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**POETIC WALKING ACROSS MOBILE BOUNDARIES:
CONTEMPORARY SOUTHEAST ASIAN NARRATIVES IN THE WORK
OF TRINH T. MINH-HA AND APICHATPONG WEERASETHAKUL**

Weiying Yu

APS 650: Capstone Project

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Abstract

This research investigates how personal politics, the poetics of cinematic narrative form, and current Southeast Asian landscapes are embodied in the work of filmmakers/artists Trinh T. Minh-ha (b. 1952, Hanoi, Vietnam) and Apichatpong Weerasethakul (b. 1970, Bangkok, Thailand). Trinh and Apichatpong's transnational reflections and radical poetics challenge the West as the authoritative domain of modern knowledge, evoking a border rupture that questions hegemonic definitions of culture, history, geography, and society. Synthesizing art and politics, their works create experimental spaces to navigate the multidimensional consciousness associated with the Asia Pacific and global political issues of immigration, refugeeism, military action resistance, and surveillance. Ultimately, this research highlights the ongoing impact of Trinh and Apichatpong's work on our awareness of relevant cultural and local phenomena along with identity transformation by calling attention to intangible borders that overcome the limiting boundaries of reality.

Through a multidisciplinary approach, this paper analyzes visual expressions and narrative strategies in Trinh and Apichatpong's work that suggest global fluidity and multiplicity and utilizes the metaphor of "walking" to illustrate the idea of mobile boundaries. Particularly, my work addresses Trinh's notion of "resonances in displacement" through innovative poetics and rhetoric regarding the concepts of "believe in land not borders" and "making and unmaking identity," as well as Apichatpong's meditations rendered through filmic and digital spaces on states of dream and reality, fiction and fact, and decayed memories of personal and regional histories. In doing so, this project furthers existing discourse about Southeast Asian narratives, providing a fresh and deeper understanding of how Trinh and Apichatpong's contemporary poetic visual practices resist singular definition and contextualize their personal politics.

KEYWORDS: "Walking," Border Crossing, Poetic Narratives, Personal Politics, Southeast Asia, Independent Films, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Apichatpong Weerasethakul

Prologue

“I certainly do belong to this whole context of Asia whose cultural heritages cut across national borderlines.”¹

-Trinh T. Minh-ha

In an age of global awareness and mobility, the notion of geopolitical boundaries is redefined by temporary travelers, workers, students, as well as by nomadic immigrants and refugees. During the course of such frequent movements, the discourses of cultural displacement, shifting identity, and narratives of “others” turn visible boundaries into invisible and controversial ones. Beyond Western perspectives and interpretations, an alternative experimental space, created by critic Trinh T. Minh-ha² (b. 1952, Hanoi, Vietnam) and independent filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul (b. 1970, Bangkok, Thailand), brings greater awareness to the intersection of personal politics and collective memories for global audiences and sheds light on contemporary narratives of Southeast Asia.

Trinh T. Minh-ha is a prolific independent filmmaker and scholar, composer, feminist theorist and critic, and a professor of Gender & Women’s Studies and Rhetoric at the University of California, Berkeley. Her first film *Reassemblage* (1982), focusing on the cultural and daily lives of villagers in Senegal, and the following one, *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989) exploring Vietnamese women’s identities in contemporary society, offer groundbreaking and unconventional visual narratives that question normative representations of women’s experiences and reductive ethnographic portrayals in both the past and present. By probing the complexity and multiplicity of unfixed geopolitical boundaries and identities, Trinh’s critical and poetic ruminations on such issues are radical, personal, and interdisciplinary. While Trinh utilizes intellectual discourses of linguistics, post-colonialism, and feminism that reshape the

¹ Minh-ha. T. Trinh, *The Digital Film Event* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 127.

² Trinh is a Vietnamese family name. The order of Trinh T. Minh-ha’s name follows the traditional pattern of Asian names, wherein the family name appears first.

contemporary Southeast Asian landscape, Thai independent filmmaker and artist Apichatpong depicts a dreamlike, and mysterious visual realm that intertwines personal and collective memories. Apichatpong's films present the subtle contradictions between reality and dreams, anxiety and tranquility, the mundane and absurd. In particular, his 2015 film, *Cemetery of Splendour*, portrays an enigmatic sleeping sickness among soldiers that serves as a metaphor for self-consciousness, fragmented memories, and Thailand's military politics. Although *Cemetery of Splendour* alludes to Thai military dictatorship and authority from the 1960s to 1980s, this nation's controversial history is concealed and reassessed through a nuanced dreamlike cinematic narrative and setting.

