

The Political Asleep: Non-Traumatic Spectrality in Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Cemetery of Splendour*

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Abstract

In this paper, I analyse *Cemetery of Splendour* (2015) to argue that spectrality is addressed therein differently from the way it is in the other feature films by Apichatpong Weerasethakul. As a methodological framework, I will particularly rely on Fredric Jameson's idea of "cognitive mapping" and focus, thereby, mainly on the film's geopolitical implications as well as on its self-referentiality. In regard to the former, the specificities of Isan region in the Northeast of Thailand will prove very relevant (as in other films by the same director). In regard to the latter, I will have to draw as well on Jameson's theories of film enunciation (somewhat related to Jean-Pierre Oudart's "suture theory") as key to the film's political subtext.

Keywords: Cognitive Mapping; Jameson; Suture; Spectral; Shining.

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The cinema of Apichatpong Weerasethakul teems with ghosts. In this paper, I will argue that in *Cemetery of Splendour* (*Rak Ti Khon Kaen*, 2015; henceforth: *Cemetery*) spectrality is addressed differently from his other feature films. My analysis will rely less on Jacques Derrida's pioneering elaborations on spectrality, and more on a theoretical/philosophical framework ambivalently positioned vis-à-vis Derrida's, such as Fredric Jameson's. While it would be easy to categorize Apichatpong's filmography as a whole as an exemplary case study for cinematic spectrality in the customary Derridean sense, my paper will focus on *Cemetery* as an eccentrically, thus all the more interestingly Jamesonian tangent within his broader body of work.

1 Spectrality in Apichatpong's Cinema

Active in the art world as well as in the worldwide film festivals' circuit, Weerasethakul has from the outset skilfully negotiated a double alignment "with Thailand on the one hand, and the global film and art world on the other" (Boehler 2016: 223). The carefully calculated primitivism of his works (drawing considerably on local folklore and myths, including the rich Thai ghost-related tradition) programmatically "oscillates between local and post-national or global culture" (Boehler 2016: 223), broaching many concerns and facets customarily associated with so-called "Global South": among others, luxuriant natural environments, formal outlandishness, slow and enigmatic narratives, ghosts, reincarnation, ethnicity, migration, repressed histories, memory, spirituality, animism ("the regional paradigm of Southeast Asian practices of human-spirit sociality and communication, which taken together form part of both an ecology of experiencing, relating and existing, and a repertoire of speculative future-making practices on the part of the powerless"; Ingawanij 2021: 550), ontological multiplicity (Marrero-Guillamón 2018) (not only humans have souls, but also animals, spirits, inanimate objects, etc.). Not least, the multinaturalism prominently theorized by Viveiros de Castro (2012), repositing "the relation between humans and the nonhuman in a way that calls into question the privileged position from which the anthropocentric perception experiences the world" (Doğan 2024: 94-95), profoundly resonates with Weerasethakul's cinema. There is not one nature but many; accordingly, non-anthropocentric and even non-human experiences, consciousnesses and perspectives exist and should be acknowledged.

This multi-perspectivism is followed in the very structure of his feature films *Blissfully Yours* (Śud śaṇḍhā, 2002), *Tropical Malady* (Satpralat, 2004), *Syndromes and a Century* (Sæng śatawāat, 2006), each divided in two distinct halves whose succession fulfils more a spatial, simultaneity-driven, multi-perspectival logic than a sequential one. Thereby, textual unity and the unitary, centred spectatorship of conventional narrative textuality is undermined. In a nod to contemporary art exhibition practices (Kim 2010: 134-136), an effort is demanded from the viewer to embrace more than one perspective to effectively grasp the film as a whole (Kim 2010: 137). No half is not affected by the implicit presence of the other, foregrounding "the potential coexistence of temporalities and spatialities within and between place" (Morgan 2004: 20). Each half *haunts* the other: "Haunting takes the form not only of temporal shifting but spatial disjunction, as though the present can multiply and reproduce states that co-exist" (Harbord 2017: 175).

"Haunting" is also among the key concepts of Derrida's *Specters of Marx* (1994). According to it, in the new globalized post-Cold-War world the past (most notably the legacy of Marxism) is not dead: its ghost resists death and persists beyond it, blending materiality and immateriality, life and death etc., to haunt the present with a presence which is also an absence, as a silent burden of injustices weighing upon the living for them to prospectively straighten them out. In Apichatpong's cinema, "ghosts are often a metaphor for how the past is embedded in the present" (Birks 2021: 59). In his *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (*Lung Bunmi Raluek Chat*, 2010; henceforth: *Uncle Boonmee*), the dying titular character is visited by various spirits (previous reincarnations — a princess, a water buffalo —, the phantom of his dead wife, his son-turned-monkey) and haunted by the suspicion that having killed too many communists in the past (his — and Apichatpong's — region of Isan in North-East Thailand has witnessed massive political repression) may result in bad karma, and by the visions of a future in which all traces of the past are violently erased by an unspecified dictatorial military power.

