The “Strange” Dis/ability Affects and Sexual Politics of Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s Transient Bodies

by Brian Bergen-Aurand

Bodies must remain within certain boundaries, and their “leakage” beyond such parameters violates social expectations of properity (the appropriate self-mastery of one’s bodily functions, fluids, and abilities).

— Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell, *Crip Theory: Cultural Locations of Disability"

Following Sedgwick on queerness— we might say that disability refers to the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, discontinuities and resonances, lapses and excess of meaning when the constituent elements of body, mental, or behavioral functioning aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically.

— Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory"

Independent filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul (born 1970 to ethnic-Chinese parents in the North East of Thailand) has composed seven critically acclaimed feature-length films and more than forty-five short films, videos, and photography installations since the early 1990s. He has won the *Un certain regard* prize (2002), *Prix du jury* (2004), and *Palme d’or* (2010) at the Cannes film festival. In 1999, he co-founded Kick the Machine, which has produced a significant number of important experimental films and videos and other Thai visual arts projects. The company has also readily available for observation in culture. To a great extent, film’s seduction hinges on securing audience interest through the address of that which is constructed as “outside” a common visual field. (157-8)

The relationship between dis/ability and normate film seduction is founded in the play of the game of fort/da: absence/presence. Within specific cinematic traditions of “body genres,” the display of (visible) disability functions as off-limits in public spaces garners the capital of the unfamiliar. Film promotes its status as a desirable cultural product partly through its willingness to recirculate bodies typically concealed from view. In this way, the clotting of disabled people from public observation exacts a double marginality: disability extracts one from participation while also turning that palpable absence into the terms of one’s exoticism. Film spectators arrive at the screen prepared to glimpse the extraordinary body displayed for moments of uninterrupted visual access—a practice shared by clinical assessment rituals associated with the medical gaze. Consequently, the “normative” viewing instance is conceived as that which is readily available for observation in culture. To a great extent, film’s seduction hinges on securing audience interest through the address of that which is constructed as “outside” a common visual field. (157-8)

The relationship between dis/ability and normate film seduction is founded in the play of the game of fort/da: absence/presence. Within specific cinematic traditions of “body genres,” the display of (visible) disability functions through the “closeting of disabled people.” These films do not simply “represent” or depict disabled bodies but do they engage in crip seduction— the deployment of “leaking” bodily functions, fluids, and abilities that aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically in order to complicate the expected relations among filmic narrarive, desire, corporeality, and disability? In “Body Genres and Disability Sensations: ‘The Challenge of the New Disability Documentary Cinema,’” from *Crip Theory*, Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell establish the terms of our discussion of filmic seduction in relation to functional structures across cinematic “body genres.”

Here, in addressing these deployments, it is a question of the circulation of sex and disability in and through Apichatpong’s body of work in terms of the border zone perceptions they project. How do these films sex disability? How do they disable sex? In other words, how do they engage in crip seduction—the deployment of “leaking” bodily functions, fluids, and abilities that aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically in order to complicate the expected relations among filmic narrative, desire, corporeality, and disability? (157-8)
Thus, oscillating between looking and caring—rather bodies in their transience between looking and caring.

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ation, are seductive and queer. Because they interrupt the normate closeting that provides the “blank” backdrop on which to project such estranged, exoticized bodies and because their intervention counts the contradictions of medicalized surveillance by putting that very surveillance under examination, ultimately, Apichatpong’s crisis seduction, by associating disability and desire (rather than disability and disgust), provokes us to think the condition of the cinema in terms of such an association: the dis/abled condition that marks all of cinema.

First, since there are many disabled bodies in Apichatpong’s films, and since this display of disability is mundanely contextualized by his deployment of disabled bodies in the quotidian in his cinema, they interrupt the tradition of “closeting” before it begins. Apichatpong’s films deploy the most ordinary of disabled bodies and, thus, resist the perpetuation of the medical gaze. Ultimately, Apichatpong’s crisis seduction, by associating disability and desire (rather than disability and disgust), provocates us to think the condition of the cinema in terms of such an association: the dis/abled condition that marks all of cinema.

