

PART I

REGARDING SLEEP

Into the Dark

Apichatpong's 2015 feature film *Cemetery of Splendor* takes its narrative premise from news reports that circulated in Thailand a few years earlier about a group of soldiers quarantined in a hospital in the country's north, afflicted with a mysterious sleeping sickness.¹ Picking up on this stranger-than-fiction scenario, the film begins with accommodations that are made in response to a pathological outbreak of hypersomnia within the ranks of the military. An old schoolhouse in Khon Kaen is converted into a clinic in which to sequester the unconscious afflicted. "The soldiers just sleep," and "the army doesn't know what to do with them," a nurse comments; and so the clinic's workers simply look after their slumber and attend to them during their brief, sporadic periods of waking. The film's story follows the relationships that develop between one of the soldiers, Itt; a woman who works as a volunteer at the clinic, Jen; and Keng, a psychic who has been retained to help the soldiers' loved ones to communicate with them by reading their minds. Jen and Itt grow closer, and her sleep patterns shift, as if synchronizing with those of the soldiers. Meanwhile, the curious epidemic of sleeping sickness remains an unexplained mystery and a structuring cause that accrues layers of significance in the course of the film.

Viewers already familiar with Apichatpong's filmmaking will recognize in *Cemetery of Splendor* elements from his previous work. For instance, cast in the role of Itt is the actor Banlop Lomnoi, who also played a soldier in one of his early feature films, *Tropical Malady* (Sud Pralad, 2004). The setting of the clinic echoes the hospitals in which *Syndromes and a Century* (Sang Sattawat, 2006) takes place, and motivates scenes that recall that film's depiction of humorous exchanges among doctors and patients. Moreover, *Cemetery's* portrayal of characters in unconscious states is anticipated by his previous works, in which the act of sleeping regularly occupies the image, takes its time, and exercises a claim upon the audience's attention. Itt, the other sleeping soldiers, and Jen (who eventually also becomes infected) find their counterparts throughout his filmography, which is filled with



FIGURE 8. *Cemetery of Splendor* (Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2015).

characters caught dozing in bedrooms or hotel rooms, *en plein air*, and in the partial shelter of caves or under shaded pavilions known as *salas*. *Blissfully Yours* concludes with a nearly four-minute-long single take of a pair of lovers gently dozing by a stream in the jungle. Another long take of a sleeping character—Tong, a young man with whom Lomnoi’s soldier falls in love—marks the exact midpoint of *Tropical Malady*, while also serving as the hinge upon which the film pivots from a realistic tale of romance to a fantastical jungle fable. Both the acclaimed feature *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* and the short film *Mekong Hotel* (2012) are replete with supine bodies and relationships that unfold along a plane of horizontality, among characters who share stories and memories with one another as they slide in and out of sleep. The depth of the bonds between friends, lovers, and kin is revealed as their exchanges extend into moments of grogginess, states of illness, and interludes of vulnerability and incapacity. In the pauses and silences of sleep, dimensions of their shared histories are illuminated, giving rise to a vivid picture of “sociality at the edges of consciousness.”²

In devoting so much screen time to sleep, Apichatpong contravenes standard ideas about what counts as meaningful action in cinema. Considered within the framework of narrative filmmaking, slumber and rest would seem to embody the very negation of drama, as paradigmatic instances of the dead time that is typically eliminated in the process of editing. Sleep, as a pause in purposive action, would seem to detract from the momentum and movement that are vital to narrative progression. In his body of work, however, the conventional coding of sleep as inactivity is turned on its head. The uncommon visibility accorded to sleep accompanies a keen sensitivity to the most ordinary and inescapable aspects of the animal existence of human beings. Apichatpong trains his camera on the acts of sleeping,

eating, drinking, excreting, exercising, working, loafing, praying, chatting, and so on. Narrative momentum decelerates as gestures, moments, and physical details break free from the designs of storytelling, assuming an amplified presence and weight. The contours of plot dissolve into the rhythmic repetition of these baseline actions and reconstitute in new and unfamiliar forms, which blur the line between active doing and passive being. In the cinematic worlds constructed by Apichatpong, sleep asserts a material presence, confronting the audience with a fundamental given of living in a body while also raising the question of how this bodily life is organized by society and enmeshed in a biocultural-technical matrix. Watching these films and regarding sleep in contexts that are by turns homely, unhomely, safe, uncomfortable, and exposed, we find ourselves prompted to consider sleep carefully as an index of security, status, resources, belonging, and trust.

