Beyond Republics: Apichatpong Weerasethakul's Fever Room
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Subjectivity in Independent Film

On the 29th of April 2018, after the lights returned following the multiscreen presentation of Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Fever Room*, silence and awe permeated the Taiwanese, Thai, and regional cinefiles, like me, who made the trip to the National Taichung Theater. In front of the blocked-out audience seating, which Apichatpong converted into a multi-dimensional field of projection, the staff pulled three chairs forward to begin the Q&A. Enthusiastically, the first audience member raised their hand to state what I, too, felt at the time. "This is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen in my life." To understand the aesthetic of this particular piece, we also need to understand the delirium of political parts that converge in the upset body of film where violence and unofficial state memories remain traumatic, yet active, sites of personal experience. The production reincarnates the political as a part of us, as people across a vibrating floor to emphasize the forces that push us underground. The questions of this piece revolve around what can be applied, not in the domination of screens but in the presence of subjects embraced by the exhibition.

As I write, "Thailand" the state remains active in security operations to halt massive resistance to the May 22nd 2014 *coup d'état*. Increasingly young and queer across variations of university-oriented

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liberalism, union-inspired Marxism, feminism and direct-action anarchism, the protests surged amid recent waves of Covid-19 infections that exposed the ineptitude of a military regime. Meanwhile, coup engineer Prayuth Chan-ocha solidified his interim appointments in the 2019 elections while the most progressive Future Forward Party (garnering the third most seats in parliament) was dissolved in February 2020 by the Constitutional Court in the entrenched judicialization of the state. Whereas post-coup politics functions through emergency announcements, appointments, prescriptions, and court decisions, the current wave of protests emanate in cooperation, performance-based direct action, and various incarnations of "dissensus" that counter existing hierarchies backed by conservative institutions of the state. One of the most prominent aesthetic features of the protests is paint itself, splattered onto state buildings and officials. From police stations to larger-than-life monarchical billboards, the targeted flow of paint attests to the power of presence to deform established conventions of political representation. Like paint, these events call upon the aesthetic regime of art (to cite Jacques Rancière) to rethink the conditions of sensibility that build hierarchies in the first place. The shifts in Thai cinema inaugurated by Apichatpong are an important part of this puzzle, claiming an alternative sensibility that emanates from underground. This sense of an underground is anti-state and horizontal, built upon a collaborative impulse that is local and provisional where filmmakers recalibrate the relationship between subjects and screens. Consequently, resistance includes making art as direct-action in the non-conventional sense where the rethinking of exhibition links to the performance of protest under military rule. In Taiwan, *Fever Room* conjured a cinematic departure from Fredric Jameson's spatial depiction of "late capitalism" where films play as "national allegories" in a development trajectory that dismantles expectation in postmodern irony. In Jameson's depiction of Edward Yang's Taipei-set *The Terrorizers* (1986), for instance, allusions to "new social movements" bureaucracy and dependency, the absence of heroes and denouement, "spaces of confinement," and the dependencies that condition the quest for development, reinforce the despondency and alienation of subjects on screen.[1] In the film, the cross-cut trajectories of four urban characters de-center the narrative into a tale of writing fiction

and photographing the city. Their hopelessness, Jameson claims, is offset through the play of fantasy that disrupts the progression the story in the textuality of space. The film concludes with two alternative endings, leaving audience members relegated to an emergent postmodern margin.

Whereas the problems of development as addressed in Jameson's "geopolitical aesthetic" are certainly resonant in his selection of cases, filmmaking as resistance is significantly downplayed. The result is that reading South East Asia in cinema evolves in the disappearance of active subjects. Jameson so writes that space itself is the arbiter of stories "when subjects are abolished as meaningful categories".[2] At the same time, Jameson's selection of films opens toward a rethinking of film as a political force, even if the point isn't emphasized in the early 1990s. For instance, Jameson's observations of the so-called "Third World" in Kidlat Tahimik's *The Perfumed Nightmare* (1977) questions the naïve motives of its protagonist, a bubble gum machine merchant with ambitions to reach the moon. While Tahimik's film came out almost a decade before the ouster of the Marcos dictatorship in 1986, I think Jameson rightly prioritizes the "systematic displacement" of geopolitical space by "American imperialism".[3] But the triumph of space over subject is not the only possible reading.

For me, Tahimik's assertion in the film's conclusion is not so different than the forms of autonomy I find in Apichatpong's work. Tahimik's manifesto, "I declare myself independent from those who would build bridges to the stars," encourages a reconsideration of the statements and variations of independent cinema for contemporaneous social movements. In this legacy of independence, Apichatpong's *Fever Room* contests the horizons of authority that stretch across South East Asia. Films become spaces of transit--what Apichatpong himself calls a "time-machine." The fact that *Fever Room* was first commissioned for the opening of the Asian Arts Theater in Gwangju, Korea in 2015, an appropriate location for inaugurating the work in a space of resistance against other incarnations of militarized violence, reinforces this aesthetics of resistance. Since the initial screening, Fever Room has travelled to Brussels, Nanterre-Amandiers, Berlin, Yokohama, and Singapore before arriving in Taichung where it was

rumored to be the last performance.[4] Other well-known Thai film-makers who emphasize an anti-coup politics in their work, such as Anocha Suwichakornpong and Nontawat Numbenchapol, were also here in solidarity with this unique cinematic project.

