



2020 HAWAII UNIVERSITY INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES
ARTS, HUMANITIES, SOCIAL SCIENCES, & EDUCATION JANUARY 6 - 8, 2020
HAWAII PRINCE HOTEL WAIKIKI, HONOLULU, HAWAII

BLURRED BOUNDARIES BETWEEN DREAMS AND WAKING LIFE IN WEERASETHAKUL'S CEMETERY OF SPLENDOR



CHAN, SHIN YING CINDY
CONTEMPORARY ARTS DEPARTMENT
SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY
VANCOUVER, BRITISH COLUMBIA
CANADA

Ms. Shin Ying Cindy Chan
Contemporary Arts Department
Simon Fraser University
Vancouver, British Columbia
Canada

Blurred Boundaries Between Dreams and Waking Life in Weerasethakul's Cemetery of Splendor

Synopsis:

Cemetery of Splendor (2015), by Thai filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul, depicts the spiritual relationship between humans, nature, and spirits and blurs the boundaries between dreams and waking life. Interestingly, this Thai film resonates with North American Indigenous belief systems, especially the Ojibwe traditional belief in the reality of dreams and spirits. Also, the Thai government's treatment of the soldiers and the land in the film can be linked to other governments' unjust treatment of Indigenous people and the over-extraction of natural resources. Cemetery of Splendor, in light of Ojibwe thought, tells us we must see the world as a whole—past and future, animate and inanimate, dreaming and awake.

**Blurred Boundaries Between Dreams and Waking Life in
Weerasethakul's *Cemetery of Splendor***

By Cindy Chan

© Cindy Chan
Fall 2019 Simon Fraser University

Copyright in this work rests with the author. Please ensure that any reproduction or re-use is done in accordance with the relevant national copyright legislation.

Introduction

Dreams only present the past and future. However, films connect the past and future in a present moment for people to explore the three moments in time at the same time. Achipatpong Weerasethakul's live action Thai film titled *Cemetery of Splendor* (2015) depicts the complex relationship between dreams and waking life through spirits, nature, objects, and humans. The film presents a dreamlike plot that recalls the Thai people's history of suffering and foresees an unpredictable future. It illustrates how the lives of Thai citizens and land rights become obsolete and insignificant under Thailand's political dictatorship. Similarly, North American Indigenous people have been stripped of their rightful land ownership, while colonization and deforestation have damaged the natural environment.¹ The effects of deforestation demonstrate that the decision-making of the Canadian and Thai governments threaten the inhabitants of these countries. Weerasethakul challenges the political and social issues of Thailand in the *Cemetery of Splendor*. I apply a cosmopolitan approach to analyze this Thai film, using North American Indigenous spiritual beliefs. Although the film incorporates Thai religious beliefs and culture, I bring together the Thai film with North American Indigenous beliefs, specifically traditional Ojibwe to present a new perspective on the dreamlike scenes. Thai and Southeast Asian countries have similar beliefs in that they believe in a connection between dreams and waking life, such as the fable of the butterfly dream from Chinese classical philosopher Zhuang Zi.² However, I propose that Ojibwe traditional thought also offers a valuable method to analyse this film because Thai and Indigenous people share a similar culture, habits, and spiritual beliefs. Also, they face similar environmental, political, and social issues.

Although previous scholars discuss the dreamlike quality of *Cemetery of Splendor*, they tend to focus on transgender issues and cinematic methods in the dreamlike scenes.³ Cosmopolitanism is a new method to explore the Thai film with North American Indigenous beliefs regarding dreams and spirits. I utilize Indigenous beliefs, especially those of the

¹ Sean Cubitt. *Finite Media: Environmental Implications of Digital Technologies* (London, England: Duke University Press, 2017), 42.

² Zhihua Yao. "I Have Lost Me': Zhuangzi's Butterfly Dream: I Have Lost Me," in *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 40, no. 3-4 (2013): 511-26. This parable challenges people's perspectives on whether Zhuangzi is the butterfly or not in the dream. Butterflies are transformed from humans in the dream or at death. Therefore, this parable presents that humans' spirits can possess insects.

³ Prathna Lor. "Daydreaming Transgender in Cemetery of Splendor." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 3 (2018): 394-403. Prathna argues that Keng has the potential of becoming a lesbian and present a transgender dream through the presentation of the film.

⁴ Lee Marshall. "Cemetery of Splendor: To Dream with the Ancient Kings." *Queen's Quarterly* 123, no. 2 (2016): 230-41. This article only describes the plot and the cinematic methods of the scene.

Ojibwe people of the Great Lakes region of North America, to analyze this Thai film because of the Ojibwe spiritual belief of dreams and spirits, and its worldview of environmental aesthetics. *Cemetery of Splendor* blurs the boundaries between dreams and waking life, and resonates with the Indigenous Ojibwe belief system. As this film is a medium to present the future world in a dreamlike method, I attempt to increase public awareness of the current environmental and social issues. This paper demonstrates that this Thai film interconnects with the beliefs of North American Indigenous people who are also facing equivalent ecological and social issues.

