

## **Sick bodies and the political body: The political sociology of Apichatpong Weerasethakul**

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### **Introduction: The King's Two Bodies**

My first encounter with Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Cemetery of Splendor* left me with the strange—and perhaps somewhat obsessive—impression that this film has something to do with an exotic legal theory prevalent during the Tudor dynasty in early modern Britain. This is about the two bodies of a king, a theory that claims that whereas one of them may die, the other does not. Superficially, the reason this movie elicited an association of this sort is not difficult to surmise. The film starts with the story of a weird tropical illness that causes some soldiers to sleep abnormally. As the story develops, it is revealed that underneath the hospital where the sick soldiers are being treated lies an ancient cemetery of kings, who are, in fact, alive and fighting each other by dint of imbibing soldiers' energy, which eventually causes this sleeping disease among the soldiers. In the film, this is narrated as a story of the past; however, I have been wondering if it is really meant to be regarded that way.

In 16<sup>th</sup>-century England during the time of Henry VIII, the country was in turmoil from a series of events, starting with the issue of the king's divorce from Catherine, which prompted his effort to take Britain from the reign of the Roman Church. This move eventually led to the establishment of the Anglican Church, followed by the systematic abolition of traditional monasteries, the search for a new liturgy, and so forth. During this period, a rather novel theory on the nature of kingship took shape among leading legal theorists. This is the theory mentioned above concerning the two bodies of the king.

Of these two bodies, one is called the body natural and the other body political.

The “body natural” refers to the biological body, which is born, grows, gets older, and dies. Meanwhile, the body political, as these theorists surmise, will not be affected by the biological law. The king’s political body, they say, is immortal; it does not die (*non moritur*).

This theory has become widely known in the learned community through Kantorovicz’s (1957) *magnum opus*, which follows minutely the trajectory of the development of this idea from its birth to its contemporary significance. Its development is closely related to the concept of the “mystical body” (*corpus mysticum*) in Catholicism, which I do not discuss in detail here (cf. Fukushima, 2016).

In any event, this legal theory sprang from a perceived acute need for legal clarification on the status of the kingdom when the king is dead. It focuses on the fact that the throne is vacant when the king dies and before the next one comes to the throne. The question was posed as follows: Does the kingdom disappear during this period, even very temporarily? No, the legalists at the time answered, because even though the king’s natural body is gone, the kingdom stays there, because the king has a political body that is not affected by aging or even death. In brief, the king’s political body is the body mystical, which does not die.

## **1. Natural bodies**

Watching Apichatpong’s films in succession makes us realize that his works repeatedly refer to similar topics, if from subtly different angles in each work. The main stages and/or themes for his works are Isaan (Northeast Thailand), soldiers, hospitals (or doctors and patients), forests, supernatural topics such as ghosts and reincarnation, and so forth. Among these, medical practice is of pivotal importance. His biography reveals that he was born of doctor parents and that he moved from Bangkok to Isaan, following his parents’ move. This background shows in his repeated references to hospitals and related practices in almost all of his films; indeed, in *Syndromes and a Century* and *Cemetery of Splendor*, the hospital itself serves as the main setting.

Even in the works where the stage is not the hospital itself, his medical gaze, so to speak, is palpable. First of all, many of the main characters of his films are either sick or suffering from handicaps: a wheel-chair-bound boy and deaf girls; a Burmese immigrant

with skin disease; Uncle Boonmee, who is literally dying; soldiers who suffer from a sleep disease; Jen, who suffers from an elephantiasis-like skin disease; and so forth. The byproducts of such diseases are also the object of close description at times. In *Blissfully Yours*, the fragments of skin caused by a skin disease are flowing in the river, while in *Cemetery of Splendor*, a urine guide container which keeps soldiers' urine is depicted at length. In the same film, there is even a scene of a woman urinating out in the field.

