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Official Selection

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ANATOMY OF TIME

A FILM BY JAKRAWAL NILTHAMRONG



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ANATOMY OF TIME

A FILM BY JAKRAWAL NILTHAMRONG

2021, 118 minutes, Thailand/France/Netherlands/Singapore,
1.85:1, Color, 5.1 Sound, In Thai with English subtitles

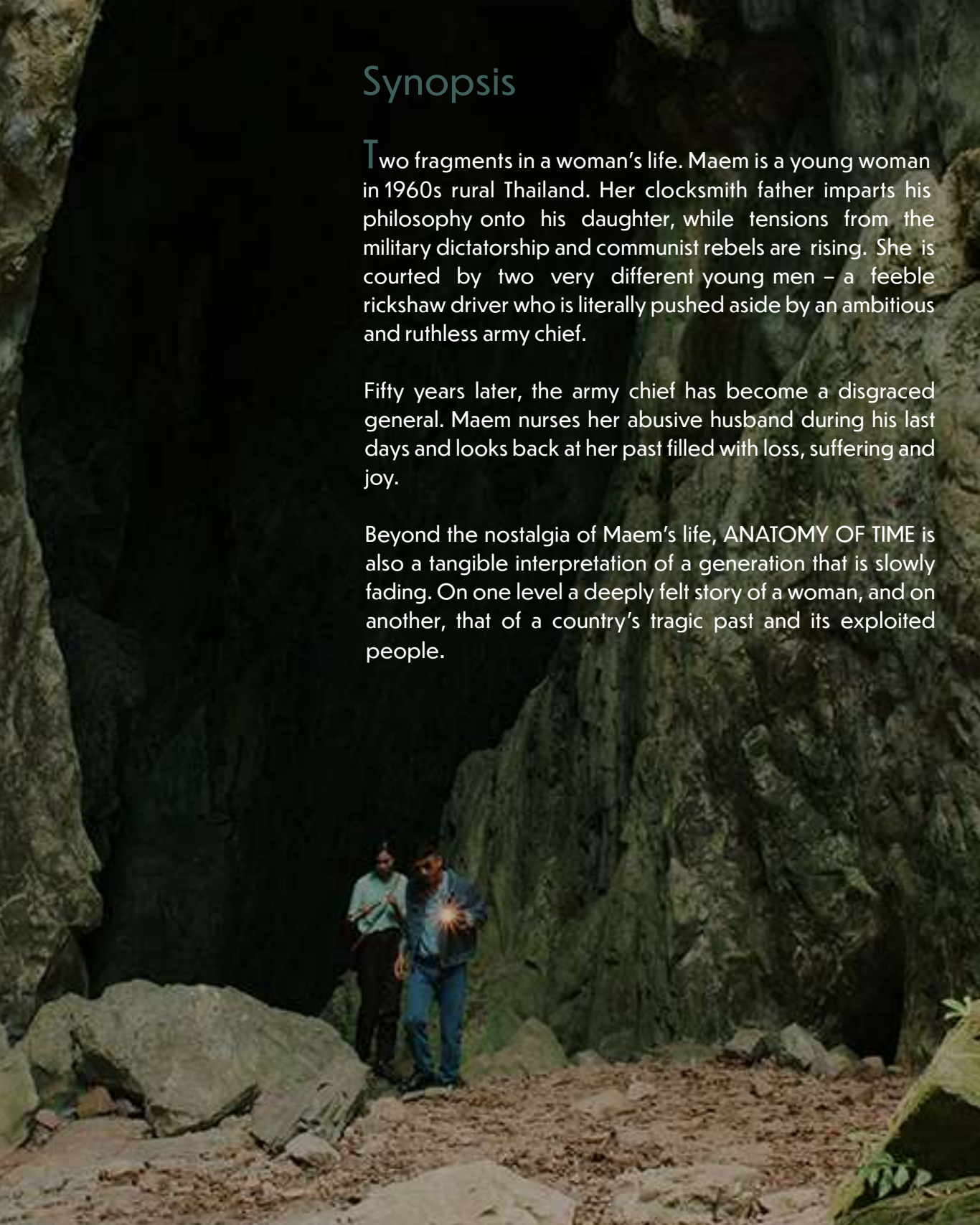
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Synopsis

Two fragments in a woman's life. Maem is a young woman in 1960s rural Thailand. Her clocksmith father imparts his philosophy onto his daughter, while tensions from the military dictatorship and communist rebels are rising. She is courted by two very different young men – a feeble rickshaw driver who is literally pushed aside by an ambitious and ruthless army chief.