A statement has been published that 75 per cent of the recruits offering for the Canadian forces are afflicted with tobacco heart and “moving-picture eye.” One of these disabilities is pretty well known; the other sounds novel—and stranger than the first. I think the Thai title of this film, which means “Flickergraph,” gives a clue to this concern for the relation between disability and cinema. Apichatpong traces a line connecting cinema and disability, where the disabled is always already cinematic and the cinematic always already disabled. Apichatpong’s play of fantastical displacements between spectacularly excessive/lacking bodies is the condition of the cinema for Apichatpong. Composing such bodies is the condition for composing film, and such acts are always already a type of malady founded in “freak” vision. Apichatpong is thinking about bodily transformation, filmicizing x bodymaking, and a certain composition enables a certain composition. In this way, crisp seduc-

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dine, death, monsters and the unnatural in contact with nature throughout Apichatpong’s oeuvre—amor-

ties, curiosities, freaks and neo-freaks, monsters, and deformed, disfigured hybrids that compose the malady, the ill condition (male habitus) of the ethics of the cinema.

Similarly, in the catalog he composed for an exhibi-
tion of his work at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, entitled For Tomorrow For Tonight, Apichatpong returns to this concern for the relation between disability and cinema for the condition for film through a prominent citation of a medical piece from an early twentieth-cen-
tury newspaper article. On the inside back cover of the catalog, Apichatpong reproduces an article from the 24 December 1910 Poverty Bay Herald entitled “Moving Picture Eye.” The article begins:

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certain fatigue of the eyes, and more or less persistent ocular troubles.”

According to the report, the cinematic experience is directly related to this “malady” of luminous impressions that may range from mild and temporary “lachrymation (watering of eyes) and photophobia (dread and intolerance of light)” to “a true conjunctivitis” with long-term effects traceable to the “defective ocular muscles” of some film viewers. These defects or impairments are then brought to light by the disabling effects of the cinematic experience. As Barraclough claims, “Bright and strongly illuminated images are more fatiguing than others, and most fatiguing of all is the abrupt transmission from black to white and from dark to light.” This “retinal fatigue” is exacerbated by older prints with worn sprocket holes and poor projection techniques. Here, in the cinematic experience, as examined by this article and highlighted by Apichatpong’s display of the article, is the confluence of disability and film brought together in the cinematic experience, where “In most of the cases treated, however, it was found that there were muscular defects in the eyes which the action of the cinematograph accentuated.” What better way to describe the experience of the cinema than as fatiguing? What better way to describe the address of that fatigue brought about through Apichatpong’s own films? This is not just to say, as the authenticator makes disability a theme of his films or that his films reveal authentic images of disability on screen. Rather, it is to offer the thesis that Apichatpong’s films engage in crisp seduction to frame (rather than shun) the play between “ability” and “disability” as the ill condition that makes cinema possible.

Mysterious Object at Noon

“Once upon a time ...” This early title appearing on screen links Mysterious Object at Noon to fairy tales and Thai radio soap operas. The film’s opening credits present the sequence of a car and then truck driving through the countryside connects the film to road stories and travel narratives. Eventually, the vehicle stops, and we hear a heart-rending confession by a road story participant. The film evokes no pity, no inspiration, no story about a boy in a wheelchair, told by people from throughout Thailand, the boundary between reality and fakery becomes more porous. In this way, as Apichatpong deploys the standard disability narrative practice of the “sensational confession,” where the disabled character reveals the particular trauma that led her to be disabled under a certain institutional regime, he interrupts it and, in so doing, instead puts the practice and its narrative structures on display, exposing it to our diagnosis.

