Wild and Worldly: Redefining the 'Forest' in Thai Independent Cinema from Apichatpong Weerasethakul's Blissfully Yours to Anucha Boonyawattana's Malila

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Abstract
The forest is a familiar symbol in Buddhist and Thai folktales. It also appears in various art forms, especially in recent Thai independent cinema. Since Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Blissfully Yours* (2002) and *Tropical Malady* (2004), the forest in Thai cinema has changed its meaning. It was often portrayed as either a fragile space that needed to be protected or a mythical space filled with ghostly spirits and fierce creatures. In *Blissfully Yours* and *Tropical Malady*, the forest became a space where desire could be explicitly and freely expressed with no constraints. Since then, the space of the forest has often been explored in Thai independent cinema as an alternative, reimagined space where the marginal can emerge and be liberated. However, in recent Thai independent films the space of the forest has been redefined. Instead of being a space free from constraints, it has been culturally coded, from a dense and wild forest to a cultivated one. In this paper, I would like to take a closer look at two recent films: Anocha Suwichakornpong's *By the Time it Gets Dark* (2016) and Anucha Boonyawattna's *Malila: The Farewell Flower* (2017), where the forest plays an important part, symbolising conflict and turmoil both in the human mind and in the current political situation of the country

Keywords: Thai independent cinema, Buddhism, Thailand political conflict, forest in film

Introduction

The forest has long occupied a significant place in Buddhism and Thai folktales. It generates various implications which have been explored in Thai cinema. It was often portrayed as either a fragile, protected space or a mythical one. The first view is often associated with the conservation theme as deforestation has been one of the main problems in Thai society for more than a hundred years, and the government first attempted to address it by setting up the Royal Forest Department in 1896. The latter view is that the forest is filled with ghostly spirits and fierce creatures, often portrayed in popular horror genres, with humans violating nature and being condemned by it and the spirits within it. Both representations often feature outsiders as a threat that resulting from the modernisation of the country. In the past, as an agricultural country, its people were seen as living harmoniously with nature, until capitalism and technological advancement threatened this way of life. In this context, Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Blissfully Yours* (2002) and *Tropical Malady* (2004) made a significant departure from the previous representations of the forest often seen in Thai cinema. In these two films, the forest became a space where desire could be explicitly and freely expressed with no constraints. The forest represents a wild and primordial nature. Since then, the space of the forest has yielded a rather different meaning from the interpretations of the past. The forest was then explored following this new line of thought. Over the last few years, the space of the forest has yet again been redefined, from the space where desire can be freely expressed to one that is socially and culturally coded.

For this paper I will examine the portrayals of the forest in recent Thai independent cinema, particularly Anocha Suwichakornpong's *By the Time It Gets Dark* (2016) and Anucha Boonyawattna's *Malila: The Farewell Flower* (2017), and how these portrayals signified the conflict and turmoil both within the human mind and in the context of the country's current political situation. The forest is no longer a place to escape to and freely express oneself but is instead where we encounter the ghosts of the past. In the following section, I will briefly discuss the symbolism of the forest in Thai culture and how it has been represented in the cinema from past to present. In the final section, I will look into the above two films and how each one constructs its meaning through the space of the forest.

The Forest in Buddhist and Thai Folktales and Its Place in Thai Cinema:

According to Thai belief, the forest is not just a natural setting. With the country situated within the confines of Indochina, the influences from both Indian and Chinese culture are overwhelming. The meaning of the forest in Thai culture is then rather rich and complex, with inherited aspects from various cultures and beliefs. This can first be seen in traditional Thai folktales, where the forest is often a main feature of the stories. In several of them, the forest is where an important journey will take place and where lessons will be learnt by the protagonist of the story. It is a place where many of the princes or kings in the folktales will have to prove whether they can complete the journey safely and with dignity. Moreover, in the folktales the forest is the place where sacred spirits have the power to help or hurt humans and can take on different forms to communicate with them. It is a power beyond any social structures. There are often gods or goddesses looking after nature who have the ability to transform into humans in order to test the humanity of the protagonist. This