Fifty years later, the army chief has become a disgraced general. Maem nurses her abusive husband during his last days and looks back at her past filled with loss, suffering and joy.

Beyond the nostalgia of Maem's life, ANATOMY OF TIME is also a tangible interpretation of a generation that is slowly fading. On one level a deeply felt story of a woman, and on another, that of a country's tragic past and its exploited people.



Director's Note

This is a film about nature; nature of suffering, nature of being and nature of time. We discover simplicity in the paradoxical nature of existence. The story explores the growing bond between two different women separated by time. While the present part seems like a true to life movie that I have been watching since I was a child, the past sequences are solely from my vivid imagination. I am trying to make sense of the reason why endurance has played such an important role in this woman's life. This is not a biopic about my parents. The film was made because of them.

Jakrawal Nilthamrong



Embracing the Unknowable

Even for many of us who are followers of Southeast Asian cinema, the terrain can still remain unfamiliar, even though well-trodden. When you encounter a film such as ANATOMY OF TIME that encompasses religion, philosophy, politics, history, cinema and more, one feels the pleasure of swimming in unknown waters yet again. Philip Cheah speaks to Jakrawal Nilthamrong, about his cinematic tapestry.

PC: In normal stories, no matter how complex the result of the narrative becomes (through technique and editing), it always starts with a simple, small idea. What was that idea that you started with?

JN: The inspiration of ANATOMY OF TIME came from a personal story. More than 10 years, my father had been seriously ill. I saw my mother tirelessly taking care of him with great dedication. In his final year, we went in and out of the hospital almost every other week. I think the bond of love between the two had long gone. But for some reason she committed to take care of her husband as best as she could. I was trying to understand that endurance. I never asked. But I think she indirectly taught me through all the torment in her life. For me, that experience opens up an opportunity to see the nature of suffering as transcending.

Reflecting on your title, the film's philosophical aspects are very strong – that time is something we can never grasp. Like the physical body, its beauty and radiance in youth, is always fleeting, always fading away. Why do you have such a connection with time, something that we saw in your first film, VANISHING POINT (2015)?

It's true. I always like to think that once we grow up (or get old) we slowly become a different person. For VANISHING POINT it's a story of a man in different stages of life while ANATOMY OF TIME explores that of a woman. I am interested in visualizing the concept of time, be it four-dimensional in physics or eternity in ontology. But I believe 'time' finds its meaning in death. And since death is never an event in life, that's why cinema has the potential to create a comprehensible experience of the phenomenon of time.

In the early scenes, Maem's father establishes the philosophical tone of the story by his reflections on religion and philosophy, redemption and karma. If we apply this to the General, then the story seems to say that he spent his youth thirsty for power and glory, never imagining that his future would be one of decay and disability. Can you please explain the reference to the Thai Young Turks in the military, the period of the 60s that the film starts at?

Thai Young Turks were a group of aspiring military officers who tried to make political changes through a series of coup d'états. They filled the political landscape of the 1960-80s with periodic power struggles. Some of the military officers who had gone through the political battles of that period were promoted as statesmen while some losers lived in shame for committing treason. It's hard to imagine that the General will find peace at the end of his life. Obviously not through the sacrifice of his wife but perhaps the longing to find his only son who was born to another woman keeps him going through life.



In addition, when the military officer visits the sick General, why is he approving the General's sacrifice for the country (what's the sacrifice?) and why does the shopkeeper insult the General for being a fascist and chase him away?

Those scenes were created as a backdrop for the General's character who might have gone through the rise and fall of his life as a military man. This character went through many battles. He has cracked down on the people's uprising against military dictatorship that killed hundreds of protesters. These backstories are not fully explained in the movie because I want the audience to feel the same way as Maem, a housewife who did not take part in her husband's cruel decisions. But, in the end, she suffered the hardship as well.