First, I will briefly introduce animism and explore North American Indigenous beliefs of spiritual life from the Ojibwe tradition. Dreams serve as a path to connect with ancestors and spiritual objects, which exhibit human behaviour but they are intangible. Examining the environment aesthetics will assist in revealing knowledge and help illustrate the intimate relationship between humans, nature, and spirituality in dreams. Furthermore, Chinese “soft film theory” will be used to analyze the aesthetic elements of the film.

Animism

Animists believe that everything in the world has a soul or spirit, personality and can be worshiped, for instance, mountains, rivers, lakes, wind, rain, animals, and plants. This is a significant concept of religion in primordial anthropology, which was developed by the founder of anthropology, Edward Burnett Tylor.⁵ Animism attributes spirits or souls to nature and ancestors. The spirits and souls can influence other natural phenomena such as thunder. For example, according to Graham Harvey, Ojibwe people believe that thunder likes birds because they both fly in the sky and shift to another location while the weather is changing.⁶ Spirits not only appear in humans but also occur in various creatures and materials. For instance, a stone can move like a human and have a physical connection with humans.⁷ The animist can communicate with the personhood of everything through listening, speaking, and touching.⁸ Drawing on Descola, humans and non-humans have the same presence of lived behaviour such as companionship and enmity although they have different physical appearances.⁹ Nature, animals, and objects are regarded as having the same humans’ value

⁵ Graham Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (London: Hurst & Co, 2005), xix.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁷ Nurit Bird-David, “Animism” Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology.” (Current Anthropology, 1999), S74.

⁸ Graham Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (London: Hurst & Co, 2005), 102-104.

⁹ Philippe Descola, “Human Natures.” *Social Anthropology* 17, no. 2 (2009): 151.

and rights, as well as consciousness and a mind. Many unknown creatures or spirits appear in various forms in the world that are beyond humans' expectations.

Scholars have observed animistic elements in Weerasethakul's previous films, such as *Tropical Malady*. Anderson discusses this Thai film with his friend Ben Abel, who lives in the jungle and was raised by an animist grandfather.¹⁰ Abel has a higher sensation to feel and listens to the sound of nature in the dark forest. He can listen to different signals such as warning, escaping, and hunting that are given off by animals.¹¹ Nature, animals, and humans can listen and communicate with each other. Moreover, Stern introduces the term "new animism" by analysing *Tropical Malady*.¹² By explaining new animism as a shift from metaphysical to the materialist, Stern argues that objects such as a walkie talkie are an animistic medium to connect events, humans, animals, and spirits.¹³ I discover similar relationships between objects and creatures in *Cemetery of Splendour*.

Ojibwe Belief

The animistic theory is similar to Indigenous spiritual beliefs, which share the same spiritual concept that everything has its existence and values in the world. The traditional Thai Indigenous people mostly believe in spirits, whose supernatural powers can control the world. For instance, the inhabitants of northeastern Thai worship Pu Ta spirits (tree spirits).¹⁴ The Thai Indigenous people have an intimate relationship between the plants and animals in the forest. They seek permission and protection from the Pu Ta spirits. After foreign cultures were introduced into Thai society, the Thai people have mostly ascribed to a combination of animism, Theravada Buddhism, and Brahmanism.¹⁵

¹⁰ Benedict R. O' G. Anderson, "The Strange Story of A Strange Beast: Receptions in Thailand of Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Sat Pralaat*," in *Glimpses of Freedom: Independent Cinema in Southeast Asia*, edited by May Adadol Ingawanij, and Benjamin McKay (New York: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 2012), 153.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 155.

¹² Lesley Stern. "Once I've Devoured Your Soul We Are Neither Animal nor Human." *The Cine-Files* 10, (2016): 15. <http://www.thecine-files.com/once-ive-devoured-your-soul>.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁴ Boonyong Kettate. "The Ancestral Spirit Forest (Don Pu Ta)² and the Role Behavior of Elders (Thao Cham) in Northeastern Thailand," in *Journal of the Siam Society* 88.1 & 2 (2000), 96. http://www.siamese-heritage.org/jsspdf/1991/JSS_088_01_BoonyongKettate_AncestralSpiritForest.pdf. Pu Ta spirits are also known as Ho Pu Ta, San Pu Ta, Tup Pu Ta, or Hong Pu Ta. The sacred place is known as Pu Ta, Ton Pu Ta or Dong Pu Ta. They are in two types of architecture style: 1) a single pillar to support a small house, and 2) four pillars to support the scared place.

¹⁵ Patchanee Malikhao. *Culture and Communication in Thailand*. Singapore: Springer, 2017, 1. Although animism, Theravada Buddhism, and Brahmanism have various components, some of the elements overlap with each other.

Traditional Thai spiritual beliefs are similar to the North American Indigenous belief system, which believes supernatural powers are in the world.¹⁶ According to David C. Posthumus, Lakota, Dakota, Sioux, and Ojibwe tribes believe that spirits and souls exist in everything and that dreams influence people's lives.¹⁷ Within these Indigenous tribes, it seemed to me that the Ojibwe people's beliefs about dreams and spirits are most relevant spiritual that parallel to this Thai film for reasons I outline below.

