
Narcotic Reception

The 2012 film *Holy Motors* begins with a title sequence that incorporates the chronophotographic motion studies conducted by Étienne-Jules Marey and Georges Demenÿ during the nineteenth century. In brief scenes that alternate with the credit titles, we glimpse cell-like spaces with gridded floors, in which nude bodies perform the basic physical actions of running, jumping, and throwing. In one of these scenes, lasting no more than two seconds, a boy propels his body upward in a leap. Following this is an equally brief fragment of footage, repeated three times in a loop, in which an adult man steps forward and vigorously tosses an object to the ground.¹ The deteriorated condition of these black-and-white images and the jerkiness of their motion situate them in an era of visual media far removed from our own. The final image shown in the credit sequence, however, shifts the time frame to a more proximate period, one whose receding the film's contemporary viewer is poised to witness. It is a color image of a mass of people who appear to be asleep while seated upright in uniform rows inside a dim, cavernous space. Given the perfect stasis of these dormant figures, it is at first unclear whether this is a filmic image or a photographic freeze-frame. Gradually, however, it becomes legible as a moving image of an unmoving, unconscious cinema audience. The reflected light from the screen washes over them, briefly exposing the red cushioning of their seats. The sounds that echo in this dim space—traffic, footsteps, a man's voice shouting "No!," a gunshot, a foghorn—emanate from the film that, although not visible in the shot, plays before them.

The juxtaposition of these scenes in the film's opening moments constructs a historical framework in which to make sense of *Holy Motors* as a work that reflects on cinema from various angles: as a technology of capture, a medium of performance, a cultural rite, and a repository of shared memories. In referencing the work of Marey and Demenÿ, the film gestures to the beginnings of moving-image technology in serial photography, which breaks down movement as a series of still photos that can be reconstituted in projection. In the image of the film



FIGURE 50. *Holy Motors* (Leos Carax, 2012).

theater—appearing as a sort of reverse shot to the prior views of the photographed body in motion—the grand scale, seating arrangement, and full-capacity crowd call to mind the burgeoning of motion pictures as a medium of mass entertainment. The image thus sounds a note of nostalgia, one that finds an echo in other twenty-first-century films that look back to a golden age of filmgoing that seems lost to the present—such as Tsai Ming-liang’s 2003 film *Goodbye Dragon Inn*, which similarly begins inside a crowded movie theater that looms like an apparition from the past.² As Dan Morgan argues, “Cinema is remembered here [in *Holy Motors*] as an institution in which the appearance of projected film on screen was enough to guarantee an audience, in which picture palaces allowed a gathering of a semi-anonymous public that would lose itself in the images, and in which the appeals of cinema were woven into the popularity of its forms.”³

If *Holy Motors* aims to resurrect those appeals—in another era and by other means—this particular visualization of the memory of what cinema used to be also injects the film’s endeavor with a certain ambivalence. A sense of uncanniness undercuts the warm glow of nostalgic retrospection. The energetic actions of the individual performing bodies form a striking contrast to the completely motionless ones inside the movie theater. The flickering, jittery quality of the older footage further animates these images, suggesting an uncontrollable energy that struggles to burst forth from within and shatter the photographic stillness of the individual frame. In the image of the film audience, however, it is as if the intervening refinements of film’s technology and industrial infrastructure have returned us to a condition of nearly photographic stasis and perhaps even an atrophy more profound. *Holy Motors* begins with a distant beginning, the body onscreen convulsed in movement and twitching with irrepressible animation, in order to arrive

at, on the other side of the fourth wall, an audience wholly given over to inertia, for whom the darkness of the theater seems to be an irresistible invitation to oblivion. Crossing over from the image onscreen to the space of the theater, we encounter unresponsive bodies that seem to be the negative reflection of the active bodies onscreen. What is remembered here, and what can be made of this strange picture of the semi-anonymous filmgoing public as a collective of sleepers?

On the one hand, we might call it an image of relaxation and reverie, reading through the reactions of those who have celebrated the movie theater as a place of welcome release from the constraints and responsibilities of waking life, fostering a newfound intimacy with one's semiconscious existence. Perhaps this is the movie audience held in that "critical point as captivating and imperceptible as that uniting waking and sleeping," to recall André Breton's resonant statement of Surrealist cinephilia.⁴ The Surrealist poet Robert Desnos writes about the movie theater in analogous terms: "There we were at home. Its darkness was like that of our bedrooms before going to sleep. The screen perhaps might be the equal of our dreams."⁵ Several decades later, Roland Barthes would also describe the theater as an enclosure that holds out the promise of ease and laxity to its occupants: "How many spectators slip into their seats as if into a bed, coats or feet flung over the row in front of them."⁶ *Holy Motors* corroborates their identification of a parallel between the cinema theater and the bedroom as a place for dreaming: the film's title appears over the shot of the sleeping audience, which is followed immediately by a cut to an image of a man in pajamas asleep on a bed in a dimly lit room. The character introduced here is another figure who evokes a memory of cinema's past, recalling the sleepers of early cinema who awaken to uncertain realities.

On cue the man—played by the film's director, Leos Carax—awakens with a start and turns on a light. He explores the unfamiliar hotel room in which he finds himself and chances upon a secret door camouflaged by the wallpaper. The door opens onto a hallway that leads him to a picture palace, where he discovers the audience of the previous scene, still absorbed in its comatose state. Reencountered through the itinerary of this figure, the scene begins to pulse with other intimations. Its cavernous gloom appears more sinister, and the deathliness of the unresponsive bodies contained in it, already somewhat apparent in the initial shot, becomes even more so through the eyes of this bystander. On the other hand, then, the film's depiction of the cinema audience can be read through the lens of discourses relating the figure of the sleeping spectator to more insidious forms of insensibility. Consider, for instance, an essay published in 1911 by the writer Jules Romains on "The Crowd at the Cinematograph": "The group dream now begins. They sleep; their eyes no longer see. They are no longer conscious of their bodies. Instead there are only passing images, a gliding and rustling of dreams. They no longer realize they are in a large square chamber, immobile, in parallel rows as in a ploughed field."⁷ In Romains's depiction of the audience as unseeing and unaware, what emerges are the more troubling implications of the cinema's captivating

force, shadowing the pleasurable reveries that it unleashes for its viewers. Both of these dimensions are at play in Romain's account. He locates another order of experience just beyond the facade of their slumbering stasis, one that is oneiric, kinetic, and alive with possibilities of transformation and even "resurrection." "And while their bodies slumber and their muscles relax and slacken in the depths of their seats, they pursue burglars across the rooftops, cheer the passing of a king from the East, or march into a wide plain with bayonets or bugles," he writes.⁸ For Romain, sleep is ambiguous in its effects, a force of both stupefaction and resurrection, much as the cinema can simultaneously lull and galvanize its audience.

