

Communication and Memory Studies in Apichatpong Weerasethakul's Film

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Abstract

As Thai and ASEAN films, Apichatpong Weerasethakul's films have various scopes of communication and memory started from intrapersonal communication to interpersonal communication, cultural communication and the other communication about culture. Simultaneously, they also reflect dimensions of memory in the light of director's memory and characters' memory in the screenplay started from individual memory to social memory, communicative memory and cultural memory. The flow of memorization is considered as distinctiveness originating identity of memory based on rebounded flow of communication in various levels. This primary analysis would become the example for studying on the relationship between communication, memory, and meaning of films.

Keywords: Communication, Memory Studies, Southeast Asian Cinema, Apichatpong Weerasethakul

Introduction

From his first film, *Mysterious Object at Noon* released in 2000, the name of a film director, Apichatpong Weerasethakul has become in the public eye of the world's film industry as the new generation film director from Thailand with unique original story and distinctive storytelling. Even in 2016, his films still motivate art of films continuously. During over these ten years, Apichatpong's works have been able to grab several important awards from many film festivals, especially Palm D'Or from Cannes Film Festival (from *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*). In addition, three of his films are also ranked in 100 Greatest Films of the 21st Century of BBC (*Tropical Malady*, *Syndromes and a Century* and *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*).

Apichatpong's works have been criticized in various points of view including "semi-experimental" storytelling and slow cinema, content on gender of characters, characteristics of "marginalization" shown in political messages hidden in stories, and Thainess requiring extensive discussion. This is because those methods of storytelling are not under fixed formula or they may be not commercial films that can be understood easily. Consequently, his works have been criticized as "Arts" with strange characteristics. However, in another perspective, those works mention characters who are "villagers" living in rural areas of Thailand plus with presentation in the form of Realism or even Magical Realism² in the light of photography directing, conversation, and performance. Consequently, these films give simple reality with pure Thainess.

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² It is a kind of styles for presenting art works and media mainly emphasizing on Realism but it is inserted by some surreal situations as if black magic.

In these 6 films including *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000)³ *Blissfully Yours* (2002)⁴ *Tropical Malady* (2004)⁵ *Syndromes and a Century* (2006)⁶ *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010)⁷, and *Cemetery of Splendor* (2015)⁸, it was not only presenting Thainess through stories of main characters that are considered as the way of life related to locality, there is also professional status that has been familiar with people in rural areas, for example, farmers, workers, doctors, nurses, patients, and conjurors. However, there are several times that their stories are overlapped with those of neighboring countries in ASEAN including the characters of aliens in *Blissfully Yours* or reference to his memory in the past related to local history that was related to neighboring countries, for example, the story of state marshals and communists in *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*

The characteristics of storytelling which are not limited at current stories but expanded to be further until they can be woven as the network of relationship between past and present. The convergence of this place and other places leading to the basic finding showing that analysis on Apichatpong's films has the perspective on "Memory" surrounding the characters. It is very interesting that such memory is shown in which form, for example, flashback stories, legends, hearsays, dreams, or even the gesture of thinking. Importantly, such memory is also related to a group of people or any event in the past. When considering on political dimensions through memory, there are some interesting influences, for example, a literature called "Counter-memory: Replaying Political Violence in Thai Digital Cinema" of Malinee Khumsupa & Sudarat Musikawong (2016)⁹ represented that this memory was related to political violence and it also served as the mouthpiece for communicating adverse contents.

In some researches of some westerners on Apichatpong's films, Daniel Grinberg (2015)¹⁰ gave his opinions that the use of context on time was considered as the important element of storytelling and stories in films, especially connecting such element with contemporary characteristics including discussion on religious issues, identity, gender of characters, and technical characteristics of the use of slides for expressing dimensions of the past as well as long take shooting leading to uniqueness of the film. However, besides dimension of time in the form of storytelling as mentioned by Grinberg, Apichatpong's are also interesting in the light of inserting time in the past, i.e., "memory", in his storytelling as mentioned further.

³ *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000) is about a trip throughout Thailand that was shot in the form of documentary presented through hearsays of people.

