

KATE MACGARRY



# A Slippage In Time: Ben Rivers and Anocha Suwichakornpong on "Krabi 2562"

The British and Thai filmmakers discuss their collaborative feature that mixes fact and fiction at the beach side town of Krabi.

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*Ben Rivers and Anocha Suwichakornpong's Krabi 2562 is showing exclusively on MUBI from May 29 - June 28, 2020 in the United Kingdom.*



In art cinema terms, Ben Rivers and Anocha Suwichakornpong's co-directed feature *Krabi 2562* could be considered an event. And momentous it is: a rare meeting of two artists at the height of their creative powers, it's a work that embodies much of what makes each of these filmmakers unique amongst their peers. While divergent in style, Rivers and

Suwichakornpong share an interest in myth, landscape, historical memory, and marginalized communities, all of which are explored in *Krabi 2562* through a combination of surreal humor and biting social satire. Set in the eponymous coastal Thai town, the film unfolds through a series of on-camera interviews with locals and a variety of lightly fictionalized episodes (including one of a television commercial shoot led by Galician director Oliver Laxe, playing an exaggeratedly sleazy version of himself) that take the viewer on an episodic tour of the city, from its stunning cliffside beaches to the bars, markets, and cinemas that dot its urban interior. As fact and fiction merge, a woman, once our ostensible guide, slowly disappears into the fabric of the narrative, opening up a rift between the ancient and the modern, a liminal zone from which Rivers and Suwichakornpong conjure any number of striking images as they reflexively interrogate notions of identity and cultural tourism.

The morning after *Krabi 2562*'s premiere at last summer's Locarno, Rivers and Suwichakornpong were in good spirits as we sat down to discuss the film's origins, the collaborative process, and how to resourcefully cast your film when working on a small production.

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**NOTEBOOK:** Do you remember when you two first became aware of each other's work? I imagine you probably saw each others' films before you met?

**ANOCHA SUWICHAKORNPONG:** It was more or less at the same time.

**BEN RIVERS:** Yeah, at the same time I think. We met when Anocha was showing *Mundane History* (2009) at Rotterdam. That was, when, 2010?

**SUWICHAKORNPONG:** Yeah. So we saw each other's work pretty much as we were getting to know each other.

**NOTEBOOK:** Had you been thinking about collaborating for a while before *Krabi*?

**RIVERS AND SUWICHAKORNPONG:** No! [*Both laugh*]

**RIVERS:** No, not at all. It just came out of the blue. I was invited to doing something for the Thailand Biennale in 2018, and I had never been to Thailand—didn't know anything about it. But once I was there I thought it would be nice to collaborate with Anocha because...well, she's from Thailand...*[Both laugh]* And of course I like her work and like her as a person. So I thought it would be worth trying, and when I proposed it to her she immediately said yes.

**SUWICHAKORNPONG:** Yeah, even though the idea never occurred to me that we would be working together, when he proposed it I thought it would be interesting because I like his films a lot, but also because we have some overlapping areas of interest. I thought it would be interesting just to see where we could take it.

**RIVERS:** We didn't know at first that we were going to make a feature, either. We thought it would probably be a short for the Biennale.

**SUWICHAKORNPONG:** Which we did.

**RIVERS:** Right, which we did—and super quickly. But as we were spending time in Krabi we realized that there was a rich world of material that we wanted to expand into a feature, and which we ended up making completely independent from the Biennale.

**NOTEBOOK:** Anocha, can you tell us a little about Krabi as a place or culture, and maybe a bit about your personal connection or relationship with this location?

**SUWICHAKORNPONG:** Krabi's in the south of Thailand, and I've actually been there many times as a tourist. It's a place where many people go for vacation. For me it's interesting because it's a place that's been used in many Hollywood movies. *The Beach* (2000) was shot there, for example. And actually, when *The Beach* was being shot I was living in Phuket, which is not far from Krabi. And this is kind of beside the point, but maybe I should mention it: I actually have a connection with the production of *The Beach*. Not a direct connection, but at that time I was writing for an English language newspaper in Phuket and they were going to send me on assignment for a scoop on the production of *The Beach*.

**RIVERS:** Really? *[Laughs]*

**SUWICHAKORNPONG:** Yeah, but at the same time there were a lot of environmentalists protesting the shoot. And I actually joined up with the protests, so I had to decline the

assignment! So that was the end of my relationship working with that newspaper—it was a very short stint. [Laughs] But it was right after that when I decided to go to film school.