The Ojibwe (also known as Chippewa, Ojibwa, and Ojibway) are an Indigenous people, which include people of mixed descent. Currently there are approximately 190,000 Ojibwe living in both Canada and the United States.¹⁸ The Ojibwe nation grew geographically within North America (spanning the northern region of Lake Huron to eastern Lake Superior and across the Michigan Peninsula) from the early 17th century to the 19th century.¹⁹ A small number of Ojibwe people resided and maintained a fur trade in Edmonton and Lesser Slave Lake. When the trading conditions worsened, the Ojibwe dispersed into various provinces in North America.²⁰ However, their spiritual beliefs remained the same.

Traditionally, Ojibwe people believe that they can communicate with their ancestors and foresee the future in dreams. They can connect with any creatures, and nature, without the boundaries of time and space. Dreams serve as a channel to facilitate communication with nonhumans to disclose social behaviour and values.²¹ Interpreting Pomedli's argument, humans' past or future experiences is presence in dreams and visions.²² Drawing on many sources, Posthumus shows that Ojibwe people believe that dreams foresee the future.²³ Humans' experience, perception, or spirit possession creates dreams. Humans' dreams may dream of different creatures and objects. For Posthumus, humans who dream about a bear or a stone have the abilities to cure or divine.²⁴ These people have extra power to help or anticipate the future through dreaming.

¹⁶ Ibid., 54.

¹⁷ David C. Posthumus, *All My Relatives: Exploring Lakota Ontology, Belief, and Ritual* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018), 139. David C. Posthumus is an anthropologist, who researches on Native North America.

¹⁸ "Ojibwe History," last modified June 21, 2000, <http://www.tolatsga.org/ojib.html>.

¹⁹ Michael M. Pomedli. *Living with Animals: Ojibwe Spirit Powers* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), xxvii.

²⁰ Ibid., xxviii.

²¹ Ibid., 142.

²² Ibid., 93. Dreams connect reality through the myth, dreams, and visions.

²³ David C. Posthumus, *All My Relatives: Exploring Lakota Ontology, Belief, and Ritual* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018), 136.

²⁴ Ibid., 150.

Moreover, the Ojibwe elders recommend keeping dreams as a secret and to avoid sharing them with others. Thus, the Great Spirit (Manito) will be with the dreamers.²⁵ The god of Ojibwe will have a personal conversation with the dreamers.

Posthumus introduces Hallowell's statement on Ojibwe's spiritual perspective:

We must conclude that all animate beings of the person class are unified conceptually in Ojibwe thinking because they have a similar structure— an inner vital part that is enduring and an outward form which can change. Vital personal attributes such as sentience, volition, memory, speech are not dependent upon outward appearance but upon the inner vital essence of being. If this be true, human beings and other- than- human persons are alike in another way. The human self does not die; it continues its existence in another place, after the body is buried in the grave (1960, 42– 43).²⁶

These accounts suggest that the Ojibwe people respect all animate beings, which have a reason to exist on this earth, and have spirits the same as humans. The outer appearance is only a temporary vessel to hold the spirit, but the inner vital essence of sensibility and experience remains the same.²⁷ For instance, humans only occupy the physical body during their lifetime. Thus, their spirits will exist in another location after they are dead. Dead spirits may communicate with people in dreams or even transform into people. The dead souls exist in dreams, visions and other various ways.²⁸ Therefore, dreams and visions are produced by connecting with ancestors through dreams.

In the Ojibwe understanding, spirits can leave the bodies and enter any kind of objects, nature, and creatures. For instance, stones will become alive if the thunders invade them.²⁹ Interpreting Tim Ingold's concept of persons into Ojibwe belief, persons can be animals, humans, natural phenomena; in other words, persons can be in waking life, dreams, and myths in the Ojibwe communities.³⁰ A person can act like a human who has movement

²⁵ Ruth Landes. *Ojibwa Religion and the Midéwiwin* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968), 9. Referring to *Dictionary*, Manito (also known as manitou), "a supernatural being that controls nature; a spirit, deity, or object that possesses supernatural power." <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/manito>

²⁶ David C. Posthumus, *All My Relatives: Exploring Lakota Ontology, Belief, and Ritual* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018), 29.

²⁷ Philippe Descola, "Human Natures." *Social Anthropology* 17, no. 2 (2009): 151-152.

²⁸ Graham Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (London: Hurst & Co, 2005), 135. This is Tylor's identification of death spirits.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 37. The power of thunders invades to stones. Consequently, the stones can move, speak, and listen. Also, they are treated as humans in Ojibwe communities.

³⁰ Tim Ingold. "The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill." In *Chapter Six: A circumpolar night's dream* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000), 91. Ingold's research is about the relationship between humans, animals, and nature. In this quote, he states that persons can be animals, objects, and plants.

and spirit with self-consciousness. To a large extent, this example proposes that spirits possess inanimate beings.

Environmental Aesthetics

Both animists and Indigenous people treasure and appreciate natural wealth. They believe that humans and the environment are interdependent. Humans rely on natural resources, such as water, soil, and sun, to survive, and every natural resource is useful in the land. Canadian Ojibwe writer Richard Wagamese wrote a story about how the Indigenous people live self-sufficiently by using the natural resources of the land. In one of his stories, the protagonist makes a fire with branches and says, “Everything you need is here. You just have to trust the land.”³¹ Traditionally, Indigenous people trust nature and satisfy their needs through the natural environment. Furthermore, the Ojibwe people hold the belief that since land and nature existed before humans, humans are the natural world keepers and have the responsibility to live in harmony with nature.³² Environmental aesthetics balance the complexity of humans’ judgment such as their experiences, strategies, and habits to identify the composition of nature.

