
Zoning Out

The sense that sleep can contribute something to the experience of moving images extends from the foregoing perspectives on the twentieth-century movie theater to contemporary cinema and a larger sphere of projection environments in the twenty-first century. Returning to the example of *SLEEP CINEMA HOTEL*—Apichatpong’s 2018 film, installation, and temporary hotel—we discover the culmination of the filmmaker’s ongoing investigation into the generative possibilities of somnolent spectatorship. During its exhibition at the International Film Festival Rotterdam, a stream of visitors meandered through the hall in which the piece was installed as they would in a regular gallery space. If they entered the exhibition not at ground level, but instead through another entrance opening onto a balcony overlooking the hall, they could perch themselves on one of the seats available there. Regarding the screen from this high-angle position, a viewer could have easily slid into the habitual immobility of the moviegoer and reverted to a familiar orientation with respect to the projected image. Indeed, many visitors sat in these seats for long periods of time, behaving as they would in one of the festival’s more standard screening locations—while either ignoring the interlocking structure of elevated beds positioned in the middle of the hall and intruding upon their view of the screen, or simply accepting it as part of the visual field. But the full experience of this work required an overnight stay. In this regard, *SLEEP CINEMA HOTEL* can be described as a work deliberately designed to put its audience to sleep, addressed to viewers presumed to be physically present yet unconscious for a major portion of its running time.

Like so many thinkers before him, Apichatpong considers darkened rooms containing illuminated screens to be fine places in which to doze off, notwithstanding the other uses for which they are intended. Whether speaking of himself as a filmgoer or the reactions of others to his work, he refers to sleep as an integral dimension of the activity of viewing, a valid state in which to experience projected images and sounds, and even an outcome for which an artist might

deliberately strive. In *Flowers of Taipei* (Chinlin Hsieh, 2014), a documentary about the Taiwan New Cinema of the 1980s, Apichatpong reflects on the inspiration he draws from the filmmakers associated with the movement. He expresses his admiration in these terms: “When I watch a film by Hou Hsiao-hsien, Edward Yang, Tsai Ming-liang, I always fall asleep. Years later, my films put audiences to sleep. I think, maybe, there’s a special power to these films that takes viewers to a different world, a different state of relaxation, where we can leave ourselves behind.”¹ When introducing his own films in person, he habitually concludes by encouraging the audience to give in to their drowsy inclinations, ending with the phrase, “I hope you sleep with good dreams.” The phrase has become a trademark sign-off, so closely identified with Apichatpong that a movie theater in Tokyo created a video of him speaking it for use as an in-house trailer. Repeated in various contexts, his words have acquired the status of a mantra, or a ritual benediction for the screening that calls upon the blessing of sleep.²

Apichatpong’s comments can be taken as a sign of an exceptionally high degree of self-awareness, for his claim that “my films put audiences to sleep” is borne out by abundant evidence. During the process of writing this book, many people told me their stories of falling asleep during his films—not only on isolated occasions, but oftentimes repeatedly across multiple viewing attempts. These stories were often shared in a sheepishly confessional tone, as if indicative of a failure on the part of the speaker. Yet the filmmaker himself would be unlikely to construe them as such. In asserting that sleep is a fine state in which to encounter his films, Apichatpong rejects the mindset that ascribes drowsiness to a deficiency of stimulus, resulting in a boredom that reflects poorly on either the work that fails to sustain interest or the viewer who fails to meet the work’s demands. His rejection of this logic finds support from other quarters. As many have long argued, boredom does not directly provoke the urge to sleep, as if the mere absence of something to hold my attention would be enough to send me toward unconsciousness. From a neurophysiological standpoint, boredom can only unmask preexisting sleepiness. And from a phenomenological standpoint, boredom is far from relaxing to experience, which is precisely what makes it unbearable. In Jan Linschoten’s description, boredom brings about a state of tension as I seek vainly to find a future goal to which I can attach my attention and anticipation. In the failure to achieve this and thus to overcome my boredom, my aspiration persists, intensifies, and drives sleep away. “One is unable to sleep because of boredom,” Linschoten argues, stuck instead in a state of empty arousal and restlessness.³

By inviting sleep in a mode of acceptance and reverence, Apichatpong dispels the aura of negativity in which conventional wisdom enshrouds this activity. He expands the terms of Anne Carson’s encomium in her essay “Every Exit Is an Entrance (A Praise of Sleep)” by disclosing its reversibility. For Carson, sleep deserves the praise of the reader attuned to the ways of its reading. For Apichatpong, as much as sleep onscreen merits the appraising scrutiny of the viewer, it can

also be an offering of praise in and of itself. Thus, in *Flowers of Taipei*, he at once pays homage to an earlier generation of filmmakers and lays claim to an artistic kinship with them by way of somnolent spectatorship. Counterintuitive though it may be, this position on sleep is not a solitary one, as previous chapters show.

Sleep does not necessarily diminish the experience of a work, but can deepen the impact that it makes, strengthen its claim on the viewer's memory, and forge a more intimate bond. To contemplate these outcomes requires letting go of a narrow definition of reception in order to attend closely to those very responses that tend to be excluded by such a definition and that have been obscured by a long-standing emphasis on spectatorship as attentive absorption. Contained in the understanding that missing out on a portion of the work poses a problem for neither the filmmaker nor the viewer is an assumption that there is more than one way in which to take in a film. The apprehension of the work in its totality and with unwavering focus need not be prioritized over other dimensions of the reception process. Apichatpong, like the theorists discussed above, advances a view of spectatorship free from the shadow of the regressive thesis. To follow their prompt is to track the multiple itineraries that can break into and branch off from the film's singular spell, tangling together messily in the situation of viewing. This chapter charts a theoretical discourse of somnolent spectatorship, connecting *SLEEPCIN-EMAHOTEL* to writings by a host of artists and theorists, and building an account of reception as it extends into involuntary, inattentive, and unconscious zones. To recall Apichatpong's words, "Asleep, you become part of a different kind of cinema in the making."⁴

