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Apichatpong Weerasethakul and the Turn to Sleep

The 2018 International Film Festival Rotterdam included among its programs a specially commissioned work by Apichatpong Weerasethakul that resists ready classification. *SLEEP CINEMA HOTEL*, presented by the festival organizers as an “immersive one-off film project,” cannot be described simply as a film or straightforwardly as an installation, despite having the characteristics of both categories. Its filmic component consisted of a found footage montage, compiled from the collections of the Netherlands’ two largest film archives, the Eye Filmmuseum and the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision. Landscape imagery—of earthly terrain, sky, and bodies of water (in a nod to the maritime siting of the festival)—dominated the visuals. Accompanying the images was a dense soundtrack of natural ambient noises, such as the lapping of waves and the sougning of leaves stirred by wind. These sounds were created from field recordings made in Thailand by Apichatpong’s frequent collaborator, the sound designer and artist Akritchalerm Kalayanamitr. The fragments of footage, which ranged from the earliest years of moving pictures to more recent aerial drone imagery, unreeled like a series of shifting views from a journey across places and periods, animated pages from an album of nature and history.

This found footage film, with a total length of twenty hours, was screened for several days, but not in one of the many commercial movie theaters in central Rotterdam dedicated to the festival. Rather, it was exhibited in a customized screening environment designed by Apichatpong and installed in a cavernous double-story hall inside the city’s former Chamber of Commerce. The film was projected on a large, perfectly round screen hung at one end of the hall, in front of a wall of windows. At the opposite end of the hall was a balcony with rows of seats, approximating the arrangement of a conventional screening venue. In the ample space between them was an intricately interlocking platform on which eight beds were arranged at varying heights diagonal to the screen. These could



FIGURE 1. *SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL* (Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2018). International Film Festival Rotterdam. Photo by author.

be reserved on a nightly basis (for a fee of 75€) by those wishing to experience the entirety of the piece's duration. Each was equipped with a nightstand, a bed made up with fluffy pillows and duvets, and even slippers and toiletries for the occupants. Thus, in addition to being a film and an installation, the work also fit the description of "an actual, operational hotel."¹

SLEEP CINEMA HOTEL's unusual exhibition architecture provided a springboard from which to launch a variety of modes of spectatorial engagement. For part of the running time, viewers could drop in and exit at will to take random dips into the stream of images, behaving as they might in a gallery or, considering the archival content of the projection, in a movie theater from an earlier historical era when films were commonly shown on a continuous loop. Or, taking a seat in one of the balcony rows at the rear of the hall, they could fall back on the comportment of a traditional moviegoer. At a certain point in the evening, however, the hall was closed to all except those with reserved bunks, thus setting a limit on this come-and-go permissiveness. Eventually the need for rest would drive the remaining visitors to their beds for the long stretch of the night. As if to lead the audience toward the shores of slumber, the film presented images of sleeping figures with increasing frequency as night fell: a dormant octopus, calling to mind the underwater views of Jean Painlevé's natural science films; sailors sleeping on a boat; workers taking a nap outdoors somewhere in Southeast Asia, likely sourced from a Dutch ethnographic film; men dozing on a beach in Northern Europe, still wearing their suits and hats as they recline on the sand. Interspersed among such nonfictional scenes of sleep from early cinema were their fictional counterparts, a catalog of bedside scenarios transpiring within domestic dramas, as well as trick films in which the bedrooms of unfortunate would-be sleepers are invaded by mischievous creatures.

SLEEP CINEMA HOTEL holds a magnifying glass to early cinema to expose its visual fascination with, and ritualistic evocations of, the act of sleep, and then, with another gesture, refracts its beam in the direction of the audience to induce a mimetic response to the figures on the screen. Scenes of slumber floated across the round screen, like clouds passing before a moon; meanwhile, the design of the installation resulted in a space of darkness, enclosure, and comfort irresistible to even the most finicky of sleepers. Footage and architecture converged around an endeavor to wholly integrate slumber into the experience of *SLEEP CINEMA HOTEL*, both visually and phenomenally. In this endeavor, Apichatpong challenges the usual definition of cinema as a medium of animation, revealing a preoccupation with stillness and inaction that emerges in the medium's infancy, running in parallel with and inseparable from the appeal of movement and dynamism. Furthermore, he puts his own spin on the notion of putting one's audience to sleep, in a clear rejection of the more commonplace implications of this phrase. Discussing the piece, Apichatpong suggests that "asleep, you become part of another kind of cinema in the making."²

If the questions raised in *SLEEP CINEMA HOTEL* about the preferred objects and qualities of spectatorial attention seem intended as a provocation targeting conventional assumptions about the viewing experience, those audience members who arrive with a prior familiarity with Apichatpong's body of work will already be prepared to grapple with these questions. Dormant figures and bedroom scenes recur throughout his art and filmmaking to a striking degree. They appear in the narrative feature films on which he has built his reputation as one of the foremost auteurs of contemporary cinema: *Blissfully Yours* (*Sud Sanaeha*,

