

# CONTEMPORARY CINEMA AND THE LOGIC OF THE BUILDING

The Case of Apichatpong Weerasethakul's  
*Loong Boonmee raleuk chat*

 **CARLOS NATÁLIO**

Universidade Nova de Lisboa,  
NOVA Institute of Communication  
carlosnatalio1@gmail.com

## ABSTRACT

This paper problematizes the use of the concept of contemporary to describe a specific *modus operandi* of a group of directors and films that no longer identify with the characteristics of modern cinema. Using the symbolic date of 9/11 as an historical decisive moment, we take as an example of this cinema, *Loong Boonmee raleuk chat*, winner of 2010's *Palme D'Or* at Cannes Film Festival. In analysing Apichatpong Weerasethakul's film, we aim at proposing, as a metaphor, a different approach – a logic of the building – in order to describe the specific creative processes in contemporary cinema. In order to describe the Thai filmmaker's method, we will recuperate Giorgio Agamben's ideas about what it means to be contemporary, and also the ethical responsibility of cinema in helping to recover the lost gestures of humanity.

Keywords: Apichatpong Weerasethakul; Contemporary; Fictional category; Gesture; Giorgio Agamben.

*Facing the jungle, the hills and vales,  
My past lives as an animal and other beings  
Rise up before me.*  
Opening epigraph of Apichatpong Weerasethakul'  
*Loong Boonmee raleuk chat*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In 2012, in our Masters' thesis, we proposed to explore the possibility that the cinema which was made in the last decade had something different from both modern and postmodern approach. Would it be possible to mobilize the concept of "contemporary" for a particular time? Was it possible to think these films in terms of a distinct category? But what films were we talking about?

At the time of the investigation, in 2011, a historical and symbolical event was obvious. It had been ten years since 2001, 9/11. So, we proposed to look at the films that had won the top major prizes (Palme d'Or; Golden Bear; Golden Lion) of three important film festivals (Cannes; Berlin; Venice) in these ten years period (2001-2011). We were talking of such different works, as *Elephant* (Gus Van Sant, 2003), *Bal* (Semih Kaplanoglu, 2010), *The Tree of Life* (Terrence Mallick, 2011) or *Loong Boonmee raleuk chat* (*Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2010), among many others. Despite the diversity of themes, genres and *mise-en-scène* what we were looking for was some common symptoms. Symptoms that weren't sufficient to close a category or a rigid system of rules, but instead could point out to a new artistic sensibility. Therefore, the time interval and the films chosen had somehow a more symbolic relevance than scientific accuracy. Exactly because what we needed was a time span sufficiently large and a group of heterogenous works that arrived at those festivals from around the world. We could say that our body of analysis was to give us a sense, a slice of what was produced during the last decade in world cinema.

And as the Twin Towers' fall was a symbol of collapse, what we observed in these films was an erecting of a multitude of other buildings. Ones that didn't responded to an anguish of what cinema might or should be in his essence. Or even, to the joy of playing with elements and references that we attribute to a postmodern cinematic sensibility.

What we aim in this essay is to present some of the conclusions of this contemporary logic of the building through a more detailed look at just one of the films we look at: Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Loong Boonmee raleuk chat*. It is not so much a question of in-depth filmic analysis what we'll present, but more a recognition of some symptoms of a particular way of doing cinema.

Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Loong Boonmee raleuk chat* won the Palme D'Or in Cannes in 2010. It was the first time Thai cinema won the top prize at the festival, with the country undergoing a very violent period, with significant threats to filmmakers' security and censorship problems.

Apichatpong, in his acceptance speech, thanked the Jury presided by Tim Burton, but also “the spirits and all the ghosts in Thailand”, that made it possible for him to be there. Apart from the political dimension, this award was also important for the reason that, at that moment, the Thai filmmaker embodied a certain label of a “serious artistic contemporary cinema”, with its proper new ways of working. Thus, the prize symbolized the institutional recognition of his singular creative approach.

However, we believe there is a distinction to be made. On one side, we could acknowledge Apichatpong’s presenting label to the world: its visible thematic originality and its way of contextualizing a genealogical hybridism of beings within a semi-realist context. But, on the other side, he was also presenting a new creative logic and *modus operandi* for cinema. As we’ve written, what we will try to do is to describe this method as something that can be useful to approach cinema from a distinct point of view from those that undertake the modes of classical, modern and postmodern cinema.