In short, the work of Trinh and Apichatpong reflect distinct methods of contemporary narration and poetic aesthetics in a Southeast Asian context, ones that cross the mobile boundaries. Trinh and Apichatpong's innovative practices and radical poetics that reflect transnational contemplation and challenge the West as an authoritative arbiter of modern knowledge. Trinh's work constantly reconstructs and meditates on contemporary human issues and global crises, while Apichatpong utilizes experimental cinematic visual strategy in a distinct way to reassess his home country, Thailand. In these ways, their work alternatively reshapes our perceptions of borders, cultural conditions, history, geography, and future society.

The Discourse of Gender, Borders, and Aesthetics in Southeast Asia

Southeast Asian art and the cultural landscape have been shaped by regional histories, political conflicts, and the shifting dynamics of culture. As Lola Lenzi points out, "Not only do the artists of Southeast Asia make work that mirrors and comments change, they actively put their practice at the service of change, their art an important and irreplaceable means of social and

political voice for all.”³ Trinh and Apichatpong, among others, express this social and political voice along with critical reflections, yet extend this discourse through visual narratives and criticism to contemplate contemporary ideas of globalized “borders and land.”

Trinh’s prolific and versatile ongoing career involves film, art, literature, music, criticism, anthropology and philosophy. Many scholars and researchers have analyzed and acknowledged her contributions through the frameworks of post-colonialism, feminism, and aesthetics. Guèye suggests that Trinh’s films offer insights from the “outsider-insider” perspective and explores the colonialist-assigned identities of non-Westerners.⁴ In addition, Lan Duong points out that “Trinh archives Vietnamese American women's roles and the fact of their realities on film.”⁵ To further demonstrate the connections between self-identity and contemporary writing, Joshua Fausty’s essay on Trinh “explores how their framing of a self-as-other could be a model for understanding ethics within critical thinking.”⁶ Furthermore, he comments that “The aesthetics of criticism can only emerge through the writing itself—through the articulations, readings and flows that result from the process of a text taking shape at the meeting point between the writing self and his or her living other.”⁷ Although these scholars emphasize the methods of critical thinking and representation of alternative women’s perspectives in Trinh’s theoretical and cinematic practices, there needs to be further acknowledgment and exploration of how Trinh’s distinct poetic criticism rebels against the limitations of reality and confronts linguistic norms. Through a close reading

³ Lola Lenzi, “Art as Voice: Political Art in Southeast Asia at the Turn of the Twenty First Century,” *Asia Art Archive*, August 1, 2011, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/ideas/ideas/art-as-voice-political-art-in-southeast-asia-at-the-turn-of-the-twenty-first-century>.

⁴ Guèye Khadidiatou, “Ethnocultural Voices and African Aesthetics in Trinh Minh-ha’s ‘Reassemblage: From the Firelight to the Screen,’” *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 39, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 14-25, Indiana University Press.

⁵ Duong Lan, “Traitors and Translators: Reframing Trinh T. Minh-ha’s ‘Surname Viet Given Name Nam.’” *Discourse*, Vol. 31, No. 3, Special Issue: Translation and Embodiment in National and Transnational Asian Film and Media (Fall 2009): 195-219.

⁶ Joshua Fausty, “Trinh T. Minh-ha Essaying Ethics,” *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry*, Issue 23 (Spring 2010), The University of Chicago Press on behalf of Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, University of the Arts London, 98-106.

⁷ Fausty, 106.

and analysis of the non-linear poetic narrative forms in Trinh's books—*Elsewhere Within Here: Immigration, Refugeeism and the Boundary Event* (2010) and *Lovecidal: Walking with the Disappeared* (2016)—I also point out how her sophisticated and philosophical writings illuminate her claim that “every voyage can be said to involve a re-siting of boundaries”⁸ as well as move away from a typical feminist representations towards more sophisticated portrayals.

While Trinh utilize a feminist lens, both she and Apichatpong express their concerns and uneasiness about national state and global immigration. Regarding Apichatpong's work, Jihoon Kim states that Apichatpong's interest in science fiction film informs the different characteristics of stasis and mobility in his films.⁹ Moreover, Violet Lucca highlights that “Apichatpong's far more haunting images are those linked with the wars and genocide around the spread of communism in the region.”¹⁰ If the connotations that emerge from the resonances between fictional characters and brutal reality of Thai area are embedded in Apichatpong's cinematic concepts, he also offers a shifting perspective on contemporary visual representations and the landscape of Thailand as well as Southeast Asian cinema. According to Ari Purnama's poetics-based research on Apichatpong's cinematic theory, his personal and experimental storytelling approach to socio-cultural dynamics and history are associated with global filmmaking in experimental and avant-garde practice.¹¹ Thus, Apichatpong's innovative cinematic languages and contemplative political metaphors generate further discussion about contemporary Southeast

⁸ Minh-ha T. Trinh, *Elsewhere, Within Here: Immigration, Refugeeism and the Boundary Event* (New York: Routledge, 2010), Preface.

⁹ Jihoon Kim, *Forms of Journey and Archive: Remaking Science Fiction in Contemporary Artist-Filmmakers' Projects* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015), Chapter 4.

