Reorienting the Art of Looking:

Contemplating Emptiness in the Cinema of Apichatpong Weerasethakul

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Abstract

This thesis presents a systematic investigation of the moving image works of Apichatpong Weerasethakul, concentrating on the contemplative and non-representational dimensions of his creative practice. Apichatpong's practice operates in the space between transnational art cinema and contemporary art and draws from a wide range of creative and conceptual influences from Theravada Buddhism to post-war American experimental filmmaking and contemporary 'slow cinema,' often diverging from conventional expectations of narrative cinema to dwell in moments of emptiness, contemplation and dead time. In this thesis, I trace these influences through Apichatpong's feature films, short films and installations the formal appearances of stillness, silence and extended duration, and reflect upon the broader political and phenomenological implications of these empty moments. Rather than understand emptiness as an incidental feature of his creative practice, I argue that emptiness is integral to Apichatpong's understanding of film form and the world. Through this investigation, I argue that Apichatpong's idiosyncratic film practice challenges many of the basic structures of conventional film form and spectatorship by orienting away from narrative logics of cinematic meaning to instead sensitise spectators to other ways of being in and experiencing the world.

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Declaration

Submitted in total fulfillment of the requirements of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy. This is to certify that:

(1) The thesis comprises only my original work towards the PhD,
(2) Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used,
(3) The thesis is fewer than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices.

Signed:

Duncan Caillard

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Dedication

For my parents.

Preface

Notes on prior publications

An early draft of *Sleep Cinema* was published with *Currents Journal* (Issue 2) in December 2021. I would like to thank the *Currents* editorial team and my anonymous reviewers for their feedback on that early draft.

Notes on translation

Throughout this thesis, I conform to the Thai naming convention of referring to Thai persons by their given name rather than their family name. Apichatpong himself goes by multiple names including 'Joe,' but for the sake of clarity I solely refer to him as Apichatpong throughout my writing. As David Teh notes in his excellent study of contemporary Thai art, Thai language and naming conventions present substantial challenges for non-Thai speakers, as there are multiple coexisting systems for the romanisation of Thai words. Consequently, whenever I transliterate Thai names, titles or place names into English I match the spelling used by Apichatpong himself in published materials on his website.

Introduction

The Art of Looking

In May 2020, Apichatpong Weerasethakul published an open letter through the Dutch magazine *de Film Krant* reflecting on the future of cinema, titled *The Cinema of Now* (2020). He opened the letter with the memory of childhood road trips through the country and recalled the impatience he felt before arriving at the destination, but noted how those same car journeys changed as an adult:

> As we grew older, we paid more attention to the passing scenery. We observed the trees, the houses, the signs, the other vehicles. We trained ourselves to be calm on a journey. We knew there was a destination.
>
> (Weerasethakul 2020b)

He compared these journeys with the experience of sheltering in place during the early months of Covid-19, experiences defined by stasis and the inability to reorient our perspectives. Lockdowns presented a crisis of our ordinary experience of time, marking a moment when we were unable to move forward and become "aware of our clocks… [and] feel the vulnerability of our mind and body" (2020), a crisis of time that also manifested within cinema. Like a car journey, he imagined narrative cinema itself as a journey pulled along by dramatic points of interest, such that "the more seamless [sic] a filmmaker fills the path and makes the audience forget about time, the closer he or she is to the 'art' of filmmaking" (Weerasethakul 2020b). Given that the role of entertainment cinema is to allow its audiences to "forget about time" and pass the journey as quickly as possible, the stasis of lockdowns also represented a crisis within narrative cinema through the uncomfortable imposition of time outside of our control.

Yet Apichatpong observed that this moment of temporal crisis also bore the capacity to rejuvenate our relationship with time, to reorient ourselves from destinations and towards the immanent conditions of the present, "to observe our surroundings, emotions, actions, time, impermanence" (Weerasethakul 2020b). He surmised that this breakdown of conventional time

was an opportunity to rethink the nature of cinema and human experience, to invoke a new way of looking at and participating in the world:

> Perhaps this current situation will breed a group of people who have developed an ability to stay in the present moment longer than others. They can stare at certain things for a long time. They will thrive in total awareness. … After we have defeated the virus, when the cinema industry has woken up from its stupor, this new group, as moviegoers, wouldn't take the same old cinema journey. They have mastered *the art of looking*; at neighbours, at the rooftops, at the computer screens. They have trained through countless video calls with friends, through group dinners captured in one continuous camera angle. They need a cinema that is closer to real life, in real time. They want the cinema of Now which possesses no fillers nor destinations.
>
> (Weerasethakul 2020b, my emphasis)

Building on this social transformation of time, he imagined a fictional "Covid-19 Cinema Manifesto… drawn up for cinema to liberate itself from its structure and its own journey," which states that "Our cinema has no place for psychological gratifications. The perpetual destination is the audience, the enlightened" (Weerasethakul 2020b). This letter frames many of Apichatpong's underlying concerns with the future of cinema and his unusual fascination with empty time, deferred gratification and spectatorial contemplation.

Stretching back from the crises of 2020 to the early years of his filmmaking as a student in Chicago in the late-1990s, this thesis considers Apichatpong Weerasethakul's 'art of looking,' addressing its radical departures from conventional film style and spectatorial practices, with significant consequences on broader cinema. Apichatpong's work presents an attractive enigma for scholarly analysis. Born in Bangkok in 1970, he spent his childhood in Khon Kaen in the Isaan region of North-eastern Thailand where his parents worked as doctors. After graduating with a degree in architecture from Khon Kaen University in 1993, he pursued a Master of Fine Arts at the School of Art Institute of Chicago, graduating in 1997. With funding from the International Film Festival Rotterdam's Hubert Bals Fund, Apichatpong completed his first film – *Dogfahr Nai Meu Marn* (*Mysterious Object at Noon*, 2000), which toured festivals internationally but did not reach the same level of critical acclaim as his later works. Three of his subsequent feature films, *Sud Sanaeha* (*Blissfully Yours*, 2002), *Sud Pralad* (*Tropical Malady*, 2004) and *Memoria* (2021), won

prizes at the Cannes Film Festival, where he was awarded the Palme d'Or for *Lung Boonmee Raluek Chat* (*Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*) in 2010. His reputation has grown substantially over the past decade, attracting substantial critical and scholarly attention.

Beyond narrative feature filmmaking, Apichatpong's practice crosses mediums into short filmmaking, installation video art, still photography, visual art and live performance and he is a key figure in Southeast Asian visual art, queer cinema, and the slow cinema movement. Through his production company 'Kick the Machine' and public advocacy for local filmmaking, he has supported a diverse array of filmmakers independent of the studio system in Thailand and has helped secure the reputation of Thai art filmmakers among international audiences. His 'signature' style – characterised by its languid pacing, tropical milieu, and permeable boundaries between life and death, waking and sleeping, town and country – has inspired numerous other filmmakers. Works as diverse as Jorge Thielen Armand's *La Soledad* (2016), David Lowery's *A Ghost Story* (2017) and Ernesto Contreras' *Sueño en otro idioma* (*I Dream in Another Language,* 2017) are described as 'Apichatpongian' by critics, and traces of his work linger in the films of compatriots Anocha Suwichakornpong, Phuttiphong Aroonpheng and Pathompon Tesprateep. Despite his critical acclaim and broad public perception of legitimising Thai art cinema, Apichatpong occupies a problematic position at home due to his critiques of authoritarianism and his independence from local studio bosses, consigning his films (which centre overwhelmingly on people and practices of North-eastern Thailand) to exclusively international distribution.

Thesis questions

In *The Cinema of Now*, Apichatpong describes a cinema in which nothing seems to happen, and spectators are drawn into a contemplative relationship with the action on-screen. He describes his "cinema of Now" as something "closer to real life, in real time" that was sensitised to the real conditions of lived experience and in which expectations of drama, continuity and narrative progression give way to the simple pleasures of being-in-the-world (Weerasethakul 2020). Apichatpong has this spectatorial experience throughout his filmmaking, lingering in moments of extended duration and stripping back narrative clarity and continuity to instead inspire a sensuous, contemplative form of cinematic spectatorship. This sidelining of dramatic action and narrative comprehension is not an incidental feature of his filmmaking practice but is rather integral to his understanding of cinematic ontology and its framing of our experience of the world. For Apichatpong, cinema is not simply a method of communicating information or passing time, but rather powerfully informs our experience of the world, bearing the capacity to radically reorient

our perceptions and sensitise us to the unseen, ephemeral or transitory conditions of lived experience.

I describe this sensitised attention to presence at the expense of narrative meaning and comprehension as 'cinematic emptiness.' Rather than simply be a synonym of 'absence,' emptiness is an evasive concept demanding robust definition. As the Buddhist concept of *suññatā* ("voidness"), emptiness is understood as a constituent element of Being, a voidness of self in all existence such that nothing can be clung to as "I" or "mine" (Buddhadāsa 1994). This profound emptiness is not 'a thing' with material characteristics and cannot be reduced to a stable object of enquiry. Adjacent to this, we can understand emptiness as a formal characteristic of art associated with vacant space, empty time, extended duration and symbolic absence, which in contrast to the conceptual evasiveness of profound emptiness is comparatively easy to identify in a variety of cinematic forms. To further complicate matters, the relationship between these two forms of emptiness – profound emptiness and formal emptiness – is not straightforward, and we cannot assume that spectators will experience the same thing when exposed to formally empty moments on screen. Despite these methodological challenges, the investigation of experiential and formal emptiness provides important insights into our experiences of and being in the world.

Previous writers have grappled with this dimension of Apichatpong's cinema, but have done so in fragments. In his essay "Resistant to Bliss" (2009b), James Quandt struggled to come to terms with the epistemic elusiveness of Apichatpong's filmmaking. Quandt characterises Apichatpong's films as "unnerving in their utter abandonment of rationalism," describing his work as "a floating, ethereal inundation of exotic signs, unmoored in decipherable meaning" (Quandt 2009b, 14-15). In the same collection, Tony Rayns linked Apichatpong's epistemic evasiveness back to his Buddhism and philosophical interest in emptiness, stating that "it's hard to write about Apichatpong's films without relying on the vocabulary of doubt, with words such as 'seeming,' 'apparently,' 'enigma,' 'opaque' and so on," perpetuating the image of his films as "apparitional, unknowable relics" (Rayns 2009, 138). For Rayns, Apichatpong's Buddhism "touches everything from [his] films' bipolar structures to their random operating procedures," connecting Apichatpong's connection to Buddhism with the emptiness and apparent meaninglessness of his films. Apichatpong's decision to use the title "Conceived and edited by" over "director" in his early films serves as an example of the Buddhist abnegation of self, a sort of performative 'not self' (Rayns 2009, 135). Kong Rithdee described Apichatpong's cinema as equivalent to Buddhist *dharma* teachings, describing it as a "cinema of impermanence" that teaches spectators "how to let things go, to not feel attached, perhaps we should do the same when watching his films" (Rithdee 2007).

Over the past decade, other theorists have also grappled with the non-representational formal qualities of his films to understand their sensuous impacts on spectators, which we can begin to understand on similar terms. In her study of Apichatpong's sound design, Philippa Lovatt argued that the ambient sound of his films is heightened "to such a degree that the human voice becomes inaudible," the sound of jungle insects or traffic overpowering their characters' soft-spoken dialogue (Lovatt 2013, 70), and found that this effect produced a haptic soundscape that marginalises narrative understanding in favour of a sensuous and bodily engagement with the scene and to "convey a floating, dream-like state" (71). Ari Purnama shared Lovatt's view that Apichatpong's style sacrificed narrational clarity but argued that the long-take style encourages the viewer to observe an anthropological gaze when watching his conversational scenes, replacing a narrative consciousness with an observational interest in human behaviour and interaction. Purnama argues that his long-take, improvisational shooting style prompts the viewer "to listen and notice the modulation of the conversations, and to scan bodily communication conveyed by the characters" (Purnama 2015, 208). In his own study, Glyn Davis argues Apichatpong's extensive use of still photography in *Uncle Boonmee*, situates his work on the fault line between slow cinema and gallery installation. For Davis, moments of stillness in Apichatpong's cinema often conceal political statements and critiques, encouraging spectators to remain sensitive to moments of emptiness on-screen (Davis 2015, 102).

I approach Apichatpong's work as a whole in order to address the overarching structures of his creative practice and consider their relationships with emptiness. Within classical narrative cinema, empty moments are typically excised as 'dead time,' substituting moments of indeterminacy for sequences of action, signification and continuity. Film's capacity to register temporal contingency – encapsulated by the natural beauty of wind moving through trees, or the ephemeral charm of smoke leaving a chimney that fascinated Siegfried Kracauer in his *Theory of Film* (1960) – is lost, replaced by the accelerated demands of intensified continuity (Bordwell 2002), and by spectacles increasingly alienated from the live conditions of everyday human existence. Rather than exclude them, Apichatpong's practice leans into these empty moments, centralising moments of empty time to facilitate contemplative reflection and stage subtle political critiques. It is my thesis that in contrast to conventional prioritisation of presence, Apichatpong's creative practice recognises the generative capacities of empty moments in cinema, manipulating duration, contingency and non-representation to facilitate heightened sensitivity to time and to the world.

My thesis responds to three overarching questions regarding emptiness in Apichatpong's cinema: first, how does emptiness manifest within Apichatpong's creative practice? This question

considers the stylistic dimensions of cinematic emptiness, exploring how Apichatpong manipulates the formal and material qualities of film (such as shot composition, editing, sound design, and plotting), but also addresses other dimensions of cinematic experience such as spectatorial practices, film materiality and the architecture of cinema itself.[1] Second, how is Apichatpong's creative practice situated within broader histories of cinematic emptiness, and how does it develop, challenge, or build upon these histories? In this question, I seek to situate Apichatpong's practice within an internationalised network of transdisciplinary creative influences, and to examine the ways in which he continues, challenges and expands upon existing artistic traditions. This focus not only allows me to situate his interventions within historical context, but also provides a rich theoretical vocabulary through which to understand his practice. Third, what are the stylistic, experiential and political implications of cinematic emptiness? In this question, I expand my focus from the material conditions of film form and historical influences towards the phenomenological and experiential conditions of spectatorship. What sort of affects and experiences are facilitated by Apichatpong's creative practice, and how do these experiences reorient our experience of the world?

Investigating cinematic emptiness: Methods and methodology

On this basis, my methodology is at once formalist, historical and phenomenological, encompassing Apichatpong's vast and interdisciplinary body of work encompassing his narrative feature films, short films, video installations, photography, artist's statements, essays, poetry and public interviews. Apichatpong is an orienting centre within a web of mediums and methods, and his work presents an outlook on the world and its contents—his art of looking. In order to accommodate these methodological demands, this thesis proposed an updated auteur methodology informed by Martin Heidegger and his essay "The Origin of the Work of Art" (1971a). Through Heidegger, I argue that the being of the artist is not a textual accident of merely incidental importance to the work, but rather an intimate and inextricable component of the work itself through which we can begin to understand its outlook on the world.[2]

[1] Throughout this thesis, I use the term 'cinema' to refer to a collection of interrelated concepts: as an architectural site, as a historically-specific set of spectatorial and production conventions, and as a body of work ("Apichatpong's cinema"). In this way, I oppose Apichatpong's "cinema" to mainstream Western entertainment cinema and its associated stylistic, productive and ideological conventions.

[2] Although my methodology draws from Heidegger's aesthetics, it does not attempt a strict or systematic interpretation of this philosophy. As Shawn Loht notes in his study of Heideggerian

Apichatpong exerts an unusually high level of control over the filmmaking process, placing him at the animating centre of artistic production. He is actively involved in every stage of production for his major narrative features, and personally completes the bulk of the labour involved in his short films and visual art projects, resembling the artisanal film production practices described by Pam Cook. Cook writes that in this mode of production:

> The relationship of the film-maker/producer to her or his work is no longer alienated, but close and intimate, leading to the inscription of the material presence of the film (dust, particles, sprocket holes, black leader, etc.), and the presence of the filmmaker, in the film itself.
>
> (Cook 1981, 274).

Although some of Apichatpong's major films exceed the intimate scale described by Cook, the financing structures of his films allow him disproportionate influence over creative decisions. Despite this artistic autonomy, his style is also reinforced by the recurrence of key collaborators such as editor and post-production coordinator Lee Chatametikool, sound designer Akritchalerm Kalayanamitr, cinematographer Sayombhu Mukdeeprom, producers Simon Field and Keith Griffiths, and actors Jenjira Pongpas and Sakda Kaewbuadee. My historical investigation of Apichatpong's film style takes an active interest in sites of collaboration and creative influence and does not assume a single creative 'genius' behind the work.[3]

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cinema, Heidegger does not establish a comprehensive philosophical system in his writing, and like Loht, I "end up pushing the boundaries of Heidegger's philosophy a bit farther than Heidegger would sanction" (Loht 2017, 2).

[3] For Heidegger, art is not an expression of personal genius divorced from the world, but is rather expressive of the world of which it is integrally a part. As Hubert Dreyfus argues, "Heidegger is not interested in works of art as expressions of the vision of a creator, nor is he interested in them as the source of aesthetic experiences in a viewer," but rather art allows for intersubjective experience through the "revealing of someone else's world" (Dreyfus 1987, 407-9). The word Heidegger uses for creation, *schöpfen*, translates to 'draw from,' like one draws water from a well (Sinclair 2014, 659). Creation as a 'drawing up' of a work is not an exhaustive process that gradually depletes a world of its meaning, but rather the proverbial bucket of the artist capturing a limited part of the whole.

For Heidegger, artistic expression is not an outworking of interior truth or expressive genius as Andrew Sarris argued (Sarris 1962, 1970), but is rather expressive of the artist's world.[4] This 'world' is not reducible to socio-cultural context, but rather serves a deeper ontological function of relating oneself to others and to other things in the world. Creating a work of art sets up a world, an outlook through which the artist's world makes sense that can be taken up by others. For Heidegger, Classical Greek temples stood to "[give] to things their look and to men their outlook to themselves" (Heidegger 1971a, 42), framing what it means to be in the world and providing a shared sense of identity and understanding. Works of art allow for a shared sense of the world, "manifesting a world *to those outside it*" (Dreyfus 1987, 409, original emphasis).

Heidegger's ontology of art rejects textualization, and instead insists upon a return to the historical and creative moments in which the work was produced. To understand a work as a created thing, we must return to the process of its creation. Heidegger writes that "in contrast to all other modes of production, the work is distinguished by being created so that its createdness is part of the created work," the absent hand of the painter present in the being of the work (Heidegger 1971a, 62). "Art is historical… [a] creative preserving of truth in the work" crafted through particular processes at particular points in time, such that this createdness is implicated in the 'finished' creation (Heidegger 1971a, 69). To approach a work, therefore, we must "go into the activity of the artist in order to arrive at the origin of the work of art… [as any] attempt to define the work being of the work purely in terms of the work itself proves to be unfeasible" (Heidegger 1971a, 56). A work of art is not locked in a process of perpetual production in the moment of reception, but rather is a historical preservation of truth intimately tied to the moments of its creation.

At the same time, Heidegger also rejected a realist ontology of cinema. Heidegger himself was ambivalent about cinema, viewing it as yet another modern technology that alienates us from (rather than sensitises us to) the world, as he argued in his essay "The Thing" (1971):

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[4] Heidegger uses the term 'world' in two different senses across his writing, which complicates our understanding of it in relation to art. Graham Harman notes that Heidegger employed 'world' in *Being and Time* (2008b) to refer to the interrelation of entities "in a global system of references" and the "highly specific context from which they receive their meaning"; Heidegger uses the term again in "Origin," but in this case positions 'world' as that which is openly visible, in opposition to 'earth' which is "dark and concealed" (Harman 2007, 177). World, then, is not simply socio-cultural context but is also a style, an ordering of things, a perspective through which existence makes sense. In his own reading of Heidegger, Dreyfus defines 'world' as "the whole context of shared equipment, roles and practices on the basis of which one can encounter entities and other people as intelligible" (Dreyfus 1987, 407).

> All distances in space and time are shrinking. Man now reaches overnight, by plane, places which formerly took weeks and months of travel. He now receives instant information, by radio, of events which he formerly learned about only years later, if at all. The germination and growth of plants, which remained hidden throughout the seasons, is now exhibited publicly in a minute, on film. Distant sites of the most ancient cultures are shown on film as if they stood this very moment amidst today's street traffic.
>
> (Heidegger 1971b, 163)

For Heidegger, this "frantic abolition of all distances" facilitated by cinema "brings no nearness, for nearness does not consist in shortness of distance" (163), but rather alienates us from the immanent conditions of existence. However, Heidegger maintains a "narrow" view of cinema that inadequately accounts for its expressive capacities as an art form; rather than simply alienating us from the world, cinema can sensitise us to the things of the world and provide an outlook on the world and our place within it. Critically, however, the essence of film art is not in the ontological realism of photography itself (as Bazin argued), but rather in the artistic interventions imposed upon the film material by the filmmakers themselves.

The essence of cinematic art, therefore, is not simply in its capacity to represent linguistic meaning, nor in its capacity to represent realistically, but rather is in its capacity to draw us closer to the world and sensitise us to its contents through the artistic interventions of its artists. Rather than approaching reception as an act of forming meaning, Heidegger understands the spectatorship as an act of *preserving* meaning that is already intact. He notes that "Just as a work cannot be created but is essentially in need of creators, so what is created cannot itself come into being without those who preserve it" (1971a, 64). For Heidegger, this aesthetic experience is not a transaction between a radically separate subject and object but rather a viewer's "standing-within" the space of the work, an open experience of the "awesomeness of the truth that is happening in the work" (65). As Sean Loht notes:

> Artworks disclose truth through their own power; truth is "set" into the work, while the work itself preserves this truth for a time. Yet this truth cannot emerge, it cannot be appreciated without a human viewer who is there, participating in the artwork's disclosure. This phenomenon is a dynamic two-way process in which the artwork's disclosure occurs to and for the human viewer…

(Loht 2017, 6)

Understood on these terms, the *working* of art requires both the active involvement of artist and those who receive it—or as Heidegger described, "preserve it" (1971a, 64). Rather than simply understanding the experience of Apichatpong's cinema as one of reading, I instead see it as an 'architecture of experience,' a structure through which spectators pass and experience an outlook on the world. Rather than structuring a strict linear narrative, I understand Apichatpong's films as architectural spaces through which particular visions of the world are made visible, entailing an active and embodied form of spectatorship.

This leads me to a discussion of my practical methods. My formal analysis is informed by David Bordwell's method of 'historical poetics,' a method organised around the investigation of film form and its evolution over time. Just as Heidegger argues that since "all art is in essence poetry, the arts… must be traced to poesy" (Heidegger 1971a, 70), Bordwell derives the term 'poetics' from the same Greek root 'poiêsis' or 'active making' (Bordwell 1989, 371). In Bordwell's formulation, "The poetics of any medium studies the finished work as a process of construction—a process which includes a craft component… the more general principles according to which the work is composed, and its functions, effects and uses" (Bordwell 1989, 371). Historical poetics asks two primary questions when applied to film: "what are the principles according to which films are constructed and the means by which they achieve particular effects?" and second, "How and why have these principles arisen and changed in particular empirical circumstances?" (Bordwell 1989, 371). Notably, Bordwell positions historical poetics in opposition to the semiotic methods of interpretation that he argues have historically dominated the field of film studies. For Bordwell, historical poetics provides empirical data to counter the *a priori* arrangements of meaning he associates with "Grand Theory" and continental philosophy, concentrating instead on "intersubjectively accepted data which are in principle amenable to alternative definition" (Bordwell 1989, 371-2).

Building on historical poetics, this thesis conducts a comprehensive analysis of Apichatpong's filmmaking, its evolution over time, and its situation within broader aesthetic histories and traditions. To do this, I conduct detailed shot-by-shot analysis of the majority of his feature films released to date, providing detailed data on the visual editing, shot selection and sound design of his narrative work, including a macroscopic view on the evolution of his filmmaking practice over time. Inspired by Barry Salt (1992), cinemetric analysis allows for the empirical study of editing rhythms by finding the average shot length (ASL) of films from across history to compare their stylistic characteristics. By coupling this shot-by-shot study of Apichatpong's feature films

with in-depth analysis of shot composition, camera movement, sound design and plot structure, I develop a comprehensive portrait of his filmmaking style and its evolution over time, organised in a way that makes my data intelligible to comparable studies of other filmmakers. Similar empirical analysis has been conducted on the work of Yasujirō Ozu (Bordwell 1988), Béla Tarr (Kovács 2013) and Tsai Ming-liang (Lim 2014), among others. This in-depth analysis also enables me to make stylistic comparisons between his work and that of comparable filmmakers and influences, which I explore further in later chapters.

Beyond his feature films, my analysis also encompasses Apichatpong's diverse catalogue of short films, installations and other creative works. He often explores themes across different media simultaneously, and projects often evolve over time and shift from one medium to another; for example, his installation *Primitive* (2009d) began as a research trip but morphed into its own video installation, and photographic elements from his trip were incorporated into *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2011). When analysing his non-narrative shorts or installations, I acknowledge their formal differences and changing spectatorial conditions associated with different media, and account for site-specificity and installation layout where applicable. As a former architecture student, Apichatpong takes great interest in spatial composition across his work, and I try my best to account for these layouts based on existing records from galleries and Apichatpong himself. Since his video installations have been curated, broken apart and repurposed across multiple travelling shows and exhibitions, each installation I include in analysis is tied to a specific site (where that data is available).

In addition to formal analysis of the works themselves, my investigation incorporates material from an extensive archive of public interviews, artist's statements and published essays by Apichatpong over the past 25 years. He has extensively discussed his creative influences, personal philosophies and practical filmmaking decisions throughout his career, providing an extensive archive of written sources to guide my analysis. Many of these sources were assembled by Apichatpong himself and published through a personal archive on his website, but I also depend upon archives from other galleries and film festivals who have made reference materials and correspondence publicly available. This historical research contextualises my formal analysis, and provides insight into the historical, stylistic and institutional influences on Apichatpong's work.

Given the interdisciplinary focus of my investigation of cinematic emptiness, however, I exceed the strictly empirical focus of Bordwell's historical poetics and delve into more phenomenological explanations of Apichatpong's cinema, utilising affective and qualitative methods of analysis. Bordwell's method provides useful data to quantify the material characteristics of Apichatpong's filmmaking, but his opposition to "Grand Theory" prevents us

from fully understanding the impact and relevance of Apichatpong's filmmaking. Consequently, my analysis acknowledges both my own embodied and historical position in relation to the works, and that of Apichatpong and his collaborators. Engaging with a film as a created work, then, is neither entirely formalist or phenomenological, as to engage with a work puts me in direct contact with the work, and through the work, the artist. Vivian Sobchack's film phenomenology seeks a form of 'first person' cinematic participation that "does not limit my access to the world, but on the contrary is my means of entering into communication with it" (1992, xix). Apichatpong's films invite such auto-ethnographic phenomenological analysis, invoking a sensuous and irrational relationship with the screen that cannot be easily reconciled with external systems of understanding. But this acknowledgement of phenomenological involvement also bears an ethical dimension: 'I' am not some transcendent intelligence dictating meaning above the work, but rather am imminently present in the world. Furthermore, I must also acknowledge that I share the world with Apichatpong himself – a living person – and that through my analysis contribute to discourses surrounding his work that therefore indirectly affect him. As an act of preservation, reading his films is itself a political act, and I take exclusive responsibility for the views contained within it. I acknowledge my own history and position, and that this thesis is itself a work—an object of work, time, and personal experience.

By fusing historical poetics with a phenomenological analysis of embodied experience, my thesis investigates the relationship between formal and profound emptiness within Apichatpong's filmmaking. By grounding my analysis in the empirical formal conditions of his films, my embodied analysis avoids the reduction of emptiness to a purely subjective experience, allowing me to historicise it within specific aesthetic and philosophical traditions. Additionally, by incorporating phenomenological investigation, I draw out the reorienting implications of his work on spectators, addressing the broader phenomenological, political, and ethical implications of his art of looking.