Fever Room meditates upon a lived micropolitics of subjects that contests the narratives and iconography of states. Apichatpong's late-friend Benedict Anderson (1983) wrote how state spaces emerge in monuments and icons, producing the nation with the ascendancy of colonial and modernized monarchical regimes in Southeast Asia. Maps, museums, and statues monumentalize the heroic figures of nationhood as a "necropolitics" of the dead, particularly in the de-limitation and territorialization of visual space.   But in the variability of subjects that don't fit neatly into the categories and codes of post-coloniality, an intervention into representation begins. In this sense, Apichatpong's use of the term "live cinema" to describe *Fever Room* could be called "life" cinema as a reclaiming of political space—not as an allegory of the nation, but as an occupation of subjects against a hierarchy of forms that condition them. Below, I will build my reading of *Fever Room* upon live cinema's aversion to the state in anarchist practice. These oppositions inspire a rethinking of Plato's cave allegory for its early descriptions of screens and projections, and the "forms" that move between an auxiliary class of soldiers and an enlightened few that dominate the world of ideas. The work's hier-archical motif of a statue of long-dead Thai general, Sarit Thanarat, rethinks subjectivity in the interplay of state signs and active looking. Apichatpong activates an autonomous viewer that thinks through this infrastructure of seeing in what Seung-hoon Jeong refers to as "cinematic interfaces."[5] As a truly independent cinema in an age where soldiers arm themselves with cameras, *Fever Room,* inspires an aesthetics of resistance by amplifying the presence of seeing subjects.

An Anarchist Aesthetics

Whereas introductions, scholarly literature, and analytical themes provide one formulaic structure for addressing specific films, *Fever Room* challenges interpretation in emphasizing the visceral experi-ence of the audience over narrative unity. This piece requires the

active technical collaboration of several teams behind the scenes (not to mention to logistical communication that opens mobility in global space), and the participation of unskilled actors in under-represented geographic space. Challenging restrictions on space, the work functions as an expanded cinema, or "virtual public sculpture," where the augmentation of the exhibition site acts as an intervention into other spaces and times.[6] Therefore, a summary of *Fever Room* requires a sensory reimagination of Thai politics that is neither linear nor coherent, but open to the transformation of subjects in art and in protest.

Retaining these external connections, the theatrical film does not intend to resolve any coherent plot. Conceived during the production of his 2015 film *Cemetery of Splendour, Fever Room* features two of its main characters, Jenjira Pongpas (Jen) and Banlop Lomnoi (Itt). Thematically aligned with the former project's the cold meditation on Thailand's militarization, Jen and Itt continue their journey through sleep and dreams when other spaces fail to recognize them.[7] By following their states of consciousness, we navigate between light and darkness, inventories of objects that anchor their worlds, and the rural spaces of the province—especially the Mekong River. Jen is undergoing surgery in a hospital, but connects to Itt in dreams. Meanwhile, young men look out across the river while an older masked-man explores an uninhabited cave. There are two climactic surges of energy that divide *Fever Room* into parts. In the first, a young man with a camouflage coat walks along an elevated shoreline as he stalks a boat down below with a strange projection of light. The audience point of view is from the boat, as a pulsing techno track scores the scene. In the second and final climax, the walls open to reveal the theater's audience seating, which becomes the source of projection amid the interplay of light and smoke. It is highly probably that every audience member will piece *Fever Room* together differently, and therein lies its fascinating potential.

Fever Room also advances an aesthetics of self-determination and autonomous expression through overt opposition to the hierarchical arrangements of everyday life. Characters move along borders proximate to authoritarian regimes and the routine targeting of protests.

This region of the Mekong river is where the bodies of Thai activists were found filled with concrete, and where groups like Thalu Fa ("Pierce the Sky"), who face severe prison terms for environmental activism and street-based direct action, began organizing.[8] Anarchism esteems direct-action as a prefigurative incubator of a possible commons that is rightly suspicious of how state's generate stories about themselves. While there are many versions of a Left politics in Thailand, Tilman Baumgärtel's treatment of the confrontation between filmmakers and governments in Southeast Asia is instructive of the ways global and independent cinema constitute "imagined worlds" beyond the state.[9] On one hand, the rise of politicized film production is backed by a digital mode that encourages participation, but also an ethics of independence that embraces "what is unresolved, proscribed, or taboo in their countries." (Baumgärtel 2012, 23) On the other, as Baumgärtel emphasizes, autonomy beyond the nation is a multidimensional process. For Apichatpong, an experimental background aligns with the ethos of his small production company, Kick the Machine, and the implicit support for independent spaces that support free expression, like the Thai Short Film and Video Festival. Besides this, Apichatpong has lead movements against film censorship (Free Thai Cinema), attended the recent demonstrations with his actors, and written letters of protest to governing bodies like the Ministry of Culture. These worlds of opposition stretch beyond film itself to illuminate the failure of state bodies to fix spaces of representation. *Fever Room* highlights these networks of solidarity that attend independence in the global mediascape.

