



Apichatpong Weerasethakul, *Morakot (Emerald)* (2007), frame enlargements. Courtesy the artist.

WE ARE ALL FLOATING IN THE SAME RIVER

Short Films by Apichatpong Weerasethakul
Film at Lincoln Center, May 2023

Feathers that could be ashes float silently in the slow circulation of a hotel room. Fixed-camera surveys of curtain-drawn rooms and hallways reveal Bangkok's Morakot Hotel, now defunct but once bustling with foreign visitors and refugees. In lieu of guests, the particles drift around, multiply, and brighten—then like wisping shards of ghosts, now like debris orbiting after impact. To focus on the gauzy fragments and unfocus on the images of the hotel highlights the invisible presence of those who found shelter in these rooms.

And then a woman's voice calls out for two men. She tells of dreams and access to sacred sensations beyond time: "There's this tree called Parichart. Hidden in the mountains far away. If you smell its flower, you will remember your past lives. You will know who you were in many lives. If we smell this flower with our lovers, we will be together for thousands of years until we are no longer reborn." Personal memory and collective myth unfurl as one organic form.

Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Morakot (Emerald)* (2007) is a twelve-minute jewel-flecked reverie. With a shorter runtime than a sleep cycle, the film nonetheless evokes the Thai filmmaker's belief that "... we go to the cinema because of this biological

need to be in the dark and to experience a dream..." Like eyes adjusting to low light, Weerasethakul's films call on our conscious and unconscious faculties to perceive residues of experience that enhance with variations in attention.

In *thirdworld* (1997), another offscreen character tells of a dream. He remembers floating through an open plaza in an ancient town, looking up at ruins and endless rows of posts and lintels. "I can see it play like a movie," responds an interlocutor as grainy black and white shots of a Thai village flow by, scored by field recordings of a screeching rooster. Dream-telling in Weerasethakul's work braids fantasy, fiction, and non-fiction into scenes of communion for characters and for audiences. We see characters sleep and we dream with them.

Weerasethakul's short films are less narratively-structured than his features, feverishly shifting tone, texture, camera lens, or aspect ratio. The short films can resemble single gems isolated from a larger frieze, or they can contain multiple bands of storytelling with visual and sonic information that cross into and out of each other. In *Ashes* (2012), wide 35mm frames of Weerasethakul's dog proceed like a slideshow with an asynchronous sound mix. But it is not as simple as a personal, saturated diary film of morning



Apichatpong Weerasethakul, *thirdworld* (1997), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist.



LEFT Apichatpong Weerasethakul, *Ablaze* (2016), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist.

RIGHT Apichatpong Weerasethakul, *Ashes* (2012), frame enlargements. Courtesy the artist.



walks with the Boston Terrier. Things take off once the frame bifurcates into above and below images that advance at different speeds corresponding to diegetic rhythmical clicking.

The first words in *Ashes*, spoken by Weerasethakul himself, ring out more than halfway through the 20-minute runtime, as the screen cuts to black: “I realised it was a dream. It’s a dream within a dream. I reached out for a 2B pencil. I drew a picture on paper, my back to the dream. I kept turning back to look at the large images, trying to copy them— to mimic the colors.” We can think about Weerasethakul’s films in this way. His work is preoccupied with the transmission of dreams, legends, and other ancient stories into a contemporary, personal context. Weerasethakul’s work serves cultural memory by realizing these stories as collective environments to encounter something beyond one’s own experience or comprehension.

The World of Apichatpong Weerasethakul, a near-complete career retrospective presented by Film at Lincoln Center in May 2023, included four shorts programs— *Worldly River*, *Haunted Ashes*, *Luminous Empire*, and *Vapour Lights*. *Morakot (Emerald)* screened in *Worldly River* alongside other examinations of natural flows and the bleak or healing realities of industry. *Haunted Ashes* included *Ashes* and shorts that toy with camp—a *Blair Witch Project*-style hunt for a nocturnal avian vampire and a soap opera where 10 sets of characters have the same name and are played by different actors. The early, more muted *thirdworld* screened in *Luminous Empire* with the incandescent *Blue* (2018), which studies longtime Weerasethakul collaborator Jenjira Pongpas as she lies awake in a bed in the middle of the jungle, unable to sleep and with a fire burning in her chest.

Along with “dream,” another important word not found in the titles of the shorts programs is “jungle.” Beyond knowledge, outside of empire and the colonial constructs of time, the jungle is a profound zone of activity in Weerasethakul’s films. Without society’s protective and coercive structures, individual human subjectivity is especially vulnerable in the jungle. A threat of dissolved individuation—by death, sleep, or reincarnation—is never far away.

In the *Vapour Lights* program, *Ablaze* (2016) stood out for its serene jungle trip. An abstract tangle of gray forms clarifies into recognizable silhouettes of people and trees. Confusing the recognition of physical versus digital effects is something that recurs in Weerasethakul’s work. What is happening here? How did he do it? With *Morakot (Emerald)*, I mistook digital effects for physical ones, and the work effectively undermines the optical prowess of the camera. Opposite, *Ablaze*, is shot simply from shadows on a white studio wall, neither in the jungle nor rendered in a computer, yet calling to mind the dense mutability of both.

These short films brilliantly realize the blur of dreams and the significance of remembering. Free from the weighty inertia of feature films, which Weerasethakul likens to time machines, his shorts and video installations move more abruptly and unevenly through time and space. Before alloys with during and after into a timeless current.

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