Apichatpong's general concern with physiological reality, so to speak, especially that of sick bodies, can be dubbed as the gaze of "medical realism," and when this perspective is directed towards those without ill or handicapped bodies, his expression becomes almost ruthless. For instance, in *Blissfully Yours*, the scene of sexual intercourse between a rather aged couple who are committing adultery is presented with numbing precision, as if it were a documentary. In *Syndromes and a Century*, a kiss between the doctor and his lover is depicted at great length, even down to the doctor's gesture of shamefully hiding his erect genital. This scene is one of those ordered to be deleted by the censoring authority in the country.

When this medical realism is further directed to social authority, the gaze inevitably conveys an atmosphere of radical criticism. One such case is Apichatpong's treatment of Buddhist monks in his films. Differing from the typical world of Buddhist monks in Japan, who obediently followed the verdict of the Meiji government in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century which allowed them to eat meat and get married, Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia stipulates a stricter set of precepts that also guarantee the high social status of these monks (Kuramoto, 2014). There may be actual misdeeds and even scandals among these monks, inviting cynical and even critical comments from both the public and the mass media; however, such is not considered tantamount to openly expressing such criticism in the visual media, which is not allowed. Apichatpong, in this respect, often appears to be unrelenting. In *Syndromes and a Century*, he was ordered to cut a scene that describes a monk playing the guitar, as well as the scene of the doctor's kiss noted above; his refusal to comply with this demand meant that the film was not allowed to circulate in his country. In the case of *Uncle Boonmee*, one scene portrays a young monk who, playing truant from his duty in the temple to see his family, takes off his yellow Buddhist robe and takes a shower, thereby exposing his muscular body. The scene after this, a

mysterious one that is probably caused by a mischievous evil spirit (*phi*), has often been favorably acclaimed by his critics as the epitome of the cinematographic magic in his artful film-making. In my view, however, the more impressive is the previous scene just described, wherein Buddhist monks are revealed with down-to-earth realism, as if claiming that a monk, however much revered by the public, is only a common man without the yellow robe. This, I agree, is true, at least sociologically. Yet describing such sociological “truth” in a visual manner is another story, which I believe requires a fair amount of courage and determination on the filmmaker’s part.

## **2. The political body**

Whether king or common man, both are equal in terms of their natural bodies: the king, just like the commoner, will become sick and old, following the passage of time, and will eventually breathe his last. The legalists in the Tudor era, however, insisted that the political body of the king is immortal (*non moritur*) and thus not affected by this natural law.

For further discussing the meaning of the political body in Apichatpong’s films, the soldiers’ figure in his works may be pivotal, as they also appear in almost every picture that he has produced thus far. In fact, in both *Blissfully Yours* and *Cemetery of Splendor*, soldiers are the main characters, while in *Syndromes and a Century*, soldiers are found everywhere in the hospital, which serves as the main setting for the narrative; even the clandestine research on artificial legs for wounded soldiers is minutely described in the latter part of the movie. It probably goes without saying that these soldiers and even the army as a whole are one of the major components of the modern political body; in terms of the theory of the two bodies of the king, however, it plays only a subordinate role. In fact, I do not believe that Apichatpong treats these soldiers in a manner that is harsher or more critical than his approach to, say, doctors or monks. This is because his focus is on the more essential problem of the political body, namely the very constitution of his country as a totality.

In contemporary Thailand, any discussion on the king or the monarchy has not been allowed, and any breach of this rule has been considered as *lese majeste*, which leads directly to arrest and punishment with prison terms. Rama IX, who demised in

October 2016, was on the throne for almost 70 years, the longest-reigning monarch in the world at that time, and has been deeply respected by the public. On the other hand, his old age and the long lasting political struggles between the red shirt and yellow shirt factions and the subsequent military coup made the atmosphere in Thai society both tense and oppressive.

However, what is meant here by “the political body” is not directly oriented to such military juntas or even to the recent bloodshed related to this oppressive regime. The political aspect of Apichatpong’s films, especially of the longer versions, is not directed at this or that recent political incident, but to the very constitution of the contemporary Thai polity with its historical background. This aspect is often misunderstood by quite a few critics when they discuss (or more precisely, refuse to discuss) the political aspects of his works. In reality, concerning the political body of the whole Thai state, his works have been very eloquent, even if often in the form of indirect suggestion and subtle reference.