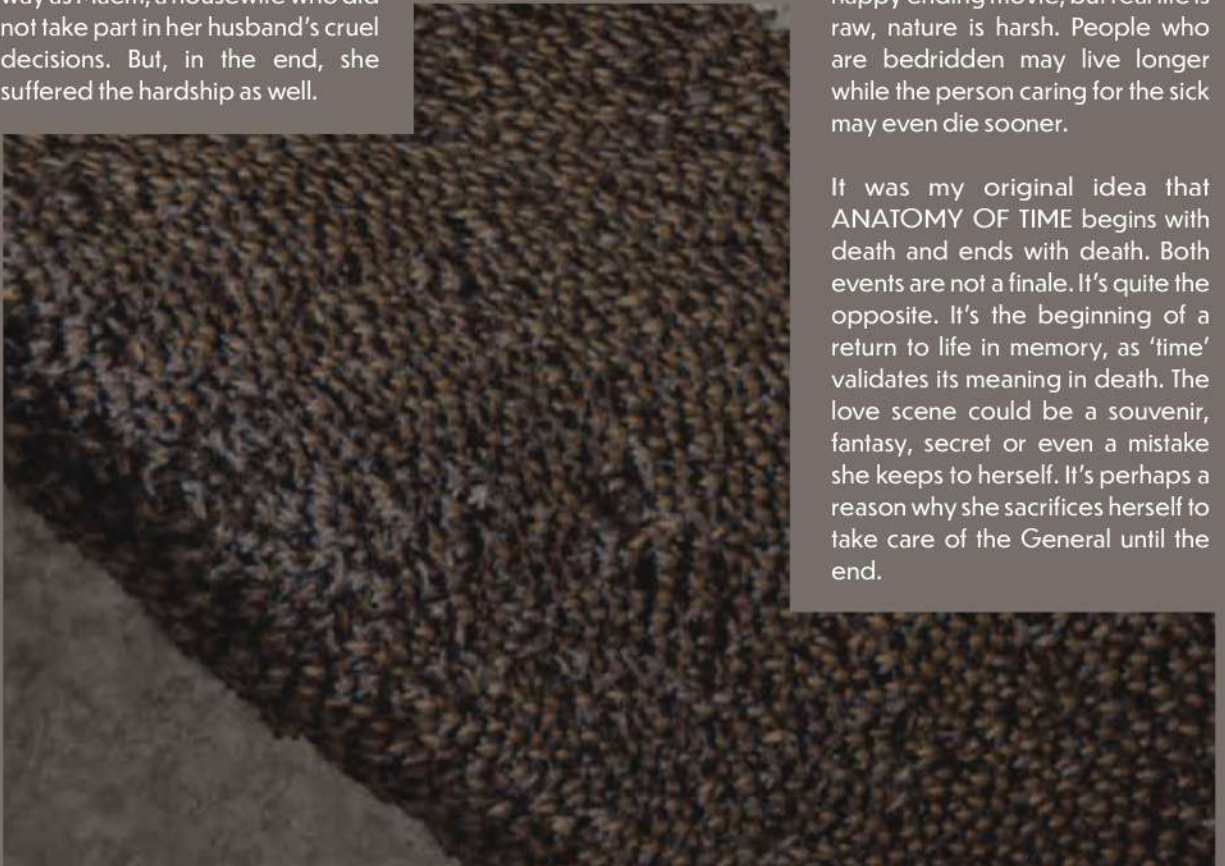
But if we apply Maem's father's philosophy to Maem herself, then is it that she has to accept the choice that she made of the General instead of Don? Are the constant images of clocks, of the dog's births and death, meant to show Maem's resignation to her fate?

