

Issue#18

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Wasteland

On Body & Soul



WASTELAND

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Dedicated to films that explore embodiment either aesthetically or thematically; films concerned with our spiritual selves; films that offer their own interpretation or expression of what it means to be a breathing body, especially on screen.

Features:

The Woman with Two Heads
1977, Shuji Terayama
Words by Jessica Moore

Good Morning
2008, Satoshi Kon
Words by Charlotte Mansfield

*Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall
His Past Lives*
2010, Apichatpong Weerasethakul
Words by Jonny Rogers

*The Woman With
Two Heads*
1977 d. Shuji Terayama

Words by Jessica Moore





Behind a girl and her rolling hoop, a shadow hangs against a sheet, as if delicately pinned by a psychic substance. Indeed, shadows are spirited. They shape-shift, they follow, they cling; they're parasitic. They swell and distend; they lure our gaze. In faculty, they are similar to filmic representations. Attached to and dependent on the figures they replicate, shadows possess an opacity familiar to the screen. They, like items in an image, are untouchable and otherworldly. In film, photographs or paintings, shadows are equal to the bodies who cast them—just as opaque, just as intangible. They dangle before us; we outstretch our arms.

Outside of film, there is an earthliness to shadows. They are recognisable shapes emptied and refilled with darkness. Bound to truth, at least in part, shadows are extensions of what's there; what's real.

Shadows are not reflections, however. They are chasms, not mirrors. Mirrors stare back—we are met with ourselves. Shadows, by contrast, are far less confrontational. In the dark, there's room for manipulation. Shadows belie their assumed honesty, replacing truth with possibility. They contort and spread outward, they indulge in misguidance.

Early cinema used shadows to bewilder audiences. One is reminded of the fantastical set-pieces of Robert Wiene's 1920 *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* and the silhouettes of Fritz Lang's 1931 *M*. Later, film noir offered its own, often socially critical, employment—of anguished men drifting beneath imprisoning shadows. In Ingmar Bergman's 1966 *Persona*, identities collapse in the dark; shadows are portals to one's mitotic consciousness. Later still, though clearly referential to the chiaroscuro of its predecessors, Shuji Terayama's 1977 *The Woman With Two Heads* sees shadows as embodied—as soulful, lively figures that depict their own curious visual narratives, at odds with, though somehow related to, the bodies who cast them.

Roman author Pliny the Elder claimed the very art of painting began with tracing the edge of shadow, etching its shape. This act of immortalisation becomes an emotional gesture in Terayama's film. Characters yearn for memories of childhood and sexual intimacy. They see a past just out of reach—through a dark tunnel.

Writing on Japanese aesthetics, author Jun'ichirō Tanizaki exalts shadows' adherence to *mono no aware* (the art of impermanence). For Terayama, the quest to clasp the intangible holds the centre of his short. Separated from the bodies they visually echo, souls are hidden amidst the depthless and unpredictable motions of the shadows they inhabit. Beginning with a girl and her rolling hoop, moving to a couple in bed, and ending with a woman on a film set with her head in her hands, shadows are severed from their sources, suspended in fantasy. They blur the line between object and sight; they fade and dissolve. As maintained by Terayama's meta surrealism, shadows, like memories, can be washed away, relished or refused.

Cut down the middle between material and immaterial, shadows are hosts of desire. With room to move fluidly and unrestrained, they lift bodies out of corporeal limitation. They succumb to the artist's imagination; they are as easily destroyed as they are created.

It seems, at least according to Terayama, the indeterminacy of shadows is their most filmic quality. In fact, if one was able to slice a screen in two, poring over its impossible cross-section, perhaps there would only be shadows—drifting through endless tunnels, dancing in the dark.

