

Strand Releasing presents

UNCLE BOONMEE

WHO CAN RECALL HIS PAST LIVES

A film by Apichatpong Weerasethakul

**Starring Thanapat Saisaymar, Janjira Pongpas,
Sakda Kaewbuadee, Natthakarn Aphaiwonk**

*Winner of the Palme d'Or
Cannes Film Festival 2010*

Winner, Toronto Film Critics Association, Foreign Prize Film

Country of Origin: UK/Thailand/Germany/France/Spain/ In Thai with English Subtitles
Format: 35mm / Color
Aspect Ratio: 1:1.85
Sound Format: Dolby SRD
Running Time: 113 minutes
Not Rated

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SYNOPSIS

Suffering from acute kidney failure, Uncle Boonmee has chosen to spend his final days surrounded by his loved ones in the countryside. Surprisingly, the ghost of his deceased wife appears to care for him, and his long lost son returns home in a non-human form. Contemplating the reasons for his illness, Boonmee treks through the jungle with his family to a mysterious hilltop cave – the birthplace of his first life...

PRIMITIVE

Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives was conceived as an integral part of the *Primitive* project. This project, all of which takes place in Isan province in the North-East of Thailand consists in addition to this feature of several works that focus on the teenagers of the village of Nabua. There is a seven screen installation *Primitive*, a single screen installation, *Phantoms of Nabua*, initially commissioned for continuing on-line presentation at www.animatedprojects.com and the short film *A Letter to Uncle Boonmee*. In addition Apichatpong Weerasethakul created in collaboration with Edizioni Zero, Milan, the artist's book CUJO which features documentation and photographs related to this project in Isan.

The installations and short film were commissioned by the Haus der Kunst (Munich), FACT (Foundation for Art and Creative Technology), Liverpool where *Primitive* was presented in 2009 and by Animate Projects, London. They were produced by Kick the Machine Films and Illumination Films.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives is an homage to my home, and to a certain kind of cinema I grew up with.

I believe in the transmigration of souls between humans, plants, animals, and ghosts. Uncle Boonmee's story shows the relationship between man and animal and at the same time destroys the line dividing them. When the events are represented through cinema, they become shared memories of the crew, the cast, and the public. A new layer of (simulated) memory is augmented in the audience's experience. In this regard, filmmaking is like creating synthetic past lives. I am interested in exploring the innards of this time machine. There might be some mysterious forces waiting to be revealed just as certain things that used to be called black magic have been shown to be scientific facts. For me, filmmaking remains a source all of whose energy we haven't properly utilized. In the same way that we have not thoroughly explained the inner workings of the mind.

Additionally, I have become interested in the destruction and extinction processes of cultures and of species. For the past few years in Thailand, nationalism, fueled by the military coups, brought about a confrontation of ideologies. There is now a state agency that acts as a moral policeman to ban 'inappropriate' activities and to destroy their contents. It is impossible not to relate the story of Uncle Boonmee and his belief to this. He is an emblem of something that is about to disappear, something that erodes like the old kind of cinemas, theatres, the old acting styles that have no place in our contemporary landscape.

-Apichatpong Weerasethakul

INTERVIEW WITH APICHATPONG WEERASETHAKUL

What is so special about the north-east of Thailand to you? And what inspired you to make the film?

A few years ago, when I was living in the north-east, I came across Uncle Boonmee. An abbot at a monastery near my house told me that there was an old man who had arrived at the temple to help out with the temple's activities and to learn meditation. One day this man, Boonmee, came to an abbot and told him that while he was deep in meditation, he could see his past lives playing behind his closed eyes like a movie. He saw and felt himself to be a buffalo, a cow, even a body-less spirit that roamed around the north-east plains. The abbot was impressed but not surprised, because Boonmee was not the first person to tell him about such experiences. From near and far, he had collected stories from villagers who shared their past lives with him. Later, he published a little book. On its cover one could read: *A Man Who Can Recall His Past Lives*. Unfortunately, by the time I got a hold of the book, Boonmee had passed away several years earlier.

All your films have incorporated stronger autobiographical elements. That seems to be much less the case with *Uncle Boonmee*... ?

