SPECTRALITY AND THE PLURAL BODY: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE WORKS OF APICHATPONG WEERASETHAKUL AND KORAKRIT ARUNANONDCHAI

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ABSTRACT

This article surveys the role of the spectral body as a device of transgression, multiplicity and entanglement, through a comparative study of the film *Uncle Boonmee Who Recalls His Past Lives* (2010), by the contemporary artist and filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul, and short film installation by contemporary artist Korakrit Arunanondchai, titled *No History in a Room Filled with People with Funny Names* 5 (2018) at Serralves Contemporary Art Museum, Porto, co-produced with Alex Gjovic and boychild. The body enacts a spectral, pluralistic device in the narrative strategies devised by the authors, traversing physical and spiritual dimensions in diegetic and extra-diegetic spaces, entangling subjects, territories, esoteric and spiritual traditions, postcolonial histories, and sociological dimensions.

KEYWORDS

In memory of Professor Margarida Medeiros, who will be missed for her extensive knowledge, generosity, and diligent tending to the world of cinematic ghosts.

Introduction

This article surveys the role of the spectral body as a device of transgression, multiplicity and entanglement, through a comparative study of the film *Uncle Boonmee Who Recalls His Past Lives* (2010, hereafter *Uncle Boonmee*) by the Thai contemporary artist and filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul, and the short film installation by the Thai-born, New York-based contemporary artist Korakrit Arunanondchai, titled *No History in a Room Filled with People with Funny Names 5* (2018, hereafter *No History 5*), produced in collaboration with filmmaker Alex Gjovic and performing artist boychild (also known as Tosh Basco), exhibited at Serralves Contemporary Art Museum, Porto, in 2020. Produced and showcased within almost ten years of one another, the works share common contextual backgrounds pertaining to Thailand, its traditions and geopolitical history, as well as its history of censorship of cinema. In this comparative study, the topic of spectrality becomes relevant due to various ghostly deployments of the body and the films' human and non-human subjects, and further accentuated by the artists' choice of medium – cinema, or the moving image – known for their longstanding correlation with haunting, the paranormal and the occult[1], as well as the uncertain, disjointed status of the ghost between body and spirit wrought by technological mediation.[2] These ghosts form entangled relationships to historical and political moments originating in Thailand, with a reach that is nevertheless relevant to a global geopolitical landscape.

Apichatpong Weerasethakul's oeuvre spans cinema, photography, art installation and print. His films are known for crossing stylistic boundaries and fusing several genres - horror, phantasy, slow cinema, Thai soap opera, drama, art cinema and political films, to name a few.

Korakrit Arunanondchai's eclectic oeuvre includes painting, performance, installation, video and multimedia. The artist addresses the history of Thailand, notions of individuality and authenticity, spirituality and technology, as well as practices of collaboration, through a dense overlaying of photography, painted and moving images. The range of Korakrit's references include his most personal background of family and friends, as well as wider national and global issues, commenting broadly on Thailand's dependence on Western capitalism, the police-state, Eastern spiritual traditions, rituals of grieving, animism and the supernatural.

In the first part of the article I briefly contextualize spectrality and the technological uncanny in the history of cinema as surveyed by Murray Leeder (2017), and as conveyed by Jacques Derrida's concept of *hauntology* (1993), which the scholar Mei Gao revisits through a study of magical realism in Chinese cinema, re-proposing the spectre as a magic realist figure – a proposition that illustrates well the contrasts in the choices of animism,

reincarnation, and the quasi-documentary realism of *Uncle Boonmee*; as well as the trope of ritual, performance and the dissolution of barriers between diegetic and extra-diegetic spaces, where the body of both characters and spectators participate in co-creating the spectral in *No History 5*. The idea of a spectral plural body is introduced as a multidimensional construct in the artists' oeuvres operating across various space-time differentials, where the fundamentally performative qualities of subjects place the human and non-human body in a dynamic locus of multiplicity, magic, memory, and transgression.

The second part of the article offers an analysis of the spectre in relation to notions of archive, memory, effacement and the body, in connection with Thailand's history of military occupation and cinematic censorship. Apichatpong's use of ghostly subjects functions as a commentary on the disappearance and anonymity of subjects during Thailand's communist insurgency – a guerrilla war that lasted from the early 1960s until the 1980s, fought mainly between the Communist Party of Thailand and the government of Thailand.

In this part of the text, I further engage with a letter written by the performer boychild's to Korakrit, where the haptic function is described through entanglements between coloniality, technology and phantasmagoria. I address the notion of an archival body in connection to the intermedial topographies that emerge around the nomadic, ritualistic cinema practices of Thailand, in reference to May Adadol Ingawanij's study of Isaan region's historical ties to US military occupation, the development of cinematic technology and the rehashing of phantoms pertaining to both local and global histories. The scholarly work of Jamie Lee in *Producing the Archival Body* (2020) and Tomie Hahn's notion of the body as a field site (2018) become pertinent references here.

