MYSTERIOUS OBJECTS OF KNOWLEDGE:
AN INTERPRETATION OF THREE FEATURE FILMS BY APICHATPONG WEERASETHAKUL IN TERMS OF THE ETHNOGRAPHIC PARADIGM

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Three feature films from acclaimed Thai art film director Apichatpong Weerasethakul – Mysterious Object at Noon, Blissfully Yours, and Tropical Malady– are interpreted here within the context of ethnographic discourse. In particular, this thesis argues for an appreciation of the films as experimental ethnographic “writings” closely bound to the generic blurring of non-fiction and fiction film modes. Furthermore, recurring anthropological thematics are situated within the discursive web of writer-text-reader relations. One especially prominent and overarching thematic addressed throughout is the evocation of local or traditional knowledge in an increasingly globalized Thai cultural setting, and how this is enacted formally by a society/nature dialectic. Finally, these films are situated within a broader art world shift towards quasi-anthropological art in which a primitivist paradigm is still very much in operation, implicating the artist’s cultural identity in relation to the cultural content of the works and the cultural location of their dominant interpretive community.

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Introduction: Approaching Mixed Forms as New Ways of “Writing” Culture

Recent Thai cinematic revival in the wake of the economic crash of 1997 has prompted the declaration of an emergent Thai “New Wave” from the international cinephile community. One of the indisputable vanguards of this group of directors is Apichatpong Weerasethakul, whose 2004 film, *Tropical Malady*, in winning the “Jury Prize” at the Cannes film festival, has probably done more for amplifying the international profile of art films coming out of Thailand than anything else to date. Additionally, splitting his time between small experimental films and features, Apichatpong has helped spearhead an experimental film and video culture emerging in the shadows of mainstream and art film industry successes in Thailand. It is not hard to find evidence to the extent of his fresh renown and the variety of critical accolades, not to mention an unusually strong interest in the artist’s cultural identity. One of the central problems motivating this paper originates from this wild-fire reception milieu — to formulate a response to one of the most frequent comments made about Apichatpong’s films in myriad internet reports, popular periodicals, blogs, and academic journals: that his films “defy categorization.” This is another way of suggesting that Apichatpong’s films require new methods of “reading” or interpretive frameworks.

One of the central tenets throughout the thesis will be to propose that the fundamental character of these films lies in their design as experimental “writings” intended to explore and problematize the incursion of new cultural knowledge upon older, ancient, even primitive ways of knowing. Explorations of alternative forms of cultural knowledge appear differently in each film, but this thesis suggests that the three major features under
examination here are productively viewed as enacting juxtapositions between contemporary and traditional forms of knowledge.

A less intelligible though wholly sensuous style has encouraged the undertaking of numerous interviews with the director, evidently in the hope of gleaning an appreciable method to this filmic madness, perhaps since it feels almost unnatural to superimpose an external critical interpretive framework over such original or “new” pieces. Additionally, the three films considered here are exceptional in their implications for viewer interpretation in the process of making the film one’s own, so to speak. Four feature films into this nascent cinematic oeuvre reveals some decided thematic preoccupations, as well as a directorial style fundamentally organized around personal instincts as an act of critical subversion of hegemonic narrative conventions. (The production company he founded is fittingly named “Kick The Machine”). Apichatpong’s work is also commonly characterized by its formal blurring of fiction and non-fiction modes. The films strike a delicate balance between presenting a documentarian’s view of Thai rural and village cultural spectacle without quite becoming full-fledged documentaries, and “fictional” premises without the films becoming wholly fictional narrative features. And yet somehow each mode would be anemic without the other given the unique manner in which the films conflate them.

A goal throughout will be to explore the ways in which Apichatpong’s films explode or blur the boundaries of the art film and documentary film modes, and in particular the manner in which each film engages ethnographic problematics, or an ethnographic paradigm, in which the artist is ethnographer as much as producer. This will be one level
of the analysis. Second –and necessarily tied to considerations of the films’ formal hybridity– will be to argue for a close consideration of these films as enacting anthropological concerns and concepts. In short, the extent to which anthropological aspects, explorations, dichotomies, problems, visions, and so on, constitute these films, strongly suggests a critical inroad for their reading, as well as an appropriate means for locating them within generic and discursive interstices.

Chapter one looks at Apichatpong’s first feature film, *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000), inspired by the Surrealist game, the “exquisite corpse.” *Mysterious Object* enacts a collective storytelling project by traveling around Thailand and soliciting story fragments from locals along the way. *Mysterious Object* is the most explicitly documentary in origin of the three films, yet also the most self-conscious about contesting the neat lines traditionally drawn between fiction and non-fiction. Inspired formally on the one hand by a European avant-garde tradition, the film is strongly inflected with contemporary non-fiction issues common to third world ethnographic projects. A central theme in *Mysterious* is the celebration and exploration of local knowledge, local narratives, and local unity amidst the threat of economic development in traditionally subsistent and culturally insular locales defined sketchily as the outlying areas of Thailand (i.e., rural and village areas, not Bangkok –the cosmopolitan capital). Furthermore, *Mysterious* might be understood as a form of “direct theory,” problematizing the questions of “voice, authority, and authorship” which are central to the widely acknowledged “crisis of representation” in anthropology, and in particular ethnographic film practice (Marcus and Fischer 8-10). This is closely connected to what
Jay Ruby understands as the negotiations of “speaking for, speaking about, speaking with, speaking alongside” in ethnographic practice (Ruby 196). Chapter one will consider these problematics in relation to the film’s representation of the rural and village areas as an ideologically loaded ethnographic site.

Chapter two considers Apichatpong’s second feature film, Blissfully Yours (2002). Blissfully offers a more conventional fictional narrative than Mysterious, though the film still maintains a subtle form of documentary realism through a loose, real-time style, a detached, extreme long-take and long-shot aesthetic, and the use of “social actors” (i.e. non-actors, as in Mysterious) (Nichols 42). Blissfully enacts a structural dialectic similar to Mysterious, though to a somewhat different end. The film is structurally bifurcated through the conspicuous placement of credits nearly half way into its duration as the characters drive from an industrially developed area to the border wilderness between Thailand and Burma, setting up a society/nature or town/country dialectic in which the characters are symbolically inscribed. Blissfully Yours acts out the familiar concept of “liminality” found in anthropological studies of people in transition —those “betwixt and between”— commonly associated with ritual rites of passage. This is most explicitly configured through the character of Min, a dispossessed illegal Burmese immigrant, but it is present on a number of other levels as well, such as the symbolic setting of the border wilderness in-between nations and culture. An important assertion of this chapter will be that the film suggests a primitive submission to the senses and a return to nature as a means to the cessation of suffering associated with the oppressive and marginalizing forces of society. Like Mysterious Object and Tropical Malady, Blissfully Yours suggests
the value of a traditional form of knowledge to be found in the personal re-integration with nature, evoking a close affinity with certain Buddhist ideals, but also engaging a “primitivist fantasy” (Foster 175) and presenting a distinctly “cultural style” for international consumption.

Chapter three will consider Apichatpong’s fourth feature film, *Tropical Malady* (2004). *Tropical* presents a two-part narrative structure similar to that of *Blissfully Yours*, but with a much more violent narrative rupture. This might on some level indicate the evolution in Apichatpong’s anthropological cinematic outlook by pushing the society/nature dialectic to a logical extreme. The first part depicts the romantic (fore)play of a soldier from a village and a peasant boy. Their romantic development ends when the screen goes black for a cinematic eternity, and then re-opens with a different story set in the jungle with no dialogue of a soldier hunting a shaman trapped in a tiger. A discourse on shamanism and animism is a subset of cultural anthropology that has found its way into countless indigenous ethnographies. In an age of globalization, it is often asserted as a form of local indigenous knowledge reclaimed or appropriated in contention with the acculturating forces of global economic development (See Vitebsky, as one example). This chapter will also suggest that *Tropical* should be viewed as a case of “new age” appropriation of tradition (in the form of a shamanistic worldview), one example of how local tradition and globalized worldviews may be reconciled and reformulated in light of each other. But as with the other films, *Tropical* engages in a “primitivist fantasy” while simultaneously implicating an “other” “interpretive community” (a term coined by
Stanley Fish) abroad, and thus engaging in the problematics of how ethnographic meaning is defined within cross-cultural reception.

Chapter four examines how each of the films engages with the ethnographic discourse of “othering.” Interpretations from the previous chapters are considered in relation to questions of how ethnographic meaning is made differently in foreign reception contexts. The central purpose of this chapter is, on the one hand, to classify these films within an ethnographic paradigm with special regard for questions of the degree and kind of “ethnographicness,” and the notion of “the artist as ethnographer” as it may be articulated within the web of producer-text-reader relations. Another central purpose is to suggest that an important factor overlooked when considering these films’ critical success abroad is the communication of the “primitivist fantasy,” or more generally, the communication of one culture for another, itself a fundamental feature in institutional definitions of ethnography. The intent is not to undermine the critical validity and appreciation of these films, but to reveal a discursive web in which they are situated. This chapter also describes how Apichatpong’s cinema stands somewhere outside of conventional (disciplinary) ethnographic practice, falling rather in the realm of ethnographic “provocation” in the terms of an ethnographic “crisis in representation” which had called for alternatives to the colonialist ways of “writing culture.” As such, the films under discussion here are treated as a form of “quasi-anthropological” (Foster 171-85) cinema generating experimental ethnographic provocations –secondary ethnographic expressions apart from the confines of disciplinary ethnographic practice.
Finally, on the most immediate personal level this interpretive project is inspired by the sensuous quality and thematics of these films, which are all the more pronounced by a designed limiting of easy intelligibility. They are deceptively simple in their meaning as an appeal to the senses, and yet allusive through the same means. In short, they are mysterious and often beautiful objects of knowledge that demand from the viewer/reader an extraordinary form of personal, interpretive activity. The objective of the interpretative actions taken in the subsequent chapters is in part to respond to the films’ cues, but then drawing from this more generally to theorize how the films implicate a reader’s subjectivity in direct relation to ethnographic discourse and the problematics of cross-cultural reading politics. Taken altogether, the films articulate the blurring of disciplinary and formal boundaries between cinematic practice and the ethnographic paradigm in anthropology.
Chapter 1: Mysterious Object At Noon: Experimental Evocations of Rural Thai Knowledge in an Age of Globalization

It’s a rare thing, these days or any other, for an award-winning film not to have a credited “director.” Apichatpong Weerasethakul does not take credit for directing Mysterious Object at Noon, only for conceiving and editing it, and the same goes for his other award-winning films. This point is especially significant when considering Mysterious Object, since it is inspired by the Surrealist game, “exquisite corpse,” and is by structural design actively dispersing authorship amongst the film’s social actors. The “exquisite corpse” is essentially a method for producing a textual or visual collage in which participants each contribute pieces or fragments that cumulatively generate a “whole” or finished work. The written version is said to be inspired from a parlor game in which members are given the first word to a sentence and from this they must complete the sentence, and then introduce the next sentence for another participant to complete. Apichatpong transfers this experimental method to film in order to evoke the problematics of representing cultural knowledge embodied in the cultural “other” by exploring the complicities of fiction and non-fiction, fact and fantasy.

Mysterious Object is its own blend of observational documentary footage interspersed with verité style enactments of a story “written” by social actors. The film’s significance as an exercise in evoking the idea of Thai knowledge is dependent on a blurring of fiction and non-fiction. A story (it could have been any) starts arbitrarily from the imaginings of a street vendor, and then it continues to grow from the contributions of each new social actor (or actors) as it is passed along by Apichatpong and his crew. Mysterious Object
documents a seemingly arbitrary journey around the periphery of Thailand in the search for fictional fragments contributing to an ongoing, collective storytelling project. Story fragments are then enacted beside the “real” cultural milieu from which they originate. Apichatpong claims in an interview that the last frame of the film was determined when the camera stopped working, and even more provocatively, he claims that the film is about “nothing at all.” Not surprisingly, *Mysterious Object* is even more rife with hermeneutic potential for its formal effacing of (some)thing-ness. *Mysterious Object* does, as Apichatpong suggests, become more about the process of finding and telling stories than the stories themselves.

This chapter will consider several linked issues generated by the film: First, as Apichatpong tries not “to speak for” local Thai villagers –allowing them “to speak for themselves” by deploying the “exquisite corpse” form– he evokes the problematics of the much discussed “crisis in representation” in anthropology and ethnographic film practice. Through Apichatpong’s formal attempts at subverting a singular authorial agent or “voice,” *Mysterious Object* can fruitfully be treated as an alternative or experimental ethnographic film exercise. Second, as Apichatpong tries to stimulate a collective narration and generate a formal statement of local, indigenous Thai knowledge, he evokes a discourse on rural Thai identity in relation to Thai national identity in the age of globalization. The linking of collectively generated (i.e. democratic) cultural knowledge and imagination to a specific cultural demographic –the working class, merchants, and peasants at the margins outside of Bangkok and the countryside– reinforces the sense of *Mysterious Object* as a project concerned with the lives and cultures of those typical to
ethnographic inquiry. And third, as a film ostensibly intended for both Thai and non-Thai (and non-Thai specialist) audiences, if *Mysterious Object* does represent an aesthetic of resistance to the imposition of a global economy on traditional Thai culture, as well as subversion of the problematic tropes of ethnographic representation, then how effective can it be given its predominately western cinephile reception register? This third aspect might be understood as a subset of ethnographic discourse that seeks to understand issues of ethnographic film spectatorship, in particular dealing with questions pertaining to cross-cultural interpretation. Problems in the link between spectatorship and ethnographic meaning (i.e. “cultural knowledge”) will be discussed briefly here, but revisited again in general terms for all three of the films in chapter four. Finally, one of the overarching suggestions this chapter will make about *Mysterious Object*, as well as the interpretations in the subsequent chapters, is that Apichatpong’s cinema is an attempt at generating cultural representations which –centrally through each film’s way of blending fiction and non-fiction– call attention to the disparities between authentic and synthetic notions of Thai knowledge and their link to cinematic representation.