¹⁰ Violet Lucca, “Dream State: In *Cemetery of Splendor*, Apichatpong Weerasethakul Employs His Entrancing Language of Metaphor to Diagnose an Ailing Thailand,” *Film Comment*, March-April 2016 Issue. <https://www.filmcomment.com/article/apichatpong-weerasethakul-cemetery-of-splendor/>.

¹¹ Ari Purnama, *A Historical Poetics of Independent Fiction Films from Southeast Asia: Toward A Multidisciplinary, Objects-centered and Historically Sensitive Southeast Asian Film Scholarship*. The 8th Annual Conference of The Asian Studies Association of Hong Kong The Hong Kong Institute of Education. https://www.academia.edu/4979614/A_Historical_Poetics_of_Independent_Fiction_Films_from_Southeast_Asia_Toward_A_Multidisciplinary_Objectscentered_and_Historically_Sensitive_Southeast_Asian_Film_Scholarship_The_8th_Annual_Conference_of_The_Asian_Studies_Ass.

Asian memories and expression. With this in mind, I look at Apichatpong's films *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010), *Cemetery of Splendour* (2015), and his 2019-2020 travelling exhibition *Serenity of Madness*, to explore how his cinematic and artistic depictions reveal Thailand's history.

Expanding on the discourse about the work of Trinh and Apichatpong, this research critically assesses the shifting views of Southeast Asian cultural landscape, reconsiders the notions of poetics and politics in Trinh and Apichatpong's work, and inspires global audiences to understand "borders and lands" as "fluid, interacting movements"¹² in today's world. Notably, the concept and metaphor of "walking" helps us to reassess the artistic and critical visions of Trinh and Apichatpong. Throughout the paper, I explore the myriad notions of "walking," representing a vast allegory of movement, journey, quest, crossing, and kinesis. This project, proposing an alternative perspective to the Western lens, investigates how personal politics, the poetics of cinematic narrative form, and current Southeast Asian landscapes are embodied in the versatile works and careers of Trinh and Apichatpong. The notion of "personal politics," which first appeared in the U.S. feminist movement in the late 1960s, addresses private experiences that manifest from political and social structures. For Trinh and Apichatpong, who were born in Vietnam and Thailand, "personal politics" do not simply relate to issues of political liberation and identity. Rather, they transform their artistic genres by deconstructing chaotic, traumatic memories using poetic and fictional strategies. Equally, if not more important, their work suggests how film and contemporary narratives are able to deconstruct politics rather than being manipulated by them. Instead of simple protest or political claims, the work of Trinh and Apichatpong uses independent

¹² Erika Balsom, "'There is No Such Thing as Documentary': An Interview with Trinh T. Minh-ha." *Frieze*, (November 2018). <https://frieze.com/article/there-no-such-thing-documentary-interview-trinh-t-minh-ha>.

thinking and personal experiences to generate diverse angles from which we can examine memories, disruptions, and aspirations.

I. Across Border, Live on Land: More Than One Identity

“Sometimes the mind freezes and the heart goes on fasting: name, nation, identity, citizenship disappear. *Once I was a human.*”¹³

– Trinh T. Minh-ha

For Trinh and Apichatpong’s practices, “walking” is an action that features constant steps, distance, and thoughts. “Walking” is an experience that involves sight, feeling, and change. “Walking with the disappeared” becomes Trinh’s critical and philosophical meditation for those who have suffered from human-made disasters. Through a global lens, Trinh shows the unstable identity of Southeast Asia, questioning the motives of humanity and illuminating various forms of destruction in our time. Trinh’s criticism involves various discourses, such as feminism, post-colonialism, and the avant-garde that intend “to shift set boundaries—whether cultural, political or artistic.”¹⁴ The boundaries are set up by the “walls” that are invisible but present and by nations and regions with certain beliefs that perceive individuals or groups as potential threats to Western countries. In a sense, “border crossing” is a dilemma for democracy and an issue that affects the globalized world. As Trinh puts it:

The talk on the world political page is all about closing down, curtailing movements, reinforcing borders, building new fences, installing more checkpoints, fortifying security zones, setting up gated communities, and worse, sealing an entire nation into restricted areas.... The epoch of global fear has provoked extreme reactions and sentenced the world to indefinite confinement behind the bars of homeland security.¹⁵

¹³ Minh-ha, T. Trinh, *Lovecidal: Walking with Disappeared* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), I.

¹⁴ Minh-ha, T. Trinh, *Elsewhere, Within Here: Immigration, Refugeeism and the Boundary Event*. Sleepless Silence, 2010, retrieved from <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com>, 13.

¹⁵ Trinh, 1.

