



NEW RELEASES

Memoria

Apichatpong's Cannes prize-winner *Memoria*, shot entirely in Colombia, is a splendid renewal of his cinema. In form, it's a real 'journey to the interior', with all the Joseph Conrad resonances that implies: Tilda Swinton plays an expat orchid-grower plagued by a recurrent booming noise in her head which prevents her from sleeping, who travels from the capital Bogotá to the remote rural township of Pijao in search of... answers? The character was first written as 'Erika' but renamed 'Jessica Holland' in honour of the character played by Christine Gordon in Jacques Tourneur's *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943), which Apichatpong has called one of his 'beloved' films. Swinton's Jessica shares her aural hallucination with the director himself (it's a rare and little understood phenomenon variously called 'exploding head syndrome' and 'auditory sleep starts'), but whereas he came to regard the 'bang' as a 'strange pleasure' and even regretted the loss when it stopped happening, it turns his protagonist into an insomniac and displaces her relationships, her work and her general sense of purpose in life. She is the latest in a long line of Apichatpong protagonists looking for a physical and spiritual 'cure'.

Memoria returns to the two-part structure of Apichatpong's first four features, although without any elaborate system of parallels between the two parts. The first part is urban, the second rural, with a brief detour to La Linea – the 8km tunnel through the Andes which is under construction to link Colombia's east and west coasts – marking the film's mid-point. It opens in Bogotá, balancing between rather sterile, academic environments and more heavily populated street life. The thrust of the first part is broadly rational and scientific: we see a university campus, research labs, a lecture theatre, a library. Jessica is seen struggling to understand, define and 'capture' the noise she keeps hearing in her head, and also to figure out how to deal with fungal infections in her orchids. Along the way, though, she encounters traces of the country's unhappy political history (most strikingly, a pedestrian who throws himself to the ground when he hears a tyre burst, thinking that it's a terrorist bomb), and evidence of ancient mysteries (the 6,000-year-old skull of a young woman, excavated at La Linea, which shows that she underwent trepanation).

The second, rural part doesn't really offer solutions to any of the problems and enigmas, since Jessica's dream-led trajectory takes her deep into an irrational realm, where she ends up feeling-hearing the memories of a man who may or may not be an extraterrestrial and may or may not be linked to the source of the aural hallucinations. Anyone who knows *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010) and *Cemetery of Splendour* (2015) will recognise the second part as a characteristic Apichatpong phantasmagoria, complete with weird sounds from nature (howler monkeys), disturbing phenomena (earth tremors and potential pollution from the La Linea tunnelling) and a spaceship that looks a bit like a whale. Aside from a consultation with a woman doctor, the second part is mostly devoted to Jessica's interactions with an old man who calls himself Hernán (played by Elkin Díaz) – a name he shares, not coincidentally, with a young sound engineer in Bogotá who flirted with Jessica and then mysteriously vanished from her life.

It's hard to discuss what happens in the second part without spoiling the film's effect, giving away its surprises, but it's clear that the older Hernán's

dealings with Jessica – first in the open, beside a stream, where he’s preparing fish for dinner, then in his memory-crammed house – help her to achieve some equanimity and possibly to banish the noise in her head. No sunlit uplands, though: the closing scenes are full of darkling skies and ominous sounds and rumours from afar. It’s at best a nervous equanimity.

The idea of making a film in Colombia arose quite spontaneously from the need to find a location where neither Apichatpong nor Swinton would feel at home. In an email, I asked him if he sees *Memoria* as another of his very personal films. Is Swinton playing a version of himself? ‘I guess so,’ he responded. ‘Even now [in Thailand], maybe even more than during the making of *Memoria*, I feel that I don’t belong to any place... or that I belong to every place? But home in Thailand doesn’t feel like THE home. [In the last couple of years] I feel like I am floating.’ In some ways, though, Colombia felt familiar. ‘I like that people are not punctual (same as me), and that [Colombian] time seems fluid, casual. The unpredictability, from social to political, is maybe what attracted me to it. It synchronises well with the weather there, too, in that the weather is also temperamental.’ The film dramatises a surrender to the Colombian ambience by introducing Jessica in the first part as a very halting speaker of Spanish and then having her converse with Hernán in fluent Spanish in the second.