The political, as Nicholas Mirzoeff writes, is opened in the space of looking where the legislation of perception is undone in the liberating experiences of interpersonal exchange. On August 21st 2021, the Thalu Fa group gathered in front of the United Nations in Bangkok to call for the end of draconian Lèse-majesté law known as Article 112. The reference to the sky in the group's moniker is part of the larger call for monarchical reform in Thailand in the wake of the post-coup escalation of the Lèse-majesté law. In the background, the group placed a sign reading "You are fighters, not prisoners." Their choreography of direct-action screened the occupation of bureaucratic space where standard issue Thai prison uniforms oppress bodies in the

militant reimagination of subjectivity. This dramaturgy is simultaneously the theater of self-determination and a claim to a visual commons underscored in the interpretive act of looking.

> This commons is not abstract but material. It constitutes the grounds of freedom. It is the refusal to stay in the place allocated to you in systems such as that in Plato's *Republic*. It is the refusal to serve with downcast eyes, as require by codes of slavery, segregation, mass incarceration and servitude. (Mirzoeff, 206)

Examples from the streets of Bangkok recall Mirzoeff's reference to the subjugated modes of vision derived from classical approaches to authority. At the same time, these protests are channeling the interplay of signs in ways that channel the potential of art and cinema. Kathy Ferguson, in her book on Emma Goldman, underscores an anarchist commons in which self-determination aligns with an apprentice subjects engaging the "challenging journey through signs."[10] Ferguson thereby points to the ways that anarchism interprets signs less through theoretical expectation than through interpretive action. As protests are increasingly channeled through a world of camera ubiquity, Apichatpong's work emphasizes play over procedure, difference over aesthetic convention, often in the enhanced visibility of subjects in the decomposition of space.

Some will surely challenge the ability of film to break the representational sign-systems of states. But the ocean of art and film might be reimagined in the tides of protest that Loma Cuevas-Hewitt and Bas Umali beautifully link to the "archipelagic" thinking (influenced by what Epeli Hau`ofa elsewhere described as a "sea of islands").[11] Anarchism need not derive from one place, nor culminate in one thing. Like the variability of protests, anarchism in Southeast Asia links to an alternative aesthetic of diasporic media, border crossing, and modes of autonomous resistance that are local and mobile. Its goal can be sought in "the fomentation of new subjectivities."[12] *Fever Room* is a technologically-advanced vision of how states of consciousness link to corporeal bodies of the state. The volatile fault lines of political events in Thailand during the 2000s provoked fear, anger,

and disillusionment, and fractured personal relationships in ways that now call for the coalescing and realignments of protests. Violence against them is coupled with a lack of visibility in other channels. For this reason, *Fever Room* digs deeper into the time where authority is contested in dreams, and political space becomes an active imagination beyond the conventional duration of events.

The Active Subjects of *Fever Room*

Independence in film derives, aesthetically, from its break from convention.[13] We might link such breaks, for instance, to *Tropical Malady*, Apichatpong's fourth feature film that was first screened in Thailand in the summer of 2004.[14] The film begins as a narrative of intimacy between a country boy and a soldier, but their courtship ends in an abrupt cut to a different story set in the indeterminate space of the jungle.[15] Here, in the form of a local folktale, a tiger's threat to a village motivates the deployment of a soldier into the jungle to track it down. In the forested landscape where the senses sharpen over time, a spirit departs from the carcass of a white cow and a darkened tree is illuminated by fireflies. Whereas the creatures and spirits of the jungle dwarf human dwelling, the true lesson of the final scenes is that subjectivity is transformative. The transcendent shape-shifting between bodies and spirits amplifies the provinces as a rebalancing of the film world where ghostly forces contravene the rational, bureaucratic and militant histories of the state. The opening scene, for instance, is of a seemingly irrelevant capture of soldiers photographing a dead body, but it links to a historical world where the jungle became a space of resistance to the Cold War counter-insurgency. In other government-censored films, such as *Blissfully Yours* (2002) or the banned *Syndromes and a Century* (2007), Apichatpong's aversion for aesthetic norms is emphasized in queered and marginalized subjects, pushed into the everyday architecture of doctor's offices, hospital basements and wheelchairs, where the space of dreams opens a layer of resistance beyond the capture of government officials. In dreams, the official narratives are undone. Ultimately, disrupted bodies and unconscious "states" provoke a sense of incompleteness in our own attempts to reconstruct one unified or homogenous way of being.

Apichatpong's differentiation of parts undermines homogenous wholes throughout his film and installation practice. In a gallery setting, subjects can be re-centered to dominate the field of view. We might move through rooms, between the loops of mounted video screens, and retain many of the disruptive habits of the world in transition. In the *Primitive* exhibit (2011-2012, Jim Thompson House), the horror of northeastern (hereafter, "Isan") villages set aflame in the 1960s converges with shirtless descendants who remap their cartography of violence with three video cameras to the rhythm of Modern Dog's "I'm Still Breathing."[16] These young men, who remain present in landscapes of resurgent militarization, reappear in *Fever Room*. In *Fever Room*, their world is redressed in the necessity of looking around, enacting a peripheral vision multiplied in several screens of Thailand's silenced periphery. In the immersive consciousness of an active audience, Thailand's Isan region emanates like puzzle pieces to triangulate Thailand's key political forces: a statue of a well-known Thai general who restored the power of the monarchy in a U.S.-backed dictatorship between 1957 and 1963; the subsequent counter-insurgency through which a military-monarchy nexus was built; Thailand's largest voting block exemplified in the 2010 military crackdown of Red Shirt street protestors that left 91 dead; and the community collaborations the director carried out amid descendants of the counter-insurgency in his home region. In this augmented spatiality, the theater structure (like the jungle addressed above) builds sensory awareness. We see characters in a hospital, sleeping and dreaming, and young men (from prior works) passing time along the Mekong River. In an apocalyptic scenario, a solitary man resides in a cave, the subterranean space where we must learn to live when the world above is no longer habitable. Subwoofers surround the stage floor where we sit, pulsing through the body to converge listening and seeing. Smoke also augments the screen, first in a circular vortex of fog, then in seven carefully-managed horizontal layers of haze. As we remain part of the performance, one audience member raises her hand to be sure she is awake. The Director of Lighting & Smoke Design, Pornpan Arayaveerasid, captured this sense afterward when he expressed to me his joy in being part of the project: "I wish I could go back and see it for the first time."