The third part of the article addresses the artists' allusion to the physical senses as possessed both by ghostly and living subjects, humans and non-humans, looking more closely at the performative aspects of subjects inhabiting diegetic and extra-diegetic spaces and the spectators' participation, in reference to scholars Mitsuo Wada-Marciano and May Adadol Ingawanij.

Throughout the text I address the notions of embodiment, entanglement and spectrality as a construct or ensemble, highlighted by the cross-temporal, cross-spatial dimensions in which subjects act, as well as the relational – yet simultaneously disjointed or displaced – aspects in which these subjects operate in the films. In contemporary posthuman feminist discourses, entanglement has been the subject of wide discussion, with Rosi Braidotti's conception of the nomadic subject – one that is "non-unitary", split, in process, knotted, rhizomatic, transitional[3] - and Karen Barad's diffractive notion of *intra-action* (2007)[4], which invoke further considerations of the body as extended landscape and as an ecology-bound, relational subject. These theoretical considerations become relevant when analysing the

pluralistic deployment of the body and the potential multiplications of the Self in the works of Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Korakrit Arunanondchai, which, in paraphrase to Braidotti, may serve as 'experiments with contemporary subjectivity actualiz[ing] the virtual possibilities of an expanded, relational self that functions in a nature-culture continuum and is technologically mediated'[5]. Braidotti holds that corporeality and embodiment remain a strength in feminist philosophies, their relevance in times of crisis and in their contribution to multiple perspectives, that offer alternatives to Eurocentric, anthropocentric, masculinist, and other discriminatory unitary views.[6]

It is not the aim of this article to reduce the reading of the artists' eclectic, multi-layered works into a perspective narrowed by the tropes of the physical body – but rather to investigate how the contemporary body may enact collective, technological and mnemonic functions woven into the medium of film, and to consider why this may be relevant during a time when species extinction, climate change, and technocratic hegemonies appear to threaten and colonise the embodied Self. The works invite us to reconsider the role of the body in a contemporary landscape where technology and mediation instigate new physical and spatio-temporal conceptions, particularly at a moment in time when digital mediation has become a pervasive, transformative and almost mandatory constituent of contemporary life.

Plural bodies and spectral transgressions

Spectrality has been the topic of extensive interest and analysis in cinema theory. According to Esther Pereen, since the end of the twentieth century the topic of ghosts evolved from 'possible actual entities, plot devices and clichés' into a sphere of greater conceptual influence in global culture and in academia.[7] Murray Leeder states that "[t]he cinema is full of ghosts"[8] in his publication *The Modern Supernatural and the Beginnings of Cinema*" (2017), which extensively correlates cinema and the spectral through a series of edited texts surveying the historical links between image technologies and the evocations of the spiritual and the occult.

Jacques Derrida's publication *Spectres de Marx* (1993) has been commonly considered as a catalyst for the "spectral turn" in academia[9]. Here Derrida formulates a general hauntology (*hantologie*) – i.e a "haunted" "ontology", a destabilizing concept in light of ontological certainty, about the return of cultural memory and past aesthetics in the (mediated) present, as in the manner of a ghost. Derrida identifies that the "spectre" (in reference to Karl Marx's passage in *The Communist Manifesto*[10]) "*begins by coming back*",

and that spectres are concerned with a time that is not linear nor straightforward - "What seems to be […] the future, comes back […] from the past", and therefore every future appearance is a reappearance.[11] For Derrida, the cinematic experience is one of spectrality,[12] since the mechanisms of the cinematic image render what is present on the screen as something already absent. Colin Davis describes Derrida's spectre as a 'deconstructive figure hovering between life and death, presence and absence, (…) making established certainties vacillate'.[13] Derrida states that 'haunting is historical, to be sure, but it is not *dated*, it is never docilely given a date in the chain of presents, day after day, according to the instituted order of the calendar'.[14] Haunting is therefore chronologically disruptive and transgressive of linear time – as Peter Buse and Andrew Stott comment: 'haunting, by its very structure, implies a deformation of linear temporality: there may be no proper time for ghosts'.[15]

The corporeal function of the ghost appears in Derrida's analysis when he states that, '[f]or there to be ghost, there must be a return to the body, but to a body that is more abstract than ever. The spectrogenic process corresponds therefore to a paradoxical *incorporation*'[16] – proposing that the ghost re-emerges as the "more than one/no more one [*le plus d'un*]" in hauntology. The contradiction inherent to the term *hauntology* would seem to resonate with the equally paradoxical juxtaposition of concepts in "magical realism" – a term that describes the cinematic style of recent Chinese and other Southeast Asian films where elements of the physical and the concrete are conjugated with the ethereal. By 'materializing ghosts, merging past and present, and emphasizing the spiritual undertones of the objective world'[17], this cinematic style brings to the fore the spiritual or the unknowable that underlie the material certainty of the present. Mei Gao suggests that the Derridean spectre is a magic realist figure,[18] one which, I argue, would seem to closely align with an idea of a plural body in relation to spectrality. In *Uncle Boonmee* the magic realist figure is featured in the characters of the narrative, as embodied spectres in-between worlds.

