

features



Phantoms Of Nabua, 2009 (still from film) Apichatpong Weerasethakul

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APICHATPONG WEERASETHAKUL - PHANTOMS OF NABUA

7/1/2010 Art / Film

By Emily McMehen

Cinema is becoming increasingly polarized -- following a frenetic turbo-drive towards pure simultaneous speed and fantasy that would make Paul Virilio (and the Lawnmower Man) proud, as well as the contemplative resisting impulse to dig in our heels and stop and smell the roses, even at the cost of causing a pile-up.

Maybe the same thing that drives us, yoga mats in hand, towards deep meditation and "spiritual enrichment" classes that we can fit into our lunch hour also pulls us into the cinema to watch long slow stories unfold. There is a deepening chasm in the film community that mirrors this divide, and at the centre of it, we find this year's Palm d'Or winner Apichatpong Weerasethakul.

Weerasethakul likes to take his time to tell a story. There will be no blazing guns or dizzying plot twists involving meteors or terrorist invasions of local chemists. But part of the joy of watching his films is in the unwinding required to fall into pace with his narrative. To watch his work, we must slow down. His new installation at the BFI is a light bite at just under 11 minutes long, but its beauty is in its simplicity and its lingering effect. An atmospheric short film featuring Thai teenagers playing with a blazing football tells a quiet story about the history of conflict in the area where they grew up, and the permeating normality

The collision of two elements -- the historic and the contemporary -- are subtle here; the lightning on the screen alludes to a historic regional conflict between a totalitarian government and a rebellious communist contingent of citizens, and the flaming football a commentary on the inertia faced by those growing up in the area now stricken by poverty.

One of the central arguments in favour of the contentious Contemporary Contemplative Cinema is that the devil is in the details. A slower narrative means a deeper reading. For Weerasethakul, the scene is deceptively simple. A complex array of symbols and readings lurk in the dusky shadows as we follow the ball, follow the lightning on the screen, and succumb to the swollen silence of the soundtrack. So, considering how brief the artist's statement, we are left in the dark and to our own devices to decode them.

As the football is passed back and forth, the eye begins to track across the screen and through the scene, reading and rereading the disparate elements. At one point, the screen onto which the lightning stricken village is projected catches fire, and a vague sense of melancholy that the past is being dissolved into the present lingers as it burns. The film is powerfully ambiguous, and raises interesting questions about political resonance and narrative, and could shed a little light on Weerasethakul's modus operandi for anyone curious about his style.

Emily McMehen is an artist and writer living and working in London.

Links Phantoms Of Nabua at BFI Southbank KF Artworker: Apichatpong Weerasethakul



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