⁴ *Blissfully Yours* (2002) presents love of a young Thai woman and a young Myanmar man who were traveling to picnic at the border of both countries.

⁵ *Tropical Malady* (2004) is about love of a young soldier and a young employee of an ice factory before travelling to a forest with wild and cruel tigers.

⁶ *Syndromes and a Century* (2006) imitates the love life happened in a hospital of persons who would become the parents of the director.

⁷ *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010) is a film related to the terminal of Uncle Boonmee who can recall his various part lives.

⁸ *Cemetery of Splendor* (2015) presents strange illness of soldiers in a hospital under care of a voluntary aunt and a conjuror.

⁹ Read from Issue 20, *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia*, September 2016

¹⁰ Accessed from http://www.tft.ucla.edu/mediascape/Fall2015_TimeAndTimeAgain.html

Memory Studies and Communication

The study on memory or “Memory Studies” was emerged by social and cultural phenomena as concluded by Natthanai Prasannam (2014)¹¹ and Astrid Erll (2011)¹² to have 2 phenomena as follows:

1) Historical changing due to the loss of memory of humans who have to pass on their memory in the past making us to rely on historical records helping to pass on memories leading to various perspectives towards any story in the past;

2) Development of academic field leading to branches of study on the past originating post-modernism vision what is not considered the past as “reality” but “reformation of the past” is also interested.

When reviewing knowledge on “memory” through the concept of Jan Assmann (2008)¹³, it was found that memory relates to humans in 3 levels as shown in the Table below:

Level	Time	Identity	Memory
Inner (neuro-mental)	inner, subjective time	inner self	individual memory
Social	social time	social self, person as carrier of social roles	communicative memory
Cultural	historical, mythical, cultural time	cultural identity	cultural memory

Table1: Human’s Memory’s Levels by Jan Assmann (2008)

From the above Table, it is found that the lowest level of memory that is explained in autobiography is inner level of each individual that was related to brain and nervous systems. In communication, it is classified as intra-personal communication. The following level is social level and memory in this level is originated by communication and social interaction enabling humans to live their social life and live together in the form of group and society. The highest level is cultural level that is collectively owned by a group of people in any culture and it also consumes long and extensive period from perception on history, background, tales, and construction of culture up till now as long as we can feel that such memory “is ours”.

However, cultural memory is considered as a form of “collective memory” in the light of collective memory of a group of people who live together with the same cultural characteristics and identity. However, another implication of “collective memory is not included with the scope of tradition, transmitting, and passing on in the same meaning with that of “culture” that has been inherited until it becomes the big tale of such culture. Accordingly, to make explanation clearly, Jan Assmann (2008) proposed the use of the term, “communicative memory”, for explaining differences of long-term cultural memory in big scale with memory of a group of people in moderate society inherited through communication for 3-4 generations.

¹¹ From a review article of a book called Memory in Culture published in Journal of Humanities, 21st Year, Vol. 2 (July – December 2014). In this regard, the author would like to thank Associate Professor Natthanai Prasannam for suggestions on this article.

¹² Erll, Astrid.2011. Memory in Culture. Translated by Sara B. Young. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

¹³ From Cultural Memory Studies. An Interdisciplinary Handbook, Berlin, New York 2008, p. 109-118

As mentioned, the term, Cultural Memory (it is spelled by the capital C and M) has the status as an institution that can be inherited from generation to generation for long period with tradition, ceremonies, activities, and patterns. On the other hand, Communicative Memory is not in the form of institution and it is not related to learning institution without emphasizing on time transmitting, and fostering by experts. However, it is present in daily interaction and communication as well as retrospective investigation that is not over than a few generations or not over than 80 years as shown in the Table below.

