

Somnolent Journeys

The cryptic prelude of *The Life of American Fireman*, in which the chief firefighter has a dream of sleep, might call to mind another well-known overture from a work of modern literature that similarly begins with closed eyes. Marcel Proust inaugurates *In Search of Lost Time* with the sleepy thoughts of the narrator Marcel. The book's very first sentence—"For a long time, I went to bed early"—activates a pendulum of consciousness that moves back and forth between snatches of slumber and glimmerings of wakefulness, generating a pulse that sustains the book's opening chapter.¹

Sometimes, my candle scarcely out, my eyes would close so quickly that I did not have time to say to myself: "I'm falling asleep." And, half an hour later, the thought that it was time to try to sleep would wake me. (7)

I would go back to sleep, and sometimes afterwards woke only briefly for a moment . . . I would completely surround my head with my pillow before returning to the world of dreams . . . I woke up. (8)

My stiffened side, trying to guess its orientation, would imagine, for instance, that it lay facing the wall in a big canopied bed and immediately I would say to myself, "Why, I went to sleep in the end even though Mama didn't come to say good night to me," I was in the country at the house of my grandfather . . . (10)

Then the memory of a new position would be reborn; the wall would slip away in another direction: I was in my room in Mme de Saint-Loup's, in the country; good Lord! It's ten o'clock or even later, they will have finished dinner! I must have overslept in the nap I take every evening when I come back from my walk with Mme de Saint-Loup. (10)

The reader's first acquaintance is with a drowsy, disoriented narrator who lies alone and blinking in the dark as he recollects and describes a series of scenes from the past that echo the present nocturnal situation. Marcel shakes off his sleep, wonders what time it is, and resumes his intermittent slumber. And with every swing of the pendulum of his hazy consciousness, the question of temporal

positioning becomes increasingly vexed. Each brief awakening described by Marcel triggers another succession of memories—recollections of past awakenings, of oneiric interludes dreamed in different rooms that he momentarily confuses with the one he presently occupies, and of insomniac episodes that lead to further confusion between daybreak and dead night. Within the hazy penumbra of sleep, minutes expand and contract. The narrator's immediate physical surroundings dissolve into motion and rearrange themselves. The ever-turning "kaleidoscope of the darkness" hurtles Marcel through a succession of bedrooms in which he has slept before, such that he is no longer sure of where or when he is.²

In this overture, the effect of sleep is strikingly similar to the motionless voyages of cinema, generating what is in essence a cinematic conjunction of movement in stasis.³ From a fixed, unmoving position, Marcel paradoxically experiences a vertiginous journey, "travelling at top speed through time and space." Despite his feeling of physical paralysis—"my body, too benumbed to move"—he is swept up in a vortex of dynamic motion, much like Dorothy caught in the eye of the tornado: "everything revolved around me in the darkness, things, countries, years."⁴ A whirlwind emanates from Marcel's inner state of sleepy disorientation to surround him in his bed, along with the reader, now also deprived of gravity and locational coordinates, and made unsure of where and when the story begins. After numerous entrances and exits—Balbec, Paris, Doncières, Venice—this journey back in time comes to a halt and deposits the reader on solid ground. The memories aroused by slumber and sustained in nocturnal reveries eventually clarify into the episodes from Marcel's childhood in Combray that make up the first part of *Swann's Way*.⁵

In *In Search of Lost Time* Proust sets the stage with a dream of sleep—or more accurately, an uncontrolled, involuntary remembrance of past sleep. For as Roland Barthes rightly observes, "this sleep has nothing Freudian about it; it is not oneiric (there are few real dreams in Proust's work); rather, it is constituted by the depths of consciousness as *disorder*." In this fifty-page-long opening episode which, Barthes writes, "like a Tibetan *mandala*, collects together within its view the entire Proustian oeuvre," it is sleep itself that "has an inceptive value."⁶ The scenario of fitful awakening, along with the uniquely disoriented form of perception that it breeds, is repeated and amplified throughout the book. Or, in some cases, it is the moments just before falling asleep that lead the narrator to waver unsteadily between distant places of the past and his current location. Sleep, Barthes observes, constitutes a founding principle of the entire work, "the *disorganization* of Time"; it "establishes another logic, a logic of Vacillation, of Decompartmentalization, and it is this new logic which Proust discovers in the episode of the madeleine."⁷ In this novel, just as sleep can shatter "the immobility of the things around us"⁸—an immobility that is not their intrinsic property but rather imposed by perception—so the memories inadvertently released by sensory triggers can also make the things that surround us tremble and "flicker," can force "our whole person to believe itself surrounded

by [places that are actually far away].”⁹ Thus, Proust compares these moments of vivid sensory recall with the “dizzying uncertainty akin to that which one sometimes experiences through some ineffable vision at the moment of falling asleep.”¹⁰ Sleep, as a condition that dislodges conscious control over the directionality of thought, appropriates for itself a measure of the power of involuntary memory to accomplish what intellect on its own cannot, to “make me find the old days again, the Lost Time.”¹¹