Compared to that original Boonmee book, this film has a lot of me in it. The process of making this film made me realise that I am incapable of being faithful to any original source! Besides altering the past lives, I pushed Boonmee into the background and foregrounded my regular actors, Jenjira and Tong, who act as witnesses to this anonymous guy's passing. The film is not about Boonmee, but about my take on the idea of reincarnation. It naturally developed into an homage to the cinema I grew up with. A cinema that's also dying or is dead already. And once again, my father slipped into the film. He succumbed to kidney failure. All those pieces of equipment in Boonmee's bedroom are a simulation of those in my dad's.

Once again you have chosen to work with your regular actors and then with two primarily amateur performers (*Uncle Boonmee* and Huay). How did you cast for the film? Are they all from the north-east?

Only Tong is not. So he's the only one who's not speaking north-eastern dialect. To me, Boonmee is anonymous. So I could not use professional actors who have many public identities. I think the amateurishness is precious when you are aiming for early cinema's acting style. So I cast people from all walks of life. We ended up having a roof welder and a singer to play Boonmee and Huay.

Although the title of the film refers to *Uncle Boonmee*'s past lives, he never explains them or describes what they are.

Originally, the script was more explicit in explaining which were the past lives, and which were not. But in the film, I decided to respect the audience's imagination. Of course, after watching it, you can tell that he could be a buffalo or a princess. But for me, he could be every living thing in the film, the bugs, the bees, the soldier, the catfish and so on. He could even be his Monkey Ghost son and his ghost wife. In this way, the film reinforces a special association between cinema and reincarnation. Cinema is a man's way to create an alternate universe, and other lives.

You have spoken of the film being an homage to a certain kind of cinema, the cinema of your youth. What sort of cinema did you have in mind? Thai cinema?

I was old enough to catch the television shows that used to be shot on 16 mm film. They were done in studios with strong, and direct lighting. The lines were whispered to the actors, who mechanically repeated them. The monsters were always in the dark in order to hide the cheaply made costumes. Their eyes were red lights so that the audience could spot them. I only got the chance to see old horror films later, when I was already making films. I also think that the Thai comic books influenced me. The plots were not complicated - the ghosts were always part of the landscape. It's still like that today.

The film has distinctive shifts of tone and style, sometimes it is almost comic and ironic, at other times very serious and moving.

I love my movies to operate like a stream of consciousness, drifting from one remembrance to another. I think it is important to accentuate this drifting when the root of the film is about reincarnation, and about wandering spirits.

You have spoken of your interest in the ‘transmigration of souls’. This comes to mind particularly in the closing scenes of the film. Is that what is taking place to Jen and Tong?

The scene (gently) attacks the movie’s time and reference points. I hope that in the end, the audiences are the ones who are transported.

Ghosts and fantastic beings have appeared in your earlier films like *Tropical Malady*. But in *Uncle Boonmee...* they have taken centre stage. Could you comment on this?

The film focuses on the beliefs in other-worldly elements that are actually parts of our lives. I am captivated by the fact that as we age, our childhood has become more vivid. I think the curiosity (and perhaps the fear) of ghosts and of other worlds arises when we are young and when we are dying.

Your recent work seems to have taken on a more political direction. The still photo sequence would seem to highlight this. That sequence is so different from everything else in the film.

I wanted to introduce my memory of making this project into the film as well. The film is part of the *Primitive Project* in which I tried to capture some memories of the north-east. I ended up working with the teens in a village that had a violent political history. We built a spaceship and made up scenarios. We also made a short film, *A Letter to Uncle Boonmee*, in which we scanned the village in order to find a suitable house for the feature. For me, the experience in this village was always related to Boonmee’s existence. It is a place where memories are repressed. I want to link it with the guy who remembers everything. With that photo scene in the film, Boonmee’s and my memories merge.

ABOUT APICHATPONG WEERASETHAKUL

Apichatpong Weerasethakul was born in Bangkok (1970) and grew up in Khon Kaen, north-eastern Thailand. He graduated from Khon Kaen University and holds a Bachelor's degree in Architecture, then a Master of Fine Arts in Filmmaking from The Art Institute of Chicago. He started making films and video shorts in 1994 and completed his first feature in 2000. He has also mounted exhibitions and installations in many countries since 1998. Often non-linear, his works link with memory, invoked in subtle ways personal politics and social issues. Working independently of the Thai commercial film industry, he devotes himself to promoting experimental and independent filmmaking through his company Kick the Machine Films, founded in 1999. Kick the Machine has produced all his feature films. In 2008, he embarked on the Primitive Project, a multi-platform work of which Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall his Past Lives is part. In 2009, he and his work were the subject of a monograph published by the Austrian Film Museum.

