

Acropolis Cinema presents



July 18, 2017 ~ 8:00pm ~ Downtown Independent

## ABOUT THE FILM

The delicately poetic second feature by Thai director Anocha Suwichakornpong weaves together multiple stories and characters to create a portrait of a beautiful country haunted by the lingering trauma of the 1976 government-sanctioned massacre of student demonstrators in Bangkok.

A shape-shifting narrative around memory, politics and cinema, the film weaves together the stories of several characters. We meet a young waitress serving breakfast at an idyllic country café, only to later find her employed in the busy dining room of a river cruise ship. And we meet a filmmaker interviewing an older woman whose life was transformed by the political activism of her student years and the Thammasat University massacre of 1976. With her tender, unobtrusive filmmaking style, Suwichakornpong allows us to get to know these characters slowly and deeply. At the same time, we see how their beautiful country and its troubled history inform their actions and identities in ways both overt and subtle. (KimStim)

105 min // Thailand/France/Qatar/Netherlands // 2016

### **By the Time It Gets Dark** **by James Lattimer**

*The following article was originally published in Cinema Scope 69*

It's typical of Anocha Suwichakornpong's second feature that the inspiration for its Thai title flashes past in an instant, a single fleeting image tucked away amid a stream of others. Nothing is shown out of the ordinary, just a shot out from a car on the Bangkok highway that catches a glimpse of the sign for the exit to Dao Khanong, a nondescript neighborhood on the city's outskirts. We neither see whether the car takes the exit nor where the exit might lead, but that's not the point. As in the film as a whole, the emphasis is on what's seen along the way rather than the ultimate destination, on the tension between centre and periphery, on being free to leave the path at any time. The English title evokes the same sensation via different means, referring to Yo La Tengo's version of Sandy Denny's "By the Time it Gets Dark," a song that already speaks to the uncertain course of an evening, with an extra layer of dislocation added by the fact that a cover necessarily deviates from its original path.

This original path takes the form of the somewhat linear plot that emerges at the start of the film. A film director (Visra Vichit-Vadakan) has invited a writer (Rassami Paoluengtong) active in the '70s student protest movement to stay with her at a country house to record her testimonies to later adapt them into a script. As the writer talks calmly of her political awakening, accompanied by flashbacks of her experiences, the camera is already picking out impressionistic, seemingly unrelated details: lingering views of the surrounding landscape, a shot of the writer's hand that hangs briefly in the dark, or the sort of ab-

stract play of yellow light and camera flare you might encounter in an editing suite. These visual asides begin to be accompanied by narrative ones, like when the director and the writer conduct an unusually detailed conversation about writing versus directing with a waitress (Atchara Suwan) serving them coffee. Their own exchanges deepen in parallel, as the director expresses her admiration for the writer, dismissing her own experiences as “mundane” while referring to her interviewee as living history.

As the distinction between the main thread and such digressions progressively blurs, the writer recedes from view, just as things grow ever curiozier for the director: an encounter with a child in the forest yields spatial confusion and a glittering mushroom; a silent nocturnal tea-drinking ceremony with two ghostly women; the extended confessional she delivers direct to camera about the frustrations of telekinesis. Soon the film has left behind the director entirely, passing through a rabbit hole of pure images—circling birds, blooming mould, an excerpt from a Méliès film in which mushrooms sprout on the moon—to arrive somewhere new.

The first station is a tobacco drying facility, where each stage of the process is meticulously documented, before one of the workers, later revealed to be an actor, emerges as a nominal protagonist (Arak Amornsupasiri). But the emergence of this new character hardly ushers in stability, as the film continues to swirl and fracture, deliberately smearing the line between his everyday life and the mechanics of his various acting jobs, while inserting further unexplained images at will or darting back to the previous plot, albeit with new actresses in the roles of writer and director, their more emphatic style suggesting fiction. The only constant is the waitress, a mysterious, multivalent figure toiling in the background left untouched by the terrain shifting around her, another subtle indication that the apparently mundane might be anything but.