Chapter outline

This thesis is divided into eight chapters, with each chapter approaching a different dimension of Apichatpong's creative practice. My analysis is organised thematically and does not present a linear history of his work. Films, images and ideas recur across multiple chapters, drawing out different meanings and ideas in each case. Rather than present a single, systematic definition of cinematic emptiness, my analysis operates as a sort of 'conceptual turning over,' placing issues of emptiness and non-meaning in conversation with Apichatpong's work in a manner modelled

after Sara Ahmed's practice of "follow[ing] words around, in and out of their intellectual histories" (Ahmed 2019, 3). Ahmed's scholarly practice models a productive relationship with disorientation, a tactic for navigating sites and ideas that do not conform to modern Western standards of rationalised comprehension (Ahmed 2006, 566). Given the decentred multiplicity of Apichatpong's films and their resistance to straightforward sense, this open-ended enquiry is the most appropriate form of investigation, offering insights into the multifaceted and evasive dimensions of cinematic emptiness. In each of these chapters, my goal is not to approach a single, unified definition of cinematic emptiness, but rather to work through its manifestations and ethical implications, and to consider how Apichatpong's practice (re)orients characters and spectators in relation to the screen within his art of looking.

The first two chapters introduce key concepts relevant to the overarching thesis and contextualise my discussion of Apichatpong's filmmaking. In chapter one, I situate my enquiry within the broader philosophical and aesthetic histories of emptiness. In this chapter, I interweave discussions of the Theravada Buddhist concept of *suññatā* and Martin Heidegger's discussion of *Nichts* (Nothingness) with histories of white paintings, silence and excessive cinematic duration in order to investigate the relationship between profound emptiness and formal emptiness within art history. Through this, I challenge the association of emptiness with absence, and instead look to consider how emptiness can instead be understood on its own terms independent of absence. I argue that silences and empty spaces should not be understood as vacant spaces awaiting fulfillment but can rather exist on their own terms outside of established logics and hierarchies of value. From here, I shift focus from art history and philosophy to cinema, and explore how varied film movements from across the twentieth century have grappled with issues of emptiness in their own works. I pay particularly close attention to slow cinema, a loose movement that has developed substantially over the past three decades and represents an increased fascination with cinematic empty time. Apichatpong is an active participant within this movement and one of its most recognisable practitioners, along with major influences such as Béla Tarr, Tsai Ming-liang and Abbas Kiarostami. I conclude this chapter by connecting these discourses directly with Apichatpong's own work, reviewing how existing academic research into his filmmaking have engaged with the empty and non-representational dimensions of filmmaking practice. By reviewing these diverse aesthetic and intellectual influences, I establish a rich tradition of cinematic emptiness oriented away from spectacle and representation towards contemplative non-meaning and begin to contextualise the core questions of my thesis.

In chapter two, I provide a critical biography of Apichatpong's life and creative influences and discuss the evolution of his practice over time. He is often framed as a 'mysterious object' of

world cinema, exciting feelings of both foreignness and fascination among critics, which he himself plays into in his work.

Having contextualised my investigation in these first two chapters, the remaining six chapters each analyse a different dimension of emptiness within Apichatpong's filmmaking. Chapter three, *Silence*, explores the relationships between Apichatpong's formal silences, the histories of silent cinema in Thailand and the silencing of Thai film censorship. Rather than understand it as an absence of sound, I follow John Cage's definition of silence as the existence of sounds that are otherwise unacknowledged by intentional consciousness. By understanding silence as a concealment (as opposed to absence) of sound, I argue that by turning our attentions to silence we can recognise that which is conventionally marginalised or ignored, whether in everyday experience, in history or in discourse, and by placing Cage's work in conversation with Thongchai Winichakul's work on silences in Thai discourse, I argue that Apichatpong's silences acknowledge otherwise repressed histories and traumas.

In chapter four, *Pillows*, I address Apichatpong's visual editing style, concentrating on his use of non-diegetic inserts or 'pillow shots.' The *pillow shot* is commonly associated with director Yasujirō Ozu, whose systematic filmmaking used non-diegetic inserts to leave empty spaces *between* and *within* sequences in contradiction to conventional continuity editing practices. In contrast to classical narrative cinema's emphasis on clarity and continuity, pillow editing prioritises empty spaces and moments, sensitising spectators to objects and temporalities ordinarily excluded within conventional narrative cinema. Through comparative analysis with Ozu's editing style, I explore how Apichatpong's pillows serve mediating functions between shots and sequences, facilitating moments of spectatorial sensitivity to non-human objects and the passage of time.

Chapter five, *Ghosts*, investigates the relationship between architecture, memory and absence in Apichatpong's cinema, oriented around the site of the empty home. The concept of 'home' recurs throughout Apichatpong's cinema, and both he and his characters often return to people and places that are significant to them. Beyond its significance as a physical shelter, home provides an orienting centre for human life and identity. Empty homes mark a disappearance of this orienting centre, transformed into *unheimlich* (uncanny, unhomely) sites of unsettlement and uncertainty. Across cultures and fictions, ghosts emerge from within these non-places; they haunt empty places, tied to objects or people within them as remnants of past, or phantasmic bodies interfering with subjects in the present. At the same time, through its photographic origins, cinema itself is an uncanny medium, bearing the capacity to resuscitate people and places – like ghosts – who have long since disappeared. This chapter examines the intersections of these issues, and discusses how Apichatpong grapples with issues of disorientation, loss and absence across his work.

Building on these discussions of disorientation and dislocation, chapter six – *Strays* – addresses how Apichatpong navigates exclusion from conventional definitions of home, discussing the connections between the stray dogs, queer people and migrants that recur across his filmmaking. Straying, like queerness, is temporal, altering the way its subjects act in relation to the world in opposition to conventional values of futurity and progress. Barbara Creed describes the stray as "an outsider, the other, an exile – the one who lives apart from the mainstream," applying the concept "both to humans and animals who have drifted from their normal path, separated themselves from their kin, or been banished, rejected or abjected from their society because of their nature, situation, status or species" (Creed 2017, 7-8). This shared experience of exclusion is not only common to human and animal but can serve as grounds for emergent ethical relations between them as they share existence on the margins of the anthropocene. By way of Emmanuel Levinas, this chapter introduces the ethical dimension of Apichatpong's cinema, and considers the ways in which his films stage ethical encounters between humans and animals within the empty, destabilised spaces of his filmmaking.

This discussion of ethics is intensified in chapter seven, *Intimate Boredom*, in which I explore Apichatpong's durational filmmaking practice as a means of staging intimate encounters between spectators and the screen. Apichatpong cites Andy Warhol as one of his major influences, and places particular emphasis on Warhol's treatment of cinematic time. In *Sleep* (1963c) and *Empire* (1964), Warhol manipulated extreme duration to push the limits of human attention, but also showed great interest in human gesture and behaviour in his *Screen Tests* (1964-1966) and short films such as *Blow Job* (1963a) and *Haircut* (1963b). Both Warhol and Apichatpong had significant interest in using excessive duration as a means of imposing time on spectators – that is, "a cinema that is closer to real life, in real time" (Weerasethakul 2020b) – in order to create an experience of boredom. Yet I insist that rather than producing a solipsistic or isolated experience, Apichatpong uses boredom as a means of creating an enhanced experience of spectatorial intimacy by imposing an uncomfortable amount of time shared with the image of a face on-screen. In this, I turn to Levinas' understanding of the 'Face' as the site of ethical demand between Self and Other and argue that by imposing the image of a face on spectators through excessive duration, he stages intimate ethical encounters between them.

I conclude with chapter eight, *Sleep Cinema*, in which I analyse Apichatpong's unusual understanding of the relationship between sleep and cinema. He has often expressed his comfort with spectators sleeping through his films (Carrion-Murayari 2011, 14), and stated that "over the years I have become less and less interested in watching movies. Even [in] my own films, I sleep" (Weerasethakul 2018a). By analysing his 2018 installation *SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL*, I outline the

structure of Apichatpong's proposed 'sleep cinema,' and address its challenges to the attentive structures of conventional cinema. Whereas conventional Western cinema is organised around a highly disciplined structure of attention in which the influence non-diegetic stimuli is minimised, and spectators are expected to abide by strict conventions of behaviour, Apichatpong's sleep cinema centralises inattention by allowing its guests to fall asleep or leave at their leisure. I place this analysis in conversation with Jean-Luc Nancy's work on the phenomenology of sleep and André Breton's writing on Surrealistic cinema in order to understand how Apichatpong's reimagined 'sleep cinema' challenges the conventional subject-centred apparatus of cinema. As Nancy writes, sleep marks a moment "where I am no longer separated from the world," where "I myself become indistinct. I no longer properly distinguish myself from the world or from others, from my own body or from my mind" in which I cease to be a subject (Nancy 2009, 5-8). In this chapter, I explore the implications of Apichatpong's 'cinema without subjects,' and consider the broadening horizons of a cinema in which spectatorial attention and representational meaning are marginalised.

Chapter One

Literature Review

Mekong Hotel (2012) closes with a shot of boats playing on the river. Their tiny shapes move and interweave with one another in unexpected directions, leaving trails of foam behind them as they dance across the water. Shot from an upper floor of a hotel overlooking the river, the boats are barely visible in the distance and are instead dwarfed by the enormous empty space surrounding them. In the distance, the Mekong River hugs the shoreline of Laos, occasional traffic passing over a bridge connecting the country to Thailand. Excluding these minor moving details, the shot is defined by its stillness and compositional emptiness. Much of the frame is consumed by the calm

surface of the water reflecting the soft beige hues of the sky moments before the sun sets, the two surfaces separated by a thin horizon of land bisecting the frame. Apichatpong holds this static shot for 277 seconds, intensifying its sense of compositional emptiness and generating a moment of extended visual contemplation.

Sixty-one minutes into Tsai Ming-liang's *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (2003), the camera lingers on a static shot of an empty movie theatre following its final screening. The theatre's ticket attendant (Chen Hsiang-Chyi) sweeps the space, her body the only moving object in the frame and dwarfed by the empty space surrounding her. Tsai holds this static shot for 320 seconds – lingering even after attendant leaves the space – staring out onto the empty auditorium. There is an uncanniness to this empty movie theatre. Shot from the position of the screen facing out onto rows of seating, Tsai's image of the empty theatre mirrors the theatrical experiences of its spectators, confronting them with an extended moment of empty time while reflecting back at them an image of their own absence.

Apichatpong described *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* as one of his favourite films, and cites Tsai as a major influence on his formative filmmaking. There are obvious formal and thematic connections between the two filmmakers. They share a preference for extended shot duration and dedramatised plotting, a fascination with the architecture of the cinematic apparatus itself, and both play with memory, queerness and states of liminal perception. Yet considered more deeply, their interests converge in a shared philosophical interest in emptiness. In an online interview at the 2021 Berlin International Film Festival in 2021, Apichatpong recalled an earlier conversation he had with Tsai in which the older filmmaker stated that his goal in life was "to do nothing" (Weerasethakul 2021). Reflecting on this statement, Apichatpong stated:

> I thought that's quite a lazy activity, but the more you think about it, it keeps you thinking: what is nothingness? And also is quite a difficult task to do nothing, because we always do something. A movie is about something, so what is nothingness? I think the word expands so much, of how you approach the world, and in the end, maybe, it's about the nothingness of expectation, of self.
>
> (Weerasethakul 2021)

For Apichatpong, the question of emptiness was both spiritual and artistic, linking back to his religious experiences of Buddhism and aesthetic fascination with empty time. Building on the themes described in his public letter published in *de Film Krant* the year prior, Apichatpong

described how his experiences with COVID-19 prompted him to further rethink his relationship with emptiness:

> In the beginning of the pandemic, there was nothing on my agenda. Nothing on my schedule. And then you say, what am I going to do? And then you start to look around, and start to see the beauty of the closeness of the people around you, or animals like my dogs, to spend time, and started to notice the rhythm and the cycle of the seasons. But in the end, this nothingness inspired me to grab the camera and shoot something, to become something. We start from nothing.
>
> (Weerasethakul 2021)

For Apichatpong, moments of emptiness convey a "beauty of casualness… something fruitful and unexpected, and maybe beautiful can emerge when you don't expect" (Weerasethakul 2021). The unpredictable movements of boats dancing on the Mekong encapsulate one dimension of this "beauty of casualness," but cinematic emptiness cannot be reduced to this single sense. Rather, emptiness functions as a dynamic and constantly evolving feature of his filmmaking, demanding further contemplation and reflection.

In this literature review, I unpack the concept of emptiness as it relates to Apichatpong's cinema, which I situate within transcultural philosophical and aesthetic traditions. It is divided into two sections. In the first, I discuss the concept of 'profound emptiness' as it appears in Theravada Buddhism and the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. As an ontological or spiritual concept, profound emptiness evades straightforward definition or formalisation, but can only be understood through experience, and is therefore distinct from the related concepts of absence, vacancy and nothingness. I use the term 'profound' here to establish this form of emptiness as an affective, experiential condition, which I oppose to a concept of 'formal emptiness.' In contrast to the conceptual evasiveness of profound emptiness, formal emptiness can be stabilised and expressed through specific creative decisions. In the second section, I outline how formal emptiness has manifested in historical and contemporary art cinema, and pay particular attention to the emerging subfield of slow cinema studies. I outline the structure of contemporary slow cinema discourses and explore its connections with earlier explorations of cinematic duration and with the broader global 'slow' movement.

Profound emptiness

Emptiness is an evasive concept that resists concrete definition. Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, a Theravada monk whose sermons on *suññatā* (emptiness, voidness) are key texts within Thai Buddhism, insisted that *suññatā* evades rational understanding, stating that "the words 'to know' and 'to understand' in ordinary, everyday language are merely a matter of reading and listening, of thinking and reasoning… can't be used to know voidness" (Buddhadāsa 1994, 56). Within Buddhism, *suññatā* is a multivalent concept entangled with issues of impermanence and interconnectedness, simultaneously relating to the doctrine of not-self (*anatta)* – "being void of self, or void of having anything as self or as belonging to self," or to have "freedom from the feeling of self and the sense that things belong to self" (Buddhadāsa 1994, 27, 43) – and the emptiness of all existence beyond the self, the belief that "all conditioned phenomena are interdependent and therefore empty of a permanent autonomous self" (Lopez 2016, 176).

Coming from the Western tradition but nevertheless informed by Eastern philosophy (May 1989), Heidegger insisted that *Nichts* (nothingness) resists positive definition, such that "it remains wholly impossible for us to make the nothing into an object" (Heidegger 2008a, 97). For Heidegger, nothing exists as a purely negative concept that cannot be positively understood, but exists only as "the negation of the totality of beings; it is nonbeing pure and simple" (Heidegger 2008a, 85), and he undergoes a series of linguistic contortions to express this: "*Das Nichts nichtet*" (Nothing nothings). Like Heidegger, Gay Watson insists that to consider emptiness as a 'primordial void' compounds the problem by turning it into "a thing with transcendent and mystical properties, an absolute," and thereby sidestepping the term's ontological uncertainty (Watson 2014, 15-16). As Steven William Laycock powerfully articulates, "Emptiness… is not, of course, a 'thing.' Emptiness, absolute no/thingness, is not, then, an Atlas groaning under the weight of the world. While it conditions, it does not ground" (Laycock 2001, 118). Emptiness therefore poses an analytic challenge as it resists stabilisation and exists only to disorient, to unsettle presupposed organisations of meaning.

Western philosophy and aesthetics have historically struggled to consider emptiness on these terms. Aristotle's theory of matter excluded the possibility of a vacuum, as he imagined the world to be full and continuous such that any empty space would refill automatically (Mortelmans 2005, 20). Considered in continuum theory, a space can never remain vacant as something always fills the void. More recent aesthetic theorists have approach artistic voids and silences with the same refusal. Brian Doak argues that although we are every day surrounded by empty spaces, "there is no quantifiable space (on earth at least) where one can look and *not* see an image of *something*" (2015, 28-29), reflecting John Cage's statement that "there is no such thing as silence," that

"something is always happening that makes a sound" (Sontag 1978, 5). Susan Sontag reinforces this understanding, insisting that:

> [T]here is no such thing as empty space. As long as a human eye is looking there is always something to see. To look at something that's 'empty' is still to be looking, still to be seeing something – if only the ghosts of one's own expectations. In order to perceive fullness, one must retain an acute sense of the emptiness which marks it off; conversely, in order to perceive emptiness, one must apprehend other zones of the world as full.
>
> (Sontag 1978, 5)

Understood on these terms, emptiness cannot be visualised or expressed in itself as it is impossible to render an absolute absence of content, and rather can only exist as the recognised absence of something else: "silence," Sontag writes, "never ceases to imply its opposite and demand its presence" (1978, 5).

The core problem with these theorisations is that they incorrectly equate emptiness with absence. In his introduction to Buddhadāsa's book *Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree* (1994), Santikaro Bhikkhu insists that the equating of "*suññatā* with nothingness, nonexistence, vacancy, vacuum, zeroness, and the like" fundamentally misinterprets voidness as a purely negative concept. To describe an object, an action, or even one's life as 'empty' implies a hollowness to be filled with meaning or an absence to be overcome, a nihilism Santikaro insists is absent in Buddhadāsa's concept of *suññatā*. To look at an empty space and understand it as 'absence' masks the discomfort of emptiness by assuming that something once filled it or could fill it in the future. Only by accepting something as empty-in-itself and lingering in that state of discomfort that it provokes can profound emptiness actually be experienced. Emptiness is better understood not as an absence of presence, but rather as a state of presence-for-itself, something that cherishes itself.

Having moved beyond assumptions of negative emptiness, we can begin to acknowledge its generative potentialities. Watson traces the etymology of the word *suññatā* to its Sanskrit roots *svi* or *sva*, which denotes "hollowness or swelling, as of a seed as it expands," reflecting a potentiality lost in English translation (2014, 14-5). Within Buddhism, the contemplation of emptiness serves as grounds of profound experience and realisation, as a means of recognising the impermanence of self and thereby recognising that "nothing whatsoever should be clung to as 'I' or 'mine'" (Buddhadāsa 1994). This realisation of the emptiness, impermanence and interconnectedness of all

beings is a fundamental principle of Buddhism, and serves as a means of quenching *dukka* (pain, misery, suffering) (Buddhadāsa 1994). For Buddhadāsa, emptiness manifests through direct phenomenological sensitivity to the world. He writes:

> …to know *suññatā* means that voidness is manifest in awareness. So I encourage you, in any moment that the mind has any measure of voidness, even if it's not absolutely or perfectly void, to keep recognizing it. Actually, on any one day *suññatā* is there repeatedly. Even if it's not fixed, absolute *suññatā*, it's still very good, as long as we take the trouble to observe it. If we take an interest in this sort of voidness right from the start, it will generate a contentment with voidness that will make it easy to practice and attain the real thing. Therefore, the phrase 'we know *suññatā*' refers to having voidness manifest in awareness.
>
> (Buddhadāsa 1994, 56)

This understanding of emptiness shifts emphasis from content (or the absence thereof) to experience, focussing on a student's phenomenological capacity to recognise emptiness that is always and already present in existence. The profound effect of this experience, Buddhadāsa argues, leads the student to realise their own impermanence and the artificiality of their sense of self.

Echoing this generative understanding of emptiness, Heidegger outlines the ontological importance of nothingness as a space within which humans come in contact with the world (Heidegger 2008a, 104). In Heidegger's formulation, nothingness is not a condition of alienation, but rather a facility for the *unfolding* of Being for human beings (*Dasein*). Emptiness is not an absence of content, but rather a clearing within which we can experience the totality of beings around us. In "The Origin of the Work of Art" (1935), Heidegger introduces the concept of "clearing" as a condition within in which actions and apprehensions are possible:

> In the midst of beings as a whole an open place occurs. There is a clearing. Thought of in reference to beings, this clearing is more in being than are beings. This open centre is therefore not surrounded by beings; rather, the clearing centre itself encircles all that is, as does the nothing, which we scarcely know. … Only this clearing grants and guarantees to us humans a passage to those beings that we ourselves are not, and access to the being

> that we ourselves are. Thanks to this clearing, beings are unconcealed in certain changing degrees.
>
> (Heidegger 2008a, 178)

For both Buddhadāsa and Heidegger, therefore, profound emptiness serves an existential function through contemplation. By detaching profound emptiness from its associations with absence and instead recognising its generative capacity to facilitate profound and reorienting experiences, we can begin to reassess the generative capacities of these moments in cinema.

Empty cinemas

Buddhadāsa and Heidegger both understand emptiness ontologically and insist that it cannot be materialised. So far, I have described profound emptiness as a condition of human existence as opposed to a material feature of art works and have noted that both Buddhadāsa's *suññatā* (voidness) and Heidegger's *Nichts* (nothingness) cannot be readily formalised or materially expressed. If, as Buddhadāsa describes, voidness is implicit in all existence, then it cannot be reduced to a single set of aesthetic or formal characteristics. By comparison, formal emptiness in art is relatively easy to identify, and manifests in a variety of forms: compositional emptiness, stillness, silence, excessive duration and narrative meaninglessness. Filmmakers throughout the history of cinema have used these devices to generate various creative effects (and Apichatpong actively participates within many of these aesthetic traditions), but the relationship between these two forms of emptiness warrants further consideration.

The first and perhaps most obvious example of formal cinematic emptiness is the near-total absence of visual figuration found in the blank screen. Crafted as a visual response to John Cage's *4'33"*, Nam June Paik's installation *Zen for Film* (1964) projected an unexposed strip of celluloid onto the white wall of a gallery. With no figurative image or soundtrack, the only image is that of scratches and dust that gradually accumulated on the stock, the only sound that of film rattling through the projector in the centre of the room. When the reel ended, it would reverse back to the start, endlessly repeating itself until the stock itself physically disintegrated. Other artists and theorists in this period also experimented with non-figuration, extreme duration and silence in their respective disciplines, as we see in Robert Rauschenberg's *White Painting* (1951), Piero Manzonii's *Achrome* (1958) and Li Yuan-chia's *Monochrome White Painting* (1963), all of which feature stark white canvasses without visible figuration. In *Absence in Cinema* (2020), Justin Remes traces this tradition of blank screens back further to Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square*

(1915) and *White on White* (1918), which he then connects with the experimental film practices of Andy Warhol and Walter Ruttman. Despite their resistance to conventional standards of figurative art, Jonas Mekas insisted that these blank screens, silent performances and white canvasses can still be interpreted as a form of visual representation "governed by the same thousand year old aesthetic laws [to] be analysed and experienced like any other classical work of art" (cited in Kwon 2014, 31). Echoing Sontag's insistence on the impossibility of absolute visual emptiness, Mekas argued that the image of absence is still an image, still something to be seen, and can therefore be interpreted like any other work of art.

The absence of visual figuration in these works undermines the conventional priorities of Western art, offering new ways of understanding and valuing aesthetic experience. *Dansaekhwa* – a style of Korean monochrome painting – emerged alongside Western modernism in the 1970s and centred on the formalisation of emptiness under the influence of Korean (*Seon*) Buddhism (Morley 2013). For Simon Morley, the empty spaces of *Dansaekhwa* painting did not function as absences of representation but rather constituted "an expanded system of representation, one in which emptiness is considered a privileged sign" (Morley 2013, 200). Moreover, Morley argued that *Dansaekhwa* resisted the ocularcentrism of Western art by emphasising the haptic materiality of the work itself, the absence of *visual* figuration opening space for more embodied forms of perception (Morley 2013, 202). This reappraisal of emptiness fundamentally challenges the aesthetic hierarchies of Western art. As Korean art historian Lee Joon writes:

> From the perspective of Western art, which explicates everything based on forms, the void of Asian painting may appear, to certain extents, to suggest a lack of forms or a space of incompletion. As a matter of fact, it is difficult to find a term corresponding to the concept in the Western artistic lexicon. 'Empty space,' a negative element, implies absence of physical representation or is synonymous with 'blank space.' In the theory of East Asian painting, however, void exists as a complete, legitimate part of a work, and, in a more active sense, is an 'unpainted painting'. In that sense, void does not mean the renunciation of the use of space but rather the encouragement of space and is absence-cum-presence.
>
> (cited in Morley 2013, 200)

Understood in these terms, we can unsettle Sontag's belief that "[T]here is no such thing as empty space. As long as a human eye is looking there is always something to see" (Sontag 1978, 5). By

apprehending these moments as absence, we detach ourselves from the conditions of emptiness itself and ignore the presence(s) contained within them. Instead of searching for moments of audio-visual absence, we should instead be guided towards moments of emptiness within presence, towards the "beauty of casualness" that permeates empty moments in cinema.

Rather than being purely visual, formal cinematic emptiness is also temporal, emerging through excessive duration as an emptying of meaning. Questions of cinematic duration have persisted across the history of screen studies and are often linked to the long take theories of André Bazin. In his realist ontology of the cinematic image, Bazin criticised montage for diminishing the importance of the photographic image itself. Whereas Soviet Montagists sought to intervene in the meaning of photographic images by juxtaposing them in dialectic relationships with one another, Bazin preferred the ambiguity of the deep focus long take which he argued "brings the spectator into a relation with the image closer to that which he enjoys with reality" (Bazin 1967, 35). By contrast, Andy Warhol manipulated cinematic duration for anti-realistic purposes, filming human faces in single takes during his *Screen Tests* (1964-1966) and shooting the Empire State Building overnight for his eight-hour film *Empire* (1964). Whereas Bazin's long takes approximated a condition of sensory realism, Warhol's films problematised the temporal conditions of everyday life, making them seem odd or out of place. Adam Sitney argues that Warhol "was the first film-maker to try to make films which would outlast a viewer's initial state of perception" (Sitney 2002, 351), manipulating duration not as a form of realism but rather as a means of complicating and drawing attention to the viewing experience itself. By contrast, Andrei Tarkovsky proposed that "*Time, captured in its factual forms and manifestations*… is the supreme idea of cinema as an art," insisting that the aesthetic manipulation of duration – "sculpting in time"– was the key creative task of the director (Tarkovsy 1986, 62-4, original emphasis). Unlike Bazin, Tarkovsky understood the manipulation of cinematic duration as an act of artistic expression but opposes the modernist reflexivity of Warhol's filmmaking. We can therefore already see three differing accounts of cinematic duration: as an absence of artistic intervention (Bazin), as grounds for spectatorial reflexivity (Warhol), and as a means of artistic experience (Tarkovsky).

These issues of durational emptiness converge in 'slow cinema.' In a foundational essay "Towards an Aesthetic of Slow in Contemporary Cinema," Matthew Flanagan defined slow cinema as a style of durational filmmaking characterised by "the employment of (often extremely) long takes, de-centred and understated modes of storytelling, and a pronounced emphasis on quietude and the everyday" (2008), which he associated with the creative outputs of Philippe Garrel, Chantal Akerman, Béla Tarr, Lav Diaz, Abbas Kiarostami, Tsai Ming-liang and Apichatpong himself (Flanagan 2008). Many of these directors were associated with national cinemas ordinarily

marginalised within the international film industry, producing work on low budgets financed through international non-profit arts organisations, film festival financing (such as the Hubert Bals Fund) and small amounts of private investment in the same liminal space between the 'black box' of the international film industry and the 'white cube' of the art gallery, allowing them to borrow from the aesthetics of video installation and sidestep the expectations of clarity and cohesion associated with mainstream narrative cinema.

