter aftertaste.

As we have seen, in contrast to most films which only show us one story, i.e. one version of (a) truth, Weerasethakul's work tells stories that which be fragmented, are able to start over again half-way with subtle variations, or can morph and change direction across space or time. Even across works, he revisits places and stories, altering and challenging our interpretations of what we have seen earlier. Boonmee's character is also used in a short film, the same statues play a role in both his Fireworks installation as in *Rak ti Khon Kaen*, and the hospital in the first half of *Sang sattawat* is the same hospital as the one used in *Sud sanaeh*. Other places and characters return in his short films and installations as well, and the character portrayed by Jenjira Pongpas is often simply called Jen, referring to how close the portrayed character often is to the actress' real life. This influences both the projects themselves and the viewer's perception of them. My argument here is that all these scenes and recurring themes, often presented in the most mundane way, symbolize the fragmented nature of multiple angles, experiences, histories and truths, and the relation between them. Both literally and symbolically, through multiple timelines and stories, they open up the way for alternative histories, discourses and ultimately, truths, to be shared and experienced, and in turn, morphed again into new stories and truths. The constructions of his film mimic this idea as well. If we put the four films I have focused on in this analysis in a row, we can see that they all use a different way to symbolize this structurally. In *Sud pralad*, the meeting between the mythical creature and the soldier in the jungle in the second half (played by the same actors, whether they are reincarnations or variations of Tong and Keng or not is not explained, nor is it important here) is influenced by the relationship that slowly evolved between Tong and Keng in the first half. In *Sang sattawat*, two similar spaces (hospitals) are juxtaposed in separate areas and timelines, but with a similar narrative that are influenced by the other. In *Loong Boonmee raleuk chat*, apart from referencing past deeds that have yielded bad karma which effects the present, multiple forms of film and media are used for each segment as well: the film is divided in several reels, and each reel has its own style and feel to it: one reel is

inspired by old Thai horror movies, another by television soaps and so on. These choices in turn inform the content of the different segments. Finally, in *Rak ti Khon Kaen*, separate timelines in the same space come together in the present as the consequences they continue to have are revealed. The keyword here is multiple. Multiple lives, stories, places, forms of media, timelines all exist at the same time and all continually influence each other. By exploring multiple stories they opt for alternatives to official versions of history, nationality and related concepts, and they are testament to the fact that there are always multiple truths to be found, rather than one master narrative. Each film within his oeuvre does this in a comparable but slightly different manner.

## Conclusion

In this thesis I have researched how the films by Apichatpong Weerasethakul subtly comment on issues such as nationalism, militarism and the concept of Thainess, and explore how these issues continue to be relevant and have consequences on people living in modern day Thailand. They do so through a focus on un(der)represented people and narratives, mainly located in the Isan region where the director himself grew up. I argue that the way his films are usually approached by both critics and scholars have led to a sort of agreement that many elements in his films are ineffable and unexplainable and therefore, do not have to be analyzed further in essays on his work. I believe this is at least partly informed by the fact that a certain hegemonic vision on both what constitutes film analysis, film history and history in general continues to inform the field of Film Studies, and many Western scholars continue to analyze not only Weerasethakul's work, but film in general in terms of predetermined Western categories and aesthetics. This hegemony has been identified by other scholars writing on non-Western cinema as well, and one of the main goals of this thesis has been to challenge this hegemony. In order to do so, I have attempted to analyze Weerasethakul's films on their own terms, without resorting to tracing influences by other directors or movements. I have done so by researching the complex history of both the country they are made in and the region of Isan they are mostly situated in, and secondly by analyzing how the characters portrayed and the films themselves relate to both the places their narratives are located in and to those places' complex history and relationship with present day Thailand. I argue these films reflect upon the ambiguous relationship of the crew involved in making them towards modern day Thailand. I conclude that the films discussed in this essay can be interpreted as a challenge and an alternative to the official representations of Thai people by both official media and mainstream cinema in Thailand, since they create room for multiple, alternative stories, discourses and truths. In doing so, they subvert the master narrative offered by the state and represented in the media in an attempt to give an honest voice to un(der)represented minorities. I hope this thesis will open up new ways of approaching Weerasethakul's work as well for those who seek to delve even deeper into his work.

I believe his films are not only important for Thailand, but touch upon issues that are relevant everywhere in today's society, in which nationalist tendencies stemming from what Appadurai has labeled *fear of incompleteness* continue to be the *modi opperandi* of modern nation-states across the globe, which in turn continue to have enormous influences on the

lives of minorities living in these nations. For examples of this pattern one just has to look at the various xenophobic political parties that are popular around the world today. Apart from an attempt to challenge the hegemonic Western view of what constitutes film analysis, this essay has also been an attempt to reduce the gap I have encountered between the respective fields of Area Studies and Film Studies, which I have struggled with while majoring in both of these field. I believe these fields do not appropriate each other's knowledge enough, and a combination of these two fields could be beneficial for scholars from both fields in overcoming shortcomings in knowledge.

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