The first volume of *In Search of Lost Time* makes an appearance in *The Serenity of Madness*, a retrospective exhibition of Apichatpong’s moving-image works. The exhibition concludes with an “archives room” displaying documents and texts from his personal collection. Along with original handwritten film scripts and storyboards, the display includes a table of books selected by the artist: volumes on Thailand’s history and national politics that shed light on the political concerns of his projects, as well as fictional titles that indicate the web of literary inspirations underlying his work. These include the stories of Ray Bradbury, Roberto Bolaño’s *By Night in Chile*, and a copy of *Swann’s Way*. This suggestion of an affinity between Proust and Apichatpong is borne out by their common grasp of the inceptive value of sleep—as an action to describe and observe, a territory to explore, and a formal logic to elaborate. For the writer as much as for the artist-filmmaker, sleep activates interior movements that become the movement of the narrative. The effects of sleep in these opening pages are similar to those found in many of his films: the physical world is set atremble by unseen forces, the past surges forth to engulf the present, and partitions dissolve. Proust and Apichatpong dwell within the atmosphere of vacillating uncertainty that sleep brings in its wake, without going so far as to establish a binary contrast between dream worlds and waking worlds. For both of them, the visions produced in sleep include but also extend beyond dreaming. And both of them affirm, rather than dismiss as illusory, the reality of these visions and their power to resuscitate a past that both belongs to and exceeds the self.

Apichatpong, like Proust, conceives the act of sleeping as a kind of journeying, marked by a fluid mobility that supersedes ordinary constraints of space and time, and he invites the viewer to follow the movements that radiate from its apparent stillness. “I like people when they are sleeping—making a journey somewhere,” he says, discussing the installation *Teem* (2007).¹² The installation consists of three silent videos projected onto different walls of the artist’s then-partner Teem as he sleeps. Elsewhere the association between sleeping and journeying is forged in more literal terms. The short film *Luminous People* (Khon Rueang Saeng, 2007) centers on a reenactment of a Buddhist funereal ceremony, in which a group of people set out on a boat to scatter the ashes of a dead man into the Mekong River. As the boat makes its return journey after the ceremony has taken place, dusk falls and several of the participants drift off to sleep. The shots of the dozing passengers call to mind a tendency in the cinema to show characters nodding off while on the

road, upon the water, or in the air—en route if not in the bedroom (for instance, most of *Inception* transpires in the interval of a trans-Pacific flight). In the visual syntax and gestural economy of movies, sleep often marks an elision of the time of transport and telescopically condenses the distance between A and B. This coding reflects a perceived interchangeability between journeying and sleeping as instances of dead time, deferred action, and a state of in-betweenness.

Luminous People both evokes and deviates from the conventions of onscreen sleep. In this work, sleep implies not so much an expedient overcoming of distance and duration as getting lost within what lies in-between. The journey depicted here is a multilayered one: transpiring in a nebulous time between day and night, whose crepuscular light is enhanced by the graininess of Super 8 film; on a boat that traverses the distance between the dead and the living as it sends off the remains of the deceased father; and on a river that represents the border between two nations, Thailand and Laos. Just as the time of the ritual is indeterminate, so the memory of the dead man lingers, while the ceaseless flow of the river undercuts the solidity of geographical borders. A voice on the soundtrack sings a song about a dream vision: “Last night I dreamed that my father paid me a visit. Last night I dreamed that my father came. I was very happy . . . Father.” As Arnika Fuhrmann observes, this particular funeral subverts the ceremony’s intended purport to “initiate the process of detachment from the dead”; instead, it “prompts continuing attachment to the deceased.”¹³ By integrating sleep and dream into the ritual—and rejection—of mourning, *Luminous People* plunges deeper into the zone of “otherworldly temporality” and spatial indeterminacy that is host to such residual desires.¹⁴

In the installation *Primitive*, the voyage of sleep is imagined through the tropes of science fiction, reflecting the artist’s long interest in the genre. *Primitive* arose from a trip taken by Apichatpong to the rural northeast province of Isaan—one of Thailand’s poorest regions, situated on its border with Laos, and distinct in language, religion, and regional identity from the dominant Siamese culture anchored in the country’s south. (These differences are subtly but consistently signaled in Apichatpong’s work.) Isaan was not brought under the direct rule of the Siamese monarchy until the late nineteenth century, and it continues to have the status of a disenfranchised and “disadvantaged regional minority.”¹⁵ Its history has been shaped by waves of political dissent and anti-state rebellions.¹⁶ During the Cold War era, the Communist Party of Thailand established its strongest foothold in this region. Consequently, Isaan emerged as a locus of political conflict and a target of state counterinsurgent campaigns from the 1960s to the early 1980s (complicating the general view of Thailand as an island of stability amid the tumult of the Cold War, firmly in alliance with American interests). Apichatpong has a personal connection with Isaan, having lived there in his childhood, and it is also the homeland of his frequent collaborator, the actor Jenjira Pongpas.

