

### **A Film Review: Cemetery of Splendor**

Apichatpong's Cemetery of Splendor is a film I can't say I love but it is definitely an interesting and intriguing watch in its own way that is different from any other film I've seen. It was not an exciting narrative, not much emotions, in fact its dull still beats felt disjointed, and I can't piece it together for a single takeaway, but I could see the layers of meaning that was unfolding in drips and drapes to the layman and perhaps to the one who knows its context would then see the magic and genius behind the visuals. Having heard of this famous Thai director, I do not doubt that it was a metaphorical commentary of many societal issues in Thailand.

However, what really captured me is its surreal, magical, dreamlike quality from beginning to end, in a way that the line between dream and reality blurs increasingly as the film progresses such that you forget or become confused between the two. And for this whole offbeat uneasiness to be possibly and intentionally crafted by Apichatpong through his screenplay and direction would then be rather mind-blowing for me on hindsight.

It didn't quite hit me at first, but it is after re-watching certain scenes that I realize how the film slowly affected me without me knowing. I would say it is a very meticulously and carefully planned film, because of the many elements in the story that has been homogenously woven in with the dream concept of the film.

The setup itself is not realistic, it is set fantastical and metaphorical in many ways, for example, the mysterious sleeping sickness that is happening to the soldiers, the psychic power of the lady, the made-up reality of the colourful breathing tubes, and the attraction between Jen and Itt. The unexplained nature of things force viewers to take on the absurdity as it is, as though deciphering a sci-fi film except that its not supposed to make scientific sense, but rather to understand it metaphorically. The interweaving of fantasy and reality is incepted in the mind of the audience from the onset and we learn to accept it, ignore rationality, and wait for things to unfold according to how he wants to tell the story. It is somewhat like how the character of DiCaprio said in Inception, that 'in a dream you never remember how it started' and you don't question it when you are in it but flow along with the events. That is exactly how I felt while watching this film and I can't do anything about it, or make sense of it, which is both annoying and intriguing. It doesn't help when Jen, our main protagonist, accepts everything as it is and we are made to feel that we want to empathise for her.

We were literally brought into the dreamscape in two particular scenes in the film. The first is in the scene near the start when the teacher is introduced to the hospital to teach the nurses and volunteers how to meditate. His instructions to the characters are as though speaking to the audience as well. I felt like he was speaking to me and it made me want to listen to him and close my eyes while watching the film as we see the people meditating. The second is when Keng the psychic female medium possesses Itt's spirit and talks to Jen

through her body, it was just an odd experience that went on for the next 25min of the film ending with an intimate scene where Keng caresses and kisses Jen's infected lower leg that just pushes the eccentricity of the scene further. Because of how realistic the cinematography is, with the long shots and the plain basic framing, it only adds on the unreality of the scene despite having totally absurd events. The shitting, the exercising, the dinosaurs beside the school, the rapid switching of seats especially is almost like a visual illusion where your eyes can't catch up with what you are seeing, a play on this idea where absurdity and dream is made reality and vice versa, which is how he blurs the line and creates this surreal sensation for the audience.

Even in the use of colours in the art direction, in which the blues and greens takes a very homogenous palette, adds to the monotony, rhythm and peace amidst the unreality. The vivid colours are reserved for the colourful tubes where it represents the life it gives to the paralyzed patients amidst the 'real' world of dulled colour.

I like that even though it was addressing societal issues that he expresses it in an indirect and lighthearted manner through his metaphors and dead-pan humour for example the cream sellers selling the cream to the housewives to help them with beauty and loneliness. Also, his dialogue is crafted and cut in a manner that intentionally leaves the audience hanging, leaving space for the audience to think, which is important for slow cinema.

He uses the long-shot and almost zero camera movement except for two shots in the whole film, and a lot the lack of music, score but only non-diegetic sounds, which makes his film very very still and silent, and accentuates the dreamlike quality of the film. For some reason, the stillness and silence of the film is rather immersive that it makes you feel like you are there in the hospital, a part of the space, you are observing the soldiers in the space.

I love the ending shot where the boys play soccer through the heaps of sand on the field and that revelation that Jen's eyes never blinked. A powerful ending to the film to emphasize on her continual immersion in this dreamscape, that Jen who started out helping the soldiers fall into this cemetery of splendor herself.

I guess that it why Apichatpong's cinema is ground-breaking, as he breaks that fourth wall with the audience in a very interesting way that runs within his story, as well as the treatment of the film in visuals and in sound, in time and space. There is an unconscious interaction with the audience that happens in the silence, in the seemingly lack of engagement, all very subtly affecting the mind of the audience.

And interestingly, I feel that it works particularly well for the Thai language, im not sure from a Thai's POV, but for somebody who doesn't understand Thai, the language and how it was spoken and directed has this sort of calamity and tranquil quality that only adds onto this monotone and dreamscape.

I would say that Apichatpong has a kind of quality in his work/stories that is special and uniquely Apichatpong that makes him an auteur even in the realm of Slow Cinema, let alone in the international cinema realm very evidently from his success and recognition in Cannes.

In conclusion, I actually learnt to appreciate the film a lot more after thinking and writing about it. It is hard to appreciate from the start but I guess it is as some would term it as an acquired taste. It really is more than meets the eye, which is just such a fresh and mesmerizing way to tell a story than the typical emotional drama that people love.

(1212 words)