I adopt notions of environmental aesthetics to explain the scenes in *Cemetery of Splendor*. At the same time, soft film theory can support my argument on how people threaten the natural world in the film. According to the “soft film theory” of 1930s China, the cinematic experience is predominantly aesthetic. As Victor Fan argues, the concept of “approaching reality” allows spectators to apprehend an event in the moment it actually happens.³³ The cinematographic image is an imaginary scene, which exercises spectators’ aesthetic experience and helps them to appreciate the narrative in films. Soft film theory believes that the aesthetic is the most vital element to determine the film’s value, not the content. The theory is a method to educate people about the beauty of nature and argue that one must have a pure soul to understand the cinematographic image.

Soft film theory stimulates me to explore the environmental aesthetics perspective in the film. Environmental aesthetics combines art philosophy and perspectives of natural beauty to demonstrate the importance of understanding the relationship between humans and

³¹ Richard Wagamese, *One Story, One Song*. (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2011), 69.

³² Thomas D Peacock, and Marlene Wisuri. *Ojibwe Waasa Inaabidaa = We Look in All Directions*. Foreword by Winona LaDuke. 1st ed. (Minnesota: Afton Historical Society Press, 2002), 43.

³³ Victor Fan. “Soft Film Theory: Life in All Its Presence and Concreteness.” In *Cinema Approaching Reality: Locating Chinese Film Theory*. (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 83. Hou Yao and Gu Kenfu investigated on approaching reality in the 1920s. According to the notion of approaching reality, cinema creates an aesthetic experience that combines the pace of life.

natural environments.³⁴ This philosophy draws humans' attention to the natural world, landscape, and people's daily life. Humans become aware that their behavior will affect their surrounding environment.

Animism, Ojibwe beliefs, and environmental aesthetics are interrelated to each other. Although animism seems to be ethereal, it generates a simple idea of having souls in everything. This theory strengthens the Ojibwe beliefs in explaining how spiritual transformation is depicted in the Thai film. The tradition Ojibwe spiritual beliefs reinforce the association between dreams and waking life. Dreams and waking life are closely related because our experience and memories will affect our dreams. Moreover, dreams enable us to have an unbelievable experience, such as talking with ancestors. As trees bear witnesses to past events, they are historical facts of the current world. However, politicians and entrepreneurs tend to disregard this fact and extract natural resources. This threatening action destroys the relationship between humans and the environment. It is difficult to balance the needs of humans and the growth of the natural environment. Weerasethakul presents the dreamlike scenes for people to reflect on these issues.

Cemetery of Splendor

Cemetery of Splendor's storyline has many layers and as such the plot slowly unfolds for the audience. The film comprises affections between the characters, the belief of the goddess, the treasure of the natural world, and the Thai political crisis of 2014. The film is set in a rural ancient hospital in the city of Khon Kaen in the northeast of Thailand. Jenjira, a hospital volunteer, and whose right leg is grossly enlarged and ten centimeters shorter than her left leg because of an accident. Her personal experience creates a connection to the Itt, an ex-soldier with a sleeping illness, whom she takes care of in the hospital. Jenjira learns the past of Itt through Kent, a psychic, who can sense and communicate with spirits. They walk through the forest, and discover that the ancient palace has been demolished.

The unpredictable scenes produce dreamlike perspectives while the characters can shift their spirits and traverse space-time. As with Ojibwe beliefs, in the film dreams exist as though in waking life because humans have the same senses in dreams as in waking states. In this half-dream state, dreamers may dissolve the impression of self-awareness and uncover

³⁴ Ronald W. Hepburn, "Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty," in *British Analytical Philosophy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), 287. For instance, nature's shapes and colours influence human sensations. Therefore, these aesthetic components are the path to communicate with humans about the natural environment.

new knowledge. To demonstrate that dreams and waking life are connected and share the same universe, I will discuss several scenes from the film.

Two Young Ladies



Figure 1. *The conversation between the three ladies*

In one scene, two young ladies visit Jenjira and sit next to her in a kiosk near the hospital. We realize that they are the goddesses from the shrine she visited a few days ago, come to life. They wear pearl jewelry on their ears and neck, and their hair cascades down their back, like the goddess statues at the shrine. The two ladies thank Jenjira for offering the miniature gibbon statues to the shrine. Jenjira is surprised at the understanding of the two ladies. Jenjira pulls away from them when they disclose the truth of their identities to her. The filmmaker intentionally makes use of the natural backlighting of the park. Because of this backlighting, the three ladies have silhouetted faces, which creates a mysterious like feeling during their conversation.

The goddesses appear to possess large amounts of power because they can transform their physical appearances to look like humans. As well, they tell Jenjira that the former kings used the sick soldiers' power to fight the ancient wars. Because of this, the sick soldiers were often asleep, unable to wake up and recover from the illness. Although the two ladies both possess humans' outlook, they are very different creatures. As with Ojibwe beliefs, a person can be in any form and appear in various places.³⁵ The goddesses disguise their being with

³⁵ Tim Ingold, "The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill," in *Chapter Six: A circumpolar night's dream* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000), 94.

clothing and human bodies. The conversation between the two ladies is unrealistic or even a dream to Jenjira. I am curious as to how the goddesses can look and act like humans. They must have observed human behaviour for a long period of time.