**RIVERS:** Oh, really? Wow.

**SUWICHAKORNPONG:** Yeah, so it was quite funny being in Krabi this time shooting with Ben. After all that the story of *The Beach* ended up coming back to me because the projectionist that's in our film also had a small role in the shooting of *The Beach*: his cinema was used as a kind of home base for the production of the film.

But apart from *The Beach*, the fact that Krabi was chosen by the Ministry of Culture to host the first ever Biennale in Thailand was quite interesting to me, because it is pretty far away from Bangkok. I think they were playing with this idea of decentralizing the art scene by bringing the Biennale to a place where there's actually very little infrastructure for contemporary art. They were trying to find the avenues in which they could promote Krabi as a site for discovery, as a place where the prehistoric meets the contemporary. So I thought it would be an interesting moment to make a film about this place because, even though it's a very



touristy place, it's still a small town and suddenly there was a lot of interest from the government in bringing art to what is a pretty strange place, a place that may or may not be ready for such an event—actually, not really ready! *[Both laugh]*

**NOTEBOOK:** Once you had the location and the idea to make a feature, how did you start formulating the ideas for the narrative? There are, of course, some documentary elements to the film, but there are also numerous fictional and mythological stands running throughout.

**RIVERS:** We did a site visit to Krabi in 2018 and we had a really good guide. The tour guide in the film is actually semi-based on the guy who took us around the first time we were there. He was really smart and well connected, and he introduced us to many of the people and places that ended up in the film. For example, we had heard about this abandoned cinema, and obviously we needed to see that, so he took us. And when we got there the projectionist took us in and we saw his one-sided beard, which you see in the film, and the birds that just live in the cinema. So we were kind of collecting these various elements along the way. And from there we began to talk about how we wanted to tie these things together, which ultimately was by introducing this fictional character, who could act as a kind of loose navigator of these things—and through her build the simplest kind of plot, which as you can tell we're not especially interested in! *[Both laugh]* It's just a vehicle to get us around. But then at a certain point that plot person just kind of disappears and you realize that the important thing is the other aspects of Krabi.

**SUWICHAKORNPONG:** It was after that trip that we began to develop a treatment.

**RIVERS:** Yeah, to raise money, which eventually turned into a crowd fund, which neither of us had done before. That was fun. It was actually still running while we were shooting in January 2019. So we were actually shooting and watching the money flow in! *[Laughs]* But we did meet our target. The film is enabled in large part because of that, and also through a few other small pots of money from a few grants and our Chinese sales agent.

**NOTEBOOK:** Were some of the more interview-based segments with locals things you shot or conceptualized first, before expanding on the fictional aspects of the narrative?

**RIVERS:** Well, we met those people and by then knew we wanted to do some interviews with certain locals. But everything was kind of written in our long treatment. So it was filmed mostly in one chunk, in a twelve-day shoot in January of this year. We had the actress for three days, and one day with the actor who does the singing, and one day with the guys who play the Neanderthals. And then the other days were like, say, a day with the projectionist: so a day at the cinema, where we did the interview and shot the sequence with the birds. So it was all planned out and scheduled.

**SUWICHAKORNPONG:** But they were all a little different. For example, since we had met the projectionist before, we already knew his stories, so the interview itself was kind of scripted—not word by word, but it was planned. Whereas something like the old man at the house, the boxer, we had met him but we hadn't really talked or interviewed him until the day we went to shoot.

**RIVERS:** Yeah, so it was completely unpredictable what he was going to say. But then the interview with the tour guide was almost entirely scripted. So they varied, as does everything: there are a lot of things in the film that might seem documentary-like but are completely fictional, and maybe the other way around as well. So there are these very slippery layers...

**SUWICHAKORNPONG:** Like the hotel receptionist talking about ghosts, that was not scripted at all. She just started talking about all this supernatural stuff.

**RIVERS:** We always started the conversations with each interviewee by talking to them about the tour guide, this nameless person who they had met, and from there we allowed them to just talk about their life, or whatever they wanted.

**NOTEBOOK:** What about stuff like the story of the sea serpent? Are these anecdotes you heard from the tour guide or someone else that you then decided to integrate into the film?

**SUWICHAKORNPONG:** The sea serpent is a mythical creature that is sort of known around Thailand—it's a legend that goes along with this particular beach. I think I learned about it online, just through research, not from the tour guide. And then when we started talking to some local people they would tell us variations on the myth.

