

*Transitional Space in Apichatpong Weerasethakul's Syndromes and a Century:
The Reflection of Thailand in Transition*

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The Asian Conference on Media, Communication & Film 2018
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Recently, transitional space has been employed as an aesthetic and stylistic means of narrative in many contemporary films, and it has been explored in many different ways, which go far beyond its conventional use for continuity editing. This paper will examine the use of transitional space in Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Syndromes and a Century* and explore how it can create multiple dimensions of space, time, and break an authority of the film's narrative. For me, Apichatpong's way of making film is a blending of content and form, in most of his films, content is form and form is also content. Form is not merely the film apparatus for delivering content, but it becomes content itself. Though Apichatpong always says that this film is about his memory of his parents, however, it is also about the memory of the country, Thailand. It is about how we have gone through the change, from the past to modernized country, from the rural to urban. The rupture of the storyline and the interweaving of time and space in *Syndromes and a Century* disrupts the continuity of the film and leave viewers in frustration. The narrative authority is destructed and the film opens up space for viewers to question what they are seeing on the screen.

Keywords: Transitional Space, *Syndromes and a Century*, politics

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Introduction

'Transition' has many meanings. It literally means the process, passage, or period of changing from one state, subject, place, or condition to another. In terms of geography and architecture, transitional space refers to spaces or interfaces that can be between the city and the countryside or between two places via a highway or a corridor, such as is commonly experienced on the move. Then, there is its meaning as a mark of change, a movement from one thing to another, the leaving behind of one state and the creation of something new.

When it comes to film technique, it has another meaning. Transition or transitional space/shots are part of an aspect of basic film editing, and have been used as tools to indicate the change in space and time in film. It is a way of continuity editing to connect different places and times, and to help the audience make sense of what is going on in the story. Transitional space usually has no meaning of its own. It is images or sequence shots that are neutral. In terms of storytelling, the transitional space has no role in driving the story. One acclaimed director remarkable for his unconventional use of spatial-temporal relations is Yasujiro Ozu. His use of 'empty shots' is said to reproduce the worldview of Zen Buddhism, or to reflect the modernist fascination with surface and materiality (Eleftheriotis & Needham, 2006, p. 19-20). Moreover, Ozu's tradition denies the emptiness of transitional space and conceives of it instead as a space of possibility. It is considered to be denying the cause-effect chain that is a function of Western logocentrism, individualism, and bourgeois capitalism, or to draw the viewer's attention away from results and toward process. Ozu's tradition has greatly influenced many filmmakers, both in Asia and the West.

Recently, transitional space has been employed as an aesthetic and stylistic means of narrative in many contemporary films, especially in contemporary Asian films. Transitional space is explored in many different ways, and the means of using it have moved far from the conventions of continuity editing or even the established tradition of Ozu's empty shot. Of particular interest are those transitional spaces used in prominent works of Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Jia Zhangke, and Tsai Ming-Liang. In Apichatpong's *Syndromes and a Century* (2006), throughout the film transitional space is used in various ways, such as the extended sequence shot of a rice field at the beginning of the film. A rice field used as a transitional space and does not directly function in the filmic narrative, but becomes the main focal point of the scene while the sound of a conversation between characters talking in another place is audible. The ideal of transition is used throughout the film, such as the cut to the middle of the story without any transition to connect the two parts of the film, and the tracking camera along the corridor of the hospital scene. Although these transitions are different in terms of technique, they are all employed to break, pause, or interrupt the narrative flow.

Apart from the transitional space in term of film technique, which is an aesthetic approach and concern, this kind of space in terms of actual spaces such as airports, airplanes, and corridors that are presented in many films are also significant. In Jia Zhanke's *The World* (2004), he has used spaces such as an 'airplane' and a 'motel' to be temporary spaces for the main characters to stop, rest, and hide themselves from Chinese authority and the rapid economic flow. The whole film is set up in The World Park, a theme park that he sees as a model of China, as he says, '...the distance

of the world is so compressed there (The World Park). It is so close, yet so far. It is a profile of the impact of economic development on our inner being' (Lik-kwan, 2005). The lovers work in The World Park, where they are made to believe that they can see the whole world without going anywhere. The World Park they are living in seems to be an image of the outside world that is concrete, reachable, and familiar, yet giving them a sense of not belonging and loss of control. Therefore, a place such as a fake airplane can give them a sense of being away from familiar territory and free from state authority, as well as the motel that creates a sense of temporary stoppage and rest before they have to go on again. These places become spaces where they can express their real dreams, desires, and hopes in their lives.