## 2. THE CONTEMPORARY: A RELATIONSHIP WITH ITS OWN TIME

We know there are several ways to approach the notion of contemporaneity. For example, some that proceed from a genealogical perspective, others from the subject of Art History and its historical periods. The notion of contemporary we will be exploring stresses the questions of relationship with time, in particular, with its own time. If we look in a dictionary<sup>1</sup>, we see that the word “contemporary” comes from the Latin adjective “contemporaneus”, which means “it is from the same time”. Other meanings are close: “that lives or existed in the same epoch”, or “it is from the actual time”<sup>2</sup>. These meanings stress the *mere* temporal dimension of the concept. In another words, to be a contemporary would just be a question of having lived at the same time, not having anything more in common than that temporal factor.

However, as states Lionel Ruffel, in a collective book titled *Qu’est ce que le contemporain?*, “the contemporary is not sufficient in itself, it is always of something else” (Ruffel, 2010, p.10). So, there is this need to a relationship with something or someone. Contemporary is a condition which is in between an absolute and relative meaning. Or, as we might phrase it, between an historical and ahistorical perspective, objective and subjective modes of relationship with its own time. The historical, objective mode of considering the contemporary always stumbles upon the difficulty of considering History as something sequential and teleological. And when are we supposed to mark the historical beginning of that contemporary? The same problem regarding the 9/11 mark comes up.

The subjective mode of being contemporary allows for the possibility of someone feeling cotemporary to someone (or something) from another previous time. How exactly should we understand this subjective mode of connection? To help us with this, we should consider the work of Giorgio Agamben on the notion of contemporary. To phrase what was supposed

1 We used the Portuguese Language Houaiss Dictionary.

2 Some of the references presented in this paper are Portuguese translations or originals. In those cases, we will provide a personal English translation of the quotations.

3 This concept appears in Nietzsche's *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen* (1876) as a way to criticize historicism and an idea of progress that placed history in the centre of the preoccupations of the epoch.

4 "The one that really belongs to its time, who is its really contemporary is someone who doesn't perfectly coincide with it nor adapts to its demands and it is for this reason, in this sense, untimely." (Agamben, 2010, p. 22)

to be this *feeling contemporary of someone/something* – or in other words, the notion of contemporary apart from the historical categories –, the Italian philosopher uses the Nietzschean concept of *unzeitgemäßen* (in English commonly translated as “untimely”)<sup>3</sup>. In the essay “Che cos'è il contemporaneo?”, Giorgio Agamben (2010, p. 19-20) defends that the contemporary is connected with this Nietzschean *untimely* notion of inadequacy between the subject and its historical present. The real contemporary subject would not be the one who lives at the same time of the other subjects, but the one who, instead, feels a disconnection towards his own present<sup>4</sup>. It is exactly because of this disconnection that the contemporary is the one who can better understand and capture his own time. In that sense to be a contemporary is to have a particular relationship with its own time: in a way it adheres to it, but, at the same time, always keeps a distance.

In the quoted essay, the philosopher advances one definition of the concept: “Contemporary is someone who turns his gaze upon its time, not to perceive its lights, but its darkness” (Agamben, 2010, p. 22). After that, he proceeds with two metaphors, one from the field of neurophysiology and the other from astrophysics, in order to illustrate what it means to be able to see that “darkness”. In the first one, Agamben tells us how, physiologically, when we are deprived of light, a specific group of cells is activated. Which means that darkness is a result of a proper vision, of a distinct activity and singular ability, and does not come merely from the subtraction of light. This physical capacity to see the darkness – that in a certain sense is what is demanded when one is before a cinematic projection in a dark room – allows us to explain something else. That this ability to neutralize light, that comes from the epoch, in which one lives, is what permits the contemporary to find the obscurity or special darkness of its own age.

The second metaphor permits the introduction of the notion of movement. In fact, it is not the contemporary that searches the darkness of its own time. Instead, this darkness heads in the direction of the contemporary and questions him. Like in astrophysics when the darkness of the skies is explained by the light of faraway galaxies. This light is heading toward us, but at an inferior speed to the one those galaxies are moving away from us (Agamben, 2010, p. 24). This way, for Giorgio Agamben, contemporaneity involves this movement of being able to see a certain light, amidst a profound darkness of the present; a light that is always heading us, but never manages to fully reach us.

We will be seeing ahead how this particular confluence of times is, in a certain way, the subject of Apichatpong's film. But let's first highlight how this time, in terms of its contemporaneity, is also a preoccupation in terms of these symptoms of contemporary cinema. If modern cinema discovered the duration, and a particular reflection about time itself, one can say that still today the temporal axis function as a great divide. In a non-rigorous mode, we can at least understand what is at stake is this notion of contemporaneity, in terms of the relationship with its own time and rhythm. For example, in the cliché opposition between a fast, mainstream, neo-baroque mainstream cinema, and a contemplative, slow

paced and meditative approach. It seems, up to a certain degree, that these differences express a continuity or a disruption towards your own time. And this might be a symptom of a certain contemporary anxiety.