The role of sleep in moving-image reception constitutes a red thread throughout Apichatpong's productions. As much as thematic elaborations of somnolent states bridge his filmic and artistic practice, so his quest to directly elicit such states in the audience is indicative of his sustained dialogue with theories of narcotic reception. The persistence and systematicity with which he engages with sleep—in his discursive performances, feature films, experimental shorts, installations, and uncategorizable works like *SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL* and *Fever Room*—bring a particular pressure to bear upon normative models of spectatorship. The latter are taken apart, reassessed from a defamiliarized perspective, and reconfigured into other sensory-experiential possibilities. This chapter makes a case for Apichatpong's profound impact and intervention as not just a director and an artist, but also a theorist, for whom filmmaking constitutes but one facet of an ongoing inquiry into cinema that combines the concerns of history, technology, ontology, phenomenology, and politics. Apichatpong can be affiliated with an avant-garde lineage of figures who have defined, transformed, and recreated cinema through a theoretical-practical method—an unorthodox lineage to which Pavle Levi refers as a "cinema by other means."⁵ In Apichatpong's case, this theoretical-practical method encompasses creative projects, exhibition strategies, written texts, and verbal statements offered mostly in the discursive format of the interview (as part

of the public performance of authorship typically demanded of directors). These statements might be brief, at times articulated in a casual or lapidary way; nonetheless, they are highly suggestive when read in light of his artistic production and broader critical debates. For this reason, my discussion draws extensively from Apichatpong's own words and places them in dialogue with more orthodox written forms of film theory.

Moreover, Apichatpong's reflections on narcotic reception relate the traditional movie theater to other spaces of moving-image exhibition, responding to and participating in the diffusion of cinema across the contemporary cultural landscape. Discussing the exhibition of *Primitive* at the New Museum in 2011, he says,

I am fine when people say that they sleep through my movies. They wake up and can patch things up in their own way. This is what I want the installation audience to feel. It is not meant to be monumental but weightless. So many times I operate similarly when shooting a feature or a short piece, no matter how they will be shown. There is always an element of casualness and carelessness.⁶

When *Primitive* was displayed at Tate Modern in The Tanks, a subterranean gallery built from a former oil storage tank, the artist approvingly noted the similarity between the spaceship built by the Nabua teenagers, used by them as a place for sleeping and documented in the piece, and the cave-like installation space: "I hope that people will be relaxed enough to sleep inside the space."⁷ In conjunction with this exhibition, the museum also organized an all-night program of Apichatpong's films. Viewers could enter the screening at any point between its starting time of 10 p.m. and conclusion at noon of the following day. Other venues have followed suit in taking him at his word and adopting a sleepover screening format. At an all-night screening of his work at the 2018 Glasgow Short Film Festival, the theater was even filled with mattresses and pillows for the audience.

In associating sleepiness with film's ability to transport the viewer to another world and a different state of mind, Apichatpong rehearses a familiar claim about the motionless voyage of cinema. At the same time, he ties these effects to particular modes of filmmaking. The "special power" to lull and relax the viewer that he finds in the films of Hou, Yang, and Tsai stems from an approach that prioritizes the observation of material realities, decelerates and pauses narrative momentum, and deprioritizes drama and causality. The question of how such an approach might affect the audience's response was broached in an interview conducted with Hou upon the release of *Flowers of Shanghai* (1998), a historical drama taking place in the brothels of the late Qing era. Asked if his aim was to make the audience feel as sedated as the opium-smoking characters in the film, Hou replies that this was not exactly his intent; nonetheless, he continues, the film can be likened to "a dream from which one is just awakening. I think that this idea is tied to my method of evoking time in film. I believe that in my films, one loses a sense of time; as in dreams, one is no longer able to measure the passage of time."⁸ Here

Hou draws a parallel between the reaction of his audience and the disorientation that accompanies the transitions between sleeping and waking—moments which, in Linschoten’s account, lose their “moment-character” and become suspended, tenuous in their links to a before and after. Linschoten writes, “If we do fall asleep we experience the time between being awake and sleeping as a timeless time, a suspended time.”⁹ This loss of a sense of time is a characteristic of not only *Flowers of Shanghai* but also Hou’s other films—in particular, his acclaimed Taiwan Trilogy, which leads viewers along a twisting path through the characters’ memories, daydreams, fabrications, states of intoxication, and confused awakenings.¹⁰ These films, with their hypnotically drifting rhythms and nocturnal atmospheres, submerge the audience in a twilight zone of consciousness where it is easy to lose one’s bearings.

Sedation can be attributed to certain stylistic approaches, following from films that deprive their viewers of the usual markers of narrative progression and plunge them into an unmeasurable flow of time. In a similar fashion, Apichatpong’s feature films reject the conventions of causal linearity and dramatic progression. They proceed along a path that cannot be anticipated in advance, shaped by desultory turns and puzzling ellipses. His stories meander, twist, then suddenly break their frame and shift into a new series; or alternatively, they double back and repeat in a different register. *Tropical Malady* begins as a story about the budding romance between two men in a contemporary rural setting but, halfway through the film, a new set of credits and establishing intertitles launch a detour to another setting and metaphysical plane, where one of the men transforms into a tiger spirit who hunts the other. *Blissfully Yours* is likewise interrupted by an opening credit sequence that inexplicably arrives forty minutes after the film begins. The credits mark a transition from the setting of the city, in which the film’s characters rush about in a determined hustle, to that of the jungle, a place where time dilates and action unwinds. In numerous other films, Apichatpong returns to the jungle as a location where, in his words, “any reference to time is removed.”¹¹ In *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*, the passage of time is marked by the sleep patterns of the characters as the setting alternates between night and day. But instead of conveying an orderly chronological progression, these circadian cycles generate a mood of temporal disorder. As in some of Hou’s films, we find ourselves immersed in a half-light of consciousness, lingering in transitional zones that dissolve the distinctions between sleeping and waking, between dream and reality, between past and present lives.