Fever Room **(Apichatpong Weerasethakul 2015) courtesy of Kick the Machine Films**

Apichatpong has often spoke of creating films to go underground, especially in the context of going into the provinces and being with the community of crew members and local residents.[17] This impromptu collective surpasses state hierarchies that zone who belongs where. In *Fever Room*, Apichatpong's reference to Plato's "cave allegory" permeates the haunted theater of Thai politics. In describing the Taichung show, the director introduces a hybrid of film and theater he calls "live cinema," which comprises "elements [that] are all included in the philosophy of film."[18] The remixing of theater and cinema harkens toward a youthful lineage that Rancière traces to the time before narrative Hollywood cinema took-over. With the interplay of images, the montage of early cinema demonstrated that "[l]ife is not about stories, about actions oriented towards an end, but about situations open in every direction."[19] As Michael J. Shapiro has argued, even the Central Intelligence Agency had an interest in building a "theater programme" to direct the narrative of the Cold War.[20] In live cinema, narratives of the real are called into question by de-centering the audience experience: between screens and between genres that guide attention. Interestingly, *Fever Room's* rethinking of film is also an intervention into the canon of political philosophy, especially where the screen is framed as the dominant world of the subject. Viewers of

Apichatpong's work will note a genealogical stream where the cave is itself a mode of thinking the political.[21]

In the director's fourth feature film, *Uncle Boonmee who can recall his past lives* (2009), the protagonist's cave is where the heightened sensibility for images coincides with his impending death. There in the cave, the dying Boonmee speaks of a dream of a future city, a dream that easily links to a climactic *Fever Room* scene where a soldier shines a flickering light from an elevated riverbank. Boonmee, too, seemed to speak of an ominous light:

> Last night I dreamt of the future. I arrived there in a
> sort of time machine. The future city was ruled by an
> authority able to make anybody disappear. When they
> found 'past people,' they shone a light at them. That
> light projected images of them onto the screen. From
> the past, until the arrival in the future. Once those im-
> ages appeared, these 'past people' disappeared.

By this point in the film, the viewer knows that Boonmee fears his karmic state for having executed ("shone a light" on) alleged Communists during the counter-insurgencies of the late 1960s. But he also talks of the cave as "like a womb." "I was born here in a life I can't recall," says the dying Boonmee, as death nears. Plato advances a related thematic, visualizing the dramaturgy of political power in the temporary premise that we are all born in a cave. But the question raised in Apichatpong's work is why we must repeatedly return there. A decade after *Uncle Boonmee, Fever Room's* multi-screen montage embues the cave with a field of imagined screens where no image can dominate all at once.

Plato's *Republic* is often taught as the normative model for imagining how a political society should be designed in the interest of justice and the good. Penned sometime around the fourth century BCE, the scenes of the *Republic* unfold as a series of dialogues between Socrates, the main character, and a group of acquaintances as they stroll through the streets of Athens. Irony is deployed in Socrates' attempt to feign ignorance as a method of argument, but also in the

fantasy that theoretical precision reigns victorious in the dialectic of ideas (though later dialogues expose the irony of such victories in his death sentencing by the state). As an added level of irony, Socrates diagnoses the problems of justice as an imbalance of roles in the classical polis. The rebalancing must ensue through rigorous educational tests—the most relevant of which are, here, cave-dwelling prisoners who perform mastery over virtual objects they assume to be real.[22] In the Thai context, *Fever Room* folds into Plato's cautionary tale of how visual culture originates as a political idea and how representation (in this case repetition, naming, reverence, and enclosure) is central to the maintenance of order and hierarchy.

Apichatpong states that Plato's cave is a key inspiration for *Fever Room* but intervenes in the original format of the allegory. In *The Republic*, Socrates speaks of an underground den where prisoners are chained in front of a wall as guardian-philosophers of an ideal state project simple images (or shadows) of "all sorts of vessels, and statues and figures of animals".[23] In order to imbue the "shadows" with life, the prisoners begin naming them, as "voices" in the background that extend the sensory world of representations. So, too, at the beginning of *Fever Room*, we see a dog running as a voice-over enunciates the scene as "dog," and a statue referred to as "Sarit" (Sarit Thanarat was the former military ruler between 1957 and 1963) alongside several other short takes. Sarit Thanarat's statue frequents Apichatpong's work, from a climactic montage sequence in *Cemetery of Splendour* to a long-take from the short film *Song of the City* (2018). Whereas the "naming" process of objects emphasizes Plato's representational mode of apprehending the visible world, the duplicitous meaning of an "underground" thwarts the representational power of these images. On stage, multiple screens descend and ascend against blackened curtain that separates us from the larger world of the auditorium— we cannot know the scale of the world, except through its projection. References to Plato's cave are neither about justice nor the good, but about the failure of power and hierarchy to resonate as a legitimate basis for political life. Underground, on the stage of Taichung Theater's housing of *Fever Room*, we learn how to see anew.