In another shot of the scene, a park with dinosaur figures is shown before and after the ladies' conversation at the kiosk. The dinosaur figures create a dreamlike approach because the asymmetrical and irrelevant dinosaurs produce an informal landscape view of the garden. The sculptures look like the guardian to protect the creatures at the shrine. They generate an antihuman atmosphere and prevent humans from entering the shrine. However, the ladies ignore this bizarre feeling and sit inside the wooden kiosk. The scene shows that a dinosaur looks at the shrine of the left-hand side of the camera. It seems to examine the safety of the shrine and protect the goddesses from dangers. I feel intrigued by how loyalty the dinosaur is, which disregards the weather conditions and the changes in time. Moreover, the dinosaurs' static postures lead me to think of the figurines that people offer at the goddesses' shrine. Though not only the goddesses transform into humans, but the gibbon also transforms into a dinosaur. The outer appearance transformation tends to be common at the dreamy hospital site.

The Hospital Ward



Figure 2. The nighttime of the hospital ward

The next scene presents the immense contrast between the continuously changing coloured lighting machines in the hospital ward while the patients are sleeping deeply during

the night. The four ceiling fans are the only moving objects. The lighting machines align in diagonal lines and run parallel with the symmetrical beds to generate a dynamic composition. The ward's setting produces a continuous flow of the images in the dark room. The colours of the common objects create a sense of weirdness in a natural position. Colour evokes resonance with memories and senses and establishes inner synesthetic resonance in a visual image.³⁶ The colored lights are like musical instruments: they perform a mute concert with psychedelic colours. The undulated colours appease the sleeping patients' souls, creating a surreal atmosphere at the dark eerie hospital. The coloured lighting machines are the protagonists, which stimulate a troubling emotional response in me.

The machines are social agents which dominate the patients' behaviour. As animistic theory argues, such objects can be considered persons if they show liveliness in their behaviour.³⁷ The machines change their position from object to subject. An animist approach, such as that proposed by Graham Harvey, spiritual objects are inconclusively human, but they can "feel and express their emotions, passions and reasoning."³⁸ The colours of the lighting machines seem to sync with the patients' emotions and energetic spirits, as though they are alive and sensing. The cool colours represent the patients' low-temper and depression. In contrast, the warm colors symbolize their high-temper and joyfulness. Although the patients sleep steadily in their beds, the colour is the only dialogue in the film. The old kings' spirit manipulates the patients to fight in the battle. The colour tends to be the emotion of the patients. On the contrary, the patients' bodies appear to be immobile objects, which are containers to hold the patients' spirits. Their spirits perhaps emerging to the lighting machines because the machines are alive through the connection with the patients. The Ojibwe concept of dream explains that the soul and spirit possess the object.³⁹

Writing of Ojibwe belief, Posthumus argues that "the virtual reality of dreams provided access to the domain of nonhuman spirit persons, pure interiorities, where appearances were not always as they seemed."⁴⁰ Humans' spirit possession occurs in nature, animals, and inanimate objects. Similarly, it appears that patients are enchanted in their

³⁶ Patricia Pisters, "Orchestration of the Senses in Yellow: Eisenstein's Fourth Dimension, Memory, and Mirror-Touch Synaesthesia," in *Mirror-Touch Synaesthesia: Thresholds of Empathy with Art*, ed. Daria Martin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 76-79.

³⁷ David C. Posthumus. *All My Relatives: Exploring Lakota Ontology, Belief, and Ritual* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018), 110. Objects can become agents of the god to communicate with the people.

³⁸ Graham Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (London: Hurst & Co, 2005), 170.

³⁹ Richard Wagamese, *Runaway Dreams: Poems* (Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2011), 22.

⁴⁰ David C. Posthumus. *All My Relatives: Exploring Lakota Ontology, Belief, and Ritual* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018), 143.

dreams, and their spirits are occupied. Their wants and desires can be fulfilled in dreams. Hence, they refuse to wake up and deal with the complex situation of their societies. Moreover, the cicadas' songs surround the hospital, for it is the summer season in Thailand. The sound produces a secretive sense of the unknown world outside of the ward.

The nighttime hospital ward creates a mysterious atmosphere because Jenjira is only there during the daytime. Using Jenjira's lens of dreaming, I see the dark hospital. I wonder whether I am inside Jenjira's dream after she visits the hospital. The dreamlike scene seems to manifest Jenjira's memory, which transforms the scenery of the patients in the ward into her dream and shifts day to night. I agree with Ingold that "[t]he awareness of the self is as phenomenally real when one is dreaming as when one is awake, and these dream experiences are built into the constitution of the self by memory processes that are no different from those working on the experiences of waking life."⁴¹ This suggests that one's experience in dreams and waking life is the same. As an audience member, I cannot distinguish the scene that happens in reality or under the dream of Jenjira. The coloured lighting machines seem to be a clue for me to understand that this scene happens in a dream. The machines are either steady or without colours in the daytime while Jenjira focuses on taking care of Itt. The active coloured lighting machines represent the patients' spirits, which escape from the patients' immobile bodies when they are sleeping at night. As a spectator, I follow the flow of the moving image and gradually become one of the patients, whose spirits move freely in this dreamlike scene.