In current times, Trinh illuminates “every voyage can be said to involve a re-siting of boundaries.”¹⁶ During this uncertain process, fears about and hatred of “border crossing” raise questions about humans’ preoccupation with boundaries—their construction, deconstruction, and possibilities.¹⁷ “Walking” on the boundless path requires courage, caution, and constant compassion. More importantly, when one’s name, identity, nationality is blurred, as Trinh argues, “walking” is a human form of strength, driven by internal awareness and external forces. When one crosses borders, this movement reveals multivalent forms of “walking:” it disrupts nations’ boundaries, acts as a form of agency, or acts as a counterbalance to “blind walking” (which will be discussed later).

Globally and historically, political and military powers force individuals to leave their land; the consequences are diaspora, in which border crossing is violent and intense. The metaphor of “walking” particularly refers to taking a journey physically and emotionally with people who are absent in Trinh’s 2016 book *Lovecidal: Walking with the Disappeared*. Trinh critically investigates climate change, lyrically reiterates the theme of political and military power abuse worldwide, and poetically affirms the spirits of the disappeared and dynamics of these people and cultures. The concept of “walking with disappeared” explores the subtle and profound connections between personal and global memories in an unstable contemporary reality. Various forces—diaspora, exile, dislocation or disappearance—lead to one’s shifting identities, which breaks ties with one’s history and culture. In other words, “walking” can help disenfranchised or absent people reconcile their fragmented, ruptured selves.

¹⁶ Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Elsewhere, within Here: Immigration, Refugeeism and Boundary Event* (New York and London: Routledge, 2011), 27.

¹⁷ As we see more evidences in the immigration policy of Present Donald Trump since 2016, and the temporary Covid-19 border closing in 2020, etc.

Trinh's critical contents reflect aesthetics, and her aesthetics echo the idea of "walking." She walks across the traditional lines of criticism, visual documentation, and regional histories. Trinh's artistic and writing practices have inspired critical reflections on the global crisis and paradigm shifts of the cultural landscape of Southeast Asia. Examples of Trinh's extensive critical investigations are her 1991 book *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics* and her 2016 digital film *Forgetting Vietnam*, in which Trinh continues enquiring about the categorical boundaries and the duality of culture and gender. In addition, rooted in an Asian cultural context, Trinh further expands her educational background and research experiences through composition, comparative literature of America and France, philosophy, and cultural criticism. Her critical vision and artistic approaches don't try to artificially consolidate a certain notion or singular dimension, but attempt to open possible spaces for contemplation. As Trinh says, "So, what you have in my films and video is never a homogenized space of sight and sound, but always a heterogeneous space between ear and eye as enriched by the multiplicity of elements involved."¹⁸

In particular, when discussing one's identity, which is related to the power of established knowledge and construction, Trinh's earlier cinematic practice began probing into the notion of "making and unmaking identity" in the 1980s. For example, in 1982, her first 16mm documentary



Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*, 1989, 135 mins, still image

¹⁸ Min-ha T. Trinh, *Traveling (in) Time with Irina Leimbacher*, The article first appeared in the March 2001 issue of *ReleasePrint*, the magazine of Film Arts Foundation), 14.

Reassemblage: From the Firelight to the Screen portrays African aesthetics and tribal life of a Senegalese village through unconventional methods. In the film, Trinh's approach is "not to speak about but speak nearby."¹⁹ Through music, silence, and occasional voice-overs by her, the visual montage assembles primary footage to interrogate predictable interpretations and expectations in the Western anthropological documentary traditions. In her following 1989 film *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*, the mock interviews of fictional female characters reflect the concept of "resonances in displacement." In this piece, Trinh further argues that contemporary identity and documentary translation exist on fixed and unfixed spectrums. The journeys of these Vietnamese female characters in Trinh's films disrupt the boundaries of their traditional roles in the patriarchal society and official cultural definitions. Dislocation and displacement caused by wars and armed conflicts resonate with contemporary Vietnamese women's experiences, which include walking through violence, cultures, and memories.

The hybrid and unsettled identities portrayed in Trinh's films alludes to a "walking" through and between aspects of the self, a quest for reconciliation. Such movement is not only interior but embedded in the concept of land representation, which contains mobile borderlines across nations and cultures. In contrast, the "land" in Apichatpong's films is physically present in rural Thailand. The land is protected as well as devastated by the people, who launched wars that began in ancient



Apichatpong Weerasethakul, *Cemetery of Splendour*, 2015, still images

¹⁹ Voice-over in the film *Reassemblage* (1982) by Trinh.

times. In *Cemetery of Splendor*, a strange disease causes soldiers to sleep for a longtime in a rural hospital. The site was a school before being transformed into a hospital; however, in ancient times it was the cemetery of a king, and the “battle” is ongoing. Symbolically, the “land” embodies spirits, memorials, and possibilities that traverse different times and spaces.