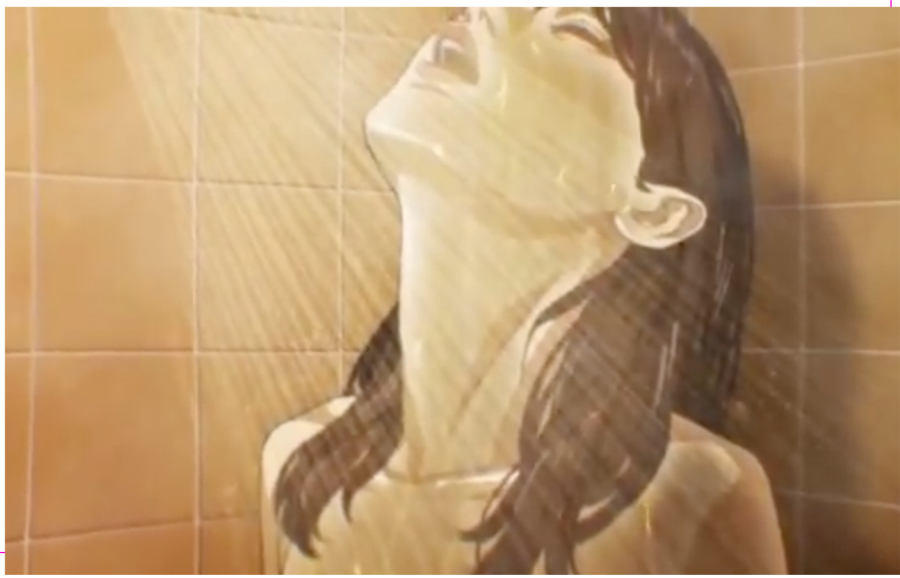


Good morning

2008 d. Satoshi Kon

Words by Charlotte Mansfield





Suitably capturing the fleeting and the intangible on film is an achievement in feature-length cinema, yet this fifty-nine second animation beautifully wraps up the ephemerality of a wake-up ritual. Perhaps after a heavy night of celebration, a woman is awoken by her phone and becomes split into two. Both bodies appear translucent, with one falling behind another, only to be reunited in the mirror once her ritual is complete.

Capturing the elusiveness of morning fog, the ghost of the unconscious self lingers, weighed down on the mattress a few moments more. The body is forced out of slumber while the spirit rests until fully prepared to receive its soul. Primed by water this ritual is ancient in origins, owing itself to religious practice as well as everyday necessities.

The short explores the mystery of the dream state, not simply as a state of mind but a physical realm the body is tied to during slumber. To be see-through is to pass time without effect, to blend into one's environment. She is part of the bed, the fridge, the morning news, and all the elements that influence her day.

In an age of idealised morning routines, the film takes on another significance in finding the beauty in simplicity and even banality. Without romanticising 5am wake-up calls, intense workouts, elaborate recipes or expensive products the woman prances around her own cluttered space with grace. This animation is not only beautiful visually, but in its reminder of the pleasures of simply being awake despite the luxury of sleep.



Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives

2010 d. Apichatpong Weerasethakul

Words by Jonny Rogers





Every culture has its monsters; whether terrifying, savage, strange, or numinous, these creatures provide a way of talking about the unknown and the untamed. In most traditions, their residence is the wilderness: the further you travel outside the boundaries of civilization, through the dark woodlands beyond the walls of the city, the greater the danger you face. The boundaries between man and beast begin to blur; mortal and immortal; natural and supernatural.

Set in the mountainous forests of northeast Thailand, *Uncle Boonmee* invites us into a world in which spirits and talking animals live alongside humans; not as an aggressive presence that threatens their security, but as a natural part of a reality infused with magic and superstition.

The film's loose and free-flowing structure centres on the titular character coming to terms with his approaching death, uncertain of what will follow. He laments, at one point, that his illness is a result of karma for killing communists while serving in the military. Contrary to what the title declares, however, Boonmee cannot remember his past lives - at least, not with any clarity.

One segment of the film features a disfigured princess rejecting the advances of a servant, before discarding her jewelry as she gives herself over to a talking catfish in the hope that she will be made beautiful again. It is uncertain whether this is a dream or a memory from a past life; Boonmee might well believe himself to have been the princess, the servant, the catfish, or something else entirely.

Perhaps the most memorable scene occurs near the beginning. Soon after the ghost of Boonmee's late wife appears at the dinner table - and entering not with a bang but with a gentle fade - a red-eyed Monkey Spirit silently approaches from the shadows, claiming to be their son, Boonsong. Having been so captivated by a mysterious creature he had glimpsed in a photograph, Boonsong found himself

transformed into a Monkey Spirit after mating with one.

Boonmee describes a dream in which a future civilisation is able to make 'past people' disappear by shining a light on them. A series of photos show an ape-like beast being chained by the military, while a group of teenage boys throw stones from a distance. This attempt to control the unknown erupts in an act of unseen violence, the subjugation of the sublime.

If there is any common thread between the disparate parts of the film, it's that the boundaries of the human body and soul are in flux; characters might easily slip into the non-human domain through seduction by the forces of nature, whether conscious or unconscious. This is a realm of endless possibility, unshackled from the sober rationalism of the technologised world that curtails creativity in servitude to its own conventions.

Weerasethakul invites us to view cinema as a kind of reincarnation, accumulating old ideas and memories as it takes on new forms. The film does not seek to explain or justify its metaphysics; rather, it delights in its playful absurdity, finding inspiration as much in the cheap costumes of B-movie horror monsters, historical dramas, and half-forgotten dreams as in local folklore, Buddhist traditions, and the collective trauma of Thailand's turbulent past.

Despite, or perhaps because of, its languid pace and strange amalgamation of images, the film is at once comforting and unsettling. As magic becomes mundane, the material vitality of this world becomes magical; the white noise of flies, crickets, and birds calls us to recognise that we share our space with countless unseen creatures.

The film's opening shows a water buffalo breaking free from a rope tethered to a tree and wandering into the forest. A man observes, and begins to follow. Likewise, I suggest you let the film roam and see where it takes you.



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