During the making of *Primitive*, the artist found himself gravitating toward the village of Nabua, where the first instances of open warfare between state forces and



FIGURE 29. *Primitive* (Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2009). Courtesy of Kick the Machine.

communist-allied farmers broke out in the mid-1960s. The village subsequently became a “widow town,” he notes, occupied by the military as it sought to crush the insurgency by means of execution, torture, and rape.¹⁷ Working with a group of local youth living there (most of them migrant farm workers waiting for the harvest to begin), Apichatpong improvised performances with them and recorded their activities. The photographic and moving-image works resulting from their collaboration constitute the *Primitive* project, which he describes as “a portrait of the teenage male descendants of the communist farmers.”¹⁸ Among these collaborations was the construction of a “spaceship,” which the teenagers designed and used for hanging out, drinking, and sleeping. A podlike hollow structure built from organic materials, cave-like when viewed from the inside, the spaceship fuses primitive forms with science fiction motifs. Some of the photography and video in *Primitive* show the young men dressed up in military fatigues and crashed out side by side on the floor inside the vessel. Awash in a saturated tint of bright red, the images suggest corpses left in the wake of battle as much as teenagers tired out by their playacting.

With this project Apichatpong overlays the notion of time travel upon that of extraterrestrial exploration, describing the spaceship as a time machine that transports its occupants to the future. The workings of this spaceship-time machine can be witnessed in his visual documentation of the teenagers lounging inside, fulfilling the vessel’s dual function by sleeping and dreaming. “Our minds are like time machines waiting to depart for a long journey,” posits Apichatpong, and “what we



FIGURE 30. *Primitive* (Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2009). Courtesy of Kick the Machine.

can achieve now is quite elementary and primitive, although we do it everyday: we sleep.”¹⁹ This identification of the ordinary act of sleep with the extraordinary feat of traveling in time has a Proustian ring to it, but also a broader popular resonance, calling to mind motifs from the science fiction genre. As well as sharing in the latter’s galactic imagination, *Primitive* draws upon a particular coding of time travel in science fiction films, wherein sleep functions as a visual shorthand signifying a break from and projection beyond the present moment. The sleeping teenagers from Nabua have counterparts in American films of the late twentieth century like *Back to the Future* (Robert Zemeckis, 1985) and *Donnie Darko* (Richard Kelly, 2001). These two films have endings that find their teenage protagonists in bed, awakening to an alternative reality brought about by their interventions. The coding of sleep as a temporal restart function also finds precedents in earlier contributions to the genre. In *La Jetée* (Chris Marker, 1962), the story’s leaps between an apocalyptic present, an unspoiled prewar past, and an unknown future are signaled by a fading out of and back into consciousness. The protagonist closes his eyes and blacks out in order to awaken to another time; in turn, the woman from his past whom he seeks in his time travels opens her own eyes to greet him. Science fiction turns to sleep as an exit that is also an entrance in an expanded temporal vista, providing an escape from dead ends and initiating a new timeline in answer to the desire to start over.

The question of futurity threads through *Primitive*, driving its exploration of sleep as “an active force of inertia,” in Apichatpong’s words.²⁰ The project addresses

Nabua's past and confronts a history of violence and death that remains unacknowledged and unmemorialized in official state discourse. But it does so not by staging an encounter between past and present according to a preconceived pedagogical imperative. Rather, its approach is to take a position alongside those who already live with this past and to make a space for their dreams. Apichatpong "does not seek to remedy or even remediate the political history of Nabua by transmitting knowledge of local memory into universal archives," as Una Chung writes about *Primitive*. "Nor will he shake the locals into horrified rememory of the traumas of the past" or demand that they confront the atrocities inflicted upon their ancestors. Instead, he adopts an approach that implicitly makes an argument for *living* history, "*as it finds us*, knowing that we are embedded in it in ways more complex and nonarbitrary than our conscious knowledge of time might lead us to think."²¹ The weight of past events continues to press upon the current generation as they navigate ongoing conditions of economic devastation and political alienation. And so *Primitive* memorializes the isolation, boredom, and inertia felt by these teenagers who drink heavily, fantasize about escape, and sleep. The spaceship is a materialization of what Apichatpong describes as their "collective aspiration": "the act of closing one's eyes for refuge, or for transporting oneself to another reality to 'see' something different is to me a very relevant mechanism in our contemporary landscape. It's a kind of revolt."²²