Flanagan theorised that the slow durations and structural reliance on deep focus long takes within these films are essential features of their aesthetic politics, which he opposed to the intensified continuity style that has dominated Hollywood cinema since the 1990s (Bordwell 2002). Building on a method of shot analysis first proposed by Barry Salt (1992), David Bordwell analysed shot lengths over Hollywood history and found that the editing tempo of feature films gradually accelerated over time, with average shot lengths dropping from between 8 and 11 seconds in 1960 to between 3 and 6 seconds in 2000 (Bordwell 2002, 16-7). Flanagan argues that this contraction of shot length reflects a broader acceleration or 'restlessness' of contemporary image culture that slow cinema seeks to unwind. In opposition to this acceleration, many works of slow cinema have average shot lengths (ASLs) higher than 30 seconds, ranging as high as 175 seconds in Tsai's *Journey to the West* (2014) or 226 seconds in Béla Tarr's *The Turin Horse* (2011). Slow cinema, Flanagan writes, allows spectators to be "*Liberated* from the formal abundance of visual signifiers that comprise a sizeable amount of mass-market cinema," and are instead "invited to let our eyes wander within the parameters of the frame, observing details that would remain veiled or merely implied by a swifter form of narration" (2008, my emphasis). Whereas works of intensified continuity are motivated by a constant procession of content, works of slow cinema linger in moments of extended empty time, opening spaces of visual contemplation ordinarily excluded by mainstream cinema.

Following Flanagan's theorisation, slow cinema discourses have expanded considerably over the past decade. Flanagan expanded his article into a doctoral thesis (2012), which emerged alongside similar theses from Tiago de Luca (2011) and Orhan Emre Çağlayan (2014). Scholarly interest in slow cinema grew over the next decade, culminating in the publication of multiple books on the topic including Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge's edited collection *Slow Cinema* (2015), Song Hwee Lim's *Tsai Ming-liang and the Cinema of Slowness* (2014), Lutz Koepnick's *On Slowness* (2014) and *The Long Take* (2017), Orhan Emre Çağlayan's *The Poetics of Slow Cinema* (2018), in addition to an updated edition of Paul Schrader's *Transcendental Style in Film* (2018). Many of these studies follow the same realist histories and theorisations as Flanagan, centring from Bazin's theorisation of cinematic realism and prioritisation of the long take in

opposition to the intensified continuity style of contemporary Hollywood. Most also follow Gilles Deleuze's history of post-war art cinema found in *Cinema II: The Time Image* (1989), which concentrates on the transformation of art cinema in the aftermath of WWII.

However, when we consider the history of empty moments in cinema, it is important that we extend our histories past 1945 and consider how formal emptiness is entangled with the very origins of cinema. Writing in 1911, Ricciotto Canudo argued that:

> Our age has destroyed most earnestly, with a thousand extremely complex means, the love of restfulness, symbolized by the smoking of a patriarchal pipe at the domestic hearth. Who is still able to enjoy a pipe by the fire in peace these days, without listening to the jarring noise of cars, animating outside, day and night, in every way, an irresistible desire for spaces to conquer?
>
> (Canudo 1911, 60).

On this basis, we can understand that the acceleration of cinema is not a recent phenomenon nor one which can be easily traced to the transformation of film style in the 1980s and 1990s under the regime of intensified continuity, but rather as something implicit within the conditions of modern perception itself.

The excessive durations and empty moments of slow cinema facilitate forms of visual contemplation ordinarily excluded by commercial entertainment media, reversing cinema's complicity in the rationalisation of the human experience of time. In *Techniques of the Observer* (1990) and *Suspensions of Perception* (2001), Jonathan Crary traces a transformation of human attention over the nineteenth century, shifting the concentration of human perception towards a small number of tasks. Under capitalist modernity, Western societies in the late-nineteenth century radically restructured human sensory experience – what Crary describes as "a revolutionizing of the means of perception" – that prioritised productivity, order and discipline to allow concentrated attention on particular tasks for emerging classes of students, workers and consumers (Crary 2001, 13, 22-23). The emerging economies of factory assembly lines and centralised office spaces demanded workers who could attend to specialised tasks, and for the sake of productivity could exclude sensory experiences outside of their productive frame of reference. Consequently attention became "an activity of exclusion, of rendering parts of a perceptual field unperceived" (24-25). Due to its incompatibility with enduring, pre-modern forms of human attention, this new system entailed a "disciplinary regime of attentiveness" through which human attention could be regulated

and directed towards productive ends according to a logic of capital (13). Within this regime of attention, distraction became a moral problem with disciplinary solutions. This capitalisation of human attentiveness marginalised experiences of profound emptiness which refuse to be readily instrumentalised.

For Mary Ann Doane, this rationalisation of time emerged took place alongside the emergence of industrial modernity, occurring parallel with the development of the railroad, telegraphy and the pocket watch (Doane 2002, 5-6). This rationalisation of time into "uniform, homogeneous, irreversible" units logically divisible into hours, minutes and seconds reduced time to currency and thereby divorced it from the contingent lived experiences of actual human life (Doane 2002, 6-8). This modern temporality was encapsulated by Walter Benjamin's concept of "homogeneous, empty time," which reduces time to standing reserve ready to be exploited by capitalist machines of progress, or as Bliss Chua Lim summarises, "[to] a predictable, empty, uniform series of recurring, measured intervals, waiting to be filled with experience" (Lim 2009, 10). Understood on these terms, Benjamin's "homogeneous, empty time" is directly opposed to the profound emptiness I have so far discussed, which is heterogenous, contingent and opposed to financialisation. For Doane, cinematic technologies are intimately involved in this modern temporality as they made possible "a new access to time or its 'perfect representation,'" in other words, "the structuring of time and contingency in capitalist modernity" (Doane 2002, 3-4). Just as Crary argues that cinema participated in the wholesale restructuring of modern visuality, Doane argues that cinema also contributed to the broader restructuring of the human experience of time, further regulating and homogenising our experience of the world.

Against this, Michelle Boulous Walker understands slowness as an act of temporal resistance against the institutionalising rhythms of technological modernity, and following Heidegger's critique of technology argues that "our understanding and our ways of being in the world are becoming technological themselves," reducing the world and its contents to a 'standing reserve' of exploitable resources, and the task of thinking to an act of "information extraction or mining" (Boulous Walker 2017, xic-xv). The act of 'slowing down,' she argues, enables a deeper level of critical reflexivity opposed to the straightforward or efficient conclusions, and is instead oriented towards a pleasurable love of knowledge. Rather than existing as an objective category, 'slowness' functions as an act of intentional temporal resistance against the desensitised acceleration of contemporary life through participation in time-based practices conventionally incompatible with the pace of capitalist modernity, encompassing a broader global 'slow movement' of food, philosophy (Gros 2014, Boulous Walker 2017), science (Stengers 2018), journalism (Le Masurier 2016) and theories of social justice (Nixon 2011).

These issues of slowness can be further connected with the issue of queer temporality. Following theories of queer temporality proposed by Lee Edelman (2004) and Jack Halberstam (2005), Karl Schoonover argues for the political usefulness of slowness, insisting on its capacity to support queer or non-normative forms of being in the world. If, as Schoonover argues, "Queerness often looks like wasted time, wasted lives, wasted productivity," then the 'wastrels' of slow cinema model an alternative manner of queer living opposed to the productive expectations and industrial demands of technological modernity (Schoonover 2012, 73). Queer temporality represents a new model for 'using' empty time, rejecting conventional (capitalist) manipulations of time in preference for other more creative and ethical uses. Analysing the exhausted bodies, alienated protagonists and unusual temporalities of Michelangelo Antonioni, Schoonover argues that in contrast to the action-oriented heroes of Hollywood narrative cinema, Antonioni's subjects waste most of their time or spend it unproductively, searching in vain for a missing lover in *L'avventura* (1960), wandering aimlessly through Rome in *L'eclisse* (1962), or experiencing existential ennui in the industrial wastelands in *Red Desert* (1964), reflecting the aimless wandering of Antonioni's characters and inconclusive endings of Apichatpong's own filmmaking. For Schoonover, the dissident temporalities of slow cinema extend beyond the diegetic world into cinematic spectatorship itself, as by sharing in this moment of extended empty time, spectators themselves participate in this act of queer temporality.

The temporality of slow cinema therefore functions on two overlapping levels: on a level of film form, and in the conditions of spectatorship itself. As Lim argues, "Cinematic time is, thus, both ontological and phenomenological" (Lim 2014, 15). For de Luca, the spectatorial conditions of slow cinema are inextricably linked to the social and technological apparatus of the cinematic auditorium, as the aesthetics of slow cinema prompt a heightened awareness of the spectatorial process itself, "triggering a self-conscious mode of spectatorship whereby the viewer becomes aware of the viewing process and the time spent in such a process" (de Luca 2016, 29, 24). Citing Tsai's empty cinema in *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*, de Luca argues that as this scene stretches time to a point of meaninglessness, it forces spectators to abandon ordinary spectatorial practices of scanning the screen for relevant narrative information and to instead be confronted by uncomfortable, meaningless duration (de Luca 2016, 30).

Cinematic emptiness therefore manifests at the fulcrum of profound and formal emptiness. Profound emptiness cannot be objectified, but rather emerges in moments within which concepts of complete and continuous selfhood or concretised meaning give way typically through

experiences of contemplation. Profound emptiness cannot be manufactured, but the spectatorial conditions of formal emptiness can create conditions conducive to contemplation and profound experience. Slow cinema inverts entertainment cinema's usual function of concentrating and intensifying human attention at the expense of empty moments by foregrounding moments of extended, empty duration, facilitating new forms of spectatorial contemplation. My analysis chapters hinge on this negotiation, examining how film form and the structures of spectatorship reorient experiences of the world.

Chapter Two

Joe, the Mysterious Object

Apichatpong encourages people who struggle with his difficult Thai name to address him as 'Joe,' a nickname he developed during his time studying film in Chicago (Bergstrom 2015, 2). Although some writers familiar with Apichatpong prefer the informal 'Joe,' reflecting an intimacy with the relaxed, soft-spoken artist himself, other Western critics find the name 'Apichatpong' more fitting for a filmmaker whose obscure cinema syncretises the animistic Buddhism of north-eastern Thailand with eclectic artistic influences drawn from international art cinema and the post-war American avant-garde. When juror Quentin Tarantino awarded Apichatpong the *Prix du Jury* for *Tropical Malady* at the Cannes Film Festival in 2004, he stated, "It is wonderful, and I don't understand it" (Anderson 2012, 159), pre-empting Tim Burton's description of *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* six years later as "a beautiful strange dream" (cited in Badt 2010).

There is a tension between these two names, between the ephemeral art and the soft-spoken person, that writers have sought to resolve since his aptly-titled debut feature *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000). Apichatpong's idiosyncratic filmmaking practices have complicated attempts by critics to concretely determine the meaning of his works and in turn his oeuvre has been approached as a 'mysterious object.' This has led many scholars to turn to the personal history of the filmmaker himself – his cultural background, education and key influences – in order to refine the obscurity of his narrative works into something more grounded in a specific place and time. Apichatpong's practice hybridises vernacular Thai media and culture, animistic Buddhism and international cinematic traditions incubated in an American art school and the globalised marketplace of international art cinema, leading James Quandt to describe him as "a fetish for categories" for *farang* (foreigner) film critics (Quandt 2009b, 2). Apichatpong himself often seems to relish the status of otherness and foreign incomprehensibility, sometimes describing his work in interviews and artist's statements using the same poetic obscurity associated with his filmmaking.

The interpretive difficulties associated with Apichatpong's films are well documented. Populated by ellipses, repetition and 'unmotivated' improvised dialogue, his films are rarely organised around a single narrative trajectory and instead wander through the mundane, seemingly unimportant details of their subjects' lives, resisting straightforward narrative analysis.

In general, there is a lack of concrete analysis of what Apichatpong is trying to communicate, depending instead upon what May Adadol Ingawanij and Richard Lowell MacDonald describe as "an abstract assertion of the "underlying" presence of the political rather than concrete suggestion as to how the film is making its political intervention" (Ingawanij and MacDonald 2010, 127). Despite these difficulties, Quandt – one of the earliest critics to engage with Apichatpong's work as a whole – insists that close analysis of these works reveals them to be works of precision and artistic intention, unlike the "apparitional, unknowable relics" they appear to be at first glance (Quandt 2009b, 15).

This chapter contextualises Apichatpong's creative practice by providing a brief overview of his life, influences and politics. Apichatpong has often emphasised the importance of the person of the artist in analysing the works, stating that "film that reflects the filmmaker's own self. It does not necessarily have to be easy to interpret" (Weerasethakul 2006, 2). He expressed a similar frustration in 2011, stating that:

> When you talk about cinema, it's often all about the logic of narrative. The question is, "What is your film about?" In the art world, this kind of question is irrelevant. The question is more about the artist, the person who presents and is behind the work, and the emotions being communicated.
>
> (cited in Kim 2011, 50)

Through this contextualisation, I do not attempt to reduce my study of Apichatpong's cinema to objects of anthropological inquiry, explaining them through reference to elements of his personal or ethnocultural past, but rather to historically ground my discussion of his creative practice through reference to his network of cultural and artistic influences, and the socio-economic conditions under which his filmmaking is possible.

This chapter presents a linear history of Apichatpong's life and career prior to the release of *Memoria* (2021), which I organise around key sites for each period of his life. I begin in Khon Kaen, Apichatpong's hometown, and discuss his childhood spent in and around hospitals with his parents, his early exposure to cinema, and the importance of place – particularly the marginal Isaan region – that has informed his filmmaking as an adult. I discuss his time studying a Master of Fine

Art at the School of Art Institute of Chicago where he was exposed to American experimental filmmaking and international narrative art cinema. The avant-garde emphasis in Chicago powerfully informed his filmmaking practice by decentring conventional industrial processes to instead prioritise personal expression and artisanal production models. From there, I establish Apichatpong's growing international esteem, culminating in his *Palme d'Or* at Cannes in 2010, and consider how international institutions in Europe, North America and Asia have informed, supported or hindered his work as a filmmaker. Parallel to this, I discuss Apichatpong's growing conflicts with Thai censors and industry bodies and examine his increasing detachment from the domestic film industry and growing alienation from Thailand. I conclude in Columbia, where I address his current artistic exile from Thailand and consider the future of his creative practice beyond the scope of this study.

Khon Kaen: 1970 – 1996

Apichatpong was born in a Bangkok hospital in July 1970, but soon moved to the Isaan region in north-eastern Thailand, where his parents worked as doctors in the city of Khon Kaen. The socio-political history of Isaan serves as an important backdrop for much of Apichatpong's practice. Situated close to the country's permeable borders with Laos and Cambodia, Isaan was culturally and politically distinct from Southern Thailand prior to its annexation by Siam in 1893, with its language closer to Lao than modern Thai (Boehler 2011, 294). Socially matriarchal and spiritually animistic, the incorporation of Isaan into the Buddhist-patriarchal body politic of Siamese Thailand accelerated as part of broader processes of national modernisation under the reign of King Rama V (1868-1910) before loosening slightly over the course of the twentieth century (Teh 2011, 604). Over the twentieth century, infrastructural neglect, poor climatic conditions and economic underdevelopment left Isaan socioeconomically underdeveloped on the national fringe, disengaged from the centripetal forces of Thai monarchical politics. As Thongchai Winichakul notes, this socio-political under-development took on a spiritual dimension, as the *chaobannok* (rural villagers) of Isaan were situated outside of the "umbrella of merit" emanating from the monarch, placing them in the territory of *Pa*—"the domain beyond normal social and political power… inhabited by wild animals and spirits" (Winichakul 2000, 537). In the late-twentieth century, Isaan was the site of a failed communist uprising concentrated in its dense forests, further cementing its status as a site of primitive anti-nationalism and spiritual regression.

Isaan's culture, politics and history form the background of Apichatpong's creative practice in Thailand. Brian Bergen-Aurand argues that of the critics who have responded to his work,

"almost all [focus] on *border zone perceptions* of excess and exclusion" (Bergen-Aurand 2015, 26, original emphasis), and most biographical accounts emphasise the role of Isaan in developing Apichatpong's social concerns (Ingawanij 2006b, Ingawanij and MacDonald 2010, Teh 2011, Boehler 2014b, Rooij 2016). Apichatpong is deeply interested in permeable boundaries between life and death, human and animal, town and country, cinema and other mediums, and rather than merely challenging distinctions between things, his practice often settles on the annihilation of distinctions altogether. Isaan also contributes to his fascinated with the colonial concept of 'primitivity,' an interest that permeates his engagement with animism, natural ecology, and with 'primitive' forms of cinematography such as 16mm film and photographic double exposure. For Apichatpong, therefore, Isaan serves as both a socio-cultural setting for his films and as a primitive alternative model to modern Thai authoritarian nationalism (which I explore further in chapters three and five).

Apichatpong spent a sheltered middle-class childhood close to the hospital grounds, splitting his time between the hospital, his school, and the cinema—an experience he compared to "growing up in a kind of bubble" (Ingawanij and Teh 2010, 4). Hospital spaces and medical procedures recur throughout his films: his fourth feature, *Syndromes and a Century* (2006), was inspired by stories of his parents before they met and is set in two hospitals (one urban, one rural); *Cemetery of Splendour* (2015) was set in an abandoned school that was converted into a military hospital, restaging the key sites of Apichatpong's childhood. His films often centre on medical conditions and disability, but exchange conventional narratives of overcoming illness for the sensuous, seductive imagination of bodily disability, owed in part to his formative experiences at his parents' clinics (Bergen-Aurand 2015).

In his spare time, Apichatpong visited local movie theatres with his parents, who insisted that he and his siblings watch American movies in English to help them learn the language (Weerasethakul 2009b, 106). Science fiction blockbusters and classic monster movies were among his favourites to the point that he named his French bulldogs Godzilla, King Kong, Dracula and Vampire. He recalls these early cinematic experiences with reverence:

> …looking back, I don't think I ever saw a bad film before I was eighteen. Luckily there were no videotapes at that time, so there were cinemas scattered around town, like temples, making it seem a more cultured place.
>
> (Weerasethakul 2009b, 105)

Growing up in a provincial town in the 1970s and 1980s, Apichatpong's early experiences of Thai Cinema were of an industry in transition. The '16mm Era' of cheaply produced live-dubbed films came to an end, replaced by domestic 35mm productions and international blockbusters. Despite their fading importance in Thai national cinema, the films of the 16mm Era – characterised by cheap special effects, genre exploitation and animistic story lines – were particularly popular in his home province and would grow to influence the production design of *Uncle Boonmee.* Apichatpong's early experiences with cinema were split between two poles of influence – American classic and blockbuster cinema, and Thai genre film and television – presaging the stylistic syncretism that characterises much of his later work.

At the behest of his parents, Apichatpong studied architecture at Khon Kaen University in the early-1990s, an experience that had an enduring impact on his creative practice. Apichatpong understands cinema and architecture as parallel art forms, stating that:

> Architecture has its own stories, it is just another way to tell stories. It is characterised by how a person experiences art by using space and time. It is walking from one point to another, which is very similar to cinema.
>
> (Weerasethakul 2006)

His films are often interested in built environments such as homes, hospitals and schools, or in architectural sites in varying states of decay (which I discuss further in chapter five). His use of deep focus and static long takes places compositional emphasis on architectural structure, perhaps best embodied by the clear perspective lines of corridors, tables and beds in *Cemetery of Splendour*. Yet beyond its impact on his visual style, Apichatpong's background in architecture informs his fascination with the structure of cinema itself. This fascination is particularly visible in his video installations, which actively involve the bodily movement and shifting perspectives of its spectators. Apichatpong's film practice is situated in a liminal space between theatrical narrative cinema and video installation, incorporating cinematic elements into his video work, while redeploying the extended shot lengths and interstitial plots of his art projects in his narrative filmmaking (Kim 2010, 126). By situating his practice within an architectural tradition that blends its characteristics with narrative filmmaking and video installation, Apichatpong often exchanges linear narrative for a spatial approach to cinematic storytelling, structuring his films as an immersive experience of space, mood and embodied movement, rather than a linear sequence of events.

Isaan marks a crucial site in Apichatpong's personal and creative development. At once, the region represents the site of his childhood, a repository of memories and places drawn upon in many of his later work. Isaan's history of violent persecution and socio-economic marginalisation informs his politics, along with his fascination with socially constructed categories of primitivity.

Chicago: 1996 – 1998

Many biographical descriptions of Apichatpong's filmmaking stop in Khon Kaen, attributing his values and influences to his ethno-cultural background, in the process diminishing the importance of his film education in the United States. He completed his first film – *Bullet* (1993) – while still studying architecture in Thailand, and was then accepted into the MFA program at the Art Institute of Chicago (AIC). In contrast to the industrial focus of other US film schools such as USC and UCLA, Apichatpong's education at the AIC concentrated on European art cinema and the post-war American avant-garde, exposing him to the work of seminal experimental filmmakers such as Georges Méliès, Maya Deren, Bruce Baillie, Stan Brakhage and Andy Warhol, whose styles and approach to creative practice greatly influenced his later work. His time at the AIC also cultivated a referential approach to filmmaking in which he actively drew upon the work of other experimental filmmakers in conceptualising work. Through this unusual film school environment, Apichatpong developed an anti-commercial, artisanal film practice modelled on his experimental influences, taking a highly conceptual approach to both his experimental and feature film projects.

Traces of American experimental filmmaking traditions can be found throughout Apichatpong's career—particularly in his early works. His first short film shot during his time at the AIC, *0116643225059* (1994), alternates still shots of his Chicago apartment with a photograph of his mother—an explicit citation of the American 'Structural film' movement. Rather than prioritise narrative or personal expression, Structural filmmaking emphasised the manipulation of the material qualities of film itself, experimenting with its most fundamental, non-representational properties: light, colour, rhythm, sound (Rees 2011, 81). In 2010, Apichatpong emphasised the importance of film materiality in his early work, stating that:

> When I made *Dogfahr* [*Mysterious Object at Noon*] I was in a very experimental phase, trying to understand the properties of this medium I was holding in my hands. … I see film as film. I still play with medium specificity by emphasising to the audience that you're watching a film, an illusion.

(cited in Ingawanij and Teh 2010)

During this time, Apichatpong also encountered Warhol's durational filmic minimalism, although his interest in Warhol was primarily conceptual. He cites Warhol's *Empire* (1964), an eight-hour black-and-white silent film of the Empire State Building, as one of his favourite films, but admitted in 2009 that he had never actually seen it (Quandt 2009b, 15). The work of Warhol and the Structuralists modelled a form of conceptual film practice oriented towards the materiality of film itself, an interest that continues to linger particularly in Apichatpong's short film and installation work.

In addition to his structural influences, Apichatpong's early work drew heavily from the work of experimental filmmaker Bruce Baillie.[5] A co-founder of the Canyon Cinema co-op in San Francisco, Baillie's films linked moments of everyday American life into non-narrative visual poems. This lyrical treatment of everyday life made a clear impact on Apichatpong, who praised Baillie as a formative influence for the way in which he "records pleasure, and the sun" (Quandt 2007). Baillie's short film *To Parsifal* (1963) presents a primal journey from sea to land, passing waves, seagulls, forests and men working on the construction of a train line before settling on a naked body of a young person washing their body in a stream. Shot entirely in close ups, Baillie's treatment of the young person never identifies their face but concentrates on the contours of their tanned skin: their hands, feet, and the contour of their leg as it bends at the knee. Baillie predominantly shot handheld using a lightweight 16mm camera, often bringing the camera extremely close to its objects of attention, rendering an erotic closeness between those objects and the viewer. This tactility is reflected in *Blissfully Yours*'s disinterest in narrative progress and in its emphasis on the tactility of the water and the sensuousness with which Roong and Orn apply skin cream to Min's chest.

With Stan Brakhage, Baillie was a prominent practitioner of the 'lyric film', an approach to experimental filmmaking that acknowledged the position of the filmmaker behind the camera. Adam Sitney writes:

> The lyrical film postulates the film-maker behind the camera as the first-person protagonist of the film. The images of the film are what he sees,

[5] There are striking visual and thematic parallels between these two filmmakers, to the point that when Baillie fell terminally ill in 2020, Apichatpong coordinated with his wife to crowdfund his hospice care.

> filmed in such a way that we never forget his presence and we know how he is reacting to his vision. In the lyrical form there is no longer a hero; instead, the screen is filled with movement, and that movement, both of the camera and the editing, reverberates with the idea of a person looking.
>
> (Sitney 2002, 160)

Lyrical film models a highly personal mode of film practice in which the body of the filmmaker is actively implicated in the being and production of the work, setting the stage for Apichatpong's future creative practice. He has noted the influence of Brakhage's practice of physically marking, discolouring and degrading film stock to create visual experiences without the need for photographic exposure, describing his 2018 installation *Constellations* as a "remaking of Brakhage in an architectural form" (Weerasethakul 2018b). Apichatpong repurposed Brakhage's method of physically inscribing with hand-drawn markings in *Blissfully Yours* and *My Mother's Garden* (2007), in which Apichatpong sketches personal memories as an overlay on top of the photographic image. On the other hand, Apichatpong's early filmmaking actively diminished his presence as an artist, preferring to credit his films as "Conceived by Apichatpong Weerasethakul" over "Directed by Apichatpong Weerasethakul" until 2003. As with structural filmmaking, therefore, Apichatpong's encounter with the lyrical tradition informed his practice without strictly prescribing him to its methodology. Rather, he incorporated elements of its filmmaking philosophy into his own – combining the seemingly-contradictory values of structural and lyrical filmmaking with Deren's dream logic and Warhol's durational approach to produce a style loosely compatible with the demands of narrative filmmaking.

Beyond his formal education at the AIC, Chicago also offered Apichatpong ample cinephilic opportunities unavailable in Thailand at the time. He benefitted from the ready availability of home video in the US, where he saw *Rebels of the Neon God* (dir. Tsai Ming-liang, Ming-liang 1992) and *Vive l'amor* (dir. Tsai Ming-liang, 1994) at home on VHS, before later seeing *The River* (dir. Tsai Ming-liang, 1997) at the Chicago Film Festival (Weerasethakul 2020a, 13). During this time, he was also exposed to the work of Béla Tarr, with whom he would develop a personal friendship later in life.

Apichatpong's time in Chicago modelled two idiosyncratic models of creative film practice: the experimental tradition of the post-war American avant-garde, and the narrative tradition of contemporary international art cinema. Both models reject the logic of commercial American cinema, exchanging goal-oriented linear narratives and highly conventionalised systems of film style in order to focus on experimentation with the qualities of film material itself. Between

Chicago and Khon Kaen, we can see a nexus of unusual creative influences, knotting together the conventions of Hollywood entertainment films, Thai exploitation cinema, Structural and Lyrical experimental filmmaking and international narrative art cinema into a highly original collage of aesthetic influences.

Cannes: 1999 – 2014

After leaving the AIC, Apichatpong returned home to Thailand where he started work on his first feature film, *Mysterious Object at Noon*. Returning home in the aftermath of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, Apichatpong arrived at a moment of industrial transformation for the Thai film industry with the emergence of New Thai Cinema (which I discuss further in chapter three). Alongside this moment of domestic industrial transformation, Apichatpong's return home coincided with growing global interest in Asian art cinema, resulting in easier access to international capital.

Mysterious Object at Noon was partly funded by the Hubert Bals Fund, a Rotterdam-based film financing body organised by the International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR) and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs to support film production from developing countries. Shot in Thailand with co-production support from 9/6 Cinema Factory and Firecracker Films, *Mysterious Object at Noon* was produced on an extremely limited budget with non-professional crew who Apichatpong trained on-set. Like his short student films, *Mysterious Object* was stylistically indebted to American traditions of experimental and ethnographic filmmaking and was organised as a pseudo-documentary 'exquisite corpse' built up over a series of improvised documentary interviews. Demonstrating the influence of the "Structural" film movement, *Mysterious Object* engaged with film materiality and production process as a core feature of its design, making it incredibly difficult to follow narratively. The film toured international film festivals to moderate acclaim but did not receive the same critical acclaim as his later work. *Mysterious Object* was also one of his most atypical productions, displaying few of the stylistic signatures that characterise his later feature films. He had not yet established many of his key creative partnerships, and his signature style was under-developed. Although *Mysterious Object* still has the comparatively high ASL of 23.80 seconds, 67.5% of its shots were shot using a handheld camera, distinguishing it from the static long take style of his later work (Figure 1).