2002), which made his name on the global film circuit when it received Le Prix Un Certain Regard at the Cannes Film Festival; *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (*Lung Boonmee Raluek Chat*, 2010), the first Thai film ever to receive the prestigious Palme d'Or; *Cemetery of Splendor* (*Rak Ti Khon Kaen*, 2015), whose story centers on a group of soldiers afflicted with a sleeping sickness; and *Memo-ria* (2021), whose main character Jessica Holland is named after the sleepwalking woman in the American horror film *I Walked With a Zombie*.³ Such scenes also appear across the corpus of photographs, videos, installations, and performances Apichatpong has produced as an artist, simultaneous with his filmmaking career. The sleeping body finds a natural lodging within his minute explorations of the spaces, rhythms, and materialities of everyday life. It also melds seamlessly with the languorous tempo of his moving-image works, which tend to pause the gaze in prolonged moments of stillness or set it adrift in hypnotic flows of images. Apichatpong's name comes up frequently in contemporary accounts of slow cinema, where he is cited as a key figure in the emergence in recent decades of a distinct aesthetics of slowness in global art cinema and beyond. His ongoing inquiry into states of somnolence is consistent with the formal strategies of deceleration and reduction that distinguish this cinema of slowness, along with the "relaxed form of panoramic perception" with which the latter is associated.⁴

At the same time, the affirmation of sleep as an integral part of the audience's experience of the work—suggested in many of Apichatpong's projects, but nowhere quite as emphatically as *SLEEP CINEMA HOTEL*—goes a long way beyond the drifting forms of attention typically attributed to slow cinema. On the one hand, the piece's address to and interpellation of an unseeing, unconscious viewer, combined with its marathon running time, calls to mind a longer history of avant-garde challenges to the norms of aesthetic contemplation. Consider, for instance, the opera *Einstein on the Beach* (1976), a collaboration between the composer Philip Glass and theater artist Robert Wilson. When asked about the opera's five-hour length, Glass shares a view expressed by his collaborator: "Well, you know, if you fall asleep, when you wake up it'll still be going on."⁵ In his other theatrical projects, Wilson composed performances of even more extreme durations, extending from twelve hours up to seven days and thus engendering a "long wave rhythm" of attention inclusive of deep relaxation, diverted focus, and sleep. The cultivation of what Richard Schechner terms "selective inattention" as an alternative mode of reception—often by means of temporal dilation—threads throughout the postwar American avant-garde, connecting the durational media of music, performance, and film.⁶ By situating *SLEEP CINEMA HOTEL* against this historical background, we can better grasp dimensions of this work that escape purely cinematic frameworks of analysis—such as the notion of spectatorship as participatory, real-time performance that is implied in Apichatpong's comment about the piece. Sleep is not merely an acceptable state in which to experience this work, but the most ideal. This position signals a decisive turn away from the



FIGURE 2. *SLEEP1237* (Shu Lea Cheang and Matthew Fuller, 2019). Courtesy of the artist.

focused vision and concentrated attentiveness that are traditionally prioritized as hallmarks of the aesthetic encounter, and that continue to operate as regulating ideals in contemporary debates about spectatorship.

On the other hand, *SLEEP CINEMA HOTEL* also calls to mind a host of more recent efforts to make sleep a part of the experience of works of art, music, and performance. Its description as a “unique, one-off project,” while accurate in the sense that the installation has never been replicated, is somewhat complicated by the extent to which overnight sleeping arrangements have lately become available to visitors of museums, galleries, and venues of performance around the world. For example, the 2019 edition of the New York–based biennial *Performa* included *SLEEP1237*, by the Taiwanese artist Shu Lea Cheang in collaboration with the British media scholar Matthew Fuller. The piece consisted of a series of one-hour-long readings by various participants, interspersed with breaks, starting at 5:51 p.m. and ending the next morning at 6:38 a.m. Among them were the actor Phumzile Sitole reading the Pantone color codes, the writer Larissa Pham reciting the first 10,000 primes, and the media scholar McKenzie Wark reading instructions and warnings for hormone replacement therapy medicine. The audience was provided with tryptophan-rich snacks, tranquilizing herbal teas, army blankets, and garbage bags stuffed with pillows on which to lounge. Some of them bunked high up on scaffolds mimicking the fire escapes of New York apartment buildings, recalling a time-honored urban tradition of decamping to the outdoors on hot summer nights.

While *SLEEP*₁₂₃₇ references the sleeping conditions of the unhoused, and *SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL* emulates the format of a well-appointed budget hotel, other overnight works aim for a degree of comfort along the lines of a luxury boutique experience. An elevated bed formed the centerpiece of Carsten Höller's *Soma* (2010), installed in a former railway station in Berlin and one of many auto-powered moving and rotating beds built by the artist. The bed, mounted on a hydraulic platform that could be lowered or raised, constituted both an object of display in the exhibition for a waking audience and functional furniture for a more select few. For a fee of 1,000€, it could be reserved by one or two people to spend a night in the installation.⁷ And at the 2000 Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale in Japan, the artist Marina Abramović converted a hundred-year-old farmhouse into *Dream House*, where guests spent the night in specially designed beds and pajamas and recorded their dreams in a "Dream Book."⁸ Another group of examples can be found in overnight visits programmed by museums, such as the Rubin Museum of Art's highly popular annual event "Dream-Over." The 2019 exhibition *Edward Hopper and the American Hotel* at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts included a life-scale replica of the hotel room in Hopper's painting *Western Hotel*. Visitors could reserve an evening in the room, described on the museum's website as "an immersive space for overnight guests with an exclusive view inside the exhibition."⁹