**Authorial Corpse, Exquisite Representations**

*Mysterious Object* opens with an intertitle “once upon a time”, instantly evoking a generic awareness of fictional forms, but then proceeds with an observational documentary eye. The opening shot is from the vantage point inside a car as it leaves an unnamed urban center, moving away from sky-rises and the beltway to small town and village street level. Apichatpong solicits the film’s fictional “seed” from a woman selling
fish sauce out of a truck. After we briefly hear her own “real” story (or so we infer from her tears) about being sold by her father as a teenage girl, Apichatpong asks: “Do you have any other stories to tell us? It can be real or fiction.” The film’s examination of the threshold between fiction and non-fiction is immediately foregrounded. The woman’s personal story evokes the tradition in ethnographic film and documentary of representing the culturally marginal, in particular here the disenfranchisement of women. In this initial “interview” we are introduced to our social demographic –peasant and working class poor of the rural villages and countryside in the periphery of Bangkok– but then almost immediately we are released from the perspective of viewing their “real” problems as Apichatpong solicits fictional imaginings from them. In casting aside real-life problems for something closer to real-life subconsciousness, Mysterious Object announces its concern with evoking a demographic site of consciousness, aura, or knowledge. Later on in the chapter we will consider how this demographic site is commonly ascribed as a locus of Thai authenticity and tradition in an age where the rapid advances of a global economy jeopardize the integrity of traditional knowledge.

The first woman wipes her tears, and then imagines the story of a crippled boy who is cared for by a nurse called Dogfahr (entitled “Dogfahr in The Devil’s Hand”). This nurse brings photos and other things from the outside world to entertain the crippled boy. In this scene, the din of the village street market where the woman (as “writer”) sells fish sauce serves as the ambient backdrop for the first enacted segment. The non-fictional observational ambience overlaps in the crosscutting between documentary and fiction. This formal blurring is a definitive quality throughout Mysterious Object. The crippled
boy asks his teacher, “What did you see in the outside world today?” The next image observes the teacher at a market bartering over the price of vegetables. In this way, the film foregrounds the conflating of fictional and non-fictional modes, but additionally, sets up a metaphorical fiction to non-fiction cross-cutting of a space of synthetic cultural experience (the boy who learns about the outside world by putting together gathered pieces brought in), and one of cultural authenticity, directly experienced.

The commencement of each new narrative fragment is punctuated by a travel sequence viewed from the vantage points of autos and trains. At each new site, the inchoate story is told to another person who participates by imagining the next link in a narrative chain. The range of participants suggests a cross-section of the rural and village Thai subaltern, such as: an elderly peasant woman, a village performance troupe, two teenage boys, two deaf-mute girls, a group of young schoolchildren, etc. It goes on like this from village to village, as the crew travels by train and truck, scouting out locals to build a narrative chain piece by disparate piece. Interspersed with the piecemeal storytelling is an enactment of it by non-actors (i.e. social actors). The observational footage of the social storytellers, or “writers,” is often overlapped with the fictional enactments, visually and acoustically, so that there is a formal blurring of fiction and non-fiction modes where the sounds and spectacles of the tellers’ “real” lives intermingles with the fictional enactment of their stories. This blurring might be greater to the western spectator who misses the colloquial nuance necessary to distinguish actor from non-actor. Furthermore, there is an absence of formal or stylistic cues demarcating documentary from fictional scenes. A uniform technical aesthetic throughout underlies the marriage
between the documentary and the “Dogfahr” fiction told within: gritty 16 mm black and white stock, imperfect and high contrast exposures at both ends of the spectrum, boom mikes popping into the frame, and so on. And yet, we know what “is” the fiction since we first hear it coming from the mouths of the found “writers,” the social participants.

The fictional space within (of Dogfahr and the boy) is in many respects less the carrier of the film’s “message” (as was suggested in this chapter’s introduction) than the story of these people contributing to its becoming. In short, the process of “writing” is in the end more significant than the story itself. It is in this sense that Apichatpong didn’t “direct” or “author” the film, the participants did. The important inversion of tradition to recognize here is that Apichatpong is, in some sense, allowing himself to be “used” so that they, the participants, can all “write” a story, rather than the filmmaker “using” the participant to make an argument, or explore some ethnographic topic. As a formal experiment, or what may be called a cinematic exercise, Mysterious Object’s meaning lies in its methodological self-consciousness. This is more fully illuminated when considered in relation to anthropology’s “crisis in representation.”

**Experimental Form and the “Crisis in Representation”**

Anthropologists have long been sorting through a so-called “crisis in representation” in which the central motivating question appears to be, is this text (visual or written) a vehicle for cultural domination (Marcus and Fischer 8-12)? How and how not? This crisis has resulted in a great deal of experimentation within the discipline of anthropology and ethnographic film, mostly as attempts at overcoming the many pitfalls associated with the
ideals of scientific anthropology. Visual anthropology—in particular ethnographic film and video—stands as one of the most robust areas in challenging the traditional, colonialist inscriptions found in cross-cultural representation in anthropology. Catherine Russell argues that the merging of experimental and avant-garde aesthetics with the ethnographic tradition of cultural representation has resulted in alternatives that can “circumvent the empiricism and objectivity conventionally linked to ethnography.” Russell describes this as “a methodological incursion of aesthetics on cultural representation, a collision of social theory and formal experimentation” and the “dissolution of disciplinary boundaries” (11).

Peter Crawford and Bill Nichols also address this crisis in ethnographic film practice. Crawford’s essay, “Film as Discourse: The Invention of Anthropological Realities” (1992), likens ethnographic film to written anthropological discourse, delineating three overlapping modes of ethnographic film practice in representing a given cultural subject: “the-fly-on-the-wall,” “the-fly-in-the-soup,” and “the-fly-in-the-I” mode (Crawford 74). *Mysterious Object* oscillates between all three of these modes on some level, though most significantly calls attention to its working in the third mode, “the-fly-in-the-I,” what Crawford also labels the “evocative” mode (67). In *Mysterious Object* the camera style is quite often “on-the-wall,” aloof, effacing expressivity (itself a form of expressivity), observational, purporting the guise of objectivity. Then periodically we are reflexively “in-the-soup” with the filmmakers, such as when we hear Apichatpong ask a question, or when a crew member walks into the frame, or when the camera pans to reveal an artificial lighting setup and sound equipment. But the “exquisite corpse” narrative model
delimiting traditional authorship most directly implicates negotiations of “the fly-in-the
(Western) I” – the “evocative” mode, as opposed the “perspicuous” or “experiential.”

The perspicuous and experiential modes (fly-on-the-wall and fly-in-the-soup respectively) of ethnographic film both subscribe to a notion of mimetic representation in which concepts such as authenticity, truth, contextualization, and meaning are still regarded as pertinent and desirable. . . . The evocative alternative to filmic representation may be described as the-fly-in-the-I, in which the camera is used to comment on and “deconstruct” western conventions of representing other cultures. It is pure critique of ‘I’ of the Western eye. It exaggerates reflexivity to an extent where the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction no longer exist. (78-79)

*Mysterious Object* has internalized this critical current about upending traditional ethnographic film representation. Nichols’ discussion of ethnographic film similarly echoes the shift from direct representation to “evocation” as an alternative to traditional modes of representing the cultural “other.” For Nichols, ethnographic film is about knowledge and is inseparable from questions of power, and he proposes that the evocative mode be understood as an alternative way in which to move beyond many of the problems of traditional ethnography.

The challenge is to listen to what unembalmed, uncontained, self-representing others have to say; to evoke the give and take of conversation that matters as crucially to the one as to the other rather than represent, explain, describe or interpret others that matter very little to anyone but ourselves. (228)

This chapter contends that *Mysterious Object* operates very much in the evocative mode.

In what ways then are the “actors” in *Mysterious Object* “unembalmed, uncontained, self-representing?” How does this produce a “give and take of conversation” more than “explanation, description and interpretation?” How does it critique the “I of the western
eye?” Ultimately, how does *Mysterious Object* avoid representing the Thai “other” in a fashion based on informing another “other,” namely, us, the viewers?

The first reaction to these questions is to point to Apichatpong as a native of rural, northern Thailand. In ethnographic terms, the camera has been “handed over” to the locals so they may “speak for themselves” (Russell 11). But this view becomes problematic when you consider that Apichatpong studied film and video making at the Art Institute of Chicago after completing an architecture degree in Thailand, and that he is the son of doctors, and thus arguably both in terms of education and socioeconomic privilege different from those he is, if not quite representing, at least evoking material from. Additionally, *Mysterious Object* was funded largely by European donors, and Apichatpong is admittedly influenced by European artistic idioms and artists such as Andy Warhol, Bruce Bailie, Marcel Duchamp, and others. His work is decidedly of a transnational sensibility and influence. While we sense a western aesthete, intelligentsia, or cinephile target audience, *Mysterious Object* is also clearly aimed at giving voice to an under-represented Thai demographic, activating a sort of Thai telling of itself in some sense. Thus it is hard to locate Apichatpong as wholly insider or outsider precisely in regard to his origins, education, and influences. Consequently the provenance of *Mysterious Object* is similarly contested. If we view him as an outsider on the grounds given above, then his relationship to his Thai subjects is similar to the western anthropologist traveling to a foreign land, immersing him or herself culturally, then representing foreign cultural knowledge for a readership elsewhere. However, when viewed as local, or indigenous, he is attempting to produce something subversive for the
empowerment of his own people. And yet, granting the cultural incursions of westernization, economic development, and cosmopolitanism (i.e. globalization), then the entire notion of national or cultural authenticity is already thrown into question. This problematic is best understood as an oscillation between cultural “becoming” and “othering,” and is something which is finally irresolvable (Crawford 69) if highly revealing and pertinent to understanding the web of “writing-text-reading” (Banks 127) which these films are concerned with challenging. It’s hard not to ask here, though, as Marcus Banks does, “why was the film made?” “Who was it made for?” And, “What can it be used for?” (117). We will return to these questions again in chapter four, but in the meantime, *Mysterious Object*’s terms of representation still need to be attended to.

Beyond conceiving a cinematic version of the “exquisite corpse” in rural Thailand, Apichatpong is functionally not much more than a coordinator and facilitator for a project of collective storytelling. The experimental authorship of the text is also its subject. Joe provided the authoring intent, but not the content, or event. *Mysterious Object*’s content and progression was determined by the Thai persons’ imagining what they will. The only guidance, shaping, or context for participants is in what the previous participants had contributed. From there it is up to them to decide where the story should go next. And indeed, it yields some interesting results. It is fruitful to return to the story again: Dogfahr (the nurse) unexpectedly falls dead. A “mysterious object” falls from the sky but also rolls out of Dogfahr’s apron. Out of the object arises a strange boy. This boy appears to help the cripple stow a passed-out Dogfahr in a closet. But then Dogfahr recovers and is taken away by a man. Finally, the strange boy is eaten by three tigers. The term “end” is
inappropriate in this case. Nothing is solved, resolved, or revealed by the story of Dogfahr, as has traditionally been the case in ethnographic film. For the spectator, the knowledge derived is more intangible, and “we” (I’m speaking for the western audience) are not allowed to take much in the way of specific cultural knowledge or possess some new sense of ourselves in relation to “them.” The reward comes in appreciating the unique will and conception of the project and its local drive, but not so much in its conveyance of particular local information beyond what is gleaned from the quotidian observational footage.

From this basis we may say that the participants are not “embalmed” by the traditional ethnographic quest for knowledge and meaning vis à vis explaining an “Other” since they are producing their own stories, rather than in response to the critical perspective of some observer/participant hoping to glean some authentic truths of Thailand and Thainess. If Apichatpong does seek some knowledge it is not to “explain, describe or interpret” Thailand to an outsider, but rather, to the contrary he is setting in motion an epistemological exercise that finally yields, if anything, a knowledge-statement about knowledge. While one might gather some oblique knowledge of Thailand, some sense of a rural Thai idiom of stories and narrative, some sense of atmosphere and details from a verité but incidental mise-en-scène, this is ultimately not what Mysterious Object sets out to reveal. What it might reveal to a foreign audience is the manner in which we’ve become accustomed to receiving conclusive information about another culture from documentaries, usually for our own reference –for our cultural point of view.
The alternative ethnographic ideals of being “uncontained, self-represented,” all hinge on a tradition of representing the “Other” marked by various formal conventions deployed for placing distance between “us” and “them,” “here” and “there,” “self” and “other,” and necessarily implicating the unconscious mechanisms of power—the narrative structures of hierarchy implicating the terms of agency, control, and voice. We’ve seen this inscribed in traditional ethnographic films from the observational mode (Nanook, Night Mail) to the reflexive and verité turns (Chronicle of a Summer, Cora and Celso) brought on by the crisis of representation in anthropology still being played out through the postmodern evocations of Trinh T. Minha and others. Nichols characterizes the problematics of ethnography as resulting in the inevitable “negotiations over representation and self-representation” (67). Mysterious Object’s structural innovation is best viewed as methodological self-consciousness, a narrative reflexivity designed to evoke the problematics of cultural representation. Mysterious Object allows authorship—the inscription of a determining self—to cave in under collective agency, symbolic cooperation, through the volition of imagination and oral narratives. Nichols links the use of long takes and minimal editing to the “disguising” of agency and formal traces of a controlling gaze employed for the ideal of scientific objectivity, and while both of these techniques apply to the film, it has as much avowed itself fiction as nonfiction, and these conventions thus become operative as strong intertextual references to this fallen paradigm in active retreat here.