In blackness, the rise and decline of screens exposes the fictions of

projection against the faint resounding of mechanical motors. As mentioned earlier, the first screen introduces Jenn and Itt like phantom images of a prior story. Apichatpong's assistant director Sompot Chidgasornpongse told me to engage the work without preconceived expectations, but these initial sequences seem—as poet and playwright Alfian Sa'at observes—to offer a window into the expanded world of *Cemetery of Splendour*.[24] In the earlier film, we see Jenn and Itt as nurse and patient who become intimate confidantes amid the precarious outbreak of a sleeping sickness. The deep sleep leads to various attempts to read and translate dreams as a cinematic allegory of distance, separation, exile, and escape under military dictatorship. The hospital that provides the backdrop of the film rests upon a burial ground for prior monarchs. Bulldozers tear into this cemetery of kings throughout the film. For the spectator of Thai film, the dematerialization of narrative in the tropes of sleep, dreams, digging and burial becomes a mode of referencing actual political events by encrypting them in the "ground" of fiction. Fiction thereby breaks, with bulldozers and the opening of other worlds, into aesthetic disruption. Jacques Rancière calls this process "dissensus" to describe the politics of visibility "the redistribution of the sensible," since film and literature break narratives apart as a reminder that nothing ever remains the same.[25]

Here we can begin to imagine the differences between what Apichatpong calls live cinema and the conventions of narrative independent cinema. Narrative films work from the mobility of dominant characters (heroes and heroines), who signal change in their movement through the plot. In *The Dialogic Imagination*, Mikhail Bakhtin deployed the concept of the chronotope in order to demonstrate the convergence of narrative time and space within the "concrete" and historical "reality" of the novel. But film also works to materialize time: the places we once met friends and co-workers; the viewpoints we shared; or the monuments of dead politicians that give history a vantage point. The camera sutures one thing to another. Live cinema, on the other hand, de-sutures images from the narrative by replacing fictional characters with the audience perception of a multi-mediated "real" on top of a dreamworld where other options emerge. In *Fever Room*, we become protagonists and we sit on the stage of the audito-

rium. As time passes between different image sequences and screens, our eyes adapt to the interplay of interfaces—screens, sub-woofers, smoke, etc. The audience shifts perception from screen to screen, or from the vibration of the stage to the depth perception of the auditorium. A dream can be a space of liberation that connects, Freud states, sleep and the waking life.[26] The stage is therefore a haunted space, where the dream "state" is invaded by the infected imagination of the modern state. Socrates' guardians command the aspirations of prisoners by reducing experiences and the phenomena of the world to names and objects. But the fiction is that they are always in control.

Films teach us how to look at a range of possible worlds, and for this Plato is also "rebelling against the introduction of visible or tangible objects." In the conclusion of Plato's version of the cave, education develops as a quantitative mode: for example, to know numbers for "the sake of their military use." The future city will depend on high levels of control among a citizenry who, upon finishing their education, "will be spending the bulk of their time...in the practice of war."[27] The world of everyone else is absent—though resolved in the earlier image of prisoners who remain chained to each other. By the end of the cave allegory, we realize a similarity between Plato's guardians of the state and the figures of modern military dictatorships. Between age 35 and age 50, carefully groomed members of an elite class gain military experience in the machinery of law and "distinguish themselves" so that by the time they "depart to the Islands of the blest," they are remembered in the "public memorials" of demigods. Glaucon's response: "You are a sculptor, Socrates, and have made statues of our governors faultless in beauty."[28]

The early sequence of *Fever Room* is therefore crucial to the hierarchy of Plato's republic. Jen's dream images (as revealed to Itt) are transformed into visual objects that a guardian might use to animate the reality of the cave. A montage repeats an image series, where lush landscapes and everyday pleasures are inseparable from the appearance of one particular statue: Sarit Thanarat, the most brutal of Thai dictators.[29]

JEN (Female): There was… the sound of motorcycles, racing at 1AM.

เจน: ต้นกล้วย
JEN: Banana trees

เจน: ไดโนเสาร์ที่บึง
JEN: Dinosaur at the lake

เจน: ลานแอโรบิก
JEN: Aerobic court

เจน: ต้นไม้ริมบึง
JEN: Trees by the lake

เจน: แดร็กคิวล่า
JEN: Dracula

เจน: คิงคอง
JEN: King Kong

เจน: แวมไพร์
JEN: Vampire

เจน: ทะเล
JEN: The Sea

เจน: เพิ่งรู้ว่าน้ำทะเลมันเค็มตอนอายุ 30 นีแหละ
JEN: I found out that the sea water is salty when I was thirty.