The disintegration of the present’s moment-character into an uncontrolled temporal flux is perhaps most vivid in *Mekong Hotel*. Three characters staying at a hotel on the banks of the Mekong River rehearse scenes from an imaginary horror film that features the flesh-eating ghosts of Thai folklore. In between their rehearsals of the film-within-the film, they hang out and watch the river flow by, or lounge and nap in their hotel rooms where, in soft voices heavy with sleep, they

share stories about their pasts. In these stories, their identities as actors merge with those of the characters they play, and their spirits disconnect from the physical here-and-now to commune on a cosmic plane of death, reincarnation, and after-life. Lingered with the characters in this drowsy zone, the viewer might undergo a disorientation like that to which Hou refers, or even like that experienced by the narrator at the beginning of *In Search of Lost Time*. A shifting kaleidoscope of moments encircles their languorous bodies, as static images begin to vibrate with a sense of virtual multidirectional movement. Minutes condense a sleep of centuries; the transitions between sleeping and waking distill passages across cyclical lifetimes; time seems to expand, contract, and overflow its bounds, much like the river in the background. The sense of an immeasurable current of time is musically echoed by a single guitar that plays throughout the entirety of the film. Its gentle melody meanders and circles back without ever progressing to a resolution, thus blurring its endings into beginnings. The film's scenes, portraying variations on a triangle of filial love and romantic love, stand out like tenuous islands, or shards of lucidity, within this constantly flowing and increasingly hazy narcoleptic stream. In many of Apichatpong's films, but especially *Mekong Hotel*, the passage of time is extraordinarily difficult to track. One might leave the film feeling as I did—unsure if thirty minutes or several hours have gone by, and likewise uncertain whether the characters are the ages they appear to be or hundreds of years old.

The proposition that particular filmmaking approaches can engender distinctive spectatorial responses has gained a purchase on contemporary film discourse, especially in critical debates about the recent emergence of a cinema of slowness. Apichatpong, along with Hou and Tsai, frequently comes up in accounts of this cinema of slowness, which is defined in opposition to the accelerated rhythms and intensified continuity of popular commercial filmmaking. In contrast, the so-called slow cinema favors extended shot durations, silences, and inactivity. For its champions, the aesthetics of slowness offers a contemplative alternative to, and a haven from, the perceptual onslaughts of mainstream film culture, presenting viewers an opportunity to indulge in a freely wandering gaze that takes its time rather than being hurried along from one thing to the next. In Matthew Flanagan's influential formulation, to the extent that slowness can be considered "a unique formal and structural design" shared by an otherwise geographically, culturally, and stylistically diverse group of filmmakers, its cohesiveness derives from both a reliance on long takes and the perceptual-epistemological effects engendered by this reliance. By means of strategies of deceleration and reduction, he argues, slow cinema is that which "compels us to retreat from a culture of speed, modify our expectations of filmic narration and physically attune to a more deliberate rhythm."¹² Beyond an aesthetic retreat, slow cinema has even been construed as a form of resistance in the context of late capitalism's 24/7 regime. Within this regime, Jonathan Crary writes, "any act of viewing is layered with options of simultaneous and interruptive actions, choices, and feedback," captured by a technological "infrastructure

for continuous work and production,” while conversely, “the idea of long blocks of time spent exclusively as a spectator is outmoded.”¹³ Yet this very idea lies at the heart of slow cinema, Tiago de Luca observes.¹⁴ Thus, de Luca reads slowness in the way that Crary reads sleep—as a remission of capitalism’s colonization of time and a “recovery of perceptual capacities that are disabled or disregarded during the day.”¹⁵ The virtues of slow cinema are staked upon a reparative claim to make whole again that which has been fragmented, to give back time that has been lost, and to “[restore] a sense of time and experience in a world short of both.”¹⁶

Indeed, the viewers of slow films, who are drawn into what Flanagan calls “a relaxed form of panoramic perception,” might very well undergo a languorous release of consciousness and find themselves at the edges of sleep.¹⁷ This suggestion has been made by Abbas Kiarostami, another figure commonly aligned with slow cinema, while discussing his film *Five*, comprising five long, static takes of natural landscapes (e.g., driftwood buoyed by the waves of the Caspian Sea, a flock of ducks, and the moon’s reflection on a pond). If some viewers are tempted to nap during *Five*, Kiarostami maintains, “I will not be annoyed at all. The important thing for me is how you feel once the film is finished, the relaxing feeling that you carry with you after the film ends . . . I declare that you can nap during this film.”¹⁸ Justin Remes takes this to mean that “perhaps it is the spectator who struggles mightily to stay awake for the entire film who is missing something,” while the spectator who surrenders to the urge to sleep has in fact “given herself/himself over to the work’s soothing quiescence, its uneventful tranquility.”¹⁹ The prerogative to sleep ties in with a principle of spectatorial freedom, one that Kiarostami embraces (for both himself and for his audiences) as the antithesis of filmmaking modes that strive to “take their viewers hostage.” As he puts it, “I do not believe in nailing the audience down at all.” In a similar vein, Flanagan defines the aesthetic of slowness as “a deliberate retreat from *forceful representation*.”²⁰

To some extent, Apichatpong’s encouragement of audience sleep parallels slow cinema’s endeavor to recalibrate the viewer’s perception and clear a pathway for thought in the absence of a predetermined perspective. With their long and lazy rhythms, his films often prompt critics to reach for adjectives such as tranquil, serene, and meditative. The director’s description of how he engages his viewers resonates with Kiarostami’s comments: “I want to give the audience the freedom to fly or to float, to just let their mind go here and there, to drift, like when we sit in a train, listen to a Walkman, and look at the landscape. It’s liberating, and also the audience understands that they are not watching a routine three-act narrative.”²¹ The audience attitude envisioned by him calls to mind the relaxed panoramic perception of not just the train traveler looking out the window, but also the characters in *Mekong Hotel* patiently regarding the continuous scroll of the river. While the Mekong River features in several of his film and installation projects, Apichatpong also refers to the fluvial qualities of the images themselves as they carry the viewer away. Discussing the continuous all-night screening of his films at the

Glasgow Short Film Festival, he says, “I hope that at one point in the night, one doesn’t need to interpret meanings but let the image and sound flow like a river. You cannot control it, just marvel.”²²