In particular, Apichatpong illuminates his perspective on the transformation of humans in *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (*Uncle Boonmee*). The protagonist, Uncle Boonmee, is afflicted with kidney disease; in the last several months of his life, he meets the ghost of his wife and his lost son, who has become an ape-like monster. This film explores the temporal and invisible experiences of spirituality, which Anders Bergstrom asserts are utilized “not because they conveniently illustrate themes of spirituality, but because in their very construction and representation of notions of memory and subjectivity are spiritual practices.”²⁰ In particular, the film psychologically revokes the deep connection between people and the land on which they have lived. The sentence at the beginning of the film reads: “For Uncle Boonmee Sirgulwong who has



Apichatpong Weerasethakul, *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Call His Past Life*, 2010, still color image, 16mm (expanded to 35mm), 114 minutes

²⁰ Anders Bergstrom, “Cinematic Past Lives: Memory, Modernity, and Cinematic Reincarnation in Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s ‘Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives’,” *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal: a special proceedings issue: A Matter of Lifedeath III*, vol. 48, no. 4 (December 2015): 16.

remained in Thailand's northeast for his past reincarnations & for the residents of Nabua village who were forced to leave home." For Uncle Boonmee, "Facing the jungle, the hills and vales, my past lives as an animal and other beings rise up before me." Thus, the idea of "disappeared" goes beyond fixed identity, walking through the invisible spirits and physical living spaces.

According to Trinh's global awareness of boundary events, "walking" evokes a rupture in the contemporary understandings of "national borderlines." From border crossing to "walking" on land, Apichatpong's films resonate with the mysterious connections between spirits, memories, and the Southeast Asian landscape.

II. Walking Through Southeast Asia: Innovative Poetics Narratives

"Speaking, writing, and discoursing are not mere acts of communication; they are above all acts of compulsion. Please follow me. Trust me, for deep feeling and understanding require total commitment."²¹

–Trinh T. Minh-ha

Poetic "walking" refers to the idea that people who have disappeared still live on the land and in others' memories. The poetic narratives of Trinh and Apichatpong allow these people to reappear. The aesthetic practices of Trinh and Apichatpong craft representations that express historical and fragmented memories, metaphors of cultures and in everyday life, and personal contemplations. For "deep feeling and understanding" of land, buried memories and disappeared lives, the creative forms of writing, storytelling, and filmmaking create movement: bringing what is hidden to the surface; making the invisible visible; and shaping a voice and story for the displaced.

This movement is expressed through artistic techniques and approaches. The concept of contemporary narratives in writing and cinema is associated with avant-garde and post-modern

²¹ Trinh. T. Trinh, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 52.

discourses. Trinh's early practice of filmmaking in the 1980s began her experimental process of analyzing critical concepts and exploring poetic cinematic languages. For example, both Trinh and Apichatpong shot on 16mm, and this visual format is an iconic representation of experimental and independent film. Apichatpong, as a younger generation native Thai independent filmmaker, addresses a peculiar avant-garde cinematic representation: the non-linear narratives of plots, full-length shots, direct lighting, and experimental soundtrack or nature sounds.

Various forms of walking are made distinct in Trinh's writings. Her thinking on humanity and inhumanity explicitly embodies this poetic approach:

It is said that in the profound crisis of our civilization—a crisis far more dangerous and frightening than the nuke nightmare itself—man forgets to be man. Like the blind walking by an abyss, one finds oneself living by one's shadow, hiding and drifting dazed as one witnesses one's own participation in the darkest side of humanity's inhumanity.²²

The "blind walking" in Trinh's notion involves blind energy. The disconnection between humans and their reality is expressed by the metaphor of the shadow. This dark forces and energy are generated by the absence of belonging to land. The land is witness to the true condition of humans—walking blindly through catastrophes and becoming disconnected from freedom.

The innovative poetics and rhetoric embedded in Trinh and Apichatpong's practices involve "everyday life and landscape."²³ Multiple metaphors are subtly conveyed through their artistic sensibility and are associated with nature, humanity, and spirits. Although Trinh's criticism clearly states her concerns about humanity, she puts these ideas in a personal and universal perspective with a gentle yet fierce tone and allegoric prose. In contrast to blind walking, human affections and longing for the land arouse poetic expressions and intense sensation. Both Trinh and Apichatpong's personal ruminations on the notion of land remind me of Italo Calvino. In his

²² Minh-ha T. Trinh, *Lovely: Walking with Disappeared*, "Blind Energy" (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 13.

²³ Antoine Thirion, "Apichatpong Weerasethakul, hors d'oeuvre," *Independencia*, 13 May 2010, http://independencia.fr/FESTIVALS/CANNES_2010_Apichatpong_Mail.html.

speech on *Invisible Cities*, Calvino writes, “What is the city today, for us? I believe that I have written something like a last poem addressed to the city, at a time when it is becoming increasingly difficult to live there.”²⁴ Trinh’s cautions about humanity’s dissonance and Apichatpong’s apprehensions about Thailand’s future reveal their deep consideration for the land. Calvino reflects his concerns and existential questions in prose, while Trinh’s poetics demonstrates her daily resistance in our times. The “walking” expedition is iterated in cities, villages, and cultural landscapes for individuals and the public. Writing and walking explore and archive the fragmented moments and possibilities for Trinh. Land, mountains and trees witness people’s suffering; rains, rivers, and springs remember people’s sorrow in Trinh’s film *Forgetting Vietnam*. Vietnam recalls its memory—between land and water, between the ancient and the modern, between the everlasting and the transient—for its people who are present and those who are absent.