	Communicative Memory	Cultural Memory
Content	History in the frame of autobiographical memory, recent past	Mythical history, events in absolute past
Forms	Informal traditions and genres of everyday communication	High degree of formation, ceremonial communication
Media	Living, embodied memory, communication in vernacular language	Mediated in texts, icons, dances, rituals, and performances of various kinds:, “classical” or otherwise formalized language (s)
Time structure	80-100 years, a moving horizon of 3-4 interacting generations	Absolute past, mythical primordial time, “300 years”
Participation structure	Diffuse	Specialized carriers of memory, hierarchically structured

Table 2: Comparison between Cultural Memory and Communicative memory by Jan Assmann (2008)

However, Assmann accepted that this table with Binary Opposition was out of date because there is tendency of variety that is beyond binary opposition, especially emergence of media in communication culture such as films and televisions that can keep the past leading to dazzling between modern media to exist for hundred years until it becomes the cultural tale. Moreover, when considering on traditional Cultural Memory of Assmann, it was found that it emphasized on long-term past and legends that have been inherited as the symbol and tradition of the society.

To analyze films through this “Memory Studies” concept should be started from using the term, cultural memory, with broad meaning as the first step then it had to be screened and addressed as follows:

1. Which content should be presented.
2. What is a format of expression on memory.
3. How such characteristics connect with communication characteristics.
4. Which “meaning” is brought when films serve as a kind of story.

Films and Memory

Apichatpong’s films reflected variety of memory in the light of contents, issues, and memory forms. As a result, to open the space of such valuable memory, the examples of basic analysis are presented in order to show which kind of memory that is kept in the films of this film director.

From Autobiographical Memory: Childhood Life

Most memories in Apichatpong's films are based on autobiographical memory that is considered as the memory with time territories connected throughout the generation, especially by raising a time of his childhood as the foundation of the stories in his films as he gave the interview in isaanrecord.com website as shown below:

“Most of my films are created from my memory when I was growing up in Khon Kaen province. For scenery and buildings, I intend to insert the image of Isan in my films because I think they are charisma of this region.”

“In my childhood, I spent most of my time at a hospital because my family lived in an official residence for physicians in such hospital's area.”

“In the subsequent period, when I earned higher budget for producing films, I started to think that I wished to make my films closer to Isan region like a scene in *Syndromes and a Century*, i.e., half of this film was shot in Isan. For *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*, 95% of such film was shot in Isan while my latest film, *Cemetery of Splendor*, was wholly shot in Khon Kaen.”

The elements that are considered as the main memory presented by the director through most of his films are characters who are physicians, hospital and clinic settings, Isan rural scenery¹⁴, forest and stream, living of people in communities with public park as background. These emphasize on communication of autobiographical stories that are not over than a generation and it is also able to be inherited from a person through his/her own telling.

When considering on memory framework of this film producer, these stories are in the form of short-term applied memory and it is not upgraded as cultural memory with the manner of institution. On the other hand, it is just the individual memory that is presented through media with the manner of mass media responsibility to reproduce and inherit such memory not to be longer than basic communication occurred in daily life by attaching to other stories that are gathered as a film.

In collective memory: Isan's Local Areas and Others

For smaller units like “stories” told in films, the producer presents “collective memory” of a group of people by inserting it as the “stories told by characters” that have been inherited in communities and societies including collective memory of a group of people that is mutually presented in order to enable film producers to arrange from one person to another person without any fixed pattern. In *Mysterious Object at Noon*, a local legend on a novice, a pond, and an uncle who can reincarnate as well as some mysterious stories of tigers and a person with black magic in the forest as shown in *Tropical Malady*, a strange story mixed between memory and self-imagination of monks in *Syndrome and a Century*, reincarnation leading to the past of battle occurred in Isan region and emphasis on current political violence of *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*, diaries of patients and conjuring for reincarnating to history of places in *Cemetery of Splendor*. These stories emphasize on the purpose of collective memory in community through different methods.

¹⁴ Isan region or northern part of Thailand is consisted of 20 provinces with boundaries next to neighboring countries including Laos and Cambodia that are considered as countries with similar demographic characteristics and landscape.

The appearances of these memories are both in the form of memory stored in brain and inherited through hearsays, for example, legends in *Tropical Malady*, hearsays of life in *Mysterious Object at Noon*, self-thinking on identity and marginalization in *Blissfully Yours*, to the media that started to be serious works such as photography through actions of the characters in *Cemetery of Splendor* and *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*, a large photo of Field Marshall Sarit Thanarat located in some places such as a canteen of a hospital in *Cemetery of Splendor*, a song in *Tropical Malady* and *Syndromes and a Century*, or motion and sound from a television on political situation in *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*.