These connotations of mobility and flow, of physical and virtual movement, are folded together in *SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL*. The audiovisual component of the piece incorporates shots of waterways and waves, percolating clouds and foliage, and landscapes animated by the movement of the camera. While its sources range from actualities and phantom rides dating from the earliest years of cinema to satellite and drone imagery of more recent vintage, the overall effect of the composition is to evoke early cinema’s captivation with the living world of movement, what the Lumière cameraman Félix Mesguich once described as “the dynamism of life, of nature and its manifestations.”²³ The soundtrack contributes to a heightened awareness of the perpetual rustle of nature, dominated by sounds like the sougling of the wind in bamboo leaves and the rhythmic lapping of waves upon the shore. The movement of elements within the frame, the spatial passages of the camera, and the fluid progression from shot to shot all fuse together into a continuous stream, so that the audience is swept up in sensations of both moving through space and immersion within a dynamic surround. According to Apichatpong, “It’s like a river, you just flow . . . the whole space is like a ship that floats into this river of images that you discover.”²⁴ His nautical analogy is reinforced by the materials of the installation, which include netting like that found on ships and cotton scrims that can be raised and lowered like sails. The circular screen frames a defamiliarized perspective, not that of the conventional rectangular picture window, but one that resembles the porthole of a ship. Here the dispositive of cinema is reconfigured as a sailing vessel that launches the audience on a voyage. Their sleep, like the sleep of the characters in his films, implies the act of “making a journey somewhere.”²⁵

And yet despite the apparent kinship between the viewer of *SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL*, gliding on the stream of images, and the viewer posited by the discourse of slow cinema, riding the currents of a liberated gaze, the two are set apart by notable differences. For Apichatpong proposes a reconceptualization of spectatorship that goes much further than the modes of perceptual recalibration commonly claimed on behalf of slow cinema, thereby exposing the limits of the latter’s challenge to spectatorial norms. One of the key theoretical touchstones in accounts of slow cinema is André Bazin’s essay “The Evolution of the Language of Cinema.” Flanagan associates the directors of contemporary slow films with a tendency that Bazin identifies in this essay, wherein “the image is evaluated not according to what it adds to reality but what it reveals of it.”²⁶ In deploying a filmic language that proceeds from a “respect for the continuity of dramatic space and, of course, of its duration,” slow cinema also affirms how such an approach “affects the relationships of the minds of the spectators to the image.”²⁷ For Bazin, respect for spatio-temporal continuity implies “a more active mental attitude on the part

of the spectator and a more positive contribution on his part to the action in progress It is from his attention and from his will that the meaning of the image in part derives.”²⁸ What Bazin identifies as a means of giving back to the image its reality—in all of its ambiguity and indeterminacy—also entails a summoning of the attention, will, and choice of the filmgoer, resulting in a more active receptive stance. Writing on William Wyler, he emphasizes the subjective autonomy implied by this approach, which holds out to the audience “the freedom . . . to modify at each instant our method of selection, to select one aspect of the image over another according to our own inclinations and thoughts.”²⁹ In the exercise of a sustained, searching, and self-directed gaze, the viewer chooses “of his own will” what to observe in the image (in Wyler’s own words) and thus lays claim to the freedom to see in his own way.³⁰

As Karl Schoonover observes, “For Bazin and many of his followers, the slower the shot and the greater the sense of unfettered, living duration, or *durée*, the greater the effort required of the spectator. This dilation of time encourages a more active and politically present viewing practice—an engagement commended for the intensity of its perception. *Seeing becomes a form of labor*.”³¹ Bearing out his argument is the distinction that Flanagan makes between fast and slow ways of seeing: “whereas speed perpetually risks gratuitous haste, fragmentation and distraction, reduction intensifies the spectator’s gaze, awareness and response.” Thus, while Flanagan starts off by painting a picture of a relaxed spectator who takes their time and indulges their gaze, his turn to Bazin complicates this picture. The viewer’s activity comes to be shaped by a work ethic of spectatorship, imbued with another set of values: productivity, persistent effort, and unflagging focus. In this regard, the discourse of slow cinema restages a century-long “debate about whether a film spectator is actively or passively engaged,” Schoonover writes, a debate now recast in terms of an opposition between “time wasted and time labored.”³²

The redemption of slowness by means of an appeal to the active labor of viewing is symptomatic of a tendency in the discourses around slow cinema to reinscribe entrenched dichotomies and hierarchies of quality, as scholars like Tina Kendall and Karen Redrobe have pointed out.³³ Just as slow films are held up as a more wholesome, intellectually nourishing alternative to the junk food of popular Hollywood, they note, so too does this division mobilize other sets of “rigid polarizations” that are ideologically overdetermined—between commercialization and art, between industry and artistry (defined primarily on the basis of a male-dominated pantheon of global auteurs), and “between passive consumption and active viewing.”³⁴ Indeed, such dichotomies hold sway in the many other domains in which slowness has taken hold as a central paradigm of the early twenty-first century. Consider, for example, these excerpts from the influential *Slow Media Manifesto*, published in Germany in 2010: “Slow Media cannot be consumed casually, but provoke the full concentration of their users. As with the production of a good meal, which demands the full attention of all senses by the cook and his

guests, Slow Media can only be consumed with pleasure in focused alertness.” And: “In Slow Media, the active Prosumer, inspired by his media usage to develop new ideas and take action, replaces the passive consumer.”³⁵ Such ideas find a historical echo in critiques of modernity as an unsettling onslaught of fast-paced and discontinuous sensations, which threaten to overwhelm the senses and fracture understanding (which explains why these passages read like Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility” essay in reverse).³⁶ Reacting against this threat, the ethos of slowness turns to a familiar ideal, that of the active spectator, and advocates for a return to concentration as a privileged form of attention. This ethos is guided by a recuperative impulse to return to the viewing subject their proper share of agency and self-determination. It revives, in the words of Claire Bishop, a dusty “dream of full concentration and focused vision” as it endeavors “to recoup perceptual unity and subjective wholeness.”³⁷