While *Einstein on the Beach* invites slumber into its fold, as one possible response along a spectrum of selective inattention, the work neither explicitly calls for this response nor directly reflects upon the effects engendered by it. In contrast to this incidental status, sleep occupies a more prominent position as a central point of reference and axis of participation in *SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL* and many of its contemporary counterparts. As their titles suggest, these works involve sleep while also being about sleep, bringing an activity usually restricted to the most private spaces of life into public view and provoking a reconsideration by framing it within an unfamiliar situation. Representing this approach in contemporary theater is *8 Hours (Minimum)* (2013), an overnight performance from the Berlin-based collective Turbo Pascale, billed as a "sleep and tiredness laboratory" for "the fatigue society," capable of accommodating one hundred participants. With this description, the piece contains echoes of the "Laboratory of Sleep" designed by the Soviet architect Konstantin Melnikov for exhausted workers.¹⁰ As Katharina Rost observes, *8 Hours (Minimum)* is one of numerous recent works of experimental theater whose primary aim is to induce audience responses of drowsiness, reverie, and self-absence.¹¹ In a similar vein, a 2014 stage adaptation of the classical Chinese novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* directed by Jim Findlay broke the text down into "dreams" of seven hours each, performed overnight with beds provided for the audience.¹²

The most telling illustration of this development, however, comes from the realm of performed music in the example of *Sleep* (2015), an eight-hour-long



FIGURE 3. *Soma* (Carsten Höller, 2010). Photo by John Macdougall.

composition for strings, piano, organ, synthesizer, and voice by the British composer of classical and film music Max Richter. The composition is meant to be listened to continuously throughout the night, a format that calls to mind the “sleep concerts” pioneered by the electronic musician Robert Rich and performed by him since the 1980s.¹³ *Sleep* has been performed for recumbent audiences at venues ranging from world-class music halls like the Sydney Opera House to Austin’s SXSW Music Festival. Richter describes the piece as an extended lullaby, composed with the purpose of putting the audience to sleep in order to explore the interaction between music and the unconscious mind (he cites as inspiration Bach’s *Goldberg Variations*, purportedly commissioned by Count Keyserlingk to cure his insomnia).¹⁴ The titling of the piece as simply *Sleep* is consistent with the composer’s highly functionalist and oddly recursive description of it (not to mention the music’s blandly repetitive structure): “The theme of the music is the listener’s experience of it, and the musical material is the landscape which he or she inhabits.”¹⁵ Which is to say, *Sleep* sounds like music to sleep to, its content defined by its intended effect, leading the audience through a rather narrow gateway into the boundless territory of unconsciousness. Nonetheless, the success that has greeted the piece across disparate spheres of the music world and beyond—the concert has sold out most of the venues where it has been staged and was the subject of a 2020 documentary film—reveals the strong appeal of this territory.¹⁶ The reception of *Sleep* speaks to the persuasiveness of its central proposition, encapsulated in an adage by Heraclitus cited in the liner notes: “Even a soul submerged in sleep is hard at work and helps make something of the world.”¹⁷



FIGURE 4. *Sleep* (Max Richter, 2015). 2018 SXSW Music Festival. Photo by Travis P. Ball.

The question of what sleep helps make of the world has in recent years assumed a newly charged urgency, taken up by practitioners in a variety of media. The works discussed above represent but a small sampling from a larger phenomenon, a turn to sleep unfolding in contemporary art, film, performance, music, and dance. In and of itself, the fascination of sleep is nothing new, as the history of visual and narrative arts amply demonstrates. Many studies of this history have unpacked the iconographic, symbolic, and poetic resonance of the activity of slumber. For the ancient Greeks, to sleep brings one closer to death, according to the origin myth of Hypnos and Thanatos as twin siblings, but also closer to the gods. In the temples of Asklepios, to sleep was to receive the deity's healing powers and thus to be cured of one's ailments. Along with healing, Anne Carson observes, divine insight and special powers were bestowed upon the sleepers of myth and Homeric epic.¹⁸ These implications persist in the imagery of the Italian Renaissance, informing the portrayal of poets and men of learning asleep among their books; discussing such sleeping-author portraits, Maria Ruvoldt identifies a link between slumber and divine inspiration or deep contemplation.¹⁹ And in eighteenth-century French painting, Michael Fried argues, sleep was presented as a "vital sign" of intense absorption, equated with an idealized state of mind that is "inward, concentrated, closed."²⁰ Rather than an evacuation of attention, it denotes "an absorptive condition, almost an absorptive activity, in its own right."²¹ While recent artistic engagements with sleep draw upon these associations, they also respond to newer conceptions that come to frame our understanding of this state, shaped by shifting perceptions that distinguish the current moment from earlier eras.