In *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone* (2006), Tsai Ming-Liang has used an unfinished construction site as a background for the ongoing developing plan, the transition to becoming a leading economic country. Also, the construction site is used in the film as a space for the main characters, a construction worker and an illegal immigrant, who are considered marginal people. Being in this kind of space for them is like being in a never-ending story, in which they will never belong to the finished project.

In *Emerald* (2007), a video installation of Apichatpong Weerasethakul, the old hotel is used as a main location; for Apichatpong, this hotel has a long history alongside the history of Bangkok. Whether the city rises or falls, the hotel looks exactly the same and is a place for people to come and stay before going on to their next destination. The hotel becomes a space full of remaining memories, both those of the people and the space itself.

These films reflect the economic and sociopolitical context of Asian countries at this moment in time. Most Asian countries have arrived at what we call 'a modern' state at different times. Since initiating market reforms in 1978, China has experienced rapid economic and social development. GDP growth averaging about 10 percent a year has lifted more than 600 million people out of poverty. Yet China remains a developing country and its market reforms are incomplete. In Thailand, economic and social development has not been stable, due to the 'Asian Crisis' and the continuation of internal political conflicts over the last ten years. The important thing is not where we are headed, but the present, where real meaning is taking place. It is an in-between space; the waiting area at the airport, the lobby of a motel. Asian countries are in a state of transition, changing and becoming, and through these films the fast change of space and time is put on hold and perhaps frozen to a standstill.

This paper particularly focuses on Apichatpong Weerasethkul's *Syndromes and a Century* (2006). The idea of transition plays an important role in every aspect of the film; i.e., the transitions between reality and fantasy, between past and present, between time and space for humans, spirits, and mythical creatures, and transition between genders. In terms of narrative, the film is divided into two parts, and the intentional lack of a smooth transition between them is the director's unique signature. The use of an extended transitional shot and fractured narrative are also notable characteristics of the films. Significantly, *Syndromes and a Century* centers on the theme of memory, which Apichatpong says it is influenced by his childhood and family and is tied to specific places and times. However, if we see the film in the sociopolitical context of Thailand, it is not just a film about his own memories, but it correlates as well to the history of Thailand. *Syndromes and a Century* reflects social

and political changes throughout Thailand's history, and his use of transition space both in terms of film techniques and the representation of the actual space strongly parallel the sociopolitical transitions of the country as a whole.

In this paper, I will investigate the relationship between his use of transitional space, both in terms of actual space represented in the films and the filmic narrative technique, in relation to the sociopolitical context of Thailand. I believe that the way Apichatpong uses transitional space in the films is a significant turning point in Thai film history, and has important implications for the sociopolitical transition of Thailand.

Transitional space in *Syndromes and a Century*

In *Syndromes and a Century*, transitional space is used in various ways, such as the extended sequence shot of rice field at the beginning of the film, the cut to at middle of the story without any transition to connect the two parts of the film, and the tracking camera along the corridor of the hospital scene. Though, these transitional shots are different in terms of technique, they are employed to break, pause, or interrupt the narrative flow. I would like to examine the way transitional space is used in the opening sequence of the film and explore how it creates multiple dimensions of space and time, opening up the possibilities in the film narrative, and how this use of transitional space reflects the socio-political context of Thailand in the film.

In the opening sequence, the film shows a new male doctor being interviewed by a female doctor. During their interview, they need to move to another place in order to meet another colleague. The camera follows the characters as they walk out of the room into the corridor. But there they leave the characters out of the frame and the scene shifts toward a window at the back end of the corridor. Through the window frame, we see a view of a rice field. The camera gradually dollies in toward the window until the interior image of the corridor and the window frame completely becomes the exterior image of the rice field. All the time that the image is changing from the characters to the window, and finally to the rice field outside the building, the conversation of the main characters is heard as they move toward another place. Then the film cuts to the next scene, in a different place and time.