Not only do scenes of sleep recur across Apichatpong's films, but so does a specific compositional placement of the somnolent body. In the scene dividing the two halves of *Tropical Malady*, Tong lies in a bed positioned in the foreground of the shot, partly bathed in sunlight that streams in from one of the bedroom windows. A window on the wall behind him, directly facing the camera and dominating the upper half of the image, opens onto a landscape of vibrant green and brings a deeper field into the frame. This compositional pattern—with variations on the basic elements of sleeper, room, aperture, and light source—reappears from film to film: *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*, in which Jen slumbers as the bright sunlight refracts in the soft folds of the mosquito net encasing her bed; *Mekong Hotel*, in which curtains block the sun and river view from the hotel rooms in which the characters lounge; and in numerous instances in *Cemetery of Splendor*, as the film circles back repeatedly to the clinic that houses Itt and the other hypersomniac soldiers. The staging of the scene of sleep establishes a visual dialogue between obscurity and illumination, inside and outside, dormant figures closed in upon themselves and openings toward other spaces or planes.

The trail of this repeating pattern does not end with Apichatpong's productions for the big screen, but also extends into other domains of his practice as a filmmaker and artist. Echoing the images described above is a shot from his 2001 experimental film *Haunted Houses*, showing a woman napping on a bare wooden pallet bed next to a neatly folded stack of bed rolls, with an open window behind her. The woman is one of several villagers from the rural region near the filmmaker's childhood home who accepted his invitation to act in the film and allowed him to shoot inside their houses. *Haunted Houses* is composed of a series of reenactments of scenes from *Tong Prakaisad*, a wildly popular televised soap opera that "mainly deals with love and the problems of the wealthy."³ The piece cycles through a series of homes that stand in for the "several million houses in the country" that are "haunted" every evening by the eight o'clock broadcast of *Tong Prakaisad*, with various villagers taking turns at playing the soap opera's characters.⁴ Thus, the film develops an ironic contrast between mass-produced boudoir fantasies and



FIGURE 9. *Tropical Malady*
(Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2004).



FIGURE 10. *Uncle Boonmee
Who Can Recall His Past Lives*
(Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2010).



FIGURE 11. *Mekong Hotel*
(Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2012).



FIGURE 12. *Cemetery of
Splendor* (Apichatpong
Weerasethakul, 2015).



FIGURE 13. *Haunted Houses* (Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2001). Courtesy of Kick the Machine.

material realities. At the same time, the strategy of reenactment does not aim solely for a critique of popular media; it also gives rise to “a more open-ended exploration of village life,” as Maeve Connolly argues.⁵ Both of these dimensions can be glimpsed in this scene of sleep.

Revisiting the imagery of the video installation *Dilbar* with these other examples in mind, we can readily recognize a repetition of motifs while also grasping the significance of changes to the pattern—as in the shot of Dilbar sleeping by a window in one of the newly constructed galleries of the Sharjah Art Foundation. He leans against a bare wall, without a bed or any other provisions for comfort, in a room devoid of any traces of human presence, under the glare of the sun. The staging of sleep here conveys his alienated relationship to this cosmopolitan art space as a migrant construction worker, along with the conditions of social isolation, exclusion, and material privation in which the UAE’s migrant workers live and labor. Dilbar’s slumber suggests the weariness of abiding these conditions, bringing into view the adjacency of sleep and exhaustion, both representing “an indeterminate state of abeyance, of lassitude, torpor.” Thus, Dilbar belongs to what Elena Gorfinkel identifies as a cinematic archive of “tired bodies,” one that renders “perceptible otherwise imperceptible experiences of the ordinary endurance of bodies on the margins.”⁶ The question of endurance and survival hovers over the image of Dilbar asleep in bed in his quarters, with an expanse of wall behind him where we might expect to find a window. Its blankness speaks to the plight that provokes Dilbar’s prolonged sleep—a hibernation that stands for “the act of waiting and the desire for escape,” in Apichatpong’s words—and evokes the barriers that stand in the way of achieving escape and accessing relief.