What I describe as a turn to sleep in the arts of the present transpires in tandem with a more far-reaching obsession with sleep in contemporary life, one that finds expression across a multitude of cultural and discursive domains. In news media, for instance, this obsession drives an entire subgenre of popular-science journalism. On a weekly basis, the latest findings of the science of sleep are transmitted to readers. Features on the sleep patterns of humans, jellyfish, or trees are interspersed with accounts of pathologies like fatal familial insomnia, reports on the societal tolls of sleep deprivation, and (perhaps most common of all) health advice on how to improve one's sleep. Implicit in this discourse is a sense that sleep has become a widespread topical concern for the body politic, newsworthy because we are not getting enough or not getting it right. Turning from editorial to advertising content—which are in any case often not so readily distinguishable—this sense only deepens. To offer a personal example: on my return flight from Rotterdam, where *SLEEP CINEMA HOTEL* had been exhibited, I found an uncanny echo of that experience in the inflight magazine, which included a special promotional section entitled “The Sleep Doctor’s Secrets to an Ideal Sleep Environment.” “To create an ideal sleep environment, you need to pay attention to four of the five senses: sight, sound, touch, and smell,” the article stated, invoking the authority of a psychologist self-billed as The Sleep Doctor™.²² Appearing alongside recommendations for each of these areas were advertisements for bedding, circadian lighting devices, and sound machines. Such admixtures of scientific expertise, self-help, and product hawking have become a standard marketing strategy for an increasingly lucrative sleep industry, applied to everything from old-fashioned mattresses to the latest technological gadgetry.

One of the best-selling books of the past decade is *Go the Fuck to Sleep*, written in the style of a children’s book for frustrated parents.²³ For other reading options, the sleep-deprived might turn to one of the many insomnia memoirs that have appeared in the literary marketplace, such as Samantha Harvey’s *The Shapeless Unease: A Year of Not Sleeping*.²⁴ In this same period, *Sleep with Me*—a podcast of long-winded, rambling stories narrated in a furry, droning voice—broke into the rank of top fifty podcasts; started in 2013, it now numbers more than one thousand episodes.²⁵ An analogous development is the appearance of sleep as a major genre category (alongside jazz, indie rock, hip hop) in music streaming services like Spotify; the success of Richter’s *Sleep* is anticipated by the millions of subscribers to these sleep streams. The popular appetite for soothing, soporific sounds has even given rise to a novel audiovisual form, the ASMR video. Sleep is chic: the 2018 fall menswear show at Thom Browne replaced the catwalk with a flank of cots among which thirty models strolled out, rolled themselves into designer sleeping bags, and pretended to fall asleep. Shifting from the domain of popular culture to the specialized spheres of academia, the humanist disciplines have seen the rise of “critical sleep studies” at the turn of this century.²⁶ In anthropology, sociology, history, and

literature, sleep emerges as a fertile field of inquiry, approached in its myriad connections with particular contexts, institutions, geographies, and histories.

In the arts, popular culture, and public and scholarly discourses, sleep comes to the fore as a magnet of curiosity and desire, the object of a quest for deeper understanding. Driving this development is a spreading recognition that we have not fully considered the matter of sleep, despite being on intimate terms with it. As sleep moves out of the shadows and into an unprecedented visibility, it simultaneously reveals itself through a different lens. The traditionally suspicious view of sleep—as a thief of time, an obstacle to progress, an inconvenience to be tolerated only until the next cycle of waking activity—gives way to an attitude of solicitousness and respect. While the necessity of slumber was once met with heightened watchfulness, on guard against its pitfalls and excesses, in the present moment this attitude is ceding ground to a reparative impulse that runs counter to the hypervigilant stance of the paranoid critic, tightly wired and ever on the hunt for hidden dangers.²⁷ This reparative impulse, to cite Eve Sedgwick's definition, "wants to assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer to an inchoate self."²⁸ The connection drawn by Sedgwick between the impulse to repair and the attribution of plenitude carries particular weight in this instance. For the turn to sleep confers upon it a positive role, breaking from a deeply entrenched tendency to characterize it negatively—that is, as a condition defined chiefly by the absence or interruption of the vital activities, processes, and qualities that constitute waking life. The reparative investment in sleep marks a distinct break from a deficient conception that equates sleep with passivity, emptiness, and stagnation of a physical, spiritual, or social nature.

A quick review of such associations finds them scattered across the history of Western thought. A notable point of reference for philosophies of sleep is Plato's denunciation of too much sleep as a threat to state order. He writes in *Laws*, "Staying awake at night is, for everyone, the key to dealing with a large part of their political or household business. . . . No one asleep is any good for anything; he might as well be dead. Those of us who set most store by life and thought spend as much time as possible awake."²⁹ His call to vigilance in the name of security finds an echo in the political ideal of *rex exsominis*, or "the king who has no rest."³⁰ The prioritization of the business of daily life over and above the also daily need for rest has come to define the modern age in many ways. With the advent of technological capabilities to conquer darkness and disenchant night, sleeplessness emerges as a general condition, a world-historical orientation, and even an index of individual character.³¹ At the same time, slumber enters into an alliance with the deadly sin of sloth, such that the imputation of vice infuses the appearance of inactivity. As Eluned Summers-Bremner writes in her history of insomnia, in eighteenth-century Europe, sleep was made into "the equivalent of a moral disorder." This development speaks to the insomniac proclivities of societies fueled by the global trade in stimulants (coffee, tea, and sugar) and inflamed by the credo