The “exquisite corpse” is an artistic concept and practice aimed at exposing the artistic potential of the unconscious. The unconscious is in a sense reproduced or depicted
through the syntax of disparate fragments of individuals’ consciousness, yielding an assemblage amounting to unconscious anti-logic. It follows then that applying this to the practice of ethnographic filmmaking will expose, at least in part, certain unconscious mechanisms. In this respect, what *Mysterious Object* is able to get beyond that so many traditional ethnographies have consciously or unconsciously incorporated are the western canons of story and narrative structure. Nichols explains:

The canonic story form in the west of an introduction to characters and setting, presentation of a disturbance or puzzle, a goal-oriented line of causally linked situations and event, followed by a resolution to the disturbance or solution to the puzzle recurs in ethnography as well as fiction. . . . The pervasiveness of this format in classic ethnography suggests it is not considered aesthetic at all but “natural,” despite evidence to the contrary. (72)

Nichols points to this phenomenon as a potential reason for why ethnographic form has taken so long in adopting the modernist narrative upheavals associated with collage and, for example, certain Surrealist and Dadaist notions which have come to be associated with postmodernism. *Mysterious Object* is engaged in just this sort of narrative upheaval, exposing the narrative constructedness inscribed in so many documentaries and ethnographies, revealing how narratives exist in negotiation between individual and collective, self and other, are dependent on perspective, something that arguably ought not be effaced or unacknowledged even in the interest of conveying knowledge. Nichols also relates the manner in which narrative canons result in a kind of “disembodied” knowledge. Nichols submits: “Ethnography affords knowledge passed from mind to mind, but not the knowledge that is (only) represented, which is *their* knowledge, embodied knowledge located *there*, in other bodies. The result is a viewing subject caught up in a desire for this oscillation between the strange and the familiar” (74). It is
this kind of theorizing about new modes of ethnographic practice that is expressed materially by *Mysterious Object*.

It becomes apparent that Apichatpong did not undertake this project in order to tell some particular story he had in mind (a fiction), or to make a specific argument (non-fiction), present a case, or to explore some specific Thai cultural problem or issue. The central object for Apichatpong was to be a catalyst for setting a story in motion that exists and progresses only through the embodied consciousness of its participants. The multiple authorship, the non-scripting, and the content of the film appear as the generation of the participants. However, I would like to contest the alternative ethnographic ideals of *Mysterious Object* described above, suggesting that when viewed as merely symbolic, an authoring consciousness returns and reveals a decided preoccupation with a particular ideological site for notions of Thai knowledge and authenticity: the rural village.

We can also view the subversion of the hierarchy of authority in representing culture as a conceptual or methodological ideal—as a symbolic gesture for promoting the continued negotiation of problems inherent in cultural representation through aesthetic experimentation combined with cultural knowledge that challenges hegemonic conventions. Indeed, it is hard to get out from under certain information. Apichatpong did conceive of *Mysterious Object*, presumably deciding where to “look” next for participants, and then controlled the final editorial process. So, as much as the film’s structure calls attention to his authority as actively diminished, we would be remiss to discount the framing and original impetus provided by his cultural awareness. While the authorship is uniquely multiple in *Mysterious Object*, there is still a fundamental
hierarchy in place in which he stands at the top. As evidence of this are certain preoccupations of subject matter (discussed earlier) that may be more evident to the Thai spectator or Thai specialist than to the foreigner. As a brief, but relevant aside, this harkens back to Freud’s famous criticism of Surrealism’s ideal of tapping the unconscious as a process for producing art, of which the “exquisite corpse” is another method. Freud suggested that Surrealists were still operating under the conscious ego, and allowing their work to be dictated by it, despite their attempts at a revolution in form and process by tapping into the unconscious. Apichatpong’s idea is to at least symbolically suggest the idea of representing a Thai unconscious. The graphic design of the DVD insert is striking testament to the notion of evoking a collective unconscious. The image is a blank profile of the back of a human head with the geographic outline of Thailand set in relief at the very center. So even though Apichatpong claims the film is about “nothing at all” (qtd. in Romers 42-43), except as a narrative experiment or exercise, there is evidence of conscious preoccupations of Thai-ness inscribed in the film, as much as they are symbolically delimited. Mysterious Object suggests the Thai unconscious through its experimental structure, but quite significantly, this symbolic unconscious is linked in the film directly to a rural and village demographic. It is hard to escape these as symbolic geographies to which Thai studies (including much anthropological field work) regularly attributes notions of authentic Thai-ness in the face of the acculturating forces of rural economic development. In short, Mysterious Object is a statement of Thai cultural knowledge (or aura) that is significantly assigned to
Thailand’s most contested sites of its own authenticity and tradition in the face of increasing cosmopolitanism and global economic development.

**Rural Thai as Thai, and the Discourse of Rural Development**

Since the early 1990s globalization has been a buzzword in Thai public life, scrutinized by people and groups from all political persuasions for its magical powers as well as its deleterious effects. It can also be argued that what is now called globalization is a form of cosmopolitanism with deep historical roots in Thailand.

Another kind of knowledge critical to debates about globalization before and after the crash was local knowledge. Communitarians, as well as globalizers, have been sensitive to the issue of what is threatened by globalization, and what is threatened most is local customs, local practices, local culture, even local knowledge. . . . The economic crisis of mid-1997 sharpened the sense of local loss. (Reynolds 8)

It’s curious that the apparently arbitrary beginning of the “Dogfahr” story presents the situation of a paraplegic boy unable to access knowledge of the outside world except through his nurse Dogfahr. This might conveniently be read as an allegory for the heated debates—“boxing matches” between “globalizers” and “communitarians”—over how Thailand ought to reconcile its traditional agrarian cultural status amidst rapid rural economic development, and after the economic crash of 1997, the “Age of the International Monetary fund (Yuk ai em ep)” (Reynolds 310). This section will first present a review of literature that considers rural Thailand, and in particular the Thai village, as a nexus for debates over the status and future of Thai identity. (The final section of this chapter then re-views *Mysterious Object* in light of this discourse, arguing that the film represents a symbolic gesture to local, rural Thai knowledge in an
increasingly global setting.) This discourse is common in development studies circles, and it is also necessarily imbricated with ethnographic studies since much of what motivates ethnographic projects is an awareness of vanishing—or, if not vanishing, at least under some degree of threat of cultural homogenization—indigenous and local culture and an attempt to preserve the knowledge they have to offer. This has often been called the “salvage paradigm” in ethnography (Russell 12), referring to the salvage of some object of cultural knowledge before it is eroded by development. *Mysterious Object* does not appear to concern itself with salvaging discrete aspects of Thai knowledge, but in generally evoking this as a contested site of knowledge.

Globalization in Thailand connotes much the same as it does for other developing nations—the expansion of capitalism into less developed regions. In Thailand it is easy to discuss this in terms of a center/periphery binary, corresponding to the urban center, Bangkok, and the rural village periphery. The rural Thai constitute the majority of the population, and they are also at the center of debates over the threat of “synthetic Thai” to “authentic Thai” culture (Bunrak 442 qtd. in Reynolds 312). Rural Thai, village culture in particular, is treated as a discursive container for authentic Thai-ness. Craig Reynolds presents certain conditions distinct to Thailand in negotiating the shifting cultural landscape. One was the promotion of the “consumption of Thainess” in the 90s boom period. Reynolds suggests that a “Siamization” of capitalism may have mitigated the sense of cultural damage incurred by creating the sense that economic development originated from within, rather than having been “imposed” from without (309). There was also, somewhat contrary to the last point, a perceptible ethos of desiring to be “un-
Thai,” insomuch as traditional Thainess connoted a lack of knowledge and resources to compete successfully in the global economy. Contrasting this on the “communitarian” side were various groups promoting the critical address of a growing “cultural crisis,” and advocating for the increased awareness of authentic Thai culture as a means to combat “the frantic pace of social and economic change” (312). The debate is divided along these lines, between the “identification to be globalized and un-Thai” and the identification to be “communitarian” and Thai, or as Reynolds puts it, “to remain comfortably within the ethno-ideology of Thainess, imagined as a harmonious community where familial and village values continue to prevail” (313).

Dr. Tienchai Wongchaisuwan completed a PhD in the United States and then returned to Thailand and initiated a series of books under the headings, “The Globalization Series” and “The Local Knowledge Series” (322), which have been highly critical of the negative impact of globalization on the local culture and knowledge. In general, there has been a widespread critical backlash ranging from the academy to journalism and popular outlets decrying the various threats associated with globalization on Thai culture. With reference to one volume of the series entitled, “Thailand in the Age of its Cultural Enslavement,” Reynolds summarizes:

. . . Thai society is becoming so thoroughly westernized that it’s losing its Thai identity. Thais are lured into accepting Western ways of life and culture. In the past two decades European (farang) ideals of male and female beauty have intruded, with Eurasian models replacing Thai models. Western pop music is overwhelming Thai pop music, and “farang” values are spreading at the expense of Thai values. . . . Western thought will come to replace the pre-existing thought of individual nationalities. Most of the world's humanity will think like the West. Western consciousness will be established through education, especially via the power of media that knows no borders. This will eradiccate a nation's thought to the point where "farang-ism" reigns throughout the world. (327)
In reaction to these sorts of sentiments, Reynolds describes a new conception of Thai identity that has been mobilized called *phum panya*, translated as “local knowledge, indigenous knowledge, native wisdom, local genius.” Reynolds claims *phum panya* “has a decidedly rural bias, and marks the growing divide between city and village.” And furthermore that “local knowledge is the main resource for the self-sufficient economy championed by public intellectuals sometimes referred to as ‘community economists’” – that in “the wake of the economic crisis, ‘community economics’ or ‘community culture’ holds out the promise of local solutions to the problems caused by globalization” (329).

Hirsch, drawing from the work of Apichat Thongyu, explains that “this discourse of village stresses the integrity of village culture, kinship and other social bonds, common spirits, traditional wisdom” (273). The Thai village stands as a powerful encoding of social space, all the more urgent to be understood when faced with powerful forces of change (McRae 170).

The question of cultural homogenization in Thailand, and the common proffering of notions of local knowledge as a source of authentic Thai culture, has lead to a heightened awareness of cultural incursions within these spaces. Many flatly contest these incursions in the rigid defense of traditional culture, while others attempt to disguise them as authentically Thai, resulting in what Bunrak Bunyakhetmala labels a “synthetic” versus an “authentic” Thai (qtd. in Reynolds 312). Reynolds sees an example of synthetic Thai in commercial ascriptions of Thainess to foreign products. He explains: “Banks, beer, paint, and fish sauce were all advertised in terms of their Thainess. So successful were these advertising campaigns at rooting consumer products in the local culture, that some
Thai shoppers could regard Lux Soap, Pepsi, and Coke as Thai rather than foreign” (311). Economic and industrial development in rural and village Thailand reached new highs in the 80’s and 90’s, and it is hard not to connote *Mysterious Object’s* experimental evocation of local knowledge to these sweeping changes in the cultural landscape in the years leading up to the film’s production. In general, the primary threat is the advance of a money economy into formerly subsistent communities. This has arguably been progressing since the end of WWII, and takes many forms, from the imposition of industrial profit farming to wholesale clearing of land for the development of civic works such as dams, artificial waterways, and roads (Smukarn 145 qtd. in McRae 167).

The strong evocation of the value of local knowledge then so commonly found in discourses of globalization and rural development may be understood as a defense against that which endangers it. Reynolds claims that “local knowledge is seen as key to empowerment of the disenfranchised and dispossessed and as fundamental to proposals for alternative development” (14). What is less clear, for the interests of this thesis, is how effective the expressions of local knowledge can ultimately be—in a variety of forms and contexts (say, as expressed by an experimental film, for example)—in empowering the disenfranchised and as resistance to the forces of globalization. On the whole, forces of development and globalization have altered the cultural composition of villages through the spread of information, capital, and commodities. In particular, economic development has had deleterious effects on the natural environment. But as this section has attempted to articulate, the potential “pollution” and degradation of local cultural
tradition by globalization is less quantifiable than environmental damage, but no less an important site of debate over the status of Thai identity in a period of rapid change.