Connections like these serve as a reminder of the sizable body of experimental short films and installation works produced by Apichatpong alongside the feature films that have brought him international renown. His earliest films—*Bullet* and *0116643225059*, both from 1994—were 16mm shorts made during his years as a graduate student at the Art Institute of Chicago. From this time until the present, he has maintained a continuous practice in experimental filmmaking. For



FIGURE 14. *Dilbar* (Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Chai Siris, 2013). Courtesy of Kick the Machine.

the most part, these works circulate outside the distribution networks and exhibition venues that support his more highly publicized feature productions, instead playing to smaller audiences in museums, art spaces, and avant-garde programs. Nonetheless, these disparate areas of his practice cohere around common themes, images, and sounds. For instance, *Tropical Malady*'s portrayal of the jungle as an alternative order of reality is repeated in *Worldly Desires* (2005), an experimental piece structured as a film-within-a film. The gently meandering melody played by a single guitar throughout *Mekong Hotel* is heard again in the experimental short *Sakda (Rousseau)* (2012), which also returns to the same hotel by the river. And the single, continuously tracking shot that comprises most of the kinetic short *The Anthem* (2006) is preceded by a brief scene that will induce déjà vu for many viewers of Apichatpong's feature films. In it, a group of women breezily chat and snack on fruits under the shade of a *sala*. The *sala* as a fixture of Thai public space, and the leisurely gatherings that it affords, are recurring elements in the social geography described by his feature films, while the women themselves are actors from these films. A small group of nonprofessionally trained actors—Jenjira Pongpas, Banlop Lomnoi, and Sakda Kaewbuadee—appears consistently throughout Apichatpong's moving-image works, such that faces and personas echo across individual projects. Moreover, the same core production team collaborates on the majority of his productions, whether they are large-scale feature productions or small-scale films and videos. This team includes cinematographer Sayombhu Mukdeeprom, editor Lee Chatametikool, and sound designer Akritchalerm Kalayanamitr.

Beyond making work in the vein of experimental and avant-garde cinema, Apichatpong has also created a large number of moving-image pieces for gallery settings, works that incorporate multiscreen installations, various techniques of projection, and uniquely designed exhibition environments. In the same year of the release of his first feature-length film, *Mysterious Object at Noon* (*Dogfahr*

Nai Meu Marn, 2000), Apichatpong also showed his first video installation in an art exhibition. Since then, his installation works have been exhibited in a steady stream of group and solo shows, at venues in Southeast Asia, East Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and North America, including major international exhibitions such as Documenta and the Venice Biennale.⁷ These crossings between the spheres of film and art call to mind the example of other filmmakers who have similarly expanded their practice to include moving-image installations, such as Agnès Varda, Chantal Akerman, and Abbas Kiarostami. Yet Apichatpong's position also differs in notable ways from an earlier generation whose entry into the spaces of art was paved by the success they had already achieved as directors, on the one hand, and cemented with a turn toward cinema in contemporary art during the 1990s, on the other hand. In contrast to them, Apichatpong stepped into a cultural field already reconfigured by cinema's relocation from the black box to the white cube. From the very outset of his career, he produced an artistic and filmic corpus concurrently and along parallel tracks, such that to map the dissemination of his total output requires joining the network of international film festivals with that of the global art world. In contrast to those who precede him in their travels between art cinema and art exhibition, Apichatpong stands apart for his active presence and prominent stature on the contemporary art scene, based on his work with not only film and video, but also photography, light, sound, performance, and specific sites.