Part of the reason for his need to touch upon this issue of the political body, or polity, of Thailand is that the main setting for his films is Isaan, a region in Northeast Thailand. Narrating the comprehensive history of this region is impossible owing to space limitations, but it suffices here to mention that this area has been closely related to the neighboring regions of both Lao (later Laos) and Khmer (later Cambodia), and has been different both culturally and linguistically from central Thailand; meanwhile, since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the unification of the country has been driven by the present regime situated in Bangkok, and this area also has become the US army’s military base as the battlefield against the infiltrating influence of communism from neighboring communist countries (Teh, 2011).

Hence, the *genius loci* described in his pictures look somewhat exotic to those familiar with the more standard customs in the central region of the country. For instance, the ghost story related to the tiger’s spirit in *Tropical Malady* is that about a shaman from Khmer. The royal cemetery in *Cemetery of Splendor* is also said to be from the time of the Khmer dynasty. In fact, the shrine dedicated to the spirit of the past princes (who later appear as living bodies) in that piece looks very exotic, at least to me; it looks more like that dedicated to a *nat* (spirit) in Burma rather than the more common shrine for a *phi* (spirit) in central Thailand, which is not very different from a Japanese Shinto shrine (cf.

Anderson, 2011).

The heterogeneity specific to this area of Isaan from the perspective of central Thailand may be found elsewhere, too, in such works as *Blissfully Yours*. The main character is an illegal immigrant from Burma, and the efforts of his friends to procure a health certificate from a doctor to protect his status are minutely depicted in the film. Meanwhile, in *Uncle Boonmee*, a small conversation about immigrants from Laos is inserted among the trivial exchanges between the villagers. Further still, in *Cemetery of Splendor*, a scene between a temporarily awakened soldier and Jen concerns the subtle differences between the dialects from Isaan and both central and southern Thai language.

In addition to subtly problematizing the heterogeneity of ethnic and cultural elements of Isaan, as distinguished from the standard of central Thai-ness, there are frequent references to the historical background of this region. These can easily become perceived as bloodthirsty in describing the historical struggle against the infiltration of communism from the neighboring countries. For instance, in *Uncle Boonmee*, such a reference is made in a trivial conversation between Boonmee and Jen: when Boonmee deplores the cause of his illness, which he suspects is derived from his karma related to killing many communist soldiers, Jen gently replies that her father also tried to chase communists—in vain, so he hunted animals in the forest instead. Following this, later in the same film, Boonmee's son, now transfigured as a monkey spirit (*phi*), is strangely put into a time-machine and sent to the future where he found the country governed by a dictator. In *Cemetery of Splendor*, a paranoid atmosphere fills scenes in the film here and there, somewhat reflecting the recent turmoil in Thai politics: the psychic woman who can read the dream of the sleepers is repeatedly rumored to be a spy from the FBI, while the recent changes in the hospital environment are described as the outcome of an ICT company conspiracy.

The kind of crooked nature in the Thai polity that is seen in the Isaan region has been repeatedly referred to in all of Apichatpong's pictures, though these have also been somewhat embedded in the overall landscapes of his works. However, I have the strong impression that in *Cemetery of Splendor*, these two elements—the sick bodies and the political body of the kingdom—which have been referred to somewhat separately in his previous films, have become visibly united in the combination of the soldiers who suffer

from the strange sleeping illness and the kings of the past who are causing the disease. Am I the only one who sees this film as manifesting Apichatpong's determination to tackle the issue in a more outright manner?