Spiritual Transformation

In the third scene, Keng touches the hand of Itt, the ex-soldier, while he is sleeping, and the spirit of ancient dead kings enters her body. A spirit immerses in another person's body through intimate touching. The characters perform naturally in this miraculous scene; there is no animation to suggest the spiritual transformation. However, Keng said "hello" to Jenjira in a man format. Keng speaks "sawasdee krab" (male tone) instead of "sawasdee ka" (female tone). Then, Keng mentions that she is in the Thai palace while she is sitting at the kisok. These facts demonstrate that the spirit of ancient dead kings is inside Keng's body. The spirit guides Jenjira slowly into the forest to explain the historical geography of the hospital. In turn, it seems that Itt's spirit is controlled by the spirit of an ancient dead soldier.

⁴¹ Tim Ingold, "The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill," in *Chapter Six: A circumpolar night's dream* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000), 101. The experience creates dreams and waking lives that are parts of a persons' memory.

This spirit shares his experience with Jenjira about the former Thai palace that is now the hospital where the sleeping soldiers lie. The spirit is the ancient dead kings, who absorb the patients power to fight for the ancient war. The event is similar to an Indigenous fable, *Stone Boy*.⁴² In this fable, the evil's breath absorbs the boys into the cherry stone. Both Keng and evil use their sensations to control the spirits. However, one directly enters the body and the other possesses an inanimate object respectively. Also, the spirit in the film manipulates the physical body and explores the forest.



Figure 3. The ancient spirit of dead kings reacts to Jenjira

Keng leads Jenjira to sit down on a stone bench in the forest. Jenjira unreservedly reveals the ugly scars on her right leg that was burnt in a car accident. Deep and frightening scars are on her thigh, and her right leg is quite swollen and ten centimetres shorter than her left leg. Jenjira is nervous about Keng's reaction to her leg. However, Keng is not afraid of her scarred leg at all, and she gently touches Jenjira's leg. Keng kneels in front of Jenjira and leans forward towards Jenjira. Then, Keng pours liquid from a bottle onto Jenjira's disabled right leg, and massages it. Although Jenjira tells Keng that her leg has bacteria, Keng continues to kiss her leg gently. Jenjira closes her eyes and starts to cry out. She feels cared

⁴² David C. Posthumus. *All My Relatives: Exploring Lakota Ontology, Belief, and Ritual* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018), 94.

for and touched, while Keng is kissing her leg. This scene invites us to feel empathy for Jenjira.

As an audience member, Keng's empathetic emotion and solicitous reaction affected me. I feel touched because the soldier's spirit that possessed Keng's body has a pure and beautiful soul, one which overcomes his pride by kneeling in front of a woman. As Thai people believe that masculine has power over feminine⁴³, this action breaks down the hierarchy between males and females, and spirits and humans. This scene teaches me, through this aesthetic experience, to desire social transformation. The scene produces a cross-subject understanding. The communication of life relates to real contact rather than invisible contact. The forest enhances the intimacy between nature and the characters.

The Location of the Hospital

The characters share their personal experiences and maintain an intimate relationship with the forest. The forest setting illuminates insight into the nature of this intricate relationship through the colour and the texture of the soil, the smell of the plants, and the stage of tree growth documents the natural hazards and human destruction to nature. Such insights include how the ancient dead soldier's spirit borrows Keng's body. The tree keeps a record of natural hazards. The tree silently records this flood for eternity. It has become the practical record keeper of natural disasters. Both Thai and North American Indigenous people believe that plants have god-like essences and because of this they worship and hold intricate ceremonies to celebrate them. Indigenous people believe that a dark marked tree trunk represents the water level during the massive flooding some years ago, and communicates with the people about the history of Thailand. Through walking in the forest, the conversation between Jenjira and the spirit of ancient dead kings tend to bring us into a dreamlike perspective, and to discover the history in Thailand. In animist views, according to Harvey, dreaming can give the power to narrate a story and discover the relationship between lands and inhabitants.⁴⁴ Nature and people are tied together in the dreamlike scene while the characters are taking a stroll in the forest.

The three iterations of this building: the palace, the school, and the present hospital, serve an integral role in the formation of Thai society. The spirit of ancient dead kings tells us that war broke out in a Thai palace on what is now the hospital grounds, and many villagers

⁴³ Patchanee Malikhao. *Culture and Communication in Thailand*. Singapore: Springer, 2017, 54.

⁴⁴ Graham Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (London: Hurst & Co, 2005), 71.

and soldiers died. Issues of war resonate with the 2014 Thai military coup, which resulted in six months of death and bloodshed.⁴⁵ This military coup inflicts political and social instability. As a result, the Thai government tried to control its citizens by enforcing a curfew in part to conceal the reality of the military control. Therefore, in this film, this building was remodelled into a school, which resonates with the Thai community development project.⁴⁶ More Buddhist institutions are built to promote the Buddhist teachings. The reformation of education ensures that the next generations can be educated according to government policy. However, the school transforms into a hospital for patients to stay and await their death. Every scene in the film is interconnected and continuously evolves. Weerasethakul depicts the spirits' region of the hospital ward through the contemporary characters and reflects the past historical tragedies in a subtle way. History has repeated itself. Now, the hospital site becomes an entrance to the dreamlike world. In turn the dream world presents the socio-political Thai history of political dictatorship and land development.