### 3. ERECTING A CONTEMPORARY BUILDING. A FIRST EXAMPLE.

Before turning into Apichatpong's film, let us now specify what we mean by the metaphor of the building and how it can illuminate a specific way of doing, in terms of aesthetic creation and managing one's own artistic impulses. We argue that in many of those films, contemporary cinema proceeds by the construction of a *space of possibility* that can be better understood under the metaphor of the building. This building tends to create its own rules and its own political and aesthetic territory of influence. We can note two distinct traces on this *modus operandi*. The first one is that this building frequently renounces a communication to be made in extension or *horizontality*. What we mean is that historical crystallizations and the rhythms of articulation between contemporary film works do not particularly help us to define what goes on inside each artist's building. In other words, there is a sort of solipsism in many contemporary films that tends to refuse the communication between each film with the ones that were made at that same time. The ones that, in the literal approach of the term, are *contemporary* between themselves. So, these works explicit a much more acute relationship with its *own* time, than with other works made in *their* time. That helps us to elaborate the hypothesis that maybe a characteristic of the contemporary cinema might exactly be the fact that it is a *fictional category* in itself. Firstly, a fictional category because the concept of contemporary is transversal and could only be grasped for a specific content if crystalized around a specific period of time and history. As we've tried around the group of films mentioned above. Secondly, due to this set of creative and artistic links inside contemporary cinema that go beyond the logic of collective and contextual influence.

This last idea characterizes the second trace of the creative logic that proceeds through the erection of a building. In it there is a sort of an infinite circularity inside itself that privileges a *vertical* and *in-depth* communication. That means that each film relates less with its contemporaries, and more with its own system of non-chronological references or rules. This way we are able to propose that inside the fictional category of contemporary cinema, each film may be seen as a *category of itself*. These two notions leave no room to talk about a category of contemporary cinema as something aesthetically cohesive. Instead, we are left with a singular and unifying logic of construction, which functions as the *cement* for the fabrication of those buildings.

That specific logic of creation for a characterization of contemporary cinema might resemble the field of contemporary art. Especially, this sort of emptiness, ideological vacuum, multiplicity of intentions and forms of realization that surpassed the modern and postmodern quests for purity,

essence and self-reflection in terms of art's identity. In contemporary cinema's *empty aura*, there is space to integrate and compose either elements that were part of both the classical and modern creative cinematic logic. Two paradigms in the relation man/world that were translated in terms of different manufactures of cinema – the “order” of the classical canon and the happening of modernity in cinema with its correspondent “disorder” (Grilo, 1997) – and that can be assembled in a fictional category of contemporary cinema, within an internal structure of communicating circulation. On one hand, we have the representative dimension of classical cinema as the greatest exponent of a movement of “domination of the world by man” (D’Allonnés, 1994, p. 11); of exacerbation of Deleuzian’s movement image and the subordination of the “mobile” and “rational” cut (Deleuze, 1994, p. 273-4). On the other hand, the ontological effect on humanity caused by the beginning of cinema in the Modern Age, and the trauma of the Second World War, helped to erect another project for the *fatal* condition or teleological ambition of what cinema was supposed to be and accomplish.

The way to envisage this project for modern cinema, which was simultaneously a change in ways of making but also in ways of thought, varied. Some quick examples are: “le montage interdit” de André Bazin (1967, p. 41); the necessity to make the “camera present” (Pasolini, 1981, p. 150); the idea of the “unrepeatable” and of the “work as an encounter” in Robert Bresson (2000, p. 91); the exhibition of the “insignificance of reality” and the “non evidence of the real” (D’Allonnés, 1994, p. 12, 20); the capacity to show the direct image of time (Deleuze, 2004, p. 56, 59, 61), the cut that has a value in itself (Deleuze, 2006, p. 274). All of these *visions* had in common a project for cinema: going against a certain tradition.

And what about a definition of a project for contemporary cinema? Although Robert Bresson is a director that embodied the idea that modern cinema might somehow be connected to an “anti-language”, he can also help us to better understand a contemporary *modus operandi*. In his seminal book “Notes on the Cinematographer”, the French author states the necessity to work with his models a “movement that starts on the outside and comes inside” (Bresson, 2000, p. 16). In a certain way, this inward (but also in depth) movement, in contemporary cinema, might be seen as something that no longer works in terms of trying to find what cinema might be. In that sense, this inward movement is much more a progressive self-revelation. As if contemporary cinema would be made and discovered in the same gesture and process. A gesture that, on the contrary to modern cinema, is a gesture of affirmation<sup>5</sup>. It is no more a work of depuration, that aimed to achieve – either adding or subtracting elements – a certain essence in the ways of working image and sound. Such classical/modern purity was not dissociated from a certain political program. A program that tried to transform cinema into an art more sensible to the unrepeatable, contingent and “adult” dynamics of the real.