Some parts of these memories may be related to power dimension as shown in the case of films referring to social, cultural, economic, and political situations in both short and long term period including communist suppression, contemporary political violence, problems on aliens, difficulty of living of grassroots. This can be said that Apichatpong has selected to present these things in various dimensions and media through Isan scenery that emphasizes that the shapes of collective memory are various and can be shown at any time.

Long-Term Memory: Dreams and Imagination

“Dreams”, “Imagination”, and “reincarnation” are always the important elements of Apichatpong’s films. Silent kisses and loving whisper with the scenery of the border of two countries in *Blissfully Yours* allowing audiences to interpret that those characters were thinking of their memories and future. Staring of a character to audiences as shown in *Tropical Malady* and *Syndromes and a Century* is in the manner of communicate with audiences in the form of face to face communication that helps to stimulate imagination and build special thinking moment. On the other hand, unique memory as if it is from a distant world was shown clearly in *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* and *Cemetery of Splendor* in the light of reincarnation and conjuring. Although the latter group is in the form of communication integrated with Intrapersonal Communication.

Simultaneously, sleeping and dreaming is another way for memory management because it is considered as the asylum of memory and it is also the appropriate environment for creating imagination that is over than reality as shown in the interview of the director as follows:

“My films have various forms of borders, for example, border between dead and living people as well as border between daily life and dreams.

“For example, some Isan local tales are full of imagination and belief on spirit therefore it seems like Isan people, as same as me, do not live our life in one dimension only but in the reality and various dreams. These things could be dreams, supernatural stories, spiritual stories, and dreams of better life.

“When you are unable to do anything with it, you just sleep. This is another way to escape from the real world to dream world. I have started to use this theme for my films since the film called *Blissfully Yours*.

“There was a kind of craziness in the former projects because I am often interested in sleeping as a form of escape. I also studied on sickness related to sleeping and I found several cases of soldiers who had to suffer from such sickness during World War II.”

It is interesting that communication levels started to return to Intrapersonal Communication level again in the event of dreams, reincarnation, and imagination overlapped with autobiographical communication. Apichatpong's films do not limit the boundary of each communication level separately because such condition brings surrounding people to participate as witnesses like the case of interpersonal communication, cultural communication and the other communication about culture as shown in *Cemetery of Splendor*. Actually, such communication method is in the manner of flowing to all communication levels and everything can be happened. This reflects freedom of communication and this communication is considered as the important carrier of memory.

Conclusion of Films, Communication, and Memory

From Apichatpong's films, it is found that mixing communication with memory is considered as interdisciplinary and openness of new perspectives on films imagination (especially in the case of Apichatpong's films that are always analyzed in the form of storytelling, symbols, and power) by integrating with memory studies. Simultaneously, memory studies also shows boarder potential with expansion based on communication dimension.

We can find that smaller scale of memory that is present everywhere in individual level and autobiographical level is upgraded as storytelling without explicit background and it is stored in the form of films using international storytelling methods. Simultaneously, when mixing with inherited cultural treasure as Culture Memory (including legends, long-term memory), Apichatpong's films are in the form of multiple appearances of memory. Moreover, when mixing variety together and driving with surreal imagination, such stories give clever uniqueness. Therefore, the storytelling formula driven by individual memory and intrapersonal communication is expanded to become cultural memory with integration of cultural legends before returning to the use of interpersonal memory for driving imagination, time travel to former life or thinking of future.

As a result, Apichatpong's films have relied on driven of various forms of memory and many scales of communication supporting the story to be passed on to several generations through time. In this article, it is films that are considered as the container of huge amount of small scales of various types of communication leading to the meaning of stories that is beyond normal time. In addition, such stories would become international without attaching to any period specifically although some parts of such stories may be limited by the scope of time as defined in the stories clearly.

Communication and memory in this film seems to be consistent with indication of Assmann (2008) firstly indicating that transition from autobiography and communicative memory in a few generations to cultural memory was interesting. Transition from unimportant thing to the center of attraction represents something and all of these should be merged by media and communication field. Consequently, we could see influences between "memory" and "communication" leading to boarder dimensions of thinking and analysis.

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