



SIGHT AND SOUND GREATEST FILMS OF ALL TIME 2022: 95=

Tropical Malady

(Sud Pralad)

Tropical Malady was the title under which the artist and filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul's 2004 feature was distributed in the UK and elsewhere. Its original Thai title, *Sud Pralad*, in fact means something like 'strange beast'. This is perhaps a more apt characterisation of a film that compels through fierce natural strangeness rather than intimations of illness per se. More is going on here in terms of story, sense perception, sexuality, identity and spirituality than is easily accessible to mainstream sensibilities. But if that speaks to malady, it seems less a matter of infection or disease than the disordered expectation that the world will constrain itself to conventionally limited and contingent ways of thinking, feeling and understanding. Strange beasts are best met on their own ground, on their own terms.

The film is a diptych of sorts. The first part introduces us to soldier Keng (Banlop Lomnoi), part of a group assigned to a rural area where unsettling killings of animals have been noted, perhaps the work of an unquiet spirit – the strange beast. There, Keng meets Tong (Sakda Kaewbuadee), a placid-seeming young man with whom he strikes up a flirtatious rapport. They spend time together in town and country, at the movies, taking a dog to the vet, exploring nearby shrines. In the second part, Keng is in the forest, alone, tracking and being tracked by the strange spirit, who seems to be at once Tong and a tiger. There are stalkings, struggles and submissions, encounters with ghost cows and clever monkeys. In both parts, transportive sound design and locked-off compositions frame interpersonal dynamics that tilt in unexpected ways. Queerness here is not only a matter of same-sex desire but of radical uncertainty, shifts between persons and worlds.

It's a work that defies straightforward understanding and suggests that understandability may be overrated. (Benedict Anderson has argued that aspects of narrative, setting and character unfamiliar to the film's cosmopolitan audiences are quite accessible to viewers from the region where the film was shot – yet even they were perplexed by other elements.) Apichatpong's earlier features had won festival recognition but this was a breakthrough. In the years since, its calm indifference to staid forms of logic, hierarchy and desire have helped affirm it as a marvel of imaginative engagement with posthuman possibilities.

Ben Walters, *Sight and Sound*, Winter 2022-23

A contemporary review

With this winner of the *Prix du Jury* in Cannes in 2004 – the first Thai film to be shown in competition – Apichatpong Weerasethakul has proved himself one of the most brilliantly original directors in the world. UK audiences were deprived of his last film, *Blissfully Yours* (2002) – also award-winning, also bifurcated – whose day-out in-the-jungle sexual fable might have prepared them for the cocktail of bestial strangeness that is *Tropical Malady*.

The first section of this movie is delightful, though the mood of upcoming unease is signalled from the very first shot: a chirpy group of Thai soldiers pose for photographs while on patrol. The hand-held camera only slightly swerves down at the last minute to show that they are trophy posing over a recovered corpse. For most of the rest of this section, however, the camerawork is resolutely static, the soundtrack awash with loud ambient sound, like the background noise of a phone call from a noisy place to a quiet place. It's no surprise to learn that the tiger spirit in the second section of the movie has a special fascination with the soldier's walkie-talkie: the film has the spooked air of one long phone call from the subconscious.

The gay love story which is the kernel of the first section asks for no special treatment; much of it is filmed like the universal gay love story made everywhere in many countries around the world, though it is perhaps unusually discreet in execution here, without a shred of sexual-politics. That said, Chicago-educated Weerasethakul has a shrewd eye for detail – the sparing use of camp is especially judicious and the modern way of saying things. In some ways these are stereotypes of Thai gay culture – the entwined hands, the flowery protestations of love, the sentimental songs on stage, the accepting family members – which Weerasethakul is setting up to derail with his later blast of rotting jungle matter, rutting animal desires, transmigrating sex and death. Not even Buddhism survives as this night falls, with its progression of kitschy little monk stories and the ephemeral trash laid at shrines in underground eaves, including a toy that plays inappropriate Christmas carols.