The latter exemplifies the opposition between the messianic and the apocalyptic wherewith Jameson closes his review of *Specters of Marx*. Elsewhere, the latter's messianicity without messianism has been aptly summarized as

the opening to the future or the coming of the other as the advent of justice, but without horizon of expectation, without prophetic prefiguration. The coming of the other can only arise as a singular event where no anticipation sees it coming, where the other and death—and radical evil—can surprise at any moment. Possibilities that at the same time open and perhaps always interrupt history, or at least the ordinary course of history.... It concerns a “general structure of experience”. This messianic dimension does not depend on any messianism. It does not follow any determinate revelation. It does not belong properly to any Abrahamic religion (even if I may here continue “entre nous” for essential reasons of language and of place, of culture, and of provisional rhetorical and historical strategy of which I will speak later, to give to it the names inscribed by the Abrahamic religions). (Derrida 1998: 17-18)

The distinction between messianicity and messianism serves, among others, the theoretical purpose of setting the former all the more neatly against the apocalyptic, i.e. the announcement that the end of history (*à la* Francis Fukuyama) has already come, and thus that historicity is over as well as any utopian redemption in the future. It is “the definitive exorcism of spectres and spectrality, the beginning of a market universe which is a perpetual present” (Jameson 1999: 63). Following Walter Benjamin, Jameson insists that for the messianic not to fall prey to its apocalyptic nemesis, futurity (otherwise co-opted by the false sirens of capitalist progress) must be in tension with itself (Jameson 1999: 59-65): there is no messianic future except non-linear and unpredictable. Jameson’s definition of spectrality does not even contemplate the future:

what makes the present waver: like the vibrations of a heat wave through which the massiveness of the object world — indeed of matter itself — now shimmers like a mirage. [...] Spectrality does not involve the conviction that ghosts exist or that the past (and maybe even the future they offer to prophesy) is still very much alive and at work, within the living present: all it says, if it can be thought to speak, is that the living present is scarcely as self sufficient as it claims to be; that we would do well not to count on its density and solidity, which might under exceptional circumstances betray us. (Jameson 1999: 38-39)

Past and future are almost dispensed with altogether in favour of the de-realizing “wavering” of the present. The atmosphere and mood of Weerasethakul’s cinema may come to mind, with its “palpable tension between the sleeping and waking worlds, cultivating a persistent sense of something more or yet to be discerned” (Ma 2022: 56), with the suspended, dreamy quality of its montage and the hypnotic lingering of his long takes sending “ominous ripples across [the films’] serene surfaces” (Ma 2022: 50). In the ending of *Uncle Boonmee*, two characters bifurcate, i.e. they watch TV in a hotel room while identical replicas of themselves go to a restaurant, as in an illustration of Derrida’s deferral: there is no real time that is not always layered and redoubled in an embedded memory of sorts: “there is never an absolutely real time. What we call real time, and it is easy to understand how it can be opposed to deferred time in everyday language, is in fact never pure” (Jacques Derrida quoted in Derrida and Stiegler 2013 [2002]: 47).

The difference between Derrida’s messianic and Jameson’s secular utopia is best explained by reference to the latter’s disagreement with Derrida’s “there is nothing outside the text” (1997 [1967]: 158). Famously, Jameson (1979) binds utopia dialectically to its opposite, namely *ideology*: utopian impulses, emerging particularly in mass culture products in response to given social contradictions, are repressed by those same products by way of reification, i.e. when utopia is turned into a representation of utopia. This does not mean that utopia lies totally outside of representation, but rather in a certain tension between representation and the (social) outside which determines it, emerging through the inconsistencies of representation. “For Jameson (contra Derrida) history *is* outside the text, and indeed the outside of text, yet (in partial agreement with Derrida) only accessible to us in textual form and therefore very much inside the text too” (Buchanan 2006: 58-59). This is Jameson’s ‘cognitive mapping’: a practice more spatial than narrative/temporal, both in and outside of representation, aiming to retrace a social totality that cannot be retraced.

Uncle Boonmee merges recent recognizably Western conceptions of spectrality with Buddhism, not only to conciliate the global with the local, but also to make up, thanks to Buddhism’s own non-linear temporality, for a futurity which spectrality regards as untenable unless self-contradicting. History, however, enters the picture basically through narrative and textual means, i.e. through Boonmee’s biography. The only other way the film accounts for history is through the images of 2009’s mass protests that can be glimpsed from the ending’s TV

screen, but their coming right at the end singles out and *reifies* those protests, again narratively and textually, as the implicit redemptive *telos* in the future of the past historical horrors embodied by departed Boonmee. In this way, only partly does the ending give up the future after Boonmee's death in favour of a properly spectral emphasis on detaching the present from itself: in those TV images, the future is surreptitiously back with a vengeance, i.e. in the reified guise of a *telos* causally (that is, narratively and textually) bound to the past it should redeem. The outside of *Uncle Boonmee* is then less history than the multi-platform art project (*Primitive*, 2009-2010) the film is part of, notwithstanding its far lesser recourse than in its director's previous films to forms borrowed from contemporary art (despite the persistence of some elements estranging the narrative, e.g. the latter's fragmentariness, and still photographs freezing the story's flow).

2 Cemetery's Political Unconscious

In *Cemetery*, elderly Jen visits her former school in Khon Kaen (Isan), now turned into a hospital hosting soldiers affected by a strange sleeping sickness, from which they sometimes only temporarily wake up. She befriends one of them (Itt) and Keng, a woman who can read the minds of those sleepers — whose energies, as it turns out, are drained by the spirits of ancient kings buried in that site, continuing to fight after death. Keng takes Jen to a stroll in the hospital park: relating the dream Itt is having, Keng describes as she were actually walking through it the bygone glories of the luxurious palace that used to be there and about which Itt is dreaming, while all either Jen and the spectator can see is spontaneous, unkempt foliage and a littered waste ground.