Figure 1: Opening sequence of *Syndromes and a Century* (2007)

The use of transitional space in this sequence is rather extreme. The long take of moving camera, and contradiction between the image that moves away from the characters to the exterior view of the rice field and the intimate sound of the characters talking, creates tension between the exterior and the interior, between what is happening now and what is coming next, and between past, present and future. With this use of the camera, the rice field is not merely a cutaway, but the transitional shot that loses its function and leaves the audience in a process of continuous change, which does not seem to be going anywhere. Far from the classic use of transitional space, in this sequence, transitional space is used not to make the narrative flow but to prolong and reveal the moment of transition, moving and changing.

By placing this radical shot at the beginning of the film, Apichatpong is preparing the audience for a different kind of storytelling, for modes of narrative disruption that will eventually open up a space of possibility in interpreting and altering the film narrative. It is also can be seen as a space of criticism that challenge the narrative authority and in the bigger picture, it can be seen as a critique of the grand narrative of Thai history and challenge authority figure and powerful institution, which is one of the significant point Apichatpong try to address in this film. I would like to identify two significant aspects of narrative disruption in this opening scene which will be discussed in this section. First aspect is the extended duration of transitional sequence shot and the second aspect is the contrast between sound and image in the scene.

For the first aspect, I would like to discuss how the extended transitional shot disrupt narrative authority. The use of transitional space in *Syndrome and a Century* leads me to think of Gilles Deleuze's concept of 'Any-Space-Whatever' in which he wrote:

Any-space-whatever is not an abstract universal, in all times, in all places. It is a perfectly singular space, which has merely lost its homogeneity, that is, the principle of its metric relations or the connection of its own parts so that the linkages can be made in an infinite number of ways. It is a space of virtual conjunction, grasped as pure locus of the possible. What in fact manifests the instability, the heterogeneity, the absence of link of such a

space, is a richness in potentials or singularities which are, as it were, prior conditions of all actualization, all determination. (Deleuze, 1986, p. 109)

For Deleuze (1986) this 'Any-Space-Whatever' is deserted but inhabited. It could be disused warehouses, waste ground, or cities in the course of demolition that emerged after the Second World War. For him, these spaces have changed the relationship between people and how they react to the space. They have lost their old meaning and the logical link or relation to the character has also broken down. The character is no longer an active subject which can react to the space or site in the film, and become the seer. This can also be applied to the relationship between the viewer and the film: the logical narrative of the film is disrupted and the viewer is left with the filmic image which has all its old meaning emptied out so that it becomes a space of possibility for the viewer to interpret for themselves.

The prolonged shot of the rice field we see at the end of the sequence is nearly a still image that can be linked to minimalist art that aim to deduct all the details of the art piece and leave just a form. Painters and sculptors avoid overt symbolism and emotional content, but instead call attention to the materiality of the works. This lead to some works that force the viewer to confront the arrangement and scale of the forms. Viewers also are led to experience qualities of weight, height, gravity, or even the appearance of light as a material presence. They are often faced with artworks that demand a physical as well as a visual response. By this mean, the audience is pushed away from the art piece to be conscious with themselves being in the space.

As Kim Jihoon (2010) points out of the relationship between Apichatpong's films and his installation art, 'The elongated duration of shots, which provides enhanced sensory perception of the space depicted in the films.' Further, 'The viewer's journey through the moving itinerary of the cinematic map corresponds less to appreciating the pictorial representation of spatial imaginary than to being a way of "lived" experiences produced by "a narrativized space that is intersubjective"'. The rice field in *Syndromes and a Century* is also an image that is taken out its story, nothing is really happening, just the hardly noticeable waving paddy field. The audience is left with this simple image and since the scene is not moving to anywhere, the logical narrative of the film is disrupted and the viewer is left with the filmic image which its meaning is emptied out so that it becomes a space of possibility for the viewer to interpret for themselves. This is a common nature of Apichatpong's works as he says in an interview that he likes to observe what is happening, watching people pass by, and it is the same in his films, he let the audiences observe what is going on and let them make up the narrative themselves.