The dearth of critical writing that places Apichatpong's films into conversation with his art is a testament to the institutional divides that shape his reception, if not his practice. But as his reputation grows in each of these spheres—buttressed by accolades like the Palme d'Or awarded to *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* in 2010 and the Artes Mundi prize recognizing his contribution to contemporary art in 2019—it casts a larger shadow upon the other. Recent exhibitions have brought together in one place works that previously circulated through separate outlets—such as the Tate Modern's 2016 exhibition of the multichannel installation *Primitive* (2009), accompanied by an extensive program of his feature and short films in the museum's Starr Cinema. The retrospective solo exhibition *Apichatpong Weerasethakul: The Serenity of Madness*, curated by Gridthiya Gaweewong, lays out an overview of his entire corpus from 1994 to 2016, bringing together his experimental shorts and installations with scripts, drawings, and reference materials from his feature films. Included in the retrospective is a screening program of newly restored short films, as well as several experimental films that have been reworked by Apichatpong for display in the gallery instead of the film theater. His approach to the exhibition as not merely an occasion for the display of previous works, but also a prompt for their evolving transformation, carries over to the installations in the show, which are also presented in new configurations and combinations. Describing the techniques and forms of projection he devised specially for *The Serenity of Madness*, Apichatpong emphasizes their effect of recreating his projects: "I feel that it's like a new project. It's not a film, it's not even an installation. It's like a newly edited piece, become a singular new experience."⁸

The view expressed here affirms the permeability that May Adadol Ingawanij and David Teh have identified as a conceptual key or a “password” for Apichatpong’s practice. His work endures by way of a multiform, rather than a fixed, existence, crossing over categories as it moves between old and new iterations. The repetition of specific motifs and ideas also renders his films and installations permeable to one another, so much that the titles of certain works (*Ablaze*, *Windows*, *Unknown Forces*, *The Importance of Telepathy*, to name just a few) might well be applied to other works whose key elements they name. Common sources and lines of exploration carve out additional open channels—as in the examples of *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* and *Primitive*, a multichannel installation that stands out as one of his most ambitious projects. These works both originate in a book alluded to in the film’s title, written by a monk about a man named Boonmee who could remember the lives he lived in his previous incarnations. Inspired by this text, Apichatpong and his crew traveled to Boonmee’s homeland in the northeast province of Isaan, searching for his descendants and collecting stories about the region’s turbulent political history from its inhabitants. The encounters and materials generated by this research trip make up the core of both works, such that Apichatpong considers *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* to be fully “a part of the *Primitive* project.” The two are linked together, permeable to one another, as branches of an integral endeavor to research past lives, resurrect regional memories, and investigate a history of brutal military violence targeting northeast Thailand as a locus of communist insurgency.⁹ The memorial aspect of the project is at the same time cut through by a sense of premonition, Ingawanij notes, responding to a contemporary political climate marked by the “resurgence of reactionary forms of royalist nationalism.”¹⁰

Cemetery of Splendor, also shot in the Isaan province, continues this reflection on the lingering traces of past political conflicts and the burden of national history that weighs upon present generations. As Jen eventually learns, the schoolhouse-turned-hospital sits on top of an ancient cemetery of kings, upon land once strewn with the corpses of warring armies and villagers. The soldiers will never recover from their sleeping sickness because the spirits of the kings below are siphoning off their energy to continue fighting their battles in the netherworld. Thus, turmoil and threat infuse the film’s quiet scenes of slumber, sending ominous ripples across their serene surfaces, analogous to the invisible pathogen. The association between fictional narcotic malady and real political danger is further cemented by the context of the film’s making—shortly after May 2014, when Thailand’s elected prime minister was deposed in a coup d’état and replaced by a military junta. Apichatpong relates *Cemetery of Splendor* to the feeling of powerlessness spreading in the wake of the country’s authoritarian turn and an attendant disorienting atmosphere of unreality, in which it feels unclear “whether you are asleep or awake.”¹¹ And in the years since the film’s release, with mounting tensions in Thailand’s politics—as the ruling junta intensifies its repression of opposing voices, and as protests against the military and monarchy gain in mass—the theme of sleep has emerged as an even more prominent element of his work. The two main characters who are overtaken by sleep