It should be noted that the narrative of the film focuses on the story of the kingdom in the past, not the contemporary royal regime (if one does that, one will be arrested). However, Apichatpong's way of playing the game this time seems to be very close to a straight-pitch game, to adopt a baseball metaphor. One such typical case is a scene in the midst of the film where Jen and a soldier, who is temporarily awakened from the sleeping disease, come out of the hospital for a night on the town to see a movie. In Thailand, after the trailer and just before the main film is shown, there is a moment where the king appears on the screen with the national anthem. The audience is obliged to stand upright to greet the king's glorious figure. In the film portrayed in *Cemetery of Splendor*, however, after a lengthy trailer that introduces a noisy ghost movie, there is a mysterious scene wherein Jen and the soldier, along with the rest of the audience, simply stand still in darkness in front of the screen. This darkness appears to be intentionally ambiguous: it may be variously interpreted as the absence of the king or a portrayal of a black hole of power. Either way, however, we have the strong impression that the real main character of this film has finally made his appearance here. Following this scene, the town itself becomes colored with a light that slowly changes from blue to red, the same light emitted from the bizarre machines used in the hospital for allegedly curing the sleeping disease of the soldiers there. Thus, this scene clearly suggests that it is not only the soldiers but also the whole town that is in a coma.

The story then morphs into a scene where Jen, with the help of a psychic woman, dives into the dream of a sleeping soldier. In a sense, this can be read as Jen's psychoanalytic (or more precisely, hypnoanalytic?) approach to the collective unconscious of the political body of Thailand, as symbolized by her stepping into the royal palace situated in the soldier's dream. The details of the imagined royal palace, such as the mirror hall and exotic Burmese royal bathtub, are narrated in an astute and exotic manner, and it is in this setting that Jen's pivotal monologue, almost a murmur, is presented, wherein she expresses her realization that "in the center of the kingdom, there are only corn fields."

For understanding the nature of the traditional polity in Southeast Asia, it is pivotal to note that it is defined not by its geographical territory, which is demarcated by the border, but by its very center; in other words, a kingdom is almost identical with its capital. The royal palace, wherein the king resides, is situated in the capital, and the king is, by definition, in the center of the universe (Geertz 1980). Thus, to say that only corn fields are in the center is to say that there is no such thing as kingdom on the earth (cf. Fukushima 2002).

### **3. Transformation of the body**

The way in which Apichatpong allows the main character to present this radical conclusion, as if it were nothing, is deeply impressive indeed. However, it is also true that the world of the two bodies he has described thus far deviates naturally and fundamentally from the original dualism of the natural and political bodies as stipulated by the legalists in the Tudor era. Behind this lies a thought that these legalists had never conceived—namely, the idea of reincarnation and the transformation of the body.

While it is a little hard to perceive the whole-hearted respect of orthodox Buddhism in Apichatpong's utterly dispassionate presentation of the monks in his pictures, his belief in reincarnation and the transformation of the body appear to be more authentic, as observed in a conversation between the doctor and the young monk in *Syndromes and a Century*. *Tropical Malady* narrates this very topic of transformation into an animal while *Uncle Boonmee* is literally the story of a man who can see his past lives. Quite a few critics tend to underscore this theme as the pith of his cinematographic magic.

In this chapter, however, I am more concerned with the political connotations of such a viewpoint. In truth, this perspective provides a fundamentally different picture from that emphasized in the two bodies theory: namely, the immortality of the political body. In fact, it is true that this notion of the transforming body may harm the immortality of the political body itself. If the political body reveals its transforming nature through *panta rei* (namely, the impermanence of things), this is straight-forwardly opposite to the belief in the immortality of the political authority. In fact, according to the traditional theory of polity in neighboring Java, Indonesia, kings' authority, which is visually

represented by the existence of a shining entity called *wahyu*, is thought to diminish over the generations; thus, the notion of impermanence has been already embedded in the very theory of the legitimacy of kingship.

In fact, Kantorovicz himself admits that something more is needed than a discursive emphasis on the immortality of the king's political body for purposes of a more situated choreography of royal authority. Such accessories include the royal regalia, such as a crown and other royal paraphernalia, for impressing the subjects. In an exotic scene in *Uncle Boonmee*, a princess-like figure in the legendary form makes love to a big catfish. As is typical in these films, this intercourse is lengthily depicted, with the royal jewels falling off from her body to the bottom of the river, one by one. This scene seems to imply that once such supplementary devices as royal jewels have fallen from the body, all that is left is the natural body, which is intrinsically no different from that of animals, as corroborated by the fact that such intercourse is indeed afforded.

