

**BLISSFULLY YOURS (SUD SANAEHA)**  
*Apichatpong 'Joe' Weerasethakul, Thailand, 2002*

**BLISS IS NO LESS ELUSIVE IN THE MOVIES THAN IT IS IN LIFE, BUT IT'S NOT HARD TO FIND IN APICHATPONG WEERASETHAKUL'S MOVIES. MAYBE IT HELPS THAT HE'S A BUDDHIST.**

Last time I saw Khun Apichatpong ("Joe" to his friends), he kindly gave me an English translation of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's *Heartwood of the*

## TOWARDS THE WONDROUS VOID

By Tony Rayns



*Bodhi Tree: The Buddha's Teaching on Voidness.* (It's published by Silkworm Books: ISBN 974-9575-57-1.) I've hardly begun to grapple with this book, which sets out to rescue the meaning of *sunyata* from the ways the term has been construed in many western studies of Theravada Buddhism; the usual translations are 'emptiness' and 'nothingness', both of which imply unhelpfully that something material is missing. The translator here (a Brit living in Isan, ordained as a monk in 1980) plumps for "voidness" as a shorthand for "void of self" or "void from self". The monk who called himself Buddhadasa ("Slave of Buddha") died in 1993 after a lifetime of teaching and social activism which made him a hate figure for right-wingers of all stripes and a hero to more than one generation of Thai students. His writing is wonderfully clear and lucid.

You could say the same of Joe's film-making. Clear and lucid ... but not simple. Joe has made several shorts and has created around ten film/video installations, but let's focus for now on his features.

The first was *Mysterious Object at Noon (Dogfah Nai Meu Marn, 2000)*, a kind-of documentary which traverses rural Thailand playing the Surrealist game of "exquisite corpse": randomly chosen strangers are invited to improvise successive twists, turns and transformations in the story of a woman named Dogfah, nurse to a paraplegic boy and subsequently 'mother' to a star-child. Three distinct worlds creatively corrupt each other in the film: the social and economic realities of Thai villages and towns, the imitations of life in Thai TV and radio soap operas

(constantly seen and heard in the background) and, of course, the increasingly bizarre fiction of Dogfah's story. There is no 'subject' as such. The film -- itself a 'mysterious object' -- exists only in the inter-penetration of those worlds. But no other film offers a more vivid account of the state of Thai culture as it entered the 21st century.

*Tropical Malady (Sud Pralad, 2004)*, Joe's most recent feature, is also all about inter-penetrating worlds. Its two halves -- one not exactly naturalistic, the other not exactly fantastic -- could be taken as a continuous narrative or as two alternative versions of the same story. Either way, the 'meaning' of the film is in the space between the two. Soldier Keng falls for village boy Tong, and his love becomes obsessive when Tong slips away into the night. The consequent quest through the jungle brings out the animal in both men: they discover their inner maladies.

*Blissfully Yours (Sud Sanaeha, 2002)* falls midway between these two films, both



chronologically and conceptually. On the face of it, it's Joe's most straightforward film: a linear narrative with no mysteries, dreams or non-sequiturs. The three main characters form a kind of sexual triangle; two of them are youngish lovers, and the third is an older woman who is interested in the boy and jealous of the girl. During one morning and afternoon, the (mostly unvoiced) tensions between the two women provide the film with most of its 'drama'. No doubt that's one reason why Joe has referred to it as an "emotional disaster movie".

The opening scenes (shot in Khon Kaen, Pathumthani and Nakhonpathom) are urban. There are three locations: a woman doctor's surgery, an office and a factory where tourist souvenirs are mass-produced. In these scenes, across some 35 minutes, Joe introduces six main characters (the three leads and three important supporting characters) and clarifies their relationships and problems. These turn out to be surprisingly tangled, but their complexity emerges almost incidentally from scenes that are filmed as plainly as possible, in static, wide-angle compositions.

The character around whom the film pivots is Min, an illegal immigrant from Burma. He speaks minimal Thai. He is not a political refugee but an economic migrant, looking for a job -- and for a way to cure a stubborn skin infection. Roong, his Thai girlfriend, works in the tourist-souvenir factory but keeps taking time off to be with him. She is paying Orn, the older woman, to get the documents that will legalise Min's position in Thailand. Orn's husband Sirote, an office manager, has connections with the woman doctor; he has suggested trying to trick her into providing the necessary certificate while treating Min's skin problem -- a ruse that isn't working. Meanwhile Orn has lost a child in a drowning accident, and wants Sirote to give her another. She is having an affair with Tommy, who works in Sirote's office, but he uses condoms to avoid impregnating her. Roong senses, correctly, that Orn has sexual feelings for Min.

Almost all of this emerges in the film's first 35 minutes, before the film's title sequence finally shows up. The credits appear over the scene in which Roong and Min drive out into the countryside for a picnic and a leisurely afternoon of *al fresco* sex; the rest of the film is rural. (It was shot in and around Kao Yai National Park.) In one sense, the first 35 minutes constitute a conventional pre-credits sequence, presenting the basic information needed to make sense of the film proper. But by interrupting the film for the credits, with a bouncy pop song by Nadia on the soundtrack, Joe is also setting up a characteristic dialectic between town and country -- and between the ways his characters will behave in each.