Another consideration of the somnolent audience comes from the theorist Jean Comolli in an essay from 1966. While Romain offers the merest suggestion of the deindividualization of the movie audience, whom he describes as fixed "in parallel rows as in a ploughed field," Comolli takes this suggestion to a more extreme conclusion. For him, the conditions of theatrical film exhibition lead directly to the regrettable "repetition, sameness and conformity" of the entire system of commercial cinema. He holds to account the darkness of the movie theater and the "half-sleeping state" induced in the filmgoer for the shortcomings of cinema.⁹ In entering "a darkness close to that of the bedroom," the viewer is primed to expect and experience "a series of standardized emotions," he writes.¹⁰ "Conditioning to darkness activates to full effect a kind of unthinking reflex in the spectator entering a cinema—expectation, desire even, for familiar forms, recognized patterns, the whole homogenized apparatus."¹¹ Comolli construes darkness as an impediment to the clarity of vision and "lucid participation" that might lead the audience beyond its state of complacency and provoke a demand for more from its movies.¹² Thus, darkness extinguishes more than merely sight, while the onset of sleep brings about a pacification of the ability to discriminate, leading to the unification of the audience around a lowest common denominator of judgment.

Through these writings, we can begin to grasp the deep theoretical resonance of the prelude of *Holy Motors*, which condenses a history of cinema by visualizing an equation between sleeping and filmgoing. The works cited above represent but a small sampling from a voluminous discourse about all the ways in which filmgoing involves passing into a special zone of influence, an altered state of mind, and a different mode of consciousness. Considering cinema reception, numerous filmmakers, critics, and writers have picked up on an insight commonly attributed to Richard Wagner—that the design of exhibitionary space can affect the consciousness of the audience.¹³ For instance, echoing Comolli's claims in an article published in the same year, the artist Robert Smithson writes, "Even more of a mental conditioner than the movies, is the actual movie house The physical confinement of the dark box-like room indirectly conditions the mind."¹⁴ Resuming this line of thought in "A Cinematic Atopia," Smithson imagines the film viewer as a hermit dwelling in a cave—"impassive, mute, still," and "a captive of sloth."¹⁵ His description applies not only to the filmgoer's body but also to their senses, which

likewise succumb to the drag of torpor. Perception assumes “a kind of sluggishness,” and a state of “dozing consciousness” sets in. This moviegoer might very well fall asleep, Smithson notes, and it wouldn’t even matter.¹⁶

For other observers, too, the process of falling asleep—attended by a sense of winding down, going under, and blurring out—aptly captures the way cinema modifies the psychophysiological functioning of its audience to bring about a state of lowered consciousness. This affinity with sleep seems to set cinema apart from other popular entertainments. The curator and critic Iris Barry, for example, contrasts film to drama: “To go to the pictures is to purchase a dream. To go to the theatre is to buy an experience We come out of the pictures soothed and drugged like sleepers wakened, having half-forgotten our own existence, hardly knowing our own names. The theatre is a tonic, the cinema a sedative.”¹⁷ The darkness of the theater, which limits the scope of sensory perception; the brightness of the screen, which dominates the visual field; and seating configured to, in the words of Jocelyn Szczepaniak-Gillece, maintain a “cradled spectator,” together conspire to subdue the audience.¹⁸ Filmgoing and sleeping converge at the point of a decidedly passive receptivity, the result of the slackening of degrees of both physical and mental exertion. Thus, observing her fellow audience members, Olivia Howard Dunbar asks, “Are these pleasure-seekers resolutely disguising their enjoyment? Or are they as they appear to be, half asleep?”¹⁹ The cinema experience has repeatedly been equated with a kind of half sleep, a “*minimum of sleep*,” or a “sleep in miniature.”²⁰

At many points during the period of theatrical exhibition as a prevalent commercial norm, film spectatorship was compared with sleeping, and the soporific inducements of cinema related to modes of reception that range from reduced perceptual processing to cognitive incapacitation to wholesale phantasmatic regression. Woven throughout the history of cinema is a discourse of narcotic reception that expounds upon the sedative effects of filmgoing in contrast to an implicit ideal of alert self-possession and autonomous judgment. This discourse of narcotic reception threads across diverse historical and cultural contexts, advanced by manifold voices and from varying perspectives in the domains of aesthetic debate, psychology, social reform, journalism, as well as film theory proper. It is divided between, on the one hand, an investment in the transformative or liberatory possibilities of the filmgoer’s reveries (as in the case of the Surrealists) and, on the other hand, a phobic distrust of the medium’s sway over its audience. If the condition induced in the filmgoer shares in the reduced critical functioning that defines sleeping and dreaming, it also overlaps with other states that conform to this definition, such as hypnosis (commonly understood as a kind of partial sleep or somnambulism), opiation (as a somnolence induced by intoxication), and anaesthetization.²¹ The bonding of sleep with regression places it on a continuum with these other modalities of diminished discernment and deactivated volition; as in screen portrayals of somnolence, sleep cannot be disentangled from adjacent

forms of insensibility. The idea of artificially induced sleep that is synonymous with narcosis extends the latter's reach as an overarching metaphor for film as an experience that the viewer does not fully control.