that “devotion and business . . . go hand in hand.”³² The devaluation of sleep continues in lockstep with the ascendance of an Enlightenment worldview defined by “a privileging of consciousness and volition, of notions of utility, objectivity, and self-interested agency,” writes Jonathan Crary. Thus, he continues, “Descartes, Hume, and Locke were only a few of the philosophers who disparaged sleep for its irrelevance to the operation of the mind or the pursuit of knowledge.”³³ Insofar as the sleep of reason produces monsters (to borrow from the title of Francisco Goya’s famous etching of 1799), the sovereign subject is exhorted to overcome its darkness and awaken to “a permanent daylight—the daylight of reason.”³⁴ With the birth of psychoanalysis, the danger of moral disorder gives way to ideas of psychic disorder that color twentieth-century understandings of sleep. Sigmund Freud viewed sleep and dreams as a periodic backtracking from the fully developed ego, a temporary state of regression intrinsically related to psychopathological states such as psychosis and narcissism. The misgivings that surround sleep in the modern era resonate in the present day, as evidenced by the currency of the term “woke” in American political discourse. Popularized by Erykah Badu’s 2008 song “Master Teacher” and amplified by the Movement for Black Lives, woke received a new entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary* in June 2017. The revised definition conjoins a state of being awake with one of being “alert to injustice in society, especially racism.”³⁵

These discourses converge in a mode of shadow knowledge that grasps sleep in its deviation from a norm or ideal embodied in the conscious mind that is fully awake and alert. The sidelining of sleep by this norm reflects the difficulty of tackling sleep directly. Undeniably, there remains at its core an obscurity that is resistant to the light of scrutiny. Consciousness cannot form a representation of its own sleep; “to say ‘I’m asleep’ is in effect, literally, as impossible as to say ‘I’m dead,’” writes Roland Barthes.³⁶ Any attempt to answer the question of my sleep can only end with frustration, for as Jean-Luc Nancy points out, “sleep appears only as non-appearing.” Its very arrival entails a disappearance or becoming absent that discharges the circuits of self-reflection and “carries away any sort of analysis.”³⁷ To draw closer to this object of would-be inquiry is to relinquish by proportional degrees the presence of mind that is prerequisite to the very exercise of inquiry. On this basis, it would be tempting to relegate sleep to a realm of unknowability that tolerates no analysis and puts an end to all attempts at description, as Nancy does when he identifies the sleeper as an I who has become “the thing itself. . . . isolated from all manifestation, from all phenomenality, the sleeping thing at rest, sheltered from knowledge, techniques, and arts of all kinds, exempt from judgments and prospects.” Elaborating this formulation through a series of aporetic constructions—that is, sleep as an appearance of nonappearing, as a presence-in-absence—Nancy concludes that “there can be no phenomenology of sleep.”³⁸ To look to sleep as the vanishing point of reflection is to reaffirm the premise of a fundamental incompatibility that invariably intrudes between sleep and the sensing,

thinking mind. When the sleeping consciousness is reduced to “a recess of pure nothingness,” the primacy of the waking consciousness remains unquestioned, and the sovereignty of the self-possessed subject remains intact.³⁹

From other philosophical viewpoints, however, sleep presents an opportunity to “make us acquainted with a genus of being with regard to which the subject is not sovereign, without the subject being inserted in it.”⁴⁰ For Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a phenomenology of sleep is not only possible but indeed crucial for an understanding of precisely those dimensions of mental and physical life that are neglected by modern ontologies of the subject, lying beyond the intentional agency of a self-directed subject and posing obstructions to “the transparency of the ‘I think.’”⁴¹ “The sleep of consciousness is not consciousness of sleep,” Merleau-Ponty writes at multiple points in his lecture notes on this question.⁴² Slipping free from its subordinate object position, sleep encounters consciousness on equal footing in a murky place where shapes recede without entirely vanishing, where traces of the world (or “the debris of the past and present”) litter the void of nothingness.⁴³ Rejecting the reductive binary of presence versus absence, phenomenological accounts of sleep approach it as “a modality of perceptual progression” and a “divergence” toward unwilling, involuntary, and passive modes of experience. A different perspective on sleep emerges in conjunction with the challenge to modern ontologies of the reasoning subject, relating it to what Jacqueline Risset describes as the pleasurable and peculiar turns of reflection that come with “the defeat of our thought, the defeat of the supremacy of our experience.”⁴⁴ As José Esteban Muñoz conjectures, in the “ontological humility” that comes with sleep, we might discover a resource for resisting “practices of thought that reify a kind of ontological totality—a totality that boxes us into an intractable and stalled version of the world.”⁴⁵

The mystery of sleep also persists as a scientific riddle. Even as scientists have confirmed the universality of sleep in the animal kingdom, a firm understanding of why this is so is far from established. Nonetheless, the study of human sleep in the age of electroencephalography (EEG) and neuroscience has yielded insights that similarly shift the perspective on sleep away from negativity and deficiency. Neurophysiological studies reveal it to be less an interruption than an *intensification* of cognitive activity and life processes. Rather than a passive or reduced functional mode, sleep is a highly active state. It constitutes a specific mode of functioning in its own right—marked by its own rhythms, phasic variations, and thresholds—whose complexity exceeds any binary logic that frames sleep solely in opposition to waking. During REM sleep (or rapid eye movement sleep, when most dreaming takes place), our brain activity, eye movement, and metabolism are equally or even more active than when awake. NREM sleep (non-rapid eye movement sleep, also known as stage 3 or deep sleep) was once hypothesized to resemble a state of coma or hibernation, but today is understood as an “active and meticulously coordinated state of cerebral unity,” enabling “communication

possibilities between distant regions of the brain.⁴⁶ And in the stage of light sleep, people can still respond to external stimuli, believe themselves to be awake, and engage in automatic behaviors. The discovery of the body's circadian rhythms further discredits the notion that sleeping and waking can be defined in oppositional terms; rather, they are enmeshed as complementary elements of an integral circadian cycle. Animal sleep is controlled by the body's circadian clock, described by the psychiatrist Thomas Wehr as a "pacemaker" that "creates a day and night within the organism that mirrors the world outside."⁴⁷ The discovery of circadian rhythms "has the effect of uniting waking and sleeping into a single, carefully equilibrated system, so that it becomes impossible to ask what sleep is for without asking what waking is for."⁴⁸