Sidney Shoemaker illustrates to some extent Apichatpong's suggestion of the subject's capacity to reincarnate in several bodies: not necessarily human ones, and not necessarily in chronological fashion.

> From earliest times people have found intelligible, and sometimes almost believable, the idea that persons are capable of surviving death, either in disembodied form or through bodily resurrection or reincarnation. And many a piece of popular fiction relies on the idea that a person might have different bodies at different times.[19]

Through the narrative device of reincarnation, Apichatpong places the spectres of Boonmee and his dead relatives alongside living characters, rendering a sense of commonality in the co-existence of spirits and living beings in everyday life. The spectator is given the subtle suggestion that Uncle Boonmee may have reincarnated as a water buffalo, and as an ugly princess who appears later in the film. Spectres become transgressive in the way they fade in and out of the scenes, disrupting the seamlessness of the cinematic image as well as its chronological linearity. Huay, Uncle Boonmee's dead wife, appears first as a ghost and materialises into physical reality to look after Boonmee while he is sick. In a different scene, Jen and Tong split into two, and go on to "live" a parallel scene in a restaurant, while simultaneously their "doubles" remain in the hotel room watching television. This sense of duplication - of being both material and non-material, of existing in simultaneous temporal moments and parallel realities, where the spiritual world co-exists in commonality with the physical world - offers a disorienting and heterogeneous sense of time and space, rendering the body as a transgressive device across timelines and dimensions in diegetic space. When Boonsong, the deceased son of Boonmee (who is now a black-figured monkey-ghost with red laser eyes) appears during the evening dinner scene, he is not recognised by his family. As he begins to speak, his living family members begin to recall the sound of his voice, which hadn't changed since his death. This scene illustrates how physical attributes act as bridges in the liminal space between the material and immaterial world, the Present and the echo of the Past, conveying the transgressive potential of the spectral body in the film.

In the article "*Showing the Unknowable: Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*"[20], Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano addresses the film's transcendence of normative time, where the audience is offered a non-linear, non-homogenous concept of the spatio-temporal dimension by 'following the logic of reincarnation or, more precisely, the accumulation of *ksana* (moments)'.[21] Wada-Marciano comments on an 'uncertain tie with multiple memories'.[22] This multi-temporal dimension of the film is further conveyed through Apichatpong's pluralistic deployment of different human and non-human characters, their offering of an alternative understanding of the chronology of events (or lack there-of), and ghosts which exist outside of normal temporality.

Apichatpong's approach suggests a physical reality that is porous and layered, where material immaterialities are perceived as real. It is relevant to think of the idea of the real (and of realism), and the body's seeming ontological reliability. *Uncle Boonmee* is marked by

austere, minimalist, panoramic camera views that seem characteristic of *slow cinema* ('—a type of cinema characterized by minimalism, austerity, and extended duration'),[23] conveying a blatant physicality and ongoing sense of presence in the way the characters endure the scenes. They also enhance the spectator's own self-awareness during the still or uneventful passages where the landscape or the setting become the extended focus of the camera. In its resemblance to documentary-style imagery, the film embodies qualities that classify a typical ontology of realism, according to Ingawanij.[24] Wada-Marciano references a moment in the film where Boonmee asks if Jen's deceased father has visited her after his death. 'Jen replies, "No, once he was dead, he was gone. He didn't become a ghost." Her pragmatic manner effectively works to anchor their conversation—and, further, the film—to the mundane facts of life'.[25] However, there is deception in this enduring realism, as the standard chronological narrative becomes distorted, along with our notion of characters having linear, well-defined singular roles. There is greater permeability between the characters, both alive and dead, human and non-human, which destabilise the conventional boundaries around self or personhood. In one of the latter scenes of the film: on the eve of his death, Boonmee has a divinatory dream in a cave, surrounded by the ghost of his ex-wife Huan, his sister-in-law Jen, and Tong. This dream is conveyed through a series of photographs – featuring an ape, a group of soldiers, a photographer taking pictures, and a crop circle. It is unclear who Boonmee might be in this vision of the future, or whether this is his dream at all – his sense of self is rattled, as not only he cannot be identified with the dream, but he also cannot find compatibility between his self and the future.[26]

The sense of transgressive spectrality is further accentuated in the interpolation of scenes of animals and other beings enacting the alleged past-lives of Boonmee, as well as in their unlikely interactions. For example, an ugly princess has intercourse with a catfish by a waterfall, a scene which enhances the permeability between the human and non-human worlds, between the self and multiple beings. Ingawanij states, 'As a structure of perception and framework of experience, the relevance of animism to the theme of cinema beyond the human lies in its conception of the self as porous with respect to a multiplicity of life forms'.[27] In *Uncle Boonmee* the body exists in multiple states of being and timeframes – we encounter a phenomenon of plurality of the body as a spectral rendition in the diegetic space, where it transgresses into more than one spatio-temporal plane, and more than one representation – the body has a mobile agency. Each embodiment is not a singular rendition, i.e., it is not a mere character or phantom in the film - it is an active, networked device enacting a material bridge across human and non-human worlds, and across different time-frames in the diegetic space.