On the contrary, contemporaneity buildings in cinema erect a compositing dimension on interiority: as a strategy for the affirmation of a certain artistic truth of particular and individual dimension. Therefore, a

5 In terms of affirmation gestures, one must recall Gilles Deleuze's critique of the New American Cinema that already showed the crisis of movement-image. Namely its incapacity to erect an “aesthetic and political project able to build a positive enterprise,” and “to make a new image born,” especially in the combat to clichés (Deleuze, 2004, p. 278).

certain logic of integration *à la carte* – of different elements that belong to paradigms that made the history of cinema – emerges. Each of these elements might be received with the same distance or proximity, importance or irony. To extend the metaphor of the building, one might say that each of these elements serves the construction of a different *floor*. In other words, these buildings are closed into themselves, but besides the manipulating gesture of art for art's sake. This integration helps to create certain rules that only apply inside each contemporary cinematic building. For example, the use of the black colour or dark spaces inside Pedro Costa's buildings has a very specific and non-transmissible meaning. It is from the integration of the elements, as a way to work the present time as something *closed and obscure*, that a specific logic for contemporary cinema emerges, or at least can be conceptualized. This logic is beside specific technical options and solutions, or even stylistic differentiated marks. These can be very much diversified. In fact, all kinds of stylistic approaches are possible, and the very fact of its possibility reveals much more of the contemporaneity in cinema than each choice that is made.

Contemporary cinema seems to have come to terms with the ontological questions about certain uses for its *medium*, and be ready to film and create through whatever terms. It is not so much about proving cinema's potential anymore, or even connecting him to the real in its *ambiguity* and lack of sense. Contemporary logic in cinema seems to work a certain space of possibility, as a locus where world and filmmaker, technique and creator's gestures become undifferentiated. In order to address this contemporary insulation, we think it would not be unreasonable to recuperate Walter Benjamin's idea of method he would attribute to materialistic historiography. He wrote:

take advantage of this opportunity to force a certain epoch to leave the homogenous flux of history: therefore, extract a certain life from its epoch and a certain work from the set of an *oeuvre*. (Benjamin, 2010, p. 19)

What the German thinker introduced as a possibility for breaking with the causal and bourgeois logic of history seems to have the same form of *rupture* for these contemporary cinematic buildings. The spaces where these buildings arise and from where one can reveal certain solitary new realities only make sense within a category that we are never able to fully grasp. A category that is, as we have seen, somehow mobile or fictional.

Let us end this section highlighting this logic of the building in relation to one first example: Gus Van Sant's *Elephant*. In this film we follow the daily routine of some adolescents in a secondary school in Portland, vaguely inspired by the Columbine High School Massacre in 1999. But some scenes remind us the distance to these known facts, namely because Van Sant tries to erase psychological motivations. It's the void of a psychology of the evil that visibly clashes with director's

6 “[the film] opposes a part-pris of conceptual abstraction that makes the *mise-en-scène* a rigorous demonstration of a point of view. The point of view is this: there is no reason for the crime, except for the real absence of reasons.” (Rancière, 2004, p. 96)

arrangement of images and sounds. According with Jacques Rancière’s analysis the film’s *mise-en-scène* is a “long manifestation of that void” (Rancière, 2004, p. 4)<sup>6</sup>.

But is the proper notion of *mise-en-scène* enough? The director is always using, but also keeping away from, that particular tragic and contemporary event in order to create something else. In a sense, this High School, with its corridors, the camera tracking endlessly through the space and following the constant and abstract advance of these figures, is a space with no possibility of escape. Once we enter Elephant’s building, it’s not possible to get out. Would it be possible to analyse this building with the traditional categories of *mise-en-scène*? Are those adolescents’ spectral trajectories truly sequence shots? Is the repetition of events simple cuts in the narrative’s chronology? Are these spectral figures, really characters? One gets the feeling that in *Elephant’s* High School in a dialectic logic between what we knew of the real (the memory of the massacres, the condition of the American adolescence) and cinema’s technical capacities to work these knowledges, something else is created *ex novo*, something that in a way is intemporal, and incommunicable.