**NOTEBOOK:** How does something non-local or clearly fictional like the Oliver Laxe character and this fake commercial shoot come about, then?

**RIVERS:** Well, we already had a fake commercial written into the film, but Oliver just got in touch saying that he was in Thailand on holiday and that we should meet up. So I wrote back asking if he could be in the film...

**NOTEBOOK:** It creates a further connection with your other films. [*Laxe and Rivers have worked together on multiple occasions.*]

**RIVERS:** It does, yeah. It was a happy accident that makes complete sense. And he's brilliant in the film. He really works well as a commercial director. [*All laugh*] And him kind of chatting up the young assistant director—it's really, really nice. [*Laughs*] That was all improvised—or he knew basically what he was going to say, but we didn't know what *she* would say.

**SUWICHAKORNPONG:** I don't think she knew what she was going to say up until that moment!

**NOTEBOOK:** You mentioned that a linking of the prehistoric and the modern was one of the impetuses behind the Biennale being in Krabi. Is this how the idea for the cave people in the film came about?

**RIVERS:** It was interesting: during our site visit the mayor gave this talk, and I couldn't understand it—there was no translator. But I kept hearing at certain moments him saying the word "Africa." And afterwards I asked Anocha, "Why did he keep saying 'Africa'?" And she tells me that he's saying that maybe the birthplace of humanity was actually Krabi, not Africa.

**SUWICHAKORNPONG:** Yeah, like the first human traveled from Krabi to Africa. [*Both laugh*] But yeah, the idea was that they were really trying to use this angle to promote the Biennale. That traffic light that you see in the film that's made to look like a Neanderthal? There are a lot of those in town.



**RIVERS:** Yeah, and because of all that I think it was really important to include them in some way. It also helped in looking at different time periods in Krabi history. There are different ways of thinking about these people. We film them in real caves that could have been there during that time. But weirdly, when you put them in there they become...more fake somehow? [All laugh] It's kind of amazing. It looks like a diorama or something. When I saw that image it reminded of—I don't know if you know this book of short stories by George Saunders called *Pastoralia*? There's this really beautiful story set in this kind of theme park where the people act out different periods of human time, and there's a Neanderthal cave, and the performers are really not allowed to go out of character. But, of course, when no one's around they start talking to each other, having a cigarette, things like that. I like the idea that the Neanderthals in the film might be that...or that there might have been this weird slippage in time from this other period. Or that there's this isolated island where they've somehow been able to stay the same for tens of thousands of years, and they're only just now being found by this commercial production shoot who has come across this isolated island. [Laughs] It's kind of nice to think about it from these angles, since it's never quite clear who they are or where they came from.



**NOTEBOOK:** That's interesting because the festival catalogue describes the film, at least in part, as campy. So I was sort of expecting these sequences to move in that direction. And visually it is sort of disorienting, but you guys don't play up the absurdity.



**RIVERS:** No, we don't. We actually cut out a couple of shots quite late in the process that made it more absurd. And I think for a good reason: we don't want any of the people, whether the tourists or Neanderthal characters, to feel like we're making fun of them. It's okay if it's funny, but...

**NOTEBOOK:** Yeah the tourist characters are sort of inherently humorous.

**RIVERS:** Right. And in the scenes of the commercial shoot, the guy with the pink umbrella and the bad caveman outfit—that's a bit campy.

**NOTEBOOK:** You mentioned during the Q&A last night that some of the cast doubled as crew members. Was that out of necessity?

**SUWICHAKORNPONG:** Partly out of necessity. In the case of the male Neanderthal, for example, who's played by our assistant director, we knew he was going to be on set with us the whole time, of course, but we also felt that he was right for the part—and he was happy and excited to do it. He actually went off and did research on Neanderthals. *[Laughs]* He was asking all kinds of questions, like "How do they sound?" *[Laughs]* And in the case of the tour guide, she was also our casting director. She's actually from Krabi—she was born there and she knows the place really well, which was a help.

**RIVERS:** But our costume director, who's the girl standing in the water in the commercial scene holding the umbrella, she's was cast at the last minute. We'd been hoping to have someone else, who ended up not showing up. So we just decided to ask the costume girl, who was up for it and turned out really good. And Maenum *[Chagsik]*, who's one of our producers, she's in the scene with Oliver...