In contrast, the receptive stance espoused by Apichatpong makes no claims on the viewers’ maximal concentration, the concerted fullness of their senses, or the activation of their will. Casual by design, as he explicitly stipulates, this stance takes the promise of relaxation at its word. Instead of an intensification of attention, what he emphasizes is the slackening of the bridle of self-direction as the audience allows itself to “just flow” and let their minds “go here and there.” The metaphor of flow implies the deactivation of certain dimensions of the viewer’s response; likewise, his frequent recourse to tropes of weightlessness, floating, and flying places an emphasis on the suspension of effort. Spectatorship as Apichatpong conceives it is an experience marked by a quality of buoyancy, as if bobbing along on the stream of the film, potentially able to float away at any point, and neither locked into its rhythms nor immersed in its narrative. These dynamics call to mind Barthes’s wordplay with the verb *décoller* in “Upon Leaving the Movie Theater,” unfolding its meanings of coming unglued, taking flight, and getting high.³⁸ Similarly, the viewer envisaged by Apichatpong zones out and peels away. As attention drifts and drowsiness takes over, the gaze is drained of its intensity. It slips, loses focus, becomes careless of the image. The viewer whom he evokes, like the limply feline filmgoer described by Barthes, is more passive than active, more languorous than laboring, more lax than alert. Sleep displaces the familiar ideal of the active spectator and introduces an entirely different notion of reception. Passivity is not to be reconverted into effortful concentration, but rather inhabited in its own right.

Turning to *SLEEP CINEMA HOTEL*, we encounter a material framework in which to flesh out this receptive stance. For the most doggedly attentive of viewers—including those who arrive with pen, paper, and the objective of producing a thorough report—meet their match in this piece. To experience a full cycle of *SLEEP CINEMA HOTEL*, and at a film festival no less, is to be drawn into a direct confrontation with one’s own deep-seated spectatorial habits in a setting that is usually associated with the most rigorous protocols of attentive comportment. On

the one hand, the option of sitting still in the darkness and devoting oneself to concentrated study of the images and sounds was readily available, as I found during my own visit. On the other hand, I soon began to interrogate my tendency to default to this option, confronted with the impossibility of suppressing my awareness of the myriad other viewing modes that were equally available to visitors. Given how the features of the hall imposed upon my perceptual field rather than receding from view, these alternatives pressed constantly into my awareness. Any expectations of finding a position from which to scan the entirety of the image were thwarted by obstructions from nearly every angle—such as the edifice of beds raised between the screen and the seats, requiring the viewers on the balcony to watch the film through layers of mesh, scaffolding, furniture, and the silhouettes of any people who happened to be lounging on the beds. From the vantage point of the recumbent viewers, too, portions of the structure jutted into their sightlines toward the screen. Only in one spot—a low wooden platform generously sprinkled with cushions positioned directly underneath the screen in front of the beds—was it possible to enjoy a completely unobstructed view of the film.

Along with such architectural impediments to the pursuit of the perfect view, the extended running time of the piece also imposed insurmountable limits on a viewer's ability to sustain attention. The need to step out of the hall—for brief breaks as well as longer interludes occupied by social distractions and the search for nourishment—chipped away at my resolve to apply myself to the maximum of my endurance. Released into the sea of an entire night, I could not help but experience a displacement from such self-imposed disciplinary reflexes. Thus primed for the next phase of my visit, I retreated to my reserved bed on an elevated bunk reached by a ladder. There I entered a space that was arranged with an evident care for the tranquil slumber of the occupant. The darkness of this area of the hall, unbroken by a projector's beam (the digital projector was situated off to the side of the screen, its beam refracted by a mirror), reduced my self-consciousness of being in the sightlines of other people, while the generous allowance of space between the bunks also mitigated sensations of unwanted exposure. The coziness of the bed, made up with pillows and a fluffy cover, exerted its persuasive force—calling upon the supine body's inertia as the ally of a passive mode of receptivity, converting my would-be industriousness to indolence. Adding to the feeling of comfortable enclosure was the thick auditory presence of the soundtrack playing from multiple speakers positioned throughout the highly reverberant hall. The susurrant, lapping, and streaming sounds that filled the space and dampened the noises of other visitors were reminiscent of the white noise devices that promise to enhance the listener's sleep by wrapping them in a blanket of soothing sounds. Immersed in this wet acoustic bath of echoes, ensconced in a cocoon of light reflected on the walls and ceilings, I seemed to be inside the ultimate sleep machine. I was very content not to budge from my designated place until the next morning—as were the other guests, to judge from their reactions. Despite my insomniac tendencies and to my own surprise, I had an excellent night's sleep.



FIGURE 62. *SLEEP CINEMA HOTEL* (Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2018). International Film Festival Rotterdam. Photo by author.

As the evening progressed, images of sleeping figures appeared with greater frequency on the screen, as if to offer a mimetic cue to those of us in the audience. Lying in the dark and unable to resist the sensation of relaxation that spread over me, I began to drift off. Sleep did not come quickly in this unfamiliar setting, but in fits and starts across a protracted transition. I would close my eyes and start to lose myself and then, suddenly recollecting my curiosity, open them again. Even with eyes closed, I continued to see an afterimage of the screen, a glowing white orb burned into the back of my eyelids. The orb persisted in my unseeing vision, aggressively luminous, giving me the strange impression that the film was looking back at me. After an indeterminate period of watching the film in such intermittent snatches, I began to feel the blurriness that announces the imminent arrival of sleep. The afterimage of the screen was joined and then replaced by the pictures that formed in my head, taking shape of their own accord and forming a stepladder down into the well of unconsciousness. Remembered images from earlier in