Itt has both no future (reportedly, he will *never* recover from his condition) and one that is absolutely indetermined: Jen tells Itt that, because metabolism slows down while sleeping, he may live longer and thus should save himself for a better future. Indeed, the only role the future plays (if any) is paradoxical, while the present is largely stuck in the past. "A sense of paralysis in the face of a future that cannot be imagined distinguishes [...] *Cemetery* from Apichatpong's earlier moving image works" (Veal 2020: 289). Jonathan Romney interpreted the recurring images of a ceiling fan's and a water mill's blades as tokens of "repetition" and "eternal return" (Romney 2016). "The palpable sense of stasis throughout *Cemetery* is" not only "an effect of the virtual absence of representations of mobility (highways, railways and rivers) that have featured in Apichatpong's other films" (Veal 2020: 289), but also of the fan and the mill engendering constant rotational motion without ever moving in space.

On the other hand, the (musicless) game of musical chairs some individuals seem to engage in, repeatedly changing the respective positions as they sit or stand near the town's lake, seemingly suggests a slightly different historical pattern: not simply the impossibility of change (repetition, eternal return), but the perpetual change of *shape* of something essentially remaining the same. Catherine Malabou's plasticity may come to mind, designating "the future understood as future within closure, the possibility of a structural transformation: a transformation of structure within structure, a mutation 'right at the level of the form'" (Malabou 2005[1996]: 192), especially as her essay on plasticity in Freud quotes (Malabou 2022[2007]: 283) the latter's mention to the plasticity of amoeba, an organism a (giant-sized) token of which is, in *Cemetery*, enigmatically floating in the sky (fig. 1).

It remains to be seen whether and how *Cemetery* admits at all the possibility of the new within a scenario lacking any hope for change: "situation critical, and probably inoperable" is, according to Tony Rayns (2016), the film's diagnosis of 21st century's Thailand.

The political subtexts of the film have already been extensively analyzed in academic literature which I summarize only in broad brushstrokes and to which I recommend to turn for a more exhaustive picture. In the hospital canteen, a portrait appears of "Field Marshall Sarit Thanarak, a notorious, Franco-like dictator who ruled in the mid-'50s and whose revolting shadow still looms with every subsequent coup" (Rithdee 2015) (seventeen only between 1932 and 1991, and still counting). For centuries, deeply (politically, historically and socially) scarred Isan region was "buffeted between three spheres of influence: Khmer to the east; Lao kingdoms to the north (with whom it has close ethno-linguistic ties); and the central Siamese lowland powers" (Teh 2011: 600). Proper borders and annexation to Siam only came with the Franco-Siamese 1893 war; subsequent processes of forced Thaification, assimilation and centralization elicited various forms of resistance. Poor, rural, marginal,

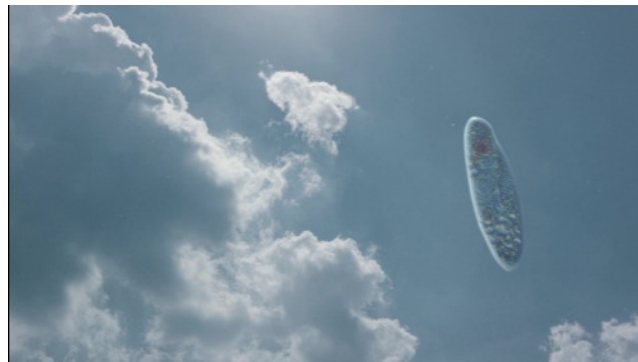


Fig. 1: Giant-sized amoeba floating in the sky.

“a buffer zone– and thus frequent battleground– between its stronger neighbours” (Teh 2011: 601) and hence eventually hosting several U.S. military bases, religiously composite (with “animistic and shamanistic beliefs of Khmer origin” (Malaina 2022: 144) contaminating and complicating Thai-hegemonic Theravada Buddhism), Isan has not infrequently nurtured leftist tendencies (also intersecting recent “Red Shirts” movement), often violently repressed, and opposing not least the paternalism of official relationships between central state and region. “Development and modernisation were instrumentalised to provide legitimacy for the royalist regime without undermining the hierarchical model upon which it was based” (Veal 2020: 286): regional identities and leverage were only allowed insofar as they embraced the “royalist-nationalist metanarrative of Thailand [as] the ‘condition of possibility’ for the constitution of national subjects” (Veal 2020: 285), enforced particularly by King Bhumibol Adulyadej, who ruled between 1946 and 2016, and whose portrait hangs in *Cemetery*’s hospital.

Besides a couple of jokes exchanged by characters about regional differences, *Cemetery* does touch upon forced Thaification by scattering posters with embarrassingly paternalistic slogans (e.g. “Hunger for heaven will lead you to hell”) in what remains of that former school, by contrasting present misery and delusions of past national/imperial grandeur in the park stroll scene, and by showing homeless persons next to Sarit’s memorial, a mural with relief sculptures celebrating the regime’s infrastructural achievements (e.g. electricity) connecting the state’s centre and periphery.