เจน: ฝน
JEN: Fon

เจน: แม่น้ำโขง
JEN: Mekong River

เจน: ศาลา
JEN: Pavilion

เจน: หกเหลี่ยม
JEN: Hexagons

เจน: ภูเขา
JEN: Mountains

เจน: เจ้าแม่กวนอิม
JEN: Guan Yin

เจน: สฤษดิ์
JEN: Sarit

เจน: ห่านในห้องน้ำ
JEN: Geese in the toilet

เจน: ดิว
JEN: Dew

เจน: ดวงอาทิตย์
JEN: The Sun

With the final image of the sun, we are removed from the gaze of some filmmaker behind the camera, and brought toward what Seung-hoon Jeong calls "quasi-interfacial objects.[30] Joeng refers to the sun as a light-producing object that becomes an interface for subjectivity in the camera-like ability to render objects visible.[31] We will return to his example momentarily. But for this particular dream sequence of images, the statue of a Thai general and former Prime Minister becomes an interface for audience subjectivity to activate a connection between histories of dictatorship and the militarized present. Field Marshal Sarit seized power as a despotic anti-Communist in 1957. In the Cold War-era West, he was legitimized as "[a]n effective, though unwilling, politician."[32] But in Thailand, he was "native son" of the northeast and a node through which the region was developed alongside an anti-Communist apparatus designed to stifle borderland resistance. In his account of the rise of "despotic paternalism" in Thailand, Thak Chaloemtiarana provides an extensive reading of the Sarit statue and the bas relief murals that stretch a narrative

behind the statue. Thak argues that the centrality of the Isan region in the dominant narrative of the Thai nation-state rests upon the persistent visibility of this particular despot in the larger memory. Tellingly, when he went to photograph the monument, "graffiti desecrated the monument extolling his virtues."[33] Sarit consolidated his power and took absolute control of the executive in 1959, imposing an interim constitution to legalize the basis for execution and indefinite incarceration of alleged Communists. As Thak points out, the geopolitical charade of the Cold War provided the basis for a more invasive regimentation of everyday life that included film censorship and the close monitoring of appropriate cultural expression (including proper hair-cuts).[34] Sarit was especially well-known for associating Communism with attempts to "subvert our sacred institutions, the nation, the religion and the monarchy."[35]

Photograph from the set of *Song of the City* (Apichatpong Weerasethakul 2018) courtesy of Kick the Machine Films

The statue, as much as many of the tropes of *Fever Room*, is an interface that connects the world above with those who live underground. On March 8, 2021, a group of local activists known as Femliberate shrouded the statue to protest the imprisonment of the well-known student activists Parit "Penguin" Chiwarak, Panusaya Sitthijirawat-

tanakul and Panupong "Mike" Jadnok.[36] In their call for monarchical reform, the dissolution of parliament and the end of activist intimidation, these and many other protestors were charged with violating Article 112 of the Thai criminal code. Article 112 restricts criticism of the monarchy and its legacy in a long list of Lèse-majesté cases can be traced back to 1957, the year that Sarit seized power.[37] *Fever Room's* reference to the statue thereby surpasses the rote naming of Plato's cave in ways that open toward protest subjectivities. Defying paternal narratives of hierarchy, the statue manifests the delirium of military rule in the contemporary materialization of resistance.

Photograph from the set of *Song of the City* (Apichatpong Weerasethakul 2018) courtesy of Kick the Machine Films

Conclusion: Light and Voice

Fever Room converges film and art installation by activating an audience perception that interfaces with contemporaneous political events. As interface, disconnected parts of the diegetic world break narrative to reach beyond it.[38] Jeong observes that the sun of *Syndromes and a Century*, Apichatpong's fifth feature film, connects characters across divergent time and space. The blackened sun that culminates one story in a serene Isan landscape becomes a point of

transition to Bangkok where much of the action is 'eclipsed' by its cold and isolating infrastructure. Later, in the hospital's underground layer, the interface repeats in a black circle that mirrors the earlier eclipse: specifically, the dark entrance to a large exhaust pipe. In slow circular pan, the black hole sucks smoke from the room as if all that the city has become (a suspended polis, a neoliberal site for military-led capitalism, and bureaucratic technocracy that regiments culture in its thorough organization of everyday life) is literally sucking the life out of the world. The sun administers life beyond the darkened underground corridors of everyday life in Thailand. On the other, light is engulfed in darkness. The Thai language title of *Fever Room*, "The City of Light Has Come to an End," references this general shift from light to darkness, and to the "immanent virtuality" that reigns over political life. Jeong's articulation provides a useful conclusion to the operational mechanics of *Fever Room* in the context of Apichat-pong's less obvious references to nature.

One additional perspective guides my reading of *Fever Room*. In July of 2019, film scholar Graiwoot Chulpongsathorn linked *Fever Room* to a contemporaneous short film project, *Vapour* (2015, 21 min.), to illuminate the global environmental crisis in the smog-ridden north. His insightful presentation let me to one of the short film's shots where smoke emerges from a hole in the ground to connect the polluted world of power generation with the trope of political resistance. Smoke and fog signal the environmental crisis of space in the murky mountainous landscapes where the filmmaker attempts to revisit "a battleground between the people and the state."