Suwichakornpong’s debut feature *Mundane History*, the unadorned tale of the bond between a young bed-ridden man and the nurse hired to take care of him, already funneled increasing digression into its central narrative. But while that film’s segues into extended sequences of empty interiors, museum exhibits, or supernovas generate surprise and a degree of rapturous confusion at first, they do at least receive some explanatory context, most explicitly in the passing remark that the young man studied cinema, the sequences thus decipherable as films he might have made, topped off with his voiceover accordingly.

Such navigational aids are mostly notable by their absence in *By the Time it Gets Dark*, whose incessant detouring is hemmed in by motifs that pivot on atmosphere, tactility, and movement: diffused light, reflections, skin, hair, roads, birds, and the omnipresent mushrooms. This penchant for digression without explanation is characteristic of Suwichakornpong’s approach, which is akin to concealing an essay film within an ostensible fiction. While abrupt shifts in theme or tone are commonplace in, or even constitutive of, the essay film, similar shifts feel radical and even confounding when applied without warning in narrative contexts, where allowing the plot to flow undisturbed is all too often paramount. Yet this confusion is part of the strategy: when the need for immediate contextualization is suspended and the senses are given free rein, the ideas running through the underlying essay can be as much understood as they are felt. As such, the starting point for the essay at the heart of *By the Time it Gets Dark* is not spelled out explic-

-itly but merely offered up for examination in the form of the piercing scene that precedes the opening credits. A group of young people lie face down on the floor of a warehouse, shirts removed, arms bound, bodies smeared with dirt, while armed police wander among them, bellowing for them to keep to the ground. When the camera pans out to reveal a lighting rig and a woman's voice starts shouting instructions via megaphone, it becomes clear that this is a re-enactment; photographers swarm over the prone bodies, snapping black-and-white shots of their anguished gestures that are subsequently flashed on screen. The scene is an allusion to the October 6th Massacre in Bangkok in 1976, when the police joined forces with ultra right-wing groups to slaughter a group of student protesters, an atrocity that casts a long shadow but remains absent from the history books nonetheless.

How do you select the right image to fill such a gap? While these photographs offer one alternative, there are infinite other images that might equally suffice, whether casually captured or intentionally conceived, all in varying degrees of the oblique and the direct. The essay here is about nothing other than the process of sifting through different types of images accordingly; if, as the director suggests, a life is living history, hypothetically at least all images are potentially relevant. The film's restless digression is merely the formal expression of this idea, for once you start looking for one image, others will inevitably distract you along the way. In the film's second half, pop videos, direct testimonies to the camera, alternate versions of scenes, flight simulator footage, and film colour-grading sessions vie for attention, like witnessing someone get deliberately lost in an endless stream of visual information. No wonder the digital image starts breaking up at the end of the film, as if the resultant glitching were caused by all the other information pressing up against it.

Just like the motivation for the film's title, the essay's defining statement is tucked away within the flow of images, just before the end, when we finally return to the writer. She talks of going downstairs the morning after the massacre, of turning on the television and watching bodies being pushed to the ground, of seeing the image of people being burned. With so many images having already been sifted through, it's no coincidence that it's the one left unseen that stands out. Perhaps that's the point here, that an image can be felt and even described, but that doesn't mean it can be properly replicated or shown. When the writer talks of the sensation of seeing images pass before her, it's reminiscent of how *By the Time it Gets Dark* itself is experienced, even if the feelings conjured up are different. It's this connection that's at once the most subtle and most fundamental of all, the idea that history and cinema unfold in the same tense, each a string of living images that feel like the present, but are always at a remove from it, nothing but an assurance that "something had been happening" at a given moment. Perhaps that's why cinema is so well-suited to depicting history, because neither can be truly grasped. There's never just a single image, for each is inseparable from all the others. ♦



@AcropolisCinema



/AcropolisCinema



AcropolisCinema@gmail.com

[www.acropoliscinema.com](http://www.acropoliscinema.com)