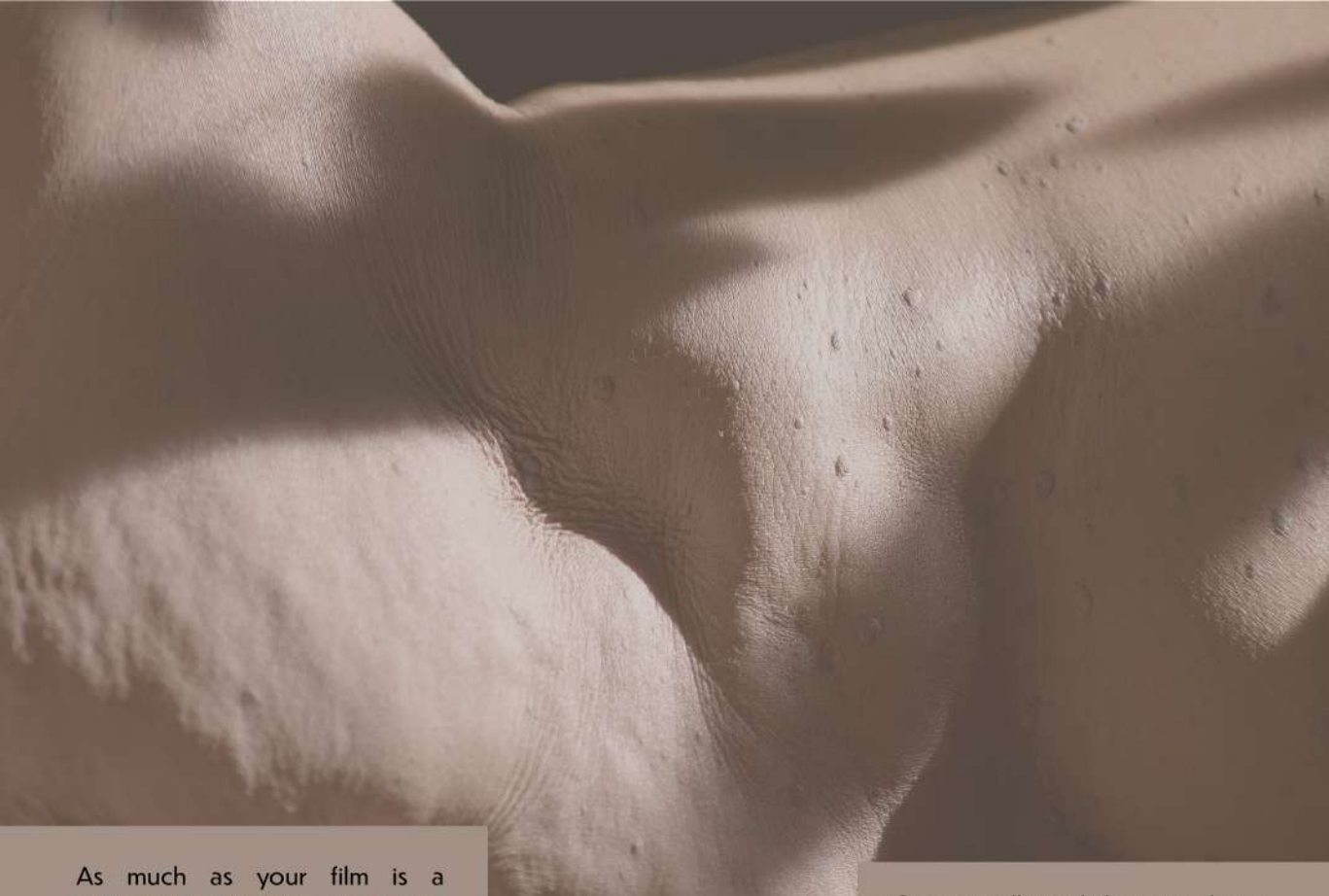
I think the philosophy her father described could be used as an analogy to Maem's life when she is old, including trying to attain nirvana. One could interpret that endurance inside the cave (or life) could be the way that transcends you to the exit (or afterlife). I don't think it's a resignation to her fate but rather she embraces life as it is. Just like a smiling Sisyphus as he's pushing the rock.

There seems to be two endings to the film, one where Maem lives and one where she dies. Perhaps one way to read it is that when she lies down naked on the wooden floor near the end, she dreams of her youth when she first made love to Don. Sex is a kind of a small death, and her orgasmic ecstasy is linked to the next scene where her husband gets up. Was this your intention?

The 'ending' or 'death' may seem to be the ultimate aim that she wishes for. It's a perfect ideal of 'death' to have a husband die after a long-term illness, in order for her to return home and spend her last moments peacefully in the midst of nature. For me, this could be a happy ending movie, but real life is raw, nature is harsh. People who are bedridden may live longer while the person caring for the sick may even die sooner.

It was my original idea that ANATOMY OF TIME begins with death and ends with death. Both events are not a finale. It's quite the opposite. It's the beginning of a return to life in memory, as 'time' validates its meaning in death. The love scene could be a souvenir, fantasy, secret or even a mistake she keeps to herself. It's perhaps a reason why she sacrifices herself to take care of the General until the end.