Siegfried Kracauer refers successively to these different facets of narcosis in *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, where he compares the influence that film exerts over its viewer to the effects of mesmerism, intoxicants, and the onset of sleep. The moviegoer becomes "spellbound by the luminous rectangle before his eyes—which resembles the glittering object in the hand of a hypnotist," he writes. Like a "hypnotized person," they lose control over their thoughts and succumb to the "suggestions" fed to them by the film. It is for this reason, he goes on, that film is "an incomparable instrument of propaganda."²² Elsewhere in the same text, he turns from the rectangle of light to the darkness that surrounds it: "Darkness automatically reduces our contacts with reality, depriving us of many environmental data needed for adequate judgements and other mental activities. It lulls the mind."²³ The effect of this sensory deprivation is to suspend volitional thought. Perhaps the attraction of cinema consists precisely in this pacification of mental agency and effort, in this lulling descent into "a state between waking and sleeping."²⁴ Thus, Kracauer situates the medium on a spectrum that is continuous with sedation and stupor, in a liminal zone suggested by the double meaning of narcosis as both getting high and falling into unconsciousness. "Doping creates dope addicts. It would seem a sound proposition that the cinema has its habitués who frequent it out of an all but physiological urge. They are not prompted by a desire to look at a specific film or to be pleasantly entertained; what they really crave is for once to be released from the grip of consciousness, lose their identity in the dark."²⁵

In the course of tracing the effects of cinema's narcosis, Kracauer shifts his attention from the restraints imposed upon the audience's discerning capacities to the intensification of its response. For as cinema's drug-like powers set in, the very sense of a self begins to unravel: "with the moviegoer, the self as the mainspring of thoughts and decisions relinquishes its power of control."²⁶ And when in this manner "the conscious personality begins to disintegrate," a condition of porosity ensues, drawing the moviegoer into a heightened state of receptiveness to the image and the material world it presents. He cites the words of an acquaintance who tells him, "In the theater I am always I, but in the cinema I dissolve into all things and beings."²⁷ Losing her identity in the dark, this acquaintance simultaneously discovers a state of radical impressionability and receptivity, one that originates in the "visceral faculties" rather than in the "power of reasoning," rippling outward toward the physical world.²⁸ Contemplating this transformation, Kracauer describes a kind of cinematic absorption that is different from the usual sense of enthrallment by the imaginary. "Released from the control of consciousness, the spectator cannot help feeling attracted by the phenomena in front of him. They beckon him to come nearer So he drifts toward and into the objects."²⁹

This absorption is defined by an enlarged capacity for identification—to an extreme degree, without discrimination, and breaking through the constraints of habitual perception. The narcotized spectator is poised somewhere in between complete immersion and total dissociation, he writes, “wavering between self-absorption and self-abandonment.”³⁰

Recall that for Merleau-Ponty, investigations of sleep and other passive modalities of experience “must make us acquainted with a genus of being with regard to which the subject is not sovereign, without the subject being inserted in it.”³¹ Probing the artificial somnolence of cinema, Kracauer arrives at a conception of spectatorship as an experience with no I behind it. For him, as Miriam Hansen has pointed out, “the film experience undercuts the still revenant ideology of the sovereign, self-identical subject.”³² To the extent that this sedated spectator can even be described as a subject at all, it is a self-alienated and “curious” one—as Johannes von Moltke writes, a subject “that yields its autonomy and sovereignty and gains a new openness and receptivity in turn.”³³ This curious subject occupies a specific place in history, both Hansen and von Moltke note, a product of the postwar, postcrisis moment in which Kracauer completed *Theory of Film*.³⁴ But it was incubated in the movie houses of an earlier period. Kracauer cites an essay written by the French critic Michel Dard during the peak of the silent era, in which Dard detects the birth of a new sensibility in a young generation of cinephiles. Dard observes the movie addicts who, leaving one theater and on their way to another, walk the streets with “gazes lost or fixed on who knows what,” in a stupor so deep and mysterious that they seem to still be cloaked in the darkness from which they’ve just emerged, wrapped in a “night in which their eyes and their spirits have swum away, leaving them behind.”³⁵ He continues, “Never, in effect, has one seen in France a sensibility of this kind: passive, personal, as little humanistic or humanitarian as possible; diffuse, unorganized, and unconscious like an amoeba; deprived of an object or rather, attached to all [of them] like fog, [and] penetrant like rain; heavy to bear, easy to satisfy, impossible to restrain.”³⁶

These barely sentient creatures are likely whom Kracauer has in mind when he postulates that what the habitué of cinema ultimately craves is not to be entertained but “to be released from the grip of consciousness, lose their identity in the dark.” In this ameboid figure, we find an extreme embodiment of the passive spectator, who “will do nothing but receive the image,” as Dard writes, indiscriminately storing up impressions to who knows what end. The dawning age of cinephilia is conveyed in an oddly inscrutable—and more than a little disconcerting—portrait of an army of sleepwalkers, film junkies who want nothing more than to go back under. Nonetheless, to reawaken or rehabilitate these sleepwalkers is not the goal of these thinkers. Dard sees in these dissolute filmgoers new possibilities of identification that level the distinction between subject and object, making them into the “brothers of poisonous plants and pebbles.”³⁷ Similarly, Kracauer imagines the spectator as a receiving vessel, attuned to a secret, indeterminate

murmur—"the murmur of existence"—that would otherwise go unheard, and drawn toward the brink of some "unattainable goal" that he does not name.³⁸

Kracauer suspends moral judgment when he considers the ways that cinema lulls the mind. In the writings of other commentators of his time, however, similar observations precipitate a reaction of moral panic. The psychologist Robert Gaupp writes, "The darkened room, the monotonous sound, the forcefulness of exciting scenes following each other beat by beat lull every critical faculty to sleep in impressionable souls, and thus, not infrequently the content of the drama becomes a fateful suggestion for the complaisant youthful mind. We know that *all suggestions adhere more strongly when the critical faculties sleep*."³⁹ For Gaupp, movies are the cause of a crisis of attention and character, tendering further stupefaction to minds already fatigued and acquiescent. Irrespective of the differences in these accounts of cinematic narcosis, they share in a conception of sedation that links the relaxation of the body to an unwinding of mental capacities. Beginning in the same place, with the enclosure of darkness and settling into stasis that pave the way for a somnolent descent, they arrive at the endpoint of an evacuation of the filmgoer's senses, mind, and will. If the cinema's sedative effect results in an unusually heightened state of receptivity or impressionability, this state is interpreted as an indication of the audience's loss of acuity and resistance. Cinema operates as an instrument of mass hypnosis, and this hypnosis, in Raymond Bellour's words, works upon "the child who sleeps in every spectator."⁴⁰ To the extent that sleep plays a role here, then, it is a role formed in the shadow of the regression thesis—within a larger dynamic of possession and dispossession, part of an escalating susceptibility to external powers of suggestion.