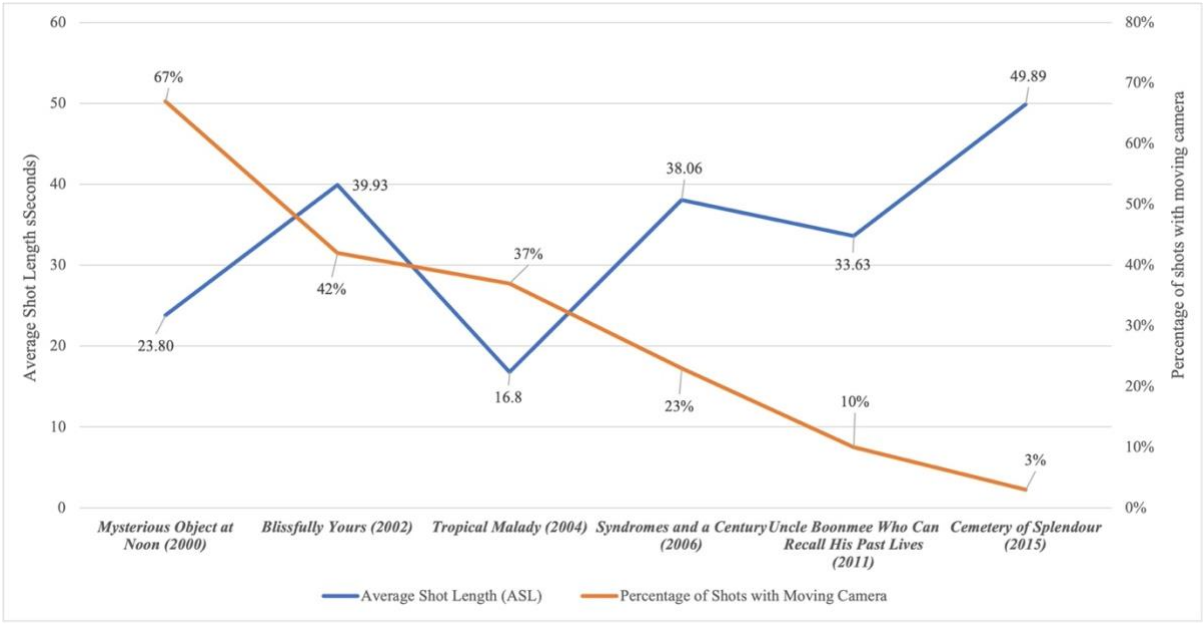

Figure 1. The evolution of Apichatpong's average shot lengths (ASLs) and camera movement over time.

Building on his early successes and growing reputation as a contemporary artist, Apichatpong produced *Blissfully Yours* in 2002 through his own production company, Kick the Machine, with financing support from the Paris-based production company Anna Sanders Films (who would go on to produce five of his next six feature films). The plot of *Blissfully Yours* centres on the everyday struggles of three marginalised individuals living in a Thai border town: Min (Min Oo), an unregistered Burmese immigrant with a painful skin condition, Roong (Kanokporn Tongaram), a young factory worker romantically interested in him, and Orn (Jenjira Pongpas), her middle-aged landlady. The film is divided into two acts separated by a credit sequence that starts 40-minutes into the film, with its first act centring on the stifling conditions of their everyday lives, and the second on their escape to a nearby forest on the Thai border for an afternoon of relaxation.

Blissfully Yours contains many of the key stylistic traits now associates with 'Apichatpongian film style' such as static long takes, tropical setting, languid pacing and sensuous sound design. *Blissfully Yours* marked Apichatpong's first collaboration with several key creative partners – editor Lee Chatametikool, cinematographer Sayombhu Mukdeeprom, production designer Akekarat Homlaor, producer Charles de Meaux, and actor Jenjira Pongpas. The film also marked his transition from the experimental documentary practice that characterised his early work to the slow narrative filmmaking of his later projects, while maintaining a similarly improvisational approach to film production. His previous short films *Thirdworld* (1997), *Like the Relentless Fury of the Pounding Waves* (1999) and *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000) were shot on black-and-white film stock using lightweight cameras, and do not exhibit the same slow, deliberate pace of his later

work. Whereas *Mysterious Object at Noon* was edited to an ASL of 23.80 seconds, *Blissfully Yours* was cut to a far slower ASL of 39.93 seconds, leaning more heavily into long takes than in previous work. This slower editing was also matched by a sharp reduction in its use of handheld cinematography. Whereas 57% of shots in *Mysterious Object at Noon* were shot handheld, only 14% of the shots in *Blissfully Yours* were handheld (and these were mostly used in difficult or inaccessible locations where more complex camera setups were impractical). *Blissfully Yours* was accepted into Cannes in 2002, where it won the *Un Certain Regard* section.

Between *Blissfully Yours* and *Tropical Malady*, Apichatpong co-directed *The Adventure of Iron Pussy* (2003) with Michael Shaowanasai – a queer pastiche of the genre conventions of Thailand's 16mm Era, an uncharacteristically-sloppy exploitation film quickly produced in order to keep his production company afloat that occupies a marginal position within his oeuvre. In his own words, Apichatpong stated that *Irony Pussy* was produced "as if composed of the junk left in the trash bins of the abandoned Thai film studios… designed to celebrate the old style of 'quickie' cinema that nobody makes anymore in contemporary Thai cinema" (cited in Quandt 2009a, 223). In many respects, *Iron Pussy* marked one of Apichatpong's most adventurous experimentations, abandoning his typical style and creative collaborations for genre conventions and working practices outside of his usual practice, thereby warranting further consideration than its marginal status would imply.

In 2004, Apichatpong released *Tropical Malady*, a queer romance split in two halves. The film's first act portrays the burgeoning gay love story between two Thai men set in a regional city, which transforms into a jungle-set horror film about a soldier's hunt for an elusive monster – the *sat pralaat* – in its second act. *Tropical Malady* was more produced than his previous films and was financed with a larger budget, leading him to storyboard for the first time (Rayns 2009, 140). Owing to this heightened production, *Tropical Malady* is also Apichatpong's most rapidly edited film, featuring an average shot length of 16.8 seconds. Despite this accelerated editing pace, *Tropical Malady* actually contained fewer shots with moving camera than *Blissfully Yours* (36.7%), reflecting his growing stylistic discipline. *Tropical Malady* also represented a stylistic innovation in Apichatpong's sound design heralded by his new partnership with sound designer Akritchalerm Kalayanamitr. Although the film is characterised by a faster rate of visual editing, its sound design is heavily durational and almost entirely devoid of dialogue in its second act. In this second act, the sound design is dominated by a continuous soundscape of wind, rustling leaves and insects, making it very difficult to tell the passage of time within the jungle. This style of durational sound design would persist in Apichatpong's later feature films, all of which were produced in collaboration with

Akritchalerm. *Tropical Malady* received critical acclaim, and was awarded the *Prix du Jury* at Cannes that year, and has since been lauded for its progressive representation of gay male intimacy.

Following the international success of *Tropical Malady*, Apichatpong found increased attention in Europe. His next feature, *Syndromes and a Century* (2007), was co-produced by Illuminations Films (UK) and a further six French institutions (including the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Culture and Communications), along with state funding from the Thai Ministry of Culture. Following the same bifurcated plot structures of *Blissfully Yours* and *Tropical Malady*, *Syndromes* retold a fictionalised account of the early encounters of Apichatpong's parents divided across two hospitals: one urban, one rural. The film continued Apichatpong's trend towards static long takes with an ASL of 38.06 seconds and only 22.8% of shots containing camera movement. *Syndromes* also marks the beginning of Apichatpong's almost total abandonment of handheld cinematography, with only two of its 158 shots filmed this way. Despite the film's critical success and international backing, *Syndromes and a Century* was withheld by the Thai Board of Censors due to its seemingly banal representation of Buddhist monks until particular scenes were edited from the final film (a process I discuss in detail in chapter four). Following this traumatic experience with censorship, Apichatpong ceased releasing films domestically in Thailand, releasing his films exclusively through the international film markets that were increasingly available to him.

With his growing international esteem and complicated relationship with domestic markets and censors, Apichatpong's practice increasingly focussed on short films and installation projects in partnership with fine art institutions around the world. Reflecting the permeable boundary between filmmaking and video installation art practiced by comparable filmmakers such as Chantal Akerman, Abbas Kiarostami and Tsai Ming-liang, Apichatpong often uses these smaller projects as thematic, stylistic or technological experimentations that inform the shape or direction of later major projects. His gallery installation *Primitive* (2009d) was commissioned by Haus der Kunst in Munich and co-produced with Illuminations Films, but was shot in the town of Nabua in Thailand's northeast with a group of young men descended from persecuted farmers who took part in the failed communist uprising of the twentieth century. I return to *Primitive* at various points throughout this thesis, as the installation indexes many of Apichatpong's key concerns: memory and the process of memorialisation, resistance to authoritarianism, freedom and imagination, film materiality, and reincarnation. *Primitive* also served as a research trip ahead of Apichatpong's next film, *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*, with photographic elements of the installation reincorporated into his finished feature film. Later installations such as *For Tomorrow, For Tonight* and *The Serenity of Madness* feature a combination of original material and back catalogue,

repurposing short films, photographs and other materials across different galleries. Viewed through his installations, Apichatpong's body of work is in a constant state of transformation and reappropriation, shifting settings, formats and arrangement with every new installation.

By the time *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* was released in 2010, Apichatpong had the international reputation to draw funding from a diverse array of European arts funding bodies, insulating him from many of the commercial demands of conventional feature filmmaking. *Uncle Boonmee* was co-produced by 16 different entities from England, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain and Thailand, including government bodies and art galleries. By this time, Apichatpong had comfortably determined his signature style, editing to an ASL of 33.63 seconds with only 10.3% of shots containing moving camera.

Following *Primitive*, *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* was also his most pointedly political film up to that point. It concerns the final days in the life of its title character as he travels to his home in the Isaan countryside and is interspersed with memories of his past lives in previous centuries and spiritual visits from his dead wife and long-lost sons. As I discuss further in chapter four, the film opaquely criticised the state-sanctioned repression of the region and the Thai state's de-memorialisation of the atrocities that were committed there, concealing its political criticisms within a supernatural storyline. Despite its stylistic and cultural idiosyncrasies, *Uncle Boonmee* was critically lauded on its release, becoming the first Thai film to be awarded the Palme d'Or at Cannes.

Prior to 2010, academic interest in Apichatpong was largely restricted to reviews, interviews and short essays on individual films. Lorena Cancela (2003) wrote an early overview of his works for *Metro,* Brett Farmer (2006) published an analysis of *Blissfully Yours* in *Senses of Cinema*, and James Quandt (who would go on to edit the first book on Apichatpong) published two essays for *Artforum International* (2005, 2007). This early period also contributed three theses on his early feature films: Matthew P. Ferrari completed a master's thesis on an ethnographic study of his first three major films (2006); Apichatpong features prominently in Anadol Ingawanij's thesis on Thai bourgeois spectatorship (2006a); a chapter on *Tropical Malady* is included in Arnika Furhman's doctoral thesis on sexual subjectivity in Thai cinema (2008). James Quandt's sourcebook, *Apichatpong Weerasethakul* (2009a), featured the first comprehensive overview of his work, and was written in collaboration with the filmmaker himself.

Scholarly attention in his work intensified after his victory at Cannes, and started to broach increasingly nuanced elements of his practice. Migration, liminality and border zones became common themes in scholarly discourse: Boehler (2011) and Rooij (2016) examine the socio-historical context context of Isan, Teh (2011) traces the importance of migration in Thai itinerant

storytelling, while Creed (2011) explores human-animal hybridisation in *Tropical Malady*. The role of memory and the motif of reincarnation took on greater academic significance, most prominently in Anders Bergstrom's 2015 article on *Uncle Boonmee* and his doctoral thesis on transnational art cinema (2017). Apichatpong's homosexuality is broached by many writers as an aside, although Schoonover (2012) and Rich (2013) locate it centrally within their study of the filmmaker. Increasingly, Apichatpong has been absorbed into the canon of auteurs and is included as a case study alongside other significant filmmakers such as Nuri Bilge Ceylan and Pedro Costa (Parks 2015), or Kim Ki-duk and Wong Kar-wai (Promkhuntong 2016). During this time, Apichatpong's films were re-released on DVD by Second Run in the UK, including a restoration of *Mysterious Object at Noon*. As the film's original 16mm negative print was lost, the film was only re-released in 2016 following its restoration by the Austrian Film Museum based on a 35mm blown-up internegative supplied by Apichatpong himself.

Despite his unprecedented international success, Apichatpong's work holds an ambivalent position in Thailand. His reputation as a talented avant-garde filmmaker in Bangkok art circles has not translated into wider domestic popularity, and his creative practice remains a marginal exercise detached from the conventional organisational structures of the Thai film industry (Ingawanij and MacDonald 2010, 126). Apichatpong's films are rarely distributed domestically but are primarily funded and distributed through the North Atlantic film festival circuit, for which they represent a fascinating fusion of familiar avant-garde influences with Thai cultural foreignness. Benedict Anderson traced the domestic reception of Apichatpong's films and found a tepid response among the country's elite. In contrast to the foreign intellectuals who celebrated Apichatpong's unusual creative practice, Anderson found that Bangkok intellectuals struggled to reconcile their desire to celebrate a Thai filmmaker succeeding internationally with their own experience of a film that they could not understand, as the animistic logics and *chaobannok* life schedules were as alien to them as to Western viewers (Anderson 2012, 159). At the same time, Ingawanij and MacDonald argue that Apichatpong's resistive cinema is at risk of being co-opted by domestic elites as an accomplishment of *sakon,* a form of "bourgeois national self-projection" despite their apprehensions over its confusing contents (Ingawanij and MacDonald 2010, 133-4). Situated at the interface of Thai national identity and the international art scene, Apichatpong constantly negotiates issues of foreignness in his work, intentionally complicating the meaning(s) of his work as a means of domestic cultural resistance.

Simultaneous to this, Apichatpong increasingly came into conflict with institutional forces within Thailand itself. He publicly advocated for updating the restrictive 1930 Film Act that governed Thai media production but remained frustrated when the updated *Film and Video Act*

(2008) introduced a ratings system while maintaining the state's right to arbitrary censorship. Beyond the influence of the state, Anderson also notes the impact of commercial censorship from powerful local producers and studio bosses who are hostile to Apichatpong's creative independence. After *Blissfully Yours* was extensively recut by an influential Bangkok-based distributor without his consent, Apichatpong's relationship with the cartel that manages domestic distribution broke down, and as such the distribution of *Tropical Malady* was limited to a single theatre in Bangkok for three weeks (Anderson 2012, 162-163). Although partially funded by the Thai Ministry of Culture, *Syndromes and a Century* was heavily censored by the state on its domestic release, leading him to bypass domestic distribution entirely in his future films. Despite his critical success, Apichatpong has never been included in the official Thai delegation to Cannes.

Beyond his own filmmaking, Apichatpong has also mentored a variety of emerging filmmakers in Thailand and provided support to independent art institutions in Southeast Asia. After returning from Chicago, he co-founded the Bangkok Experimental Film Festival with curator Gridthiya Gaweewong in 1997, which ran until 2007. Through his production company Kick the Machine, he produced Sompot Chidgasornpongse's *Railway Sleepers* (2016), a documentary examining the development of modern Thailand through a history of its railway system. In 2014, Apichatpong collaborated with Lee Chatametikool, Aditya Assarat, Anocha Suwichakornpong, Pimpaka Towira and Soros Sukhum to launch Mosquito Films, a distribution company specialising in international sales of independent productions from Southeast Asia (Kwai 2014). In 2018, his studio in Chiang Mai launched a screening program of independent and experimental films. Many of these programs have since become defunct, but Apichatpong remains an active patron of emerging filmmakers from the region, recently promoting the work of experimental filmmaker Mont Tesprateep at the 2018 edition of the IFFR.

Columbia: 2014 – present

Following *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*, Apichatpong directed the short film *Mekong Hotel* (2012), the live stage performance *Fever Room* (2015), and the feature film *Cemetery of Splendour* (2015), which he has stated will be his last film shot in Thailand for the indefinite future. Shot in a disused school in Khon Kaen, *Cemetery of Splendour* centres on a middle-aged woman (Jenjira Pongpas) who develops an attachment to a young soldier struck by a mysterious sleeping sickness. *Cemetery of Splendour* marked a further refinement of Apichatpong's visual style, cut to an ASL of 49.89 seconds with only four out of its 140 shots (3.1%) containing camera movement. Like *Uncle Boonmee*, *Cemetery of Splendour* presents an

indirect critique of the authoritarian order of contemporary Thailand but is also a reflection on Apichatpong's personal memories of Khon Kaen and its gradual transformation over time. Facing the political uncertainty of shooting major productions at home, Apichatpong set his next film *Memoria* (2021) in Columbia, whose tropical environments and traumatic histories could serve as a suitable stand in for Thailand in his creative practice.

Coupled with the global pandemic of 2020, Apichatpong's temporary creative departure from Thailand provides a useful historical endpoint for this thesis. However, while historical analysis is useful in contextualising his filmmaking practice, it cannot by itself explain his filmmaking decisions. Nor does his practice evolve in a straightforward or linear way, but exists in a constant process of reference and reformulation. Rather, through this through this historicization, I mean to challenge Apichatpong's reduction to his status as a 'Thai director,' and to establish the complex network of influences and institutions that have informed his career to date. His film practice represents images, memories, and cultural logics from his home in north-eastern Thailand, mediated through a cocktail of international auteur cinemas incorporating elements of American experimentalism, and nurtured within the economic and institutional conditions of a globalised film and visual art industry that allow his films to be produced.

Through this, I seek to also establish Apichatpong's disengagement from industrial structures of conventional film production, and his alternative focus on personal expression, political resistance and the ontological contemplation of the film medium itself. More so than many other filmmakers, Apichatpong's creative and financial independence allow him to practice a personal form of experimental and non-narrative storytelling within the otherwise-prohibitive confines of feature filmmaking that has allowed him to establish a highly distinctive art of looking. Rather than retrace the linear history outlined here, therefore, the following six analysis chapters cut across his work as a whole in order to establish thematic and stylistic connections between them, and to contemplate the structure and ethics of emptiness within Apichatpong's art of looking.

Chapter Three

Silence

In September 2007, a print of Apichatpong's *Syndromes and a Century* was locked in a police vault on the orders of the Thai Board of Censors, who refused to release the film domestically until the film's producers agreed to cut four scenes from the film: a monk playing guitar (seconds), doctors drinking in a hospital basement (386 seconds), a doctor kissing his girlfriend in a hospital locker room (242 seconds), and two monks operating a toy remote controlled flying saucer (26 seconds) (Weerasethakul 2007e). Upon appeal, the censors ordered that two further shots be cut from the film: the first a statue of Prince Songkla, the father of modern medicine in Thailand (17 seconds), and the second a statue of the Princess Mother (16 seconds) (Rithdee 2008). After negotiations failed, Apichatpong agreed to remove the banned scenes from the film's domestic release but replaced each shot with a strip of scratched black leader of equivalent runtime to mark the absences scarred onto its body by the censors.

Through this act of marking the celluloid body of *Syndromes and a Century* with sections of black leader, Apichatpong materialised the silencing operations of Thai state power. Postcards were handed to ticket holders with links to online versions of the excised scenes, although one blogger noted that the text seemed to be partially faded to avoid suspicion (Kwai 2008). Bracketed in this way, the originally censored scenes were transformed into objects of intensified scrutiny, drawing attention to the otherwise invisible operations of state power. As Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt argue, the act of excision does not merely create an invisible absence but also simultaneously "provides a record of censorship, as well as a new relationality between two images and between image and spectator" (Schoonover and Galt 2016, 293). For Schoonover and Galt, the glitches or ruptures exposed by acts of censorship committed against queer films produce a desire for that originally censored image, sensitising spectators to the absence implicit in the censored film. The act of silencing provides a record of the excision, opening the way for resistive readings and tactical archival practices that unearth that which has been concealed. By marking the physical body of his

film with silence, Apichatpong materialised the discursive silencing of censorship while fetishizing the very images that were silenced, challenging the hegemonic operations of the silencing regime.

Silence – in its varied forms – reflects a key manifestation of cinematic emptiness, serving simultaneously as an empty space for contemplative reflection and a gesture towards that which is conventionally unacknowledged and unregistered. This chapter situates Apichatpong's filmmaking within the political and aesthetic histories of Thai cinema, and analyses the complex operations of silence within his work. The history of Thai cinema is marked by a complex and enduring relationship with silence, which simultaneously operates as a stylistic trope, as a mechanical feature of 'silent' filmmaking, and as a consequence of censorship. Rather than understanding these stylistic and political factors as separate from one another, I argue that the manifestations of silence in Thai cinema are intimately entwined with one another. Through my analysis, I consider how Apichatpong's filmmaking style relates to these political currents in Thailand, and address how he uses silence and ambiguity to conduct political critique.

This chapter is divided into six sections. In the first section, I conceptualise silence in line with John Cage and Thongchai Winichakul as that which is unregistered or forgotten within perception and discourse, challenging the common assumption that silence is an absolute absence of content. As a manifestation of emptiness, I define silence on multiple intersecting levels: as a formal quality of art, as an experience of human perception, as a feature of discourse, as a consequence of censorship, and as a mechanical characteristic of cinema. While examining these related forms of silence, I take particular interest in Thongchai's exploration of silence and "unforgetting," and consider the ways in which Apichatpong uses formal silence as a method of unforgetting traumas from his country's past. Alongside this, I explore the dual histories of censorship and silent cinema in Thailand and explore the relationships between them. Alongside its censorship regimes, Thailand housed one of the most prosperous and enduring silent film industries in the world, with its live dubbed '16mm era' lasting in its provinces until the mid-1970s. Although these two issues appear distinct from one another on the surface, the '16mm era' modelled a form of cinematic expression opposed to the centralising interests of the modern Thai state, and modelling forms of localised expression otherwise silenced within national discourse.

Following on from the political and historical discourses, I examine four manifestations of silence in Apichatpong's filmmaking, and address their stylistic and political implications. I begin by analysing Apichatpong's formal use of silent black screens in his filmmaking, which represent a significant use of audio-visual emptiness. Returning to the histories of Thai silent cinema, I discuss Apichatpong's arguably most unusual film – *The Adventure of Iron Pussy* (2003) – a camp spy thriller co-directed with artist Michael Shaowanasai. *Irony Pussy* exchanges Apichatpong's

typical durational aesthetics and dreamlike atmosphere for camp genre aesthetics (a shift in tone from his usual practice that alienated international and local audiences on its release). Despite its marginal position within his oeuvre, I argue that *Iron Pussy* participates within an alternative history of Thai cinema by repurposing the aesthetics of the seemingly primitive silent '16mm era' of filmmaking, challenging the heritage impulses of the New Thai Cinema of the late-1990s by embedding himself within a decentred and marginalised style.

In the final sections of this chapter, I consider the ghostly silences of *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010) and situate the film within the wider history of state violence in north-eastern Thailand. The relationship between *Uncle Boonmee* and the troubled history of Isaan has already been explored at length by other writers, who have already established that the film indirectly engages with the silenced history of the region's murdered communist insurgents.[6] Building on this, I argue that the silences are deeply ecological and represent a turning away from human civilisation to non-human ecology. Rather than simply participating within human discourses *Uncle Boonmee* proposes an alternative politics divorced from modern uses of language and rationality. I conclude my analysis by addressing Apichatpong's two-channel video installation *Invisibility* (2016) – a shadow play released shortly after the coup d'état – and consider how Apichatpong uses silence and indirect communication as a means of camouflaging political critique.

Conceptualising silence

In his 1952 composition *4'33"* ("four minutes and thirty-three seconds"), John Cage instructed his performers to remain silent for the piece's entire three movements. Although the sheet music for *4'33"* notes that the piece is "for any instrument or combination of instruments," the sheet music itself only includes blank staves spread across three pages without notes to play from. Instead, the musician would sit in a position ready to play but remain silent, drawing attention towards the absence of intentional sound (Ferguson 2003, 62). For Cage, however, the function of *4'33"* was not to provide space for spectators to meditate on the absolute emptiness of silence, but rather to guide them to recognise the existence of sounds that are conventionally unregistered during performances and everyday life. He writes:

[6] For further discussion of Isaan's historical traumas in Apichatpong's cinema, see Bergstrom (2015) and Boehler (2011).

> There is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we might to make a silence, we cannot.
>
> (Cage 1973, 8)

Confronted by the absence of structured sound in the concert hall, the attentions of spectators are drawn to other sounds inhabiting the space: the rhythmic hum of the air conditioner, the sound of traffic in the distance, the breathing of the person next to him, or even his own heartbeat. With *4'33"*, Cage manipulated the attentive spectatorial conventions of the concert hall to challenge the foundations of Western art music in which silence serves as a break or pause between sounds, allowing the establishment of rhythm, duration and the differences between tones (Kahn 1997, 557-8), to instead sensitise listeners to the unintended sounds always and already in the world such as "The sound of a truck at 50 m.p.h. Static between the stations. Rain" (Cage 1970, 54).

In the Cagean sense, silence is not an absolute absence of content, but rather gestures towards the multiplicity of events in the world that are unacknowledged by intentional consciousness. He writes:

> But this fearlessness only follows if, at the parting of the ways, where it is realised that sounds occur whether intended or not, *one turns in the direction of those he does not intend*. This turning is psychological and seems at first to be a giving up of everything that belongs to humanity — for a musician, the giving up of music. This psychological turning leads to the world of nature, where, gradually or suddenly, one sees that humanity and nature, not separate, are in this world together; that nothing was lost when everything was given away.
>
> (Cage 1973, 8, my emphasis)

In our being in the world, Cage argues, we are surrounded by a multiplicity of unregistered sounds that are excluded from intentional consciousness, or are too soft to be perceived by human perceptual faculties, thereby sensitising ourselves to ordinarily concealed parts of the world.

By reconceptualising silence as a failure of recognition rather than an absence of content, we can begin to consider the relationship between silence and power. Feminist scholars have for decades noted the historical silences and silencing of women's voices in the public sphere, both through their social exclusion in the present and the erasure of their pasts (Olsen 1978, Rich 1979).

During the AIDS crisis, Act Up's equation "Silence = Death" materialised the relationship between political silencing and violence, connecting the inactions of governments and the state-sponsored persecution of queer people during the holocaust. More recently, the phrase "Silence is Compliance" has been applied to both the recent Black Lives Matter movement in the United States and by Hong Kong activists critical of the National Security Law and the growing impact of Chinese political repression (Choi et al. 2020). Speaking to the Thai context, Thongchai Winichakul writes:

> Silence is usually the result of the conscious effort to suppress memory, either by power or authority (being silenced) or voluntarily (being silent). Silence, however, is also a symptom of obedience to authority, especially in an authoritarian society such as Thailand. In such cases, being silenced and voluntarily silenced, being censored and self-censoring, are hardly distinguishable.
>
> (Winichakul 2020, 17-18)

In each case, silence seemingly sides with the oppressor, leaving the activist to speak up and be heard, in order to undo the silencing operations of power.