In classical film theory, cinematic enchantment and animism have been closely associated with Jean Epstein's idea of *photogénie*, a term borrowed from Louis Delluc – which he referred to as the purest expression of cinema, that which enhances any 'aspect of things, beings or souls' on screen. *Photogénie* brings life to objects that may assume the status of charms and amulets or the ominous, in a cinema Epstein describes as polytheistic and theogonic; a cinema which avoids narratives dealing 'with historical, educational, novelistic, moral or immoral, geographical or documentary subjects'.[28] *Photogénie* has been associated with various notions of 'transformation, expression, the close-up, movement, temporality, rhythm, and the augmentation of the senses'[29] i.e events that embody particular forms of compositional sensuality. Christophe Walla Romana argues for a corporeal vision in Epstein's cinema: first, because 'for him cinema is an apparatus of vision of and into the body', and 'cinema's mode of vision and spectatorship is tightly intertwined for Epstein with bodily affects and non-visual sensations, especially what he calls "coenaesthesis," the inner sensations that the body has of itself'.[30] The interpretation demonstrates a close affinity between the body and the camera, yet it still operates within a dualism between object and subject. Apichatpong's cinema differs from these classical origins of cinematic enchantment, due to an internal logic where the body becomes pivot to an alternative reality and to existentially uncertain states through various performative assemblages. Apichatpong devises a networked disposition of the body – as a subject entangled to multiple characters, ghosts and temporal frames – i.e. where the expansion of the diegetic and spatio-temporal space come to the fore - i.e. there is a greater system of relations instigated by the body.

Fig.1
Korakrit Arunanondchai and Alex Gvojic (with Tosh Basco)
No history in a room filled with people with funny names 5, 2018

In Korakrit Arunanondchai's film installation, spectrality appears to be both intrinsic and extrinsic to the film, dissolving the duality between characters and spectators. Spectrality is intrinsic in the way the body plays a collective, ritualistic role of spirit invocation and ghostly enactment in diegetic space; and extrinsic, in the sense that it is taken up by the unassuming performative spectator as he or she enters and inhabits the exhibition space. Ingawanij refers to a 'movie for ghosts' ('Here, in this environment, the ghosts are the movie watchers, gathered in a nocturnal cinematic territory to watch invisible humans on screen'[31]). Three large screens occupy the exhibition space, displaying simultaneous non-linear narratives where overlapping dissonant sequences of fragmented images evoke eerie moods and an atmosphere of mystery, cult, and transitory states. There is an ongoing centering of the camera on human bodies in various states of transition: the transgendered figure of boychild performs a kind of diabolical dance, seemingly possessed, emitting light from a small screen embedded in his/her open mouth; a group of teenagers appear painted and dressed in white, standing like ghostly figures in a hall-setting, reminding us of cult group gatherings, seemingly evoking spirits (Fig.1); while others gather around the dead to honour and mourn them. The ageing man and woman are Korakrit's grandparents, whose aged, folded skin is occasionally scrutinised by the camera's long, amplifying shots.

The performance artist boychild often re-appears throughout the screening, subject to various modifications and transformations: his/her body's gender is non-binary, multiplied through special effects to resemble an infinite sequence of spectres (reminiscent of Kali, the deity of destruction); while simultaneously appearing to embody a serpent deity (Fig. 2). Is s/he possessed? Or is s/he a bewitching enchantress? Her head has been cast in the colour green and placed as the centerpiece in the funereal arrangement at the entrance of the exhibition, reminiscent of the bald head of a Buddha figure (Fig. 3). Elsewhere in the screening, her green head is held by Korakrit, as he stands with his bare torso. boychild's body is plural, transformative, itinerant, transgressive; it fragments, and at the same time occupies multiple places, roles and dimensions across diegetic and non-diegetic spaces, transcending classical conceptual dualisms, while seemingly undergoing a ritual of shamanic dismemberment. S/he is transgender, both alive and dead, demon and deity, spectral and material, original and copied, highly individualised – i.e recognizable as the real-life performer - and at the same time s/he is an empty bodily placeholder for multiple enactments, postures, genders, rituals, invocations, spirits, digital trickeries and projections. S/he shape-shifts across conceptual, visual, and technical levels of the film. Philippe Vergne

refers to the state of boychild's body in the film as an 'endless, transitioning, transforming body'.[32]
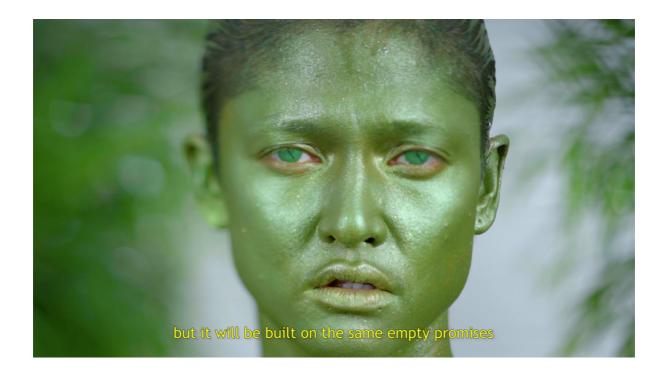