narrative has been represented in many traditional performances, including Likay and Lakhon Nok. In Lakhon Nok, according to Jukka O. Miettinen, 'the plays depict the trials of noble princes and adventures in demon-infested forests with Hindu deities and spirits taking part in the action'.[1] This has been transformed and incorporated into the Thai cinematic tradition in various ways. In mainstream cinema, the forest is used as background in different genres, whether adventure, comedy or horror. In the popular horror genre, the forest is often the place of a journey which the characters need to survive, surrounded by ghostly spirits and wild creatures, after they have violated nature in some way. In the same vein as May Adadol Ingawanij and Richard Lowell MacDonald (2010) refer to the rural-provincial as 'a conventional trope by which to gauge social change and modernisation', the representation of the forest is also an indication of the interference of the modernisation of the country with nature (p. 132).

Moreover, with its roots in Buddhist, Brahmin and Hindu mythologies, the forest has become a rather sacred space in many Asian countries, particularly India, with its legendary Himmapan Forest. The word 'Himalaya' in ancient Sanskrit means 'abode of snow' and is the likely source of the name Himmapan (Karnchanapayap, n.d.). It is also believed that the Himmapan Forest, located between heaven and earth, is where many of the mystical strange creatures live, including the half-man, half-bird being (Radhakrishnan, 2015, The Dancing Princess Section). It has a place in both Buddhist manuscripts regarding Buddha's previous incarnations. The Himmapan Forest here is believed to be a sacred place and for many it exists in the present on another plane of reality. This has also been incorporated into films, for example *Vengeance* (Preaw Sirisuwan, 2006), an adventure-horror film featuring tiger bees, fruit tree maidens, and many monstrous animals in the forest where the criminals escape and need to be caught. The Himmapan Forest space only serves as a location for exoticising the film.

Figure 1: Himmapan forest imagined in Thai painting

Since *Blissfully Yours*, the depiction of the forest has become rather different in Thai independent cinema, with the forest now a personal space where the desires of each character can be freely expressed instead of a space for grandiose narratives about heroes as in the past. Similarly, Nicholas Mercer (2012) argues that the forest in

Blissfully Yours is a site of transgression and liberation: 'affirming the characters' libidinal impulses and affecting a brief existential respite to the alienating conditions of the modern world' (p. 203). The forest in *Blissfully Yours* is like a private realm where the characters, Roong, a factory worker, Min, a Burmese migrant, and Orn, a middle-aged woman in an unsatisfying marriage, are drifting through the afternoon, day-dreaming amidst the dazzling sunlight and forest streams. The three marginal characters then soon turn the space of the forest into a setting for their sexual ecstasy. The forest here exists outside both the confining world of the city and the norms of storytelling. There are no sacred spirits or wild creatures but it is a place in which the primordial forces of nature bring out the beast in man.

Figure 2: Blissfully Yours (2002)

In *Tropical Malady*, on the other hand, Weerasethakul fuses the two different worlds together: the private world of personal desire and the ideological world of the forest inherent in Thai folktales. In an interview, Weerasethakul refers to the forest in his films as not a real place but a memory of his childhood where he listened to many tales about strange creatures, as well as being a place to hide (Saisongkhroh, 2018). The forest in *Tropical Malady* is a space with no rules where humans are no longer restricted or oppressed by social constraints, including sexual norms. It is also the Himmapan-inspired space where the Kinnaree, half human-half bird, who has become the wife of the king, lives among other supernatural animals in the forest. According to Mercer (2012), in the forest 'Tong and Keng's desire undergoes complete transmogrification as it flows through the animistic imaginary of the jungle' (p. 204). The film is split into two halves, with the first telling the simple story of two young men, Tong and Keng, a soldier and a countryman, falling in love in a small town at the edge of the forest. The ending of the first half is when they stand on the edge of the forest as if it were a threshold between civilisation and the primitive world. The two halves of the film are divided by the image of a tiger and the words 'once upon a time, there is a skillful Khmer shaman who can transform into various animal forms'. In the second half of the film, the two characters are seemingly metamorphosising into characters of the folklore tales of the primitive world, where human and animal can transform into each other. The character of Keng -or it might be someone else portrayed by the same actor - makes the journey into the dark forest in search of a tiger-ghost which can converse with humans.