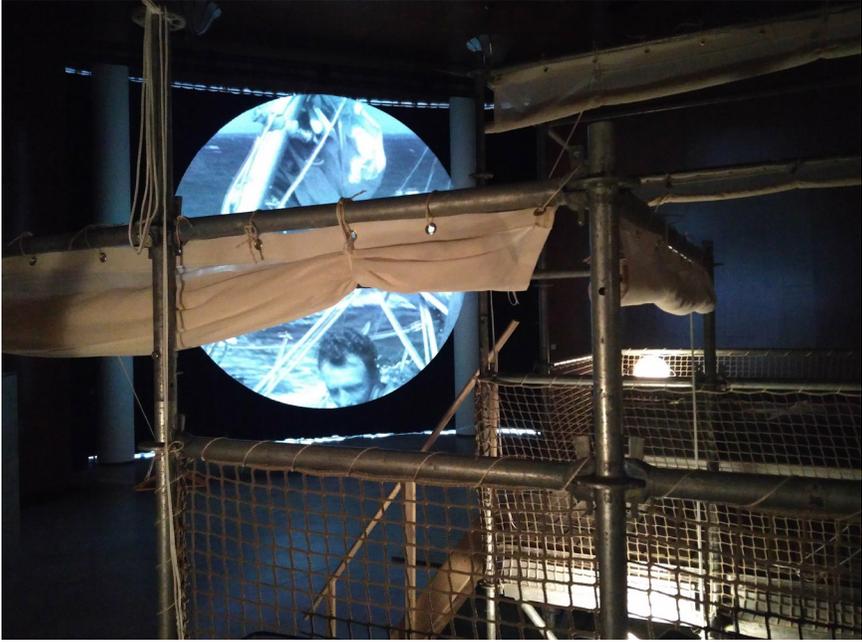


FIGURE 63. *SLEEP CINEMA HOTEL* (Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2018). International Film Festival Rotterdam. Photo by author.

the film appeared in this hypnagogic stream, while the phasing ambient sounds—of pouring rain and creaking doors—suggested new images. The recognition of these images and sounds formed the last of my semiconscious thoughts. Falling asleep, I finally gave in fully to the notion of *SLEEP CINEMA HOTEL* as a work not to be grasped in its totality.

In the middle of the night, I awoke to the image of a boat rocking on waters, shot from a position on the deck overlooking the bow. Reassured of the continuity of the journey of sleep, I reentered the waters. In the early morning hours, I opened my eyes to find a trick film playing on the screen. A child reading in his bed at night falls asleep, and the large window above his bed becomes a projection screen for his dreams. The boy climbs into a hot air balloon and takes off, then dives underwater and dances with jellyfish maidens. In my half-awake haze, I was all the more enchanted by the adventures of the dreaming child. In this figure I could dimly sense the reflection of myself in my present state, along with the echo of a familiar scene of early cinema in the current situation. This moment, with its allusion to a primal link between sleep and cinema, seemed to transmit an important message, one that could lead the audience to a recognition of their own sleep as an integral part of *SLEEP CINEMA HOTEL*. Despite this significance, though, it seemed to be lost on the others in the room, who by all indications were asleep at this precise instant when I happened to awaken. Accompanying the awareness

of my solitude in this moment was an inkling of the many other moments during which I would have been fast asleep while another member of the audience experienced a brief awakening of their own, accompanied by a different flash of insight in response to whatever was playing on the screen at that time. From the baseline of our communal slumber emerged countless image sequences to be experienced by individual viewers, a multitude of films seen and remembered by each one according to the unique timing of their own cycles of sleep. I went back under and entered an intense bout of REM sleep that lasted until morning, accompanied by vivid dreams that took their place alongside the images of the night. At breakfast (eggs, pastries, and at the filmmaker's request, sticky rice with mango), the other visitors and I talked about our dreams and recorded them in a notebook provided by Apichatpong. On the first page of the notebook was his handwritten description of his own dreams. The other pages were filled with the writings of the guests who preceded us. At the end of the run of *SLEEP-CINEMAHOTEL*, we were told, the book would be preserved, becoming another part of the work as the record of its collective undertaking.

The transitivity that Carson identifies in sleep—as an experience in which the doors of perception do not shut but rather revolve, every closing simultaneously an opening, every exit also an entrance—also structures the experience of *SLEEP-CINEMAHOTEL*. At the same time that this work draws its audience into the fold of a common condition, it also scatters them to a myriad of individual trajectories, each constituted in a unique amalgamation of perceiving, not perceiving, and dreaming. Here it is the very capture of the body that enables the release of the mind to the dissipating, centrifugal effects of somnolence. In calling upon sleep as a force that immobilizes and pacifies its viewers for the course of an entire night, the work also carves out openings through which to zone out, or channels through which an entirely different set of visions can enter into play. In the very same gesture of making captive physically, *SLEEP-CINEMAHOTEL* simultaneously abdicates its claim to the undivided attention of the audience. Its duration gives free rein to the flux of perception between conscious and unconscious states, between presence and absence of mind, rather than pinning the viewer to the heights of alertness.

The resulting experience calls to mind another passage from Bazin, describing not the long takes of Wyler but the longeurs of Charles Chaplin's *Limelight*:

Even the boredom one might experience enters mysteriously into the harmony of the over-all work. In any case, what do we mean here by the word boredom? I have seen *Limelight* three times and I admit I was bored three times, not always in the same places. Also, I never wished for any shortening of this period of boredom. It was rather a relaxing of attention that left my mind half free to wander—a daydreaming about the images. There were also many occasions on which the feeling of length left me during the screening. The film, objectively speaking a long one (two hours and twenty minutes), and slow, caused a lot of people, myself included, to lose their sense of time.³⁹

While a running time of two hours and twenty minutes hardly qualifies as long when juxtaposed with a work like *SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL*, it is nonetheless enough to lead Bazin to an important recognition of how duration can foster a productively disjunctive form of spectatorship. The harmonious, agreeable boredom that he identifies with the film—not to be confused with a garden-variety boredom that induces tears—takes root in the gap that opens up between the viewer’s mind and the images on the screen. As his attention becomes untethered from the film, Bazin’s mind is freed to wander in this gap, to fill the space around the images with his reveries and, as he states later in the passage, to “embroider” the time of the film.