As the woman begins the next story, the film cuts to an interior shot of a boy sitting in a wheelchair at a table. His tutor/teacher, Dogfahr, stands to his right, attends to him, showing him several photographs. The storyteller explains his condition: he cannot leave this space, so his tutor brings him pictures of the world outside his house. Here, in Apichatpong’s first feature film, traumatized and disabled bodies are deployed and despectacularized. From the start, the film evokes no pity, no inspiration, no story “despite,” no narrative of overcoming. Instead, the film depicts people creating rather than only consuming their own pop-media “radio soap operas” as they tell stories about this boy and Dogfahr. The stories regard the relation between the boy and the young woman and interrupt crude and super-crit narratives. They replace such narratives with stories of the itinerancy of their embodiments and the itinerant situatedness of disability in its relation to dependency and heteronomy. Rather than dwelling on the boy’s separation and isolation, the film deploys the boy’s use of the wheelchair as the link between him and Dogfahr, as the prosthetic device that conditions their relation. Thus, the film imagines the human relation as dependent upon the situation of the boy’s impairment and its location within the habitation of the house, as the ill condition (male habitus ) for his relation with Dogfahr and the other children who visit him at home.

In one way, this focus connects with David Teh’s analysis of Mysterious Object at Noon in “Itinerant Cinema,” where he argues, “For all the dreaminess of his films, the unconscious that Apichatpong taps—or that taps him—is as much collectivize as it is individual” (604). It is linked more to Bataille’s social “vague orientation,” according to Teh because it also breaks with prioritizing individualism. Mysterious Object at Noon focuses on collective narration and characterization. Multiple voices narrate the central story, the story of a relation made possible through this “vague orientation” of crisp seduction—relations conditioned by the alien bodies—emphasizing the heteronomy of such situations as the ill condition (male habitus ) that connect rather than separate people. Furthermore, Teh finds Apichatpong’s work “deliberately incriminating and equivocal,” its “stance irreducible,” with a “non-committal position,” “unfixed perspective,” “and a logic of itinerancy,” which aligns it closely with Thai traditions of nivist or travel poetry (605). The filmmaker within the film travels across Thailand, asking each participant to extend the story of Dogfahr and the boy. These are itinerant moving images. They evoke, according to Teh, a “psychology of displacement” and “melancholy of separation” (606). They provoke a cinematic encounter effused with “longing,” “displacement,” and “yearning” (607). Yet, they deny fixing that yearning, binding it to any monocural embodiment. Here, the film traces a line between not only visible disability and the “retinal fatigue” of the cinematic experience but also between disability and this cinema of itinerancy, these improper bodies and their depictions on screen. In the end, Teh stresses this relation between conditions. And it is in this history of resistance—resistance to fixity and certitude—that Apichatpong’s work may finally come to rest. A history without dates, a map without place-names, a documentary without facts, Dogfahr dramatizes this condition, prompting a reconsideration of the epistemological status not just of film, but of narrative per se. (609)

However, it is possible to suggest, that it is not Dogfahr alone who dramatizes this condition but, rather, the relation between Dogfahr and the boy—their connection through the excessive prosthesis of the wheelchair and the impairment that provokes it—that this condition’s epistemological leakage that signals as well ethical, disability, and sexual linkages.

Blissfully Yours

Made mildly infamous by its full frontal male nudity and vivid (if somewhat obscured) sex scenes, this film deploys longing shots of a male body as seen from the points of view of a female doctor, or a male lover to construct an intimate and positioned spectators. Additionally, this male body and its illness are exposed to desire and regard from the beginning, establishing the film’s overall interruption of the regimes of traditional body genres.

Min has illegally crossed the Burmese border into Thailand to seek work, but he has developed a skin ailment that forces him to seek medical advice, along with a medical certificate for employment. Rong has brought Min in for his medical consultation. She dislikes her husband and looks after and at Min. After the consultation, Min sits in a waiting area where a man caresses his leg while asking him to stay for lunch. Later, he speaks with Orn, his girlfriend who has paid Rong to help keep his illegal status a secret. Orn and Min drive into the jungle, where he strips to his boxer shorts to cool off, and they share an intimate picnic. Min remains in his boxes throughout the rest of the film. Rong and her clandestine lover appear in an adjacent part of the forest, where someone steals their motorbike while they make love. A short while later, Orn performs oral on Min, while Roong watches from afar. Eventually, the two women swim in the jungle pool they have been sitting beside.