In other spheres of knowledge, too, the shell of alterity and unknowability that surrounds our slumber is being chipped away by a finer attunement to sleep's complex imbrications with waking life. New research from critical sleep studies constructs an understanding of sleep as a positive form of socially and culturally informed expression, thus further discrediting its reduction to mere inactivity. In the words of the anthropologist Roger Ivar Lohmann,

Sleeping, like waking life, is a biocultural phenomenon that manifests as interrelated ideals, bodily practices, and artifacts contextualized in a sociocultural matrix that is subject to historical change. The formula "sleep is to passivity as waking is to agency" is false because it regards sleep as a lack of wakefulness and intentionality rather than as a distinctive mode of mental and motor behavior in its own right. It also ignores intrusions of waking in bouts of sleep, and vice versa, which vary crossculturally. Sleeping and waking infuse each another, and do so in different ways, depending on the enculturation history of sleepers.⁴⁹

In the social sciences as much as the biological sciences, sleep is grasped as an actively lived condition, or a "technique of the body." It is molded by social expectations and institutional demands, as well as expressive of cultural logics of time and space that change through history and across places.⁵⁰ The answer to the universal need for sleep unfolds along a varying spectrum of practices, and what many readers of this book have likely internalized as the correct, normal, and desirable way to sleep—in a single consolidated phase of roughly eight hours, alone or with one bed partner, in a space specially designated for this purpose—represents but one limited position on this spectrum.

At the Edges of Sleep approaches the artistic turn to sleep as not just one more outgrowth of this larger reconceptualization but also a key to delineating its stakes, mapping its contours, and marking its perils and possibilities. The works discussed in the chapters that follow build upon the insight that the boundary between sleep and wake consists less in a rigid division than in a dynamic edge zone of overlap and interaction, of tension and confluence. As sleep moves from the margins to the center, we are presented with a challenge to reassess its significance and role. If sleep is enmeshed in the orders—and disorders—of waking life, then it must also

hold the potential to intervene in these orders and reconfigure the forms of our experience. In the difficulty of reconciling sleep with the systems of value that shape the waking world, there also resides the potential to interrogate, dismantle, and reconfigure these very systems. By the same token, however, this potential cannot be staked upon a simple transvaluation of sleep's unassimilable otherness—a move that recodes its negativity as an exemption from the determinations of history, power, and socialization and essentializes its obscurity as an authentic or primordial expression of unspoiled experience. What is the value of sleep on its own terms, then? What is it that we seek to preserve in carving out a space for sleep?

These questions demarcate the general conceptual field in which this book wanders. But the particular course along which it traverses this potentially limitless terrain follows closely on the tracks of the figure referenced at the beginning of this introduction, Apichatpong Weerasethakul. Apichatpong has engaged with the subject of sleep with an unmatched degree of persistence, depth, and systematicity throughout his entire career as an artist and filmmaker. Scenes of sleep reappear throughout his films and videos as a nocturnal motif, an essential element of the atmospheres and audiovisual universes conjured therein, and an inroad toward otherworldly and liminal modes of being. When darkness descends and the curtain of somnolence drops, a crack simultaneously appears among its folds, affording a glimpse into another dimension. Following his characters behind this curtain, we meet halfway the ghosts and spirits who stir from their hibernation, the histories and alternative realities hidden by the light of day. Sleep, far from negating action and meaning, extends these into new territories as it designates ways of existing in the world—in connection with other people, places, nature, and the past. Emerging from the shadows and into the frame, sleep introduces a perspective on these relationships that moves beyond the structuring divisions of interior and exterior, individual and communal, past and present. The first part of this book traces the intricate perspectives on this activity that unfold throughout Apichatpong's corpus, placing these perspectives into dialogue with works by other filmmakers and authors.

Going further, Apichatpong situates sleep at the core of the medium of moving images. Human sleep is organized by cycles that repeat through the night, and the average length of each cycle is roughly ninety minutes—the equivalent of a standard feature-length film, he points out. "To go to the cinema," Apichatpong suggests, "is to go to sleep." His explorations of somnolent states thus tie into a reflexive investigation of the forms of moving-image media and the phenomenology of spectatorship. These threads of investigation come together in projects like *SLEEP CINEMA HOTEL*, in which the dismantling and recombination of the constitutive elements of the exhibitionary apparatus open a door through which fluctuating and checkered states of consciousness can readily enter the cinema experience. For the audience, too, the curtain of somnolence brings not the finality of

closure, but rather an opening of passageways between voluntary and involuntary streams of thought, perception and memory, attentiveness and inattentiveness. In mining the possibilities of sleepy spectatorship, Apichatpong shows his hand as not just an artist and director, but also a theorist, for whom the making of moving images comprises one dimension of an ongoing reflection on what cinema was and where it is heading. He takes up these concerns through the rubric of a *permeable* ontology; as May Adadol Ingwanij and David Teh have argued, this quality of permeability references at once regionally distinct traditions of cinema projection and present-day mutations of moving-image environments.⁵¹