**Circulating Experimental Ethnographic Knowledge**

In *Mysterious Object* local knowledge exists on two significant levels: First, in the non-fictional, observational style exposition of peoples’ public and private milieu; and second, local knowledge is symbolically rendered in the stuff of the social actors’ imaginings or “writings” for the “Dogfahr” fiction. But as suggested earlier, the formal blurring of the non-fiction with the fiction is a symbolic suggestion of the conflicted status of notions of authentic Thainess; that local knowledge is simultaneously natural and socially constructed (or synthetic). Or put another way, the use of an observational documentary mode implicates the authentic, while the use of fictional enactments in the same mode implicates the counterfeit, and the blurring of these two modes within the film throws the contested nature of the social actors’ cultural knowledge and identity into relief. Another simple way of expressing the dynamic of the film’s blurring of modes is in what was a fundamental motive behind the Surrealist interest in exploring the unconscious: to explode the boundaries between art and life (Rees 41). The exchange between Apichatpong and the film’s first social participant announces this project. After recounting how as a child she was sold by her father, the woman wipes away her tears and proceeds to tell us the beginning of a made-up story. The film’s syntax at this moment generates an associative link between this woman’s personal historical trauma and the story she tells. The suggestion of “real” personal loss is paralleled with a story of
fictional loss—the crippled boy confined to a wheelchair, who is also defined by his loss or “lack,” both physical and epistemological in his insulation from the outside world. On another level, the syntax between fact and fiction at this moment calls attention to the transcription of knowledge from one medium to another—from oral to filmic. The idea of rural cultural knowledge at this late stage of industrial development and cultural cosmopolitanism is itself a kind of “mysterious object”—a discursive container erected to promote the critical awareness of the threats upon old ways of knowing. The idea of local knowledge is a central feature of what has been referred to as the “salvage paradigm” motivating much of ethnographic practice. *Mysterious Object* seems to suggest that while the idea of authentic local knowledge is easy enough, the charting of it is more complicated. This idea of cultural knowledge and tradition returns again in different forms in the subsequent chapters. In the case of *Mysterious Object*, this chapter suggests that the film promotes both a general awareness of the possibility of cultural knowledge—siting it to one of the most contested areas (the rural village) understood as a locus of Thai values— as well as the necessity of formulating new means of understanding it and new means of producing it—as in this experimental storytelling project. *Mysterious Object* is also strongly implicating the ethnographic ideal that local knowledge is embodied in the individual, and perhaps even that this authenticity is as near to fiction as it is to fact. And, finally, *Mysterious Object* suggests that the very idea of local knowledge or cultural authenticity is easily appropriated and abused by serving other interests, like selling Lux Soap.
Chapter 2: *Blissfully Yours*: Liminal Style as a Cultural Style and Ideological Critique

Apichatpong’s second feature film, *Blissfully Yours* (2002), reflects a concern for examining issues of cultural knowledge and its marginalization in Thailand similar to those expressed in *Mysterious Object*. *Blissfully Yours* is less of a formal experiment than *Mysterious*, yet no less a subversion of dominant cinematic cultural representation. The film enacts its cultural commentary more in line with the social realist tradition in film history in a manner that depends on the straddling of non-fiction and fiction modes, a central feature of Apichatpong’s cinema. *Mysterious Object* evoked the critical space exposed by exploding fact and fiction within a contested area of cultural knowledge, a place characterized by the conflict of local versus global ways of knowing. *Blissfully Yours* reflects a critical-cultural awareness similar to *Mysterious Object* and *Tropical Malady* of the interplay between development and tradition suggesting a clear national metaphor of “return to the country” (Knee 121) during a time of cultural transformation and continued national evaluation. In this case the “return to the country” is set within a society/nature dialectic, depicting the wilderness as a source of knowledge in the form of pleasure and refuge from the deleterious forces of society.

*Blissfully Yours* consciously observes (in documentary fashion) and loosely narrates (in a fictional fashion) a liminal period in the intertwined lives of three people in a moment of retreat from society. Min, Roong, and Orn leave behind their troubled social milieu filled with ascriptions of suffering and marginalization to find blissful escape in the sacred geography of mountains, jungle, and rivers in the northern border wilderness.
between Thailand and Burma. The film formally constructs a situation of human immersion in the wilderness, suggesting the value of return to primitive or ancient ways of knowing through submission to the senses and basic sexual pleasures. This highly sensual return to nature derives its force and meaning from an overall narrative structure enacting a society/nature dialectic (or nature/culture dichotomy), which also, quite crucially, fits in with similar thematics in Apichatpong’s other features discussed here of local knowledge and tradition in the face of rapid economic development in the margins of Thailand. Nature is aligned with tradition as an escape from hegemonic culture.

This chapter will utilize Victor Turner’s descriptive concept of “liminality” to help articulate how liminal thematics are matched (and enacted) by a liminal film style, and how this potentially results in the establishment of (viewer) subject-positions which function as part of a larger ideological critique made by the film. This critique is closely tied to the nature/culture dichotomy enacted by the unconventional placement of the film’s credit sequence nearly mid-way through the film as the characters are in transit from a social landscape to a wilderness landscape. The rupture made by the film’s credit placement somewhere in the middle (connoting in-between-ness, as we will see, essential to the concept of liminality) calls attention to the dominant western narrative conventions (and also a general world-view) signifying cultural notions of closure and narrative causality.

**Border Crossings and Liminal Subjects**
The notion of liminality provides a powerful descriptive concept for understanding the mysteries of *Blissfully Yours*. Just as ethnographic film problematics as a subset of the larger discipline of anthropology are central to understanding the critical-cultural implications of *Mysterious Object*, liminality, another prominent descriptive concept in anthropology, announces its presence in producing meaning in *Blissfully Yours*. First it is necessary to define the concept and its features.

The prominence of liminality as a descriptive concept in anthropology derives centrally from the work of anthropologist Victor Turner. In the 1974 essay “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage,” Turner proposes some general conditions characterizing those “‘betwixt and between’ phases of life or states of consciousness which possess an initiate during a life-crisis ritual and plunges him or her into an interstitial realm where the rules and values of everyday life cease to apply, where the structure of normal life gives way to the anti-structure of initiatory experience.” Building off of Turner, Lee Drummond claims that “the critical factors in liminality are movement and interstitiality within some specifiable domain of symbolic or semiotic space” (75). Turner’s work was an elaboration of Arnold Van Gennep’s original conception of “the liminal phase” in *rites de passage*, defined as “rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position, and age” (qtd. in Drummond 79). The rites of passage are marked by three phases:

Separation, margin, and aggregation. The first phase (of separation) comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a “state”), or from both. During the intervening “liminal” period, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the “passenger”) are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the coming attributes of the coming state. In the
third phase (reaggregation or reincorporation), the passage is consummated. (Turner 79)

Turner continues to outline some of the common symbolic marks of liminal entities, those he labels “threshold people.”

Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, or ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon. . . . Liminal entities, such as neophytes in initiation of puberty rites, may be represented as possessing nothing. They may be disguised as monsters, wear only a strip of clothing, or even go naked to demonstrate that they have no status, property . . . It is as if they are being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to enable to cope with their new station in life. (80)

It is first necessary to outline the story briefly before looking closer at the liminal thematics and characterizations. Min is a Burmese immigrant living in industrial Thailand with his girlfriend Roong. He left a wife and child in Burma for the promise of better pay in Thailand. The other central character is Orn, a middle aged woman who rents a room to Roong and helps her take care of Min while she works at a factory painting Disney figurines. The relationship between Min and Roong is central, but in many ways Min’s character carries the most symbolic significance. As an illegal alien, he is unable to find work. He doesn’t speak the language and he suffers from a skin rash acquired when he was forced to hide from authorities. Min and Roong leave town together for an afternoon in the jungle. Unbeknownst to them, Orn meets her illicit lover nearby, but is then stranded as her partner mysteriously runs off as their motorbike is stolen. Orn eventually finds her way through the jungle to Min and Roong.
Blissfully Yours suggests the approximate geographical border between Thailand and Burma as a metaphor for the characters’ own states of personal intermediacy. Min states in one of only a few voice-overs that he is “preparing to go to a new country,” suggesting his present state of transition at the precise moment he is literally in a geographic in-between. The flaking and deterioration of his skin is also a symbolic border tension. And the characters’ merging with nature, discussed in more detail further on, is also evocative of the boundaries between old and new ways of being. The film’s final shot caps the many border motifs throughout, the camera lingering over Orn almost looking to capture authentically the moments in which one descends from a conscious into a dream state.

The personal becomes an allegory for the political when we consider Min’s flaking skin in light of this border motif. The deterioration of his body’s physical boundary is symbolic of the deleterious effects of national boundaries on his person through dispossession and alienation. His skin is a symbolic motif mirroring the human dissolution of national boundaries, and the national boundaries’ dissolution of humans. A great deal of attention is given to the care and nurturing of Min’s skin by Orn and Roong. In one especially poignant scene towards the end, they hold Min in the river, floating on his back, and peel the dead skin off his body. Min closes his eyes and his inner monologue comes in briefly as voice-over, but soon fades out to the ambient sounds of nature (providing no sense of completion), as if his thoughts have just washed down the stream with his skin. The fade-out of Min’s voice-over to the ambient sounds of jungle and water indicate the importance not so much of representing what Min is actually thinking, but instead of depicting the interpenetrations of the internal and external,
ascribed here more broadly within the dialectic of the social and the natural. What’s most important at this moment is not the content of Min’s thoughts so much as our awareness of his literal and symbolic merging with nature, and the importance of recognizing this natural fluidity between people despite differences in cultural identity. It connotes a value for submitting to the senses holistically as a means to knowledge, healing, and personal transformation over and against the contemporary values prescribed within a social context. Furthermore, this scene has an indisputably ritualistic quality to it, as in a baptism, further suggesting the status of Min as liminal entity in the midst of some greater rite of passage.

Min is the most symbolically liminal of the three – the most obviously a “threshold” person. While they are all in a symbolically liminal space, Min bears the most marks of being a liminal entity. Min is undocumented, has no position, and no voice. He is “betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law” (Turner 80). He is associated with the wilderness directly through his national and ethnic origins. His skin ailment associates him with death and decay. He is visually depicted as possessing nothing, literally reduced to wearing only his underwear because his skin bothers him too much. Min is being literally “ground down” to be “fashioned anew” as his skin deteriorates. And he is symbolically “ground down” as the film constructs a visual and acoustic immersion of the characters in the wild. The wilderness ambience becomes such a strong character as to suggest the characters’ spiritual subordination to it. The next section will suggest how Blissfully Yours’ style can be seen as matching the liminal thematics of place and character. I have already described in places the manner in which
the film suggests on the overall narrative level a society/nature dichotomy, and in places how the film produces a form suggesting the submission to the natural world. I would like to look at this more closely and furthermore propose how this synergy of form and content (separated for descriptive purposes, as much as analysis resists this) may be understood as a cultural style critical of hegemonic forms of representation, and forms of knowledge.

**Liminal Style as a Cultural Style and Ideological Critique**

The approximation of a real-time narrative arc—the duration spanning an afternoon—places the characters exclusively in their own very personal, momentary crises, but most crucially, it manages to do so without compelling in the viewer a desire to know details of what came before and what lies ahead of this transitional moment. This is accomplished partly by eliminating any semblance of conventional narrative conflict, thus rendering the trope of conclusion moot, and adding to the sense that this is the depiction of spaces in-between, both in narrative themes and style. This is produced through an observational documentary style in which the sensuality of images takes precedence over narrative drive.

Superimposing a loose definition of rites of passage over the characters helps frame the moment represented in their lives as liminal. *Blissfully Yours* can be understood, along the lines of Turner’s concept, to depict the period of “margin”—the liminal period—but not the (past) “separation” or (future) “aggregation.” In other words, we don’t witness the characters’ traumatic incidents, nor do we attend to any final resolution or return to
structured normalcy, only the intermediary process of healing. The only background or back-story given defines the characters schematically and with personal detail included only to indicate a source of dissatisfaction or suffering.

*Blissfully Yours* speaks formally to the affinities between social realism and documentaries. There is only one trained actor, Orn, while Min and Roong are non-actors or social actors. The narrative pacing is languorous, utilizing primarily long-takes, deep focus and static-frame shots with no disruptive editing—all in order to keep reality intact. As mentioned earlier, *Blissfully Yours* offers no conventional narrative conflict with which to accord a resolution. We do not judge their moral character because there is little given to judge; instead the spectator is put in a position of having to come to terms with and interpret the minimization of space between people and nature at a remove from their commodified lives.

Devices which conventional films use to focus on the furthering of a causal chain of events, such as dialogue, the framing of characters as the dominant kinesthetic presence or action-makers in the frame, and sympathetic scoring, are minimized so as to emphasize the characters’ subordination to nature. The characters are not ascribed the usual import of fictional film characters. Furthermore, by virtue of long takes, deep focus, single-shot scenes with mostly static framing, the narrative becomes a play between the human characters and the natural space they inhabit, and how it inhabits them. There is no use of shot-reverse shot or point of view editing, further inhibiting character identification. The majority of the shots in the latter part of the film are medium to extra-long shots. Like the actors, the camera works to depict a neutral space on the border
between fiction and non-fiction. By the second part of the film, the wilderness highlighted around them becomes the dominant character, or at the very least it is on an equal stage. The film becomes about the characters’ place in the landscape, how it parallels their issues and stands as a metaphor for their relationships and personal situations. And in the extended sequences when the characters are not speaking (even when they are, it is not in the furthering of a narrative chain of events) the subject becomes their meta-dialogue with nature; and in this we become aware of how society and nature reflect on and constitute one another.