Throughout the film, everyone stares at Min. Many of the characters touch him or caress his skin. His tattered and positioned spectators. Additionally, this male body and its illness are exposed to desire and regard from the beginning, establishing the film’s overall interruption of the regimes of traditional body genres.
Blissfully Yours

Tropical Malady

other films: “December 2003. Min is in Bangkok while waiting for work at a casino on the Thai-Cambodian border. Roong got back together with her boyfriend and they sell noodles in a town not far from Bangkok. Orn continues working as an extra in Thai movies.” Again, it can be a real or fiction.

Directly connecting disability (or, at least, ailment) and sex, Blissfully Yours opens with the scene of a medical examination that invokes political and carnal inspections as well. Three women—Orn, the doctor, and her assistant—survey the body and health of a Burmese man with psoriasis. He does not speak; he rarely speaks throughout the film. He is a body to be examined, yet, this examination and its ill condition are never separated from the ethics of crib seduction deployed. After his diagnosis is complete, Min remains under medical, political, and carnal examination as the women and men in the film look after/at him—often combining bashful admiration for his physique with concerned caregiving for his medical and political condition. Orn repeatedly asks the doctor for the medical certificate that would allow Min to work at a local factory. And, Orn's request turns the doctor's look from one of medical supervision to political surveillance. The doctor must see proper identification to verify his status or she cannot issue the certificate. As well, in the middle of this conversation, Orn asks if she might become addicted to the sedatives the doctor has prescribed her. Orn wants to have a baby, but the medication makes her sleepy and greatly diminishes her libido. The doctor seems surprised that Orn, a middle-aged woman, would still want to have a baby, but assures her that if she follows the instructions, she will not become addicted to the medications. In this scene, the doctor associates age and (sexual) ability to Min while associating age and (sexual) disability to Orn, while the film connects medicine to (procreative) sexual activity. Further, against assumed narratives of desexualized disability, Blissfully Yours connects the salve/solution for Min's psoriasis to his sexuality when Min and Roong are Blissfully Yours Tropical Malady— a film focused on the disabling effects of desire. A young soldier, Keng (Banlop Lomnoi), becomes obsessed with a young man from the country, Tong (Sadka Kaewbuadee). Through the first half of the movie, their relationship develops around simple, well-lighted meetings in town, sharing and trading everyday objects, the singing of Thai pop songs, and small gestures and embraces that navigate among their passions, their uncertainties, and their bodies. At one point the two enjoy a quiet moment sitting on a sala in the forest. Keng asks Tong if he can rest his head in his lap. Tong says, “No …” Keng is disappointed and pulls away. Tong continues by explaining he was about to say “No problem,” but he hesitated. As Keng rests his head in Tong's lap, he tells Tong that when he gave him that Crash cassette, he forgot also to give Tong his heart, so now he is sending it to him. He reaches to touch Tong's shoulder. After a moment, Tong says he can feel the gift of Keng's heart coming to him. Soon, a woman appears and asks if they want flowers. In another scene, the two young men watching a movie in a theater. We never see the images they are watching but hear the soundtrack while the camera cuts between different views of the theater audience. As Keng and Tong begin to relax and enjoy the film, Keng puts his hand on Tong's knee and slides it up his inner thigh. Tong responds by trapping Keng's hand between his legs. They laugh quietly as they tussle erotically until Tong puts his arm around Keng's shoulders and Keng grabs his hand. The scene cuts to Tong in the men's room, flirting with another man. In a third scene, Keng watches Tong urinate on the side of the road, and when Tong walks back to him, Keng grabs his hand and begins kissing it. Tong protests that he has not washed his hands, but Keng continues. Then, Tong takes Keng's hand and begins kissing and licking it. He stops, lets Keng's hand fall, smiles, turns, and walks away. While not engaging visible disability directly, Malady assays the excessive embodiment associating disability and sexuality throughout these films.