Apichatpong returned to Isaan for *Cemetery of Splendor*, shooting in his hometown of Khon Kaen. The film responds to recent developments in national politics that the director views as a continuation of the events behind the *Primitive* project. He writes, "The story of Nabua undeniably has echoes of the current political turmoil in Thailand. Institutions involved in those events of the past, along with new ones, are the key players in the ongoing chaos. Just as in the past, they manipulate the public psyche, instilling it with faith and fear."²³ In *Cemetery*, too, a scene of collective slumber serves as a figure for a vexed relation to history—one that weighs heavily upon the present but eludes straightforward reclamation, presenting a challenge to the exercise of discursive and political agency. Instead of teenage boys costumed in military fatigues to reenact episodes of armed struggle, like the participants in *Primitive*, the film centers on a group of actual soldiers, representatives of a military that constitutes one of the main bodies of state power in Thailand. The soldiers have been disarmed by an epidemic, an irresistible narcolepsy that also operates in the manner of a time machine, transporting the men's minds to a distant past while their bodies lie inert. The place where they sleep sits on the site of a former palace and cemetery of kings. Their illness has a supernatural cause, for "the spirits of the dead kings are drawing on the soldiers' energy to fight their battles," as one of the characters says. Thus, the film's *mise-en-scène* implicates the throne, another central state institution, and calls attention to the conjunction of military and monarchical power. Hovering below the surface of filmed reality is a monument to royal power (palace)

and a repository of the casualties wrought by the latter (cemetery), a shadow presence emphasized by the film's English title.

Other signifiers of political and institutional power accrue around the scene of sleep, folded into the quotidian and fantastical layers of the film's setting. The soldiers are housed in a clinic, isolated as objects of care, observation, and treatment by medical authorities. Not by coincidence, these characters bear the distinction of a demographic whose sleeping habits are subject to the most extreme and cutting-edge methods of monitoring, management, experimentation, and optimization. The main instruments for their care, the machines that light their dreams in changing colors, have a touch of science fiction about them, while the premise that the soldiers' bodies have been drained of vitality by phantom forces likewise echoes a common scenario in science fiction (e.g., *The Matrix*, 1999). The machines also introduce the suggestion that behind the soldiers' disorderly sleep lurk the traumas of other recent wars. A technician off-handedly notes that the same apparatus was used to treat the nightmares of American soldiers in Afghanistan. A nurse comments that they remind her of funeral lights. Furthermore, the clinic has been hastily converted from a former schoolhouse and remains incongruously decorated with the remnants of its previous existence. Visible on its walls are abecedaries and numerical tables, along with images of Thailand's king, its flag, and the bodhisattva—indications of an education emphasizing the three pillars of nation, monarchy, and the official religion of Theravada Buddhism. As writer Kong Rithee argues, these remnants serve as constant reminders of "a place of learning that is transformed into a laboratory of oblivion."²⁴ In many of the examples from Western cinema discussed thus far, the journey of sleep begins and ends in the bedroom, but in *Cemetery of Splendor*, the locations of sleep overturn the division between public and private, radiating across a panoply of spaces as they trace a dense matrix of social, political, and historical relationships. The viewer is thus invited to see many things in the film's main setting: a laboratory, a shelter, a resting place, a time machine, or a tomb.

Against this backdrop, the paths of the three main characters converge, and their dreams and memories entangle. As Iggy Cortez observes, the soldiers' "state of vulnerable exposure and corresponding dependency create unforeseen rhythms through which new relational arrangements begin to take form."²⁵ Jen returns to the schoolhouse of her childhood and volunteers to assist in the care of the soldiers now lodged there. She gravitates to a bed in the corner where she used to sit and turns her attentions to its present occupant, a soldier who, unlike the others, has no relatives to visit him. The two meet for the first time when he suddenly awakens while she bathes his body. The intimacy of the act of rubbing his skin with her bare hands belies their status as strangers to one another, and their eyes meet awkwardly. The charged tenor of this initial meeting persists in the friendship that develops between them, as they develop a routine of sharing meals and each other's company during Itt's waking moments, which come and go at



FIGURE 31. *Cemetery of Splendor* (Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2015).

random. Jen refers to Itt as her “son,” registering the age difference between them, but also by more playful monikers, like “little pup,” when their conversations assume a teasing, flirtatious tone. As their bond deepens, Jen finds herself struggling to stay awake, and a telepathic channel opens up between their dreams. In a scene at the end of the film that mirrors their initial meeting, Itt wakes up in his hospital bed to find Jen asleep, slumped over beside him. Responding to his efforts to rouse her, she drowsily tells him, “Suddenly, I can read your mind. I have seen your dream.” To this, Itt replies, “And I have seen yours.”