By comparison to conventional cinema, psychological intimacy with characters is reduced to emphasize their intimacy with nature. If we were regularly given close-ups or shallow depth of field, our attention would be directed towards their human condition in isolation from its contingencies to nature. In this way they are actively mediated by the wilderness. One of Blissfully Yours’ most remarkable dynamics is to generate representations of sex at a remove from sentiment and romance that renders it as “natural” or “biological.” Two of the three sex scenes are viewed in an aloof visual manner, in single takes and without cut-ins or editing. In not dominating the frame the sex is not about emotional intimacy or conventional sexuality, but rather about their situation in the landscape as foreign, engaging naturally in basic human drives for the purposes of healing through pleasure.

Vital to this imagistic intermingling of characters and nature is a suffusion of ambient sound as a supplement to dialogue. In the minimization of dialogue and only one brief interlude of scoring during the credits, what would normally be the background drone of
crickets and other jungle insects becomes the film’s predominant acoustic element. The ambient jungle noise engulfs, nearly invades the three figures as does the visual field left around them from the long-shot framing and deep focus. There is no attempt to isolate their human presence in this context. Indeed, the intent seems to be quite the opposite—to nearly inundate and subordinate them to the natural world. This subordination to nature doesn’t work to supplant the social composition of Orn and Roong’s psychic burdens established in the film’s first part, but rather renders it more salient, further teasing out this tension between society/nature divisions.

As I suggested at the beginning, the inter-textuality of the credits at the film’s mid-point contrasts with and interrogates the tradition of placing credits at beginning and end, actively subverting a convention which signifies the fundamental belief in notions of closure and completeness. Blissfully Yours is preoccupied with foregrounding the “in-between-ness,” not the closing or over determining of meaning; with articulating the liminal subjects through a liminal style somewhere between fiction and non-fiction, functioning implicitly as a critique of the problematic nature of representations which essentialize meanings and thereby risk obscuring certain kinds of knowledge at the expense of reactive or cathartic meanings typical of mainstream film.

The ethic here seems to be one of slighting the neat, water-tight categories of traditional modes of representation in order to embrace the meanings and kinds of knowledge extracted from liminal conditions. Min, Roong, and Orn struggle to find a temporary reprieve from the weight of personal burdens by retreating to nature. They try to temporarily escape conscious awareness by finding that place where things cannot be
felt, only to leave them somewhere in-between having nearly merged with the natural
world around them, just as they are nationally in-between. And extra-textually, the
spectator is not immersed, not granted an easily consumable experience, yet not driven
away by any means, thus similarly situated as the characters—in-between their own
meaning and the film’s, rather than wholly immersed.

Thus, as with Mysterious Object, Blissfully Yours is an evocation of the ideological
problematics of ways of knowing, and in particular in challenging conventional cinematic
ways of representing cultural knowledge and experience. In particular, I propose that
Blissfully Yours is suggesting an ancient or primitive form of submission to the senses as
an alternative to the virtual realities so abundant in a capitalist society. Finally, I would
like to propose that Blissfully Yours might be further considered as promoting an
ideological aesthetic sharing many affinities for Buddhist tradition. This has not been the
focus of the discussion thus far, but a few brief points make the connection between
Buddhist ideals and the ideas of suffering, compassion, and healing explored in Blissfully
Yours. This is ultimately another means of specifying the ways in which Apichatpong’s
films are each concerned with the reconciliation of traditional and often primitive world-
views with an increasingly globalized Thailand.

Blissfully Yours also connotes a Buddhist worldview, the articulation of which
provides a final frame of reference for further understanding how Blissfully Yours enacts
a “style” that reflects or articulates in some sense an older paradigm of knowledge in
Thai culture. Buddhism is a paradigm of resistance to the, in some instances (in particular
environmental damage), deleterious forces of economic globalization, not only in
Thailand but elsewhere in the world. While economic development clearly has certain material and health advantages, as I argue in chapter one it presents an uncertain threat to traditional culture and, more specifically, to people’s links to the natural world. A new age “reformist Buddhist perspective” (Swearer 5) has emerged in opposition to the harmful effects of economic development on traditional ways of life. Donald Swearer sees this as a “return to the fundamental verities of a simpler era believed to be embodied in an earlier historic age or represented by an idealized, mythic time of primal beginnings” (4). Where the spread of a money economy into traditionally subsistent areas has resulted in a shift away from traditional worldviews towards increasingly commodified subjectivities, Buddhism provides a spiritual model prescribing “plants, trees, and the land itself” as a source of “potential spiritual liberation.” The core Buddhist beliefs in understanding the source and nature of suffering, along with a moral virtue of compassion, and the renunciation of material wealth, would all appear to be informing the ideological and aesthetic workings of Blissfully Yours. Extending from this I suggest consideration for the film as enacting a religious aesthetic or, put more broadly, a cultural style (where the style fits the culture, or some identifiable part of it). And when you consider that Blissfully Yours’ main readership has been a cinephile audience outside of Thailand, and mostly in the west, the film’s ethnographic functioning stands out more clearly. That is, if the central organizing basis of ethnography is to communicate one culture for another or, as David MacDougall describes it, “one text of life for another,” then the cultural mysteries which are arguably the source of its critical success abroad can
be understood as dependent on a fundamentally ethnographic style representing an “other” for foreign consumption.
Chapter Three: *Tropical Malady*: The Society/Nature Dialectic, Ecological Integration, and Ancient Ways of Knowing

I present nature in my films to evoke how our identity depends on clothes and other means of self-representation. In the Jungle, you don’t have to care about such things. It’s a place where your primal instincts are set free from a cage. And any reference to time is removed as well. (Apichatpong qtd. from an interview in Romers 45)

One hour into *Tropical Malady*, Apichatpong’s fourth feature film, having already witnessed the meandering observational narration of two men sensuously exploring each other’s worlds, the viewer sees the screen go black for 15 long seconds and then commence an all but new story of a soldier hunting a Tiger-Shaman in the jungle. As with Apichatpong’s other films, in *Tropical Malady*’s first half narrative coherence yields to a simple observational view of cultural details from Thai daily life, fundamentally organized around pleasure in looking at faces with and without smiles, in work and play, in town and country, in communion and isolation. In this second half, however, the realist, observational approach gives way to a mystical exploration of one soldier’s submission to and transformation within the natural world and its spirit forces. Dennis Lim’s comment in the *Village Voice* that the film’s “mysteries are so cosmic that any attempt to ascribe allegory can seem puny” is an understandable response. Yet it also smacks of evasion to the film’s call to produce a meaning out of the synthesis of the two halves. As Apichatpong has suggested, neither part makes sense without the other, and the challenge for the viewer is to produce their synthesis. Certainly there is no immanent meaning in the film’s “mysteries,” but *Tropical Malady* sets up such a lucid dialectical
tension between two opposed yet necessarily “interpenetrating” parts, it practically begs viewers to produce some synthesis.

This chapter will propose how the two-part dialectic of *Tropical Malady*’s bifurcated narrative structure is beneficially understood as enacting a nature/culture, or nature-society dialectic, and in particular how it evokes an awareness of how this nature/culture relationship has fundamentally changed. In continuation of an overall question posed in the previous chapters, a central task is to consider how *Tropical Malady* enacts certain anthropological questions such as these: to the non-Thai viewer (or non-Thai specialist) is *Tropical Malady* asking one to consider the current state of man’s relationship to nature? From a Thai perspective it might ask more specifically how has the Thai relationship to nature changed? How do *Tropical Malady*’s powerful evocations of an animistic (or shamanistic) world-view come to bear on questions of local knowledge in an increasingly globalized and materialized context?

Once again (as in previous films) *Tropical* frames these tensions within a strong town/country (or loosely rural-urban) division, yet here the return to nature is deeper – more dreamlike and illusory – and closely conjoined with a gay pre-plot that effectively sexual-politicizes a nature/culture transformation, in addition to staging a larger critique of human alienation from traditional, even ancient forms of being and knowing.

All of us are by nature wild beasts. Our duty as humans is to become like trainers who keep their animals in check, and even teach them to perform tasks alien to their bestiality.

-Inter-title at the opening of *Tropical Malady*
In an interview for *Cineaste* magazine with Holger Romers, Apichatpong responds to the question of whether or not he thinks “the rural depictions might not be perceived as exotic to outsiders” by claiming that this is simply “the environment I grew up in – I want to capture the transformation of that rural area.” The significance of Apichatpong’s rural representations in the context of their transformation ought not to go overlooked.

However variously inflected *Tropical* is, the film’s overall dialectic structure is reducible to the enactment of a society/nature dichotomy; this dichotomy asks one to consider one’s own personal cultural accretions and the possibility of shedding them to expose a primeval human essence inseparable from nature. And yet this tension is inscribed somewhat understatedly in the film’s first half within a gay relationship to produce an interesting perspective on homoerotics that I will come to shortly.

The first half of *Tropical Malady* depicts the casual development of a relationship between Keng, a soldier, and Tong, a peasant boy who works days in town cutting massive blocks of ice and then returns to his parent’s farm in the evening. They meet when Keng’s patrol unit finds a dead body in the area of Tong’s farm. They begin to spend time together, and a mutual attraction is evident, although their affections are conspicuously unconsummated in the traditional sense. Their somewhat unusual, though quite tender intimations of attraction provide the central basis for engagement in part one, framed within a style of casual, observational accounting of Thai daily life. Their flirting is erotic, but understated and even desexualized, appearing at times as a form of animal curiosity and companionship as much as it resembles modern love. Most of the cues of typical modern relationships, gay or straight, might be inferred, but we don’t see them.
Instead we see Keng licking Tong’s hand just after he has urinated, after which Tong reciprocates. It’s not unsurprising that Strand Releasing, a distributor of gay and lesbian films, picked up *Tropical Malady*. However, it also makes sense that Apichatpong would claim the film is not a “direct” reflection on his own homosexuality, since the attraction between Keng and Tong is transfigured into something more animalistic, like watching two friendly dogs casually sniff each other’s parts and then go play.

The erotic nature of their flirtations here are defamiliarized through a transmogrification of conventional homoerotics into a form of bestial attraction. This is also evident in the film’s second half. As Chuck Stephens suggests in the DVD’s audio commentary with Apichatpong, you’re not sure whether they’re about to make love or “devour” each other like wild animals. Later in the film, during a similarly homoerotic scene in which the soldier and the Tiger-Shaman grapple with each other ambiguously in a field, Stephens calls it a “sex scene,” an interpretation which Apichatpong then in response bluntly rejects. (Stephens discounts the significance of their framing in extreme long shot, in which they appear dwarfed by the natural surroundings, making it less intimate and also less about “sex” between lovers than just another pair of creatures involved in mutual exploration) Stephens’ interpretation reflects a move to locate the foreign within a familiar framework. Apichatpong clearly intended this to be a muddling of standard homoerotics with primeval instincts. Which might be, quite exceptionally, one of the more non-prejudicial ways of framing gay love; that is, perhaps what is “alien to our bestiality” is to deny our curiosity (or instinct) about exploring the same sex, as this depiction of attraction wants to suggest. So while Stephens’ interpretation of the
film’s homoerotic-animalistic instances as gay “sex” scenes is a testament to the convenient possibility for queered readings, this analysis is more concerned with considering the nature/culture, or society/nature dialectic behind the transmogrification from typical gay love into mutual animal exploration. This ties in directly to the society/nature dialectic, which is in part a discourse of understanding the relationship between two levels of human nature: a second-order nature linked to the conditioning upon humans from social structure, and a first-order nature conceived as a stripping of social residue, linked to the idea of human biology in isolation from society. Certainly this is an extraordinary kind of gay love story; however, what makes it so is an overall trajectory moving from culture to nature, from human to animal, from social to nature. The somewhat alien quality of the homoerotics in the film’s first half anticipate the latter half’s fully developed stripping of acculturated humanity into a de-culturated animal consciousness—a transmogrification from civilized man to beast. Before exploring the latter half—the primeval transmogrification in the jungle—and its relation to the former, it is necessary to look more closely at some of the conceptual issues Tropical Malady is enacting.

The film’s first half can be seen as filled up with ascriptions of second-order nature, while I will argue that the second half of the film can be productively viewed as a shedding of second-order nature that reflects back to the first part. First it is necessary to establish the sense of these terms. Marxist approaches to critiques of capitalism offer a useful entryway into a dialectical view of the society/nature relationship. David Pepper
describes the two main features of the society/nature relationship as it is most commonly formulated:

This holds, first, that there is no separation between humans and nature. They are part of each other: contradictory opposites, which means that it is impossible to define one except in relation to the other. . . . Second, they constantly interpenetrate and interact, in a circular, mutually affecting relationship. (107)

Marx understood humanity’s dialectic “interpenetrations” with nature to be fundamentally enacted through production, so that “nature is humanized while men are naturalized” (109). Underlying this was the recognition of a “first” nature that came before humans and effectively “gave birth” to them. Humans then through their labor, through a working on “first” nature produce a “second” nature. Related to this is a labor theory of value that distinguishes between “use” value and “exchange” value. For Marx, one of the fundamentally corrupting essences of capitalism was a larger cultural transition when the value of man’s labor on nature becomes measured by exchange value over and above use value. Exchange value results in an alienation from nature upon which we depend. This formula has been at the root of many anarchist and counter-cultural movements from the European avant-garde (Surrealism, Dadaism, Situationism) to “eco-socialist” movements like the current global “Green” movement. This society/nature dialectic is also reflected in “town/country” “antagonisms,” a feature common to all three of Apichatpong’s features under discussion (111).