Figure 2: The rice field in the opening sequence of *Syndromes and a Century*

The extended rice field shot can also be seen in relation to Andy Warhol's *Empire*. In *Empire*, Warhol uses extreme long and slow-motion footage of the immobile Empire building to reveal and criticise the deceived continuity editing, which is a core element of classical Hollywood at the time. In *Syndrome and a Century*, Apichatpong employs a similar technique, the rice field becomes a pause in the narrative. The prolonged duration of the shot enhances sensory perception of the space depicted in the film and makes the viewer move away from appreciating the pictorial representation to live experiences produced by a narrativized space that is intersubjective. This can be seen as a challenge of narrative authority in conveying the audience into the storyline.

For the second aspect, I would like to discuss is how the contrast between sound and image manipulates the audience's perception of space and time. The contradiction between image and sound keeps pulling the viewer backward and forward, the image on screen is the moving camera toward the rice field which supposed to change to the next scene, while the sound pulls the audience back to the characters walking away. The binary opposition between past and present, present and future is broken down and the edge between the two becomes blurred. If the film is what Apichatpong calls 'his memory about his own parents', then this sequence might suggest that this memory might be a living memory that is caught in-between past and present, the memory of the past which is looked through the perspective of the present, and the merge between the imagination and the real.

The rice field shot can be seen as his suggestion about what he is going to tell or let us observe throughout the film. The binary opposition appears throughout the film, a clear example is the way in which the film is divided into two equal parts. Both parts seem to have the same structure and they are almost symmetrical. The first seems to represent the past and the image of rural area of Thailand as the film is set in the provincial hospital and the natural scenery, and the second is the present and urban landscape, where the story is centred in the modern hospital in Bangkok.

However, this cannot be simply seen as linear storyline, from past to present, or the contradictory image of rural and urban, tradition and modern. In fact, the mimetic storyline of the two parts, with differences in details, keeps pulling the viewer back

and forward between the two parts. This makes time and space represented in the film overlapped and interweaving, the past is also in the present and the future is also in the past.

The transitional space used in this film is very much connected to the socio-political context of Thailand. For me, Apichatpong's way of making film is a blending of content and form, in most of his films, content is form and form is also content. Form is not merely the film apparatus for delivering content, but it becomes content itself. In *Syndromes and a Century*, transitional space is used in questioning grand narratives of Thai history and dominant authority and institutions in Thailand.

Syndromes and a Century: The reflection of Thailand in Transition

Though Apichatpong always says that this film is about his memory of his parents (Quadt, 2011), however, it is also about the memory of the country, Thailand. Thailand has gone through significant turning points in recent years such as the democracy movement in 1973, the communist movement and the massacre in 1976, the 'Asian Financial Crisis' in 1997, and the military coup in 2006. Throughout its history, the story of Thailand has been told as a continuous movement of serial events, which are driven by a cause and effect chain. Thailand has always been in a state of continuous change. The process of globalisation, the juxtaposition of cultural and social diversity, the fast growth in its economy, and the political crisis, have driven the city to keep transforming and mutating from its own past.

The transformation of Thailand due to the socio-political and economic forces has created a new form of the country's condition, which may have disrupted and altered the conventional relationship between binary oppositions, such as global/local, modern/traditional, urban/rural, and social relations such as bourgeoisie and working class. It is at this state of change, in the time of flux, and in the moment of transition, that the old meaning and norms have been loosened and questioned, although the new meaning has not yet become clear. This in-between condition is not a void or dysfunctional, but rather the condition that leads to the alternative kind of space, the space of possibility and creativity, which emerges from the contradiction of ideology.

Regarding the prominent works on space such as *Of Other Spaces* Michel Foucault (1997) allows me to think of the transitional space in terms of 'heterotopia', the space that Foucault proposes exists in between the opposite poles:

Finally, the last characteristic of heterotopias is that they have, in relation to the rest of space, a function that takes place between two opposite poles. On the one hand they perform the task of creating a space of illusion that reveals how all of real space is more illusory, all the locations within which life is fragmented. On the other, they have the function of forming another space, another real space, as perfect, meticulous and well-arranged as ours is disordered, ill-conceived and in a sketchy state (p. 335).