Homeless persons, however, are shown also under the advertising poster for a “EU wedding studio” presumably arranging Thai-European marriages. *Cemetery* tackles not only state-region conflicts, inadequacies and imbalances, but also local-global ones. While scholarship on the film is largely limited, scope-wise, to the former level (also the only level thematized in *Uncle Boonmee*), May Adadol Ingawanij examined the latter too:

Khon Kaen is currently undergoing accelerated capitalization in the orbit of Chinese regional dominance and military/royal rule [,] a speculative capitalist frontier whose clique of elite entrepreneurs energetically prospect the future through their championing of a transport infrastructure project and the imaginary of the smart city. These elite futurologists are mobilizing media-saturated events, CGI urban dream images and promotional discourses to energize and affectively legitimize their vision of a private-financed future, under local leadership and guided by the mentorship of the military-oligarchic regime. (Ingawanij 2021: 555)

In *Cemetery*, a caterpillar machine digs near the hospital to lay fibre optic cables, or perhaps “some kind of surveillance system for the military regime” (Ingawanij 2021: 556). Allusions are made “to the global present-future of networked capitalist expansion and the national time of nihilistic repetition, the time of yet another coup regime” (Ingawanij 2021: 556), e.g. when Jen relates that “The Mayor planned this place to showcase the Northeast region, but then the flood came”.

At first, Jen buys into frameworks like “national” and “foreign”. Twice she asks if Keng works for the FBI. “Itt is a very good man. He serves the nation. You are a foreigner, you wouldn’t understand” she tells her husband,

a retired US soldier (whom she checked on before marrying to ascertain he wasn't a terrorist), who replies "I do understand. I know you're very patriotic" (as confirmed by some other occasional remarks of hers). Then the park stroll, juxtaposing the floridity of an imaginary kingdom with far duller present realities, has some cathartic effect on her. She concludes that "at the heart of the kingdom there is nothing"; then she tells Itt that caterpillars are "a secret government project", and he replies "It's so secret that they're digging out in the open".

Only in the next and last scene she (fig. 2) becomes able to see what is hidden in plain sight, as manifested by a caterpillar excavating a football pitch (fig. 3): the devastation of territory to connect Khon Kaen (unlikely to benefit particularly therefrom) to somewhere else following capital circulation, investments and speculation. On the resulting piles of dirt, children play football as if nothing were happening, unable (unlike Jen) to see the obvious under their noses. No longer any conspiracies, no faith in the substantiality of the national or even the local, much less in them as defences against foreign superpowers with which they are de facto allied in the name of mutually benefitting capital circulation. No need to name names either, whether China or Bangkok or whatever else: all that matters is the visible evidence, obviously embodied by the caterpillar, of some *conflictual imbalance between centres and margins*.



Fig. 2: Eyes wide open.

Coup after coup, the nation's grasp on Isan is as colonialism-leaning as foreign imperialist powers, themselves changing skin but not nature: American imperialism may be declining (Jen's *retired* husband; the machines to facilitate pleasant dreams imported from Afghanistan's U.S. bases) but then new, non-Western imperialisms do the same differently. Thus, *Cemetery's* way to cognitive mapping is about *not* establishing differences between these agents, which are but contingent instances of a more fundamental conflict between centres and margins, rendering even present powers mere iterations of past ones in different shapes. Chinese capital flowing to Isan through Bangkok's regime is only the new guise of an imperialist power once represented by the U.S., and not very different from Thai state's quasi-colonial domination of the North-East region. That the film's cognitive mapping relies on leaving these relationships deliberately uncharted seems corroborated by Jen leafing through a notebook of Itt's and finding first writings, then map-like drawings (fig. 4), and then just rows of rectangular(-ish) shapes (fig. 5): in this third case, coming *beyond* mapping (the drawings), the emphasis is on the alikeness of elements indiscriminately juxtaposed.



Fig. 3: Devastation hidden in plain sight.