The opening shot of the film is a static one, showing us a utility pole, as times passes from day to night. Time passes but everything else works a pause, an intentional void built upon the circularity of movement that evolves in this “timeless space”. As Raymond Bellour (2002) notes, when we see Eric and Alex, the two killer adolescents, entering the High School twice, from two different angles, that is a sort of abstract and endless entering. As if the massacre had already started in the mind of the spectator without having really begun (Bellour, 2002, p. 7). And, paradoxically, although the characters never stop advancing, the action seems not to go forward, as in a temporal maze. It’s the crystallization of progression, and the principle of interruption (as in the abrupt ending) that gives *Elephant* a sort of enigmatic quality. It is as if Van Sant was writing and rewriting in this immobility, in this circular action, with no progression.

The High School as a no way-out temporal maze allows us to literalize this logic of the building. This is about establishing its own political aesthetic territory, where its elements communicate between them, in a vertical, interior, in depth relationship. For instance, the exploded clarity of the film’s exteriors communicates with the lack of depth of field in the interiors; or the choice of the repeated angles of the school’s corridors with the videogame’s action. One can say extensive or horizontally communication is not a key question here. *Elephant* communicates less with films that were its contemporaries, than with a disperse system of relationships built inside its own building. A system that does not respect temporal historical criteria. That is why – with the exception of the vague inspiration taken from Alan Clarke’s 1989 homonymous film – that Sant’s building communicates much closer, in the immobility of the slow motions and the freezing of its causal temporal structures, with the eternal of the photographic. Or, inversely, with installation work that approach interactivity and the choice of angles and points of view using digital multi-cameras.



#### 4. THE BUILDING OF *LOONG BOONMEE RALEUK CHAT*

Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Loong Boonmee raleuk chat* centres around the life, or lives, of uncle Boonmee. He lives in a farm in Thailand, surrounded by the migrant workers from Laos that do the work in the field, and the assistance of Jaai who nurses him, especially due to his need of daily dialysis treatments. He receives two visits. The first one is of his sister-in-law Jen and his nephew Tong. The second visit is a stranger one. One night, while Boonmee, Jen and Tong are having dinner in the balcony, the ghost of the uncle's wife appears to him. Just followed by a monkey like creature which turns out to be his son Boonsong, who disappeared just after his mother's death. The film is structured, roughly, into four segments. The first one in which Boonmee receives these two visits. The second is a kind of interval folk story, in which an ageing princess encounters a catfish that creates a younger reflex of the monarch in the water. The third moment is an excursion of Boonmee, his ghost wife, Jen and Tong. They walk through the forest up to a cave where the uncle is going to die. In the final segment, a sort of uncanny epilogue, Jen and Tong, now a monk, attend to uncle Boonmee's funeral ceremonies.

It is time to ask what specifically constitutes Apichatpong's building, in this particular film. As we'll see, in this building, many elements circulate. The Thai director erected a film-excursion: a voyage that circulates between the concrete and the oneiric, realism and mythology, past and present. Joachim Lepastier, film critic in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, defines the Thai artist as someone between "an explorer and a DJ" (Lepastier, 2010, p.7).

The time in Apichatpong's film is a complex matter. Let's recall Agamben's idea of the contemporary that draws a particular relationship with its own time. If we recall his already quoted phrase in which a "contemporary is someone who turns his gaze upon its time, not to perceive its lights, but its darkness," we immediately are able to relate to *Loong Boonmee*. Especially two moments. In the first one, Boonmee is showing the ghost of his wife the pictures he took during her own funeral. And suddenly, his son, now a hybrid creature between a monkey ghost and a human, says to them that he can't see well in that bright light. Here we are talking about the ability to see clearer in the dark, but the film pushes forward the idea. *Loong Boonmee* creates a world where mythological creatures, folk tale characters, animals, spirits can turn to light. It is a matter of conceiving a reality that expands the spectre of the visible, in order to call the attention for a non-anthropomorphic world. The second example comes much later. When arriving in the cave – whose walls look like a starry dark night – the nephew tells the others: "What's wrong with my eyes? They are open but I can't see a thing. Or are my eyes closed?" Her mother answers: "Maybe your eyes need time to adjust to the dark." It is a moment in which Apichatpong's cinema shows Agamben's idea that the contemporary is something that inverts the relationship between light and darkness in order to truly see your own time.

But this idea of circulation of times within *Loong Boonmee* goes further. It seems to favour that same movement of looking at our present

as something both questioning and diffuse. A present that seems “always arriving but whose clarity we can never grasp.” (Agamben, 2009, p. 46) In other words, when light reaches the contemporary it already belongs to something from the past. Exactly like those “past people,” that disappear when projected a light at, that Tong mentions immediately after doubting his eyes in the cave. In this moment we hear his monologue, while we see photos of soldiers capturing a monkey like figure:

Last night I dreamt of the future. I arrived there in a sort of time machine. The future city was ruled by an authority able to make anybody disappear. When they found ‘past people’ they shone a light at them. That light projected images of them onto the screen. From the past until their arrival in the future. Once those images appeared these ‘past people’ disappeared.