The antagonism between town and country begins with the transition from barbarism to civilization and runs through the whole history of civilization to the present day. (Marx and Engels 108)

Understanding the society/nature (or micro-cosmic level, man/nature) relationship according to a dialectical formulation of reality means that each depends on the other for
its existence. David Pepper makes sure to distinguish between the Marxist view of nature and a “deep ecology” point of view. The “deep ecology” perspective maintains that overcoming alienation from nature means “asserting the naturalness of humans by living in harmony with the environment” or “by living lightly on the earth through trying not to transform it,” a view which Pepper accuses of being guilty of the same dualism that deep ecologists “ascribe to the project of dominating culture” (i.e. transforming it through economic development). From the Marxist view, human nature is the human-in-nature and the nature-in-human, such that alienation is a condition of mass failure to “conceive of nature as a social creation.” In other words, for humanity to surmount its alienation from nature it must “assert its (nature’s) human-ness” (113-115). The Marxist sociological view of the society/nature dialectic is precisely how anthropologists commonly approach primitive shamanic world-views and various indigenous animistic philosophies: by examining the ways in which indigenous societies did not distinguish between man and nature in their world-views (by directly merging their own subjectivities with the natural world around them), at least not to the extent that has resulted from capitalist development. For indigenous societies this was a condition of not viewing nature as external, or as surface, but as a whole of which they are just another part. Pepper understands the primitive shamanistic view as “mystifying” nature, “placing humanity apart from it” which is contradictory in some sense to its assertion of “one-ness” with nature. According to Pepper, then, the Marxists differ fundamentally from the indigenous and the “deep ecologist’s” views in the sense that one asks “whether what we do accords with nature” (mystic-dualistic view), where the other asks “whether we like
what we have wrought” (Marxist-monistic view) (114-116). Tropical Malady doesn’t
make such fine distinctions, as I will consider later, but does provide a text that appears
almost designed to engage these sorts of tensions. Indeed, as reductive as the dialectic
approach may appear, it provides a model for conceiving and sorting through these age-
old philosophical questions. Tropical Malady also operates under a similarly reductive
formulation, bluntly rupturing one story to reveal how it “means” against something close
to its opposite.

Tied to this society/nature dialectic is another important dialectic frame of reference
(which will later be related directly to Tropical Malady’s hybrid style): that which gives
notions of reality and truth that are rooted in discourses of development, progress, and
science their power –dreaming, magic, illusion, and appearance. Development and
progress are based in science, a discourse of truth (Cambell 126). Science and
development have rendered the supernatural or the mystical as modern and familiar.
(129) Alan Cambell discusses the similarities between art and ethnography as a form of
resistance to the forces of progress in over-familiarizing the unknown:

. . . there are different voices, there are those prepared to explore unknown fears. .
. . to go about dissolving our boundaries and getting ourselves within reach of
others. It’s art that shows the way. . . . Appreciating the power of metaphor and
integrity in art parallels the ethnographic appreciation of unfamiliar cultures.
What’s required is a similar disposition to be open to strangeness. ‘Submit’ was
Lafew’s word –to learn to submit to beliefs and practices, to those things
supernatural and causeless; not to reduce them to familiar trifles. The most
important lesson anthropology has to teach is that there’s simply no point in
making statements about how reasonable or unreasonable ‘savage’ thought might
be. (127)

Cambell is addressing the difficulty for anthropologists in coming to really know
something ethnographically when they don’t actually believe it. He discusses how it is
impossible for the anthropologist who has been acculturated to advanced industrial society to be able to enter the shamanic or animistic world-view in which “there is no culture as opposed to nature.” For indigenous societies, “there was no social world set over and against a natural world” and, thus, given our developed society and “the material condition of our lives,” the shamanistic worldview is incomprehensible or inaccessible. *Tropical Malady* is concerned with the challenges of accessing this knowledge of the human relationship to nature and with overcoming them through submission. Cambell refers to the shamanic state of knowledge as one of “ecological integrity,” essentially characterized by the situation of a person in “life-and-death relation with their surroundings.” Additionally, this kind of relationship with nature is contrary to ideas of national integrity, which developed later. “Integration” into “national society” (what Cambell calls an “empty abstraction”) requires fundamentally corrupting if not altogether destroying the relation between the individual and “the forest.” This national integration and the break from ecological integration occur through “acquiring and depending on material goods.” Or, as Marxists would describe it, in the capitalist turn brought on by technological innovation, man’s creative interaction with nature through production from use value to exchange value alienates him from nature –his own nature, and thus his ability to see the human-ness of the “external” nature. As Cambell puts it quite bluntly, “integration meant shotguns and radios, hence an umbilical cord to the outside society to get hold of lead shot and batteries” (114). At the start of the second half of *Tropical Malady*, Tong enters the jungle with a shotgun and a radio (and a flashlight, for seeing through the darkness), and by the end of his transformation, these materials are
meaningless. He loses one way of being by “submitting” to an “other,” ancient way of being. Let’s look more closely at how the nature/culture relationship is configured in *Tropical*.

If after seeing *Tropical Malady* one is not thinking of the dialectic between man and nature, then one is at least trying to connect the available threads between the two parts. The most obvious link is that the shaman trapped in the tiger’s form is played by the same person who played Tong (except when it’s played by a real tiger), and the soldier hunting him is played by the same person who played Keng. This makes it possible to transpose their relationship from the first half to the second. Yet there are other subtle ascriptions from the first half that are modified through juxtaposition with the second half. This is the condition of a “mutually affecting” or “interpenetrating” relationship between the two parts that are meaningless without reference to the other which the Marxist dialectic offers. Apichatpong’s observational, documentary style in the first half favors an unprivileged gaze upon seemingly arbitrary features of Thai town and country life. Many of these become less arbitrary in the reflection of the second half. For example, in one scene Tong and Keng have lunch with two older women, one of whom shows them her new phallus carving, a traditional good luck charm, and evidence of traditional folk superstition still intact in the older generation. Of course, in the first half this insinuates the lovers’ attraction, but in the second half it is in retrospect connotative of traditional “folk shards,” something Cambell has criticized old school anthropologists for referring to as “the mental rubbish of peasant credulity” (Cambell 125). One of the women, apparently oblivious of the contemporary legal strictures, offers them marijuana
(which she grew herself), evoking a time when medicine and healing were tied to the immediate natural world (akin to shamanistic healing practices) and not modern medicine (science). What might otherwise be passing observational snippets in the first part, once reflected on by the second half, become references to the idea of living in a state of “ecological integration.”

Another strong overall effect that may pass by viewers without the re-framing context of the second half is the constant shuttling back and forth between town and country. As suggested by Marx, this classic dichotomy configures each as “repositories” for “material circumstances and values.” All of Apichatpong’s films present their own form of what can be conveniently understood as a town/country antagonism. And these antagonisms are inseparable from class divisions, as well as all economic, political, and socio-cultural developments associated with the spread of global capitalism (Pepper 110). In town they visit a “Lotus Superstore” (a Thai variant of Wal-Mart or Best Buy) and are inundated by the global commercial spectacle. Oversized images of male clothing models hanging above them insinuate the lovers’ identities, yet by the second half this is as much significant as an image of subjectivities inhabiting the capitalist commercial spectacle. Later on they watch the newfangled version of Thai “Jazzercise” staged in open-air public venues. (Apichatpong expressed in the commentary his own curious bafflement of this emergent popular phenomenon, something that didn’t exist in Thailand five years earlier). The quotidian meanderings of the lovers through both traditional and development (or folk vs. modern) cultural spectacles are not subordinated to any narrative drive. The camera is casually exploring images of them amidst both town and
country spectacle, often to the extent of subordinating them to these second-order surroundings. Linear narrative momentum is minimally generated through the increasing mutual explorations of Keng and Tong, and it is common in the first half for their voices to be nearly indiscernible from the ambient sounds of either the town or country spectacle around them. Cultural atmosphere and ambience is not simply an incidental backdrop, but the defining tone of the first half. Since their relationship is never subject to the typical narrative development, the first half is about their relationship in an aimless drift amid the details of cultural spectacle. One might think of similar instances of these character-to-cultural-geography relationships, such as in a film like *Lost in Translation*. Now suppose *Lost in Translation* were cut short somewhere in the middle as Bill (Murray) and Scarlet’s (Johansson) relationship was blossoming (though ultimately unconsummated), fade to black, and in comes *Apocalypse Now* with Colonel Kurtz “going primitive” (only he is played by Bill Murray instead of Marlon Brando). Each half would radically re-inform the other. A bizarre prospect, sure, but it illustrates the point.

Keng and Tong are themselves symbolically inscribed within these town/country antagonisms. As stated in previous chapters, the rural is associated with Thai tradition, something commonly returned to in representations that have internalized the problematics of rapid economic development in traditionally underdeveloped areas. Keng stands in as a representative of development Thailand, while Tong is traditional Thailand. As Cambell has claimed, “the two shining examples of development and progress are political institutions and literacy” (124). It is significant then that Keng is in the military, often shown in uniform. The camera frequently gazes upon Keng’s company. While this
imagery has homoerotic connotations related to power and authority, it is also one of the most prominent local icons of political institutions infiltrating traditionally autonomous areas. Furthermore, Tong is embarrassed to reveal his illiteracy to Keng when he cannot read some paperwork in a veterinarian’s office. Apichatpong calls attention to the significance of these elements through inversions, or what Chuck Stephens calls “shape-shifting,” for example, when we see Tong wandering through town in military uniform (presumably Keng’s). These town/country shape-shifts, or transformations, become unique parallels to the animistic transmogrifications in the second half.

The last image before the film ruptures and then begins again is of Tong dissolving into the shadows of night as he walks away from Keng. The next time we see him is as a tortured soul trapped in a tiger’s body. He is symbolically merged with nature and primeval forces of life and death. If he is not shown in the tiger’s form, then he is nude and tattooed with indigenous markings. The only verbal communication made in the jungle half comes from a monkey telling Keng (or should we just refer to him now as “the soldier”?) he can either “kill him to free him from the ghost world. Or let him devour you and enter his world.” In the end, after Keng’s modern acculturation has been symbolically “devoured,” he confronts the tiger-shaman, and then submits. “Monster I give you, my spirit, my flesh, and my memories” as his voice is modulated to sound gradually more and more like the tiger. Tong, representative of tradition and the rural (country) in the first half, is fittingly the one who is already animistically or “ecologically integrated” as the tiger-shaman. Keng, an educated soldier and symbolic representative of developed Thailand, must undergo a period of degradation, physical and symbolic, before
he can fully coalesce with nature; before he is fully able to “submit” to a state of “ecological integration.” This degradation of his second-order nature is configured in various ways.

One prominent motif indicating a degrading link between Keng and society is one of communication. The radio transceiver Keng brings with him only transmits unintelligible voices overwhelmed by static. This same sound-design element is later heard coming from a firefly trying to communicate to Keng, and then again from an entire tree aglow with fireflies, like a supernatural antenna between nature and society. Towards the end, Keng finds his transceiver to be entirely dead. Keng is also significantly seen falling asleep periodically. One instance of his sleeping returns at the end, suggesting that the entire episode in the jungle is a dream. Indigenous societies often associated shamanic states and the communications of spirits in the forms of plants, animals, or objects with dreaming. Anthropologists, most prominently Claude Levi-Strauss, understood shamanism as a primitive form of psychoanalysis. Dreams are symbolic of submission to the unknown, as a doubling of Keng’s submission to the unknown forces and spirits of the wild. Keng is also periodically seen peeling leaches from his skin, a sign of his physical merging with nature. As he acclimates to the wild, one begins to wonder whether he will eventually kill the tiger or submit to it as he is with the rest of the jungle. He covers himself in mud to hide his scent and further erode his social status. And in one especially powerful scene at the very end, he is overwhelmed to the point of mysterious convulsions from fear and physical transformation, perhaps fighting through the last of his social residue preventing him from confronting his fate with the tiger. As indicated
earlier, his final submission is implied, though we never see a final consummation of his contest with the tiger, just as we never did between Keng and Tong.