It is in another set of debates, however, where the impact of Freud's regressive thesis is most clearly evident. The discussions of cinema that gained momentum in the 1970s, quickened by the currents of poststructuralist theory, produced new conceptual models for the filmgoing experience. Drawing on the resources of psychoanalysis and Althusserian ideology critique, these models elaborated the filmic experience in terms of spectatorial positioning and a technologically mediated subject effect: as much as films play for an audience, they produce the spectator as a subject position, by activating, binding, and directing the vision and desire of their viewers. Such accounts of spectatorship often describe scenes of regression that play out within the movie theater, with the encounter between audience and screen image modeled on some form of return to an earlier stage of psychic development. For example, in drawing what would become a highly influential analogy of the screen to a mirror, Christian Metz invokes the scenario of the mirror stage set forth by Lacan, in which the child (mis)recognizes and identifies with its image. During the screening, writes Metz, we are "like the child, in a sub-motor and hyper-perceptive state . . . like the child again, we are prey to the imaginary, the double."⁴¹ The notion that there is something fundamentally regressive about

cinematic spectatorship, rendering the pleasures of movie watching suspect, is a constant refrain in the theoretical debates of this period.

A particularly rigorous formulation of this idea comes from two papers published in 1975 in a special issue of the journal *Communications* on “Psychoanalysis and Cinema” that not only launched the psychoanalytic turn in film theory, but also gave rise to a reconceptualization of ideology as, in the words of Rodowick, “a special kind of practice” producing “an almost inescapable regime of sight and power.”⁴² (The cover of the journal issue appropriately includes an image of Cesare, the somnambulist from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*.) “The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality,” by Jean-Louis Baudry, and “The Fiction Film and Its Spectator: A Metapsychological Study,” by Metz, delineate the mechanisms of cinematic regression by means of a close dialogue with Freud.⁴³ The titles give a clue to the focus of their analysis. In their respective papers, and in dialogue with one another, Baudry and Metz offer a new take on a familiar metaphor—of film as like a dream—by way of a rigorous theorization of the dream metaphor rooted in Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams*. At the same time, both authors reanimate and retheorize the discourse of narcotic reception by way of a sustained engagement with that book’s seventh and final chapter. Baudry and Metz theorize film spectatorship as “a special regime of perception” and explicate it as such in the terms laid out by Freud.⁴⁴ The metapsychological perspective adopted by Freud in this chapter (and resumed in his follow-up paper *A Metapsychological Supplement to the Theory of Dreams*) is crucial to their arguments, serving as a bridge that connects the scene of the dream to the scene of filmic projection, as parallel loci where this special regime of perception may be activated. Just as Freud returns in this chapter to the matter of sleep as the “economic condition” that makes dreaming possible by bringing about a series of modifications in the psychical system that disarm its wakeful functions, so Baudry and Metz look to sleep in order to explain how an impression of reality comes to dominate the filmgoer’s perception. In composing a metapsychology of the film spectator, they pose a question of cinematic fiction “in relation to waking and sleep.”⁴⁵

“The Apparatus” and “The Fiction Film and Its Spectator” have in common a focus on the space of the movie theater and the environmental conditions of film exhibition (as opposed to the image, the frame, or the camera), positing these as key conditioning factors that induce an attitude of naïve credulity on the part of the filmgoer.⁴⁶ With this focus, the two essays intercept and extend earlier discussions that identify cinematic reception with narcotic effects. Baudry singles out the darkness of the theater and the immobilization of the viewer in their seat. These features of exhibitionary space replicate the scenario of the cave in Plato’s parable, as he argues with his by-now notorious comparison between the audience of movies and the prisoners in the cave, both caught in a “state of confusion” that “makes them take images and shadows for the real.” But immobility in darkness “was not invented by Plato,” Baudry notes. Rather, as Freud reminds us, it can also refer to

“the forced immobility of the sleeper who we know repeats the postnatal state and even intrauterine existence; but this is also the immobility that the visitor to the dim space rediscovers, leaning back into his chair.”⁴⁷ The movie theater is affiliated with a series of spaces—cave, chamber, bedroom, womb—that all share the attributes of inhibiting motor response and cutting off direct contact with external reality. Deprived of such response and contact, the filmgoer occupies a position like that of the sleeper for whom, according to Freud, “the possibility of reality-testing is abandoned,” perception being closed to the outside.⁴⁸ For the person who sleeps and dreams, “the perception originates within the subject’s own body; it is not real,” although the dreamer cannot know this at the time.⁴⁹ Likewise, the film spectator can easily fall prey to an impression of reality. By restaging the conditions that “make it possible for dream to pass itself off for reality to the dreamer,” Baudry writes, the cinematic apparatus reproduces the sleeping psyche.⁵⁰ The film therefore shares in the characteristics of the dream “in that *it offers the subject perceptions ‘of a reality’ whose status seems similar to that of representations experienced as perception.*”⁵¹

In “The Fiction Film and Its Spectator,” Metz also describes the spectatorial experience in terms of a transition from wakeful consciousness to a hazier state, a transition that begins when the filmgoer enters the theater and takes a seat. “In contrast to the ordinary activities of life, the filmic state as induced by traditional fiction films . . . is marked by a general tendency to lower wakefulness, to take a step in the direction of sleep and dreaming,” writes Metz.⁵² Not only do the “customary forms” of exhibition impose darkness and immobility upon the audience; they also elicit an attitude by way of certain rituals and rules of comportment, such that the filmgoer “had decided in advance to conduct himself as a spectator . . . for the duration of the projection he puts off any plan of action.” The result of these protocols is to momentarily sever the audience’s bonds to waking life and to reduce alertness, as most clearly illustrated at the point of their termination: “In ordinary screening conditions, as everyone has had the opportunity to observe, the subject who has fallen prey to the filmic state . . . feels he is in a kind of daze, and spectators at the exit, brutally rejected by the black belly of the cinema into the bright, unkind light of the foyer, sometimes have the bewildered expression (happy or unhappy) of people waking up. To leave the cinema is a little like getting out of bed: not always easy.”⁵³ Thus, Metz compares the filmic situation to “*a kind of sleep in miniature.*”⁵⁴ And just as “the internal process of the dream is predicated in its particulars on the economic conditions of sleep,” as Freud has argued, so this miniature sleep in the theater paves the way for “perceptual transference,” which is Metz’s term for “that dream-like and sleepy confusion of film and reality” situated at the crux of the cinema’s power.⁵⁵ The soporific inducements of the filmic situation bring about the beginnings of psychic regression, in which one begins to mistake impressions for reality, “to perceive as true and external the events and the heroes of the fiction rather than the images and sounds belonging purely to

the screening process (which is, nonetheless, the only real agency): a tendency, in short, to perceive as real the represented and not the representer (the technological medium of the representation), to pass over the latter without seeing it for what it is.⁵⁶ Therefore, emerging from the state of perceptual transference, “the subject not coincidentally has the feeling of ‘waking up’: this is because he has furtively engaged in the state of sleeping and dreaming. The spectator will have dreamt a little bit of the film.”⁵⁷