in *Cemetery of Splendor*, like apparitions who will not be nailed down in space and time, reappear in subsequent projects. These include *Fireworks (Archives)* (2014, a single-channel video shot at Sala Kaew Ku Temple, which also serves as a location in *Cemetery*); *Fever Room* (2015, a stunning “projection performance” involving multiple projections on screens that shift their position in space, sounds distributed precisely on multiple channels, strobe lights, artificial fog, and physical props); *Invisibility* (2016, a two-channel video installation); and the experimental short film *Blue* (2018). The continuities across these projects reflect a shift in Apichatpong’s method, from approaching each film as a self-contained, completed object to treating it as “platform” from which other works can be built or a “satellite” within a larger universe, such that “it all ends up being one piece; all together.”¹²

Fever Room commences in a theater in which all the sources of light have been extinguished (including exit and safety lights). The total darkness is broken by a single projector that casts a familiar image: a room with a bed in the lower half of the frame, overlooked by a wall of windows opening onto a tree-lined street. The first “act” of the performance picks up where *Cemetery of Splendor* left off, bringing Jen and Itt back together in a hospital that recalls the film’s setting. Jen’s voice describes a series of places and scenes that are shown on a single screen; among these are several that can be recognized as locations from the film, and Itt repeats her words as if following along with her visions. This exchange is followed by close-up shots of each of them in bed with their eyes closed, as if to suggest that we overhear a conversation taking place in their dreams. The flow of images quickens, with additional screens making an entrance and composing a complex montage of views. The projected world widens out to reference imagery from other previous works—the waters of the Mekong River, echoing scenes from *Mekong Hotel*; a group of young men, reminiscent of the local youth captured in *Primitive*, who gaze at the rushing waters as if waiting for something to arrive; a cave, like the one in which *Uncle Boonmee* ends—while periodically returning to the two sleepers. In *Invisibility*, the silhouettes of the two actors can be clearly discerned among the layered moving shadows that appear side by side on the installation’s two channels, interspersed with textual intertitles. Actions play in repeating loops, like Itt sitting up in a bed or Jen nodding off while she sits, suggestive of their confinement to a room “with no way out” except for routes that wind inward into their minds.¹³ And in the short film *Blue*, Jenjira is shown lying in a bed in the middle of a jungle; replacing the architectural feature of the window view is a large translucent screen onto which a fire casts its reflection, creating layered compositions. Jenjira tosses and turns, seemingly too troubled to sleep, but neither does she react when her blanket appears to catch on fire. The flames continue to grow, like a mounting alarm that goes unnoticed. These projects—building from a central premise wherein “the people take refuge in dreams while their land is on a brink of collapse, echoing Thailand’s present state of military dictatorship”—develop variations on a scenario of uncontrolled sleep. In so doing, they charge the act of sleep—and the problem of awakening—with a sense of political urgency.¹⁴



FIGURE 15. *Fever Room* (Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2015). Courtesy of Kick the Machine.



FIGURE 16. *Invisibility* (Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2016). Courtesy of Kick the Machine.



FIGURE 17. *Blue* (Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2018).

Revisited and reworked in so many instances, the scenario emerges as a kind of reflexive, degree-zero tableau in Apichatpong's work—not just a locus of accumulating thematic associations and political implications, but also a distillation of the formal and ontological concerns animating this work. The scene of sleep breaks down into a set of core elements—contrasting zones of shadow and luminescence, enclosures and apertures, a figure held in hypnotic thrall—that constitute a baseline from which his practice extends across media and permeates the boundaries between them. Furthermore, these core elements correlate with the components of cinema's exhibitionary apparatus, as the initial image of *Fever Room* invites us to consider. The bank of windows that allows light into the dim bedroom occupies a position corresponding to that of the rectangular screen inside the dark theater, which likewise frames a view. The window illuminates the bedroom just as the screen lights up the dark auditorium; the luminous source within the image establishes the conditions in which the audience can see. With this doubling between the space in the film and that of the audience, we are also invited to project ourselves into the place of the sleeper who is positioned just below the edge of the shot. As *Fever Room* returns to the scene of sleep, it reassembles these elements into novel configurations, engendering an expanded, exploded audiovisual experience of multiplied projection surfaces, oscillations between visual and haptic sensations, and disorienting immersion. At some points, the arrangement of screens echoes the composition within single images, as with a pair of screens depicting Itt asleep in the one below and a landscape image in the one above, thus contributing to the dynamic relationships between two- and three-dimensional space, between the projected image and its material support. These relationships are also activated in *Blue*: in the film's final shot, the screen that reflects the image of flames is simultaneously positioned as a transparent window framing a view of Jenjira in bed.