**NOTEBOOK:** So quite a few, then.

**SUWICHAKORNPONG:** Yeah, the team was very small. *[Laughs]* But these are things that happen when people are making films, so it seems to make sense to just use your crew if you can't do it another way.

**NOTEBOOK:** I'm curious if each of you can discuss what the other person brought to your process, or what you maybe learned from the other person through this collaboration? I'm not sure since Ben was kind of the outsider coming into this place, if Anocha maybe led the process more?

**RIVERS:** I don't think so. I think we were pretty much on the same level.

**SUWICHAKORNPONG:** Yeah, and since we were working with other people, the crew, it actually wouldn't always be us making the decisions. Sometimes someone on the crew would be like, "Hey, this isn't right," and we would listen to them. There was one scene, which we started shooting in a karaoke bar, when we had slightly different opinions about the space, where it should be shot, because we had two options. I said to Ben, "You know, maybe this kind of place isn't really right for this scene," and he listened. But even then it wasn't just my decision: Maenum, our producer, also said, "Yeah, maybe this is right for *Only God Forgives*, but not for this film."*[All laugh]*

**RIVERS:** Yeah, and as soon as she said that I was like, "Ew!"*[Laughs]* She was completely right. It would've been too stylized.

**SUWICHAKORNPONG:** What I think I got out of this collaboration was learning how to work with a small team. I've always wanted to work smaller, but the reality in Thailand is that they like to have a lot of people on set. It's sometimes difficult to convince people that you don't need that many people. I never actually managed to do that until now.

**NOTEBOOK:** And Ben, you tend to work small.

**RIVERS:** Yeah, I tend to, though this film and *The Sky Trembles...* (2015) are actually the biggest for me—each around 20 people. That already tends to feel quite busy to me. *[Laughs]* But I think the reason I like it is because it allows you to be more flexible. Occasionally I've worked on other people's films with much bigger crews and you kind of feel the presence of this machine—everyone is sort of waiting on you. It feels less free, and you're able to make fewer snap or out-of-the-box decisions.

**SUWICHAKORNPONG:** And schedules tend to be more strict when you have larger crews. Things have to run a certain way, and there's not much time for playing around...

**RIVERS:** Improvisation...

**SUWICHAKORNPONG:** Yeah, or just testing things out on set that may not have been there originally. With those kinds of schedules there's a lot of pressure on you as a director. But for this film it felt a little bit looser. We had a small budget, so we didn't have a ton a shooting days. If we would've had more time it probably would have been even more evident in the film. But this way of working is nicer for me.

**NOTEBOOK:** Anocha, your film *Nightfall* (2016) is also playing at Locarno this year, and I noticed while watching it that there's a scene with children singing in that film that's somewhat similar to the opening scene of *Krabi*, which features students singing a kind of patriotic anthem. What is it about children or about this strange dynamic between young kids and these songs that interests you?

**SUWICHAKORNPONG:** Well, I do like watching children on screen, but now that you mention it I should point out that the song in *Nightfall* is actually the same song that the people are singing during their march on the streets in *Krabi*.

**RIVERS:** Oh yeah!

**SUWICHAKORNPONG:** Yeah, that was purely coincidental. It's like this kind of nursery rhyme.

**RIVERS:** That was shot when I went back to do some reshoots.

**SUWICHAKORNPONG:** I wasn't even there.

**RIVERS:** Yeah, Anocha wasn't there, but we were talking every day. I went back for a week. We were actually looking at something else to possibly film when we heard this procession, which we then started running after with the camera. I wasn't even sure what they were doing—it just seemed like a great scene, with all these yellow jerseys and things.

**SUWICHAKORNPONG:** But to answer your question, I think filming children is...this sort of sounds bad, but it's kind of like filming animals. Because when they're young they have less ideas about performance. Not to say that they don't have any idea, but the dynamic is different. And even when they know they're acting, it's then kind of obvious that they're acting, which is in itself more interesting. It's another way of looking at the area where fiction and nonfiction can happen at the same time.

**NOTEBOOK:** Do you two have any plans to work together again?

**SUWICHAKORNPONG:** I think it may be too soon. [*Laughs*]

**RIVERS:** Yeah, it's too soon. We need a break. [*Laughs*] It was the same with Ben [Russell, co-director of *A Spell to Ward Off the Darkness* (2013)]. I did work with Ben again, but, y'know, we needed time apart. [*All laugh*]