Fever Room implies that this battleground continues, especially at in Thailand's borderland margins. Thai youth appear at the edge of the Mekong, the "margins" conditioned in the cartographic projection of modern state visual culture.[39] As the colonial push converged with Bangkok's expansion into the region, cartography flattened multiple sovereignties into a "geo-body" triangulated in the representation of nation, religion and monarchy. To rethink the dimensionality of an image is, therefore, to reconfigure the multidimensionality of bodies in space. The manifestation of resistance in the visibility of political subjectivity began earlier (in the *Primitive* example cited above),

where these young men engaged memories of the anti-Communist crackdown in their village. Here, the audience meditates on the shores of politics from a boat looking up at the bank. The music picks up with the intensity of the sound design let by Akritchalerm Kalayanamitr and Koichi Shimizu's modular synthesizer to produce unpredictable variations of sound. These artificial voices, with the "808 kick" made famous in early 1980s dance music, holds the modulation together, as surrounding floor monitors pulsate throughout the stage to imbue the low angle perspective of the scene with immense significance. Along the elevated shoreline, a man with a camouflage jacket walks in parallel with our view as he points a flashing light (or camera) directly at the fourth wall of the viewer.

Fever Room **(Apichatpong Weerasethakul 2015) courtesy of Kick the Machine Films**

The sequence perfectly captures the shape-shifting of military rule since 2006, where camcorders, sniper rifles and checkpoint operators share in the mechanization of vision. The scene assembles the rhythms of surveillance, where events on screen materialize in this production of sleep, dreams, and the reinvention of life underground. Apichatpong later revealed that the thematic of dreaming emerges within a duality of political resistance and escape. We sense this relationship through the return of characters from other diegetic worlds and movements that project the state "on the brink of collapse."[40]

> In *Fever Room*, Apichatpong documents personal and regional history as if they will soon disappear. A hospital is a transitional place of consciousness. The caves are explored for re-habitation. The Mekong River is observed by a group of anonymous young men on land and on the boats. The last evening is coming to a close.[41]

But I couldn't help to wonder whether this structure of the theater dominates the agency of the stage where we sit. We too dream from the corridors of resistance, military rule, and Fascism born from the proliferation of screens imagined by Plato. Political power is ordered from the top-down, Plato demonstrates, when the conditions of visuality are localized. In Taichung, however, regional histories of resistance also act as the ephemeral presence of this multidimensional work that is as much virtual as material. On this last point, Apichatpong notes that he does not consider himself a political filmmaker, but that his works tend to take shape within the conditions of the present.[42] But the *Fever Room* performance rethinks the political as an aesthetic and anarchic sense that raises subjectivity above the limitations of space. And even as the militarization of screens haunts utopian visions with the continuous delirium of the post-coup present, an oneiric space of refuge is also a channel for the reconsideration of collectivity.

Notes

[1] Fredric Jameson. 1992. *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 152.

[2] Ibid, 151.

[3] Ibid, 191.

[4] Another performance was later scheduled at Tokyo's Asia Center (June 30th – July 3rd 2019)

[5] Seung-hoon Jeong. 2013. *Cinematic Interfaces: Film Theory After New Media,* New York: Routledge.

[6] Golan Levin and Tega Brain. 2021. *Code as Creative Medium: A Handbook for Computational Art and Design*, Cambridge, Ma: MIT Press, 132.

[7] Apichatpong did not screen either project in Thailand for fear of state persecution.

[8] 2019. "Bodies of exiled Thai activists 'stuffed with concrete,'" *Reuters*, January 23, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-activists-idUSKCN1PH134. Accessed August 10, 2021.

[9] Baumgärtel also comes to mind in documenting that Apichatpong "cites the Taiwanese New Wave as a central influence." (Baumgärtel 2012, 30) Whereas Jameson (via Peter Wollen) sees "new waves" of film as visual commodities for international consumption, the Thai context for consumption is aligned with informal "bootleg" markets of video addressed in Nawapol Thamrongrattanarit's *The Master* (2015). Rather than a contribution to larger streams of global consumerism, informal video markets helped to build affinities with waves of experimentation elsewhere.

[10] Kathy E. Ferguson. 2011. *Emma Goldman: Political Thinking in the Streets*, Lanham, Ma: Rowman & Littlefield. 130.

[11] Bas Umali. 2020. *Pangayaw and Decolonizing Resistance: Anarchism in the Philippines,* Oakland, Ca: PM Press, 24-34.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Jacques Rancière. 2004. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible,* London: Continuum.

[14] Benedict Anderson. 2016. "The Strange Story of a Strange Beast: Receptions in Thailand of Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Tropical Malady,*" *Verso*, June 13, https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2701-the-strange-story-of-a-strange-beast-receptions-in-thailand-of-apichatpong-weerasethakul-s-tropical-malady. Accessed August 28, 2021.

[15] I like the way Isaac Marrero-Guillamón expresses such departures: "it was not about seeing the world differently, but about seeing different worlds." See Isaac Marrero-Guillamón. 2018. "The Politics and Aesthetics of Non-Representation: Re-Imagining Ethnographic Cinema with Apichatpong Weerasethakul," Antípoda. Revista de Antropología y Arquiología 33: 15. http://www.scielo.org.co/pdf/antpo/n33/1900-5407-antpo-33-00013.pdf. Accessed August 28, 2021.

[16] Shirtlessness is also a feature of military detainment, apparent in the protests photographs of the 1970s, 1992, and at present. See also Apichatpong Weerasethakul. 2011. "I'm Still Breathing," *PRIMITIVE* (curated by Gridthiya Gaweewong, Penwadee Nophaket Manont), Single channel video, 11:00 minutes (looped). Bangkok: Jim Thompson Art Center (1st December 2011 – 20th March 2012).