The paradox at play is close to that astrophysics idea mentioned before: a light is heading us, but at an inferior speed to the one the source emitting the light is moving away. Apart from Tong’s dream, what does this mean in the world of Apichatpong’s film? The contemporary – in its images of ancestral figures, gods and spirits from animal world –, shows us this *retroactive* dimension. It is far away, because it comes from a light that never fully comes, but is also near, because is close to the *arkhé*, the origins. It is recurrent: a cave is also a heaven and a womb. After death, existence will take other forms. For example, the final scenes of the film may suggest that the *monk-form* of Tong was another birth; or that, in the future, we will have this monkey like appearance.

This circulation inside Apichatpong’s building, which allows the elision of diegetic time makes it, in a certain sense, a film without time. First of all, because there are references to the war, the migrant workers, it seems we are in a specific historical present. But, at the same time, this world is also drawn from the primitive (the caves, monkey ghosts resemble Australopithecus), the past lives and forms of each creature, and, finally, a mythical time.

After the strong Bazanian idea that somehow opened the program of modern cinema – that it should respect the integrity of the real – the paradigm shifted. In a post-simulation era, films began to operate a nostalgic return to the real, as if it had been lost somewhere in the strategy of the postmodern and the disseminations of the digital. That return sometimes involves a phenomenological reflection about the unveiling of the real, but also a primitivist inflection. *Loong Boonmee* operates a return to the primitive and manages to unite an ancestral past to a future. Those two come together in an incomprehensible present. The temporal dimension of this present does not seem strange and indefinite only because of long, lengthy shots. It feels *there is no time*, or that we are living in a *real dream*. Images in Apichatpong’s film seem to come both from the confluence of all the times and of no time in particular.

In the particular case of *Loong Boonmee*, various dimension of the past are convened: on the one side, the already mentioned relationship

with primitivism and the coexistence and breeding of human beings with animals and mythological beings; on the other side, the historical context of 1965's violent repression of the communists sympathizers by the Thai police, in the city of Nabua. Finally, there is also a certain relation to another kind of past. Firstly, through a particular homage to the genre cinema. The film is divided in six different parts, each corresponding to different reels shot in a distinct cinematic style. These styles include, in the director's own words: "old cinema with stiff acting and classical staging," "documentary style," "costume drama," and "my kind of film when you see long takes of animals and people driving." (Apichatpong *apud* Ritthdee, 2010) Secondly, the filmmaker decided to use film, in particular the super 16mm. The use of a somehow *old and passé* format a very few people use nowadays was an assumed *lamentation* for a certain way of doing cinema bound to vanish. These different pasts – and more specifically this auto-reflexive *requiem* about a certain cinema declared almost dead – have certain tones of regeneration. Why? Because the building Apichatpong is erecting is laid down in a present that crosses both the path of cinema and contemporary art. *Loong Boonmee* is one of the seven parts of the *Primitive Project*, a bigger work of the director about the memories and documental/fictional recreation of Nabua, a manless village in northeast Thailand.

The relationship of this building with this wider project, that comprises several other artistic objects, represents a partition of a traditional logic of the *dispositif*. Logic that already was reinforced through the division of the film itself into six reels, each one representing a particular style. However, this division in parts does not mean the transformation of the whole into a serial film, a minimalist recreation, or an arbitrary collage. In *Loong Boonmee* emerges a certain dimension of the *dispositif* that goes beyond the technical materials and that aims to work two distinct dimensions: *hybridism* and *proximity*.

Let us first tackle the question of *hybridism*. Traditionally, hybridism is conceptualized as the outcome of juxtaposition, collage and citation, roughly associated with a postmodern aesthetics in cinema. However, in this film there is no *game*. That means that hybridism in terms of different beings in the film – conveyed by the "fantastic that arises within everyday life" (Lepastier, 2010, p. 8) – or in the search for new articulations and convergences of sound and image<sup>7</sup>, do not look for the simple pleasure of collision of elements. Instead, Apichatpong aims at achieving a *world-artistic* alchemy, which is visible in a personal "hybrid writing." One that incessantly looks for mobilizing all registers, matters that belong to either the sensible world, or the filmic technique.