The breakthrough between them, moreover, has been forged with the help of a third party, Keng, the psychic hired by the clinic. In Keng’s first appearance early in the film, she displays her ability to bridge the chasm between the sleeping and waking worlds by penetrating other people’s dreaming thoughts. Sitting with her eyes closed and resting her hand upon the body of one of the unconscious soldiers, she describes what he sees, feels, and craves to his mother. “He is walking about somewhere. It’s dark . . . there’s a mound of dirt,” she says. In response to the mother’s query about what he would like to eat, she reports in the same dreamy voice, “Minced meat and a bamboo shoot soup . . . three chilis is enough.” The other characters refer to her psychic abilities in a matter-of-fact fashion, displaying no skepticism. As Keng explains to Jen when they meet, “I’ve had this gift since I was young. Out of the blue, I could recall my past life as a boy. I fell from a tree and died.” The anecdote represents one of numerous instances throughout Apichatpong’s films where characters casually mention their memories of past lives (including but not limited to *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*). The only reaction of wonder from Jen comes in the form of a running joke in which she keeps asking Keng if she secretly works for the FBI. Later on, Keng reveals

that her special powers extend to those of a spirit medium, able to incarnate others' spirits in her body; becoming a physical vessel for Itt's spirit while his own body sleeps, she serves as a bridge between Jen and Itt. The progression of the film's story consists in the formation of a three-way circuit of dreams, visions, and desires—a love triangle—between these characters as they travel together beyond the waking world. For them, too, sleep is “a journey into a different territory,” says Apichatpong.²⁶

In *Cemetery of Splendor*, sleep leads into this “different territory” and parallel realm. This realm is neither the exclusive property of the solitary sleeper, as a Western psychoanalytic mindset would have it, nor solely the fabrication of an individual psyche. Instead, the territories of sleep are crowded places, where others can enter unbidden or by invitation. Phantoms can potentially invade this territory to possess the sleeper, as we find out when Jen is informed about the existence of the ancient cemetery and underworld wars. This knowledge comes from two strangers who approach her as she eats fruit under a *sala* in the park near the clinic. The women introduce themselves as the Laotian goddesses whose shrine is nearby. (The shrine, where some of the film's scenes take place, is a marker of Isaan's regional culture and Laotian history.) In this instance, too, the film does not dramatize the fantastical nature of this encounter. The women are ordinary in their appearance, and when Jen stares at them incredulously after hearing that “both of us are dead,” they simply smile at her and help themselves to the fruit on the table. Their message concerning things buried below the surface finds visual reinforcement in the film's recurrent shots of a bulldozer digging up piles of dirt in the vicinity of the clinic. The invocation of the different territory entered via sleep hangs in the air, a transparent presence, heightening the atmosphere of existentially uncertain realism that Ingawani identifies as a hallmark of Apichatpong's films.

In *Cemetery of Splendor*, to sleep is to find oneself submerged within a past from which it is difficult to break free, like the narrator Marcel, to come into contact with things that have vanished, and to submit to invisible forces. Here, as in Proust's work, its effect is to disorganize time and make the present tense waver. For Apichatpong, however, sleep brings a particular form of double vision that looks beyond the seeming immobility of the present by bringing into focus the afterimages that cling to specific places as traces of their history. This vision activates individual memories but also, importantly, reaches beyond them. These effects come to the fore in the scene of possession. If Jen at first beholds the clinic through the filter of her childhood memory, recalling and envisioning the old schoolhouse that it once was, here she is led to penetrate yet further into its more distant past. During this journey into the territory of sleep, space dissolves into multiple temporal perspectives that phase in and out.

During a morning picnic in the park with Jen, Itt falls asleep in the middle of their meal. Keng joins them under the *sala* and takes advantage of the opportu-

nity to conduct their daily mind-reading session. Resting her hand upon Itt's and closing her eyes, she tells Jen that Itt wants to know if she would like to see what he sees in this dream. "How can I see?" asks Jen. "Through my body," replies Keng. "If so, this would be an amazing afternoon," says Jen. "Goodbye, sister." With these words of parting, Keng slowly turns toward Jen, opens her eyes, and greets her again with a "hello," as if she has become other to herself after being possessed by Itt's spirit. The two proceed to take a leisurely walk through the park, during which Keng-as-Itt shares a sleeping vision that sees beyond present reality, to the Lao kingdoms that previously reigned over the region for hundreds of years before their conquest by the expanding Siamese empire. Their walk takes the form of a tour of the royal palace that once stood on this ground. Stepping into a circle of trees, Keng/Itt shows Jen a princely dressing room encrusted with mirrors, and cautions her not to hit her head as they pass into a sumptuously furnished bedroom. Keng/Itt takes her into a royal bathroom and points out a foot basin carved from pink stone. They cast their gazes downward, and the film cuts to a reverse shot of a spot on the ground covered in dry leaves and shadows of foliage, holding the shot for a beat as if to wait for something to materialize. The viewer is challenged to visualize what was previously here, much as Jen is by her companion. As they continue their wandering, the tension between what is visible and what is conjured by Keng/Itt's words becomes increasingly charged—as when the camera cuts to painted wooden signs mounted on some of the trees that bear moral instructional slogans such as "Hunger for heaven . . . will lead you to hell." Such signs are distributed by the state throughout Thailand's public spaces (including schools and temples), disseminating its authoritative voice and representing the trappings of the modern nation-kingdom that stand in conjunction with the ornaments of the ancient kingdom.

