

คนชายขอบ or Marginal People in Apichatpong Weerasethakul's Films

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“Social exclusion”, an expression that was first used in France and later used in the postindustrial society (Silver 1994, 531-578), has nowadays spread in many Western countries, especially in Europe. This exclusion can be categorized after several levels and dimensions, as individuals or entire parts of the population are excluded from various rights, opportunities and resources, such as housing, employment, healthcare, civic engagement, democratic participation, and fair treatment in the judicial system (Miller 1999). Such forms of exclusion and discrimination may occur with people with a disability, minorities, LGBT people, drug users, persons excluded from any system of institutional care, the elderly and the young. Anyone who appears to deviate in any way from perceived norms of a population may therefore become a victim of either coarse or subtle forms of social exclusion. In modern Thailand, many contemporary writers, artists and film directors have tried to present these social injustices in their works. They mostly discuss the boundaries between the urban and rural societies, the rich and the poor, the traditional and the occidental cultures, the equality among different sexual orientations, the problem between Buddhists and Muslims in the Deep South of the Kingdom, etc. These marginalized people, also called “minorities”¹ have been ignored and excluded from the society for a long time but today they struggle in order to claim for their rights and play up their existences.

Apichatpong Weerasethakul was born on 16 July 1970 in Bangkok. Both of his parents are physicians in Khon Kean province. He graduated from the Faculty of Architecture of Khon Kaen University and also holds a master degree in filmmaking from The School of Art Institute of Chicago. Weerasethakul directed several feature and dozens of short films and the themes of his films include dream, nature, and sexuality (including his own homosexuality). He is internationally known because of many awards he obtained at Cannes film festivals and others various international film festivals, especially the prestigious “Palme d’Or” which he received in 2010 for *Uncle Boonmee who can recall his past lives*. Most of his films present many groups or individuals of marginal people of the Thai society: the poor, old and weak Uncle Boonmee in *Uncle Boonmee who can recall his past lives*, a Burmese worker in *Blissfully Yours* and a homosexual couple in *Tropical Malady* for example.

Our communication aims to analyze the images of these marginalized people and the techniques used to depict them in Weerasethakul's films. In our research, we have found marginalized people depicted in three different contexts: geographical and ethnical context, economic, social, sexual and cultural. Characters in these films are deprived of the chance to get any education due to poverty and distance. They are rejected from the society because of their sexual orientation or of indigenous or ancestral beliefs. The techniques he uses in order to present the images of these marginalized people can be divided into three types, which we shall consider: through the plot, through the characters or through the setting and atmosphere. The setting can be a place, a moment, a way of life or social conditions.

Our research is based on his trilogy: *Sut Sanaeha* สุดเสน่หา (Blissfully yours)², *Sat Pralat* สัตว์ประหลาด (Tropical Malady)³ and *Saeng Sattawat* แสงศตวรรษ (Syndromes and a Century)⁴. In these three films, Weerasethakul exposes his point of view about marginalized people: an illegal immigrant and poor factory worker, a homosexual couple and doctors and patients. In modern Thailand, there are many workers, originated from other poorer South-East Asian countries, such as Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos, who come to work in the country, expecting to have a better life (Martin 2007, 1-5). They are excluded from Thai society in the terms of social welfare and they suffer because of the inequality of wages by comparison with Thai workers. In this film, *Blissfully Yours*, the impossible love between a Thai and a Burmese becomes possible once they are in the jungle where we see only trees, which there is no more border between them as they could feel when living in the town.

The homosexual couple in *Tropical Malady*, inspired by the director's homosexuality, seems to be happy together but as one of them is a soldier, it is difficult for him to exhibit his sexuality. As in *Blissfully Yours*, Weerasethakul chooses here the deep forest as the setting where the soldier gets lost after chasing a mysterious man. In order to survive in the jungle, the soldier has to reveal his dark side but he is killed by this mysterious creature. The LGBT people are also marginalized in modern Thailand even though the Thai society seems to tolerate them but they don't still have the same right as the straights in terms of law and common rights.

In *Syndromes and a Century*, Weerasethakul describes us the relationship between the physicians and patients both in a rural area and in Bangkok, where the hospital is more modern but where there is a wide gap between individuals. In the modern and urban area, human contacts and relationship seem to be colder as if doctors and patients do not live in the same world.

A study of Weerasethakul's films shows that in his works, he himself chooses to stay on the sidelines of the current mainstream Thai cinema, which repeats the same characters and the same location for decades.

1 - Scenarios contrary to the traditional Thai cinema habits

Generally Thai mainstream cinema represents the way of life of those who are from the middle and upper classes of Thailand. The setting is always in the urban area and the big cities such as Bangkok, Chiangmai, Khon Kean, Phuket etc. It seems to be that others provinces, especially rural and remote areas are totally invisible and ignored. Weerasethakul, in contrary, prefers to represent this excluded part in most of his films or show a contrasted picture between the rural and urban sceneries as we can see the example of two hospitals, one in the province and the other in Bangkok in *Syndromes and a century*.

Weerasethakul also refuses to the recurring and artificial themes: love affairs, comedies or violent stories which are omnipresent in Thai mainstream cinema production. In fact, Thai spectators appreciate the romantic stories or the story that ends well like Cinderella Storyline. For those stories that cannot finish well as it used to be, it is because of the *bad Karma* (Jindawong 2008, 29-30). Some religious belief makes Thai audience believe that it is a question of sin in their past or current life that makes them unsuccessful or cannot achieve what they are expecting.