Such permutations of sleep point to continuities between Apichatpong's most recent projects and his earliest experimental films, with their formally reductive, reflexive tendencies. A striking example of the latter is *Windows* (1999). This piece was prompted by Apichatpong's discovery of the bouncing of sunlight between the lens of the video camera he was trying out for the first time, a nearby television screen, and a window in the same room. At once rigorous in its simplicity and playfully spontaneous in its construction, both photographic and abstracted, *Windows* is an "improvisation" in which the micromovements of the filmmaker's body create reflections of light that shudder, flicker, and dance. In the version of *Windows* shown as part of *The Serenity of Madness*, the image is projected onto a translucent screen that can be seen (and seen through) from both sides, imbuing the work with a sculptural presence. In my viewing of *Windows* at the Sullivan Galleries at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, the patterns of light playing on the screen were mirrored on the polished concrete floor, adding to the intensity and intricacy of the film installation's flicker effects. The window within the film

illuminated the dark space of the gallery as well, making the latter's physical features a part of the interplay of reflecting surfaces.

The transitional zone between waking and sleeping, light and darkness, grounds an inquiry into cinema as a medium constituted in the combination, and inventive recombinations, of controlled and concentrated illumination, reflective surfaces and projections. At certain points, Apichatpong's comments even suggest an effort to surpass cinema entirely by directly wiring the action of light into the neuro-perceptual circuitry of vision, thereby bypassing the camera-made image: "Better than cinema is the light itself. Our eyes, our brain is the best projector that is constantly interplaying with light."¹⁵ This biomechanical medium-consciousness, and the speculative possibilities toward which it gestures, informs the diegetic world of *Cemetery of Splendor*. The patients in the sleep clinic are each hooked up to a machine specially designed "to help them sleep with good dreams," along with more realistic instruments like catheters and oxygen masks. The machine, a curved vertical tube of light reminiscent of minimalist sculpture, emits a luminescence of continuously cycling colors—blue, violet, pink, red, and green. With each return to the setting of the clinic in the course of the film—to the soldiers inanimate in their sound repose, bathed in an otherworldly radiance, unable to disconnect from the projectors in their heads—the scene of sleep appears more surreal, portentous, and oddly animated. It radiates with disquiet even despite its stillness, intimating hidden movements and invisible agencies. These implications cling to one of the film's most indelible images: a long shot of the clinic at night, silent except for the humming of electric ceiling fans and motionless except for the waves of light seeping through the tubes that seem to stand sentry over the soldiers. Bracketed by cross-fades so that it seems to hover out of space and time, at once realistic and artificial, and held for an extremely long duration, the shot stands out as the keynote of *Cemetery of Splendor*, distilling its poetics and politics of sleep. As the colors gently cycle, they also ooze beyond the clinic into the surrounding spaces, and perhaps into the heads of the film's spectators. The miasma of hypnosis spreads.

