

Film Review



“Lung Neaw Visits His Neighbors “

Lung Neaw Visits His Neighbors

(Docu – Thailand-Mexico)

An Estudio de Produccion presentation. Produced by Cristian Manzutto, Rirkrit Tiravanija.

Directed by Rirkrit Tiravanija. Camera (color, 16mm), Cristian Manzutto, Tiravanija; editor, Manzutto; sound, Eva Sangiorgi, Chalermrat Kaweewattana; sound editor, Estudio De Sonido. Reviewed at Museum of Modern Art, New York, July 21, 2012. (In 2011 Venice Film Festival.) Running time: 154 MIN.

With: Lung Neaw, Pa Lek, Pa Pen, Pee Nee.

(Thai dialogue)

By John Anderson

An observational docu, a work of conceptual art and a slo-mo slap in the face to short attention spans, “Lung Neaw Visits His Neighbors” is not for the impatient. With a pace as unhurried as his subject, New York-based, Argentine-born artist Rirkrit Tiravanija charts the real-time, day-to-day peregrinations of a retired rice farmer as he moves around his rural Thai village, foraging, shopping, bathing, planting and almost defying viewers to stick with the film. Those who do will be rewarded, although they won’t number enough to make more than a few thousand baht for this limited New York presentation.

Tiravanija is less interested in traditional storytelling than in the relationship between viewer and object, a theme evident in his other works (such as an art piece in which he turned a gallery into a kitchen). The helmer means to scrutinize the process that transpires between art and consumer; if auds feel affronted by “Lung Neaw,” it isn’t by accident. Their comfortable give-and-take with the screen is being turned upside down, although that implies more conventional drama than the film cares to dole out.

Lung Neaw (“lung” means “uncle” in Thai), whose weary gait and weathered face make him an unconventional (but ultimately endearing) subject for such

protracted study, shops at a night market, trudges home, gives his food away to a troupe of traveling monks, and looks impassive as his groceries move on down the road. Neaw wasn’t chosen by Tiravanija because he’s a font of emotion; rather, he reflects an age-old way of life and attitude toward nature that are measured and resigned. Neaw seems to have few expectations and receives few surprises.

Viewers may be surprised at how they are drawn into his story, as it were, the lush landscapes of northern Thailand being one attraction, and the deliberate pace being another. Rather than the comparatively assaultive approach to cinema applied by so many commercial directors, Tiravanija’s technique solicits nothing: It merely is, and one either gets on the trail with Neaw or doesn’t.

The result is a study in cinematic relativity: Watching Neaw negotiate a vast field of rice paddies by walking the dirt berms that separate them — with the camera positioned about a mile away — literally reduces the viewer’s pulse rate. The cooking of a meal, subsequently, becomes high drama, especially when one of the participants is furiously skinning a snake. (Will it be eaten? The imagination roils.) Under such low-key conditions, the imposition of a car crash or shoot-out would cause a coronary.

The film is divided into chapters with such titles as “The Days of This Society Is (sic) Numbered,” “No Fire, No Ash” and “Tomorrow Is Another Day” — none of which seem to have any specific meaning in relation to what follows, but provide hope to the weary that something specific is about to happen. But Tiravanija is a provocateur; Neaw’s seemingly endless, futile attempts to get good reception on his ancient transistor radio seem calculated to push squirmers out of their seats. Others will find this one more funny episode in Neaw’s life and Tiravanija’s art.

Production values are mixed: The visuals seem intentionally shaky, although Cristian Manzutto’s 16mm camera is always pointed in the right direction.