As Tropical Malady “drifts” through a minute-long fade to black at the half-way point, it shifts from this difficult courtship tale to further its assessment through a fantastic conceptualization of the lovesickness it has already deployed. In “Spirit’s Path,” the title of the second half of the film, the soldier (Banlop Lomnoi) pursues the shaman/tiger (Sadka Kaewbuadee) who has been killing cows and terrorizing local farmers. (We are never quite certain if these two characters are or are not Keng and Tong again, but the two stories reflexively comment upon one another.) As the soldier struggles to catch the tiger/spirit, he loses communication with headquarters, runs out of provisions, and becomes evermore frustrated and agitated. Eventually, a baboon cautions the soldier over the complexity of this malady, warning him that the shaman/tiger considers the soldier his “companion” and his “prey.” The baboon continues to explain there are two outcomes possible in this situation. If the soldier kills the tiger/shaman, the soldier will free him. If the soldier lets the shaman/tiger eat him, the soldier will join him. One night, as the soldier becomes more frenzied, he encounters the tiger/spirit again in a tree above him. They stare at one another. The soldier brandishes his knife. The spirit/tiger speaks to him: And now … I see myself here. My mother. My father. Fear. Sadness. It was all so real … so real that … they brought me to life. Once I’ve devoured your soul, we are neither animal nor human. Stop breathing. I miss you … soldier.

The camera pans the dark jungle and cuts to a drawn image of a tiger in a tree, his exceptionally long tongue reaching to a soldier on the ground below him. We hear the soldier’s voice on the soundtrack: “Monster, I give you my spirit, my flesh, and my memories.” The film cuts to a close-up of the soldier’s face. Tears stream down his cheeks. The voiceover continues, “Every drop of my blood sings-out song. A song of happiness.” The film cuts to a shot of trees blown in the wind. “There … Do you hear it?” asks the soldier’s voice. Here, seduction is crippling, interrupts social expectations of propriety, and exposes bodies to border zone perceptions—the leakages between human/animal, self/other, and ability/disability. Constituent elements of bodily, mental, and behavioral functioning violate the parameters of signification as desire disables and the only situation allowing for perception is the very border zone of excess, the ill condition (male habitus) of bodily functions, fluids, and abilities out of control. This is the malady of the concurrence of excessive desire and corporeality.
 Syndromes and a Century

A syndrome is a set of medical signs and symptoms that are correlated with each other and, often, with a specific disease. The word derives from the Greek συνάρμολος, meaning concurrence. Syndromes and a Century is a film where the first and second halves mirror one another and sometimes echo or reflect each other word-for-word and situation-for-situation. The two main characters—Dr. Toey and Dr. Nohng—recall Apichatpong's parents, who met while working in a hospital. The first half of the film focuses on Dr. Toey and her position in a rural clinic not unlike where Apichatpong was born and raised. The second half follows Dr. Nohng through an urban medical center and rehabilitation center. With this film again, Apichatpong associates medicine and eroticism, disease and desire, disability and seduction as the ill condition of the cinema by complicating the epistemological authority of medical inspection and interrupting the closeting/exposing relevant to body genres.