The patients in the film and in reality face a similar fight for their homeland in Thailand. They tried to protect their own land when they were soldiers in the past. However, the patients are unable to revolt due to the Thai government's implementation of military's control. Simultaneously, modern Thai people disregard and relinquish the illnesses of the ex-soldiers at the ancient hospital, with its underdeveloped medical equipment, and insufficient staff. The forty enigmatic sick soldiers relate to an event of 2012, where the Thai government failed to disclose the health issues that were afflicting its soldiers in northern Thailand.⁴⁷ Likewise, the patients are having medical treatment in a rural area in Thailand in the film. The government seems to hide the secret from the urban districts. Because of this secrecy, there is an insufficient number of doctors and nurses to take care of the ex-soldiers' patients. The Thai governments in both the film and the reality send the sick ex-soldiers to the rural area and hide their personal identities.

Not only are the Thai people confronted with unequal treatment, but the North American Indigenous people too who have been forced to sign unreasonable land treaties with the federal government. One such example is the Athabaskan tar sands issue in Alberta.

⁴⁵ Andrew Pulver, "Apichatpong Weerasethakul: My country is run by superstition", *The Guardian*, April 12, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/apr/12/apichatpong-weerasethakul-cemetery-of-splendour-thailand-interview>.

⁴⁶ Kiran Prasad, *Communication, Culture and Ecology Rethinking Sustainable Development in Asia* (Singapore: Imprint: Springer, 2018), 26. The Thai government executed a rural and community-based development during 2012–2016. This development plan covers diverse fields. One of plans is to develop sustainable education in Thailand.

⁴⁷ "Mysterious illness afflicts 40 soldiers in Northern Thailand," *Thailandnews*, June 2, 2012. <https://www.thailandnews.co/2012/06/mysterious-illness-afflicts-40-soldiers-in-northern-thailand>.

In Article 29 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, Indigenous People have the right to rectify how people use their land. However, the Canadian government added an additional agreement “that they did not accept the principle of free, prior, and informed consent”.⁴⁸ Accordingly, Indigenous Canadians are without the recourse right to ask for compensation for the damaged land and polluted water. Due to the oil industry, approximately 30% of the Indigenous inhabitants in that region have a higher cancer rate than others.⁴⁹ The extraction of natural resources impacts the environment and the inhabitants’ health.

The Construction Site



Figure 4. The environmental issues in the film

Cemetery of Splendor stimulates me as a spectator to cherish the profusion of life in its presence and concreteness. I can see and apprehend the essence of life in the cinematographic image in this scene. The ancient spirits of the dead king told Jenjira that he can view the fertile land from the throne room in the past. The verdant land is covered with green plants, and the rivers are full of fish. However, the filmmaker portrays a solitary landscape while the trees are flimsy and slim. The brown dead leaves cover up the pavement. The distinct contrast of the landscape descriptions between literal and visual stimulates me to think of how humans threaten the world. As in soft film theory, this scene is like an educational tool and presents that we share the same environmental issues whether in the film or in reality around the world.⁵⁰ This scene challenges me to see through the surface of the

⁴⁸ Sean Cubitt. *Finite Media: Environmental Implications of Digital Technologies* (London, England: Duke University Press, 2017), 42. In the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, it mentions that “Indigenous peoples have the right to redress, by means that can include restitution or, when this is not possible, just, fair and equitable compensation, for the lands, territories, and resources which they have traditionally owned or otherwise occupied or used, and which have been confiscated, taken, occupied, used or damaged without their free, prior and informed consent” (United Nations 2008).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁵⁰ Victor Fan. “Soft Film Theory: Life in All Its Presence and Concreteness.” In *Cinema Approaching Reality: Locating Chinese Film Theory*. (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 89.

solidarity landscape and study the changes of the natural world due to urban development and projects to improve the quality of life.

Close to the river, an excavator keeps digging up the football field while a group of male football players play on the uneven surface. Although this field endangers the safety of the public, the public still participate in recreational activities. The construction site may be one of the factors polluting the natural environment near the hospital because the polluted waste may seep into the water. Then, the vermin might appear and generate illness to the inhabitants of the hospital area. This result influences various species' habitats and increases their chances of having health issues. Also, a scene at the beginning of the film presents that a creature floats on the sea. Although we are unsure whether the polluted water or human factors affected the creature health, this sense tends to present that life becomes insignificant while constructors carry out massive construction. This fact proves that the water is been polluted, and excavator creates rumbles. Consequently, water and noise pollution threaten the patients' health and their sleeping habits.

On behalf of the ancient kings who control the patients' spirits, all these threatening conditions affect the patients' health. These are the other reasons to explain why the patients do not recover from the illness. Nevertheless, the negative relationship between humans and nature not only destroys the environment, but also presents that people are unaware of the natural world. Humans should balance environmental needs and human demand because the environment contains the human footprint and the earth's rich resources are not an infinite resource.