Apichatpong’s visual expressions are just as dynamic and powerful. Through the lens of experimental films and digital installations as primary resources, Apichatpong meditates on states of dream and reality, fiction and fact, and decayed memories connected to personal and regional



Apichatpong Weerasethakul, *Cemetery of Splendour*, 2015, film shot, 1’28”



A sculpture from Sala Keoku Temple, as featured in *Fireworks (Archives)*, 2015, HD video projected on holofilm, 6’40”

²⁴ Italo Calvino, “Italo Calvino on Invisible Cities” (a lecture given by Italo Calvino to the students of the Writing Group Division at Columbia University on March 29, 1983), 4.

histories. These themes intermingle in the tropic air and wind, mundane scenarios, and tranquil scenery in Southeast Asia. In *Syndromes and A Century* (2006), full-length fixed shots feature a series of daily conversations in tranquil summer scenes that emerge through a poetic and mysterious aura. Buddhist and figurative statues silently witness the doctors and patients in the hospital. Gazing at the familiar daily scenarios, we view an unfamiliar cinematic narrative that creates a parallel world: strange illness and disease are illuminated by mysterious powers, the unidentified reincarnation of lives connecting the past and present. Apichatpong's poetic narrative induces inspirations and imagination from earthly dialogues in daily life, and transitions common figures and images into metaphors for nature, humanity, and unseen forces. The eternity of death and daily temporal recur the sculptures of two lovers and human skeletons, embracing each other and sitting on the bench in *Cemetery of Splendour*, are converted into an art installation tracing Apichatpong's contemplation of life's changing moments.

Moreover, the land is inextricable from history, family, and individual memories. The themes of Apichatpong's films bond invisible elements of the supernatural and imagination to his homeland. In particular, science fiction imagery in Apichatpong's films adds multiple layers to connect past memories and the present. When talking about *Cemetery of Splendor*, Apichatpong explains the diverse interests that led him to conceive an unknown sleeping illness:

Since the movie is about sleeping and about a journey into a different territory, I like to add this element of science to open up the audience's imagination. The possibility of characters being hypnotized by some machine works in a parallel way with the audience being hypnotized by movies. I also like the idea of mediation and discovery. So I tried to combine all of these interests of mine into the film.²⁵

²⁵ Clayton Dillard, "Interview: Apichatpong Weerasethakul Talks *Cemetery of Splendour*," March 3, 2016. <https://www.slantmagazine.com/film/interview-apichatpong-weerasethakul/>.

Likewise, the neon light installations in the hospital is linked to the realm of science fiction. These light tubes are a fictional element mentioned in the film that is supposed to help American soldiers from the War in Afghanistan sleep. Meanwhile, the atmosphere created by the



Apichatpong Weerasethakul, *Cemetery of Splendour*, 2015, still images

light installations reminds audiences of laboratory space. Finally, the changing, varied colors of the light create a surreal realm that represents the dreams of these soldiers traveling through reality and sleeping, consciousness and spirits.

The use of cinematic space allows for the made-up of reality to impact the viewer. Unsettling memories in Apichatpong's cinematic space lead us to wonder, engage, and get lost in fabulation. Does it matter whether we can accurately translate memories into reality? It may not be possible to do so, but we receive the feelings transition between moments and breathing open to the past and future. The desire to listen to stories is humans' instinct, and "to feel the films of Apichatpong is to infuse life with the zest of fabulation."²⁶ Besides this fabulation, there are unseen forces that humans' systematic knowledge cannot articulate. The importance of imagination emerges in Trinh's work as well. Her fictional narratives are rooted in poetic walking through the images of land—internal perception and memories project the landscape and history. In particular, the scripts composed for the interviews of five Vietnamese women, performed in the film *Surname*

²⁶ Toni Pape, "The Vitality of Fabulation: Improvisation and Clichés in Mysterious Objects at Noon and The Adventure of Iron Pussy," *Nocturnal Fabulations: Ecology, Vitality and Opacity in the Cinema of Apichatpong* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2017), 41.

Viet Given Name Nam dramatically present the blurred line between oral history and theatrical documentation. In this light, the fictional narratives in Trinh and Apichatpong's work conjure up a sense of visible invisibility that is associated with our unconscious self-awareness through multi-layered experiences.