#### **4. Back to the Tudor era**

As seen already in my narrative, Apichatpong's concern as expressed in his films seems to overlap partly with the two bodies theory even as it also subtly deviates from it. Meanwhile, it may be worthwhile to mention another comparison with which readers may be familiar. This is related to a recent documentary I watched on TV concerning the real identity of William Shakespeare, the world famous playwright from the Elizabethan era at the end of the Tudor dynasty. The documentary attempts to prove that Shakespeare, rather than being a merchant from Stratford-upon-Avon, was actually Edward de Vere (the Earl of Oxford), a very talented and educated young aristocrat who was genealogically close to Queen Elizabeth I herself. This theory has seemed to gain increasing support in recent years (First Folio Pictures, 2012). Of particular note in this documentary is the fact that the latter part of the Elizabethan era was marked by a rapid increase in political and religious turmoil, as represented in part by a failed coup attempt from the Earl of Essex in 1601, which was a serious threat to the throne. During this turbulent period, Shakespeare's *Richard II* was staged, which describes such sensitive topics as rebellion and even the deposition of the king. Various authors in the documentary pose a compelling question: why was Shakespeare, unlike other writers who were actually

arrested for criticism of the throne, apparently immune to such an attack from the royal court and able to put his works on stage? Their shared conviction of these authors is that Shakespeare's close tie to the royal court in fact worked as a special protection that allowed such potentially dangerous plays to be tolerated and even circulated. This is one of the proofs that they believe support their claim, namely, that Shakespeare's real identity was the Earl of Oxford.

Such instances cannot be confined to a specific period in a specific country, as many writers and artists, all over the world and throughout history, have attempted to express themselves under severe political and/or religious oppression. Yovel's (1989) impressive work on Baruch Spinoza's double language eloquently proves the need to interpret his work in his context, in which he was under serious accusations that he was an atheist. Another example, which I have experienced by myself, is the case of the New Order of Suharto's military regime in Indonesia in the 1980s. In fact, during my stay in that country, the works of world-famous novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer were banned. In addition, hardly any critical voices were raised against some illegitimate policy practices on the part of the Suharto government that clearly violated human rights, such as cases of the illegal killing of young gangsters by the army, called "mysterious shootings." In this oppressive atmosphere, people developed a technique of insinuation, so to speak, for expressing their criticism. These techniques were often witnessed on such occasions as local festivities where Islamic leaders were invited for educational and entertaining speeches. Though the police were ordinarily surveilling such speeches, these leaders were tactful enough to evoke laughter from the audience over their very subtle way of referring situations in a way that had different levels of interpretation. Another case is that of socialist Poland after the military coup of General Jaruzelski in the 1980s. In this case, it was the first Polish Pope, John Paul II, who visited his own country and spoke openly in front of an ocean-like audience about the importance of "solidarity" (*solidarnosc*) among the people, which received the enthusiastic applause from the audience: needless to say, *Solidarnosc* was also the name of the independent labor union that was fighting against the socialist government.

When Akira Kurosawa passed away decades ago, Steven Spielberg called him "the pictorial Shakespeare of our time." I do not know whether or not Apichatpong will

be called something like this in the future. One thing I am certain of, however, is that I have never heard that he has any special protection from the present government in his country, the kind of the protection that the supporters of the theory of “the Earl of Oxford as Shakespeare” believe that Shakespeare enjoyed from Queen Elizabeth I for his potentially dangerous plays. Apichatpong, day by day, has conducted his original and, in a sense, risky quest of the relationship between natural bodies and the political body unarmed, without either visible or invisible protection from those in power. Knowing this, we are all obliged to keep a heedful watch on his continuing ventures, with eyes wide open, like Jen at the end of *Cemetery of Splendor*.

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