As much as your film is a philosophical treatise, it can also read as a political fable. Prime Minister Thanom Kittikachorn ran a military dictatorship from 1963-73 until protests forced him out. Your narrative possibly echoes this as it is set in that period. But instead of detailing the numerous military coups that afflict Thailand's history, did you instead want to show the temporary nature of power?

It is true that the time period in the movie can be compared to real people or events in Thai political history. But for me, the same stories happen over and over again. Whether in Thailand or other countries. That's why I choose not to explain the behind-the-scenes of Thai politics. So "temporary nature" is not only applied to power but also to all things.

There are many lovely moments of nature that we see in the film such as the harvesting of mountain honey. Can you tell us about the background to some of those scenes? My memorable scene is when a flying bird poops on the ground and a plant later grows...

Nature is a character in ANATOMY OF TIME. It has its own language, experiences, and consciousness. It tells Maem where she came from and what she should do on the road ahead. It's a tool to access the truth for her. The origin of the tree, the death of a male bee after mating with a queen bee, life in the nursing home. All these metaphors represent the dotted lines that make up the big picture of what the characters wonder about.

Can you tell us a little more about the elderly actors? Were their nude scenes planned in the early script or did this evolve naturally? The elder actress' nudity was especially special as it was such a tender, fragile moment...

Yes, it was in the original script. We were searching for actors to play this role for a long time. Some people hesitated to play that particular scene. We were lucky to have Sorabodi and Thaveerat on board with us. Thaveerat was a former fashion model. She is a perfect fit to the role as now she's also taking care of her ageing husband, who's a famous writer. The young lovers, Prapamont and Wanlop, are also exceptional talents. They are fearless and very committed to the project.



The technical credits for the film are superb. Please tell us about the cinematographer. Also about the hunt for locations. Many sets such as the clock shop and the General's bedroom have wonderful detail and resonance.

The beautiful set was designed by a friend of mine, Sarawut Karwnamyen and photographed by Phutti Phong Aroonpheng, who is also a film director (MANTA RAY, 2018). The story of the old Maem was filmed in my mother's house within two months after my father passed away. Many props were used in real life and played an important role in a make-believe for actors. While the story of young Maem was an imaginary image of how the two found love, we tried to design those scenes to be bright, vibrant, and an ideal space for young lovers.

Can you please mention some of your film director influences? For example, I can almost imagine parts of your film as THE TREE OF LIFE (Terence Malick, 2011) minus the monologue. But I've been told that one of your film's scenes is actually a homage to a film classic.

And of course, Terence Malick is one of my favourites. But as for ANATOMY OF TIME, I think my film shares the same tendency as modern philosophy; be it that of Heidegger or Wittgenstein. Paying homage that you mentioned is Ingmar Bergman's PERSONA (1966). It's how I constructed the love scene on the beach. In Bergman's film it was the monologue of the nurse telling a secret that she had a sexual affair with a stranger on the beach. That forced her to have an abortion and later, unable to have children with her husband. So, I visualized that monologue into a scene.

Do you actually worry that the viewer will understand your film? Even if they don't, what would be the small idea that you would want to leave them with?

I think the best way to embrace the film is the same way we embrace life. My job as a director is done. Now ANATOMY OF TIME belongs to the audience. So, I would never worry.

Philip Cheah is currently program consultant at the following film festivals: Jogja-NETPAC (Indonesia), Hanoi (Vietnam), Jaffna (Sri Lanka), Asiaticamediale (Italy), El-Gouna (Egypt) and Shanghai (China). He is Joint President of NETPAC, the Network for the Promotion of Asia Pacific Cinema. He co-founded the South-east Asian Film Festival and is Patron of the SEA (South-east Asia) Screen Academy in Makassar, Indonesia. He is co-director of the Asia Pacific Screen Lab, Australia and Spiritual Advisor to the Bakunawa Young Cinema Film Festival, Philippines. Philip is also a film critic and is the editor of BigO, Singapore's only independent pop culture publication. He is co-editor of the books, Garin Nugroho: And the Moon Dances; Noel Vera: Critic After Dark and Ngo Phuoc Lan: Modernity and Nationality in Vietnamese Cinema.