Conclusion

Indigenous beliefs help us understand the connection between dreams and waking life in the Thai film *Cemetery of Splendor*. As in Ojibwe belief, the film blurs the boundaries of dreams and waking life and treats the spiritual transformation of humans and objects as normal. This connection enabled me to investigate how the environment influences humans, nature, and spirituality that exist in dreams and waking life in the film. In addition, animistic theories shed light on the complex relationship between nature, creatures, and spirits in the film.

In later scenes in the film, Weerasethakul critiques the Thai government's treatment of the soldiers and the land by using the dreamlike scene to disclose reality in Thailand. This scene can be linked to other governments' unjust treatment of North American Indigenous people and the over extraction of natural resources. The buildings keep on demolished and rebuilt to serve the needs of people while the environment is being damaged. This scene invites me as a viewer to stay alert to

the political and ecological crisis. If not, the natural environment will become a dreamlike scene and vanish like the Thai palace in film. As we are living in the world, we have the responsibility to protect the environment, which protect our humanity.

Works Cited: Books

- Anderson, Benedict R. O' G. "The Strange story of a strange beast: Receptions in Thailand of Apichatpong Weerasethakul's Sat Pralaat." In *Glimpses of Freedom: Independent Cinema in Southeast Asia*, edited by May Adadol Ingwanij, and Benjamin McKay, 149-163. New York: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 2012.
- Bird-David, Nurit. "Animism" Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology." *Current Anthropology*, 1999, S67-91.
- Cubitt, Sean. *Finite Media: Environmental Implications of Digital Technologies*. London, England: Duke University Press, 2017.
- Descola, Philippe. "Human Natures." *Social Anthropology* 17, no. 2 (2009): 145-57.
- Fan, Victor. "Soft Film Theory: Life in All Its Presence and Concreteness." In *Cinema Approaching Reality: Locating Chinese Film Theory*, 75-108. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.
- Harvey, Graham. *Animism: Respecting the Living World*. London: Hurst & Co, 2005.
- Hepburn, Ronald W. "Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty." In *British Analytical Philosophy*, 285-310. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966.
- Ingold, Tim. "The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill." In *Chapter Six: A circumpolar night's dream*, 89-110. London; New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Kettate, Boonyong. "The Ancestral Spirit Forest (Don Pu Ta)² and the Role Behavior of Elders (Thao Cham) in Northeastern Thailand." In *Journal of the Siam Society* 88.1 & 2, 2000, 96-110. http://www.siamese-heritage.org/jsspdf/1991/JSS_088_01_BoonyongKettate_AncestralSpiritForest.pdf.
- Prasad, Kiran. *Communication, Culture and Ecology Rethinking Sustainable Development in Asia*. Singapore: Imprint: Springer, 2018.
- Landes, Ruth. *Ojibwa Religion and the Midéwiwin*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968.
- Lor, Prathna. "Daydreaming Transgender in Cemetery of Splendor." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 3 (2018): 394-403.
- Marshall, Lee. "Cemetery of Splendor: To Dream with the Ancient Kings." *Queen's Quarterly* 123, no. 2 (2016): 230-41.
- Malikhao, Patchanee. *Culture and Communication in Thailand* (Singapore: Springer, 2017), 49-69.

- “Mysterious illness afflicts 40 soldiers in Northern Thailand,” *Thailandnews*, June 2, 2012. <https://www.thailandnews.co/2012/06/mysterious-illness-afflicts-40-soldiers-in-northern-thailand>.
- Peacock, Thomas D., and Marlene Wisuri. *Ojibwe Waasa Inaabidaa = We Look in All Directions*. Foreword by Winona LaDuke. 1st ed. Minnesota: Afton Historical Society Press, 2002.
- Pisters, Patricia. “Orchestration of the Senses in Yellow: Eisenstein’s Fourth Dimension, Memory, and Mirror-Touch Synaesthesia.” In *Mirror-Touch Synaesthesia: Thresholds of Empathy with Art*, ed. Daria Martin. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.
- Pulver, Andrew. “Apichatpong Weerasethakul: My country is run by superstition,” *The Guardian*. April 12, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/apr/12/apichatpong-weerasethakul-cemetery-of-splendour-thailand-interview>.
- “Ojibwe History.” Last modified June 21, 2000. <http://www.tolatsga.org/ojib.html>.
- Pomedli, Michael M. *Living with Animals: Ojibwe Spirit Powers*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014.
- Posthumus, David C. *All My Relatives: Exploring Lakota Ontology, Belief, and Ritual*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018.
- Stern, Lesley. “Once I’ve Devoured Your Soul We Are Neither Animal nor Human.” *The Cine-Files* 10, (2016): 1-27. <http://www.thecine-files.com/once-ive-devoured-your-soul>.
- Yao, Zhihua. “‘I Have Lost Me’: Zhuangzi’s Butterfly Dream: I Have Lost Me.” In *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 40, no. 3-4 (2013): 511-26.
- Wagamese, Richard. *One Story, One Song*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2011.
- Wagamese, Richard. *Runaway Dreams: Poems*. Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2011.

Works Cited: Images

- Weerasethakul, Achipatpong. *Cemetery of Splendor*. Thailand, 2015.