This in-between condition in Thailand is clear and obvious at this very moment of the country's political crisis, when the country involves different political views, the clash of social classes, and anxiety about the consequences that these turns will lead to. In

these circumstances, there seem to be two clear opponents. The first is the so-called 'Yellow Shirts', whose movement discourse has mostly dealt with political reform, anti-corruption and the destruction of ex-Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's networking, and the preservation of the royal institution. These people in this movement are mostly middle to upper-middle class and believed to represent people in the city of Bangkok. On the other hand, there are the so-called 'Red Shirts', who are commonly said to be supporters of ex-Prime Minister Thaksin and are mostly poor people from the rural part of Thailand who suffer from a centralised government that is run by a small elite comprised of the upper class of the city. They are also labelled as a group that could overthrow the royal institution. These are the main discourses from both sides that currently dominate the narrative of Thailand's political crisis.

This seems to be the conflict between binary opposition – the urban and rural, the old and the new, the left and the right wing, and especially, urban middle class and the rural poor. However, this seems to be a myth of grand narrative of 'Thailand Crisis'. The image of the 'Red Shirts' as poor, uneducated farmers is no longer appropriate. As Nidhi Aeusriwongse (2009) points out, the rural areas in Thailand have changed rapidly since 1977 due to the government's economic and social plan. The sustainable agriculture that used to be the main income of people has collapsed, and the market economy and industry have taken over. Sustainable agriculture was forced to change to industrial production, some of which was successful but most of which failed. These people tend to become owners of businesses such as small grocery shops and noodle stalls, or small trading companies and remittances, undoubtedly these jobs mostly based on basic skills and labour. These people spread out from the rural area to the provincial city and some move to cities to find better opportunity. Nidhi defined this group of people as 'lower middle class', which means that even though their incomes are above the poverty line, their economic and social status is not secured. Due to the source of their income being from informal business and self-employment which are not supported by the main economic system, their economic security is very much reliant on government policy. This newly emerged lower middle class is currently the majority of Thai people, being greatly supportive of the ex-Prime Minister, Taksin Shinawatra, whose policy is said to be 'populism'. This new definition of lower middle class people or so called 'Red Shirts' supporters gives rise to the new perception on the social relations and identity of Thai people. As Duncan and Naruemon (2010) suggest: 'They were geographically and ideologically adrift between the city and the countryside, dividing their time and their aspiration between the two.' The uprising of the new lower middle class causes an uncertainty and instability to the old power who rule and control the country and cause the significant military coup in 2006, which is the year Apichatpong makes *Syndromes and a Century*.



Figure 3: *Syndromes and a Century* (2007)

Throughout the film, Apichatpong tries to portray the old power and the nation's norm which has rules and control the country. The figure of authorities and powerful institutions are presented, such as doctor, monk, statue of royal family's member, and colour represented Thai nation. However, these figures are presented as ordinary everyday life yet defiant and resisted somehow. For example, the long tracking camera from royal family's member going through the corridor to the basement of the hospital where we find doctors drinking whisky, along the hospital corridor where we can see groups of students and nurses walking in line and keep space in order, similar to military march. These sequence shots can be considered as transition from one place to another, however, with the unusual camera and composition, these mundane everyday life is highlighted and becomes problematic. The national norm, the ideal concept of nation and institutions, and authority are challenged. Apichatpong is revealing how memory can be imagined, fantasied, and constructed, as well as the ideology of the nation and institutions that dominate and influence history of Thailand.

Conclusion

Throughout the change and transitional states of Thailand, we have been made to believe that we are heading toward the better future and there is no something wrong in the society we are living in, the norm we are adhering to, and the institutions we value for. However, In *Syndrome and a century*, Apichatpong encourages audience to question the authority of the film narrative and, perhaps, to question the authority of powerful intuitions that rule and control the country. By disrupting and prolonging the state of transition Apichatpong is revealing how we are caught up in the moment of continuous change, where we are pulled back by the ideal fantasied past while hoping for the imagined bright future that is not yet to come. Apichatpong is asking us to look carefully what is really happening in front of us at the very moment, at the present time, to realize how peculiar the world we are living in and to look at the circumstances of the country in this transition period from a new perspective.

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