Fig. 2-3

Korakrit Arunanondchai and Alex Gvojic (with Tosh Basco)
No history in a room filled with people with funny names 5, 2018

In *Uncle Boonmee*, this quality of a plural body is seen in the fluid extensions of selves and other human and non-human bodies that speculatively refer back to the character of Boonmee. In Korakrit's film-installation this plurality becomes a network of parts in the performative body of boychild, amidst a population of fellow ghosts and transitory beings. These state(s) of the body would seem to resonate with what Rosi Braidotti classifies as a non-unitary and multi-layered subject, a dynamic and changing entity, in her discussion of the *nomadic subject* – one which Braidotti identifies as symptomatic of contemporary subjectivity in a globalized world, 'a dynamic and changing entity.'[33] The notion of the nomad is apt in its alignment with the mobility of Apichatpong's and Korakrit's subjects – a mobility that also characterises the figure of the ghost. This nomadism echoes the itinerant, make-shift cinema practices of Thailand, and the historical ghosts that their nomadic structures evoke (as I shall discuss later in the text).

A plural body may also be seen in the relational interdependencies of the group, their mutuality and intimacy, in the relations between self, community and ecosystem, the individual and the family – one cannot locate a central character in the narratives, neither a definitive self nor author. Ingawanij refers to a de-prioritising of first-person narration in *No History 5*, where '[t]he narrator rarely self-identifies as 'I', and the artist's body is always visualized as one among a group'[34]. The observation may be extended to *Uncle Boonmee*, where Adam Szymanski describes Boonmee's divinatory reverie in the cave as not belonging to Boonmee's psyche – it exists 'cordoned off from the world. It surpasses Boonmee's personality, enters into the *shared ecology*.'[35] Boonmee does not recognize himself in his own dream, and it may not be his dream at all. Szymanski refers to an ecology of the film, which attempts to visualise different degrees of alterity 'under one ecologically sensitive image', provoking a 'break from the anthropocentric structure'.[36] He also applies this logic to the dining scene, where the family members and their relational dynamics are restored, taking on a new collective character, or "group subject" composed of heterogenous parts.

The connective plural body

Ingawanij describes the body as connective ('Who or what are we amongst, as we move around here with our breathing, *connective*, vulnerable bodies? What courses through our

bodies, what touches us?)'.[37] One may think of the body as a porous membrane or vessel through which there is a coursing and exchange of energies and materials. Both *Uncle Boonmee* and *No History* 5 portray the body in liminal states, connecting spiritual and material worlds, diegetic and non-diegetic space, as well as the denser entanglements of 'histories, ruins, memories, myth, stories, spectacles, propagandas'.[38] This multiple connective ability draws me toward the potential of the spectral body as a form of embodied archive, as seen through two different prisms: one of an ecology of memory in *Uncle Boonmee,* and another where the haptic becomes a mnemonic mediator of (postcolonial) phantasmagorias in *No History 5.* Although Thailand was not factually colonized, postcolonial critical theory has attempted to provide plausible frameworks to understand the history of modern Siam/Thailand in relation to the West.[39] The history of Thailand has itself been a site 'haunted by the multiplicity from which its own becoming emerges (…) the multiplicities that never actualized' to paraphrase Érik Bordeleau, making Weerasethakul an 'archivist of abandoned potential, of virtualities that history failed to select in its process of actualization.'[40] The figure of the spectre thus enters a dialogue with the archive, where the repressed and the unresolved return from an effaced past, in line with the idea forwarded by Martin Hägglund that spectres are 'haunting reminders of the victims of historical violence, of those who have been excluded or extinguished from the formation of a society'.[41] Similarly, Avery Gordon describes 'Haunting and the appearance of spectres or ghosts is one way […] we are notified that what's been concealed is very much alive and present, interfering precisely with those always incomplete forms of containment and repression ceaselessly directed towards us'.[42]

Filmed in the conflicted Isaan region, *Uncle Boonmee* and *No History 5* refer to Thailand's war-torn history of military occupation and communist purging that occurred from the 1960s through the 1980s,[43] sharing a mutual historical background and time frame that speaks to the disappearance of people driven into the jungle and lost to military oppression. The censorship of cinema in Thailand under the 1930 Film Act,[44] adds another layer and possibly a double meaning to the narrative of the ghost in Apichatpong's film, namely with respect to the effacing of authorship and individual voice in the Thai cultural landscape. Boonmee states in one of the film's scenes: '*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.*[45] In *Uncle Boonmee,* as well as in other short films and installations, Apichatpong refers to the town of Nabula as being predominantly populated by widowed women and teenage youths, orphans of men who have disappeared during communist purging performed under Thai military occupation.[46] Both films touch upon cultural memories that

have been repressed or altogether omitted from history, and their ghostly enactments serve as attempts to usher these memories out of obscurity – in a manner reminiscent of the retrieval of an archival record.