[17] Specifically, he said this in an invited Q&A session in response to a question of what democracy will look like in Thailand. 8th Association for Southeast Asian Cinema Conference (Salaya 2014).

[18] Apichatpong Weerasethakul, *Fever Room* (Exhibition Guide), National Taichung Theater/Taiwan International Festival of the Arts, April 28-29 (2018). Reprinted from <http://jfac.jp/en/culture>.

[19] Jacques Rancière. 2006. *Film Fables*, London: Berg Publishers, 2.

[20] Michael J. Shapiro. 2009. *Cinematic Geopolitics*, New York: Routledge, 31.

[21] In *Blissfully Yours* (2002), the cave-like drawings of its protagonist appear as hand-drawn symbols superimposed over scenes of temporary escape into the jungle. The symbols function as an analogue to his simultaneous struggles to speak as an undocumented Karen immigrant. Plato argued that the visible world is simply a world of representation inferior to the "forms" of the real. But the Karen immigrant Min develops his subjective world of representations as a respite from the partitions of border policing, undocumented factory work, and military rule in Myanmar. In *Tropical Malady*, two lovers—a civilian and a solider—spend their final day together according to an itinerary that includes a supermarket, an animal hospital, a movie theater, and a cave. The cave, like the forest where much of the film's second-half is set, is a space where shielded from the conventionality of the outside world.

[22] On a similar note, Socrates speaks of the shaping of a soldier class by bringing children to the frontlines as "spectators of war." Visuality and representation in what Jacques Rancière calls Plato's "ethical regime of images" exist as the ontological foundation of *The Republic*. Poetry, too, must be prevented from impinging upon the balanced representation of the state.

[23] Plato. 1973. *The Republic and Other Works*, translated by Benjamin Jowett, New York: Anchor Books, 205.

[24] Alfian Sa'at, "Warming up to Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Fever Room*," *Arts Equator* (Mar. 8, 2017). Accessed at <https://artsequator.com/review-apichatpong-weerasethakuls-fever-room/>.

[25] I'm thinking of Anocha Suwichakornpong's *By the Time it Gets Dark* (2016), which follows a director's attempt to recover the memory of political violence in October 6th 1976 against the serenity of a lush rural landscape in the first half of the film. This first half is eclipsed by cuts to the city and the climactic devolution into pixelated digital noise. In a contemporaneous escapade from the violent polis, Pimpaka *Towira's Island Funeral* finds three young Bangkokians on a road trip to three Southernmost Thai provinces in search of a distant aunt. The film ends on a mystical island that functions as an imagined sanctuary where residents—their aunt among them—take refuge from the sectarianism and militarization that continues to haunt the "Deep South."

[26] For our purposes here, more on this statement can be found in the section "The Relation of Dreams to Waking Life" from Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*. The section summarizes the academic literature that attempts to either forge or eliminate the boundary between consciousness and the subconscious dream state.

[27] Stanley Rosen, *Plato's Republic: A Study* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 138.

[28] *The Republic,* p. 233.

[29] "I remember seeing Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat's monument in Khon Kaen— what a shame! You see, there is so much ugly history here that it will take centuries to unearth, to be able to tell the histories freely. How can one work here and not

get personal?" See Apichatpong Weerasethakul, ed. *Apichatpong Weerasethakul Sourcebook: The Serenity of Madness* (New York Independent Curators International, 2016), p. 28.

[30] Jeong, *Cinematic Interfaces.*

[31] "First, what matters is not 'seeing' an image of the sun 'as' the sun, but 'seeing' (an image of) the sun 'as' (an image of) a camera. The former concerns the primary psychological illusion that has been the basic issue of all the theories of illusion, whereas the latter suggests a sort of semiotic, rhetorical illusion, or 'figuration'… which involves our interpretation of the diegetic world." Jeong, *Cinematic Interfaces*, p. 121.

[32] 1963. "Thailand's Strong Man: Sarit Thanarat," *New York Times*, November 10, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1957/09/19/84980431. html?pageNumber=5, Accessed August 12, 2021.

[33] Thak Chaloemtiarana. 2007. *Thailand: The Politics of Despotic Paternalism*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 252.

[34] Ibid, 253.

[35] 1957. "Thai Reds Face Execution," *New York Times*, September 19, L5, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1963/11/10/445507602. html?pageNumber=35, Accessed August 12, 2021.

[36] 2021. "Local media caught in the crossfire over reporting political activity," Prachatai, March 16, https://prachatai.com/english/node/9126. Accessed on August 10, 2021.

[37] David Streckfuss, "Kings in the Age of Nations: The Paradox of Lese-Majeste as Political Crime in Thailand," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37(3): 454, https://www.jstor.org/stable/179215. Accessed on August 30, 2021.

[38] This connective interface also recalls Michel Serres's concept of the quasi-object. In this association, the statue marks the subject as a figure of resistance in the same way that a "ball" marks the "player" as a subject of a game. See Michel Serres. 1982. *The Parasite*, Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press., 226.

[39] See Thongchai Winichakul. 1994. *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of the Nation*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

[40] Kick the Machine. http://www.kickthemachine.com/page80/page34/page59/ index.html

[41] Kick the Machine.

[42] Ten Years Thailand, "Ten Years Thailand: Interview with Apichatpong Weerasethakul < https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1154601921356990>.