Apichatpong has provided a key of sorts to the ideas and stimuli, visual and verbal, which fed into *Memoria* in the book of the same name published to accompany the film. It contains original texts by Apichatpong, annotated pages from various drafts of the script, a vast scrapbook of material he gathered while preparing the film, a production diary and an interview with Swinton, the last two by Apichatpong’s current amanuensis Giovanni Marchini Camia, who also co-edited the volume. I emailed Apichatpong to ask if all the reference images and texts were collected purposively during the writing of the script, and he defaulted back to the surrealist ethos: ‘The impression that hits me at the moment of encounter is the most important thing. The photos and texts are just to [help me] remember. In Colombia, it happened a lot that being in particular places or situations brought about connections to the world – or beyond it.’

The *Memoria* book stands in for the ‘deleted scenes’ supplement of the Blu-ray, which Apichatpong doesn’t want to see published. Camia’s diary of the production describes the filming of quite a few scenes which didn’t make it into the final cut, along with backstory details which Apichatpong eliminated because he decided in the edit that they provided ‘too much’ information – such as the fact that Jessica Holland is a quite recently bereaved widow at the time the story starts. I am probably one of many who thought of Jorge Luis Borges’s story ‘Funes the Memorious’ when the older Hernán describes himself as someone who has never been able to forget anything, but the book reveals that Apichatpong came across this version of ‘total recall’ in the real-life story of an Australian woman, Rebecca Sharrock, who has HSAM (‘Highly Superior Autobiographical Memory’), also known as hyperthymesia. (In the film, Hernán’s inability to forget is given a physical basis: the objects around him are literal touchstones, emitting ‘recordings’ of events he has witnessed.) There are many other serendipitous *trouvailles* in the book, which makes it an invaluable supplement to the film and a very rewarding browse.

The younger Hernán in Bogotá (Juan Pablo Urrego) plays with a ‘new music’ ensemble called The Depths of Delusion, whose name makes Jessica laugh (she gets to hear a sample of their work through headphones, but we don’t

share it). And Jessica at one point recites a short poem she has written, called 'Poem of the Sleepless Night', to her slightly scatty, new-agey sister Karen (Agnes Brekke). These references to delusions and mental upsets – and there are several others – all relate to Apichatpong's own (pleasurable) experience of 'exploding head syndrome' – in his own case, resulting not in insomnia but in a strange enhancement of his hours of reverie before fully waking up, described in detail in his introduction to the book. He goes on to make a connection between the 'drifting terrain' or 'subterranean world' of his reveries, in which he always finds himself a non-participating observer, and the Buddhist ideal of 'nothingness' or 'voidness' which has always loomed large in his thinking. But he has never defined himself as a Buddhist, and there has always been an Andy Warhol aspect to his longing for 'blankness'. Maybe we should distinguish between his openness to external stimuli and ideas during the planning and writing of his films – not so distant from the surrealist notion of 'automatic writing' – and his strict control of the processes involved in arriving at their final, edited form?

As we've noted, the Bogotá version of Hernán is a professional sound mixer. Jessica is referred to him by her brother-in-law Juan (Daniel Giménez Cacho) as someone who can help her define and reproduce the sound in her head as a recording – a 'scientific' approach to the problem which turns out to be a dead end, which is doubtless why this Hernán seems never to have existed when Jessica goes looking for him again. But the presence of a sound mixer in the character list meshes with the film's own exceptionally precise and complex sound mix. I asked Apichatpong if this sharpened focus on sound indicated a shift in his thinking about his cinema. He sent me his longest and most detailed answer:

'I've always been into the sound design of films. The sound design [in *Memoria*] is complex because the film demands it. I have enjoyed the technical aspects [of sound mixing] more since we first staged the *Fever Room* performance in 2015. In that show, the sound designers and I had the chance to experiment with loads of speakers and their placement in the theatre. And a new VR performance I'm working on now is also starting from sound, the sound of sea waves. So maybe you're right, maybe I'll be approaching cinema more through sound. The experience in Colombia probably contributed to this too: since I don't speak Spanish, I treated the language as sound, as music. In relation to that, I think of *Memoria* as a performance. So I am VERY happy that [US distributor] Neon will play the film in theatres only.'