The tiger-ghost or 'seu-sming' has appeared in various Southeast Asian beliefs and folktales. In Thailand, it is believed to be a person who has the ability to access the

world of spirits and can transform into a tiger, or a tiger that has eaten many humans, until the human spirits take over and it can finally transform into a human. The audience follows Keng's journey into the dark forest, where he gradually annihilates himself as a human in order to survive in nature. In the final scene, Keng encounters a ghost-tiger, who he believes to be Tong and surrenders himself to becoming one with the beast. Ingawanij (2013) suggests that this kind of forest cosmology is quite different from European fairy tales that 'represent the transformation of human characters into animals in the wild as a loss of humanity, impelling an ending whereby the characters return home and revert to human form' (p. 94). In Weerasethakul's forest, there is no demarcation between human and beast. The forest represents a world where the civilised identity needs to be annihilated and desire freed from any constraints, and where the two souls can join together as if the human is returning home.

Figure 3: Tropical Malady (2002)

The Ghost of the Past and Human Turmoil Amidst a Turbulent Political Situation:

In the period of authoritarian government after the coup d'état, independent films have become an alternative space in which to express the repressed subjects that remain an undercurrent in Thai society. With no financial constraints, as most independent films do not rely on local investment or the local box office, filmmakers have more freedom to raise the subjects that mainstream filmmakers dare not do. In many of the films, the forest has continued to be the main feature and has again been reappropriated by both filmmakers, as seen in the two recent films: *Malila: The Farewell Flowers* and *By the Time It Gets Dark*. The two films are more concerned with inner turmoil and attempting to bring the undercurrent to the surface.

Anucha Boonyawattna's *Malila: The Farewell Flower* is a gay romance between Shane, a farm owner, and Pich, a cancer-stricken craftsman who makes elaborate floral ornaments with jasmine flowers and banana leaves, used in various Thai ceremonies. After a short reunion and a passionate and melancholic night together, Pich bids his farewell. The main setting of the first half of the film is an orchard, which is in a way a cultivated forest in between the wild and civilisation. Shane intentionally grows jasmine trees in memory of Pich, as they are the main feature in flower ornaments. Flower ornaments and the jasmine orchard intentionally suggest the impermanence and delicacy of life, which is fleeting and easily fades away. There

is also a scene where Shane attempts to clear out the overgrown weeds in the spot where the corpse of the snake that killed his daughter still lies. In the same way, flower ornaments use the delicacy of jasmine and painstakingly attempts to put the flowers in order. It is an attempt to organise what naturally grows wild in nature.

Figure 4: Malila: The Farewell Flower (2017)

In the rest of the film, or the second part, Shane becomes a monk and goes on a pilgrimage through the Thai-Cambodian border forest with his mentor monk, seeking renunciation and solitude. In *Malila: The Farewell Flower*, the forest represents another dimension of meaning. In Buddhism, the Buddha has his moment of great awakening in the forest under the bodhi tree. The bodhi tree then becomes a symbol of the Buddha's awakening. The Buddha also spent most of his life in the forest practising asceticism before he achieved the awakening. Most of the important events in Buddhism relating to the Buddha's birth, awakening and death take place in the forest. The forest signifies a place of discovery for all those who want to follow the path of the Buddha. One of the important branches of Buddhism, known as Thai Forest Tradition, attempts to closely assimilate its practices to living in the forest and the pilgrimage to the forest is part of the practice. As a monk, one needs to sacrifice worldly desires, and being in the forest affords the time to ponder upon desires and finally let them go.

Shane and his mentor spend day after day in a rain-ridden forest to practise meditation. One of the practices is the corpse meditation as a way of becoming fully aware of the transitory nature of our lives and to conquer sexual temptation and fear of physical suffering. This practice is not for the fainted-hearted, and certainly not for a beginner like Shane. He is confronted with his inner conflicts as he practises the corpse meditation with the body he has found in the forest. The audience is left to speculate on whether the unidentified corpse might have been the victim of political conflicts. The corpse slowly turns into the body of Pich. Although the political message is unclear, Boonyawattana intends to question the role of Buddhism in the conflict, while the corpse only functions as a tool to serve the purpose of personal development (Settawilai, 2018).