The second part of this book sets the stage for an inquiry into his theoretical interventions by turning to sleep in connection with exhibition and spectatorship. Apichatpong belongs to a lineage of thinkers who have posited a fundamental identity between the experience of moving images and the state of slumber. Within this discourse of narcotic reception—which shadows a long history of theorizing cinema's medium-specific properties and effects, linking together its shifts of focus and intellectual realignments—the tension between a negative and positive conception of sleep also structures the field. If cinema wraps its audience in darkness, stills them into silence, and mesmerizes them with its projected beam of light, these sedative effects have been construed as a threat to the faculties of waking thought. Many thinkers turn to the figure of a sleeping spectator as an emblem of the medium's powers of deception, manipulation, and ideological mystification. For others, however, the changes engendered in the audience's state of consciousness entail not a shutting down but rather an expansion and release of embodied perceptual experience, beyond its most familiar zones and well-traveled pathways. From such a perspective, a positive understanding of sleep provides the basis for a finer attunement to the dynamics of reception. Sleepy spectatorship raises an intriguing question: can inconsistent attention, or even inattention, amount to a difference, rather than a necessary detraction, in the experience of moving-image media, a difference that might become the basis for other kinds of mental connections forged in the process of viewing and listening?

The question carries a particular resonance in a context marked by the dissemination of projected moving images from the traditional movie theater to a host of other spaces and platforms, where they are encountered on a variety of screens or in a multitude of windows. Pushed beyond its previous natural habitat, as Francesco Casetti argues, cinema does not die or become extinct so much as it enters into a continuing process of becoming, reborn again and everywhere in new assemblages.⁵² In this situation, the contrast between old and new ways of experiencing moving images is often couched within an opposition between passive and active spectatorship. Passivity might be attributed to the filmgoer in the theater, immobilized in a chair and hypnotized by the image, in contrast to the ambulatory viewer who can interact with the display on their own terms.⁵³ Or else the label might be pinned to the latter who, like an overstimulated window

shopper, cannot slow down and give full attention to the work, in contrast to the film viewer for whom the theater offers a last refuge for pure, concentrated looking.⁵⁴ Contemporary debates about spectatorship betray an impulse to manage the unruly transformations of audiovisual and moving-image media by resuscitating old schemas that pit distraction against concentration, unthinking passivity against idealized activity, degraded perception against perfect attentiveness. Sleep points beyond the impasse of these dichotomies as a provocation to consider attention in all its volatility and permeability. It challenges us to let go of positions that bond particular forms of attention with the capacity for intellection and critical agency. For Apichatpong and his fellow somnophiles, sleep emerges as an answer to the need for new models of encounter, contact, and engagement between the audience and the work.

The construction of this book along dual tracks—bringing together a wide-angle survey of a large topic with an in-depth analysis of an individual body of work—is motivated by its methodological wager. There is no guide more suitable than Apichatpong to the challenge of navigating the aesthetic and political currents generated by the turn to sleep, especially as these ripple through the sphere of moving-image art. And conversely, there is no better lens than sleep to direct at his work. For this lens brings into sharp focus Apichatpong's considerable impact on art and cinema at the turn of this century, along with the somewhat unique position he occupies as a practitioner who has maintained a steady and growing presence in contemporary art, worked continuously within the specialized domain of experimental film and video, and established a reputation as one of the most lauded film directors in the world—all at the same time. While these disparate dimensions of his practice have evolved interactively from the very beginning of his career, in recent years this interaction has intensified. Simultaneously, sleep has moved to the forefront of his projects, a locus of cross-referential and remediated amplifications. It emerges as the fulcrum of a deepening reflection on an interrelated set of formal, historical, and political concerns. A focus on sleep therefore contributes to a fuller picture of Apichatpong's cultural significance by bringing into conversation the multiple itineraries of his practice, counterbalancing a tendency in the existing scholarship to focus primarily on his narrative feature-length productions.⁵⁵

My approach in this book is monographic in its impulse but centrifugal in its execution. It sustains an inquiry into Apichatpong by placing his work in conversation with a host of interlocutors from various periods, places, and disciplines around the question of sleep, weaving these objects into a web that spreads outward from his corpus proper. At several points the focus moves away from Apichatpong at length before turning back to him, in the process of taking up the ideas posed in his projects and developing them further along new pathways. But even when absent as an object of direct analysis, he nonetheless hovers beyond the discussion in the manner of a magnetic pole, determining its directions and

detours. To the extent that *At the Edges of Sleep* centers on Apichatpong, it does so in a collaborative spirit of *thinking with*, beyond only *writing about*, with the aim of entering into an open-ended dialogue with his body of work rather than circumscribing it within an interpretive framework. In adopting this method, I have been guided by Erin Manning's insight that Apichatpong demands "a wholly different ethos of engagement . . . with the forces of thought that move through the work and make it work."⁵⁶ Considering his corpus as an open "relational platform" of entities that are not fully finished or complete in themselves, Manning identifies the task of the writer as one of *intercession*, which can be distinguished from explanation, as an endeavor to be activated by the work while reactivating it in turn, to become "a participant in a process that has yet to quite unfold," and to respond to his provocation to ask "what we have not yet been able to see."⁵⁷