In the film's jungle scenes, both Roong and Orn reach for 'bliss'. But their Eden is compromised -- by Min's skin disease (Joe says he had AIDS in the back of his mind while shooting), by ants, by a local thief from the Karen minority, and by the women's own doubts and fears. Min, the priapic object of their affections, says next to nothing, but the film makes us privy to his inner life. We hear his thoughts in voice-over (first while they're still in the car; he worries that Roong has



to work overtime to meet her factory quota, and he's guiding her to this secluded spot to help her relax), and we see in superimposition pages from his diary, featuring his childish attempts at writing in Thai and his equally childish drawings of the women. Min, we gather, is essentially an overgrown kid: solipsistic and uncommitted, but also considerate, sensual and perfectly capable of giving and receiving pleasure.

The flaws in the idyll may make us think of darker, off-screen realities. Of the Burmese military junta, for example, which has kept Burma one of the least developed and entrepreneurial economies in South-east Asia and has thus driven chancers like Min abroad to seek their fortune. Or even of Thailand's own government under premier Thaksin Shinawatra, the richest man in the country, whose stated ambition to make Thailand as prosperous and sanitised as Singapore is implicitly challenged by every indolent, sexy image in the film. (Thaksin doesn't say it openly, but it's clear that he'd also like the Thai population to be clinically docile -- as, of course, Singapore's is.) For Min, Thailand is a staging-post en route to Papua-New Guinea or Australia. Roong and Orn, Sirote and Tommy

display no flicker of political awareness. For them, ignorance may well be bliss.

How does all of this relate to Joe's interest in Buddhism? Nobody in the film practices Buddhist virtues; these characters are all lost in selfish desires and prey to minor dishonesties, rivalries and resentments. But they *are* all motivated in their variously impure and unenlightened ways by the quest for bliss. And the film itself makes no secret of its own quest for bliss, whether it's in real-time observation of people picking and tasting wild berries in the forest or in real-time celebration of a penis coaxed into a state of arousal. The cinematic pleasures here are not found in the story or the structure or even the performances, but in the concept and the attitude. The credit reads not "directed by" but "conceived by Apichatpong Weerasethakul". This is obviously very far from achieving "voidness". But it's manifestly a step in the right direction.

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Tony Rayns is one of the world's leading film writers and the pre-eminent curator of Asian cinema internationally.

## GLOBAL VILLAGE VOICES

"I believe that the consumer society is the final stage of civilisation. This society can continue for another hundred years or so but I completely believe that this utilitarian, devouring way of life signals that civilisation is ending." These are the words of the great Jan Svankmajer during a 2003 interview with Jason Wood (the David Frost of world cinema?) which begins as an appraisal of his influences and working methods during the making of *Little Otik* but rapidly evolves into a scathing critique of society at large. It's an example of the trust that Wood is able to elicit from his subjects, often coaxing them into an extraordinary state of openness via his painstakingly researched approach to questioning and a manner that comes across as being just the right side of genial.

This book sees Wood accumulate the interviews he has conducted over the past ten years with many of the leading lights in contemporary world cinema, all of which have invariably featured in publications such as *Enthusiasm*, *Projections* and, of course, *Vertigo*. Whether it's the gift of hindsight or just plain luck, Wood seems to catch these directors at the apex of their respective careers, with, for example, Laurent Cantet discussing *Le Temps Du Emploi*, Claire Denis discussing *Beau Travail* and Samira Makhmalbaf discussing *Blackboards*.

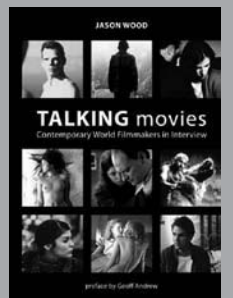
Talking to directors about their work can, logistically and emotionally, be a tricky business

## TALKING MOVIES: CONTEMPORARY WORLD FILMMAKERS IN INTERVIEW, BY JASON WOOD

Reviewed by David Jenkins

at the best of times, especially with the current rigmarole of exclusivity deals, PR bureaucracy and the dreaded press junket (with the added strain of a ticking clock in the background to contend with), so all credit to Wood for delivering a set of interviews which never settle for stock pleasantries and industry backslapping.

Indeed, Wood's fearless curiosity and resolutely cool demeanour are seldom struck by the odd moment of awkwardness or abruptness, but there are occasions where the ego of the subject does run a little wild (and why shouldn't it?) An almost comically errant Hal Hartley chatting circa the release of *Henry Fool* seems almost intimidated by the courage of his interviewer's conviction, and as such comes across at times as being almost wilfully obstructive: (JW: "The film of yours which gives me the most pleasure is *Surviving Desire*." HH: "That's probably my least favourite.")



One thing that is clear, Wood is certainly canny in his approach to interviewing, facing each director on their own terms and with broad knowledge of both oeuvre and personal history. This aids him in not only revealing the minutiae of the cinematic craft, but also the characters and personalities of the subject: you get the impression of a close personal bond between Wood and Atom Egoyan. You also feel that, ironically, Turkish director Nuri Bilge Ceylan is somewhat, well, distant. *Talking Cinema* is an indispensable volume that should be considered a set text for arts journalists (both budding and professional) in mastering the methods behind achieving the most revealing and entertaining interviews possible.

*Talking Movies: Contemporary World Filmmakers in Interview* (Wallflower Press). See [www.wallflowerpress.co.uk](http://www.wallflowerpress.co.uk)

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