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DMS333: World Cinema

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The 2010 film, “Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives”, directed by Apichatpong Weerasethakul, depicts the story of a man growing closer to death in more ways than one; Uncle Boonmee, who is suffering from kidney disease, asks his family to join him in his jungle home as he prepares for death. While him and his family eat dinner, the ghost of his wife appears and offers to help him along his journey to death along with his son who materializes as an ape-like creature after disappearing. Boonmee and his family reminisce and reflect on memories from his past life, which urges Boonmee to take his family to a special cave before he dies. While the film takes on a fantasy approach, what may be more appealing to viewers is the cinematography and “slow cinema” being used throughout the film. In both Boonmee’s home and the waterfall, slow cinema brings an austerity and serenity to the film that all viewers can appreciate. The mix of slow cinema and the fantasy element add a touch of whimsy to this simple piece.

Weerasethakul uses slow cinema all throughout his film to add a sense of serenity and simplicity to the piece that deals with the heavy topic of impending death. Best described by Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano in the chapter titled, “Showing the Unknowable: Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives”, she states, “slow cinema”—a type of cinema characterized by minimalism, austerity, and extended duration—and “deep ecology”—environmental philosophy advocated by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess since the 1970s.” (Wada-Marciano 272). Derived from Norwegian background, Slow Cinema attempts to create a specific effect

throughout a film – that effect mainly being serenity and plainness. This effect is created in Weerasethakul’s film through this use of ecology in both the home and cave scenes. A specific home scene which catches many viewers attention is when Jen, Tong and Jaai are driving through the jungles of Thailand to go to Uncle Boonmee’s house to pay him a potential final visit. The scene depicts beautiful and vast mountains and forests and long windy roads. There is minimal talking only between Tong and Jen with an enhanced ability to hear the sound of the car accelerating on the road and the wind blowing through Jen’s hair (6:35-8:45). This scene is important to note and categorize as slow cinema for two specific reasons. It helps to achieve this simplicity effect through its emphasis on the environment around the characters as well as by using minimal to no talking, little action or camera movements and solely focused on the experiences of the characters. There is a stillness to it with contemplation and reflection about said environment. It also shows a bigger picture that all of the characters are able to enjoy a simple and peaceful car ride, taking in the scenery, before coming to find out that this may be the last time they are able to see Boonmee alive. The scene perfectly captures the idealized effect that slow cinema attempts to achieve: an austerity and simplicity through use of nature and nature-sounds.

Along with the slow cinema in the landscape of Boonmee’s home, another critical setting location which is subject to slow cinema is the waterfall setting. This scene is a past-life scene that focuses on a princess. It is important to note the transcendentalist-style being used in this scene along with an addition of fantasy to help create an interesting scene. As described in article, “Rethinking Transcendental Style”, “By delaying edits, not moving the camera, forswearing music cues, not employing coverage, and heightening the mundane, transcendental style creates a sense of unease the viewer must resolve” (Page 3). Transcendental style, which is

a subgroup of slow-cinema, uses a similar approach in which it causes unease in a simplistic way by using distancing and sound effects to create a simple yet complex effect. This specific scene occurs when the princess is being carried through the forest on a chariot-like chair, above those who are carrying her. They arrive at a waterfall where the princess is seen approaching the water and looking in. A soldier then approaches her where they briefly talk before she kneels before the water and begins to pray (49:46-56:53). This scene uses a transcendentalist approach due to its distancing effect. The princess kneeling at the water is seen from both far away and up close, which creates this notion that something “might” happen before it actually does. It also uses enhanced and ambient sound, a principle of slow cinema, to add to this anticipation and simplicity.

Throughout Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s 2010 film, “Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives”, Weerasethakul takes an approach of slow cinema and transcendentalism to create a simplicity and anticipation throughout his film. Two main settings in which these are used are during the home scene as well as the waterfall scene. The home scene, specifically the scene in which the group is driving to the house, incorporates slow cinema by using enhanced and ambient sound as well as minimal speaking to create the simplistic yet heightened reaction. In the waterfall scene, both slow cinema and transcendentalism are utilized to create this sense of fantasy while still remaining to its simplistic roots. Weerasethakul accomplishes his feat in creating an austere piece through his utilization of both film techniques.