His writing is certainly not a teleological and ontological one as the advocated by Alexander Astruc, "Caméra-stylo" (1948). Nor like the ambitious and the omnipresent Alexander Vertov "Cine-eye" (Vertov, 1984, p. 41). Maybe more similar with the Pasolinian paradigm of cinema poetry (Pasolini, 1981, p. 149), if we disregard the necessity for the Italian to unite this kind of cinema to the "specifically cinematic typical processes of expression" (1981, p. 150). This consideration of a "mother-

7 One example of this can be seen in the initial sequence in which Keow, an ox, breaks loose from a tree from where he is tied and walks through the forest until he is caught by his owner. In these moments, Apichatpong *lowers* the image, preparing the night, and *shows* sound, highlighting the ordinary sonority of space.

form”, which would correspond to a “rude, almost animal” (1981, p. 138) dimension of visual communication. This specific Pasolinian link is typical of one of these projects that modernity reserved for cinema, with which contemporary cinema seems not to relate anymore. However, that “rudeness” and that “animality” inherent to the Pasolinian “im-signs” seem to remain in Apichatpong’s writing. Especially as a strategy for the inversion of a certain logic that, according with the Italian director, placed poetry and the author’s style in the “subterranean film”, in relation with the “free indirect subjective” and its characters, pretext for the cinematic modernity. Pasolini once wrote about Jean-Luc Godard: “the poetic in Godard is ontological (...) his formalism is a poetic technical skill (...) it is all about the technical restitution, and therefore poetic, of reality” (1981, p. 149).

This “shameless” approach, that seems to do without any classicist pretexts, helps us to cast a light in what regards the process in the interior of *Loong Boonmee’s* building. We believe that here the Pasolinian terms should be inverted. With Apichatpong, the technique – not only of the film, but also the gesture of integration of it in the *Primitive Project* – seems to interact as a conceptual limit, sometimes as a pretext, for the evolution of its characters. That produces not an obsession with the gesture and the details as a strategy for the liberation of the “im-signs” from the classical grammar, but instead an *anesthesia*, a creative *serenity*. Those manifest themselves in the relation between characters/camera and narrative/formalism. This bias or appeasement of an explicit self-reflexivity in Apichatpong’s film expels both the political-poetic<sup>8</sup> discourse of modern cinema, and also a postmodern meta-reflexivity. Instead, we are dealing with the construction of a personal project that can only be considered politically, if through the global contemporary reconfiguration of both the fields of politics and aesthetics. Questions like the perception of time, the moments of silence or the contemplation of absence or emptiness in Apichatpong’s cinema are questions that have an absolute value. They do not symbolize or veil a hidden sense. There is no profound meaning, which the audience should figure out. If the spectator adds some value to the Thai director works that is outside the films themselves.

Let us go back to the second dimension of the dispositif in *Loong Boonmee*, the one related to the question of *proximity*. The long shots, the wide framing (for example, when Boonmee, his sister-in-law and nephew are at the table, or with the workers in the field) and *live together*, and the refusal of approximation with close ups allow us to relate the film to the historical crystallization – which is by now also a label and a field of work and investigation – named “contemplative cinema.” In this choice for proximity, we do not see a recuperation of Kracauer’s idea of “redemption of physical reality” as the grand potential of cinema. And we don’t consider it either as a return to Bazin’s teleological project, where cinema could be seen as an intermediate technical stage heading to an ideal “cinema without cinema,” of a progressive overcome of the “material resistance” (1967, p. 21-22).

In our view, *Loong Boonmee’s* idea of proximity must be understood in a different way. In another Giorgio Agamben’s essay, “Notes on

8 About this dimension, Apichatpong said: “I’m not making a political film – it’s more like a personal diary” (Apichatpong *apud* Kwai, 2010).

Gesture”, the Italian philosopher engages with the cinematic *dispositif* and the status of the image within modernity. For him, it is the “gesture rather than image [that] is the cinematic element” (Agamben, 1993, p. 138). Cinema’s primitive preoccupation with the decomposition of movement is precisely indicative of its potential in what concerns the capture and registration of gestures. For Agamben, this capture is essential so as not to lose control of these gestures. Agamben (1993, p. 137) writes: “In the cinema, a society that has lost its gestures seeks to reappropriate what it has lost while simultaneously recording that loss.”