Jen participates in this royal tour with a hint of apprehension, as if a bit unsure of exactly what kind of game they are playing. But along with responding to the cues given by her guide, she also shifts the dynamic by taking the lead, interjecting her own commentary about her memories of the park, and thus introducing other layers to the history it contains. Stopping in front of an old tree, she points out the lines that scar its trunk, marks from a flood that devastated the area several years earlier. They make their way to an area littered with gray stone statues of people, monuments to death and destruction from a more recent period of time. Our first glimpse of these statues comes with a shot of broken fragments—a head, a torso missing its head and arms—strewn on the ground. Over this shot, Jen's off-screen voice states, "Everything looks so luxurious." The stark disjunction between sound and image, between the literal and the residual, is also a reminder of the lethal force with which glorious kingdoms are erected; as Apichatpong notes, "the signs of wealth were always idyllic, omitting the brutalities."²⁷ They come upon a likeness of a cave protruding from a hillside, in which women and children huddle together for safety. The scene triggers one of Jen's childhood memories from the Cold War



FIGURE 32. *Cemetery of Splendor* (Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2015).



FIGURE 33. *Cemetery of Splendor* (Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2015).



FIGURE 34. *Cemetery of Splendor* (Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2015).

era, when the civil war in neighboring Laos spilled into her village. “This is like when I was young in Nong Khai. Bombs were flying in from Laos. I can remember the siren.” As the two meander, their attention shifts between the ancient scenes before them and one another, and the tenor of their talk becomes more intimate. Jen’s perspective undergoes a transformation, as if she now sees through the surface of things to what is hidden. She tells her companion, “I see everything clearly now, Itt. At the heart of the kingdom, other than rice fields, there is nothing.” Behind the trappings of power is an absence of substance.

In this scene, what appears to be a straightforward action in a unified, continuous space—two characters taking a walk in a park—is transformed into a journey of unfathomable proportions through the lens of sleep. The invitation extended by Itt to Jen to see what he sees frames what follows within a double vision in which physical reality becomes less solid and palpably overdetermined, wavering as if another scene is about to materialize before our eyes, although it never does. The film does not settle the lingering question of what exactly transpires here: is this exchange initiated by Keng as a kind of trick, or has Itt’s spirit indeed taken up residence in her body? And is Jen just playing along or actually taken in? Thus, the viewer is held in a state of irresolution, wondering if there is indeed more here than meets the eye. Immaterial realities press in upon the image, undercutting its photographic literalism, thickening its air with a sense of latency, and making it seem simultaneously near and far. Itt’s invitation to Jen is also an invitation to the audience to approach the field of the visible in an expanded temporal framework that complicates any notion of real time or present tense. They are prompted to take in the diegetic world as a layered field of traces, indices of large-scale, long-durational historical forces that beg for further comprehension and decoding. As Jen’s memories mingle with the primeval retrospection of Keng’s narration, the placid surface of the park begins to pulsate with a larger significance, absorbing intimations of power and decay, of splendor and ruin, of bloody conflicts past and present.

The enjoinder to look closely and carefully as one makes one’s way amid this charged setting can be taken as a key to how to watch *Cemetery of Splendor*. The film presents an everyday reality blanketed by state propaganda, emblems of militaristic power, and expressions of royalist-nationalist ideology. For the viewer attuned to a “political angle,” says Apichatpong, “it’s in every frame.”²⁸ For instance, along with the moral maxims found in the park and the pictures on the walls of the clinic, there is a portrait of General Sarit Thanarat prominently displayed in the canteen serving the soldiers. A notorious dictator who ruled Thailand from 1958 to 1963, Sarit seized power in a coup d’état and entrenched his rule by means of an alliance with a restored monarchy and an exploitation of Buddhist symbolism.²⁹ Just as the likeness of Sarit is displayed throughout public space, his shadow hangs over the events that transpired in May 2014, Kong notes.³⁰ Prayuth Chan-ocha, the commander-in-chief of the Royal Army, imposed martial law, deposed the

country's democratically elected prime minister in another coup, and assumed leadership of the country. Like Sarit, Prayuth has staked his power upon a foundation of nationalism, royalism, and religion, ruling with the backing of the throne and the country's military and economic elite.³¹ *Cemetery of Splendor* was filmed as these events unfolded and takes its cues from the mounting authoritarianism, civil repression, and propaganda ushered in by this phase of military rule. As Kong points out, a "strong, unmistakable sense of social urgency [fills] almost every frame of the film . . . *Cemetery of Splendour* is the first Thai film that responds to the uncertainty—political, personal, historical—of military-ruled Thailand."³²

Considered in light of this context, the narcoleptic disorder afflicting the soldiers acquires the overtones of a national malady. More than a fictional conceit, it registers a political situation that feels to many like a bad dream, in Kong's words, "a nightmare from which we struggle to awake."³³ In the aftermath of the coup, an ambience of unreality, confusion, and dread takes hold, one that the director compares to a state of not knowing "whether you are asleep or awake."³⁴ *Cemetery of Splendor* responds to this moment by transporting us inside the zone between sleeping and waking, rather than by direct reference or commentary on recent events. The scene of the sleep clinic functions not just as a narrative anchor, but also as a locus of disorienting effects that emanate from this inceptive source like a fog—seeping throughout diegetic space, encasing the other characters, and rippling the perceptions of the viewer. Even before the episode with Keng/Itt in the park, Jen experiences a shift in her biorhythms, as they begin to synchronize with those of the hypersomniac soldiers. Sleepless at night but unable to stay awake during the day, she is unsure if she is dreaming. "I just want to wake up," she says to Itt.