In the wild, shamanism is dying because the local people are becoming more global in their orientation, while here [in the developed world] it is flourishing—apparently for the same sort of reason. And yet again, in other parts of the jungle and the tundra there is a revival, supposedly of traditional shamanism. (Vitebsky 281)

Shamanism is understood by anthropologists (like Vitebsky) as an epistemology for local, indigenous societies. There is an interesting paradox in the assertion of this particular version of Thai shamanism as a testament to primitive, or local knowledge under threat, or at least re-defined in relation to globalized Thailand. As Apichatpong appropriates a shamanistic world-view for cosmopolitan consumption—perhaps to assert a local knowledge in a time of rural transformation and transition—he is also reformulating this world-view by situating it in dialectic relation to a globalized or developed worldview. And this might, indeed, be the point. That Thailand is past the point of return, as so many other indigenous value systems which anthropologists scurry to so as to document before they’re lost, re-formed, modified or homogenized. What we’ve reached is a point where shamanistic knowledge—a condition of “ecological integrity”—or more generally just local knowledge, through the intrusion of modern contexts (like the first half of the film upon the second), cannot be recuperated in any pure sense. But, as Tropical Malady testifies to, we can re-enact these world-views and effectively re-make them to better understand our own contemporary conditions of being and knowing—our own changing relationship to nature. And yet asserting ancient or primitive ways to wisdom or knowledge through “submitting” to the senses is not without
its potential problems in representing other cultures, because it runs the risk of
reinforcing stereotypes of the sensualism and savagery of the East. It plays into what Hal
Foster refers to as a “primitivist fantasy,” something this thesis will take up further in the
next chapter.
Chapter Four: Art/Ethnography and Cultural Knowledge

Ethnographic film no longer occupies a singular niche. Other voices call to us in forms and modes that blur the boundaries and genres that represent distinctions between fiction and documentary, politics and culture, here and there. (Nichols 64)

Apichatpong’s films reside at a complex intersection of cinematic practice and spectatorial registers. In the course of this thesis I have likened them to documentaries in general, and in places I have more directly situated them within the ethnographic subset of documentary due to distinctly anthropological thematic preoccupations and formal concerns reflecting a problematization of the ethical questions of cultural representation, a trademark of ethnographic film discourse. I have also suggested that the mixture of experimental and art film modes in conjunction with an ethnographic interest in exploring local culture suggests the films’ ethnographic-ness is in large part made at the moment of reception. And yet we cannot locate them as wholly documentary or ethnographic or fiction films, as much as these discursive areas are essential to their interpretation. They should rather be interpreted more broadly with reference to the relationships between the art (whether avant-garde, experimental, or the narrative “art” film) and documentary modes in cinematic practice, which in turn are often understood in their affinities with and differences to (hegemonic) mainstream, commercial film practice. Through the formal conflation of fictive modes of storytelling with non-fictive modes reflecting Apichatpong’s focus on the mimetic capacity of the medium, his films engage at one pole in projects of “authenticity,” or what Catherine Russell refers to as “a regime of veracity” (10), while at the other pole they are complicit with tropes and conventions of the feature
fiction film. The three major features of Apichatpong’s oeuvre addressed here – *Mysterious Object at Noon*, *Blissfully Yours*, and *Tropical Malady*– represent an interesting overall movement from one pole toward the other, and in so doing speak to the larger postmodern phenomenon of the “blurring of the boundaries” between traditionally circumscribed generic categories.

*Mysterious Object at Noon* is the most overtly documentary in origins, and taken a step further, ethnographic in its awareness. The “observational” style in which Apichatpong locates and solicits participation from social actors, in addition to casually recording bits and pieces of their cultural milieu, references a problematic ethnographic tradition, while the sheer structural fact that the narrative fiction within is driven by the actors’ contributions unseats the hierarchy of “speaking for” an “other” through calling attention to the dissolution of a single authoring voice. The “crisis in representation” motivating the various revisionist formal maneuvers and textual shifts that have taken place in ethnographic filmmaking since the 1960’s is at the heart of this Surrealist inspired form of experimental ethnography. Whether this is conscious to Apichatpong is beside the point since if nothing else the “exquisite corpse” concept reveals a methodological self-consciousness characteristic of “reflexive,” “participatory,” and “fly-in-the-I” approaches which each attempt in ways to overcome the hierarchy of power in representation typical of classical ethnographic filmmaking. Although Apichatpong’s lack of intentionality in working as an ethnographic filmmaker does preclude the classification of *Mysterious Object* as a scientific project for anthropology –as conventional or “didactic” ethnography– the film directly implicates an essential
ethnographic trait: the imperative for representing “cultural knowledge” (in this case through evoking the idea of local knowledge and how it is “out there” more than merely exposing some discrete aspect or codifying part of it), the raison d’être of ethnographic film as a branch of anthropology. *Mysterious Object* should also be considered in its spirit of devising new ways of “writing” culture, and thus contingently, in how we “read” culture, aligning *Mysterious Object* with one of many of what MacDougall calls “postmodern provocations in anthropology” (74). Finally, granting that *Mysterious Object* problematizes how we “read” culture demands further exploration of how “ethnographicness” and the communication of cultural knowledge is “formed” within the particulars of the reception context.

*Blissfully Yours* is in some sense regressive on ethnographic grounds compared to *Mysterious Object*, being less reflexive and deploying an “observational” style, or “fly-on-the-wall” approach typical of colonialist ethnographies, what David MacDougall refers to as “the positivist notion of a single ethnographic reality, only waiting for anthropology to describe it” (137). Yet *Blissfully* only suggests an appropriation of this general style, and is at least less ethically suspect since it is formally intended as a fiction art film, and consumed primarily within cinephile spectatorial registers consonant with this space, one where readers are generally less concerned with the ethnographic problematics of representing cultural “others” than academics and anthropological practitioners (discounting some overlap). This point is key to understanding how “ethnographicness” may be closely bound to reception (Martinez 131), often over and above the ethnographic “intention” container that Apichatpong is exempt from (Banks
Film in general may be actively read (with some pains) for ethnographic information, while in some exceptional cases, like Apichatpong’s films, their meaning in foreign reception contexts is more immediately aligned to the ethnographic collision between one culture and another.

And then comes \textit{Tropical Malady}, which calls attention to its observational first half by descending into the fantastic realm of dreams and altered states vis à vis folklore and a primitive shamanistic worldview in the second half. Apichatpong has said that he hopes viewers will be asking which half is more “real,” calling attention to his awareness and interest in exploring the ways in which “realism” generates itself paradoxically from a narrative hierarchy of discourse (MacCabe 54-58), rather than from some direct ontological link to the profilmic –the positivist belief in the camera’s ability to record reality as has been the ideal of the documentary tradition and the founding basis of ethnographic film as a “regime of truth.”

Each of the three films examined here has deployed to various degrees an observational style exposition of Thai village and country culture. In \textit{Mysterious} the observational yields to reflexive “propensities” (MacDougall 4). The reflexive is produced by the camera’s literal acknowledgement of the filmmaking process, as well as by the self-consciousness of narrative construction vis à vis the “exquisite corpse.” \textit{Mysterious} has been flatly categorized as both a documentary film and a fiction film, but its formal significance is in this consummation –whereas \textit{Blissfully} is never characterized as a documentary, though its meanings also stem directly from the formal marriage of a fictional narrative that is nearly subordinated to a non-fictive camera style, performances
(by social actors, not trained ones), and observational atmosphere. *Tropical Malady’s*
bigger budget affords a degree of technical polish (including the use of special effects in
the second half) that sets it apart from *Mysterious* and *Blissfully*. But the film’s
nature/culture dialectic is enacted by the juxtaposition of an observational style narrative
with the fantasy jungle sequence, also calling attention to the explosion of these two
representational modes.

The breakdown and dispersal of ethnographic film practice through an intermingling
with other classifications of film, together with a rise in indigenous, “third worldist,” and
“diasporic” filmmaking, is what Hamid Naficy labels an “independent transnational film
genre” (119). Naficy’s grouping aims to rescue films from “discursive ghettos” such as
the “ethnographic film,” by seeing works across generic classifications normally
considered in isolation. Naficy maintains that “by problematizing the traditional generic
and authorial schemas and representational practices, such an approach blurs the
distinction, often artificially maintained, between types of films: fictional, documentary,
ethnographic, and avant-garde” (121). Apichatpong’s cinema might conveniently be
placed within this sort of grouping.

Where some lament the “death of ethnography” in the pervasive exodus away from
traditional strictures and scientific procedures towards the ever more common
“ethnographic poetics, novels and films seen as possible alternatives to traditional
ethnographic accounts that have failed to convey cultural difference in terms of *full-
bodied experience*” (Crawford 72), those involved in this shift, such as MacDougall,
submit that ethnographic objectivity was always “an artificial construct” (137), and thus
the convergence with art in general is only a natural result of this now somewhat official
acknowledgement. What’s more, many credit the ruptures in ethnographic film to the
arrival of lightweight camera and sync-sound equipment in the 1960’s, as is most
famously evidenced by the Cinema Verité films of Jean Rouche, as well as being
technologically determining within the art arena of the French new wave filmmakers. It is
as MacDougall puts it: “despite certain injections of anthropological ideas, its
[ethnographic film] origins lie in the essentially European invention of documentary
cinema” (91).

Thus a formal convergence between documentary, ethnographic “propensities,” and
the art cinema is not that new and not so revolutionary at this stage in history. But for the
interests of this chapter, what is less commonly examined and thus may be an issue of
some critical urgency is the extent to which ethnographic “othering” has converged or
seeped into popular and cinephile arenas (also increasing ethnography’s viewership), and
in particular its meaning at the moment of reception where there is less of a critical
imperative in weighing the ethics of representation than there is to evaluate notions of
originality of voice. As ethnographic visions merge with other film classifications, they
meet a new viewer/readership, one that produces ethnographic meaning differently. And
while the films discussed here are not scientific or didactic in the disciplinary tradition of
anthropology, they still greatly implicate the political problems of cross-cultural reading.

As Catherine Russell has claimed, “the history of ethnographic film is a history of the
production of otherness” (10), and while Apichatpong is not a self-professed
ethnographer, the cross-cultural nature of his works, his relation to them, and the
composition of his films’ dominant readership are significantly illuminated along the lines of “othering” and “becoming.”

**Othering and Becoming in Creative Process and Reading**

An important point of entry in understanding how these films “work” or “mean” in foreign contexts is the consideration Apichatpong’s relationship to his subjects, a point raised briefly in chapter one. In attempting to answer the question, “Which films are ethnographic films?” Marcus Banks discusses features that mark off anthropologists from other human observers:

> Anthropologists are less intrusive than other visitors (by their participation and linguistic fluency); they tend to ignore the rich, powerful, well-known in favor of obscure corners of obscure countries; they follow action and record masses of data; they are concerned with following the minutiae of daily life, with gossip and apparent trivia; they believe in getting to the heart of things, of moments of revelation; they believe in waiting. It is for these reasons as I wrote above of observational cinema having a mimetic quality and it is thus that the preferred form of ethnographic film is one of the variants of observational cinema.” (124)

What can be said then of Apichatpong is not that he is an anthropologist per se, but that his observational (mimetic) approach to cinema, coupled with his thematic and topical interests in the rural and village subaltern and their cultural (and environmental) transformations in a global context, mark him off from other filmmakers as one whose methods are decidedly mimetic of anthropologists’ working practice in the field. By his own testament he is concerned with documenting the cultural “transformation” in the rural and village areas in which he grew up, echoing “a central premise of much of anthropology . . . that the native was already vanishing, and the anthropologist could do nothing but record and reconstruct” (Russell 13). As I’ve made clear before, his
exploration and representation of Thai cultural knowledge is different from the disciplinary ethnographer, yet his observational approach suggests a personal ethic of conveying an inside Thai worldview as a form of cultural knowledge, a fundamental objective of ethnography in general. This is even more pronounced since his films have found much greater purchase in cinephile circles outside of Thailand (especially in Europe) than they have within. (Which is not to say his art-scene accolades elsewhere are not a boon to other local Thai filmmakers, they are). What has been missing from the critical reception of his films is an awareness of how his films’ appeal may hinge on an ethnographic appreciation bound up in the “oscillations” of “becoming and othering” (Crawford 69). And still another purpose here is to consider how the cultural knowledge uttered by his films can be situated on ideological grounds.

Apichatpong’s observational style, and the ethnographic workings within that broader documentary framework, however much they are lessened by fictional tropes, still strongly suggest an interest in teaching, disseminating, and at the very least, a desire to share an insider’s view of cultural knowledge and some of its implicit value systems. Furthermore, the very nature of the medium and its relationship to “reality” presupposes some configuration of embedded ideology. This is all the more apparent in “oppositional” forms such as these coming from Apichatpong’s “Kick The Machine” productions. As Comolli and Narboni put it in their famous essay in Cahiers du Cinema “Cinema/Ideology/Criticism,” “Cinema is one of the languages through which the world communicates itself to itself. . . . So, when we set out to make a film, we are encumbered
by the necessity of reproducing things not as they really are but as they appear when refracted through the ideology” (46).

There is an idea that one reliable way of curing the colonialist, hegemonic, and ultimately “othering” ideological conventions of traditional ethnographic representation is by “handing the camera over” to the “natives,” locals, indigenous, etc. so that they may “speak for themselves” rather than us “speaking for them” (Russell 11). And yet, while in some cases this has proven beneficial to local populations, it has also been criticized for perpetuating the same problems. Shohat and Stam echo this ideal of “self-representation” when they claim that “the mere desire to move beyond stereotype, however, is hardly sufficient; cultural and historical knowledge is essential” (232). Russell contends, however, that “the ‘authentic identity’ of the film or videomaker is not . . . a sufficient revision of ethnographic practice because differences exist within cultures and communities just as surely as they do between cultural identities” (11). From a western reception vantage point, foreign films made by indigenous filmmakers that tackle stories and thematics particular to their traditional societies run the same risk of stereotyping and exoticizing as did western ethnographic filmmakers. Apichatpong is caught in this insider/outsider complex as a native Thai art filmmaker working in Thailand with predominately western funding, western education and artistic influences. This is another way of saying that his personal identity is cosmopolitan (or transnational) and so is the nature of his film aesthetics, which puts him in a peculiar position to be speaking for, or speaking “alongside,” as Trinh T. Minha has described it, his native culture.
It is necessary to define the terms of “othering” and “becoming” before going any further. Crawford argues for a critical consideration of visual and textual anthropology on the same terms, as he sees them both to “exist neither as pure image nor as pure word,” despite moving in opposite directions in terms of what he labels “othering” and “becoming.” Crawford loosely understands the anthropological “process” as a “relationship between becoming and othering.” The terms of this “crisis” outlined by Crawford are highly productive in further specifying the nature and cultural location of Apichatpong’s works.