The types of characters in Weerasethakul's films are normally excluded from the Thai mainstream cinema in which, generally, as we said before, most of the characters are from the middle and upper classes. They are good, rich and intelligent but in his films we can see that the marginal people can also play an important role: they are homosexuals, disables, factory workers, old people and poor people in Bangkok or others provinces.

There is no real beginning or end of story in his films, the scenes look like collate pictures. The end of each film leads to the open ending, so the audience can imagine and rethink what will go on as life is not yet finished. The end in this case can be the beginning of another story that repeat all time the problems he wants to point out and which will never be solved.

2 - Construction of the film in opposition to the clichés of Thai cinema

Regarding the production of his movies, Weeraethakul does not follow the habits of Thai production circles; usually, in Thailand, the audience chooses to go and see a movie according to the fame of the actors and actresses: when one hires a superstar to act in a movie, he is guaranteed to be successful. But commercial success is not the purpose of Weeraethakul: he chooses his actors through a cast and he retains the ones who seem to correspond best with the characters he has imagined. This may explain the fact that his movies are quite ignored in Thailand while they are recognized and appreciated abroad, as the rewards he received may show.

As Weerasethakul grew up far from Bangkok and the main cities of Thailand, he has developed a deep passion for Nature; therefore, he does not use elaborate settings and none of his sceneries is filmed in a classic film studio; such a choice can be explained by his desire

to show the reality of both society and Nature. The characters wear normal costumes, those which can be seen everywhere in everyday Thailand. No commercial publicity for trademarks can be found in the movies (Kanjapan 2006, 3-32).

In his works, the use of lighting plays an important role; Using lighting suggests symbols as in *Tropical Malady*, when glow-worms are used to symbolize the soul of a cow which the hero just killed; they fade slowly and the forest is silent and dark again.

Weerasethakul usually uses natural sounds in his films and most of the songs which are to be listened to are sung by one of the characters and are written in accordance with the scenario. This is once again very different from what we can notice in Thai mainstream movies, where the director prefers to use songs that the audiences know very well and sung by singers who are famous in Thai entertainment circles: this is of course a choice made for commercial purposes.

Conclusion

Weerasethakul's films do not propose ways to solve the problems of marginal people but try to discuss the question of social justice and fairness in relation to marginalized people. Thai society lack of application of the concept of social justice between different classes of people. Kulapa Vajanasara (Vajanasara 2012, 18-36) shows in one article the process that turn an individual or a group into marginal people as the result of Thaisation which exclude those who are not Thai in terms of nationality and culture. The modernization of the country creates gaps between a new industrial society and agriculture. Social inequalities are often explained by the belief in reincarnation and Karma. Disables, poors, homosexuals are seen as having bad Karma and, therefore, cannot be seen as part of the society.

As we can notice, the choices made by Weerasethakul in movie-making are in fact against the habits of the Thai audience, which may explain the lack of success of his films. He does not need to entertain his audience, as he has a message to deliver; he wants to present ideas, to denounce what he sees as a dictatorship of thoughts calibrated by a so-called elite, marginalizing those who do not behave the way they do. For that elite, cinema is a distraction and should be, as we say in Thai, "light for the brain"

However, one question must be asked: when the audience of Western cinematographic festivals welcomes so favorably Weerasethakul's films, can we be sure they understand his message? Ignoring the reality that inspires him and which he wants to denounce, these Westerners are likely to see them as an aesthetic product, an intellectual game for intellectuals. If so, which is to be feared, Weerasethakul is disregarded in Thailand and misunderstood abroad.

References

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Notes

- 1 The minorities here does not refer to the number of people but how the society treats them. They might in fact represent a great part of the population but the authorities do not see them as a priority in terms of social welfare, education, public health etc.
- 2 Synopsis: Roong and Orn took Min, Roong's boyfriend, a Burmese illegal immigrant to see a doctor because he had rash. At the hospital, Min-Ou refused to talk to the doctor, as he can't speak Thai well and is afraid that he would be arrested by Thai authorities. As Orn is not satisfied with the medication, she tries to heal Min by her own method by using lotions mixed with some fresh vegetables. In the afternoon of that day, Min-Ou takes his girlfriend to relax in the forest. Once he is there, he has a feeling of freedom and begins to make love to Roong. Orn also went to the forest with young Tommy who worked with her husband. Both of them also feel happy and have a sexual affair. They are interrupted when their motorcycle is stolen. Tommy follows the thief and disappears. Orn is anxious and lost in the forest and eventually stumbles upon the young lovers by the river while Roong is giving fellatio to Min. The final shot is of Roong turning over and gazing directly into the camera.
- 3 Synopsis: Keng is a soldier assigned to a post in a small town in rural Thailand. The troops' main duties, it seems, is to investigate about the mysterious slaying of cattle in local farms. While in the field one day, Keng meets Tong. Later, Keng sees Tong riding a truck in town. The two men make a connection and embark on a romance, taking trips in the countryside. Then, one night, the country boy wanders off into the dark. The film's narrative abruptly shifts to a different story, about a soldier sent alone into the woods to find a lost villager. In the woods, the soldier encounters the spirit of a tiger shaman, who taunts and bedevils the soldier, causing him to run through the woods and become lost and isolated.
- 4 This film is a contemporary sociological critique of the modernization of Thailand and the syndromes of the century, through the childhood memories of the director of a hospital in the world of his

parents, both doctors. A man and woman doctors both work in a field hospital in a small, intimate, green, human environment, close to patients. Then they move to a more modern hospital but colder, more concrete and more depersonalized of the capital Bangkok where there is fewer human relationships between individuals.