Tony Rayns, *Sight and Sound*, Winter 2021-2022

MEMORIA

A film by: Apichatpong Weerasethakul

©: Kick The Machine Films, Burning, Anna Sanders Films, Match Factory Productions, ZDF-Arte, Piano

Production Companies: Kick The Machine Films, Burning, The Match Factory, Piano

In association with: Illuminations Films (Past Lives)

In co-production with: Anna Sanders Films, Xstream Pictures, IQiYi Pictures, Titan Creative Entertainment, Rediance, ZDF-Arte, Louverture Films, Doha Film Institute, Beijing Contemporary Art

Foundation, Bord Cadre Films, Sovereign Films, Field of Vision, 185 Films
With the financial support of: Fondo Fílmico Colombia, EFICINE189, L'Aide aux Cinémas du Monde, Centre national du cinéma et de l'image animée, Institut Français, Medienboard, Eduoard Malingue Gallery, SCAI the Bathhouse, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Hubert Bals Fund of International Film Festival Rotterdam, Purin Pictures, 100 Tonson Foundation, Estudios Churbusco Azteca

Presented by: Kick The Machine Films, Burning

In association with: Illuminations Films (Past Lives)

Executive Producer: Tilda Swinton

Producers: Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Diana Bustamante, Simon Field, Keith Griffiths, Charles de Meaux, Michael Weber, Julio Chavezmontes

Accountant: Diana Lozano

Post-production Supervisors: Lee Chatametikool, Luis Alonso Cortés

1st Assistant Director 1: Sompot Chidgasornpongse

1st Assistant Director 2: Santiago Porras

Script Supervisors: Sompot Chidgasornpongse, Natalia Moguel

Casting Director: Jorge Forero

A film [Written] by: Apichatpong Weerasethakul

Photography Direction: Sayombhu Mukdeeprom

Still Photo: Sandro Kopp

VFX: Gato Encerrado Films, Automatik VFX Ltd

Editor: Lee Chatametikool

Production Design: Angélica Perea

Set Decorator: Lulú Salgado

Graphic Designer: Maria Antonia 'Chiri' Gaviria

Prop Master: Camilo 'The Wolf' Ospina

Costume Designer: Catherine Rodriguez

Make-up Design: Adam Zoller Duplan

Colourists: Jonathan Buenrostro, Chaitawat Thrisansri

Original Music: César López

Sound Design: Akritchalerm Kalayanamitr

Sound Supervisor: Javier Umpiérrez

Direct Sound: Raúl Locatelli

Sound Mix: Akritchalerm Kalayanamitr

Sound Editing: Javier Umpiérrez

Cast

Tilda Swinton (*Jessica Holland*)

Elkin Díaz (*Hernán Bedoya*)

Jeanne Balibar (*Agnes Cerkinsky*)

Juan Pablo Urrego (*Hernán Bedoya*)

Daniel Giménez Cacho (*Juan Ospina*)

Agnes Brekke (*Karen Holland*)

Jerónimo Barón (*Mateo Ospina*)

Aida Morales (*saleswoman*)

Constanza Gutiérrez (*Doctor Constanza*)

Colombia-Thailand-UK-Mexico-France-Germany-Qatar-China-

Switzerland 2021

136min

A Sovereign Film Distribution release

NEW RELEASES

Titane

From Sat 1 Jan

West Side Story

From Sat 1 Jan

Boiling Point

From Fri 7 Jan

Licorice Pizza

From Thu 13 Jan

Memoria

From Fri 14 Jan

Parallel Mothers (Madres paralelas)

From Fri 28 Jan

RE-RELEASES

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From Fri 7 Jan

South: Sir Ernest Shackleton's Glorious Epic of the Antarctic

From Fri 28 Jan

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