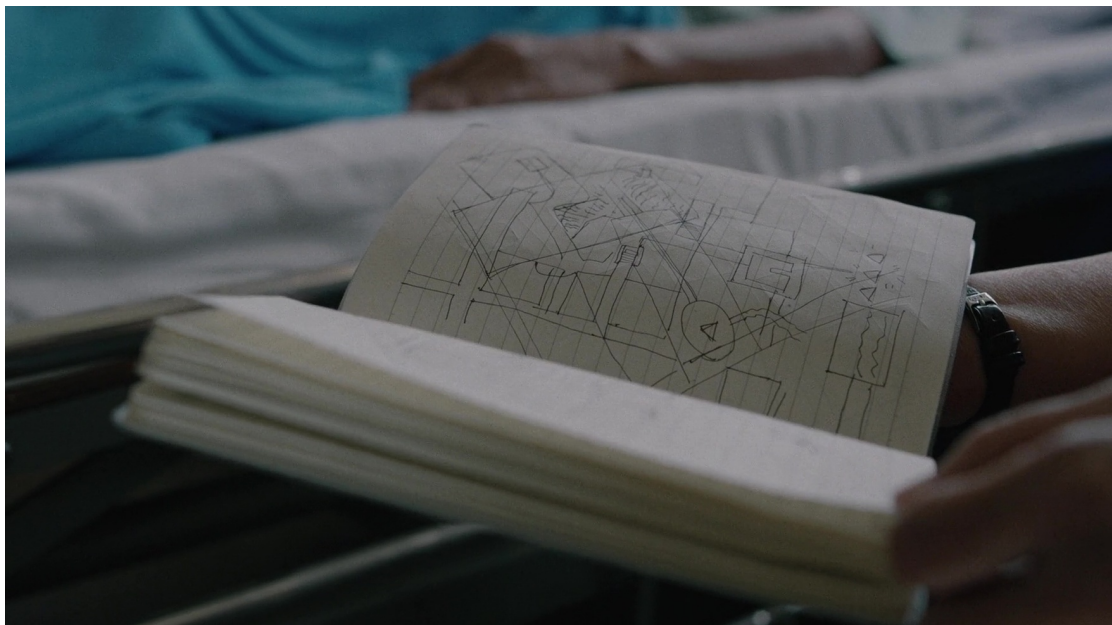


Fig. 4: Itt's notebook – Map-like drawings.

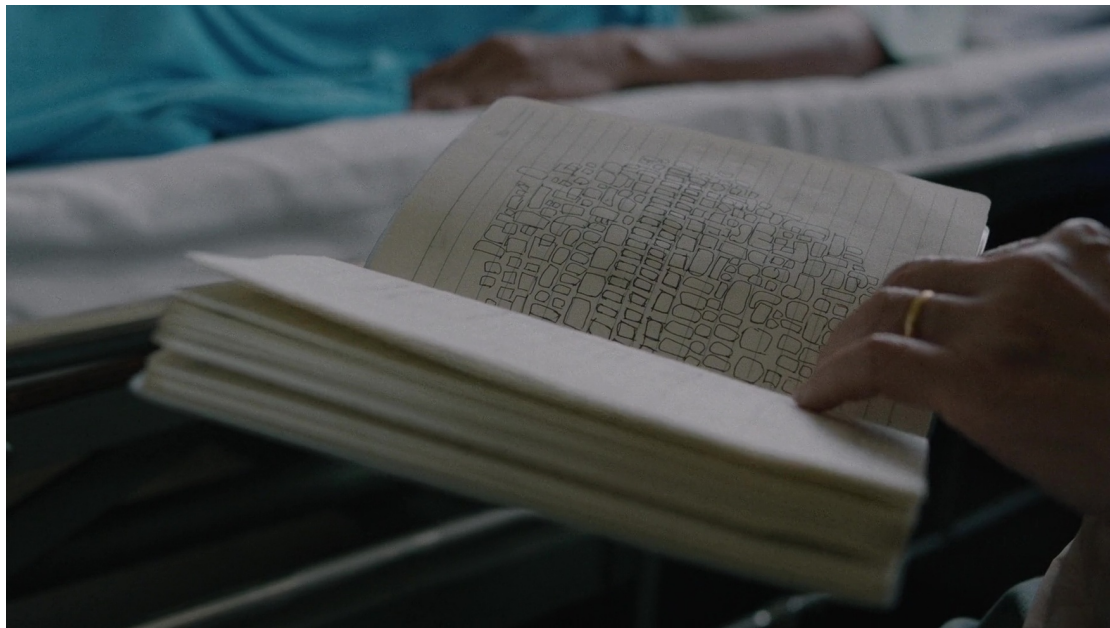


Fig. 5: Itt's notebook – Rows of rectangular(-ish) shapes.

A voice-over monologue is heard short before the end:

There's a mountain of bricks. It spreads out like a flower blossom. It stretches to the sky to devour the sun. It is very far away. It looks ominous and fearsome. It pretends to be a pure and flawless being. Pretends to be as soft as a child's palm. Before it disappears, the wall bulges and changes shape — as if it knows that, when it falls, it would be an astounding sight to behold.

Imperialisms old and new need ideology, as overblown apparatuses needing to appear natural (like flowers) and new (like children), rather than the false totalities that they are (as per the standard Marxian definition), destined to be replaced by more of the same but in different shapes.

Utopia, in *Cemetery*, is the sunlight behind the wall: a change of perspective diametrically opposed to any hermeneutic of suspicion; a kind of cognitive mapping consisting in making visible, by way of historical detour, *the always-ongoing, hidden in plain sight* (Jameson's review of *Specters of Marx* is called "Marx's Purloined Letter" after all) *antagonism between centres and margins*, this visibility being the extratextual condition of possibility for representing a posteriori relationships between local, national, global etc.

Conflicts between these are relativized in favour of the more fundamental conflict between centres and margins. In *Cemetery*, Isan stands for this conflict's structural character, utopianly resisted somehow only by the informal network of caring, mutual support and economic exchange (e.g. the longkong fruits circulating from hand to hand) formed along the film; that this includes Itt, a soldier, warns us that this network's informality is not reified in turn and thus does not preclude institutionalization. Little more than a (possibly exoticized) backdrop in *Uncle Boonmee* (a film overwhelmed by its protagonist and his doubles), Isan is, in terms both historical (Jen remembers her childhood's bombing from Laos) and non-historical, i.e. natural (the aforementioned flood stopping the investments), the decisively extratextual pivot around which *Cemetery's* political allegory revolves, standing for the structural conflict between centres and margins without being reified as a regional entity, identity or else. In this regard, Clare Veal has convincingly demonstrated that *Cemetery's* intersubjective tangle of voices, particularly during the park stroll (to which I shall return), creates deliberate confusion as to those voices' ownership in order to eschew the unspoken obligation, prescribed by the already mentioned paternalist metanarrative framing the regional, for oppositional stances to subjectivize in order to conform to and be coopted by the royalist/nationalist framework. Jen's realization that "at the heart of the kingdom there is nothing" is the realization that "while the periphery cannot be articulated without submitting to the logic of the centre, the centre is also 'nothing' without the periphery" (Veal 2020: 299).