Baudry and Metz closely follow Freud in delineating how the conditions of exhibition modify the psychical system so as to detour the processes of consciousness in a waking state—reducing the reach of the senses, decapitating the mechanisms of thought, and ultimately bringing about a state of deception like that experienced by the dreamer who believes in the reality of the dream. They derive a theory of spectatorship from Freud’s conception of sleep as a regression that paves the way for a host of other regressive transformations of the psyche. If sleep involves a “temporal regression” to an earlier phase of existence, it also opens up a pathway for “topographical regression” by allowing excitations to flow “in a *backward* direction.”⁵⁸ Wishes and thoughts, instead of being discharged in motor actions, flow back into the perceptual system. To dream is to enter into a state akin to hallucinatory psychosis, characterized by the loss of the ability to differentiate between perceptions generated from within and those provoked by external stimulation. Likewise, a similar reflux of perception takes place during the screening. “The cinematographic apparatus brings about a state of artificial regression,” argues Baudry. By means of the darkness of the space, the compelled passivity of the viewer, and the projection of image, the apparatus of exhibition “artificially leads back to an anterior phase of his development—a phase which is barely hidden, as dream and certain pathological forms of our mental life have shown.”⁵⁹ According to Metz, too, the filmic state is marked by “the beginning of regression.” For the filmgoer, “the psychical energy which, in other circumstances of waking life, would be dissipated in action is, by contrast conserved . . . It will turn back in the direction of the perceptual agency, to take the regressive path, to busy itself with hypercathecting perception from within.”⁶⁰

By way of the economic transformations of sleep, then, Baudry and Metz arrive at a theory of spectatorship that situates it in adjacency to regression and pathology, implicating cinema’s appeal to the eye in complex processes that produce blindness, masking, and misrecognition. Their arguments consolidate a particular model of reception that would come to exert a powerful influence during a period when movie spectatorship became an object of intense scrutiny and debate. Film theory inherits from psychoanalysis a paralytic reading of the scene of reception, absorbing the regressive thesis of sleep so as to emphasize the immobilization of not just the audience’s bodies, but also their capacities to think and to act in the face of the filmic image. This account of spectatorial processes relays an already established discourse of narcotic reception, in order to shift this discourse toward

the dream—more everyday and inescapable than hypnosis—as an instantiation of cognitive debilitation and ontological deception. The regression of sleep is enlisted for an indictment of illusionism.

Moreover, Baudry's and Metz's analyses harness the modern devaluation of sleep to a problem of ideology that constitutes the "core" of the film theory of this era. To the extent that sleep has long signified the evacuation of reason, it is now aligned with, in the words of Rodowick, "an illusory 'reality-effect' that transparently communicates the dominant ideology."⁶¹ The drowsy and confused spectator attests to the mystificatory efficacy of industrial cinema, embodying an "ideological relation to the apparatus" that is in the final instance acquiescent and defenseless.⁶² This putative sleeper is figured as a locus of manipulation and dispossession. In contrast to this condition, Rodowick argues, theory claims for itself an "ever-vigilant" position by offering "a secure cognitive context for critically examining and breaking with ideology."⁶³ It assumes the mission of rousing the viewer from the spell of narcosis, restoring the reality principle to its rightfully paramount place, and forging a road map for awakening. The theorist's response to the temptations of cinematic darkness is to call upon the daylight of reason in order to illuminate an exit route from the cave of sleep and dreams. Thus, Metz explicitly draws a contrast between the sleepy confusion of the generic spectator and the state of mind of the semiologist who, like a night watchman, forces himself "into a regime of maximal wakefulness."⁶⁴ In this theoretical model, the division between sleeping and waking maps onto another set of oppositions—between deception and knowledge, idealism and materialism, obscurity and lucidity. In situating sleeping and dreaming at the core of the spectatorial experience, Baudry and Metz also call upon an enduring association of sleep with "a subjectivity on which power can operate with the least political resistance."⁶⁵

Returning to the portrait of the movie audience in *Holy Motors* with their readings in mind, we can interpret it as an illustration of everything that psychoanalytic film theory identifies as troubling about the collective cinematic dream. What is disconcerting about this portrait is not merely that the entire audience sleeps; rather it is the oddly spectral quality of their sleep, which renders them indistinguishable from one another. Behind the curtain of this perfectly orderly slumber, their individual features recede from view. At the same time, their repose has an unnatural lightness to it, lacking the messy physicality that characterizes the sleeping body in the everyday world. The audience floats in a state of suspended animation, motionless to an inhuman degree, more statuary than even corpse-like. Their bodies do not summon to mind sleepers in real life so much as anesthetized patients (an image that would have been familiar to Baudry, given his day job as a dentist).⁶⁶ Weightless and untextured, their condition points less to a bodily affair than to a subject effect and an allegory of spectatorial consciousness. Here sleep serves as the paradigmatic image of a hijacked vision, reflecting the sameness and



FIGURE 51. *Holy Motors* (Leos Carax, 2012).

standardization of audience response identified by Comolli, along with the universality and inescapability of the spectatorial regime conceived by Baudry and Metz. Viewed through the lens of their arguments, the scene exposes the anxieties about the loss of independent thought and susceptibility to systematic manipulations that are never far from the imagination of *any* sleeping collective.