In part one, Dr. Toey interviews Dr. Nohng, who studied pharmacy but switched to medicine so he could spend more time interacting with patients. Toey assigns Nohng to new duties in the emergency ward and then proceeds with her day. She attends to an elder monk with joint pain and sleepless nights, who tries to talk her into giving him medicine for his companions and the community. In another scene, she inquires after some money she has loaned. Later, she negotiates the gifts, amorous pleas, and marriage proposal of Toa, to whom she recounts her past experience of unrequited love with an orchid expert named Sakda, whom she meets at the orchid farm. Elsewhere, a dentist, Dr. Ple—who sings Thai Western songs—develops an attraction to his patient Sakda—a younger monk who wants to be a DJ. After meeting again at an outdoor night concert where Ple is singing, the two talk of death, love, and their past lives as Ple tries to give Sakda several tokens of his affection but she only politely accepts it and continues with her day. Nohng walks through the hospital and talks with a friend who is a colleague. They consult on treating Off's carbon monoxide poisoning, a discussion which leads to Nohng and Off's intimate conversation in a hallway—confirming that lesson a certain ambiguity to Nohng's detachment and erection in the final scene with Joy. Throughout this portion of the film, Apichatpong eschews any spectacular revelation of disability and desire and its renegotiation of current film narratives that would pathologize such associations. Its display of disability and medical surveillance again resist the closeting/revealing dynamics, and its focusing on age and intimacy as well as polyvalent desire interrupt monological signification fixing images for inspection. In both these gestures, Boozone returns us to Cultural Disabilities of Disability.

In the case of disability, we exist in our bodies by negotiating a cultural repertoire of images that threaten to mire us in debilitating narratives of dysfunction and pathology. By contesting and expanding a representational repertoire of images in culture (even by virtue of shoring up the inadequacies of our current narrative possibilities), we also create space for alternative possibilities for imagining embodied experience itself. (169)

Despite their never directly addressing films such as Apichatpong's, Snyder and Mitchell describe in detail how such crisp seduction marks the sleek surface of normativity by recalling the ill condition fundamental to it. Our encounter with such cinema remains always already heteronomous—neither bound nor monological. The point is not in narratives of overcoming, trajectories beginning with “desire,” or inspirational stories. Rather, as Apichatpong shows us, the condition of the cinema is always already nonnormative, one founded on illness, ailments, impairments, defects. What we need do is attend to this dis/abling, regard this border zone perception that is strange, transient, and always already arousing.

All images courtesy of KIK the Machine Films.

References

Uncle Boozone Who Can Recall His Past Lives

Although Uncle Boozone Who Can Recall His Past Lives, produced and directed by Apichatpong Weerasethalak, is a complex disabled embodiment in the manner of the earlier films, it does depict chronic pain, terminal illness, and scarification in a related manner. Like Tropical Malady, particularly, Uncle Boozone assesses the regimes of body genres and the response of crisp seduction through a reconsideration of corporeality and desire. Uncle Boozone is a widower who returns to northeast Thailand to prepare for death. He is joined in his preparations by his sister-in-law Jen, his cousin Tong, his Laotian medical assistant Jai, the ghost of his deceased wife, Huay, who has returned to help him through the transition from life to death, and an ape-like being who is Boosong, his long-lost son who has become a monkey spirit. Halfway through, the film cuts to a fantasy about a princess who weds a catfish and creates love with her pool, she sees her face transform, for a moment, so the scars are smoothed over. Then, she wades into the tidal pool and offers herself to a catfish, with which she shares in a sexual epiphany. As with the other films considered here, Boozone deploys an alternative possibility for imagining embodied experience through its association of disability and desire and its renegotiation of current film narratives that would pathologize such associations. Its display of disability and medical surveillance again resist the closeting/revealing dynamics, and its focusing on age and intimacy as well as polyvalent desire interrupt monological signification fixing images for inspection. In both these gestures, Boozone returns us to Cultural Disabilities of Disability.

Uncle Boozone Who Can Recall His Past Lives

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Despite their never directly addressing films such as Apichatpong's, Snyder and Mitchell describe in detail how such crisp seduction marks the sleek surface of normativity by recalling the ill condition fundamental to it. Our encounter with such cinema remains always already heteronomous—neither bound nor monological. The point is not in narratives of overcoming, trajectories beginning with “desire,” or inspirational stories. Rather, as Apichatpong shows us, the condition of the cinema is always already nonnormative, one founded on illness, ailments, impairments, defects. What we need do is attend to this dis/abling, regard this border zone perception that is strange, transient, and always already arousing.

All images courtesy of KIK the Machine Films.

References