His art projects and feature films have won him widespread recognition and numerous festival prizes, including two prizes from the Cannes Film Festival. Blissfully Yours won the A Certain Regard Prize in 2002 and Tropical Malady won the Official Competition Jury Prize in 2004. His acclaimed 2006 feature, Syndromes and a Century, was the first Thai film selected for competition at the Venice Film Festival and was acclaimed in a number of international polls as one of the best films of the last decade.

He lives and works in Chiangmai, Thailand. He is currently preparing his next project on the filmmaker and celebrated author Donald Richie.

APICHATPONG WEERASETHAKUL FILMOGRAPHY

- 2010 Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives (Lung Boonmee Raluek Chat)
- 2006 Syndromes and a Century (San Sattawat)
- 2004 Tropical Malady (Sud Pralad)
- 2003 The Adventure of Iron Pussy (Huajai Toranong)
- 2002 Blissfully Yours (Sud Sanaeha)
- 2000 Mysterious Object at Noon (Dokfar Nai Meu Mam)

BIOGRAPHIES

CAST

THANAPAT SAISAYMAR

Boonmee

Thanapat is a roof-welder from the north-east. He relocated to Bangkok and has worked at construction sites. He appeared in a few television commercials, both as extras and in main roles.

JENJIRA PONGPAS

Jen

Jenjira first met Apichatpong when she brought actors to his office for the casting of *Blissfully Yours*. After repeated meetings, Apichatpong gave her a lead role in the film. Apart from his films, Jenjira has worked as a supporting actress for film, advertising, and television show. After a motorcycle accident in 2003 that crippled her leg, Jenjira suspended her acting career. However, Apichatpong casts her in his features and shorts. She currently produces handicrafts for a living.

SAKDA KAEWBUADEE

Tong

Born in Kanchanaburi (western Thailand), in 1978. Sakda became a temple boy when he was young in order to be able to study. Later, he came to Bangkok after finishing high school. He did many odd jobs, including stunts selling Kentucky Fried Chicken and working in a 7-Eleven. Four years later he joined the army for one year and then was ordained as a monk in Patumtani. He later returned to Bangkok and worked in a communications company. It was during that time that he met Apichatpong, who cast him as the country boy/soldier in *Tropical Malady*. He has since appeared in many works by Apichatpong, including *Syndromes and a Century*, in which he was cast as a monk.

NATTHAKARN APHAIWONK

Huay

Born in Sakon Nakorn (north-east Thailand), 1966. When Nattakarn was a teenager, she worked in various jobs such as a waitress, a direct saleswoman, and a street vendor. Later, she co-owned an outdoor cinema business with her husband. Together they travelled the north-east screening films for 11 years. Afterwards, she briefly devoted her time to a Buddhist temple before moving to Bangkok. She is currently a singer at a restaurant where she has been on stage most nights for the last 7 years.

CREW

SAYOMBHU MUKDEEPROM

Lead Cinematographer

Born in 1970, Sayombhu graduated from the Communication Arts faculty of Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, majoring in motion picture and still photography. His first film as cinematographer was Apichatpong's *Blissfully Yours* (2002). Since then he has worked prolifically as a freelance DoP for both features and commercials. His feature credits include Kongdej Jaturanrasmee's *Sayew* (2003) (co-directed by Kiat Sansanandana) and *Midnight, My Love* (2005) and three films by Yongyoot Thongkongtoon: *Iron Ladies* (2000), *Iron Ladies 2* (2003) and *M.A.I.D.* (2004). He also served as a DoP for Apichatpong's *Syndromes and a Century* (2006).