The first section in some ways functions as a trap for the unwary, posing as an ordinary piece of indistinctly empowering soap opera, and the brief intermediate section a kind of picturesque fairytale about Khmer shamans. But it is Weerasethakul's intention to go directly and strongly to the world of Joseph Beuys and William Blake, and by the time we get to the second section he is determined to evoke a place that is defiantly other worldly. The darkness of this jungle is infinite, and Weerasethakul is careful to leave it dark. Sometimes we can barely make out the soldier, shivering with dread, at the centre of the second part of the film until perhaps he moves his flashlight over some gnarled greenery and strangler figs, or fireflies light up a tree in a chorus of unearthly photo luminescence. Weerasethakul's passion for the forest floor is also considerable: few have ever attended to its structure in such detail, with its paw-prints, twigs, dead leaves, snail shells, fly-blown turds, leeches and most of all mud. It is only by smearing himself with mud, like Arnie in *Predator*, that the soldier stands any chance of outwitting his tiger-spirit nemesis.

At times the film brings to mind the famous toy, created for the ruler of Mysore, Tippu Sultan, in the 18th century, where a large orange tiger sits over an incapacitated Englishman who screams as he is devoured. But the characters in this film have a clear choice between killing the tiger and giving themselves up to it and joining it in the world of spirit; in one of the most effective scenes the stalking soldier begins to understand what a baboon like ape is saying to him from the trees. 'The tiger trails you like a shadow/his spirit is starving and lonesome/I see you are his prey and his companion.'

This is a work of outstanding originality and power that comes nearer to the condition of the quest and the dream state than any film in recent years. It requires a relaxed and open mind to watch it, be consumed by it, and enjoy its great and fearful symmetry.

Roger Clarke, *Sight & Sound*, March 2005

TROPICAL MALADY (SUD PRALAD)

Conceived by: Apichatpong Weerasethakul
©/Production Companies: Anna Sanders Films, GMM Grammy Public Company
©/Co-production Company: Kick the Machine
©/Production Companies: Thoke+Moebius Film, Downtown Pictures
With the support of: Fonds Sud, Fondation MonteCinemaVerità, Hessen Invest Film
Production Company: TIFA
In association with: Rai Cinema, Fabrica Cinema
With the participation of: Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication, Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Backup Films
World Sales Agent: Celluloid Dreams
Produced by: Charles de Meaux
Assistant Producer: Tiana Mille
Co-producers: Paiboon Damrongchaitham, Marco Müller, Christoph Thoke, Axel Moebius, Pantham Thongsang
Italy Production Co-ordinator: Valentina Merli
Post-production Supervisor: Lee Chatametikool
Assistant Director: Suchada Siridhanawuddhi
Screenplay: Apichatpong Weerasethakul [uncredited]
Directors of Photography: Vichit Tanapanitch, Jarin Pengpanitch, Jean Louis Vialard

Digital Visual Effects: TVT Postproduction GmbH
Digital Visual Effects Supervisor: Markus Degen
Edited by: Lee Chatametikool
Editing Advisor: Jacopo Quadri
Production Designer: Akekarat Homlaor
Costumes: Pilaitip Jamniam
Make-up: Ach Intapura
Laboratory: Kantana Animation Co., Ltd.
Optical Effects: Sannucha Dhisayabutr, Suchart Hongsmut, Pravit Jalvijit
Sound/Sound Design: Akritchalerm Kalayanamitr
Sound: Aka Ritt
Subtitles: Lee Chatametikool
[Subtitles] Processed by: L.V.T. (Paris)

Cast

Banlop Lomnoi (*Keng*)
Sakda Kaewbuadee (*Tong*)
Sirivech Jareonchon
Udom Promma (*Ekarat*)
Huey Deesom
Saritpong Boonyadiwon

France/Thailand/Germany/Italy/Switzerland 2004©
118 mins

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SIGHT AND SOUND GREATEST FILMS OF ALL TIME 2022

The General Sun 1 Jan 12:10; Sun 29 Jan 15:10

The Leopard (Il gattopardo)