Situated within the scene but also at a remove from the shared condition it depicts is the pajama-clad director who has stumbled upon it. Like the bright-eyed theorist, he sees the audience as they cannot see themselves, privy to the cinema's secrets and seemingly inoculated from its stupor. Will he rouse them? But perhaps the director is himself asleep, drawn into a deeper layer of his dream by a false awakening, and therefore an unreliable guide to the boundary between the real and the unreal (as suggested by the short story Carax names as the inspiration for this sequence, "Don Juan" by E. T. A. Hoffmann). *Holy Motors* does not settle the question. Despite lending visual persuasion to the discourse of narcotic reception, the scene hints at the limits of the regressive thesis with its insistence on the lucid sobriety of awakening. It invites us to question the self-assurance of the vigilant theorist despite the latter's claim to a superior vision. If the image of slumber presented here is curious, at once literal and abstracted, this mirrors the curious and paradoxical status of sleep within psychoanalytic accounts of spectatorship. For the activity of sleep simultaneously functions as a crucial foundation for the argument that the experience of cinema is comparable to dreaming *and* an obstacle to this same argument. To take the discourse of narcotic reception at its literal word, by envisioning an audience that actually sleeps, their eyes closed to the projection before them, reveals the point at which this discourse collapses under the weight of its own contradictions, and from which a wholly different understanding of reception begins to take shape.

Baudry and Metz build their metapsychological arguments around a hypothetical viewer whose eyes are open, awake to the image and thereby absorbed in the resulting impression of reality. Sleep in a functional sense—that is, defined as a set of modifications to normal perceptual processing, catalyzed by the conditions of theatrical exhibition—supports the analogy between filmgoing and dreaming. Taken in a more literal sense, however, sleep presents a stumbling block, raising the prospect of a break in the filmgoer's visual bond with the film. Baudry briefly acknowledges the differences between the dreamer and the film spectator in his discussion, only to brush aside any hint of contradiction. To be sure, he concedes, cinematographic projection only partially eliminates the viewer's access to reality testing, in contrast to the more total elimination of sleep, such that "the subject has always the choice to close his eyes, to withdraw from the spectacle, or to leave." But nonetheless, he maintains, "no more than in dream does he have means to act in any way upon the object of his perception, nor to change his viewpoint as he would like. There is no doubt that in dealing with images, and the unfolding of images, the rhythm of vision and movement are imposed on him in the same way as images in dream and hallucination."⁶⁷ For Baudry, the similitude of the dream overrides the difference of sleep. Indeed, the idea of a filmgoer who reacts to the screening environment by actually falling asleep seems never to occur to him. This is because "The Apparatus" deals neither with actual sleep nor actual spectators, but rather with an abstracted schema composed of the apparatus, its simulations, and their resulting subject effects. In his reading it is enough to collapse sleep into the functions it brings about, and to conclude on this basis that "cinema offers a simulation of regressive movement which is characteristic of dream"—stopping just short of asserting that cinema puts its audience to sleep.⁶⁸

For Metz, however, the contradiction presented by sleep is a more intractable problem, less readily dispelled as well as intriguing enough to warrant closer scrutiny. The very first sentence of "The Fiction Film and Its Spectator" is a declaration of the incontrovertible difference between the dreamer and the spectator: "The dreamer does not know that he is dreaming; the film spectator knows that he is at the cinema: this is the first and principal difference between situations of film and dream. We sometimes speak of the illusion of reality in one or the other, but true illusion belongs to the dream and to it alone."⁶⁹ With this cautionary note in mind, Metz continues to develop his comparison between the metapsychology of the dream state and that of the filmic state. But even as he goes on to enumerate the similarities between them, he also keeps returning to the gaps that thwart this analogy. For instance, Metz observes that another major difference between the two states concerns hallucinatory wish fulfillment. While the dream is made to the perfect measure of the wishes of the dreamer, the film can achieve only a poor fit, for "it rests on true perceptions which the subject cannot fashion to his liking." Unlike the dream, which is bound to the pleasure principle, the film cannot fully escape the reality principle.⁷⁰ Moreover, he writes, "filmic perception *is* a real perception

(is really a perception)” that is experienced with other spectators; “it is not reducible to an internal psychical process” in the way of a “true illusion” or a “true hallucination.”⁷¹ Metz accordingly hedges his claims—the filmic state represents a “semi-regression” versus the total regression of sleep, he clarifies—and attends carefully to the degrees that intervene between the poles of impression and illusion.⁷²

Reservations of this sort accumulate in the course of his discussion, congeal into a running counterargument to the explicit thesis of the essay, and consolidate around a central assertion: that the gap between the dream state and the filmic state boils down to the problem of sleep. As Metz writes, “The dominant situation is that in which film and dream are not confounded: this is because the film spectator is a man awake, whereas the dreamer is a man asleep.”⁷³ If the economic transformations of sleep provide a theoretical armature for the dream metaphor, they also constitute the loose thread that can unravel the metaphor altogether. Yet Metz cannot resist tugging on this thread. As he well recognizes, the very moment that the regressive movement activated by cinema reaches its endpoint, when the filmgoer closes their eyes to the film and surrenders to sleep, the entire conceptual edifice caves in on itself. In a remarkable passage, he describes this paradox as a kind of monster haunting the nightmares of the waking theorist:

When we trace the obscure kinship relations (interwoven as they are by differences) of the film and the dream, we come upon that unique and methodologically attractive object, that theoretical monster . . . a dream, in short, like life. That is to say (we always come back to this), the dream of a man awake, a man who knows that he is dreaming, and who consequently knows that he is not dreaming, who knows that he is at the cinema, *who knows that he is not sleeping*; since if a man who is sleeping is a man who does not know that he is sleeping, a man who knows that he is not sleeping is a man who is not sleeping.⁷⁴

The theorization of cinema as an impression of reality skates precariously on the razor edge of sleep. And, as Metz well demonstrates, he who invokes the imminence of sleep while simultaneously warding off its arrival might find himself twisted into knots.

Metz responds to this problem not by patching over the hole it opens in his argument, as Baudry does, but rather by diving straight into it. Eschewing the disappearing act achieved by reducing sleep to a set of regressive modifications, Metz takes the sleepy spectator as an equally central object of theoretical interest, the counterpart of the spectator who dreams with open eyes. This figure—a drowsy viewer wobbling unsteadily at the edges of consciousness, adrift in the transitional zone between sleeping and waking—becomes the genesis for an alternative line of investigation in the essay. “The Fiction Film and Its Spectator” cleaves at the point of sleep, splitting into two distinct critical tracks: on the one hand, a psychoanalytic account of film as dream and, on the other hand, a psychosomatic, even phenomenological, account of sleeping in the theater.⁷⁵ In order to arrive at the juncture of the filmic state and the dream state, it is not enough for Metz to simply

map the viewing situation and the abstracted spectator into a schema of simulated regression. Rather, his approach also requires an attention to the concrete variables of bodies perhaps already fatigued, minds more or less already emotionally spent, as these enter a space of darkness and encounter “a mill of images and sounds overfeeding our zones of shadow and irresponsibility . . . a machine for grinding up affectivity and inhibiting action.”⁷⁶ By way of this line of reasoning, Metz arrives at another view of the relationship between sleeping and waking—less as a binary opposition, in turn corresponding to an opposition between ignorance and knowledge, and more as a sliding scale.