The viewer might readily identify with Jen's disorientation, given the film's hypnotic tempo, which become more pronounced in its course. The transitions between sleeping and waking experienced by the characters engender an irregular rhythm and meandering flow; these establish the beat of passing time in the absence of other clear-cut markers of dramatic progression. In *Cemetery of Splendor*, as in so many of Apichatpong's other films, it is easy to lose one's temporal bearings—especially as the daylight settings that dominate the film's first third give way to a protracted nocturnal atmosphere. As darkness sets in, the film's mesmerizing lighting effects—all the more striking given the avoidance of other stylistic alterations of the image, such as dissolves or photographic distortions—take center stage. The machines used by the clinic to regulate the soldiers' sleep generate anti-naturalistic permutations of light and color. Cycling through a spectrum of hues in slow and continuous waves, the machines further dislocate the audience's chronological moorings by running interference with their ability to read time from light. They cast a glow that is impossibly intense and saturated, creating a hallucinatory effect as it washes over the image. Under this artificial glow, minutes seem to expand and contract.



FIGURE 35. *Cemetery of Splendor* (Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2015).

The effect of crossing over into an altered state of consciousness, even without taking leave of waking reality, comes to a head in a remarkable montage that chains together a series of nocturnal spaces in a dreamy progression. The montage is precipitated by an outing to the movies taken by Jen and Itt. The two sit in a theater watching a trailer for a horror film. A cut abruptly returns us to the clinic, with a low-angle shot of oscillating ceiling fans. The image is tinted in a midnight blue that shades into fuchsia, then red. The next two shots frame the soldiers asleep under the fans along with the source of these changing hues, the tubes of liquid, luminous color that flank their beds. All is quiet except for the low thrum of the ceiling fans and the occasion chirping of insects. An outdoor scene of sleep follows, showing a homeless couple who have camped on the sidewalk for the night. One of them sleeps in a folding lawn chair, and the other on the ground using a stuffed bag as a pillow. A streetlight reflects onto the wall behind these sleepers, on which life-sized relief figures in military uniform can be discerned. Another instance of state propaganda—dating to Sarit’s reign of power—the wall mural displays icons of national prosperity, technological achievement, and natural abundance, in ironic contrast with the poverty of the living people in the frame. This is followed by more outdoor scenes: people sitting on the banks of a canal, then another homeless sleeper lying on a bench in a bus shelter. Above him is an illuminated billboard advertising an “EU Wedding Studio,” another ironic visual element expressing geopolitical aspiration through signs of love and money. The series returns to the lobby of the movie theater with which it began, where Jen can be glimpsed exiting the theater, followed by two men carrying an unconscious Itt.

As links are forged in this chain of shots, the ambient sounds and visual effects spill beyond the boundaries of each frame, carving out channels through which

other associations may enter. Eerily and in defiance of realism, the repeating waves of color emitted by the light machines inside the clinic cast onto external spaces. They permeate the outdoor scenes and the movie theater as they continue to cycle, so gradually that one might not even consciously register their chromatic transformations on a first viewing, bathing these scenes in blue, green, yellow, red, and purple. Their effect is to contain these various scenes of sleep in separate locations within the ambit of a singular force that is undetectable save for its radiant discharge. The montage ends with an extremely slow and extended cross-fade (the only one in the film) from the movie theater to the clinic once again. The final image in the series is a static long shot of the clinic that symmetrically frames the rows of beds in a receding perspective. Returning to what is by now a familiar location, we rediscover it in a strange and sinister aspect. The soldiers, inert and indistinguishable from one another in their beds, seem to be barely alive, as if fully captive to the phantoms that have possessed them. Meanwhile, objects like the fans and light machines appear to have a life of their own. The shot is held for nearly two full minutes, as the rhythmic pulse of the fans ramps up to a more ominously reverberant drone and a full cycle of colors washes over the image. Invisible forces stir among the still bodies. The viewer is indeed prompted to wonder—is this a laboratory, a shelter, or a tomb?