In writing this book, I have taken my cues from its central subject. *At the Edges of Sleep* is broken down into chapters that are mostly shorter than those of the standard academic monograph. With its larger number of parts, the book more readily branches out across the manifold referents and directions suggested by Apichatpong's work, assuming an internal pliability that can accommodate the multidimensionality of its central subject. Dividing the composition in this way also created more openings through which to incorporate an assortment of interlocutors, as well as more seams and edges that could function as zones of juxtaposition between different objects and thinkers. While I have found a certain utility in this structure, I have not allowed it to dictate the shape of my thinking or to foreclose the option of sustained analysis. Thus the chapters overlap and bleed into one another. While in some places they move onto new ground, elsewhere they circle back and continue previous discussions from a new angle or in a framework. In this respect, the shaping of the book bears the imprint of sleep—unfolding across varying levels of depth, performing a volatile and permeable mode of attention, and maintaining a receptiveness to deviant turns and unlikely associations.⁵⁸

As this strategy implies, to fully tackle the matter of sleep necessitates above all the cultivation of a certain receptivity. Merleau-Ponty's insistence that consciousness of sleep will yield few insights into the sleep of consciousness can be taken as a warning for us would-be students: striving to awaken to the lessons of sleep, we are in danger of missing the point completely. But to reach this condition of receptivity and come around to the propositions of the subject at hand might not even require the most strenuous effort—just the smallest of steps for anyone who is already tired, pushed to the limits of their physical and cognitive endurance. The turn to sleep can be read as a reaction against conditions of lived time that take shape under constant pressures to be productive and pay attention. As Rost observes, drowsing in the theater constitutes the "anti-model" to cultural expectations of efficiency, activity, and accomplishment.⁵⁹ The urge to close the eyes, relax the body, and unfocus the mind therefore instantiates not just a path of least resistance but also a calculated disengagement from these pressures and a deliberate

interruption of, or release from, the regular programming of time. Within the framework of an “ecology of attention,” the endeavor to make room for sleep in spaces of film, performance, and art is coextensive with temporal strategies of slowing down that have surged into prominence precisely at a time when acceleration and overload have emerged as keywords describing the corrosive cognitive effects of modern technology and late capitalism.⁶⁰

The turn to sleep can thus signal participation in a history of revolt against the cult of productivity, reaffirming what Paul Lafargue termed “the right to be lazy.”⁶¹ Sleep can be another way of “doing nothing,” in the words of Jenny Odell, such that those looking for ways to unplug from the financialized networks and platforms that run on the depletable fuel of attention might very well opt for a nap.⁶² It entails not active resistance but passive refusal, calling to mind “those tactics of illegibility, opacity, and inaction that remain outside of the field of political action properly conceived,” in the words of Lilian Mengesha and Lakshmi Padmanabhan.⁶³ But alternatively, sleep can just as readily be reabsorbed into the economy of attention and experience, to the extent that it is now common for sectors of this economy to “promote deceleration as a palliative to the ills of contemporary speed.”⁶⁴ The turn to sleep shows the double edge of a refusal staked upon a claim to exception, capable at once of cutting against the grain of a dominant culture and carving out isolated zones of differentiation as compensatory havens wherein the distressed sensorium can be restored to a condition of wholeness—or what Sarah Sharma describes as “spatial solutions” that ultimately fail to solve a more systemic “problem of time.”⁶⁵ Thus the following chapter contends further with the slippery cultural politics of sleep and the divergent restorative agendas to which it is pressed to contribute, constructing a requisite prelude for the book’s analysis of sleep in specific works and exhibitionary contexts.

Finally, for anyone who watches and writes about moving-image media on a regular basis, the provocation of sleeping in the theater is not a matter of merely theoretical interest. For the injunction to relinquish a stance of watchful readiness and surrender to languorous dissipation flies directly in the face of critical norms. It runs up against the viewing habits conscientiously cultivated by those audiences with a professional stake in spectatorship, for whom the demonstration of a hyper-discerning, ultra-alert gaze amounts to an expenditure of effortful labor and a marker of expertise. For such viewers, a notion of reception inclusive of sleep is likely to be difficult to come to terms with, colliding as it does with internalized disciplinary habits of attention. Yet ironically, it is precisely this kind of viewer—one who tends to come to the viewing experience by way of a wide variety of preexisting conditions, sometimes eagerly, sometimes begrudgingly, at other times in a miasma of jet-lagged exhaustion or festival-induced enervation, in marathon stretches of back-to-back screenings in which days blur into nights and back again, or under the time pressure of editorial deadlines and teaching schedules—who is also most likely to already be on familiar terms with reception in a

state of somnolence. For those whose viewing patterns spill across the long spans and outlying edges of lived time, the push for endurance inevitably makes sleep all the more impossible to resist, and this interplay can give rise to strangely pleasurable and uniquely memorable viewing experiences. Working on this project led me back to some of my own experiences of sleeping with projected images, which stand out vividly in my memory not despite my hazy consciousness, but because of it. And along the way of presenting this material, I heard from many friends and colleagues about their own stories of sleeping at the movies, some truly marvelous. Perhaps the sleepy gaze is ultimately the gaze of the cinephile, which is to say, the lover—intimately familiar, assured of its object, affectively charged in its unpredictability, and reluctant to part company.