However, to reduce silence to a form of inaction, to equate the *unspoken* with the *unreal*, diminishes its value as a form of political resistance. Kennan Ferguson argues that silence is only regarded as a form of passivity within a normative communicative framework, and as a function of a normative (liberal) public sphere in which speech is the only thing registered as existing (Ferguson 2003, 54). Outside of this framework, in the spaces excluded by those publics, silence reflects a refusal to participate in those very publics, a radical break from the interpolating processes of hegemonic discourse. As Ferguson writes:

> The very existence of silence thereby becomes a form of resistance, of non-participation in these practices of community building, identity formation, and norm setting. Silence, in other words, betokens a rejection of these practices of power.
>
> (Ferguson 2003, 54)

Thongchai presents a similar understanding in his book *Moments of Silence* (2020), reflecting a Cagean understanding of silence as that which is unacknowledged and unrepresentable. He writes:

> Silence is the memory we failed to hear or see, located adjacent to the expressed and voiced one. It is the realm of the unforgettable or unvoiced by not forgotten memory. It is inarticulate memory.
>
> (Winichakul 2020, 18)

On these terms, the uncovering of silence is not a clean process of articulating representations, but an ongoing process of engaging with that which is unarticulated, unregistered, and multiple. By turning to silences and sensitising ourselves to that which we regard as inarticulate, we can propose an alternative politics of memory opposed to the hegemonic interests of the nation-state.

Across this chapter, I propose an integrated understanding of silence in which film form, discourse and the mechanics of cinema feed into and condition one another. As a characteristic of film form, silence can manifest as a momentary absence of sound in the soundtrack, a silent character or a black screen, or on a larger scale as an absence of narrative coherence. Silences in film form – or, in the case of *Syndromes and a Century*, a fusion of formal and mechanical silence – point to the silencing operations of power. On these grounds, *intentional silence* – that is, silence embedded within a work – operates as a means of unforgetting that which has been silenced by sensitising spectators to those very silences.

Black screens

Silence cannot be reduced to an absence of sound but is also cognate with other forms of formal audio-visual emptiness such as blank screens and extended sequences of stillness. In these ways, formal silences often emerge from absences within the material body of a work, as negative spaces opened up by the fissure between the work and our expectations of what it should be. In Susan Sontag's reading of Cage in her essay "The Aesthetics of Silence" (1978) cited in chapter one, silence emerges only as a dialectic of presence:

> A genuine emptiness, a pure silence, is not feasible – either conceptually or in fact. If only because the art-work exists in a world furnished with many other things, the artist who creates silence or emptiness must produce something dialectical: a full void, an enriching emptiness, a resonating or eloquent silence. Silence remains, inescapably, a form of speech (in many instances, of complaint or indictment) and an element in a dialogue.

(Sontag 1978, 5)

Following Sontag, Greg Taylor argues that moments of silence "*feel* silent to us precisely because they work against the hermeneutic expectations of traditional narrative" (Taylor 2007, 63, original emphasis), negating our expectations in order to reconstitute and reorient our perceptions of the world. The silence of *4'33"* did not emerge from an absolute absence of sound, but rather through its negation of Western musical practices that conventionally foregrounded sound and the playful foregrounding of sounds that were always and already there within the theatrical space but that were up to that point unacknowledged. The pursuit of cinematic silence therefore demands a pursuit of negations, looking for moments when conventional presentations of content are disrupted and replaced by something that is not ordinarily registered as content.

Apichatpong's black screens in *Syndromes and a Century* are an example of silence-as-negation. Interspersed throughout the body of the work in unexpected places without narrative explanation, these black screens mark points of rupture within the body of the work, negating visual representation to instead concentrate on extended sequences of visual non-figuration. Despite this lack of figuration, however, the cinematic black screen is not an absence of content but is rather an intense projection of light. Sean Cubitt argues that absolute black has not colour but is rather an absolute absence of light, which is only possible at a temperature of absolute zero—a state no human is able to survive (Cubitt 2014, 21). On these terms, 'black' is technically visible, gestured towards but never fully achieved through high contrast juxtapositions of dark and light colours. The black screen, therefore, marks not only an absence of representation, but also a *failure* of representation through its incapacity to be properly represented. As Richard Misek writes:

> Black screens epitomise this failure: generated through light, they are never quite black. Not nothing, they merely evoke it. Rather than negating themselves in nonidentical blackness, they constitute a range of luminous near-blacks achieved through a variety of additive colour technologies.
>
> (Misek 2017, 48)

This complicates the black screen's associations with nothingness, as on celluloid film, blackness is not an absence of content but is rather achieved "where the dye on a film print is thickest" (Misek 2017, 44). The black screen therefore marks a representational paradox, an attempt to visualise invisibility despite the impossibility of doing so.

Understood on these terms, Apichatpong's black screens allow for the momentary negation of visual representation, gesturing towards visual emptiness while still leaving something to see. Beyond his tactical use of black screens in *Syndromes and a Century*, most of Apichatpong's feature films begin with a black screen before transitioning to a credit sequence, allowing for a J-cut of audio from the following scene. *Mysterious Object at Noon* opens with a 17 second black screen in which he includes the credit for the Hubert Bals Fund and a piece of white printed text reading, "Once upon a time…," then cuts to the film's opening shot filmed from the passenger seat of the moving car. The loud, diegetic sound of music from the car radio and erratic movements of cars on the road contrast with the audio-visual absence of the preceding black screen, creating a jarring juxtaposition through that cut. *Tropical Malady* features a formally similar sequence but this time lasts 56 seconds, printing white credit text over the black screen, but this time displaying a quote from Ton Nakajima (see: chapter six). After holding this text for 20 seconds, Apichatpong cuts to a completely black screen for a further 5 seconds before cutting again to the first shot of soldiers on the edge of the jungle, creating a gap between these two pieces of information. For both *Mysterious Object at Noon* and *Tropical Malady*, therefore, the black screen allows for moments of direct address before the audience's entrance into the diegesis.

In his later films, his black screens are entangled with carefully designed soundscapes to affectively immerse spectators within the story worlds of his films. In these cases, the visual silence of the black screen concentrates viewer attention on the ordinarily concealed element of film sound, sensitising them to the rhythms and contextless noises of Akritchalerm Kalayanamitr's soundscapes. Following a silent title card for Fortissimo Films, Apichatpong opens *Syndromes and a Century* with a 95 second black screen over which he fades in a musical score. The screen remains entirely black before cutting to the title card and then cuts back to the black screen as the opening credits roll, during which time the musical score remains. Unlike the opening sequences of *Mysterious Object at Noon* and *Tropical Malady*, this sequence in *Syndromes and a Century* does not provide any extratextual information for the film, but rather draws spectators into a feeling of place before any image becomes present. This pattern recurs in *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (75 seconds) and *Cemetery of Splendour* (107 seconds). *Uncle Boonmee* opens on a black screen but is underscored from the outset by Akritchalerm's rich ambient soundscape of the jungle, anticipating the film's opening shot on the fringe of the jungle. *Cemetery of Splendour* also opens on a black screen but begins in a moment of formal silence before slowly building into a loud, mechanical sound. After the credits finish, Apichatpong cuts to a shot of the sound's source – an excavator working in a field – but the soundscape continues underneath. In each of these cases, Apichatpong combines a black screen and a fade-in J-cut of the following scene's audio to immerse

spectators in a sensuous feeling of place before they have a sense of visual orientation. Through the black screen, spectators are denied the ability to accurately predict what they are hearing, preparing them for a sensuous understanding of each film detached from expectations of rational comprehension.

The politics of silence: *Cemetery of Splendour* (2015) and *Invisibility* (2016)

Since its emergence in the early-1900s, Thai cinema has been entangled with institutions of state power. Thai cinema was supported in its early years by royal patronage and managed throughout its history by strict regimes of state and informal censorship that regulated its contents. As part of its modernisation strategy of the 20th century, Thailand developed a highly regulated public sphere – known as the 'Thai Regime of Images' – in which public expression was heavily controlled but private behaviours were comparatively untouched. As Peter A. Jackson describes, "…the distinctiveness of Thai power lies in an intense concern to monitor and police surface effects, images, public behaviours, and representations combined with a relative disinterest in controlling the private domain of life" (Jackson 2004, 181). In contrast to the "all-seeing" mode of power characterising modern Western morality in which the public and private behaviours of subjects are regulated, the Thai regime of images "is built upon a mode of power that operates laterally across surfaces rather than vertically in the panoptic… mode that Foucault described" (Jackson 2004, 182). In its most extreme form, this regime operates through Thailand's strict *lesè-majesté* laws, which criminalise criticism of the monarchy; as there are no official guidelines for what constitutes a violation of *lesè-majesté* , accusations of royal defamation are often used to silence political opponents (Streckfuss 2011, 9).

In conjunction with these broader policy measures to repress the public sphere, the Thai state has maintained formal systems of film censorship since the early twentieth century. The 1930 Film Act, which gave sweeping powers to government officials to interfere with film production at any stage of production and exhibition. The act prohibited pornography along with the representation of criminal behaviours, murder and torture of humans or animals, but also banned "act of *lesè-majesté* towards the state, the nation and the government's personnel," present political issues that "may disturb the government administration or arouse disturbance" or commit an "act of *lesè-majesté* to the monarchy" (Virulrak 1986, 4-5). Following extensive campaigning by Apichatpong and others, a new *Film and Video Act* was enacted in 2008 that introduced a ratings system for the first time, but unfortunately maintained the state's right to arbitrary censorship at any stage of the filmmaking process. According to the 2008 Act, filmmakers are only allowed to produce work "in

a way which does not undermine or is not contrary to public order or good morals, or may not affect the security and dignity of Thailand," with possible criminal penalties (Klaosoontorn 2008, Section 23). Interestingly, section 27 of the Act excludes "films exhibited in an international film festival as prescribed by the Committee," although producers still face major regulatory obstacles should they plan to exhibit their film domestically. This system of censorship and discursive control presents serious challenges to independent filmmakers critical of the regime, necessitating new critical tactics that bypass the silencing operations of censorship.

These pressures have increased substantially over the past decade. In 2014, the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) – a military junta led by General Prayuth Chan-ocha – seized control of the democratically elected Thai government in a coup d'état, leading to the overthrow of the civilian government and the repeal of the country's constitution—excluding sections relating to the monarchy. Thailand has undergone fourteen military coups since the 1930s, but the events of 2014 led to a more radical restructure of democratic society towards authoritarian military government (Baker 2016, 389-90). After coming to power, the NCPO intensified state censorship and silenced opposition, imposed martial law, banned expressions of political dissent and outlawed meetings of five or more people (390). The regime also made extensive use of existing *lesè-majesté* to punish online dissent: a Bangkok man was sentenced to 30 years in prison for six Facebook posts, while a Chiang Mai woman was sentenced to 28 years for seven posts (Ramasoota 2016, 271). On orders of King Rama X, however, *lesè-majesté* (Article 112 of the Criminal Code) is being used less frequently, replaced by Article 116 (sedition) and other forms of arbitrary and extrajudicial punishment. According to Tyrell Haberkorn, in the three years after the NCPO came to power, at least 138 people were charged with violations of *lesè-majesté*, at least 69 were charged with sedition, and at least 242 were charged with violating junta orders banning public assembly (Haberkorn 2017, 339). These statistics were gathered prior to the protests of 2020-21, during which time the arbitrary exertion of state power in Thailand increased.

Apichatpong has often advocated for greater political and artistic freedoms in Thailand, but in many cases has done so subtly to avoid coming into direct conflict with state authorities. As his career has progressed and his position within Thai national and international art cinemas has become more prominent, Apichatpong's work has become more political, as has the tactical necessity of camouflaging it. Here, the epistemic evasiveness of Apichatpong's work through its outright resistance to interpretation shelters forms of politically resistive expression that would otherwise be censored.

Sontag described silence as the ultimate gesture of an artist who, having "surpassed his peers, by the standards which he acknowledges… has only one place left to go," understanding modern

art's practice of "displeasing, provoking, or frustrating its audience as a limited, vicarious participation in the ideal of silence" (Sontag 1978, 3). For Sontag, the pursuit of mastery is a sort of death drive that ultimately results in a refusal to make meaning or conform to established logics of sense. In his reading of Sontag, Taylor imagines a "cinema of de-articulation, as its accomplishments so often lie at the edge of language, meaning, and clarity" (Taylor 2007, 53). Yet what is missing for both Sontag and Taylor is an understanding of the relationship between silence and politics, or some reckoning with an illiberal public sphere in which silence is not an "exemplary suicide of the artist" (Sontag 1978, 5). but rather an imposition from an institutional authority as in the case of Thailand. Against this, Apichatpong tactically manipulates the aesthetics of silence as a means of implicit political critique.

In his narrative films, Apichatpong rarely conducts direct political critique but rather embeds criticism within absences and silence. *Cemetery of Splendour* (2015) was produced in the aftermath of the 2014 coup and traces the political malaise impacting the country at the time. Set in Apichatpong's home town of Khon Kaen, the film follows Jen (Jenjira Pongpas) a middle-aged housewife who spends her time volunteering at a military hospital for sick soldiers built out of the decaying shell of her childhood school. The soldiers at the facility have been struck by a mysterious sleeping sickness that leaves them bedridden and unconscious for most of the day; they communicate with their families with the help of a psychic (Jarinpattra Rueangram). Jen becomes attached to one of the sleeping soldiers, Itt (Banlop Lomnoi), whose bed is placed in the same position as her old school desk. When Itt regains consciousness, the pair develop a close personal friendship and visit numerous locations spread throughout Khon Kaen.

The plot of *Cemetery of Splendour* does not directly reference the coup d'état, but silent traces of political resistance are submerged within it. The static bodies of sleeping soldiers signal a state of affairs governed by inertia, unable to recognise the socio-political transformations taking place around them. The invisible influence of a king waging wars in the afterlife using the spiritual energies of living people further speaks to the film's resistive politics, intimating the exploitative political and economic practices of the military government. At the same time, the politics of *Cemetery of Splendour* exceeds its allegorical functions by manifesting silences that speak to 'inarticulate memories' submerged by processes of state-sponsored cultural repression (Winichakul 2020, 18). Much of the film centres on Jenjira's incapacity to fully reconcile herself with her surroundings, her failure to connect with others and her inability to understand the events taking place around her. The film's narrative dislocations and ellipses embody the cultural alienation of living in a state of amnesia as its protagonist becomes increasingly incapable of differentiating between dream and reality, mirroring the increasingly fraught distinction between

truth and propaganda. *Cemetery of Splendour*'s situation on "the edge of language, meaning, and clarity" (Taylor 2007, 53) therefore allows it to evade censorship by obscuring its critiques while simultaneously embodying the dissonance of living under censorship.

Alongside this, Apichatpong's installation work, *Invisibility* (2016), models this tactical relationship with silence. *Invisibility* was produced around the same time as *Cemetery of Splendour* and his live theatre performance, *Fever Room* (2015), and was originally released as part of the Saitama Triennale in Japan but later incorporated into the international tour of his *Serenity of Madness* exhibition. The work is a silent, two-channel synchronised video installation shot in black and white. Both video channels were shot as shadow plays, the camera positioned behind a white sheet as backlit actors, sets and props cast shadows onto the semi-transparent white surface. Conceptually, the installation presents two people trapped in different bedrooms who, according to Apichatpong's artist statement, "with no way out… infiltrate each other's dreams" (Weerasethakul 2016a). The installation is formally silent and does not feature a synchronised soundtrack or recorded dialogue, but Apichatpong's installation notes state that live sound is drawn from the video shutters clattering through the projectors, adding a Cagean emphasis to the installation's silence that draws attention to the auditory absences of the video (Weerasethakul 2016a).

Reflecting its close relationship with *Cemetery of Splendour* and *Fever Room*, *Invisibility* grapples with many of the same implicit critiques. All three projects feature the same lead actors – Jenjira Pongpas and Banlop Lomnoi – and all three place them in the same hospital setting, foregrounding motifs of sleep, dreaming and medical treatment. The bedroom environment of *Invisibility* reflects *Cemetery of Splendour*'s mise-en-scène (complete with large windows opening onto trees and an IV drip attached to the bed), but is flattened and distorted by the shadow play process (a process Apichatpong had previously experimented with live in *Fever Room*). As a result of this distortion, *Invisibility* is visually unsettling, a mood intensified by the absence of synchronised sound. Taken as an informal transmedia triptych, *Cemetery of Splendour*, *Fever Room* and *Invisibility* register Apichatpong's creative practice prior to and immediately following the Thai coup d'état, and therefore mark an important turning point in his intensifying politics.

There is no obvious political critique in *Invisibility*, although the film's title – coupled with Apichatpong's artistic statements and other critical commentaries – confirm his political intentions. There is no explicit narrative, although certain objects – such as a sewing machine – recur, duplicate and warp as its light sources shift in position behind the white screen. In his artist statement, Apichatpong states that:

> *Invisibility* mirrors the troubled state of Thailand's politics. It proposes a decayed vision of the future where one needs to constantly evades [sic] reality. The viewing experience shifts between seeing and not-seeing, fact and fiction, space and void.
>
> (Weerasethakul 2016a)

In a separate poem published in connection with the installation's exhibition in Shanghai, Apichatpong describes a montage of images tied directly to this theme of revolt. His imagistic, associational poem presents disconnected images without direct or concrete meaning:

> I remember a storm of light.
>
> _____
>
> that moved the trees
> and the shadows to revolt.
>
> _____
>
> In her sleep she sees the light.
> Time duplicates… like the waves of the sea.
> A sound of gun fire.
> I dream that I wake up.
> Hold on.
>
> _____
>
> IhI light is infectious.
> The smoke is hovering over the city.
>
> _____
>
> People in the small room gathered to watch the light. The first image glowed by a combustion of hydrogen gas and oxygen.
> Even in winter people sweated because of the heat. The smoke arose from the cinema chimney against the snow.
>
> _____
>
> Grr… Grr… Grr… Grr…
> She joins the Sewing Machine United for Democracy.
> The movement's colour is black.
>
> _____
>
> This film is called Invisibility.

A proposal for camouflage.

_____

(Weerasethakul 2016b)

The associational imagery of Apichatpong's poem reflects the dream-like images of his shadow play, shifting and transforming as light sources move behind objects, distorting their size and shape on screen. In this way, the political critique of *Invisibility* is not contained within a single text but is dispersed across a seemingly incoherent array of opaque works and intertexts in which no object directly enunciates criticism but which, viewed as a whole, speak to the troubled state of affairs in Thailand. Instead, like *Invisibility*, Apichatpong's political critiques are acts of a shadow play in which representation is intentionally obscured, left in the rifts "between seeing and not-seeing, fact and fiction, space and void" (Weerasethakul 2016b).

Moreover, Apichatpong establishes a connection between revolt and cinematic spectatorship. In his phrase, "People in the small room gathered to watch the light," Apichatpong renders the communal act of filmgoing as conspiratorial and revolutionary, which is literally the case in illegal films under authoritarianism. Under the Criminal Code, the act of communal film spectatorship could violate rules against public assembly, making spectatorship itself an act of political resistance. Similarly, his dwelling on "the shadows of revolt" and insistence that "The movement's colour is black" reiterate the political resistiveness of shadow-making, while also refusing to affiliate with either of the conflicting Red and Yellow Shirt protestors of the pre-coup period. As an absence of light that is by definition that which is 'not there,' shadows are elusive and therefore provide a means of challenging totalising authority.

The spatial arrangement of *Invisibility* drew spectators into the public assembly of this shadow play. In its installation in Shanghai, the two channels of video were cast onto a wall of the exhibition space by two digital projectors propped up at eye level by metal rods, one on either side of a small bench facing the two screens. This tight arrangement meant that in order to sit down, spectators had to pass in front of one or both of the projectors, casting their own shadows onto the wall in the process. This introduction of new shadows increased the ontological uncertainty of the work, destabilising the boundary between spectator body and the projection, actively implicating their bodies in the play on screen. By implicating the spectator in the unfolding of the work, Apichatpong establishes a participatory politics in which textual understanding is of secondary importance.

On these terms, Apichatpong's shadows– like his silences – must be understood as more than mere camouflage. There is no concrete political critique concealed within *Invisibility*'s diegesis,

but rather something shifting, distorted and constantly open to transformation. As such, although he personally supports democratic reform, Apichatpong's aesthetic politics do not propose a concrete alternative to authoritarianism, but rather do away with concreteness altogether, dwelling instead on the unfixed, evasive and silent.

Silent histories: *The Adventure of Irony Pussy* (2003)

Parallel to these issues of political censorship, Thai cinema has had an enduring and complex relationship with silence as a mechanical feature and stylistic trope of its filmmaking. Thailand idiosyncratically maintained a robust silent film industry until the mid-1970s, marketing 'live-dubbed' performances of cheaply produced 16mm films aimed at the rural poor that were reviled by Bangkok elites as culturally backwards. Apichatpong's filmmaking draws from these marginalised histories of Thai cinema and repurposes their camp aesthetics as a means of political critique—most prominently in his often-overlooked camp spy thriller *The Adventure of Iron Pussy*. In this way, Thailand's silent '16mm era' served as a rupture within the Thai state's 20th century modernising project that provides a primitive alternative to state-sponsored teleological histories of progress.

From its earliest years in Thailand, cinema has been intimately connected to institutions of royal and governmental power. Unlike its neighbours, Siam was not directly colonised by external powers but ruled by its persisting absolute monarchy in a system of 'informal empire' as a 'semi-colony' of European interests (Jackson 2007). During this period of informal empire, its rulers took a more active role in the emergence of cinema, which they understood as an outworking of Western technological modernity. King Rama V (Chulalongkorn, 1868-1910) participated in the country's first film screening in 1896, and became more interested in its technologies during his official visit to Europe the following year—a visit filmed by a Lumière employee. In 1900, King Chulalongkorn's younger brother Prince Sanphasat Suphakit took an active interest in filmmaking, purchasing equipment from Europe and personally shooting short documentary-style films (Barmé 1999, 313). Under royal patronage, cinema was established as a prestigious medium popular with elites, who viewed the nascent technologies as "as an imported foreign form from the 'civilised' world … embodying the mystique of modernity" (Barmé 1999, 311-12).

Despite its popularity in the court, cinema was popularised among lower classes by enterprising foreigners, a trend that sidelined domestic production in favour of international imports. Beginning in 1904, Japanese promoter Watanabe Tomoyori exhibited documentaries in a large tent in central Bangkok capable of fitting up to 1,000 people (Barmé 1999, 310). Bangkok

had twelve established theatres by the early 1930s but grew to 120 by the end of the decade, although the majority of screenings were American films imported by the United Cinema Company, an American company (Boonyaketmala 1992, 65). Between 1927 and 1945, only sixty-four Thai films were produced, all of which were shot on silent film stock and some later dubbed with sound effects (Boonyaketmala 1992, 69). Boonrak Boonyaketmala argues that the marginalisation of locally produced films was due to two primary factors that privileged international productions: taxation and censorship. Until the 1970s, import tariffs on film prints were low (US$0.10 per 100 feet until 1959), with taxes recovered through an admission tax set at 50 per cent of the ticket price (Boonyaketmala 1992, 73). Coupled with this, Thai censors concentrated their efforts on domestic productions, rendering filmmaking excessively onerous for local producers. Consequently, Thai film production in Thailand was impoverished, commercially challenged by uncompetitive foreign exhibitors, burdened by censorship requirements and unable to access compensatory international markets.

During the Second World War, the Thai film industry transformed with the emergence of the 16mm filmmaking. Under Japanese occupation (1941-1945), the importation of American films was stopped, halting the production of expensive 35mm films that needed to be developed overseas (Ainslie 2018, 305). In order to develop content to fill now-vacant exhibition rosters, Thai producers turned to the cheap, portable and abundant silent 16mm film stock, which could be developed locally with facilities and technicians within Thailand itself. The extremely low cost of these 16mm productions – costing between $25,000 and $30,000 in 1950 – allowed local filmmakers to produce commercially viable films in this style with sound effects dubbed in post-production, or performed live at the movie theatre (Boonyaketmala 1992, 79). This style persisted in popularity until the early-1970s at which time producers reluctantly shifted to 35mm colour film stock. In contrast to the urban focus of earlier periods of film production, the 16mm industry concentrated on rural lower-class audiences, emphasising visual excess, slapstick humour and supernatural elements in order to appeal to their broad rural constituency (Ainslie 2018, 308).

The political resistiveness of the ‘16mm era’ was not based on its contents, but rather the manner of its production and exhibition. By decentring production values and allowing space for audience unruliness, mechanically silent 16mm screenings created emancipatory spaces for community participation among rural communities. In her account of Thai cinema in the 1970s, Juree Vichit-Vadakan describes the formal incoherence and spectatorial rowdiness of films at the time. She writes:

> My impression of Thai movies from earlier years had been rather negative: the cinematography was no better than that of a poor home-made movie; the plots were oftentimes mixtures of events that were incoherently tied together; and the movie themes were repetitive, unrealistic, and trite. … The story may not proceed linearly, it is often interrupted by a number of seemingly incoherent and unrelated events and incidents, and always includes a generous share of violence and humour.
>
> (Vichit-Vadakan 1977, 157-60)

As Vichit-Vadakan continues, the chaos of the experience extended beyond the diegesis into the exhibition itself, which she described as "carnival-like": organisers made intermittent announcements and advertisements over loudspeakers while audience members made loud verbal complaints or inquiries, underscored by "the symphony of chewing, nut cracking, and popping of melon seeds" (1977, 164). Yet as she describes, this social intensity was pivotal to the experience of film spectatorship at that time and place:

> A crowded movie house is not a passive viewing of the actions which take place on screen, but an 'event' where casual and also very emotional comments are made; where outbursts of emotions (laughing, crying, cursing, screaming) are given free rein; and where exchanges of opinion are common.
>
> (Vichit-Vadakan 1977, 164)

Therefore, rather than providing space for individual contemplation through the removal of sound, the absence of synchronised sound in Thailand's 'silent' 16mm films opened space for spectators to actively – and noisily – participate in its unfolding. By formally de-prioritising sound within the diegesis, films of the 16mm created spaces for affective and cultural discourse among rural people that were otherwise marginalised within modernised imaginations of Thai nationhood.

For these reasons, the '16mm era' radically inverted the elite origins of cinema in Thailand, exchanging the state's modernising intentions for the medium with the heterogeneous, folkloric and 'primitive' cultural practices of the rural lower-classes. As Boonyaketmala states, "…a number of Thai intellectuals routinely insulted native films, labelling them *nam nao*, literally, 'stagnant water,' indicating an irreversible, rotten state of affairs" (1992, 81). Implicit in elite distaste is a heterophobic reaction to regional difference, to imaginations and cultural practices that cannot be

incorporated into the homogeneous body of the modern nation. Similar to the *benshi* of Japanese silent cinema, the live performers accompanying 16mm screenings exceeded the verbal dialogue fixed in the text and added their own metadiegetic commentary. Mary Ainslie argues that this informal commentary, conducted in the local language, was often linked to popular or local culture that was relevant to the specific contexts and experiences of local audiences (2018, 312). Contextualised in this way, the live components of 16mm exhibitions allowed contextual relevance for heterogeneous audiences beyond the fixed textual confines of synchronised sound films, challenging the centralising impulses of modern nationalism.

This legacy of silence and silencing within Thai national cinema presents a representational challenge for the country's contemporary independent filmmakers, as they are pressed to navigate a complex censorial regime alongside nationalist imaginings of Thai-ness. In response to these representational challenges, independent filmmakers in Thailand have developed styles that are best described as 'epistemically evasive,' leaning into the conventions of art cinema to conceal immanent critiques of the state of affairs in contemporary Thailand. This style exists in contrast to the high concept bourgeois 'New Thai Cinema' (that emerged in the aftermath of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis) which concentrated on high production values and fidelity to nationalist imaginings of Thai cultural history and style, favouring avant-garde and experimental aesthetics that better evade censorship laws. Whereas elements of New Thai Cinema stage nostalgic representations of an imagined national past (Ingawanij 2006b) as part of an emerging "new nationalism" in Thailand (Hunt 2005, 72), many independent films reject national frames of reference in favour of local or regional identifications while marketing primarily to international film festivals. In this way, Apichatpong and other independent filmmakers offer an aesthetic counter-public to dominant frameworks conditioning Thai national cinema, bypassing forms of national identification to connect the local with the international.