Scholars addressing archival theory through the framework of the body offer further understanding of the reciprocal relationship between the plurality of the body, the spectral and the archive. The figure of the ghost and the archival record share affinities in the sense conveyed by archivist and scholar Sue McKemmish, where a record is both a conceptual construct and a physical object.[47] Verne Harris draws from the discourses of deconstruction, intersectionality and archetypal psychology, in his argument that the archive is fundamentally spectral.[48] N. Katherine Hayles suggests that the body holds histories of meaning: it is the 'net result of thousands of years of sedimented evolutionary history (…). Interpreted through metaphors resonant with cultural meanings, the body itself is a congealed metaphor'.[49]

In *Producing the Archival Body* (2021), queer oral historian Jamie Lee identifies relational reciprocities between bodies and the archive and their connection to time, where archives may be reframed 'as affective multimodalities that work to tenderly hold and structure bodies, technologies and stories'[50]. In utilizing the body as a framework, Lee interrogates the traditional notions and locations of the archive ('I study bodies. I think about the archives; I think about bodies; I think about memory, including cellular memory'), seeking to develop the notion of archive into a multiply-situated subject. Lee identifies the fragmentary nature of the archive, unable to stabilize what constitutes already fragmenting histories, and the co-creation of multiplicities in their derivations from master narratives – 'The bodies of knowledges in the archives, like human bodies, are kaleidoscopic. The bodies of fragmented and fragmenting histories are multiply situated.'[51] The ghosts of *Uncle Boonmee* and *No History 5* touch quite specifically on inherent historical multiplicities of Thailand, resonating with Lee's view in that they serve as embodied forms of narrative and storytelling, nonlinear and unsettling, generative of multiple points of view which tap into personal and collective "cell-memories" via unstable, heterogenous subjects, in processes of becoming. This appears evident in the characters' sharing of historical, inter-generational and collective memories.

In *Nocturnal Fabulations* (2017), Adam Szymanski describes an "ecology of memory" amongst Boonmee's family members' shared space of recollections, namely in Boonsong's recalling of his former life as a human photographer. Szymanski states that '[t]he images of the past that accompany Boonsong's recollection appear as a shared collective heritage.' When Boonsong tells his story in the introductory dining scene, it appears as though all characters are simultaneously in possession of the same memories; and when Jen leaves the table to sit on a nearby bench, the recollection is equally interrupted for all the

characters. Szymanski furthers that 'these images, as much as they make up Boonsong's experience and memory, are exteriorized and socialized – made a concrete part of the shared ecology (to the extent that they can even be affected [and interrupted] by others in the scene).' Szymanski refers to an *ecosophical aesthetic* devised by Apichatpong, where 'memories affect others (…) and others affect memories'.[52] The film's characters appear to belong to a collective corpus through which memories may be accessed and/or shaped – memories which appear and disappear from obscurity, similarly to the way ghosts appear and disappear from the darkened background of the film; possessing similar mobility and agency to connect the characters from the collective quantum of their conscious and unconscious worlds.

This ecology of memory transmigration between human and non-human characters resonates with the notion of *intra-action* – a neologism coined by posthuman feminist scholar Karen Barad to signify the "mutual constitution of entangled agencies"[53] by which "things" do not have inherently determinable boundaries. Barad's agential ontology offers an evocative image of Boonmee's collectively shared space of ghostly memories – 'whereby knowers and objects of knowledge are no longer discrete [and…] whereby "knowledge" produces the knower themselves as much as the objects of knowledge'[54]. Further resonances are found in Rosalyn Diprose's reading of the subject as co-constituted through 'the complex and constant processes whereby an individual who is developing personhood "borrows" from others—humans and nonhumans—consciously or unconsciously, through receiving shared and gifted materials', thereby participating in an ecological modality of sharing through exchanges that are 'not necessarily conscious or wilful'.[55]

Memory is addressed through the conceptual device of entanglement in Korakrit's work, however by means of the haptic. In the accompanying catalogue of the Serralves Museum's exhibition of *No History 5* (2020), boychild contributed with a letter addressing the sense of touch, through a reading of *The Undercommons* by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, where the authors extend upon the notion of *hapticality* in the context of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. boychild cites:

> [Hapticality], the capacity to feel through others, for others to feel through you, for you to feel them feeling you, this feel of the shipped is not regulated, at least not successfully, by a state, a religion, a people, an empire, a piece of land, a totem. (…) Recently I've noticed "haptics" pop up in the settings of our iPhones. Haptics as an extension into technology, as extensions of ourselves or our avatars, if not our bodies. As we grow more reliant on our devices, they

become a part of our everyday, our rituals, how we see, how we see ourselves (…)'.[56]

The sense of touch appears to become bound to the mediations of technological infrastructures, conferring communicative and connective ability to the body, as it appears to function as a form of mediating archive in its evoking of historical content. Through the layered historical references and mnemonic qualities attributed to the haptic in boychild's reading, touch bridges collective memories and images, which in turn resonate with the images stored in digital devices. *No History 5* interfaces the digital world with the body and the recording of histories, which also form the topics of interest in Jamie Lee's research. Lee aptly states:

Through the archives and archival productions, the stories are tethered to history as a collective body but constituted by multiple histories and truths. Therefore, multimodal storytelling on and through digital video, which elicits perception through visual (seeing), aural (hearing), and haptic (combinations of "tactile, kinesthetic, and proprioceptive, the way people experience though both on the surface of and inside our bodies"[57]

boychild's letter offers subtle references to the historical entanglements between coloniality, technology and the re-hashing of postcolonial phantasmagorias (echoed by technology's forceful deployment of non-consensual invasive strategies and remotely controlled territorial power relations, which have re-emerged in the socio-economic and geopolitical landscape of recent years).[58] Evoking the enmeshing of territory, history, spectrality, and the ancient esoteric traditions of the Udon Thani region, boychild's performance enacts a form of embodied intermedial archive, calling to mind what the scholar and ethnologist Tomie Hahn refers to as the "body as a field site".[59] For Hahn, each performer possesses an internal landscape that resonates with their immediate environment - their inner experiences become reflected in their performative act. *Uncle Boonmee* and *No History 5* present characters whose memories constitute biographical content that is entangled to the characters' direct environment and communities.

This notion of the "body as a field site" further resonates with Korakrit's re-creation of a cinematic apparatus, in dialogue with the outdoor, itinerant practices of cinema in Thailand – the *nang kae bon*, a form of human-spirit communication and sociality – where a human host commissions a movie screening as a way of making a votive offering to an ancestral spirit or divinity that is usually associated with a territorial radius.[60] boychild mediated this spirit

communication through her serpentine possession - or embodiment of the mythical Nāga. According to Stéphane Rennesson, medium of the *nang kae bon* talk about themselves 'via an intricately enmeshed series of correspondences between events punctuating their own *biographies*, and the symbolic, mythical, and ontological features of the Nāga. (…) Mediums act like transmitters of ecological energy. They are part of a circuit and assist as a conduit for the channelling of the power of the Nāga'.[61] The force-field summoned by the local spirit is "[an] energy force relating to a specific group such as a village community (…) It is the main point of energy in the network linking the whole village (…)".[62] Hahn's notion of "the body as a field site" is reinforced here as a connective body that extends into the landscape and the community, co-existing as a spiritual mediator in a shared ecological network.

The itinerancy of *No History 5* as an installation that has been exhibited in several museums worldwide, speaks directly to the itinerant make-shift cinema of Thailand's northern region, which became commonplace as a result of the US occupation. In the text *Itinerant Cinematic Practices in and Around Thailand during the Cold War* (2018), Ingawanij reflects on this history, tracing the discussion of incorporation to techno-mediated practices and the cinematic dispositive, which become provisional, grounded upon indeterminacy, 'and [upon…] the exchanging and channeling of forces between the human and non-human'. The intermedial topographic ensemble (which Inagwanij refers to as an *apparatus of animistic cinema*), serves a connective function between the mediumistic body/embodied divinity, the spectators, the community, and the territory – enacting a web of pluralistic mediations: of cinematic images, spirits, and ancient culturally-embedded archetypes which bridge the memories of the collective.

Spectral performativity and the senses

Performativity is entangled and multi-layered in *No History 5,* but also in *Uncle Boonmee*'s "mise-en-scéne" dining scene, for example, with the appearance of the Monkey-ghost Ling-phi, in what first seems to be a monkey costume for a low-budget sci-fi film, i.e. there is nothing ghostly about it. Ethnographer Ashley Thompson proposed that animistic practices of possessions and mediumship 'engender reality of a performative nature'[63], and Ingawanij refers to a *performative reality* in Apichatopong's film. When the ghost of Huay appears in the film and gains material 'density', Tong gives her a glass of water as a gesture of hospitality and acknowledgement of her material presence, in the possibility that Huay has maintained the bodily sense of taste or thirst. Jen asks Huay whether she has been receiving her food offers, in the Buddhist-animist ritual of making food offerings to the dead,

as a means of ensuring their *anima* remains nurtured during the waiting time before their reincarnation.[64]