In *Cemetery of Splendor* and throughout Apichatpong's other works, the presentation of sleep poses a question of place and vulnerability. The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas defines the activity in precisely these terms. To lay down to rest is to enter into a relationship with a place: "we abandon ourselves to a place." To close one's eyes and relinquish vigilance is to give oneself over to a harbor: "Sleep is like entering into contact with the protective forces of a place; to seek after sleep is to gropingly seek after that contact."³⁵ Notably, the question of protection is less pressing when the place of sleep is firmly underwritten by the right of property. It is telling, in this regard, that the figure who most frequently haunts Marcel's semiconscious musings is his maid Françoise, and not one of his lovers. But by projecting the scene of sleep onto an open, permeable, and public horizon, Apichatpong invites reflection on the precariousness and provisionality of the refuge sought in it. By exposing what cannot be taken for granted by the sleeper, he relates the imagery of sleep to an interrogation of belonging, security, and the distribution of resources and power. Whose sleep must be protected? The social, economic, and national resonance of this interrogation can be traced from the soldiers in the clinic, each plugged into an apparatus of controlled dreaming, to the unhoused figures on the street, likewise awash in a strange light, to the moviegoers in the theater, who also submit to a kind of hypnosis in seeking out the diversions of fictional demons and mythic pasts. As the haze of narcosis spreads, we are reminded of the dystopic edge of the filmic imaginary of the sleeping collective, implying disempowerment, manipulation, and incapacitation. Considering this imaginary, Michael Pigott observes that "to sleep is to be particularly vulnerable to deception,

a passive and prone condition wherein we are subject to being both physically and psychologically manipulated and exploited.”³⁶

What is the place of these sleepers, their claim to what is handed down from the past, and their share in national belonging? The scenes of sleep in this montage represent various facets of a common experience of dispossession in the aftermath of the coup. Apichatpong’s comments on the film emphasize this connection and encourage a political reading of sleep: “There have been endless cycles of coups since 1932 when we changed the government system from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy. We have a cycle of dreams and a cycle of coups.”³⁷ There have been a total of twenty-three coups in Thailand since 1932; for many, this number speaks to the country’s failure to establish a stable and legitimate political order.³⁸ To sleep is to confront the relentlessness of these cycles and the capture of the present within a turbulent timeline of national politics. The double vision of sleep situates the contemporary soldier in a long lineage of wars and reflects on the recent coup through the prism of past struggles for power. The past not only weighs upon current generations, but also exhausts their potential. The nightmares of history replay on an endless loop. And the recognition of the cycles of violence that have shaped modern Thai history is accompanied by the anticipation of more violence to come during a time of political danger. Thus, in *Cemetery of Splendor* the movement back in time precipitated by sleep engenders a mixture of affects that contrast with the bliss of the oceanic memory experienced by Marcel: pain, sadness, and fear.

At the same time, the political significance of sleep cannot be reduced to the stupefied state of mind that authoritarian regimes strive to instill in their subjects. To the extent that sleep expresses a relationship to power, this relationship slides between dispossession—evoking a loss of agency—and nonparticipation—signaling a retreat to a place beyond the reach of power. Just as Dilbar’s hibernation “epitomizes the act of waiting and the desire for escape,” so in *Cemetery of Splendor* the journey of sleep also delineates a line of flight from a terrible situation in which no immediate solutions are available. More than an individualized retreat, sleep leads toward a collective space in which visions can be shared, memories and stories exchanged and passed on, and an afterlife not defined by fear or threat dreamed into existence. Apichatpong approaches sleep with an attunement to what Crary identifies as its “profound ambiguity,” signifying as both “a figure for a subjectivity on which power can operate with the least political resistance *and* a condition that finally cannot be instrumentalized or controlled externally.”³⁹ *Cemetery of Splendor* simultaneously affirms the value of sleep and insists upon the urgency of awakening; these doubled aspects come together in the film’s final image of Jen sitting on a bench outside the clinic, her eyes strained wide open as she tries to wake herself up.

These implications of waiting, escape, and circumvention carry a particular weight for the artist living under a despotic regime, unable to address that condi-



FIGURE 36. *Cemetery of Splendor* (Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2015).

tion straightforwardly, forced to work around censorship, and on the search for alternatives to “images of guns and blood.”⁴⁰ *Cemetery of Splendor* was produced under shadow of a *lèse-majesté* law that, while long used against government critics, has been newly weaponized by the Prayuth regime to imprison large numbers of journalists, political organizers, and artists. (A detail in the *mise-en-scène*, a notebook in Itt’s possession, refers obliquely to this law.⁴¹) Even despite taking care not to directly address contemporary politics, the film has never been shown in Thailand.⁴² When critique and dissent are stifled by a regime that brooks no challenges to its “remystified state ideology,” when propaganda is rolled out to remake reality in the image of power, and when, as Kong notes, “every public station shows the same image, when you dictate the citizens’ audiovisual reception and tell them what to see and hear,” the significance of closing one’s eyes and tuning into another reality cannot be discounted.⁴³ As well as shattering the immobility of the present, then, sleep also creates capillary openings in a situation of political immobilization—release vents that are tenuous, consisting perhaps in nothing more than the preservation of the hope for awakening to a different future. What does Jen see when she stares so intensely in the film’s final shot?