The 'New Thai Cinema' movement was in many ways a radical departure from the styles and cultural marginalities of the '16mm era', emerging alongside a new nationalism in Thailand in the aftermath of the 1997 Asian financial crisis. As 35mm film stock became standardised in the late-1990s, budgets and production values increased as a generation of filmmakers, trained through commercials and music videos, started producing films for mass domestic audiences (Hunt 2005, 95). 'New Thai Cinema' appeared as a wave of commercially and critically successful films that simultaneously displayed high production values and a fidelity to Thai cultural history and style. May Anadol Ingawanij identifies a genre of "bourgeois heritage cinema" that played into the paradoxical desire of urban elites to "simultaneously yearn for Thai-ness and global prestige in globalisation" (Ingawanij 2007, 181). *Nang Nak* (1999), a high concept retelling of the traditional

folk story of a man unwittingly living with the ghost of his former wife, embodies this heritage genre, and was a tremendous critical and commercial success at the time of its release. *Nang Nak* was adapted from the legend of Mae Nak, which has been adapted on-screen multiple times and who was once described as "Thailand's national ghost" (181). Through its combination of high production values, integrated high concept marketing and charismatic portrayal of Thai cultural history, *Nang Nak* played into nostalgia for an imagined national past while simultaneously fulfilling bourgeois aspirations of cultural modernisation (188). As Ingawanij argues, *Nang Nak* represented a rejection of primitive 16mm aesthetics and a coming of age for Thai national cinema, "signalling that the moment had indeed arrived for Thai cinema to turn itself around by producing 'serious' work" (188). Implicitly, therefore, Thai heritage cinema reinforces nationalist discourses by promoting a nostalgic yet modern image of the Thai nation, thereby rejecting the unruliness of the '16mm era'.

Many contemporary independent filmmakers in Thailand oppose these nationalisms by deliberately creating works that evade incorporation into these nationalist histories, but their international critical success places them in a paradoxical relationship with national institutions of cultural power. On one hand, these films implicitly critique institutions of state power, and reject the nationalist nostalgia of Thai heritage cinema. Directors such as Apichatpong, Wisit Sasanatieng, Thunska Pansittivorakul, Anocha Suwichakornpong, Tanwarin Sukkhapisit and Phuttiphong Aroonpheeng have pioneered forms of resistive cinema that deploy unconventional, non-narrative or experimental practices to undermine hegemonic state discourses. *Tears of the Black Tiger* (2000), Wisit's hyper-saturated homage to 16mm filmmaking, was the first Thai film to be screened at Cannes, and (while domestically unpopular) received an international release. The dependence of these directors on international financing and distribution through film festivals – rather than local producers and studios – complicates their position within Thai national cinema and makes them ambiguous objects of celebration for elite local audiences.

Iron Pussy demonstrates Apichatpong's fascination with the iconoclastic histories of the '16mm era', and a participation in those resistive histories. Shot during the production hiatus between *Blissfully Yours* and *Tropical Malady, Iron Pussy* follows a gay convenience store clerk who transforms into a crime-fighting, cross-dressing secret agent, infiltrates a foreign drug ring and in the process becomes romantically involved with its kingpin. Beyond its narrative dissimilarities from his other work, it is often overlooked within Apichatpong's oeuvre due to its stylistic dissimilarities from his established style. *Iron Pussy* eschews Apichatpong's slow, durational aesthetics for a modern creation of 16mm style. The film's meandering plot is occasionally interrupted by choreographed musical numbers and rapid-fire action scenes, edited with stock

sound effects and a hyperactive musical score. Sound was not recorded on-set but was (poorly) synced in post-production, going so far as to swap Shaowanasai's voice (who physically performs as Iron Pussy) with the voice of a woman while he is in drag. Shot on an abbreviated schedule using cheap digital cameras, the film resembles the silent 16mm era's rushed, low-fidelity visual style, matched by rapid editing and incoherent plot detours: at the film's midpoint, Iron Pussy is revealed to be the drug kingpin's twin sister lost at birth, despite her being a *kathoey* who shifts between male and female personas, and who up until that point was framed as love interests for the kingpin.

Through their use of these devices, Apichatpong and Shaowanasai appear less interested in producing a 'good film' than in blatantly repurposing the styles and histories of Thai silent cinema for the purposes of pastiche. By commingling queer representation with a recreation of iconoclastic 16mm aesthetics, Apichatpong demonstrates interest in restaging identities and histories unacknowledged by dominant discourses. Its aesthetics are intentionally low-fidelity and its cultural references alien to even many Thai viewers, but its pastiche of silent film aesthetics marks Apichatpong's participation in and remobilisation of histories of stylistic resistance within Thailand. By reconstituting silent film genres, Apichatpong rejects the politics of heritage cinema and perpetuates subaltern genres of Thai cinema as a means of political resistance. Through this reconstitution of alternative histories counter to the modernising and centralising interests of the Thai state, Apichatpong creates space to restage histories, memories and styles silenced by dominant discourses and thereby challenge hegemonic institutions of national power.

Ecological silence: *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010)

Silence marks a refusal to participate within dominant discourses, manifesting as a form of resistance against the practices of power (Ferguson 2003, 54). At the same time, as silence is by its nature that which is present yet unrecognised, sensitivity to silence allows for the recognition of lives, histories and experiences ordinarily concealed within these dominant structures of meaning, clearing space for new forms of ethical community. For Cage, sensitivity to silence reorients our attention towards the natural world, offering insight into the ecological reality that human beings are not separated from nature but are rather intimately and inextricably part of it (Cage 1973, 8). Echoing Cage, Apichatpong's silences therefore not only resist authoritarianism but offer an alternative ecological politics in which human and non-human worlds are no longer separated.

These ecological silences are most keenly felt in *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*, particularly in the figures of his monkey spirits. The image of *Uncle Boonmee*'s monkey

spirit, its upright black body twisted to the left so that its red glowing eyes are staring directly at the camera as it stands silhouetted against the green of the jungle, is in many ways the representative moment of Apichatpong's cinema.[7] Beyond the startling composition of the image itself, what is so striking about this moment within the film is its auditory silence; aside from Boonsong's appearance at dinner in *Uncle Boonmee*'s second reel, the other ghosts never speak but watch silently from the jungle as Boonmee nears the end of his human life. Except for their glowing eyes, the ghosts are pure shadow, black voids contrasted against the saturated greens of the jungle behind them. Crucially, these silent spirits stand in for the silenced histories of anti-communist purges that wracked Thailand's northeast until the 1980s, and the residual-yet-inexpressible traumas that continue to haunt the region.

In Thailand, Cold War right-wing discourses co-opted the term 'communist' as an umbrella term encompassing Socialists, anti-monarchists and other socially non-conforming groups that extended beyond members of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) (Winichakul 2020, 37). As the influence of the Thai state spread from Bangkok to Thailand's borders with Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar, the economically under-developed, ethnically-Lao rural populations in the country's northeast came into conflict with the country's emerging military, bureaucratic and capitalistic regimes (Baker and Phongpaichit 2014, 182-3). Reinforced by communist sympathisers and left-wing intellectuals fleeing persecution in the country's south, peasants critical of the encroaching Thai state operated a guerrilla war out of Isaan's jungles, leading to almost 5000 deaths by 1978 (Baker and Phongpaichit 2014, 183). After the installation of an anti-communist military government in October 1976, communist insurgents lost the capacity to maintain their resistance to state rule and emerged from the jungle between 1982-83, before being finally dissolved in 1987 following an amnesty offered by Prime Minister General Prem (Baker and Phongpaichit 2014, 196-97). Communists were framed as subhuman, and killing them was not regarded as a serious religious sin (Winichakul 2020, 37).

The cultural memory of thI communist insurgency has recurred across Apichatpong's filmmaking and was a major concern of Apichatpong's during the development of *Primitive* and *Uncle Boonmee*. Growing up in the 1970s in Khon Kaen, a provincial city in Isaan, Apichatpong's parents were ethnically Chinese doctors, politically sympathetic to the guerrillas. Despite its

[7] This image appears on the film's DVD covers and posters on almost every continent, appears as cover photos on retrospective articles and interviews, and is the cover art for David Martin-Jones' book *Cinema Against Double Think* (2018) and Matthew Hunt's *Thai Cinema Uncensored* (2020).

cultural associations with rebellion, violence and backwardness, Apichatpong describes his relationship with the jungle as one of intimate familiarity:

> My father said that years ago Khon Kaen was jungle; the Khon Kaen that I remember was jungle too and I wanted it to be that way, a green and shady place. In the middle of this jungle was a wooden house on the hospital grounds; my parents were doctors there.
>
> (Weerasethakul 2009b, 104)

This interest in the jungle– and the repressed cultural traumas concealed within it – persists across his filmmaking. Discussing *Primitive* (which fed into his research of *Uncle Boonmee*), Apichatpong noted that he "was struck by the teens with whom [he] shared the sense of isolation, boredom, and the weight of history passed on by the previous generation", passing time with them by playing games, shooting footage and building a mock spaceship out of wood (Inouye 2011, 12). On these terms, the Isaan jungle is haunted by inexpressible memories handed down by earlier generations who directly experienced that violence. Boonmee's ghosts, in silently watching his dissipating life, bear witness to those memories without verbalising them directly.

Indeed, the subtext of communist purges bleeds into multiple dimensions of *Uncle Boonmee*. After taking Jen through a tour of his honey plantation, Boonmee lies down in a shack in preparation for dialysis, and laments his role in the killings:

Boonmee:	Jen… You know this is a result of my karma.
Jen:	What is?
Boonmee:	This illness. I killed too many communists.
Jen:	But you killed with good intentions.
Boonmee:	And I've killed lots of bugs on this farm.
Jen:	It depends on your intentions. You killed the communists for your country, right? Like my father.
Boonmee:	For the country or for what, I had no idea. My waist is so sore.
Jen:	I miss my father.
Boonmee:	You do?

Jen:	Yes. Back then, the army sent him into the jungle to hunt people. But he hunted animals instead. He stayed there until he could speak with animals.
Boonmee:	Did he come to see you after his death?
Jen:	No, once he was dead he was gone. He didn't become a ghost.

After this exchange, Apichatpong lingers on a close up of Boonmee's face turned away from her, before cutting to Jen looking down at him with sadness. By lingering on Boonmee's karmic uncertainties, as well as his nationalistic uncertainties, Apichatpong undermines the nationalist justification for the killings, and begins to to *unsilence* (and thereby *unforget*) the crimes which took place. In this way, by selectively unsilencing Boonmee at this point in the film, Apichatpong animates the silences of the rest of the film, drawing symbolic connections between silent monkey spirits and communist guerrillas, serving as both reminders of and witnesses to state-sponsored atrocities in the Isaan jungle.

This symbolic dimension of silence belies its ecological dimension. Boonmee connects the communists he murdered with the insects killed on his farm, drawing karmic comparisons between the two acts of killing. Insects recur as a motif throughout the film, which takes place on a honey plantation. Boonmee takes great pride in his bees, telling Jen that their honey tastes like tamarind and maize, and when he offers her some honey from one of his hives, he tells her to avoid larvae at the bottom of the honeycomb. Boonmee's gentleness to insects is juxtaposed against Jen's hostility to them, as she is shown killing them on two separate occasions: she steps on a bug while walking down a set of stairs and is later shown killing flies with an electric swatter. The Isaan jungle is a constant presence within the film, providing an immanent reminder of the constant presence of nonhuman life encroaching on the boundaries of Boonmee's home. Boonmee's association of killing communists with killing insects thereby further associates insurgents with the natural (nonhuman) world that Boonmee and Jen are barely separated from.

These natural ecologies exist in opposition to the totalising modernisation of statehood in which every subject (as a subject of the state) is delineated, accounted for under hegemonic institutions of state power. For Cage, silence was a gesture towards non-human ecology, an expression of multiplicity and chance operations opposed to the clarity and directedness of modern existence (Piekut 2013). As a multiplicity of unintended sounds emanating from otherwise unacknowledged beings in the world, silence presents a space cleared of human meaning and civilisation. In opposition to this, the jungle operates as a liminal space of non-differentiated and

unaccountable multiplicity, or as Natalie Boehler describes, "a non-domesticated landscape… an in-between space that invites liminality, [that] provides a setting for the transgression of those boundaries" (Boehler 2011, 303). Jen's father rejected state orders to murder people in the jungle, detaching himself from the civilisation of the Thai nation state and in the process becoming part of its natural ecology, gaining the capacity to speak with animals.

This emphasis on natural ecology also connects with the sound design of Apichatpong's films, which emphasises undifferentiated natural ambient noises over differentiated human speech. Akritchalerm Kalayanamitr's sound design is dominated by the ambient sound of insects, providing an auditory reminder of the dense, teeming life in the jungle surrounding them. In light of the title of this chapter, it is important to emphasise that Apichatpong's films are characterised by a near-total absence of absolute auditory silence. There are few moments in his films where the soundtrack fully gives way to total emptiness by stripping out all speech, music or diegetic sound. Rather, his films prominently feature dense soundscapes of ambient noise, often elevating unstructured, natural 'noise' over what would be conventionally regarded as narratively relevant sound, such as dialogue. As Philippa Lovatt describes in her analysis of sound in Apichatpong's films:

> …'natural' ambient or environmental sounds are amplified to the extent that they become almost *denaturalised*, thus heightening their affective power …the sound of the environment is often so dominant that it dismantles our reliance on the verbal or the linguistic to ground our understanding of what is happening in the narrative, and instead encourages (or rather *insists* upon) an embodied, phenomenological, engagement with the scene.
>
> (Lovatt 2013, 62)

From *Blissfully Yours*, Apichatpong layered scenes with dense ambient noises drawn from the environment – insects, wind, hooting animals, traffic – which Lovatt tied directly to Akritchalerm's interest in John Cage and Steve Reich's field recordings of the 1950s and 1960s (2013, 64). On these terms, Apichatpong's sound design can be understood as a rejection of absolute silence and a reinvestment in Cagean ecological silence. For Cage, silence reflected a turning away from the organised sounds of civilisation to the unintended multiplicity of nature, a turning "to the world of nature, where, gradually or suddenly, one sees that humanity, and nature, not separate, are in this world together" (Cage 1973, 8).

Apichatpong's silent ghosts, like his ecological sound design, challenge nationalised concepts of rationality, boundedness and subject delineation. Within Thai state discourses of the 1970s, 'communism' did not refer to a strict organisation or set of ideological principles, but rather to the non-national other, inconsistent with national principles of "Nation, religion (Buddhism), and Monarchy" (Winichakul 1994, 169). The existence of an ideological other allowed for the othering of internal dissidence by generating a "discursive domain of Thainess [that] remains homogeneous and unified" by conceptually excluding that which is ethnically, religiously or ideologically different (Winichakul 1994, 170). The Thai discursive construct of *communism* therefore operates the same way as Derrida's understanding of *animal*, which he writes, "is a word that men have given themselves the right to give… They have given themselves the word in order to corral a large number of living beings within a single concept: 'The Animal,' they say" (Derrida 2008, 32). Derrida's animals, like Thongchai's communists, are denied subjectivity within discourse, a capacity to name themselves or to speak. Sharing this world without language, "communist" and "animal" blur together—a discursive fusion visualised in Boonsong's transformation into a monkey spirit.

Uncle Boonmee therefore proposes an ecological purpose for silence, and by extension an alternative answer to the question: if Boonmee's ghosts could speak, what would they say? On one level, the silence of Boonmee's ghosts signifies the residual trauma of the purges, and the inexpressibility of those traumas in dominant discourses. Animated by Boonmee's regrets for his involvement in the killings, their silence speaks to an historical event that is otherwise unacknowledged within dominant discourse. This silence acts as an unforgetting of those events, drawing up of those silenced memories above thresholds of sense to be culturally meaningful. Yet on an ecological level, their silence reflects a rejection of language and expression altogether, a refusal to participate within the very discourses that have excluded them. Their silence does not speak into a modernised world of rationality, differentiation and accountability, but rather draws its subjects into a sensuous and unaccountable space of multiplicity and blurred distinctions in which human, animal and insect exist in continuum with each other.

Sensitivities to silence

Returning to the black leader of *Syndromes and a Century*, we can understand its silence on multiple terms. On its most basic level, the black screen is formally silent, devoid of sound or visual figuration aside from the visual scratches on its surface, but as I have argued silence is not an absolute absence of content, but rather the non-registry of content that is always and already

present. By shifting from a focus on absence to a sensitivity to that which is concealed within silence, we can begin to recover histories, events and memories that have been otherwise repressed by dominant discourses, "the realm of the unforgettable or unvoiced by not forgotten memory" (Winichakul 2020, 18). By shifting our understanding of silence from a form of passivity to a potential space for political resistance, we can begin to recognise the practices of artists and activists already engaged in immanent forms of critique but whose expressions are concealed within dominant discourse. Understood on these terms, the black leader interspersed throughout the Thai print of *Syndromes and a Century* simultaneously marked the intervention of censorship while also facilitating new forms of political critique among its spectators.

On a deeper level still, the scratches made on the black leader of the celluloid mark a reinstatement of aura on the otherwise mechanically reproduced celluloid print. While this gesture on one level speaks to Apichatpong's avant-garde film training (reflecting the material experimentations of Stan Brakhage), it also speaks to an earlier period of Thai film culture that evaded national control. The history of Thailand in 20th century can be understood as a negotiation between the state, ethno-regional difference and processes of modernisation, in which cinema served as a means of extending the centralising interests of the monarchy and national government over the periphery. The silent '16mm era' prototyped a form of decentralised cultural production where regional differences, dialects and heterogeneous cultural practices could flourish (despite the condemnation of bourgeois elites), and where cinematic experience – combined with live performance – was contingent and non-reproducible. Understood on these terms, Apichatpong's fascination with aesthetics from the silent '16mm era' not only represents a fascination with a cinematic past, but also a longing for the rowdy, heterogeneous spectatorial conditions of that period that implicitly rejected the centralising interests of the state.

Understood differently, *Uncle Boonmee* embeds the troubled recent history of north-eastern Thailand in its narrative, incorporating its silenced history of repression into its representation of spirituality. Rather than apolitically reflecting local spiritual traditions, the ghosts of *Uncle Boonmee* restage the region's traumatic mistreatment by the Thai state without directly representing them, facilitating a form of silent political critique. In this way, Apichatpong's silent ghosts lean into that which is unspoken and unspeakable, blurring lines between human and natural worlds in order to participate in an ecological politics that is not dependent upon sense-making expressions.

Finally, Apichatpong's black leader also represents a method of political camouflage, a tactic for embedding concealed political critique within opaque artistic expression in order to bypass censorship. By dispersing expression incoherently across an array of intertexts and grounding the

work itself in a site-specific environment, Apichatpong conceals his critique of the regime without enunciating direct criticism. Through works like *Invisibility*, he integrates the body of the spectator into its form via projected shadow play, destabilising the boundary between spectator and text and faintly implicating them in the work. Through this, Apichatpong seems to establish the act of spectatorship as a form of political resistance, intimating that the representation of alternative worlds and imagination of possible futures challenges the regime as an act in itself.

However, this framing of silence presents an interpretative aporia: on one hand, the politics of silence demand that such representations are unsilenced, such that through the act of interpretation they can be pulled above a threshold of sense and registered by spectators, but conversely, the very act of articulating that which has been silenced strips it of camouflage and opens their creators to political, judicial and personal reprisal. In this sense, the act of interpretation is not an ethically neutral process, and the choice between unsilencing and leaving silent cannot be easily resolved. At the same time, as Richard Maltby argues, the act of drawing subversive readings from a text is an epistemically unbounded exercise, as the reader is necessarily exceeding the meaning obviously contained within the historical text (Maltby 1986, 169). By de-historicising work in the pursuit of subversive interpretations, the act of interpretation exposes the artist for expressions that they themselves have not verbalised or expressed directly.

Beyond these issues, silence and the inarticulate can serve as vital grounds for new participatory politics. By addressing not only what was expressed but the circumstances in which that expression took place, we can better understand the historicity of silent critiques. The postcards handed out at screenings of *Syndromes and a Century*, linked to online copies of the censored scenes, reflect an invitation to be interpreted and unsilenced by attentive and sensitive spectators, but their faded print demonstrates some effort to camouflage their intentions. By opening his work to the unsilencing act of interpretation, however, Apichatpong invites spectators to participate in its politics as active agents, not passive spectators. For the aesthetic politics of silence to function, spectators have to 'lean in' and become active interpretative participants in its unfolding. But at the same time, silence invites us to find comfort within multiplicity, to cherish the very epistemic instability contained within it. Apichatpong's aesthetic politics are not simply concealed by his opaque expressions, but are themselves unstable. The very unboundedness criticised by Maltby for dehistoricising work can be used to create new political critiques exceeding those contained within the works themselves. The black screens of *Syndromes and a Century* are invitations for action and interpretation, instead of concrete constituted meanings in themselves.

Chapter Four

Pillows

Nine minutes into *Cemetery of Splendour*, there are three consecutive 12 second shots of turbines: a low angle shot of a ceiling fan from the perspective of someone lying underneath it, which is graphic-matched to two sequential shots of water turbines churning in the Bueng Khan Nakhon Lake in Khon Kaen. Twenty-seven minutes into the film, there is another triplet of 12 second shots: a tree by the same lake, an empty sporting court by the water, and another empty court. Ninety-one minutes into the film, there is a third and final triplet of shots, each lasting 23 seconds: two women sitting on a bench overlooking the lake, followed by another shot of a water turbine, then another water turbine. These shot sequences do not conform to conventions of narrative continuity editing, do not present information relevant to the unfolding story, lack clear spatial relationships with the shots that precede or follow them, and fail to establish objects or spaces relevant to future narrative action. Instead, these shots depict spaces beyond the immediate experiences of central characters, serving as both rests between sequences of narrative action and as moments of visual pleasure for their own sake. Although ordinarily excised as 'dead time' within mainstream entertainment cinema, these empty moments in Apichatpong's cinema also serve to sensitise spectators to objects, places and temporalities ordinarily excluded within those narratives.

Throughout his career, Apichatpong has had an evolving interest in spaces devoid of humans and detached from narrative action. His narratives seemingly begin and end in arbitrary places, take little interest in narrative resolution, and his scenes are often structured in ways that actively obscure their spatial organisation. He disregards many continuity editing conventions and instead revels in ruptures and diversions, drifting from his characters to focus on objects and empty spaces detached from their actions and experiences. As principles of linear editing are of limited value, unconventional editing frameworks become increasingly necessary to understand the forms and effects of Apichatpong's visual style.

In these ways, Apichatpong's editing incorporates the alternative logic of 'pillow editing.' Cinematic pillow editing refers to the strategic interspersal of shots, scenes or sequences that suspends narrative action, continuity and causality to present an image for its own sake, an empty image-in-itself. Pillows are determined by their contents (or absence thereof) and their form; a vase, a shoreline, or a sunset can all be pillow shots, provided that they are not causally linked to narrative progression. In this chapter, I analyse Apichatpong's visual editing style through his use of pillow shots, tracing the evolution of his editing over time. In the first section, I theorise pillow editing by addressing its connections with classical Japanese aesthetics (the dominant framework through which pillow editing has been understood in the past), which I place in conversation with theories of cinematic contingency, concentrating on two key intersecting aesthetic concepts: *ma* and *mono no aware*. *Ma* is a relational concept that refers to an energised spatial or temporal emptiness between two or more objects or events and is the most common term used to describe Ozu's pillow editing. I understand the affectivity of these moments through *mono no aware*, or the 'sensitivity to things.' Motoori Norinaga defined *mono no aware* as a state of "[discerning] the nature of happiness or sadness while experiencing the world" or as the state of being "stirred by external things" (Norinaga 2007, 173), and can therefore be understood as a heightened sensitivity to the temporal contingency of things in the world.

From here, my analysis shifts to concentrate on the stylistic principles of Apichatpong's visual editing through four of his major films – *Blissfully Yours*, *Syndromes and a Century*, *Cemetery of Splendour* and *Mekong Hotel* – in order to examine how his editing style has evolved over time to place a growing emphasis on compositional stillness and non-diegetic ruptures. Through this, I argue that Apichatpong's prioritisation of empty moments facilitates spectatorial sensitivity to the phenomenal world that is otherwise obscured by the causal demands of conventional narrative cinema. Pillow editing represents an alternative logic for the cinematic image in which time and objects are not subjugated to narrative logics and are instead allowed to linger as moments empty-in-themselves, disrupting conventional patterns of cinematic meaning and reorient spectatorial attention towards ordinarily obscured elements of the world.

Pillows, vases and sensitivity to things: Conceptualising pillow editing

The term 'pillow shot' entered Anglophone film discourse through Noël Burch (1979), who adapted the 'pillow word' of classical Japanese poetry. Such shots, Burch wrote, "never contribute to the progress of the narrative proper, [but] often refer to a character or a set, presenting or re-presenting it out of narrative context" (Burch 1979, 160-2). Preceding Burch's theorisation, Donald

Richie described this type of shot in Yasujirō Ozu's cinema as an "'empty' or nondramatic shot," or as "empty scenes and still lifes" (Richie 1974, 168-175), while David Bordwell and Kristen Thompson would later describe them as "non-diegetic inserts" (Bordwell and Thompson 1993, 281-2).

Throughout his post-war films, Ozu broke from continuity conventions to systematically break up scenes and sequences with shots of empty spaces and unattended objects to create visual rests between sequences of narrative action. Emptiness was of philosophical interest to Ozu, such that his grave in Engaku-ji is blank except for the character for *mu* (nothingness). Ozu's pillow edits prioritised rhythm and the experience of time, cutting visual rests into his films in manners reminiscent of musical notation or *Noh* theatre. Ozu valued rhythmic consistency to such a degree that he used a specially-made watch on set to measure both seconds and frames to avoid unexpected changes in tempo (Bordwell 1988, 75). By tracing the aesthetic legacies of these practices through Apichatpong's filmmaking practice, we can begin to understand their functions and effects on spectators.

Ozu's pillow editing manifests clearly in *Late Autumn* (1960). Like all of Ozu's post-war films, *Late Autumn* centres on intrafamilial conflict, but in this case centres on a young widow, Akiko (Setsuko Hara), as she attempts to marry her daughter Ayako (Yoko Tsukasa) at the behest of three of her former husband's friends. In the film's closing scene, Akiko is shown folding clothes in her bedroom after Ayako's off-screen marriage, when she is visited by her daughter's friend Yuriko (Mariko Okada). The pair speak briefly before Yuriko exits, leaving Akiko alone in her apartment once again folding clothes. The film ends with a sequence of five shots:

1. Long shot of Akiko sitting and removing her kimono
2. Medium close-up of Akiko in a thoughtful pose
3. Medium close-up of a kimono hanging on the wall
4. Medium close-up of Akiko on the verge of tears
5. Long shot of the corridor 'utside Akiko's apartment

These intervening shots of unattended objects and empty spaces break with classical narrative continuity conventions by disentangling form from character psychology, as neither shot 3 and 5 are connected with Akiko's eyeline or perspective. Moreover, the spatial arrangement of this scene is further confused by the movement of the kimono from the right side of the frame to the left in shot 3, ambiguating the spatial relationship between Akiko and the kimono. Moreover, as the kimono and corridor are positioned in the middle and end of the sequence respectively, they do not

serve as establishing shots, but rather detach spectator attention from narrative action. The kimono – like the corridor – is cut off from human action and subjectivity, challenging Akiko's status as the meaningful centre of the scene and diverting our attentions to non-human objects and spaces.