Also, in the domain of the image there is this always already potential of the cinematic. Images have a fixity charge, an *imago* that reifies as a “crystal of historical memory” (Agamben, 1993, p. 138). However, images also have a dynamism potential that connects them to a whole. As if they belonged, as fragments, to a gesture, or as if they were a single frame of a lost film, inside which they would recuperate their full meaning (Agamben, 1993, p. 139). It is having this polarity of the image in mind that Agamben defends the potential of the cinematic. Cinema is able to awaken this dynamic side, and make images enter in this continuous flow of the gesture. Of course, this recuperation of the “lost gestures” and of the dynamism inherent to images also means for the Italian an ethical and political program. Based on a famous passage of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* – in which the Greek establishes the distinction between *praxis* and *poesis* –, Agamben supports cinema’s ethical responsibility. The reason is that gesture – unlike production that “aims at something different than itself” – is connected with *praxis* and, therefore, with the sphere of *ethos* and action. Cinema is in the domain of action and it only aims at “doing what is right” (1993, p. 140). In a certain sense, cinema is at the centre of an ambitious program that aims at extracting and freeing images – that were reified and captured by the most varied power dispositives –, and put them again at the disposal of the contemporary imaginary in its capacity for self-signification.

In Apichatpong’s film, there is also, in some sense, the ambition for the “lost gestures.” Especially, by the way the director stages a space of proximity between his characters in the wide shots. Or the way he integrates the *mystery* of other beings and incarnations into the same continuous movement of kindness and in the inhabiting of the same world. More than a cultural and historic lament for the way we lost our gestures, Apichatpong works for the bringing together of those same gestures. Linking the narrative, the technical, the manipulating and the ironic integration gestures. Ultimately, it is this approximation of gestures, integrated in a rhythm of circularity, what can best describe the movement inside the particular and solipsistic building of *Loong Boonmee*.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we tried to mobilize the notion of contemporary to a group of films that symbolized a part of world production between 2001 and 2011. Using *Loong Boonmee* as an example, we traced some symptoms of a new way of filming, that would be distinguishable from the traits of classical, modern and postmodern cinema. More than a specific set of elements, we defended that what these films have in common is the fact that their creators proceed through a logic of the construction of a solipsist building. These buildings usually renounce a horizontal communication and favour a vertical one. That means that they create a set of rules that only apply and are valuable inside each building. That is the reason why each film should be seen as a category of itself. And also, this lack of communication between contemporary works only let us conceptualize contemporary cinema up to a limit of a fictional category.

Inside *Loong Boonmee's* building we singled out the uncertainty and confluence of different times as a trait which could be seen as something that could fit Agamben's definition of what means to be contemporary. One of these dimensions of the relationship *with* time is a return to primitivism as if a return to the origin. Two dimensions of Apichatpong's *dispositif*, when erecting his contemporary building, capture this return: the question of hybridism of beings and the proximity between different gestures. What we aimed to establish is that these single traits in Apichatpong's film are some of the important symptoms of how cinema is being thought and crafted after his postmodern time.

## 6. REFERENCES

- Agamben, G. (1993). Notes on Gesture. In *Infancy and History – The Destruction of Experience* (pp. 133-140). Verso.
- Agamben, G. (2010). O que é o contemporâneo?. In *Nudez* (pp.19-29). Relógio d'Água.
- Bazin, A. (1967). *What is Cinema?* Vol.1. University of California Press.
- Bellour, R. (2004). Le parti pris du réel. In *Trafic*, 49.
- Benjamin, W. (2010). Teses sobre a Filosofia da História (pp. 9-20). In *O Anjo da História*. Assírio & Alvim.
- D'Allonnés, F. (1994). *Pour le Cinéma Moderne*. Éditions Yellow Now.
- Deleuze, G. (2004). *A imagem-movimento – Cinema 1*. Assírio & Alvim.
- Deleuze, G. (2006). *A imagem-tempo – Cinema 2*. Assírio & Alvim.
- Grilo, J. M. (1997). *A ordem no cinema: vozes e palavras de ordem no estabelecimento do cinema em Hollywood*. Relógio D'Água.

Kracauer, S. (1997). *Theory of Film: the redemption of physical reality*. Princeton University Press.

Kwai, W. (2010) The late, great Apichatpong. In *The Nation*.  
<http://pages.citebite.com/f2m3r2o4l5cjo>.

Pasolini, P. P. (1982). *O empirismo herege*. Assírio & Alvim.

Rancière, J. (2004, May). Les nouvelles fictions du mal. In *Cahiers du Cinema*, 590.

Rithdee, K. (2000). Of monkey ghosts and men. In *Bangkok Post*.  
<http://pages.citebite.com/o3d3t4pouuj>

Vertov, D. (1984). *Kino-Eye – The Writings of Dziga Vertov*. University of California Press.

Weerasethakul, A. (2010). *Delirium*. Masterclass delivered at Malba, Buenos Aires.

Article received on 23/07/2019 and accepted on 22/05/2020.

[Creative Commons Attribution License](#) | This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.