There is an unassuming collaboration with the spectators, which further extends this analysis of a plurality of the body into extra-diegetic space, where it becomes physical and participatory. The viewers' senses become engaged with the atmospheric and environmental qualities of the works. *Uncle Boonmee* features moments where sound foregrounds a black screen, for example, in the opening scene of the water buffalo. Ingawanij aptly refers to an 'ontology of realism',[65] in *Uncle Boonmee*, where the viewer's perception is stimulated through sound and tactility - 'We perceive non-synchronicity of time and indeterminacy of space through juxtapositions that stimulate our senses of hearing and touch as intensely as sight'.[66] Wada-Marciano highlights the role of sound in smoothing the connection between the shots of the present moment and the moment of reincarnation, offering the viewers a sense of overlap between the role of a distant spectator '(because they are always located on this side of the screen)' while at the same time being 'in proximity to the pastoral space (they concurrently experience the well-crafted soundscape while they view the film)'.[67]

In *No History* 5 the spectators metaphorically adopt spectral qualities, roaming the space like ghosts. Ingawanij describes a nocturnal cinematic territory, where viewers watch "invisible humans on the screen", in reference to a scene where people gather around a green screen, dressed in white, echoing the poise of the visitors watching the triptych installation in the exhibition space (Fig.4). The description resonates with the ghostly, anonymous nature of the characters in the work, where physical beings occupy a metaphorical site of liminality, appearing to be on the verge of crossing between realms. From a technical point of view, one may also consider the function of green screens in digital film for making a particular background or character "invisible", when it is replaced by a digitally composed special effect (a landscape, or an action monster, for instance). The artist Hito Steyerl used the technique in her video *How Not to be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File* (2013), and although this is not utilised in *No History 5,* the way the characters are painted is suggestive of an attempt at invisibility, fused with the ritualistic, ghostly appearance in the midst of the fragmented video compositions.

Korakrit's installations engage the viewers' full senses: not only the visual and aural, but also tactile and olfactory. Upon entering the installation, the viewer is able to smell the plants and earthy, spongy material covering the floor. Facing a funereal arrangement with three screens hanging over the top, emitting vertical green laser lights, the viewer enters a space where death, technology and ceremony coexist.

Fig. 4-5 Korakrit Arunanondchai and Alex Gvojic (with Tosh Basco)
No history in a room filled with people with funny names 5, 2018

Epilogue

A long-standing tradition between cinema, spectrality and the supernatural persists in contemporary cinematic practices. *Uncle Boonmee* and *No History 5* enable a contemporary re-encounter of this tradition through the lens of the body as a locus of multidimensionality, offering a pluralistic view of the subject and the subject's entangled relations to personal and collective stories. May Adadol Ingawanij's readings of spectrality in Southeast Asian cinema, and in the films of Apichatpong and Korakrit specifically, are elucidative of deep historical ties between the films' shared regional interest, the development of technology and the rehashing of phantoms pertaining to both local and global histories of territorial occupation. The (spectral) body mediates between these realms of the past and the present, activating relations with the group, the community, and the environment, urging for a retrieval of repressed memories, as well as unrepresented subjects and their stories.

Spectrality and its relation to the contemporary scholarly revisioning of the archive through the frameworks of the body offer the view of an embodied, systemic, ecology-bound location of memory. The characters of *Uncle Bonmee* and *No History 5* draw from a shared space of recollection, where the notion of self is decentred, and where memories and subjects re-inform one-another reciprocally, whereby memory emerges from a space of interrelated agencies (or, to quote Karen Barad, of *intra-actions*).

The body participates in the cinematic *apparatus* devised by the artists, not only in diegetic, but also in extra-diegetic space and through the expanded participation of the viewer in co-creating the spectral, thereby extending upon the films' narratives and spatio-temporal dimensions. The spectral body becomes a mediating, transgressive device between worlds, histories, memories, environments, and spiritual dimensions in the authors' narratives, potentiating a network of interrelated - but not total - elements. An *intermedial topography*, in reference to Ingawanij, is created through the mechanisms of the body and its performativity, which assembles 'disparate elements without fusing them into a seamless whole'.[68]

It is important to note the resonance of the concept of entanglement with contemporary posthuman feminist discourse and the proposition of multiple (fragmented, nomadic) subjects, of *intra-active* webs of relations between humans, non-humans and their environments. The body becomes a travelling subject in a web of relations, inhabiting pluralistic viewpoints and dimensions. Paraphrasing Donna Haraway: 'Feminism is about the sciences of the multiple subject with (at least) double vision. (…) feminist embodiment resists fixation and is insatiably curious about the webs of differential positioning'.[69] The posthuman feminist discourse has helped to reframe this question of situatedness in

knowledge as relational, built on the concern for race, gender, and language, which decentres the anthropocentric view, making the case for a positioned rather than a total view. In the worlds of *Uncle Boonmee* and *No History 5* the human (and non-human) body becomes porous, relational, networked, subject to transformations, in the *animistic ecological relation* that is the contemporary jungle of images.

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