On one level, Ozu's pillow shots can be understood as expressions of *ma*, an energised interval between objects or events. *Ma* is simultaneously spatial and temporal: a musical rest is *ma* as it pauses between sounds, while a room can also be *ma* as it is the space between walls (Pilgrim 1986, 256). *Ma*, therefore, is not merely a void of content, but an energised relationality between things coexisting in time and space. As Richard Pilgrim wrote:

> …*ma* also means 'among.' In the compound *ningen* ('human being'), for example, *ma* (read *gen* here) implies that persons (*nin, hito*) stand within, among, or in relation to others. As such, the *ma* clearly begins to take on a relational meaning—a dynamic sense of standing in, with, among, or between.
>
> (Pilgrim 1986, 256)

Renske Maria van Dam similarly understood *ma* in opposition to Euro-centric organisations of space and time in which emptiness is viewed as absence or lack, and instead defines *ma* as "an energized middle that makes a difference" (van Dam 2019, 250). She writes:

> *Ma* is not just a gap between two doors; it is the change and movement, the energization happening within this gap. *Ma* is a charged field and should be understood as a dynamic spatiotemporal interval. The conceptualization of *ma* provides a sensitivity to this alternative space-time experience within Japanese architectural discourse.
>
> (van Dam 2019, 250)

Van Dam emphasised generative possibilities of *ma* in itself, not merely as a void between two points but as an empty space in itself. As Pilgrim noted, the Chinese characters that constitute *ma* in Japanese (間） are composed of two elements: "the enclosing radical meaning gate or door (門) and the inner character meaning… sun (日)" visually implying light shining through the crack of a door (Pilgrim 1986, 258).

This understanding of *ma* as an energised interval between two things is acutely felt in Ozu's iconic pillow shot sequence in *Late Spring* (1949). Produced during the Allied Occupation of Japan, *Late Spring* centres on the relationship between Noriko (Setsuko Hara) and her father Sukichi (Chishū Ryū), who – contrary to her wishes – wants his adult daughter to marry. Late in the film, the pair spend a night together at a Kyoto inn. As the pair get into their beds, Noriko initiates a conversation with her father about an encounter they had earlier in the day, but as she turns to face him she realises that he is already asleep. At this moment, Ozu cuts to a shot of a vase silhouetted against a *shoji* wall in the corner of the room, then cuts back to Noriko staring up at the ceiling on the verge of tears, before finally returning to the static shot of the vase. This sequence is composed of seven shots:

1. Wide shot of Noriko and Sukichi lying in their beds
2. Close up of Noriko's face as she turns to Sukichi
3. Close up of Sukichi, sleeping
4. Close up of Noriko's face
5. Long shot of a vase on the other side of the room
6. Close up of Noriko's face
7. Long shot of a vase on the other side of the room

Like the pillow shot sequence from *Late Autumn*, this shot sequence diverges from classical continuity conventions by interspersing moments of *ma*. The shot of the vase does not match Noriko's eyeline (disconnecting it from her diegetic perspective), and the object itself holds no narrative significance, obscuring the narrative justification for Ozu's cut. Rather than emphasising Noriko's emotion at a point of heightened intensity by either holding on her or showing her father, Ozu cuts from her to a dispassionate object, rupturing the emotional continuity of the scene.

This vase has attracted significant scholarly debate over time. Paul Schrader interpreted the vase as an object of transcendental contemplation, "a form which can accept deep contradictory emotion and transform it into an expression of something unified, permanent, transcendent" (Schrader 2018, 77). Richie similarly perceived the vase as "empty of all but *mu*," stating that "The vase itself means nothing, but its presence is also a space and into it pours our emotion" (Richie 1974, 174). Crucially, the affectivity of Ozu's vase is not linked to its position within a narratively continuous sequence, but rather emerges from its detachment from the demands of narrative continuity.

Beyond its intermediary function as a gap or rest between moments of action, Ozu's pillow shot of the vase is also empty-in-itself, allowing for a moment of detached visual contemplation. Beyond *ma*, Ozu's pillow shots have been understood as expressions of *mono no aware*, variously translated into English as the "sadness of things" (Kato 1962, 558), "pathos of things" (Parkes and Loughnane 2018), or a "sensitivity to things" (Hammond 2015, 78). *Mono no aware* refers to an aesthetic experience of impermanence, or a sensitivity to the contingent, ephemeral and transient conditions of phenomenal existence. Its root *aware* is an affective term referring to a spontaneous recognition of the material world, specifically one in which "there is an identification by the perceiver with the object" (Kato 1962, 559). Ōnishi Yoshinori described *aware* as a condition of aesthetic consciousness, but also as an ambivalent term with both positive and negative characteristics (Ōnishi and Marra 1999, 124). At once, *aware* encompasses an elevated aesthetic sensibility and capacity for contemplation uncommon to the masses, and a form of 'sorrow,' a negativity that seemingly contradicts the positive association with taste (Bordwell 1988, 28). Its other root – *mono* – refers to "the vast material world, including all things existing and alive, visible and invisible" (Kato 1962, 558). *Mono* grammatically alters *aware*, which must always be a sensitivity to something (Kato 1962, 558). *Mono no aware*, therefore, refers to a contemplative state of sensitivity to the world.

Mono no aware is provoked by moments of impermanent or transient beauty, stirring subjects to states of overwhelming emotion through sensitivity to the natural world. As Lauren Prusinski articulated:

> *Mono no aware* conveys fleeting beauty in an experience that cannot be pinned down or denoted in a single moment or image. Though fragile, this kind of beauty creates a powerful experience for the observer, since it must be fully enjoyed in a specific period of time… the feeling is a flicker of intense light that may shine brightly, but only for an instant, resulting in a 'powerful emotional experience' that can only be felt in the brevity of it.
>
> (Prusinski 2012, 27-28)

This feeling of *mono no aware* is stirred through poetry, sensitising audiences to the phemomenal conditions of ordinary existence (Meli 2001, 67, Ōnishi and Marra 1999, 117). Whereas *ma* can be readily identified in gaps and empty spaces, *mono no aware* evades straightforward formalisation. As Motoori Norinaga describes, 'to know *mono no aware'* "is to discern the nature of happiness or sadness while experiencing the world… to be stirred by external things" (Norinaga 2007, 173), or

as Kato simplifies, “the man who understands *mono no aware* is the one who understands the world” (Kato 1962, 558).

This sensitivity to the phenomenal world intersects with Siegfried Kracauer’s concept of cinematic contingency. In his theory of cinema, Kracauer emphasised its capacity to register “a flow of chance events, scattered objects, and nameless shapes” embodied by moments of wind blowing through trees, smoke leaving chimneys, or water rippling over rocks in a stream (Kracauer 1960, 62). As Janet Harbord summarised:

> In the camera’s arbitrary framing, the material world is fragmented and rendered strange, enabling the eye to see that which eludes habitual perception. With the photographic as its foundation, film is able to extend the indeterminate through movement: the porous film stock absorbs the random fleeting events before it, in spite of any intentional agency on the part of the camera operator.
>
> (Harbord 2007, 91)

For Mary Ann Doane, cinema was technologically complicit in the broader rationalisation of time under capitalist modernity, reducing human experience to quantifiable units subjugated by a logic of capitalist production in which time is abstracted, flattened into discrete units and consolidated as readily measured value (Doane 2002, 7). Within this system, Doane argued that time was “no longer a medium in which the human subject is situated (it is no longer *lived* or experienced in quite the same way), [but] is externalized and must be consulted (the phenomenon of the pocket watch)” (Doane 2002, 7). This rationalisation of time excludes the variable, affective qualities of experience that cannot be quantified, “the subjective play of desire, anxiety, pleasure, trauma, apprehension,” and consequently excludes any element of the subjective (Doane 2002, 11). Contingency resists this rationalising impulse of capitalist modernity by presenting moments that are “graspable, representable, but nevertheless anti-systematic” (Doane 2002, 11); it shelters the anti-systematic debris left over from capitalist rationalisation, leaving space for the subject in the otherwise depersonalised spaces of modernity.

Given its incompatibility within its system of standardised mass production, contingency has been systematically marginalised within Hollywood film style. As early as 1947, D.W. Griffith mourned the disappearance of “the beauty of moving wind in the trees, the little movement in a beautiful blowing on the blossoms in the trees” (cited in Goodman 1961, 11). Previsualisation and digital production technologies have further marginalised contingency within entertainment

cinema, further alienating contemporary cinematic production from subjective, heterogeneous experiences of lived existence. As moments of privileged contingency, pillow shots sit out of joint with the homogeneous, empty time of capitalist modernity, registering moments of useless time-for-itself that cannot be readily measured as units of capitalised value. Pillow shots privilege cinematic contingency, centralising moments of accidental or unintended movement, gesturing towards the affective and ephemeral experience of *mono no aware*, a 'sensitivity to things.'

Understood on these terms, pillow editing reorients cinematic experience by sensitising spectators to moments of spatio-temporal emptiness, prioritising rests (*ma*) as sites of energised significance while also privileging objects and temporalities that are conventionally ignored within classical narrative cinema (*mono no aware*). Through these aesthetic frameworks, we can begin to understand the affectivity and effects of Apichatpong's own pillow editing, which has evolved substantially over the course of his practice.

Rivers, mountains and roads: *Blissfully Yours* (2002)

Blissfully Yours (2002) centres on alternative, excessive and seemingly wasteful uses of time. Its plot is organised around the banal struggles of three marginalised individuals living on a Thai border town: Min (Min Oo), an unregistered Burmese migrant with a painful skin condition, Roong (Kanokporn Tongaram), a young factory worker romantically interested in him, and Orn (Jenjira Pongpas), her middle-aged landlady. The film is divided into two acts separated by a credit sequence that starts 40 minutes into the film. The first act centres on the stifling conditions of their everyday lives, and the second on their escape to a nearby forest on the Thai border for an afternoon of relaxation. Reflecting the temporal escapism of its protagonists, the visual style of *Blissfully Yours* itself embodies an alternative temporal logic through its extensive deployment of pillow shots, manifesting moments of cinematic emptiness in opposition to the action orientations of classical narrative conventions.

Blissfully Yours established many of the thematic and stylistic traits now associated with Apichatpong's 'signature' visual style. His previous films *Thirdworld* (1997), *Like the Relentless Fury of the Pounding Waves* (1999) and *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000) did not exhibit the same contemplative pace of his later work, but were shot using lightweight cameras in documentary style. Whereas *Mysterious Object at Noon* was edited to an ASL of 23.80 seconds, *Blissfully Yours* was cut to a far slower ASL of 39.93 seconds, leaning more heavily into long takes than in previous work. This slower editing was also matched by a sharp reduction in its use of handheld cinematography. Whereas 57% of shots in *Mysterious Object at Noon* were shot handheld, only

14% of the shots in *Blissfully Yours* were handheld and were mostly used in difficult or inaccessible locations where more complex camera setups were impractical. Whereas the documentary format of his previous films and the 'exquisite corpse' structure of *Mysterious Object at Noon* necessitated an improvisational approach to filming that minimised opportunities for composition and planning, the narrative format of *Blissfully Yours* afforded Apichatpong greater control over his visual style, facilitating his first significant use of pillow editing.

Beyond this shift in production style, *Blissfully Yours* also marked Apichatpong's first collaboration with editor Lee Chatametikool, whose influence professionalised and refined Apichatpong's more experimental impulses. Like Apichatpong, Chatametikool studied filmmaking in the United States and returned to Thailand during the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis—a moment of economic, technological and artistic transformation for the film industry culminating in the emergence of 'New Thai Cinema' (Chatametikool and Weerasethakul 2017). During this time, Chatametikool directed his first short film, *Miami Strips, Hollywood Dreams* (1999), and worked as a boom operator for local film productions, eventually working in the sound department for *Blissfully Yours*. This professional relationship developed into one of Apichatpong's most significant creative partnerships, with Chatametikool editing all of his later feature films, many of his short films and installations, and has served as post-production manager for most of his creative output. Beyond his collaborations with Apichatpong, Chatametikool has worked extensively with other Thai independent directors such as Anocha Suwichakornpong and Phuttiphong Aroonpheng, and directed his own feature film, *Concrete Clouds* (2013). Positioned at the start of this creative partnership, *Blissfully Yours* marks the most appropriate point to begin a systematic study of Apichatpong's editing style.

The first act of *Blissfully Yours* centres on its characters moving through different places in a Thai border town, each a site of social disempowerment: due to his immigration status, Min is unable to receive medical care at a doctor's surgery; Orn has a stifling encounter with her husband at a police station; Roong paints mass produced Looney Toon figurines at a factory and has to feign illness to her manager in order to leave. In each case, Apichatpong's characters come into conflict with institutional authorities – the medical establishment, the police, the factory foreman – enforcing a sense of institutional disempowerment.

Between these locations, however, Apichatpong presents extended sequences of car travel shot through the front or rear windows looking out onto the road, spacing out these encounters with transitional moments of empty time.[8] Many of these shots are held for unusually long durations

[8] For further discussion of mobility and movement in Apichatpong's cinema, see chapter six.

(up to 86 seconds), and do not serve a clear narrative purpose within the film's story, but rather serve as breaks between each site of institutional authority. These car scenes do not so much serve as pillow *shots* as pillow *sequences*, providing brief moments of escape from the stifling conditions of their everyday life. Similar travel sequences shot through car windows take place in *Mysterious Object at Noon*, *Tropical Malady*, *Syndromes and a Century*, *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* and *Memoria*, as well as his shorts *Luminous People* (2007) and *Mobile Men* (2008).

As *ma*, these sequences create energised empty spaces between social encounters, providing time for contemplative drift detached from demands of narrative progress and directionality. Apichatpong marks the transition between the film's two acts with an extended travel sequence depicting their car journey from Roong's factory to the wilderness. This sequence is composed of 29 separate shots and lasts for 660 seconds and concentrates on seemingly unimportant details: we see views out of the window, Min and Roong look at each other then look away, they hold hands, and Min trims his nails. By holding on sequences of travel and indeterminacy rather than rushing from one destination to the next, these road sequences embody the non-linearity of pillow editing, diverting conventional narrative expectations of goal-oriented progress to instead linger in moments of transitional empty time.

However, the pillow sequences of *Blissfully Yours* diverge from Ozu's pillow editing by more closely integrating character subjectivity. At the end of act one, after picking up Roong from her workplace, Orn leaves on her own, leaving the two lovers to drive to the edge of the jungle and then hike up a series of steep cliffs before settling down for a picnic on a cliff overlooking a valley. This scene then abruptly cuts to a shot of Orn having a sexual encounter on the fringe of the jungle with one of her husband's co-workers. The beginning of the scene is intentionally jarring, opening with a close-up to Orn's face beneath her sexual partner (seconds), before cutting to a wide shot of two naked characters in the missionary position (96 seconds), before cutting again to a low angle shot of the forest canopy above them shot from Orn's perspective (12 seconds). Over the next six shots: Orn's partner achieves orgasm (17 seconds) and the pair peel off one another and awkwardly embrace (70 seconds); she runs her hand across his chest (36 seconds); he picks through leaves in her hair and she feeds him a piece of fruit (62 seconds; she sits up and puts her underwear back on (43 seconds); Apichatpong cuts back to the shot of the tree above her (13 seconds), but this time does not match her eyeline. The scene ends abruptly when her partner notices a man stealing his motorcycle in the field outside and chases after him, leaving Orn alone on the forest edge.

Apichatpong's pillow editing in this scene reinforces the personal disconnection felt between the two characters. The opening 3 second close up shot of Orn's face is extremely short and provides no immediate context to what she is doing or where she is. This shot does not so much

establish the spatial organisation of the scene, but rather establishes the tones of dislocation and confusion that underpin it. Her sexual partner is unnamed, and aside from a brief encounter while driving earlier in the film, there is little context to explain who he is. Despite being associated with Orn's perspective looking up from beneath her partner, the low angle shot of the canopy is static, creating a disconnection between the movements of her body and the stasis of the camera. Similarly, when Apichatpong returns to that same pillow shot later in the scene, the absence of an eyeline match with Orn complicates the spectator's identification with her point of view.

Apichatpong uses a similar editing arrangement in the final scene of *Blissfully Yours*, but this time concerns Roong and Min. The scene takes place on the riverbank after the three characters have come out of the water, and Roong shuns Orn to spend private time with her male lover. As Orn starts crying by herself, Roong rests her head on Min's chest and starts fondling his penis, which gradually becomes erect (79 seconds). Apichatpong concludes the film with a sequence of six shots: Orn smokes a cigarette, then lies down on a nearby blanket (50 seconds); Roong drowsily gazes at Min's chest (234 seconds); clouds shifting in the forest canopy above her (22 seconds); the valley where they had lunch earlier in the film (44 seconds); Roong's face as she turns to the camera (3 seconds). As in the earlier scene with Orn, Apichatpong interrupts continuity with a pillow tied to character perspective, before cutting to another pillow totally detached from her perspective. Apichatpong's pillows in *Blissfu93ntangles* are entangled with character subjectivity through character eyelines, and as such, when he cuts to shots detached from character perspective, corresponds to Roong's own drifting consciousness. As she is on the verge of sleep, Apichatpong cuts to the pillow shots of clouds above her, followed by two shots of the mountains around her, before finally cutting back to the same close up her face, visualising her state of emotional and experiential drift and detachment from her own experiences.

As Apichatpong's first foray into pillow editing, the pillow sequences of *Blissfully Yours* present an alternative relationship with time and the phenomenal world. The extended travel sequences of the first act create spatio-temporal rests between scenes of social alienation, offering a glimpse into temporalities outside of the demands of modern society. Echoing Apichatpong's celebration of car journeys cited in my introductory chapter, these travel sequences reorient spectatorial expectations to linger on moments of transition over narrative destinations, sensitising them to alternative values for empty time. Moreover, his pillow editing in the second act presents moments of sensitised engagement with the natural world, detaching our perceptions from the bodies of his characters to instead linger on sequences of extended empty time in the natural world. In opposition to the social demands of the city presented in the first act, these sequences in the second offer alternative pleasures to the intensified demands of modern life.

Discontinuities and contingencies: *Syndromes and a Century* (2006)

In *Syndromes and a Century*, Apichatpong's pillow shots emphasise cinematic contingency even further, registering the transformation of objects, bodies and places over time. Apichatpong is fascinated by *in-betweenness* – enamoured by moments of passage between life and death, human and animal, waking and sleeping – and his pillows visualise these processes within shots themselves. Transitional shots recur throughout the film, centring on images of the natural world in moments of temporal transition: fields of grass blowing in the wind, a sunset shot through a bedroom window, a solar eclipse visible from the ground. These shots do not merely register empty space, but rather capture a moment of temporal transition, registering life and movement independent of human characters. Through pillow editing, these moments of non- temporal transition decentre human presence and instead sensitise spectators to ordinarily deprioritised elements of the non-human world.

Syndromes and a Century opens on a 32 second shot of a tree blowing in the wind. The tree's thin trunk bends slightly as its branches arc in the wind, the sound of its leaves rustling in the wind barely audible by the end of the shot as the volume of the synthetic musical score slowly intensifies. At this point, Apichatpong cuts to a 9 second close up shot of the face of a young man, Ple (Arkanae Cherkam) then to a 110 second close up of the face of another man, Dr. Nohng (Jaruchai Iamaram) before finally settling on an 80 second, wide shot showing the two men sitting in the office of Dr. Toey (Nantarat Sawaddikul). Following this, Apichatpong includes a second, 110 second shot of the characters speaking on the other side of the room, before cutting again to show Toey and Ple leaving her office and walking away. At this point, the camera holds its position even as the two characters leave the frame, then slowly tracks forward towards an open window facing out onto a nearby field. Wind billows in the grass, casting ripples of light through the field. Apichatpong holds on this shot of the field for 110 seconds as white credits appear over the grass, while the dialogue of the two characters remains fully audible in some other space.

The editing of this scene is governed by spatial dislocation. Rather than being structured as a clearly comprehensible scene, the editing of this sequence obscures the relationships between shots. The spatial discontinuity between the opening shot of the tree and Ple's face makes it impossible to ascertain the spatial organisation of the scene. He then cuts to a front-on close up of Nohng, but these two men are not actually in conversation with one another. When Apichatpong eventually does include an establishing shot, we see that Nohng and Ple are actually on different sides of the room, and that Nohng is actually in a conversation with Toey. Combined with the long

shot lengths and lack of narrative exposition, the arrangement of shots in this sequence interferes with the audience's understanding of its spatial organisation. Without the clues provided by conventional continuity editing they are forced to orient themselves on a shot-by-shot basis, sensitising them to the immanent conditions of each image and to body language, speech patterns and behaviour of actors on screen. As Nohng struggles to explain basic medical procedures while staring directly at the camera, actor Jaruchai Iamaram's impassive performance guides viewer attention towards minute changes in facial expression and posture, and away from the narrative contents of his speech.

Beyond the scene's focus on human expressions, its editing also sets up a tension between human and non-human, natural and artificial that persists across the rest of the film. The visual symmetry established between the tree at the start of the scene and the grassy field at its conclusion bookends what could otherwise be a conventional dialogue scene with moments of natural contingency, juxtaposing interpersonal human struggles with shots of the non-human natural world. Rather than centre attention on the struggles of human characters, Apichatpong also contemplates their absence, lingering on spaces detached from their actions and motivations.

The two most visually striking examples of pillow editing in *Syndromes* involve a setting sun, creating moments of intense cinematic contingency. Thirty-seven minutes into the film, Toey is having a conversation with Pa Jane (Jenjira Pongpas) in a field, in the midst of which Apichatpong cuts to a thirty-eight second shot of a solar eclipse occurring overhead. The moon slowly passes over sun, transforming the pale blue sky to a dark blue, before gradually passing to the other side. As in the film's opening scene, there is a disjunction between audio and visual as the characters continue to speak without commenting on the cosmological event taking place above them. This image is made even more striking by the rarity of the profilmic moment it presents, the image of an eclipse marking an extraordinary moment of temporal transition. Apichatpong recalls this image in the film's second act with the shot of the black hole of an air vent in the hospital basement, emphasising its visual importance.

A similar moment of natural contingency takes place a few minutes later as Toey has a conversation with her then-love interest, an orchid salesman. As the pair stand on the balcony of his home, he asks her for advice on how to express his love to someone else, but when she asks if they are a man or a woman he diverts the topic and the conversation awkwardly deteriorates, implying his incapacity to articulate his sexuality. The scene then cuts to a shot of his empty home (SC56), before cutting again to the view of a sunset through a nearby window (SC57). This shot of the sunset lingers for 33 seconds, more than twice the film's median shot length of 15.5 seconds. The sound of their dialogue fades out and gradually becomes inaudible as the sound of a guitar

slowly fades in, before finally cutting to the diegetic source of the music at a night market concert (SC58 onwards). On a narrative level, the sunset enables a smooth temporal transition between daytime conversation and the night-time concert, visually registering the passage of narrative time between the two spaces. Coupled with the melancholic music from the performance, the sunset thematically reinforces the personal disconnection between Toey and her love interest in the prior scene, tingeing the overall sequence with a sense of loss. Yet as a moment-in-itself – much like the opening shot of a tree or the previous shot of an eclipse – the sunset functions as a moment of contingent temporal transition detached from narrative progress.

Crucially, these sequences not only do not serve narrative functions, but actively interrupt the flow of narrative progress. Like Akiko's kimono, they represent spaces and objects detached from their characters, but in this case manifest as moments of temporal transition as opposed to stasis. This temporality returns us to Ōhashi's metaphor of double exposure: "The blazing light of the noonday sun only becomes visible, as if in a double exposure, when the brilliance dims at sunset… The fullness of the flower disappears in its fading" (Ōhashi 2011, 1192). When we consider Apichatpong's editing strategies, he is less interested in continuous action or intellectual juxtaposition than he is in moments of contingent presence. Yet as Ōhashi insists and Apichatpong's eclipse demonstrates, these moments are not temporally static but rather embroiled in a process of movement and transformation.

A sensitivity to things: *Cemetery of Splendour* (2015)

For both Apichatpong and Ozu, pillow shots not only mark moments of temporal transition, but also moments of social transformation. In *Late Spring*, Ozu includes a shot of a Coca-Cola sign by the beach, a reference to the growing influence of American globalism during the occupation period, metaphorising the traditional family unit in a moment of crisis at the centre of the film's plot. This tension between traditional and modern sits at the heart of Ozu's filmmaking, both in his storytelling and in his blending of traditional Japanese aesthetics with modernist sensibilities (Hammond 2015, 77). For Bordwell, this ambivalence leeches into the sadness of Ozu's protagonists, a feeling he links back to *mono no aware*:

> A lost past and a fleeting present often intermingle in the films. … [Most] Ozu films contain a scene of idyllic contemplation in which some characters sit or stroll in more or less natural surroundings and reflect upon

> their lives. Such a scene typically blends a sense of loss with an awareness of the transitory moment.
>
> (Bordwell 1988, 55)

Understood on these terms, Ozu's 'sensitivity to things' is not only a sensitivity to the natural world, but also to the changing circumstances of everyday life, to the fading traditional values disrupted by American industrial capitalism. A similar melancholy permeates *Cemetery of Splendour*, which registers a moment of social transformation and alienation following the 2014 coup d'état, preserving Apichatpong's memories of place and home before they are eroded by the growing influence of military rule.

This sensitivity to social transformation is communicated by *Cemetery of Splendour*'s contemplative visual style. As Apichatpong's career has progressed, his visual style has increasingly veered towards long takes and compositional stillness, allowing for greater moments of contemplative introspection. Although Apichatpong's ASLs have fluctuated over the course of his career, his camera setups have become increasingly fixed in place, shifting from a mostly handheld style in his early documentary style towards the static wide shots now commonly associated with his signature visual style (see: Figure 1, p.50). As *Mysterious Object at Noon* was shot using lightweight 16 mm cameras in a documentary style, 57.1% of its shots were filmed handheld, with a total of 67.5% of its shots filmed with moving cameras. Although *Blissfully Yours* and *Tropical Malady* both saw marginal increases in the use of static camera setups (to 54.7% and 60.9%, respectively), they also saw a substantial decrease in handheld cinematography (13.8% and 13.72%, respectively), making greater use of tracking shots facilitated by their higher budgets. By *Syndromes and a Century*, handheld shots had almost entirely disappeared from Apichatpong's visual vocabulary (down to 1.3% of its shots) and were only used in one scene to follow two characters down a set of stairs. *Cemetery of Splendour* featured only four shots with camera movement – none of which were shot handheld – with 96.9% of its shots filmed with static cameras. Apichatpong accentuates *Cemetery of Splendour*'s visual stasis by placing its only tracking shot at the end of the film (CS127, 176 seconds), breaking the film's presiding visual stillness to show an aerobics class in a court of the military hospital. We can therefore trace a steady development across Apichatpong's filmmaking towards a growing confidence in and self-awareness of his own visual style, tracking a linear progression towards ever-increasing standards of stylistic refinement.

Apichatpong's pillow editing in *Cemetery of Splendour* is used strategically to distinguish between distinct spatio-temporal moments. We can see this use of transitional pillow editing in the shot triplet cited at the start of this chapter composed of a shot of a ceiling fan (13 seconds) graphic-

matched to two sequential shots of water turbines (13 seconds each). This shot triplet was followed by a shot of a group of people gathering around a mysterious object floating near one of the turbines (18 seconds), with no narrative explanation of who they are or what the object is. This 56 second sequence forms an interval between two almost indistinguishable scenes showing Jen sitting by Itt's bedside. Aside from a costume change (Jen's shirt changes colour from navy blue to maroon), there is no indication within the shots themselves that time has elapsed between them, necessitating the four-shot sequence to transition between two points of narrative time. Apichatpong uses similar transitional pillow shots in three other places throughout *Cemetery of Splendour*. Twenty-seven minutes into the film, Apichatpong places another triplet of 12 second shots: a tree by the same lake, an empty court by the water, and another empty court. Coupled with a 46 second shot of an excavator digging up soil in a field outside the hospital, this four-shot sequence provides another temporal interval between two hospital scenes. Eighty-two minutes into the film, Apichatpong features four shots of signs nailed to trees organised according to a similar rhythm: 16 seconds, 10 seconds, 10 seconds, 11 seconds. Finally, 91-minutes into the film, Apichatpong places a final triplet of shots, each lasting 23 seconds: Jen and Keng sitting on a bench overlooking the lake, followed by two shots of water turbines, coupled with a fourth, 66 second shot of a water droplet slowly moving across the camera lens. Like Ozu's transitional pillow shots, these sequences serve intermediary functions through their emptiness, functioning as rests between moments of narrative activity.