“Othering” and “becoming” is understood in one sense as the relationship between the “producer” (the ethnographer, documentarian, or auteur) and the culture he is studying. Traditional anthropologists must “submit” and move towards “becoming” one with the culture under study, presuming they are themselves an “other” within a foreign context. This process is closely linked to dichotomous textual qualities Crawford terms the “sensuous” versus the “intelligible,” as well as messages of “understanding” versus “explanation.” These relationships apply to his “textual” (written or verbal) versus “visual” (filmed) anthropology framework, which he reduces to “word” versus “image.” In this framework, the “word” tends to function within the terms of “explanation” and “intelligibility,” where conversely the “image” functions primarily within the terms of the “sensuous” and the “understanding.” In anthropology the written text (or monograph) has traditionally served the function of “othering” in its verbal “explanation” and “intelligibility” with reference to dominant western idioms (drawn from the ethnographer’s prior “becoming” in the field). While the ethnographic film, either as
research aid or as conveyer of anthropological knowledge in itself, functions more within
the umbrella of “becoming” through the imagistic “sensuous” and the more “full bodied
experience” or “understanding.” Crawford further articulates these oscillations between
“becoming” and “othering” by referring to the idea of “semantic” versus “syntactic”
richness, with images intrinsically carrying more of the former, words intrinsically
carrying more of the latter. The visual in anthropology tends towards promoting cultural
“becoming,” where the written tend towards introducing cultural distance between self
and “other” (thus it is “othering”). However both are capable of manipulations of form in
which they may shift nearer to one pole or another. “Writing” can become more
“sensuous” (and then perhaps less “intelligible”) and overcome the distance of
explanation. Film can become more “intelligible,” for example by deploying explanatory
voice-over, and thus less “sensuous.” One begins to see how all of this impinges on
interpretations of Apichatpong’s cinema. Utilizing Crawford’s conception of the
anthropological process as one fundamentally characterized by a “process of becoming
and othering,” we can re-view how Apichatpong’s cinema is defined by these
relationships.

The descriptive terms outlined above explaining the similarities and differences
between verbal (i.e. written) and visual ethnography are revealing in defining how
Apichatpong’s films “mean” across cultures. Disciplinary or traditional ethnographic
films are a balance between the sensuous and the intelligible. If they are just “research
footage,” then they are accompanied by a written monograph or used as aids in lectures
and presentations that serve the purpose of explaining and contextualizing cultural
features of “them” in relation to “us.” Without some sort of intelligible framing or explanatory devices, ethnographic footage is merely impressionistic. In many respects, it is the interpretive, the explanatory, the intelligible that is absent from Apichatpong’s films. They represent cultural impressions from a cultural insider with a mind to communicate to an outsider or “other.” Apichatpong’s films reflect his awareness of the sensuous of the visual (over the intelligibility of writing) by using a documentary mode which minimizes explanatory devices promoting the intelligible. This absence is filled up by the staging of meandering, quotidian fictions. However, these fictional narrations are exploratory in human and cultural terms more than they are causally driven in the conventional sense. Images in Apichatpong’s cinema are sensuous in large part due to their lack of regard for the conventional ideals of directing or cueing the viewer’s attention to some relevant information in following the advance of a causal chain of events. And separating form from content for a moment for explanatory purposes, the films’ formal appeal to the sensuous over the intelligible is doubled in the content. The story of Dogfahr and the Mysterious Object is centrally concerned with the lack of access to the senses of the outside world, paralleled by a full observational access to it. Blissfully Yours is centrally concerned with healing and escape through submission to the senses in the wild, as well as to the sexual senses. And Tropical Malady, in many respects the culmination of what we might label a personal cinema of the senses, is centrally concerned with the alienation of man from nature (by suggesting a primitive knowledge with fewer barriers between people and personal integration with the natural world) and
what the idea of re-integration with nature means in the context of the global cultural spectacle.

Nicholas Banks asks the question of whether “ethnographicness” might be ascertained in the nature and formation of viewer response. If one can define the nature and existence of an ethnographic “response,” then the criteria required for constituting an ethnographic film are in the dynamic of product-reader relations, essentially meaning that “ethnographicness is not a thing out there which is captured by the camera but a thing we construct for ourselves in our relation to the film” (124-27). This becomes especially relevant for non-“self-declaring ethnographic films” like Apichatpong’s, since as Banks describes it, “different films are given the ethnographic label for different reasons, and on the whole, each may be useful when the fact is recognized” (126). In the case at hand (applying Banks’ “intention-event-reaction” model), since Apichatpong does not intend these as ethnographic films per se, the latter two “containers” of “event” and “reaction” become more significant in understanding the ethnographic workings in cross-cultural reception.

Since Apichatpong’s films are not framed as ethnographic per se, the sensuous dominates in reception. And depending on the viewing subject, one can expect a range of readings, from “oppositional” to “negotiated” to “hegemonic” (Hall 166-76). On the one hand, the “message” of the films propounded in this thesis is a somewhat universal cultural critique: our contemporary ways of being and knowing in the world are artificial, spiritually bankrupt, commodified, inauthentic, often even virtual. These films suggest a recuperation of older ways of knowing one’s place in the world, or at least how
traditional ways reflect on and effectively reformulate the new. And yet the idea that this knowledge is intact and authentic in the east— in Thailand and embodied in its subaltern— but is a knowledge obscured for the west, is not without its potential for reinforcing old primitivist stereotypes. An oppositional reading in a western reception context might suppose that the threat to tradition and older ways of knowing is endemic to Thailand as in the west. A hegemonic reading might view certain conditions of the films as reflecting a society in which a lack of civilization or development affords the articulation of sorts of knowledge we’ve moved beyond, but are somehow natural to us, buried in a primeval subconscious. This is what Hal Foster refers to as the “primitivist fantasy:” “that the other, usually assumed to be of color, has special access to primary psychic and social processes from which the white subject is somehow blocked” (175). We might even understand Apichatpong’s western funding as “ideological patronage” –an ideology inscribed in “the artist as ethnographer” where, as Foster sees it, the source of the subversion or political transformation of dominant culture is “elsewhere,” “in the ethnographer paradigm, with the cultural other, the oppressed postcolonial, subaltern, or subcultural” (173). And furthermore, returning again to the idea of Apichatpong as both cultural insider and outsider—self and other—his identity impinges on his cultural capital as an artist with the potential to subvert or transform hegemonic film practice in the west. As Foster explains, “if the invoked artist is not perceived as socially and/or culturally other, he or she has but limited access to this transformative alterity, but that if he or she is perceived as other, he or she has automatic access to it” (173). There is no easy or conclusive answer to these problematics, especially since the very restrictive notions of
inside/outside, self/other are in many ways frustrated by the forces of globalization. Though we can say with relative certainty, as has been the contention of this thesis throughout, that Apichatpong’s cinema, while apparently defying categorization, is a form of “quasi-anthropological” art which may or may not be transformative in Thailand, and without.
**Conclusions: Submitting to the Senses, Cultural Knowledge, and The Ethnographic Paradigm**

If there is truth to Roland Barthes’ claim that “a text’s unity lies not in its origins but in its destination,” then we have not fully understood the films at hand (Barthes 148). One of the fundamental claims of this thesis has been that Apichatpong’s films reflect an interest in juxtaposing contemporary and traditional ways of life, which is in some cases characterized by tapping into a “primitivist fantasy” or an ancient means to knowledge or wisdom. This thesis has also expressed the manner in which these thematics of old and new (often configured in terms of a society/nature dialectic) are generated at the experimental intersection between fiction and non-fiction forms and also by enacting an ethnographic paradigm of articulating one culture’s subaltern “other” for another’s western cinephile elite. In the case of Apichatpong’s cinema, one could say that the “ethnographicness” in his films is in large part a product of a cosmopolitan style that implies a foreign (an “other”) reader. By working in a cosmopolitan film mode –not only in the formal experimentation, but also reflected in the films’ foreign funding and distribution channels– Apichatpong caters to a foreign audience, much like the traditional ethnographer making films of foreign cultures for the western academic reader (most often for anthropology students). Apichatpong’s success is then in many respects the result of delivering the exotic, the foreign, the “other,” to the west in the form of an ethnographic or “cultural style.” This style is defined in part by the sense in which the films’ attempt to represent a site of authentic “Thainess,” insomuch as this site is discursively articulated (in Thai studies discourse, as well as in public life and pop
culture) as rural Thai in opposition to city or cosmopolitan Thai. And yet his
classification as a filmmaker is negotiated: if it can be shown that his films are intended
to empower the Thai subaltern, giving them voice and directing attention to their way of
life in Thailand and elsewhere, then we could label him an “indigenous” filmmaker
(MacDougall 96). And it is most likely this perception that enhances his reception in the
west and encourages foreign funding –in some sense a kind of “ideological patronage.”
So it would appear that the wider attention brought to Thai national filmmaking from his
notoriety abroad is a greater help than any oppositional cultural critiques made by the
films themselves, reinforcing the need to understand his works in their local/global
implications.

The ethnographic-ness of these films, and in general the reliance on documentary
modes of observing culture, implicate the ideals of sharing, teaching, and communicating
culture. As Wilton Martinez claims, the “ethnographic film has the potential to expand
students’ cross-cultural understanding and thus trigger new forms of consciousness”
(139). So this thesis has argued for an appreciation of the films’ messages of
understanding traditional forms of knowledge reflected in a submission to liminal states
and the holistic submission to the senses in nature. I have also suggested the manner in
which one might interpret these messages as depending on stereotypes of the primitive.
Apichatpong’s films deploy a society/nature dialectic as a critique of the oppressive and
marginalizing forces of economic development, tending to associate liberation with the
stripping of socio-cultural accretions and a return to primeval states of sensual awe, fear,
or merely pleasure. Martinez describes the concept of the primitive as “both an
essentialist presence—an ‘original’ and ‘basic’ form of life characterized by instinct and survival—and as a ‘lack’ or regressive absence, signaled by a lack of culture, of development” (146). However, representing the primitive outside of the confines of strict ethnographic filmmaking in some sense eliminates the problematics of mis-representing members of a foreign culture. That is, one wonders how productive it is to ask, “is it somehow irresponsible to closely associate the primitive with Thailand?” and in particular with the films’ tendency towards associating the primitive with marginal and working class Thai? One could be reasonably assured that the cinephile “interpretive community” (Fish) would appreciate the films from an “oppositional” or at least “negotiated” ideological perspective with regard to ethnocentric stereotyping or “misinterpretations.” Would playing these in the local multiplex result in “hegemonic” “misinterpretations” of the films’ meanings (Hall 167-76)? These questions are asked in order to assert the potential limitations of the films if they are to be understood as sharing, if not teaching, alternative or oppositional values of knowing in the age of the economic commodity spectacle.

But it is also unfair to reduce Apichatpong’s cinema to the politics of cross-cultural reception. On some basic level this thesis has been motivated by the excitement of having my institutionally conditioned parameters of “reading” a film challenged, and thus my subject position fundamentally altered. As much as these films may play into a form of “primitivist fantasy” (perhaps more pronounced outside of Thailand, but maybe not), they are still radical departures from mainstream narrative cinema and significant in their potential to inspire and inform original work and structural experimentation elsewhere.
This departure from narrative convention is in large part due to working in an ethnographic paradigm –the artist as ethnographer– and consummating disparate modes in an extraordinary “cultural style.” In many respects it was my condition of “not understanding” that impelled me to “put the films to work” (Rorty 93). As Dudley Andrew put it, “the point of departure for hermeneutics couldn’t be more evident: what do we have to do when we don’t understand what we read?” (62). As suggested earlier, the upheavals in ethnography surrounding the “crisis in representation” were largely an impetus to promote the production of alternative ways of “reading culture,” perhaps the most appropriate critical imperative with which to assign some interpretive specificity and overall meaning to these works. The value in generating new forms of “writing culture” –something this thesis has propounded as a productive lens for treating Apichatpong’s cinema– significantly implicate the critical role of interpretation in the continuous defining and redefining of culture (and also represents a significant disciplinary shift in anthropology and a reorientation within the art world). I suspect that the convergences and blurring of ethnography with other modes of filmmaking is closely related to a desire to engage the critical anthropologist in all of us, above and beyond those with field notebooks and disciplinary license. For if the “crisis in representation” was about acknowledging that there exists a vast body of (written and filmed) expressed anthropology, there are latent second and third anthropologies that are largely unexpressed by mainstream and even typical art film fare, something that Apichatpong’s cinematic sensorium is ample proof of.
References


166-176.


**Filmography**