Considering sleep leads Metz beyond the conception of spectatorship that is typically attributed to psychoanalytic film theory, that of a punctual subject effect inscribed by cinema’s conventional patterns and situation. To the same degree that he takes seriously the proposition of actual sleep in the movie theater, he also departs from a view that readily conflates sleep with a condition of deception. Tracing cinema’s somnolent effects, Metz follows the movements of a hypothetical embodied viewer who exists in time, drifting up and down this sliding scale, drawing nearer to or retreating from the point of perceptual transference on a moment-to-moment basis. He describes scenarios in which, “for brief instances of fleeting intensity,” the gap between the state of the dreamer (unaware that they are dreaming) and that of the filmgoer (aware that they are at the cinema) can diminish, and “the subject’s consciousness of the filmic situation as such starts to become a bit murky and to waver, although this slippage, the mere beginning of a slippage, is never carried to its conclusion.”⁷⁷ By way of example, Metz refers to the urbane adult filmgoers who are habituated to conduct themselves with silence and stillness inside the theater, in contrast to children or country audiences inclined to respond with animated outbursts of voice and gesture. Such a filmgoer, especially if already “in a state of fatigue or emotional turmoil” and moved profoundly by the film, is most likely to experience the slippage he describes.⁷⁸ This viewer might slip into perceptual transference, what Metz refers to as a dizziness or “psychical giddiness” aroused in a fleeting, anomalous moment when dreaming and seeing coincide, and the viewer dreams what they actually see. Whether the moment of perceptual transference comes about depends on the audience member’s preexisting state (“when one has not had enough sleep, dozing off is usually more a danger during the projection of a film”) and social profile (“there is material here for a socio-analytic typology of the different ways of attending a film screening”).⁷⁹ Even while explicating spectatorship as a psychic regime of perception, Metz keeps other dimensions in play and fleshes out his hypothetical viewer with a body, history, and context.

On one side of sleep is the drowsy filmgoer, their wakefulness ebbing as they succumb to the cinema’s invitation to relax, taking steps in the direction of sleeping and dreaming until they arrive at that brief flash of psychical giddiness. On the other side, Metz posits a counterpart to this figure, a dreamer who is only partially

submerged in sleep. Much as wakefulness diminishes for the filmgoer, so sleep can loosen its grip on the dreamer. There are moments when “deep sleep steals away,” when the dreamer acquires a lucid alertness to their situation and realizes, “I am in the middle of a dream.” During such moments, the illusion of reality splits open, exposing the dream as such. Metz explains these ruptures by recourse to Freud’s observations about the at times conflicted relationship between sleeping and dreaming. Even if sleep is the economic precondition for dreaming, their correlation is far from straightforward, as dreams, “even when accompanied by deep sleep, wake up [the function of consciousness] and put it to work.”⁸⁰ Metz absorbs Freud’s conclusion that dreams, while appearing to be the guardians of sleep, can have contrary effects as residues of some part of the mind that disobeys the wish to sleep; the two states do not coexist in perfect accord. The experience of dreaming therefore unfolds by way of interaction in time with sleep’s “characteristic rhythms.” As in the filmic situation, the perceptual transference of the dream is modulated by shifting degrees of wakefulness. In both cases, the normal regime of functioning can be momentarily interrupted by gaps—like the psychological giddiness of the filmgoer or the lucidity of the dreamer. And it is here, in these gaps, that Metz identifies “a kinship at once more profound and dialectical” between the filmic state and the dream state: “The filmic and dream states tend to converge when the spectator begins to doze off . . . or when the dreamer begins to wake up.”⁸¹

The drifting consciousness of sleep, then, leads to a surprising theoretical destination. Metz does not end by mobilizing the division between sleep and waking to sustain an opposition between a narcotic mode of viewing that is defenseless against the projected image and a hyperalert stance of critical awareness. Instead, he looks to those moments of convergence where this opposition breaks down, and when the experience of film does not cleave neatly along the pure extremes of wakefulness and unconsciousness. Mapping the dynamics of spectatorship through an emphasis on intermediary states and “borderline cases,” Metz arrives at a view of reception that calls into question the notions of a totalized subject effect and a uniform spectatorial position.⁸² For him, the special power of film is to momentarily reconcile regimes of consciousness that are typically distinct and mutually exclusive, to link them so as to allow for “overlapping, alternating balance, partial coincidence, staggering, and ongoing circulation.”⁸³ Dreaming in the theater is the result of an at best tenuous, always shifting equilibrium between disparate, contradictory states. The cinematic trance, far from being unbroken or unbreakable, is constantly slipping into something else. The subject of cinema hovers at a volatile juncture, shaped by processes of abstraction and disembodiment, but also by intransigent materialities and opacities. Arriving at this juncture, psychoanalytic film theory reaches beyond its own initial premises.

Recently, the metapsychology of spectatorship set forth by Baudry and Metz has been reinforced with a historical and architectural foundation by the authors of several notable studies. Describing the emergence and evolution of the movie

theater in its atmospheric and material details, these studies build a nuanced account of the complex relationships between exhibitionary space, viewer attention, and the character of the movie audience. They contribute to an understanding of the experience of cinema as part of a trajectory of discipline, wherein the norms of spectatorship are consolidated by a situation in which the viewer's attention is highly circumscribed, their responses subject to strict regulation. Negation and forgetting are fundamental to the aesthetic goal of focalizing and immersing the audience within the film, to the degree that they detach from their physical surroundings—from the space, the other people in it, and their own bodies. For instance, in *The Optical Vacuum: Spectatorship and Modernized American Theater Architecture*, Szczepaniak-Gillece tracks the rise during the post-Depression years of a new conception of the theater as an “optical vacuum”—that is, a space that deliberately erases itself to emphasize the projected image. The model of the optical vacuum ushers in a turn toward a neutralized theater—stripped of the ornamentation characterizing the silent-era picture palace, aligned with modernist design values of efficiency and functionality, and aspiring to the illusion of a “dematerialized auditorium.” It is, writes Szczepaniak-Gillece, a design for oblivion, aiming for “a spectatorship of purified presence” that would leave the viewer's body behind.⁸⁴ Long before Baudry and Metz theorized the spectator as a transcendental subject, she demonstrates, such a subject was envisioned as an explicit design objective by theater architects.