While both first and last shot (and some more in between) display a caterpillar, only the last stands for the implications sketched above, because by then both Jen and the spectator have become acquainted with the coalescence between past and present peaked in the park stroll (in which two juxtaposed statues are found, one representing a loving couple, the other the same couple as skeletons – fig. 6). Jen’s eyes spread wide open facing the final caterpillar because its political implications are both hidden in plain sight, immediately legible on its surface (no beneath, no beyond), *and* historically layered, as the latest example of a power changing shape but never really substance.



Fig. 6: Statues in the park.

Surface itself is thematized via Jen’s obsession for skin creams (stopping the effects of time) and her taking care of Itt’s skin. After the park stroll, Keng pours curative liquids on Jen’s crooked leg (10 cm shorter and severely scarred) and licks it: a non-penetrative, quasi-sexual intimate contact. It is a *menage à trois* in which skins touch as a culmination of the three character’s unconscious-es connecting with one another — and completely discarding penetration as mediation between inside and outside (Ma 2022: 99-102). Penetration is elsewhere downplayed (Jen: “I have touched way too many penises in my life”) or derided (sleeping Itt’s erected penis, jokingly poked by Keng). Dualities such as surface-depth, present-past etc., formalized in the very structure of similarly hospital-set *Syndromes and a Century* (Boehler 2016: 231) are, in *Cemetery*, abolished.

3 A Non-Subjectivizable Gaze

Uncle Boonmee’s ending epitomized Derrida’s deferral. In *Cemetery* this occurs when Jen, sitting among the ruins of her ancient classroom, gets anxious about an assignment due decades before. *Cemetery*’s ending, however, is about *overcoming* deferral: thanks to her familiarization with the coalescence between present and past, Jen finally approaches the present *as present*. In order to access the present for what it is, a detour through that coalescence was needed, as a dream bringing a new awareness once awakened. While the whole film is blatantly oneiric, this dream-like mood peaks in the park stroll — after which Jen wakes up leaning on Itt’s hospital bed.

Crucially, during the stroll, subjectivities get mutually confused. Itt dreams of the ancient palace; Keng reads his mind and tells everything to Jen, who is mostly absorbed in her own past experiences related to that park; still, Itt/Keng’s discourse and Jen’s sometimes overlap. After waking up, she tells Itt “I have seen your dream” and he replies “I have seen yours”. Who dreamt what?

This interpersonal telepathy may recall Stanley Kubrick's 1980 *The Shining*, and Itt/Keng's visions of the past, Jack Torrance's. After *Mekong Hotel* (2012), on a hotel haunted by the past with a quasi-horror subplot, *Cemetery* is set on ancient tombs. Itt's notebook resembles the "all work and no play" typewritten sheets; the only actual ghosts in the film are two nearly identical sisters who are in fact non-living goddesses; Jen's eyes wide open in the ending might come across as an "overlook".

In his *Towards a Political Aesthetics of Cinema*, Sulgi Lie analyses *The Shining* as ideally encapsulating cinema's potential for cognitive mapping according to Jameson (who refers to *The Shining* in his review of *Specters of Marx*; Jameson 1999: 39). Oudart's suture theory (which Seunghoon Jeong [2012] uses to account for Weerasethakul's cinema until *Uncle Boonmee*) is, according to Lie, essential to understand Jameson's cognitive mapping. The link between the two is postulated on the assumption of a convergence between the unrepresentable absent cause of moving images (the gaze supposedly originating them, which Jacques Lacan would call the "gaze of the Other") and the equally unrepresentable totality of social relationships. Both are not only unrepresentable, but also non-subjectivizable (Lie 2020: 175). Cinema creates visual consistency (chiefly though not exclusively through montage) which is also a consistency of meaning; the closer it gets to such consistency, the more it implies a subjectivity responsible for it. This subjectivity, however, cannot be fully disclosed on the screen, because it is nothing but an aftereffect: implied, but not substantial. The closer film gets to consistency, the more this subjectivity is concealed; the more this consistency is dismantled (e.g. in Robert Bresson's cinema), the closer cinema gets to adumbrating this (imaginary) subjectivity. Likewise, the objectivity of historical processes as a whole is exclusively negative. To make that whole seamlessly consistent would be tantamount to subjectivizing it, i.e. to betray its objectivity, thereby lapsing into ideology; rather, it can only be represented a posteriori through the gaps of representation, i.e. through the failures of reducing the whole of historical processes to consistency. The political unconscious informing cultural artworks and products, expressing the contradictions of socio-historical reality, is not an a priori substance or transcendental framework: it can only be reconstructed a posteriori. The utopian potential of cinema lies in subverting the illusory consistency of ideology and mapping out the contradictions of reality (themselves a construction, not a given) by working through the symptoms of the inconsistencies of the way cinema represents that reality. Cinema can best engage in cognitive mapping through the instances in which the gaze that is supposed to bestow consistency is manifested as not only non-objective, but also non-subjectivizable, that is, in and for itself inconsistent.