In an interview from 2016, Apichatpong refers to the cemetery as an analogy for the way his recent projects draw upon regional histories. A cemetery is a kind of reanimated archive—not just "a tomb of records that are dead," he says, but also a field of "weeds and plants that continue to grow in the audience's mind. I am curious when memories, narratives, especially violent ones, are planted [in various spots] and a new generation, the visitors, absorbs them."¹⁶ It is fitting, then, that *Cemetery of Splendor* does not exhume the bones of the ancient kings or resuscitate their stories as its narrative project, much as *Primitive*'s aim is not the retrieval and display of the past events that inspire it. Instead, the past enters the present as altered forms of life fertilized by its decaying remains, with the insistence of weeds pushing up through the soil or the irrepressibility of dream visions permeating the minds of the living. Memories are not so much excavated as they are reactivated,



FIGURE 18. *Cemetery of Splendor* (Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2015).

bleeding into the cracks between waking and sleeping life as they are handed from one generation to the next. It is also appropriate that, notwithstanding its strikingly anti-naturalistic lighting effects, *Cemetery of Splendor* otherwise eschews stylized representations of dreaming such as dissolves or photographic distortions. It does not lead its audience through the passageway from physical reality into the mental landscape of the dream. Rather, it leaves them to stand before the wall of slumber, regarding unconscious bodies that neither look back nor communicate. (This is true even in the scene that might be interpreted as the film's only "dream sequence," as I discuss in chapter five.) Breaking from a tradition of filmmaking that champions the claims of dreams upon waking life by giving them visual form, building on a long-held affinity between the oneiric and the cinematic, *Cemetery of Splendor* does not actualize the dreams of its characters in the image. The figure of the sleeper is presented as a sign of something else that remains as yet inaccessible.

A comparison helps to focalize the film's distinctive strategies. Turning to a different realm of contemporary cinema, we find in *Inception* (Christopher Nolan, 2010) another film that is full of sleeping bodies, populated by characters who are immobile and unconscious for a good part of the narrative. The film takes place in a future time of high-stakes corporate espionage and neural technology that enables spies to enter and reshape other people's dreams for the purpose of extracting valuable secrets from their unconscious. *Inception's* story transpires largely within the simulacral dreamscapes constructed by its characters, where their dream-selves do battle with the fortified defenses of their victims. For brief moments throughout, the film pulls back to the scene of sleep. These moments serve as narrative way stations, providing pauses for breath amid the frenetic action taking place in each dream sequence, and also as anchoring points, or bookmarks in space and

time that enable the audience to orient itself in the film's complex architecture of nested dream narratives. The scene of sleep functions as a juncture between narrative levels and a switching mechanism by which the characters enter further into dreams-within-dreams and then find their way back (or not) to waking reality. But despite this important structural function, *Inception* is less interested in sleep than in dreams as illusions that substitute for, compete with, and finally threaten to obliterate the consciousness of its characters.

In a similar fashion, *Cemetery of Splendor* penetrates far into the realm of dreams, so far as to lead the audience to question the ontological stability of the reality they have left behind. But here we find nothing so clear cut as a contest between opposing realities that compete for our belief. Rather, the film is the antithesis of *Inception*, less about the sway of illusions (and computer-generated imagery) than the enigma of the other lives inhabited in sleep and dreams. Instead of a reality overwritten by simulated illusions, *Cemetery of Splendor* presents a physical world encircled, undergirded, and overwritten by another reality that is never visually represented but still affects the actions of the characters and the perceptions of the audience. If that which lies beyond the zones of waking life never coalesces into a tangible picture, it nonetheless makes its presence felt in the form of a constant displacing pressure. This pressure acts in the manner of a translucent overlay, a subtle vibration that blurs the contours of the picture. "The motion of otherwise imperceptible life forces in the existing world" makes itself felt, in the words of Ingawanij.¹⁷ Sleep permeates the diegetic world like a wind: it sets things into motion, stirs up forces that impel the action and events of the film, and challenges the viewer to try to follow the melting lines of its obscure causality. In its refusal to directly visualize the territories of sleep or to frame them by means of explicit transitions, *Cemetery* preserves a palpable tension between the sleeping and waking worlds, cultivating a persistent sense of something more or yet to be discerned. A shadow hovers over the most sunlit spaces, such that these become, as Ingawanij observes, somehow "altered or existentially uncertain" despite being presented in a realistic mode.¹⁸ When borders are hazy and levels of reality underlined, the direction of awakening remains unclear.