Counterbalancing the visual emphasis of the optical vacuum, Meredith Ward's *Static in the System: Noise and the Soundscape of American Cinema Culture* addresses the history of theater design in the sound-film era from the standpoint of architectural acoustics. In engineering the cinema as an auditorium, or a space for listening, acousticians referred to the goal of sonic absorption, striving to draw the filmgoer into an intimate relationship with the sounds of the film while suppressing to the greatest extent possible the distraction of ambient noises from inside the theater. The acoustic design of the movie theater was guided by an injunction “to enter the film's sonic world as a transcendent auditor at the expense of the space that surrounds us,” thereby fusing the audio-spectator with the spectacle.⁸⁵ In this regard, the cinema auditorium inherits an ideal of purified listening from nineteenth-century musical aesthetics, one that was realized in the cone-shaped concert hall designed by Richard Wagner at Bayreuth. Like the Festspielhaus, the film theater aims to isolate and engross the listener so as to render them, in the composer's words, “oblivious of self in the delight inspired by a masterpiece of art.”⁸⁶

Numerous other commentators have pointed to the genealogy that links the commercial venues of film projection with the theatrical innovations of Wagner. Early on, Beat Wyss observed that the idea of the black box exemplified in the nineteenth-century concert hall would eventually provide the template for the twentieth-century movie theater.⁸⁷ What these more recent historical studies

of theatrical exhibition emphasize is that cinema, beyond inheriting the architectural strategies of the Festspielhaus, also perpetuates the latter's central animating proposition that, in order for the spectacle to reign supreme, "*the empirical being of the spectator must be extinguished.*"⁸⁸ Or, as Noam Elcott argues, only from within the movie theater can we begin to fully comprehend "the radicality of Bayreuth" as a technology of artificial darkness. In banishing light, the black box theater also "negated space, disciplined bodies, and suspended corporeality in favor of the production and reception of images."⁸⁹ The dream of a disembodied, vanishing audience is the thread that connects the writings of Wagner (who described his objective of a public that "disappears from the auditorium completely") to those of cinema architects, designers, and theorists throughout the twentieth century.⁹⁰

The ideal of a spectator "oblivious of self" marks the convergence between an aesthetic objective of total immersion, the standardization of commercial film exhibition, and the subjectivizing operations of the theater as a dispositive in the Foucauldian sense of the term.⁹¹ To the extent that these three studies shed light on the development of theatrical exhibition as an arrangement of elements having "the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings," they also trace the historical process by which an abstracted conception of the spectator comes to define cinema reception.⁹² Such a spectator emerges as a function of technological mediation and a punctual position within a highly controlled audiovisual configuration. Likewise, the collective of viewers assembled in the theater is cast within a similar framework, with the public as a social body or corpus understood to be "literally extinguished."⁹³

These accounts converge around the idea of oblivion as the final operative principle of the black box theater. In this regard, they bring a new set of historical evidence and arguments to bear upon, and lend credence to, the discourse of narcotic reception. The imagination of the audience submerged in slumber aligns with an understanding of the cinema experience as being defined chiefly by negation and forgetting, detachment and dislocation, compartmentalization and isolation. The oblivious spectators are doubly removed—from their differences as individuals as well as from their connections to one another as part of a viewing public that shares a common space. To the extent that it is possible at all to speak of the cinema audience as a community, it is an abstracted community composed of "eyes without bodies," in the words of Szczepaniak-Gillece, expunged of specificities and differences, coming together in a transcendent gaze.⁹⁴ Therefore it is sleep—as a force that overtakes the body and subordinates the waking consciousness, thus confronting us with the limits of self-determination and with the automatism that shadows our claims to volitional agency—that most aptly conveys the inexorability of the theater's operations as a dispositive, along with the passivity to which these operations consign the filmgoer. Oblivion appropriates the powers of sleep as it strives to bring the curtain down on a vital part of the

audience's embodied perception and to sever their bonds to their surroundings as well as to one another.

And yet, as all these writers also point out, the pursuit of a purified ideal of spectatorship was fraught with paradox if not, ultimately, doomed to fail. A closer consideration of sleeping at the movies brings these limitations into focus, notwithstanding all the ways that sleep has been called upon as a metaphor for oblivion, by serving up a reminder of the corporeal residues that muddy the waters of transcendence. For with the onset of somnolence comes the assertion of certain intractable resistances to the disappearing act pulled off by the exhibitionary dispositive. As Metz has demonstrated, it points to the failure of the dispositive's operations to reach their full conclusion and to sustain a consistent hold on the filmgoer's consciousness for the entire duration of the screening. Sleep brings into play other forms of oblivion, and in so doing might give rise to a wholly different sense of how the movie theater shapes audience attention. Is there another way of construing the sleepy spectator, then, one that can clarify other dimensions of the cinema experience and recast the relationships among the space, the individual viewer, and the audience as a whole?

The discussions of the following chapters take up this question. They connect with an ambiguity that has always resided within the idea of cinematic narcosis, as evidenced in the writings of Romain, Kracauer, and Metz. Even more emphatically for those whose ideas are detailed below, sleep breaks free from the confines of the regressive thesis, giving rise to another view of somnolent spectatorship. All share the sense that waking up or leaving the movie theater may not be enough to vanquish the spell of ideology. Rather than laying claim to the superior vision of the alert watchman, who stands apart and resists the night of cinema, they ask whether this narcosis can be a condition worth dwelling in. Besides a degraded mode of apprehension, sleep might be something else or even something more. It can lead toward an open field of differential effects, in which the subject is "recast according to different wavelengths," and in which viewers' perceptions and sensations can extend beyond their most habitual zones, unfurling toward edges and thresholds that are less commonly frequented. Cinema can provide an opportunity to further explore this unfamiliar territory by carving out a space in which to prolong transitional states and linger at the edges of sleep in the presence of others. To admit the multivalence of sleep, then, is to reanimate the question of the cinema experience and audience, both in their historical instantiations and their contemporary mutations.