This is what happens in the park stroll scene, when the gaze enveloping together Jen's, Keng's and Itt's visions is unassignable. Maximum visual consistency (master shots exhaustively accounting for the action, compositional harmony, least montage friction possible) goes along the exclusion of what is most essential: the source of Keng's dream, namely bed-ridden Itt. In the scene, "everyone's existence and desires potentially attune to each other's" (Bordeleau 2017: 90), but also and especially nobody's. Suture theory meets non-Western animism (and even more so the kind of receptive dispossession of the Self specific to animism-inflected Theravada Buddhism [Veal 2020: 299], grounding in phenomenological materiality "the radical transcendence of the speaking subject beyond subjectivity itself" [Veal 2020: 295]), as was the case already in *The Shining*, another film in which "the late capitalist erosion of sociality" (Lie 2020: 273) has clearly taken over, but in which the "minoritarian enchainment between the black man and the child constitutes one of the few relationships of solidarity" (Lie 2020: 273), quite like the informal network of *Cemetery* characters.

Contrary to *The Shining* though, in *Cemetery* there is no villain. No Jack Torrance impersonating white supremacist "autarkic male oligarchies" (Lie 2020: 296-297), as the latter have definitively dissolved into the invisibility of capital flows (the only white male, Jen's husband, is somewhat harmless). Those flows' invisibility leaves symptoms though, like the caterpillar.

Accordingly, the film is devoid of traumas. In his cinema in general, and in *Cemetery* too, Apichatpong's "handling of social taboos deliberately defuses their shock value, dousing them instead with [...] quotidian familiarity, and slightly awkward intimacy" (Teh 2011: 604). The two undead sisters do not haunt and scare Jen like *The Shining*'s do with Danny: they join Jen at her table for a lovely conversation over snacks. The past does not break into the present, but gently slides in as if the two dimensions had always coincided all along. Itt/Keng lovingly licking Jen's disfigured leg is the exact opposite of Torrance kissing an attractive naked woman only to realize it is a half-decayed corpse.

The only horrors and jumpscare are in the trailer watched by Itt and Jen in a movie theatre. Albeit *Cemetery* may be (as Apichatpong concedes in the pressbook; Vv.Aa. 2015) the Thai director's closest to a linear narrative, and arguably the farthest from contemporary art's forms and concerns, *Cemetery*'s self-referential subtext is conspicuous, and smoothly integrated in Jen's narrative arc, centred around a realisation of national/imperial/etc. ideology's shallowness ("at the heart of the kingdom there is nothing") inseparable, at the level of form, from the encounter with a gaze that cannot be subjectivized.

The trailer scene is followed by "an eight-shot montage, which opens on a shot of the ceiling fan in the hospital room where the soldiers sleep, followed by two medium-long shots of the soldiers in their beds. Besides the soldiers' beds there are tall, candy cane-shaped neon lamps [fig. 7] whose colour gradually shifts as they illuminate the room" (Quario 2024: 57), supposed to soothe the soldiers in their troubled sleep. The montage, which includes the mural and the EU wedding poster mentioned previously, along with other locations outside of the hospital, concludes with "a wide shot of the hospital room with the sleeping soldiers, which brings back the sound and lights to their spatial point of origin" (Quario 2024: 59-60). Shots are sometimes superimposed with a filter whose colour changes depending on the colours flowing inside the lamps (fig. 8).



Fig. 7: The hospital's interior, with the coloured lamps.

That the lamps' colours spill over into places other than the hospital's interiors is an indication that cinema, to which the artificial continuity between the hospital and those other places is due, also works a bit like those lamps: it plunges the spectator in a grey area between wake and sleep, life and death, involvement and detachment, through a gaze subjectively inflected (those colours are, as it were, pure affects) which however belongs to nobody. This subjective inflection is entirely atmospheric: a "translucent overlay, a subtle vibration that blurs the contours of the picture" (Ma 2022: 56) emphasized by the "sensational inaction" (Ferrari 2012: 175) of long shots of protracted duration whose tension, for lack of virtually anything happening, stems mainly from the slight changes of their graphic, geometrically-designed compositional values as they calmly follow one another. "Immaterial realities press in upon the image, undercutting its photographic literalism, thickening its air with a sense of latency, and making it seem simultaneously near and far" (Ma 2022: 88).

Cemetery's self-referentiality is ultimately reflected in the chronological proximity between that eight-shot montage and the movie theatre scene, with the trailer leaving Itt and Jen awake but unimpressed. It would be misleading, so Apichatpong seems to tell us, to regard cinema as a *dispositif* (a projection set-up in a certain context etc.), because it is way more essentially a *spectral gaze*, i.e. one "acknowledging the impossibility of keeping the opposing terms of the binary, *any* binary, separate and discrete, acknowledging their inextricable



Fig. 8: Outdoors take the same colour as the hospital's interiors.

coimplication, indetermining, reversibility and irreconcilability" (Cholodenko 2004: 107) — not least subjective and objective, as a gaze whose suture between subjective and objective is lacking: not an objective gaze but a subjectless subjective one.