What Bazin describes here has a familiar ring, referring to a kind of spectatorial freedom. But what enters into play in *Limelight* is not the unrestricted exercise of choice, as in the case of Wyler’s long takes, but rather mental processes of a more involuntary nature, such as daydreams and spontaneous associations. To this same category could be added the properly nocturnal dreams that come to the drowsing viewers of *SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL*. Indeed, perhaps the feeling of boredom that Bazin is at pains to precisely articulate lies on a continuum with the disorientation and defocalization that accompany the onset of sleep. His description recalls the language used by Hou to describe the soporific effects of his own filmmaking—“in my films, one loses a sense of time.” Incidentally, this same language was used by one of the other visitors at *SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL*, who told me over breakfast, “I lost all sense of time.” The relaxed and wandering quality of attention noted by Bazin also finds an echo in Apichatpong’s stated wish “to give the audience the freedom . . . to just let their mind go here and there.” What Apichatpong explores by way of sleep is the proposal, broached here by Bazin, that the viewer’s experience can be enhanced, and not diminished, by the lapses and wanings of their attentiveness. These can predicate provisional, capricious, and unpredictable ways of relating to the projected image and its setting. Somnolence, reverie, and distraction have something in common as inroads to a mode of reception defined by its departures and disconnections from the projected image. They converge at the point of a conception of deviant spectatorship, one that grants a vital role to the disjunctions between what the film shows and what the viewer perceives—or, recalling Apichatpong’s comments, to the gaps that the audience is at liberty to patch up in their own way. By placing desynchronization and dissociation at the core of the cinema experience, this notion of deviant spectatorship unsettles fundamental suppositions about what it means to have watched a film.

Such ideas resonate with a larger set of critical discourses that break down and redraw the circuit of transmission between author, work, and audience. To begin with, they call to mind accounts of spectatorship that emphasize the intrinsic discontinuity of the projected image. Although undetectable by the human eye and occluded from awareness, the microseconds of blank screen that knit together a film constitute an undercurrent of nonseeing that shadows the act of viewing,

a gap between knowledge and perception. While some refer this intermittency to the repressed materiality of the filmic image, for Apichatpong the fascination of disjunctive spectatorship does not reside in its reflexive inscription of the projective apparatus or in an assertion of the specificity of celluloid film. Its roots are internal rather than externally materialized, attuned to a particular kind of seeing that thrives in conditions of darkness. For him, the sleepy spectator partakes of the “inward” vision that the filmmaker and theorist Alexander Kluge associates with the theater as a space in which the audiences spends roughly half of its time in the absence of illumination. At the movies, Kluge writes, “our eyes look at something outside for 1/48th of a second, and for 1/48th of a second they look inward. That is something very beautiful.”⁴⁰

Somnolence magnifies this inward look to the point of decentering the wide-eyed look at the screen, by activating what Apichatpong describes as “a special condition when you are allowed to connect with your inner images.”⁴¹ The onset of sleep, modulating by minute and gradual degrees the perceptual bond with reality, triggers the beginnings of a cleavage between the film’s audiovisual flow and the filmgoer’s flow of thoughts, such that they split into separate streams. “Sometimes you let your mind drift off, so there are double narratives going on,” as he suggests. In conceiving reception as a scene of doubling—double narratives, or dual streams of images—he also strikes a chord with Kluge’s notion of “the film in the viewer’s head.” Stimulated by the images onscreen, “the spectator begins to produce his or her own images . . . then there is a second film.” For Kluge, this second film is the better film, to which the filmmaker must aspire to match in their efforts; “*this is the real film*.”⁴² On this point Apichatpong takes a similar position: “I’ve always believed that we possess the best cinema. We don’t need the cinema of others. When we sleep, it’s our own images that we see, and our own experiences at night. It’s underrated—we just throw them away, but in fact each time we dream, it’s a lot.”⁴³

A similar view of the projected film—as the seed for another, different film that ultimately defines the viewer’s experience rather than being itself the central object of spectatorship—has been advanced by other filmmakers. In Victor Burgin’s writings, this proposition takes the form of the “remembered film.” Expanding the temporal perimeter of reception beyond the viewing of the work in real time to include a future in which moments and images are called up in memory, Burgin defines spectatorship as a process in which the totality of the finished film becomes undone by the memory that selects, seizes, and forgets. He understands his consciousness as a filmgoer to be informed by an ongoing interplay of film fragments within the nebulous reservoir of the “already seen.”⁴⁴ Thus, he grounds the cinema experience in a fundamental disjunction: “Consciousnesses can be synchronized in a shared moment of viewing, but the film *we* saw is never the film *I* remember.”⁴⁵ The film persists and is reanimated in the viewer’s memory by means of its decomposition, dismantled into pieces that enter into association

with other memories and thus producing new “image sequences.” These fragments “seem somehow more ‘brilliant,’” he writes, charged with unconscious significations and condensed affects. In the expanded temporal framework constructed by Burgin, we can locate a harbor for a sleepy spectator who relinquishes their share in “the film *we saw*” while also redoubling their claim to the film they remember. Such a spectator, zoning out of and back into consciousness, perceives the film in discontinuous snatches that are all the more brilliant for their incompleteness, infused with a concentrated energy. In states of drowsiness and lassitude, Burgin suggests, a certain “hallucinatory vivacity of sensations” can set in.⁴⁶ If some images escape the drowsy gaze, then those that remain undergo a transformation.

Kiarostami alludes to a similar phenomenon when he says that the films that put him to sleep are the same films that exercise the strongest claim upon his memory, remaining afterwards in his thoughts “for weeks.”⁴⁷ The notion of the film-as-fragment also figures centrally in the ideas of Raúl Ruiz, another filmmaker who welcomes sleep into the frame of spectatorship. “Every film is incomplete by nature,” Ruiz writes, as the product of a series of interruptions—whether “between two shots, between two frames,” or even “between two films zapped on television.”⁴⁸ It is in the interstices formed by the film’s “missing fragments” that the activity of spectatorship begins, for the role of the viewer is to “complete these fragments.”⁴⁹ Ruiz situates this completed film on the plane of the conjectural, describing it in terms of a set of plural heterogeneous possibilities, many virtual possible films, that hover around the incomplete film. He likens these virtual possible films to airplanes flying around in search of a place to land and the actual incomplete film to the airport where the airplanes will ultimately land. In one sense, then, to watch a film, to complete its fragments, is to observe “the landing of the images and events,” or the grounding of the virtual in what is really before one’s eyes.⁵⁰