The aesthetics of Trinh and Apichatpong recur in poetic movements that contain blurry lines between uncertain realities and unsettling properties and forces embodied by spirits and landscapes. Poetic walking is like waves, walking viewers through a dark sea, the abyss of human's swirling thoughts and shimmering landscapes.

III. "Speaking Nearby" Southeast Asia: Personal Politics in the Global Age

The cultures, the languages, the forests, the animals,
the treasures hidden in the vast tunnels inside the mountains.
We are then forced to move to the Age of Enlightenment
when Nothing is meaningful.
But the spirits remain, the spirits of the artifacts.
At this particular spaceship, outside there used to be two dogs.
And it used to be something called the rain.
The dogs were always under the spaceship's canopies and wings,
Sheltering themselves from the falling water.
Now when the sky was empty because there was no sky,
Their spirits roamed the ship.
They immersed themselves in the memories they hadn't experiences,
Until they got bored.²⁷

—Apichatpong Weerasethakul

Trinh and Apichatpong's contemporary practices redefine and recontextualize the cultural landscape of Southeast Asia through their personal politics, which exposes a global fluidity and multiplicity that forwards the idea of mobile boundaries. In fact, Asian cultures, aesthetics and philosophy have become gradually visible for Americans and Europeans through international film

²⁷ Apichatpong Weerasethakul, *The Serenity of Madness*, Exhibition Catalogue (School of the Art Institute of Chicago), 2017, retrieved from https://s3.amazonaws.com/contemporaryartgroup/files/documents_file_5891.pdf

and art venues. The presence of this work in the international exhibitions featuring of Trinh and Apichatpong deepens their remarkable contributions to global discourse about the art and cultural landscape of Southeast Asia. Trinh's 2016 exhibition, *Forgetting Vietnam*, at the Tate Museum in London, explores the contemporary view of memories and land for local Vietnamese, which questions linear narratives and "borders."



Apichatpong Weerasethakul: The Serenity of Madness, installation view, Museum of Contemporary Art and Design (MCAD, Manila), 2017, courtesy of MCAD.

Apichatpong's most recent 2019-2020 solo exhibition, *The Serenity of Madness*,²⁸ presents a series of short experimental films and photography showing the thread of his insights about everyday life alongside meditations on reincarnation. Through the international exhibitions, Trinh and Apichatpong reflect upon their artistic practices that proceed from the Southeast Asian context. Furthermore, they step beyond aesthetic, disciplinary, and regional categories, crossing boundaries into a larger global context.

Personal politics help to reframe the power of poetics and memorials. In 1982, Chinese American architect Maya Lin designed the *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* in Washington, D.C., This black granite public sculpture, shaped as a giant "V," memorializes names of the soldiers who fought in the Vietnam war (1955-1975) and who lost their lives. This minimalist-style of this

²⁸ Note: The full title, *Apichatpong Weerasethakul: The Serenity of Madness*, be abbreviated as *The Serenity of Madness*. November 30, 2019 – March 15, 2020, Taipei Fine Arts Museum, curated by Gridthiya Gaweeewong. Other exhibit locations include: Museum of Contemporary Art and Design (MCAD), Manila, 2017; PARASITE, Hong Kong, September 17, 2016 – November 27, 2016.

national memorial conveys a poetic power that allows people to reflect and silently “cry” for the victims in this war. The power of “crying” in a public space for disappeared individuals shares the same emotional empathy that is connected to Trinh’s practice of personal politics. “Walking” with disappeared lives and “speaking nearby” people, the concept of personal politics is a vehicle to help us feel and understand the sorrow, encounters, and memories of these lives.

Both Trinh and Apichatpong have special conceptualizations and understandings of language that are disclosed through their innovative work and artistic practices. According to Trinh, “language is not just an exercise of power or resistance but also an infinite act of activity.”²⁹



The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Washington, D.C., designed by Maya Lin

Written words or verbal communications do not only express a simple power of confrontation and political activism; language can free our minds and help use revisit our times. Trinh creates profound individual and social commentary by “walking” through static borders via language. For Apichatpong, the concept of “language” represents the diversity and appreciation of differences: “The world doesn’t have one language,” he says, “we all have different voices, we have to

²⁹ Minh-ha, T. Trinh, *Elsewhere, within Here: Immigration, Refugeeism and the Boundary Event* (New York and London: Routledge, 2011), 125.

acknowledge these differences, whether in film, sexual preference, religion, politics....”³⁰ Despite these intentions, James Austin Farrell points out in his writing:

Ironically, much of the subtlety in his films concerning Thainess, cultural nuance, social hypocrisy, etc., will indubitably be lost on most foreign movie-watchers and critics—though perhaps the not-understanding of what is happening, or the challenge that affords, is what floats the critics’ boat.³¹

Ultimately, metaphors in Apichatpong’s films inexplicitly float in and out of the visual frame and are iterated through various images, which implies that certain elements are beyond language, that the visual is the universal. These connotations cause cultural barriers and boredom for some of the audiences when watching his films. Yet, these metaphors embody Apichatpong’s personal politics that is deeply associated with Thainess. Personal politics resides in Apichatpong’s lasting memories and disappearing lives in the Southeast Asian countryside landscape. *Uncle Boonmee* features Apichatpong’s home city Isan in northern Thailand: lush jungle outside windows, calm ponds in the valleys, and mysterious caves. People and spirits walk through these spaces summoning their past lives. The Southeast Asian tropical landscape demonstrates the liveliness of nature: it confronts the urban spectacles; it maintains the connections between land and humans; and it reincarnates the spirits and disappeared people.

