

Cannes film festival 2010: a triumph of politics over art

The consensus seems to be that Cannes 2010 was far from a stellar year. But the competition produced a bewitching Palme d'Or winner, there were frequent gems elsewhere, and flashes of real social engagement from the likes of Jean-Luc Godard and Lucy Walker



Unselfconsciously yet unapologetically spiritual ... Apichatpong Weerasethakul

Photograph: Eric Ryan/Getty

Cannes 2010 may have been a non-vintage year in many ways, but it yielded a glorious Palme d'Or winner in the form of **Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives**, by the Thai director Apichatpong Weerasethakul, an utterly beguiling film, bewitchingly mysterious and strange in his distinctive manner, and unselfconsciously yet unapologetically spiritual – a spirituality that the director quietly offers as an alternative to the belligerent nationalism and factious politics for which Thailand is now in the news.

It is a compassionate film that combines gentle comedy with fantasy and offers a transcendental vision of love, which manifests itself most vividly at the moment of our death. Its success may modify the somewhat clichéd critical view of Asian cinema at Cannes as something affectless and opaque. After the successive triumphs of his last two films, **Tropical Malady** and **Syndromes and a Century**, this showed a film-maker whose imagination is at its strongest and most confident: his creative idiom pulses like a powerful heartbeat. After watching this movie, I was so swooningly captivated, I almost felt like going to live in some sort of tent near the director's home in Chiangmai in Thailand, a true believer, like one of the followers of Tolstoy encamped near his home at the beginning of the last century.

The film is loosely inspired by a pamphlet entitled *A Man Who Can Recall Past Lives*, which the director found in a monastery in north-east Thailand, about an old man called Uncle Boonmee who helped at the temple and told gentle tales of his past lives and past incarnations as humans and animals. Weerasethakul's movie imagines a widower called Boonmee, played by the non-professional Thanapat Saisaymar, who is suffering from a terminal disease and has come to the remote forests of his boyhood – the location, as he believes, of his past spirit lives – to die. But his memory of these past lives is not merely a case of earlier incarnations being presented as a kind of mystical "flashback", but his memory of those lives which are now lost to him: his dead wife and lost son. His encounter with these past lives is gently comic, strange, dream-like and deeply moving. I write about this film in more detail [here](#).



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