The curious metaphor of the airplane recalls Barthes’s framing of spectatorship in aerodynamic terms as an activity of lifting into flight and “taking off,” which he specifies “in the aeronautic and the hallucinogenic sense of the term.”⁵¹ And indeed, Ruiz shifts his emphasis from the landing of the planes to their launching. For if we reach a point where “we begin to fall asleep, really or metaphorically [and] begin to lose the thread of the story,” something else transpires. The airplanes no longer just land. Instead, at the same time, they also “take off” again and “fly up in every direction, now toward the film, now toward the viewer in search of his multiple private lives.”⁵² To introduce another metaphor, in Ruiz’s first formulation, the film is a net of fragments in which the filmgoer’s associations, memories, and imaginings find a place to lodge or land. In the second formulation, these associations, memories, and imaginings proliferate uncontrollably and break the net apart, spinning it out in new directions. As Ruiz puts it, “Now it appears that the images are taking off from the airport of ourselves, and flying toward the film we are seeing.” Identifications run rampant, such that the viewer can no longer

distinguish between degrees of dramatic significance: “Suddenly we *are* all the characters of the film, all the objects, all the scenery.” Images from the screen and images from the viewer’s private lives collide and intermingle indiscriminately in the crowded airspace of reception. Ruiz’s conception of spectatorship, like Burgin’s, seeks out the mechanisms by which the film’s original diegetic logic is scrambled, a new syntactic order imposes itself, and a different work takes shape. These mechanisms germinate in the sleepy spectator, whose exit becomes an entrance: “From this moment forth you are in another film.”⁵³ To restate this argument in Apichatpong’s words, the film on the screen becomes another film, whose making is enabled by sleep. This viewer, having passed through a “hypnotic point,” is completely open to the associations that fly in and out of their own accord, no longer controlled by the command center of volitional thought.

Ruiz credits his discovery of these mechanisms to the insights gleaned from an experiment in self-induced narcolepsy. A few years ago, he writes, he took to “sleeping in the most disparate of places: in the street, while walking, beneath tables, during a meal, during a speech, or, of course, during a film.” Thus training himself to perceive the waking world “from the perspective of dreams and oblivion,” he develops a sense of the “‘dreamed images’ that are superimposed on the visible ones.” Real life is like a film, he concludes, its “segments spliced together so as to produce the illusion of continuity.”⁵⁴ The invisible connections can only be accessed in the realm of sleep, eluding the limited perspective of the waking mind. The displacement of this perspective unleashes a free play of images from both within and without, such that visible images activate dream images, setting off chain reactions that continue to ripple far beyond their originating source. To sleep Ruiz credits a more radically immersive experience of the film, one that begins when the narrative thread is broken and is propelled along by trains of thought that accelerate when the brakes of waking logic have been cut. Riding on their momentum, the viewer peels away, floats, flies, and breaks free from the gravitational force of the projected image.

Somnolent spectatorship exerts a disintegrating effect on the projected film, introducing interruptions that function like back doors through which a viewer can slip. While these effects have largely escaped film theorists fixated on the dangers of narcotic reception, they have been keenly grasped and articulated by filmmakers. As well as straddling the boundary between theory and practice, the figures cited here—Kiarostami, Kluge, Burgin, Ruiz, and Apichatpong—command recognition as auteurs, given their prominent standing in experimental and art cinema. It is ironic, then, that to insist on a role for sleep in cinema is to countermand strong claims for authorial control, privileging instead the disorganization of the forms devised by the filmmaker and the limits of their ability to orchestrate the audience’s perceptions. The pendulum swings from the intentions of the author to the “unpredictable interplay of associations and disassociations” that characterize each and every audience member.⁵⁵ While sleep has at times been

invoked by other filmmakers as a sign of their dominance over the viewer—as in Jean Cocteau’s assertion that the artist requires “an audience that is capable of submitting to collective hypnosis and of following his lead into sleep”⁵⁶—here it points in a different direction. To promote somnolence to a central role in the cinema experience is to advance a definition of spectatorship founded on the gaps between the message and its receiver, calling into question what Jacques Rancière terms “the logic of straight, uniform transmission.”⁵⁷ To sleep is to collaborate in the completion or realization of a work that is definitionally unfinished.

To conceive spectatorship in these terms is not to subscribe to a pedagogical mission of rousing the audience from its passive receptivity and reactivating its gaze. Even as Apichatpong solicits the contribution of the viewer’s “own images,” he makes no appeal to a viewing subject who exercises choice and volition. The receding figure of the author is not simply supplanted by a refashioned viewer who, in the process of learning to see anew, discovers an affirming reflection of their observational agency in the projected image. The “perceptual unity and subjective wholeness” (recalling Bishop) implicit in such a position do not characterize the somnolent spectator whose experience is ineluctably shaped by a surrender to involuntary processes that cast a shadow over perception and consciousness. The viewer who gives in to these processes is led to another discovery, that the brain is “the most amazing movie projector in the world.” As Apichatpong maintains, while we do not know how to operate this apparatus, not having solved the mind’s mysteries, we nonetheless call upon its powers in an “elementary and primitive” fashion every time we sleep.⁵⁸ *SLEEP CINEMA HOTEL* strives to activate this other interior cinema as an open-ended exhibitionary circuit that demands to be supplemented by the projector in the viewer’s brain. Sleepy spectatorship reimagines the apparatus by way of a detour through the body, resulting in a curiously animate ontology of cinema—or what might be termed an *animistic* ontology, following May Adadol Ingawanij. With this phrase, Ingawanij refers to region- and site-specific cinema practices that set into motion crossings between the human and nonhuman, blurring “the distinction between inside and outside, self and other.”⁵⁹ If animism refers to a conception of the porosity of the self and permeability between human and nonhuman, then this conception extends from Apichatpong’s filmic representations to his remaking of cinema as a porous medium and of the space of exhibition as a zone of permeability.⁶⁰