For Apichatpong, dreaming is not all that occupies those who slumber. Sleep holds forth the possibility of recovering forgotten memories—and not just one's own memories but those that stem from previous lives (as in the case of Uncle Boonmee). Sleep might even bring about an immersion in memories that belong to others; indeed, the very question of belonging becomes ambiguous as the sleeping body becomes possessed by ancient spirits, as with the characters in *Cemetery of Splendor*. In this regard, sleep intertwines with other phenomena that appear with regularity in Apichatpong's work: possession, transmutation, and reincarnation. His conception of sleep reflects, on the one hand, what Arnika Fuhrmann has identified as a Buddhist cosmology of "commingling divergent temporalities," constituted in an unceasing process of rebirth after death in another kind of body

(a process governed by karma).¹⁹ On the other hand, his work does not straightforwardly transmit the doctrines of Thailand's official religion of Theravada Buddhism. Rather, it is steeped in what Fuhrmann qualifies as "a vernacular, quotidian, and frequently entirely nondoctrinal Buddhism" that shades into more locally inflected knowledge systems with roots in pre-Buddhist cosmology.²⁰ An example of the nondoctrinal worldviews suffusing his work is the animistic ontology that, in Ingawani's definition, grasps "the permeability of human and nonhuman worlds" and understands "the self as porous with respect to a multiplicity of life forms."²¹ As much as all life is inseparable from afterlife, so the latter can assume a variety of forms. Thus, we encounter humans who metamorphose into strange beasts, as in *Tropical Malady*, and goddesses who appear as regular women in *Cemetery of Splendor*; *Uncle Boonmee's* cast of characters includes a ghost, an ape man, a talking catfish, and characters whose spirits temporarily dissociate from their bodies and wander away.

Situated within these ontological frameworks, the activity of sleep implies, in the broadest possible sense, a loosening of the firm edges of identity and a projection of the self beyond its usual borders into other territories and states of being. Implicated in the boundary between waking and sleeping are other boundaries—between different life forms, the material and the immaterial, past and future lives. To sleep is to enter a temporal zone that exceeds an individual lifespan, unfolding into what Apichatpong describes as "an infinite span of time" in which entities can "trade places" and transform.²² This zone is marked by transferences of energy between the dead and the living, along with an unimpeded circulation and exchange of memories. Sleep dissolves divisions and opens up passageways. If its effect on the living is to freeze them in a temporary state of suspended animation, it is also to reawaken and reanimate the dead.

The psychogeographies visited in dreams are therefore invested with historical and political as well as personal meanings. In Apichatpong's treatment, sleep is positioned on a continuum with other popular practices of representing, interpreting, and transmitting the past. The suggestion that the peaceful slumber of the soldiers in *Cemetery of Splendor* masks a nightmare of phantom wars can be related to the phenomenon of spirit possession in this region of the world. More than just a remnant of ancient traditions, Ashley Thompson argues, this phenomenon constitutes a "powerful syncretic force in the present."²³ To manifest the dead in a provisional material form, as does the spirit medium whose body is momentarily possessed, is an act of "representation and interpretation of past events," she writes.²⁴ Thompson's influential reading of possession finds an echo in Apichatpong's conception of filmmaking as an endeavor to materialize the past in images and sounds. "I made films without knowing how true they really were," he says, "like waking the dead and . . . making them walk once more."²⁵ In his hands cinema becomes, as well as a technological medium, an animistic medium of possession and a vessel for reincarnating the departed. For Apichatpong, sleep

is one more “indigenous way of making history: history in the broadest sense, as a social locus for communal memory and forgetting.”²⁶ To peer at the obscure edges of sleep is therefore to confront the far reaches of time—where ghosts rise up from the depths to grasp at the living, where remembrance touches the outermost bounds of existence, and where individual consciousness merges into the ground of a collective experience. Encountering Apichatpong’s work, one might wonder: “if the part of our mind which travels back (‘regressively back transformed’) is unconscious to us, how can we possibly be sure, when we sleep, where it might take us, just how far back in fact we go?”²⁷