Sun 1 Jan 14:10; Thu 5 Jan 18:40; Fri 20 Jan 14:00

Sunset Boulevard Sun 1 Jan 15:50; Fri 27 Jan 14:30; Mon 30 Jan 17:50

Metropolis Sun 1 Jan 17:55 (+ intro by Bryony Dixon, BFI Curator); Sun 15 Jan 14:40; Mon 30 Jan 16:30 BFI IMAX

L'avventura (The Adventure) Sun 1 Jan 18:05; Sun 22 Jan 15:20; Mon 30 Jan 20:15

Touki-Bouki Mon 2 Jan 13:40; Tue 31 Jan 17:40

The Red Shoes Mon 2 Jan 13:50; Tue 24 Jan 18:05

Once Upon a Time in the West (C'era una volta il West) Mon 2 Jan 15:20; Sat 7 Jan 17:15; Sun 15 Jan 16:15 BFI IMAX

Get Out Mon 2 Jan 18:40; Fri 6 Jan 17:50

Pierrot le Fou Tue 3 Jan 18:10; Wed 4 Jan 20:30; Thu 19 Jan 20:30

My Neighbour Totoro (Tonari no Totoro)

Tue 3 Jan 18:20; Sun 22 Jan 10:00 BFI IMAX; Sat 28 Jan 13:40

A Man Escaped (Un Condamné à mort s'est échappé) Tue 3 Jan 18:30; Sat 28 Jan 20:30

Black Girl (La Noire de...)

Tue 3 Jan 20:30; Thu 12 Jan 18:15 (+ intro)

Ugetsu Monogatari

Tue 3 Jan 20:50; Tue 17 Jan 20:30

Madame de... Wed 4 Jan 14:30; Fri 20 Jan 18:10 (+ intro by Ruby McGuigan, Cultural Programme Manager)

Yi Yi (A One and a Two...) Wed 4 Jan 18:40; Sun 22 Jan 14:00 (+ intro by Hyun Jin Cho, Film Programmer, BFI Festivals)

The Shining Fri 6 Jan 20:10; Tue 10 Jan 20:10; Sat 21 Jan 20:30 BFI IMAX

Spirited Away (Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi)

Sat 7 Jan 12:10; Sun 22 Jan 12:30 BFI IMAX

Tropical Malady (Sud pralad)

Sat 7 Jan 13:50; Mon 9 Jan 20:40

Histoire(s) du cinema Sat 7 Jan 16:30

Blue Velvet Sat 7 Jan 20:30; Fri 20 Jan 20:35; Tue 24 Jan 21:00 BFI IMAX

Sátántangó Sun 8 Jan 11:15; Sat 21 Jan 13:30

Celine and Julie Go Boating (Céline et Julie vont en bateau) Sun 8 Jan 14:45; Sat 21 Jan 17:00

Journey to Italy (Viaggio in Italia) Sun 8 Jan 18:20; Mon 23 Jan 14:30; Fri 27 Jan 20:50

Parasite (Gisaengchung)

Mon 9 Jan 17:50; Wed 18 Jan 17:30 BFI IMAX

The Gleaners and I (Les glaneurs et la glaneuse) + La Jetée Wed 11 Jan 20:30; Mon 23 Jan 18:10

A Matter of Life and Death

Thu 12 Jan 20:40; Sun 22 Jan 11:30

Chungking Express (Chung Him sam lam)

Thu 12 Jan 20:45; Tue 17 Jan 20:50; Sat 21 Jan 14:15

Modern Times Fri 13 Jan 17:45; Sun 22 Jan 13:10

A Brighter Summer Day (Guling jie shaonian sha ren shijian) Mon 16 Jan 18:30; Sat 28 Jan 16:00

Imitation of Life Wed 18 Jan 20:30; Wed 25 Jan 14:30; Sun 29 Jan 12:30

The Spirit of the Beehive (El espíritu de la colmena) Thu 19 Jan 18:00; Sat 28 Jan 13:50

Sansho the Bailiff (Sansho Dayu)

Fri 20 Jan 17:45; Thu 26 Jan 17:50

Andrei Rublev Thu 26 Jan 18:40; Sun 29 Jan 17:20

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