

Apichatpong Weerasethakul - Phantoms of Nabua at BFI Southbank

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May, 2010

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Claire Shropshall is impressed by Apichatpong Weerasethakul's new political film, on show at BFI Southbank.



There's nothing more exasperating than a piece of art that leaves you rifling through 700 pages of explanatory bumph and tearing your hair out in a desperate bid to grasp what it's all about. What's going on? How should I react? Should it really be this exhausting?! [Phantoms of Nabua](#) by Thai filmmaker and artist Apichatpong Weerasethakul needs no such rationalisation to coax a reaction from me – the short film is haunting, explosive and innocent, yet also a little disturbing.

The [BFI gallery](#) is eerily lit by a single screen projection showing a throng of teenagers booting a flaming football around a patch of scrubland at night. The boys are lit up by a rear projection of fireworks and lightning, as well as a fluorescent light pole which looms

on the sidelines. The interplay of flickering light and the football's echoing thuds make for a rather intense experience, and I catch myself jumping with each rhythmic boom.

The dancing light sources cast a strange, ethereal glow over the tussling youths, their skin appearing pale and almost ghost-like. There's a definite juxtaposition between the warm blaze of the fire and the violent streaks of lightning in the background, and as the boys become interested in the projection they had been leaping around, the flames slowly engulf and destroy it. Their fascination and gleeful excitement at watching the screen wither and die fades to hushed and almost mournful confusion – there's an all-pervading sense of loss.

The ten-minute short is described by Weerasethakul as “a portrait of home...a communication of lights, the lights that exude on the one hand the comfort of home and, on the other, of destruction”. This alone makes for an aesthetically intriguing viewing, but on a scratch below the surface there are also political reflections at play in the artist's depiction of a Thai village (Nabua) once occupied by totalitarian government militia fighting with communist locals. Eek.

However you don't need an in-depth history of the area's catastrophic past to understand that the seemingly innocent gaggle of teenagers we see whirling about the screen are hiding something altogether more sinister. Call me a wimp, but there's a definite chill in the air.

So here we have it – living proof that you shouldn't have to work too hard to appreciate art. I've enjoyed tonight's installation without needing to know why, and my locks have remained intact. Phew.

[Phantoms of Nabua](#) is at BFI Southbank until 4th July 2010.

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