AKRITCHALERM KALAYANAMITR

Lead Sound Designer

He has worked with Apichatpong Weerasethakul on all his films and art installations since *Tropical Malady*. In 2008, he founded an open art space, SOL (Space of Liberty) with his frequent sound collaborator, Koichi Shimizu. They were invited to create *Anat(t)a*, a sound installation, for the 37th Rotterdam International Film Festival in 2008. His recent credits include Pen-ek Ratanaruang's *Nymph* (2009), Anocha Suwichakornpong's *Mundane History*, Naomi Kawase's *Nanayomachi* (2008), and Aditya Assarat's *Wonderful Town* for which he was awarded Best Sound Design from the Buenos Aires Film Festival of Independent Films in 2008.

LEE CHATAMETIKOOL

Editor & Post Supervisor

He has worked as a film editor and a post-production producer in New York and Bangkok while also producing his own short films. In 2001, he moved from New York to Bangkok to work on Apichatpong Weerasethakul's first narrative feature, *Blissfully Yours*. Since then he has edited many of the most significant Thai films of the last ten years including Aditya Assarat's *Wonderful Town* (2007), Anocha Suwichakornpong's *Mundane History* (2009), and several films for Apichatpong Weerasethakul. He has won Best Editor at the Asian Film Awards twice with *Syndromes and a Century* (2006) and Chris Chong Chan Fui's *Karaoke* (2009).

ILLUMINATIONS FILMS

Producers Simon Field and Keith Griffiths manage *Illuminations Films*. They executive produced the New Crowned Hope series of films which included features by Bahman Ghobadi, Mahamat-Saleh Haroun, Tsai Ming-Liang, Garin Nugroho, Paz Encina and Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Syndromes and a Century*. They also produced the latter's major multi-platform project *Primitive*.

Their projects in development include a new Brothers Quay film *Sanatorium under the Hour Glass*, an adaptation of Henry James' *Beast in the Jungle* to be directed by Clara van Gool and Peter Strickland's *Berberian Sound Studio*. They are executive producing further productions including Simon Pummell's *Shockheaded Soul* and *The Silk Man* by Margaret Constantas.

Films in post-production are Dave McKean's second feature film *Luna* and Patrick Keiller's *Robinson in Ruins*. Recently completed are Jan Svankmajer's *Surviving Life* and Chris Petit's feature length documentary essay film, *Content*.

CAST

THANAPAT SAISAYMAR	Boonmee
JENJIRA PONGPAS	Jen
SAKDA KAEWBUADEE	Tong
NATTHAKARN APHAIWONK	Huay (Boonmee's Wife)
GEERASAK KULHONG	Boonsong (Boonmee's Son)
KANOKPORN THONGARAM	Roong (Jen's friend in hotel)
SAMUD KUGASANG	Jaai (Boonmee's chief worker)
WALLAPA MONGKOLPRASERT	Princess
SUMIT SUEBSEE	Soldier
VIEN PIMDEE	Farmer

CREW

Directed by APICHATPONG WEERASETHAKUL
Screenplay by APICHATPONG WEERASETHAKUL
Produced by SIMON FIELD, KEITH GRIFFITHS, CHARLES DE MEAUX,
APICHATPONG WEERASETHAKUL
Co-Producers HANS W. GEISSENDOERFER, LUIS MIÑARRO,
MICHAEL WEBER
Associate Producers CAROLEEN FEENEY, JOSLYN BARNES,
DANNY GLOVER (LOUVERTURE FILMS),
HOLGER STERN (ZDF/ARTE)
Directors of Photography SAYOMBHU MUKDEEPROM,
YUKONTORN MINGMONGKON, CHARIN PENG PANICH
Production Designer AKEKARAT HOMLAOR
Sound Designers AKRITCHALERM KALAYANAMITR, KOICHI SHIMIZU
Editor & Post Supervisor LEE CHATAMETIKOOL
Assistant Director & Line Producer SUCHADA SIRITHANAWUDDHI
Production Manager YAOWALAK SAE-KHOW
Asst. Production Manager NARONGWIT CHANPAN
2nd Assistant Directors YINGSIWAT YAMOLYONG,
THANACHART SIRIPATRACHAI
Production Assistant SORAYOS PRAPAPAN
Casting PANJAI SIRISUVAN, SAKDA KAEWBUADEE
Acting Coach ONWARIN NIYOMSATAYA
Location PANITHAN PISITTAKARN