Director's Biography

Jakrawal Nilthamrong lives and works in Bangkok. He obtained his BFA at Silpakorn University, Bangkok (2000) and MFA at the School of Art Institute of Chicago, USA (2006). In 2007-08, he was an artist in residence at the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten, Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Jakrawal's work spans from short films, documentary films to video installations and feature films. His first narrative feature film, *VANISHING POINT*, won the Hivos Tiger Award at International Film Festival Rotterdam in 2015.

Filmography


Features

- 2021 - ANATOMY OF TIME, DCP (118 Min)
- 2015 - VANISHING POINT, DCP (100 Min)
- 2010 - UNREAL FOREST, HD (70 Min)

Shorts (Selected)

- 2018 - INVALID THRONE, 35mm film installation (9.30 Min, Loop)
 - KAMJORN SANKWAN, HD (16 Min)
- 2014 - HIN-PEN (STONE CLOUD), HD (30 Min)
- 2013 - INTRANSIT, 35mm film installation (5 Min, Loop)
 - ZERO GRAVITY, HD (20 Min)
- 2012 - HANGMAN, 2-Channel Video Installation (14 Min)
- 2010 - IMMORTAL WOMAN, HD (9 Min)
- 2009 - MAN AND GRAVITY : PLATEAU, HDV (22 Min)
- 2008 - MAN AND GRAVITY, HDV (10 Min)
 - ORCHESTRA, DV (22 Min)
- 2007 - A VOYAGE OF FORETELLER, HD (8 Min)
- 2006 - PATTERNS OF TRANSCENDENCE, 16mm film transferred to DV (49 Min)





THAVEERATANA LEELANUJA
Maem (Present)

Thaveeratana Leelanuja started her career as a fashion model, stage actress and cultural writer in the 1970s. She has starred in a number of Thai TV dramas and stage plays, and currently works at a non-profit organization. Her most recent starring role is as a supporting cast in *THE SIAM RENAISSANCE* (dir. Surapong Pinijkhar, 2014). *ANATOMY OF TIME* is her first lead role in a feature film.

MAIN CAST



PRAPAMONTON EIAMCHAN
Maem (Past)

Prapamonton Eiamchan is an up-and-coming Thai actress whose breakout role was in *MOTEL MIST* (dir. Prabda Yoon, 2016 International Film Festival Rotterdam). She has starred in a number of Thai as well as Asian independent films including *NAKORN-SAWAN* (dir. Puangsoi Aksornsawang, 2018 Busan International Film Festival) and *ONLY THE MOUNTAIN REMAINS* (dir. Wei Liang Chiang, Taiwan).



SORABODEE CHANGSIRI
The General (Present)

Sorabodee Changsiri is a veteran Thai actor who has starred in feature films and TV series over several decades. His specialty acting role is as a Thai cop in international productions shot in Thailand, which include a 2018 US feature film *ATTRITION* starring Steven Seagal and Dutch TV series *VOETBALMAFFIA*. He also had a supporting role in Netflix Thailand's *THE MAID*. *ANATOMY OF TIME* is his first starring role in a Thai feature film.

MAIN CAST



WANLOP RUNGKUMJAD
The Chief (Past)

Wanlop Rungkumjad is a familiar figure in Thai independent film circles as an actor and art director. His acting credits include *ETERNITY* (dir. Sivaroj Kongsakul, 2011 International Film Festival Rotterdam), *36* (dir. Nawapol Thamrongrattanarit, 2012 Busan International Film Festival), *THE ISLAND FUNERAL* (dir. Pimpaka Towira, 2015 Tokyo International Film Festival). His most recent film is *MANTA RAY* (dir. Phuttiiphong Aroonpheng, 2018 Venice Film Festival).