The land and nature become associated with spirits and ancestors who return, with the power of dreams to capture us. Over the decade from 1998 to 2009, Apichatpong produced a series of short experimental films³² that conjure his personal cinematic explorations. On the Mekong river, *Luminous People* (2007) captures a boat moving through with a group of people chatting and casting off the ashes into the stream. The symbolism of a dream emerges when a man recounts

³⁰ James Austin Farrell, “Seeing Things with Joei,” <https://www.chiangmaicitylife.com/citylife-articles/seeing-things-with-joei/>.

³¹ Farrell, “Seeing Things with Joei.”

³² Short experimental films directed by Apichatpong include *Third World* (1998), *Luminous People* (2007), *Ashes* (2012), *Phantom of Nabua* (2009), *A Letter to Uncle Boonmee* (2009), *Haiku* (2009), etc.

how he was overjoyed when his father who passed away came to him while he slept. *Ashes* (2012) records Apichatpong's everyday moments in the stop-motion version. The visuals evoke his dreams—the buildings of his hometown Khon Kaen, walks with his dog in the city and on the country road, watching the flames blossom in the night sky. The significance of dreams reappears in *Ashes* (2012); humans need sleep, everyone has to have dreams. Later, Apichatpong wrote *A Letter to Uncle Boonmee* (2009) in the small village Nabua—there is the reincarnation of Uncle Boonmee's past life, and the villagers who were forced to leave reside in the jungle. The storytelling in Apichatpong's cinematic world illustrates an intimate experience in his visual diaries, in which we pass by the land and observe fleeting moments.

Trinh and Apichatpong's poetic narratives are distinctively personal—fragmented daily observations, unexpected reflections of reality, and images of multivalent resonance. Personal politics signifies particular individual commitments to inquiry and the need to reflect the past and future in contemporary moments. Trinh's expands and pushes the understanding of humanity's boundaries, fractured identities, and the possibilities of language and critical thinking, while Apichatpong's cinematic exploration conjures invisible memories and spirits that evoke deep emotion and spiritual origins linked to his homeland. Trinh and Apichatpong share personal politics as critical and creative elements to capture an Asian cultural context beyond certain paradigms in the West. Trinh and Apichatpong guide and shape poetic walking into a metaphor to rupture and cross boundaries. Their poetic walking is an endless journey for profound navigations: they return to the land of Southeast Asia and transcend national borderlines.

Coda

How do we understand and perceive the landscape and memories of Southeast Asia, its politics and cultures? This understanding can be fragmented, traumatic and chaotic, even radically “other.” There are, however, alternative representations and expressions that deeply resonate with

and speak to personalized memorials, cultural relocation, and poetic politics. Beyond the duality of art and politics, Trinh and Apichatpong's experimental works create contemplative spaces to navigate a multidimensional consciousness—one associated with the Asia Pacific and global issues of gender, immigration, refugeeism, and resistance to military actions and surveillance. Ultimately, this research highlights the ongoing impact of Trinh and Apichatpong's work on increasing our awareness of the dynamic changes that reshape intangible borders and overcome a limiting reality.

Freedom of expression, contemporary cinematic training, and avant-garde artistic practices in America and Europe offer Trinh and Apichatpong essential conduits for making films and conducting their research internationally. At the same time, their originality is demonstrated through their approach to shaping contemporary narratives and their use of poetic power. Their work captures the intimacy of personal politics rooted in the Southeast Asian landscape, reflect upon globalized crises and discourses, and lead us to contemplate our delicate, speculative world. When discussing her practice, Trinh says, "My work, like myself, can be called 'boundary event'...Each Film, each book I come up with is yet another way to work at the difficult edge between these movements inside out and outside in."³³

As independent artist-filmmakers who practice cinematic aesthetics and cultural poetics, Trinh and Apichatpong preserve their autonomy as directors, editors, and writers. Land gives them the power to walk on the earth, to trace personal politics through myths and memories, and to whisper the lives and moments and histories that we need to hear, bring them into the present. Their alternative narratives are strong yet fragile, a poetic walking that disrupts paradigms, crosses and moves borders.

³³ Minh-ha T. Trinh, "The Page Screen Canvas with Lynn Marie Kirby and Victoria Alba," *The Digital Film Event* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 193.

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