Sleep has always been a key component of Weerasethakul's poetics (Ma 2022: 43-58); in *Cemetery*, however, awakening is also important. With her naïve patriotism and slight conspiratorial delusions, Jen is, in a sense, sleeping from the beginning; in and around the hospital, this grey area between wake and sleep only exacerbates (peaking in the park stroll scene), until she gains some distance from it and thus the ability to see the obvious. Her immersion in ideology is exacerbated until she faces the impossibility to steadily subjectivize the ideological discourse she partakes in. This exacerbation reaches a breaking point right before the awakening, i.e. when that subjectlessness involves the body too in the quasi-sexual menage-à-trois. In a relatively traditional way, the spectator is encouraged to identify with Jen and enter this grey area between immersion in the film's atmospherics and self-referential awareness, until the limits of identification are banged against by encountering a subjectivity that cannot be subjectivized. The ensuing awakening is of course not neatly separated from sleep (there is something glaringly catatonic in Jen's final eyes wide open), but rather the recognition of "the potentiality of awareness in sleep" (Veal 2020: 300) — just as, in Jameson's terms, utopia is (rather than ideology's opposite, much less some image of future redemption to be prospectively actualized) ideology's flipside, the dispelling of its illusory consistency and thus the opening of potentiality in its fissures.

This awareness is distinctly *outward*. In a scene featuring group meditation, participants are asked to mentally picture their energy go out of themselves, merge with the universe and then go back into each of them. *Cemetery* goes in the opposite direction: not a sense of self renewed by merging with the non-self, but a familiarity with the coalescence between past and present aimed at recognizing the traces thereof outside, *in the historical reality of the present*, as in the case of the caterpillar qua latest instance of a long-standing conflict between centres and margins. Drawing mainly on Thomas Elsaesser's (2009) theses on world cinema's realism in the digital age, Ingawanij (2013) has argued that Apichatpong's cinema deals with performative realities ("a reality that vanishes into thin air as soon as it is not experienced as real"; Thompson 2008: 100-101); Jen's eyes facing the caterpillar, however, seem to know that the caterpillar won't disappear if they close.

4 Conclusion

A certain cosmic pantheism has sometimes been attributed to Apichatpong's cinema. *Memoria* (2021) is not foreign to this attitude, as it seems to postulate a post-anthropocentric, post-optical totality that encompasses both nature and technology, that conflates together all layers of time, and that the film arguably reifies non-dialectically by having its protagonist simply discover and accept it. Conversely, nature has nothing mystically overwhelming about it in *Cemetery*: not particularly lush, it is ordinary, modest and even drab. It seems to stand less for a totality than for a residual remainder of a totality which by definition cannot be represented (in only a couple of shots it gets as beamingly verdant as in the previous films by Apichatpong, and in both someone is defecating). *Cemetery* is also far from the director's earlier multi-perspectivism: it is not quite about embracing multiple subjective perspectives as it is about cathartically unhinging from one's own and re-hinging outside of one's own. To be sure, this is a somewhat Western way of conceiving of subjectivity, but also one that, in the case of this film, does not particularly seem to contradict animism.

What seems to unite Western and non-Western is, here, the assumption of a *spectral*, undead subjectivity that cannot be subjectivized (whether optical or else, anthropocentric or else, etc.), a presence that cannot be fully made present, as in the "absent cause" of cinema spectacle in Oudart's suture theory, and of history itself for Jameson, having already unified the world under the egis of capital and usurped any future in the process.

For Jameson, utopia, i.e. the possibility of a future in tension with futurity itself, coincides with retracing this totality that does not let itself be traced except a posteriori, by working through the cracks of this spectral, undead subjectivity, through the manifold symptoms of the impossibility for it to be subjectivized. On the other hand, Jameson formulated this "cognitive mapping" only deliberately loosely, without carving too much in stone what it could and could not be.

From within the *niche* inhabited by a director that is as global as he is Thai, *Cemetery* approaches cognitive mapping in a way that both complies with its explicit and implicit requirements and, at least partly, goes eccentrically beyond them. The spectral overlap between past and present is taken to such extremes that it leaves trauma behind: no longer haunting the present threateningly, the past simply cohabits with it. No traumatic return of the repressed, and symmetrically no messianic redemption ahead: the future is absent from *Cemetery* (unlike *Uncle Boonmee*). In lieu of it, the coalescence between past and present crystallizes into a present whose geopolitical legibility (in typical terms of conflicting centres and margins) is all on the surface of reality, both immediately obvious and historically layered, away from any hermeneutics of suspicion and surface-vs-depth dualities. Utopia consists in accessing and appropriating these symptoms hidden in plain sight to better frame the potentialities opened by a contradictory reality (without necessarily identifying them with a definite prospective actualization in the future), as a result of tearing, as it were, the veil of Maya of (national/imperial/etc.) ideology by overidentifying with it and having subjectivity confront its limits (the non-subjectivizable absent cause, of cinema spectacle as well as of history) — just what cinema regularly enables by plunging spectators in a grey area between life and death, wake and sleep, detachment and involvement, past and present.

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