CAST

Main Cast

Maem (Present)	Thaveeratana Leelanuja
Maem (Past)	Prapamonton Eiamchan
The General (Present)	Sorabodee Changsiri
The Chief (Past)	Wanlop Rungkumjad

Supporting

Father	Nopachai Jayanama
Don	Paopoom Chiwarak
Ubol	Rawipa Srisanguan
Captain Man (Past)	Witwisit Hiranyawongkul
Colonel Man (Present)	Thongkao Khunsriruksa

CREW

Cinematography	Phutti Phong Aroonpheng
Production Designer	Sarawut Karwnamyen
Editors	Lee Chatametikool Katharina Wartena
Music	Pakorn Musikaboonlert Pachara Chirativat
Producers	Mai Meksawan Chatchai Chaiyon Yohann Cornu Anouk Sluizer Panuksmi Hardjowirogo

Participated at Paris Coproduction Village
Asian Project Market, Busan

Supported by Singapore Film Commission
Hubert Bals Fund
Ministry of Culture, Thailand
Aide aux cinémas du monde
Netherlands Film Fund
Purin Pictures
World Cinema Fund
Région Nouvelle-Aquitaine

My Friend

My friend Jakrawal Nilthamrong is a modern artist. He studied art. He even studied in Amsterdam where we met for the first time. He was observing my city and made a video installation with a bicycle in it. Maybe I thought the bicycle was a bit obvious in the case of Amsterdam, but the work was nice and he was even nicer.

I had shown his early PATTERNS OF TRANSCENDENCE (2006) in Rotterdam before we met. Very all over the place America, very Thai immigrant and very experimental. Just what I was looking for. I was new to Southeast Asia and had not found much experimental work or not the experimental work of the quality of Jakrawal in my new territory.

Jakrawal soon introduced me to his wife to be. A sign we would become serious friends.

Some years after that we went to Africa together for the Rotterdam project Forget Africa (I never regretted the title) More precisely we went to Zambia (with the forever in good mood Chatchai Chaiyont as a one person crew).

Jakrawal and Chatchai and some local film people made the very nice film UNREAL FOREST, by any norm his first feature film. I just stood by, was hanging around and had a good time and saw with admiration how two young Thai men and some even younger African aspiring filmmakers made a movie with virtually no budget.

I have this private theory that traveling to Africa together with a friend will make you better friends. Not just because of survival, but even more because of the common amazing experience and the trust you have to have in each other in case things go wrong. Well, it did not go wrong and Jakrawal brought a mysterious film home to his even but different mysterious country.

My friend Jakrawal is a Buddhist. Officially he was even a real monk, like many men in his country. To me he always had something of a monk, even before that and I guess it will stay with him forever.

For me it was clear already before we met that Jakrawal would come up with a special feature film. He had it in him I felt. And, somehow still suddenly, in 2015 there was VANISHING POINT. Serious. Complicated. Sad. Mysterious. Yes, of course mysterious. Yes, it won Rotterdam. Of course.





Jakrawal is a fine draughtsman. He makes drawings that at first surprised me. They are classical. Observational. Realist. They look like art academy drawings from a long time ago. From before the invention of modern art or even before that. He makes them patiently with simple traditional tools. Pencil on paper.

How could a modern film installation artist devote himself so much to drawings like that I asked myself at the beginning. It is like amateur drawing from the time of real gentlemen, when amateurism was in fact the highest standard in art.

He does not show around his drawings much, but there are a few in a Facebook album called Sketch Book and one, of a turned over car, is on the poster of VANISHING POINT although that one is not his typical landscape or still life style. I wore the car drawing for quite a while on my chest since it was also on the promotion t-shirt. Not the typical t-shirt drawing, which made it in fact nicer.

So why the side step about the observational drawings? Because observation, carefully observing, is part of the art of the young master. The nature observations in Anatomy of Time fit in the story, since it is Maem – the young/old woman in the movie – who is looking for comfort in nature, but in fact it is the director himself looking, observing and letting the logic of nature do its work in his movie. Be it a restless bird or a reclining nude preparing for eternal sleep.

Look at the clock maker in the same film, the father of the not yet old Maem, the patience needed for his craft, the care for all its parts. Here we see a symbol of the filmmaker at work.

What to say more? No doubt there is another fine movie in this classical/modern artist. Give it some time. It will come. For sure.

Gertjan Zuilhof

Amsterdam 19/07/2021

Gertjan Zuilhof is a film curator. At the International Film Festival Rotterdam, he created the S.E.A. Eyes thematic program with focus on Southeast Asian cinema since 2004, where a number of Jakrawal's works were screened including: PATTERNS OF TRANSCENDENCE, A VOYAGE OF FORETELLER, MAN AND GRAVITY, ORCHESTRA, UNREAL FOREST, IMMORTAL WOMAN, ZERO GRAVITY and VANISHING POINT.



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