The forest here is a stage for Shane's quest for the meaning of life after his loss. The duality of the living and the dead, permanence and impermanence, the physical and metaphysical worlds, plays on Shane's mind as well as that of the audience during the

second half of the film. It is not the place where desire can be freely expressed as in *Blissfully Yours* or *Tropical Malady*, but the forest here is where worldly desire is under the microscope and eventually needs to be annihilated. Before this can happen, it needs to be recognised in order to let it go. This is where the past has come back to haunt the present, just as Shane sees the corpse as Pich whereas his mentor sees it as someone from his past.

Figure 5: Malila: Farewell Flower (2017)

By the Time It Gets Dark relates to the political incidents of 6th October 1976 and refers to the massacre of student activists as they protested against the return to Thailand of a former dictator. They were accused by the military and royalists of being antimonarchical communists. The event still haunts those who were involved and has left a black mark in Thai history as no one has been held to account for the incident, which continues to be a sensitive issue in Thai society to this day. Instead of dealing with the event directly, the film, with its experimental narrative, same characters and similar relationships in different situations, sets a pattern of repetition. A different array of characters feature in the film, including a former student activist in her sixties who was involved in the 1970s political protest, her younger self as an activist in the 1970s, an actor, and a repetition of the same actor in the roles of a waitress, a janitor and a Buddhist nun. The film uses a structure of repetition, suggesting possible real and fictional versions, the past and the present revolving like a circle. It starts with the story of a former student activist and the documentary filmmaker who arrive at a house in the beautiful setting of the Northern forest, where the former activist agrees to be interviewed by the filmmaker. For almost the first half of the film, they try to bring up the memory of the past intertwined with that of the activist's younger self, which could be the filmmaker's fictional version, and the story then moves on to someone else after the filmmaker wanders off into the light and airy forest, where she tastes mushrooms, and the forest turns into a hallucinatory version in which she sees a youngster in an animal body suit. The forest also appears again in the story of the young student activist who has to flee the city and take refuge in the forest.

Figure 6: By the Time it Gets Dark (2017)

In the recent political history of Thailand, the forest offers another significant meaning. By the 1970s, the forest had become a place of refuge for many political protesters who were accused of being communists. 'Escape to the forest' has not only literal meaning of physically taking refuge but also fleeing from political ideology. The forest is then associated with the communist ideology. Many of the students joined the communists and set up camp in the forest on the edge of the border, before signing up for the government's amnesty campaign "Leave the forest" in the 1980s, through Prime Minister General Prem Tinasulanonda's policy of giving priority to political over military issues. Here the forest is infused with political ideology. The natural world of the forest is tainted and embedded with culturally coded meaning. However, Suwichakornpong uses the forest as a place where the past and the present could be reimagined at a time when political commentary is being suppressed by the junta regime. The forest of the past is more romantically portrayed and unreal when the younger self of the student activist and her activist boyfriend in their student uniforms are strolling in the forest. The present-day forest, on the other hand, is where the filmmaker slips into the hallucinatory scene of a fictional terrain where everything is questionable. With the impossible task of creating a film on political events at a time of political turbulence, the forest appears once again as a stage waiting to be reimagined, with history often repeating itself and being reimagined at different times, as the film carefully implies. Just as history is questionable and unreliable, so is the quest for one identity, especially in troubled times.

From Weerasethakul's *Blissfully Yours* through to *Malila: The Farewell Flowers* and *By the Time It Gets Dark*, the use of the forest in Thai independent cinema has provided an alternative outlet for marginal subjects such as immigrants, working-class individuals, homosexuals, as well as political commentary through its use of the forest as a stage for questioning and transforming oneself. As one of the important symbols on many levels and dimensions in Thai society, the forest in the cinema, whether dark and mysterious, green and enlightening, imaginary or real, is a space through which to understand Thai cinema on a deeper level as well as a better way for Thais to understand themselves in a modernising and globalising world.

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