These pillow shot sequences are not simply intermediary moments, but assume significance in themselves. By graphic matching the ceiling fan to the water turbines, Apichatpong creates continuity between those objects without placing them in narrative continuity with film's plot. Rather than simply appearing once, the objects of *Cemetery of Splendour* recur multiple times: both the ceiling fan and water turbines reappear later in the film, as do other objects such as signs containing proverbs nailed to trees. In *Syndromes and a Century*, objects repeat between the two hospitals but are often transformed in the process. For example, at one point in the first act Toey and Ple sit in an outside court beside a large white Buddha statue (SC24)—an iconic object that reappears in the courtyard of the second hospital (SC93). In the second instance, Apichatpong tracks around the statue for 24 seconds, leaving enough time for spectators to recognise the statue's recurrence and new position. These repetitions imply significance to these objects without reducing them to instruments of narrative progress; they are important, but only to themselves. Positioned as the compositional centre of each shot and elevated by repetition, Apichatpong's objects assume places of significance within both films, sensitising spectators to moments without narrative justification.

Placed in context, much of *Cemetery of Splendour* rests on Jenjira contemplating places around her. Her experiences are defined by a constant sense of melancholic loss and detachment that can be read as a simultaneous mourning of her own loneliness, of the gradual modernisation of Thailand (embodied by mechanical excavators and water turbines), and of the decaying state of Thai politics itself. The film ends with a close up shot of Jenjira's face, wide-eyed and staring out onto the excavated earth of a soccer pitch metaphorising this state of upheaval. The film's contemplative pillow shots of empty spaces and objects therefore serve as memorialisation of a past that is gradually being erased. Such pillow shots, to echo Bordwell's description of Ozu, "[blend] a sense of loss with an awareness of the transitory moment" (Bordwell 1988, 55).

Particles and vacancies: *Mekong Hotel* (2012)

The pillow shots of *Mekong Hotel* are similarly entangled with issues of memory and preservation. Set in a hotel overlooking the Mekong River on Thailand's border with Laos, the film presents a series of vignettes centred on three characters: a young man (Sakda Kaewbuadee), a young woman (Maiyatan Techaparn) and her middle-aged mother (Jenjira Pongpas). Despite the film's 56 minute runtime, Apichatpong himself classifies *Mekong Hotel* as a short film, which is ironic given that the film is also his slowest: in contrast to *Syndromes* (which was composed of 158 shots at an ASL of 38.06 seconds) and his previous *Uncle Boonmee* (185 shots at an ASL of 33.8 seconds), *Mekong Hotel* features only 34 shots and is cut to an ASL of 98.82 seconds. Yet what is of most interest in *Mekong Hotel* is not the pace at which it is edited, but the logic through which its shots are organised in sequence.

There are few narrative connections between shots and sequences in *Mekong Hotel*, and although much of the runtime is spent on long takes of semi-improvised conversations between actors, the film also features a supernatural subplot in which the three characters are transformed into cannibalistic spirits, or *phi pop* (Boehler 2014a). These supernatural interruptions have no bearing on the mundane conversations that make up the rest of the film but rather present themselves as ruptures within the otherwise calm tone of the film. For example, shot MH4 shows Sakda getting dressed in his hotel room, which inexplicably cuts to Maiyatan crouching in a corner with blood dripping down her chin as she devours a chunk of flesh in the corner (MH5), before cutting again to Maiyatan (back in human form) looking out from a balcony onto the water (MH6). These jarring alternations between supernatural and mundane make *Mekong Hotel* structurally confusing, undermining any attempt to rationally organise its contents into narrative continuity.

Parallel to this, *Mekong Hotel* frequently cuts away from human action and activity to focus on empty spaces and unattended objects, marginalising human bodies within the diegesis. The film opens with a static long take of a hotel balcony overlooking the Mekong River (MH2, 35 seconds), in which a statue holding a torch above its head stands motionless in the centre of the frame, flanked by two palm trees whose leaves blow gently in the breeze. Coupled with tiny ripples in the water, the contingent motion of the palm branches emphasises the otherwise total stillness of the frame. Other shots spread throughout the film also prioritise empty spaces detached from the activities of its characters, showing highway traffic through an upstairs window (MH8, 25 seconds), a bed covered in blood (MH19, 16 seconds), and an extreme long shot of an excavator digging up sand on the shore (MH20, 73 seconds). Despite their surface similarities with Ozu's shots of empty spaces and unattended objects, however, the pillow shots of *Mekong Hotel* follow a radically different logic. Ozu's films followed a rigorous internal logic, and although many of his editing decisions diverged from Hollywood continuity conventions, they remained narratively driven and logically sequential in a way that *Mekong Hotel* is not. Whereas Akiko's kimono in *Late Autumn* interrupts an otherwise-continuous scene, there are no logical connections between shots in *Mekong Hotel*, and there is no obvious distinction between pillows and other shots. In addition, whereas Ozu's pillows only lasted a few seconds, Apichatpong's pillows in *Mekong Hotel* were included as long takes, leaving spectators to linger in extended moments of empty time without returning them to the primary narrative. In combination, this marginalisation of narrative progress, discontinuous shot structure and extensive use of long takes flattens distinctions between pillows and shots. What is left is a presiding sense of sameness and indifference in which hierarchical distinctions between human and non-human, person and place disappear.

These issues converge in the film's final shot, a 277 second extreme long shot of boats playing on the Mekong River. A bridge forms a horizon across the centre of the frame, a power pylon juts out of its lower left side, and tiny speedboats skirt across the surface of the water, barely perceptible except for the long strings of churned water left behind them. On one level, this long take functions as a visual coda, recalling Ozu's practice of ending his films with landscape shots: *Late Spring* ends with a shot of water lapping at a shoreline; *Tokyo Story*, a shot of a harbour; *Equinox Flower*, a train station; *Late Autumn*, an empty corridor. Bordwell argued that Ozu's codas mirrored the opening shot of each film, meaning that each film began and ended in the same place, establishing a sense of "…existence independent of, and indifferent to, the character's petty problems" (Bordwell 1988, 60). The final shot of *Mekong Hotel* gestures towards this impermanence, but also holds elevated emotional importance for Apichatpong himself: his father's ashes were spread in the Mekong River, and he has described his visits to the region as equivalent

to visiting his father (Weerasethakul 2021). Viewed in this light, the 277 second final shot of *Mekong Hotel* not only functions as a site of contemplation in itself – as the contingent movements of the speedboats create visual attractions for contemplative spectators – but also functions as a memorial for Apichatpong's father, whose memory persists through the survival of the photographic image.

Understood on these terms, the pillow shots of *Mekong Hotel* have a dual identity: at once, they serve intermediary spaces between moments of narrative action, but also linger as empty spaces and unattended objects for their own sakes, detached from demands of progress or continuity. As the title suggests, the primary subject of *Mekong Hotel* is not its human characters but the space of the hotel itself, marginalising human action in deference to architecture. Rather than assemble his film as a series of sequential moments, Apichatpong presents each shot as an autonomous moment 'alive' on its own terms.

Empty images

Apichatpong's visual editing is governed by a constant sense of experimentation and stylistic flux. Although his shots have gradually become longer over time and increasingly static, his oeuvre is not as internally consistent as external commentators sometimes imply when describing his film style. Despite these stylistic variations over time, Apichatpong's visual editing from *Blissfully Yours* onwards exhibits a fascination with visual emptiness, placing inordinate emphasis on unattended objects and autonomous spaces at the expense of narrative progress and spatial continuity.

In this chapter, I have traced the formal evolution of Apichatpong's pillow editing, while simultaneously contemplating the affectivity of these empty moments within his feature films. As early as *Blissfully Yours*, Apichatpong placed disproportionate emphasis on intermediary moments of travel and shots of the natural world, interspersing scenes of character interaction with extended sequences of nothing happening. These pillow sequences contributed the film's unusual rhythms, decentralising narrative progress, to instead focus on the liminal experiences of his characters. In *Syndromes and a Century*, Apichatpong pushes pillow editing even further, increasingly interrupting sequences of action with shots of empty spaces and the natural world. Here, Apichatpong's attention is increasingly directed towards moments of contingent transition and transformation – such as wind blowing through trees, sunsets and solar eclipses – instilling a sense of time passing in registers detached from the personal projects of his characters. In *Cemetery of Splendour*, Apichatpong's visual editing reaches a point of heightened internal consistency,

carefully managing shot duration to maximise the rhythms of his pillow shots. Here, object and spaces assume positions of heightened importance as expressions of Apichatpong's memories of Khon Kaen. Finally, in *Mekong Hotel*, pillow editing becomes increasingly entangled with issues of memory and loss. The voices of characters reminiscing over past experiences juxtaposed atop images of vacant hotel rooms and passing traffic, while the river itself stands in as a memorial to Apichatpong's father.

Pillow editing models an alternative logic to continuity editing in which objects, places and temporalities conventionally marginalised within mainstream entertainment cinema are granted positions of importance within cinematic experience. Pillows suspend narrative progress, departing from conventional organisations of meaning to instead rest on moments detached from logics of progress, causation or conflict, and to thereby contemplate elements of the world ordinarily ignored by human attention. Apichatpong lingers in empty moments of transition and temporal contingency incompatible with the exigencies of narrative continuity. In this way, pillow editing facilitates spectatorial sensitivity to the phenomenal world through the prioritisation of moments of cinematic emptiness.

Chapter Five

Ghosts

A camera tracks through an empty house, looking through open doorways into rooms of unmade beds, mosquito nets and clothes hooks, and through windows without glass facing out onto trees blowing in the wind. Old photographs hang on the walls, the stern expressions of their faces following us as we glide through the empty rooms of the building. Under a mosquito net in one of the bedrooms, something shifts: a dark, human-like figure lying on a mattress turns to face us, its barely discernible movement noticeable only through the otherwise-absolute stasis of the rest of the house. The scene cuts away and the camera keeps roaming through the house, preventing us from acquainting ourselves with what we have seen. The film keeps cutting, each time shifting to the empty rooms of a different house, preventing us from establishing a clear sense of time or architectural organisation. Outside in a garden behind the house, a group of young men in military uniforms digs without a discernible purpose, talking and laughing among themselves. The camera keeps roaming. We see the edge of a forest, and in the background – barely visible through the overgrowth – walks the dark figure from earlier in the house. It cuts again, and the camera slowly pans down from the forest canopy to a white horse lingering in a forest clearing, then cuts to black.

Apichatpong's short film *A Letter to Uncle Boonmee* (2009) was filmed during a research trip for *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2011) in 2008 and anticipates many of the latter film's stylistic and thematic concerns. Filmed in Nabua, a small town in north-eastern Thailand, *A Letter to Uncle Boonmee* reflects lingering community traumas from state-sponsored anti-communist repression and economic neglect, presenting a series of architectural portraits of vacant spaces and empty homes. It is a reckoning with absence and the inexpressibility of latent trauma, remediating those memories in the uncanny empty spaces of the vacant homes.

A Letter to Uncle Boonmee indexes many of the issues intersecting Apichatpong's haunted cinema: photography, spectrality, memory, and the spatial imaginary of home. By his own understanding, Apichatpong understands cinematic spectatorship as a haunted experience:

> If you notice the people around you while watching a film, you will see that their behaviour is like that of ghosts, lifting up their heads to look at the moving images in front. […] The moving images on the screen are camera records of events that have already taken place; they are remains of the past, strung together and called a film. In this hall of darkness, ghosts are watching ghosts.
>
> (Weerasethakul 2009b, 113)

Ghosts are integral to Apichatpong's cinema, informing his relationship with Thai animism (Ingawanij 2013), Buddhist reincarnation (Bergstrom 2015, Chung 2012), queer sexuality (Fuhrmann 2008) and photographic ontology (Boehler 2014a, Utterson 2020), and he dedicated his Palme d'Or for *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* to "all the ghosts and spirits of Thailand, for without them, the film could not have been made" (cited in Boehler 2014a, 63), at once gesturing towards the ghosts of the country's religious traditions and cultural practices, the 'ghosts' of Thai film history, and the unspoken or silenced histories of violence and repression submerged beneath the film's unusual construction.

A systematic study of Apichatpong's filmmaking must grapple with his ghosts, but these phantoms resist concretisation. Ghosts are ontologically uncertain, occupying the liminal space between presence and absence. As Tom Gunning wrote:

> Instead of simply being present, the phantom occupies the ontologically ambiguous status of 'haunting'—enduring and troubling in its uncanny claim on our awareness and sense of presence yet also unfamiliar and difficult to integrate into everyday space and time. … A ghost puts the nature of human senses, vision especially, in crisis. A ghost, a spirit, or a phantom is something that is sensed without being seen.
>
> (Gunning 2007, 100-2)

As Gunning described, the phantom's visual uncertainty was of key interest to early photographers and mystics, who manipulated photography's photochemical processes such as under- and over-

exposure, motion blurs and superimposition to create otherwise impossible visual objects that seemingly-confirmed the existence of supernatural entities (Gunning 2007, 99). Spirit photography manipulated two intersecting ontological uncertainties: the first a contradiction of ordinary human sight in which we perceive seemingly impossible events and objects, and the second within the photographic medium itself. Photography allowed for the coexistence of multiple contradictory temporalities, seemingly resurrecting the dead "by bringing into the present something that belongs to the past" (Behrend 2015, 202-3).

This issue of ontological uncertainty intersects with Sigmund Freud's association of ghosts with the *unheimlich* (uncanny) return of the repressed, which he understood as the destabilising resurgence of something forgotten-yet-familiar (Freud 1919, 3-4). Ghosts often emerge from the past—as the previous occupants of the house, as legacies of colonial violence and dispossession, or as remnants of pre-modern spiritualities. Natalie Boehler posited that Apichatpong's photographs functioned as collective visual archives of past events that are otherwise absent in political discourse, preserving memories and places like Nabua by allowing them to "linger as unspoken, unofficial, traumatic history" (Boehler 2014a, 69). Andrew Utterson understood Apichatpong's interest in celluloid photography throughout *Uncle Boonmee* as a reflection on the physical medium of photochemical photography itself, whose capacity to preserve time and memorialise the past "constitute[s] a haunting of sorts, not unlike the revenant return of Uncle Boonmee's past lives" (Utterson 2020, 73). Echoing Gunning and Bazin, Heike Behrend noted photography's "double identity as an instrument of scientific enquiry and an uncanny, almost magical process" allowing for the preservation of the dead as objects of the past (Behrend 2015, 207).

Beyond its connection to the past, uncanny hauntings also mark a crisis of progress, the uncanny resurgence of pre-modern existence into the homogeneous, empty time of modern life. For Jacques Derrida, haunting referred not only to traces of the past re-emerging in the present but also to the debris of a failed future that can never be fully present. In *Spectres of Marx* (1994), Derrida repurposed Hamlet's "the time is out of joint" to describe the state of affairs following the "End of History" and the collapse of the USSR, which he describes through the concept of *hauntology*. Spectres mark an uncanny absence-within-presence, a lack of being in themselves deferred into "what is *no longer* or *not yet*" (Haggland 2008, 82, original emphasis). Through Derrida, haunting became an issue of the future as well as the past, an unresolved rupture in logics of progress.

In this chapter, I examine the connections between haunting, photography and memorialisation in Apichatpong's cinema, concentrating particularly on the location (and

dislocation) of the empty home. This chapter is divided into three parts. In the first section, I conceptualise the 'spatial imaginary' of home, examining how the multi-scalar concept of 'home' operates in Apichatpong's cinema. I argue that concepts of 'home' and 'homeland' feature prominently in Apichatpong's filmmaking, and his films often return to familiar sites such as hospitals and family homes, his hometown of Khon Kaen and the Isaan region, and on a larger scale the state of Thailand itself. Nostalgia and homesickness play an enduring role in his creative practice, intensifying feelings of loss and dislocation when that home is taken away. In the second section, this disappearance of home leads me back to the original description of the uncanny – the *unheimlich* or the 'unhomely'. Gunning describes the *unheimlich* as "an unsettling uncertainty that evokes an odd familiarity in the midst of strangeness" (2008, 69) – and the figure of the ghost. As beings of ontological uncertainty often situated at the site of the destabilised home, ghosts unsettle previous stabilities and allow for the return of repressed histories and unacknowledged traumas. Building on my discussion of silenced histories in chapter four, I consider how Apichatpong haunts the architectural site of the empty home, and address how he uses these spaces to represent unacknowledged national and personal trauma. In the final section, I explore the relationship between Apichatpong's ghosts and the incomplete processes of modernisation, analysing his use of photographic multiple exposure to both represent memory and stage moments of haunting through the coexistence of multiple temporalities. Through this analysis, I linger in the uncertainties and empty spaces of Apichatpong's cinema, exploring their relationships with memorialisation and dwelling.

Double exposures: *Video Diary: One Water* (2013) and *Ashes* (2012)

Throughout his narrative filmmaking, Apichatpong uses multiple exposure to render uncanny phantoms. In the final moments of *Tropical Malady*, Keng watches as the spirit of a dead cow separates from its body, stands up and walks into the forest. Astonished, Keng follows the cow as it moves through the undergrowth, passing through physical branches until it eventually fades out and disappears. This image prefigures a later shot in *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* in which the ghost of Boonmee's wife Huay manifests at an empty chair of their dinner table. Huay slowly fades into view, shocking the other characters when they finally realise her presence at the table. Apichatpong renders both ghosts through a process of double exposure, superimposing the image of the ghost over the ordinary photographic background to make them appear semi-translucent and complicating the ontological realism of the photograph itself: just as Keng doubts the reality of the phantom cow in front of him, superimposition makes viewers hesitate over the

uncertain ontological status of the photographic image. Indeed, as André Bazin notes in his essay "The Life and Death of Superimposition," multiple exposure is uncanny due to the apparent contradiction between "the irrefutable objectivity of the photographic image and the unbelievable nature of the events that it depicts" (1946). In this way, multiple exposure photographically reflects the ontological and temporal uncertainties of haunting, combining two or more images shot at different points in time to create moments of uncanny intellectual uncertainty.

Apichatpong's use of multiple exposure links him back to early- and pre-cinematic photographic traditions of spirit photography and the trick film. American spiritualists from the 1850s used double exposure to visually render apparitions, and to separate or enlarge parts of a body, such as detached human heads or floating arms. Pre-cinematic stage magicians used superimposed projected images in their shows through the use of overlapping magic lanterns, and used visual tricks to demonstrate the potential artificiality of photography and debunk its objectivity purported by spirit photographers (Natale 2012, 134). By the time Georges Méliès manipulated multiple exposure to make ephemeral copies of his own head float on a musical stave above him in *The Melomaniac (Le Mélomane)* (1903), the method of double exposure had already been established by primitive photographers and stage magicians in the previous decades, but it took on new significance in the emergent medium of the moving image by allowing multiple temporally detached objects to coexist within the same visual space and time. As Simone Natale notes, photographic exposure tricks spilled from the trick film into broader film practice, allowing for the distinctly-cinematic devices dissolves, transparencies, superimpositions and duplications of objects (Natale 2012, 139-40). Coupled with his ongoing interest in Méliès and primitive cinema, Apichatpong's archaic use of multiple exposure to render his ghosts situates him directly within these traditions of trick films and spirit photography.

For his short film *Video Diary: One Water* (2013), Apichatpong asked Tilda Swinton to silently recall her dreams on camera, over which he superimposes photographs he imagines embody her memories. Rather than convey the optical uncanny, Apichatpong's use of multiple exposure in *Video Diary: One Water* allows for the copresence of past (embodied by black-and-white photographs and other images) with the present moment in which Swinton imagines them. The historical accuracy of the photographs is irrelevant, as Apichatpong does not attempt to accurately represent *what she remembers* so much as *what it is like to remember* and using multiple exposure to represent the process of memorialisation itself. This use of multiple exposure exceeds that of spirit and trick photographers to serve as both a means of memorialisation and of reflecting on the photographic medium itself.

The use of multiple exposure to convey memory resurfaces in *Ashes* (2012), a 20 minute short film shot on 35mm film using a hand-cranked LomoKino camera. *Ashes* begins with footage of Apichatpong and his then-partner, Teem, walking their French Bulldog, King Kong, through the streets near their home in Chiang Mai, before settling on a shot of King Kong in bed with them at night. After a brief display of busy traffic, *Ashes* shifts to the rapid montage of images showing anti-*lèse-majesté* activists producing a work of political art in the forest, images overlapping each other in the frame. The procession of images continues, but cease cutting altogether and instead accumulate on top of one another through superimposition, combining different images, objects and film stocks before finally collapsing back into a black screen. The low-framerate LomoKino footage is motion-blurred, sporadically out of focus and pockmarked by lens flares, visual imperfections and the coarse grain of the celluloid stock. The film stock itself breaks down in places, shifting between black-and-white and monochromatic stock, breaking down into sections of unexposed leader, or incorrectly scanning cells in their translation from celluloid to digital to show the top half of one image and the bottom half of another.

Apichatpong's multiple exposures simultaneously redeploy the optical uncanny through traditions of trick and spirit photography, while also attempting to sensually register memories through the photographic medium without resorting to narrative. On one hand, Apichatpong uses multiple exposure in his narrative films to register ghosts that are uncanny and ontologically uncertain, driving spectators towards states of "Fantastic hesitation" (Gunning 2008, 72). On the other, his experimental filmmaking shifts focus from photography's realism to its material properties, allowing for the coexistence of multiple temporal moments in a single image. Although ghosts only appear literally in the former, both methods are in their own way 'haunted,' as they draw multiple temporalities into a single moment in time.

Homesickness: *0116643225059* (1994), *My Mother's Garden* (2007), *Syndromes and a Century* (2006), and *Cemetery of Splendour* (2015)

Home is an orienting concept within Apichatpong's creative practice but is in negotiation with issues of absence. Home in this case does not simply refer to the architectural space or dwelling, but rather constitutes a *spatial imaginary*, that is "a set of intersecting and variable ideas and feelings, which are related to context, and which construct places, extend across spaces and connect places" (Blunt and Dowling 2006, 2). In *The Poetics of Space* (1994), Gaston Bachelard argued that "our house is our corner of the world… it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the world," and insisted upon the social and emotional importance of home for individuals (1994,

4). Home was imagined as an orienting space that served an integrating function for individuals and communities, a habitual centre of everyday routines that served as both an emotional and geographic centre of everyday life. As a spatial imaginary, home can be any place that is settled, intimate and grounded in personal history, making it a multi-scalar concept: a corner of a room can be home, but neighbourhoods, cities and nations also employ the idea of home as a means of mobilising communities through an orienting centre of imagined identity.

Parallel to its symbolic dimension, Heidegger insisted upon the ontological significance of home, stating that "Dwelling… is the *basic character of being*, in keeping with which mortals exist" (Heidegger 2008a, 362, original emphasis). For Heidegger, dwelling at home was key to an authentic relationship with the world, which was only possible on the grounds of the homeland (*Heimat*)—a grounding lost by disorienting forces of technological modernity (Tijmes 1998, 205). But for Heidegger, home was not an organic part of the world, but was actively constructed over time: "we attain to dwelling," he writes, "only by means of building" (Heidegger 2008a, 347). It is only through careful cultivation that a house becomes a dwelling place: repairs are made, pictures are hung on its walls, and memories accumulate within the spatial imaginary of the home.

Through its mediation of memory and belonging Apichatpong's *filmmaking* operates as a form of *homemaking*. Much of his work centres on memories of his parents, of sites from his childhood, of the cities of Khon Kaen and Bangkok, of the Isaan region and of Thailand itself. Reflecting Apichatpong's fascination with architecture, this multi-scalar spatial imaginary of home is also experienced within built environments, particularly the architectural spaces of hospitals and family homes connected to the memories of his childhood. Apichatpong returns to these places of personal significance throughout his filmmaking, often repurposing memories, family histories, and regional folktales in his storytelling as a process of memorialising and remediating concepts of home. Despite this, however, Apichatpong's spatial imaginary of home as a place of integration and memory is also tinged by absence, by homesickness and nostalgia for people and places that are no longer present.

0116643225059 (1994), Apichatpong's first short film produced at the Art Institute of Chicago, centres on a recorded international phone call between him and his mother back home in Thailand. The film alternates between a still photograph of his mother as a young woman and his Chicago apartment, establishing a dialectic tension between his homes in Thailand and America. *0116643225059* bridges Apichatpong's separation in America from his family back home through the intermediary presence of the photograph, providing a visual reminder of home despite his physical separation from it. In an artist's statement for *0116643225059*, Apichatpong stated that:

> The appearance of his mother's image not only recalls pieces of memories, but also conveys the artist's strong yearnings for her. Hometown and foreign land, past and present, reality and memory, these are interlinked with each other through the superimposed images.
>
> (Weerasethakul 1994)

Placed in context, *0116643225059* manifests as a work of negotiated homemaking. Through photographic montage, his mother's photograph and voice are placed in conversation with his Chicago apartment, simultaneously registering her absence within the space of his current home while also bringing a trace of her presence into his life in Chicago.

Memories of his mother infiltrate many of Apichatpong's other work, resurfacing at unexpected moments as a nostalgic longing for a lost, evanescent past. Commissioned by jewellery maker Dior, *My Mother's Garden* is presented as a series of silent close ups of the collection accompanied by hand drawn sketches recreating spaces from his childhood memories inspired by a set of jewelry modelled after poisonous flowers and carnivorous plants designed by jeweller Victoire de Castellane. In his artist's statement for *My Mother's Garden*, Apichatpong drew implicit connections between the work and his childhood memories of the garden, writing:

> I often took a refuge in the orchid house when the heat was unbearable. The shades and shadows inside made the air cool and the earth smell like rain. The rocks were soft as they were covered in green moss. The ground was filled with burned chaff that looked like black sand. There were armies of black ants and white termites who ruled the ground. Nearby, the grasshoppers camouflaged themselves in the bushes of Chinese rose. In the evening, a German Shepherd barked incessantly as my mother walked home. The smoke was creeping from the back kitchen. The rows of orchids' gray roots were touching my head as I was walking towards the exit. The roots were tentacles that absorbed the visitors' memories and fed them to the flowers above. Dinnertime arrived with the setting sun. The orchid flowers stood poised, digesting the recollections of the day.
>
> (Weerasethakul 2007b)

In his description, Apichatpong lingers on evanescent details – the feeling of unbearable heat, the smell of decomposing earth, the sounds of insects and animals – lost traces of a past that are

impossible to photographically register. Fittingly, rather than try to visually recreate his mother's orchid garden directly, Apichatpong instead lingers on colours and shapes, drawing hand-etched sketches over them to imprint them with memories of lost home.

Traces of his mother's orchid garden similarly recur throughout Apichatpong's other works. In *Syndromes and a Century*, Dr Toey becomes infatuated by an orchid seller (Sophon Pukanok) she meets at a local marketplace, who she later takes to inspect a flower growing out of one of the trees on the hospital grounds. In *Cemetery of Splendour*, Jen guides Keng (Jarinpattra Rueangram) through a community garden where she and other seniors have planted flowers onto the trunks of trees. Jessica (Tilda Swinton) – the protagonist of *Memoria* – is an orchid grower working in the Columbian city of Medellín. Planted inconspicuously throughout his oeuvre, these flowers hint at Apichatpong's fascination with the temporary beauty of life flourishing in the throes of death, but also register the persistence of his mother's memory. Like pictures of his mother, Apichatpong's orchids serve a homemaking function by linking his artistic production back to memories of his past, even in seemingly unfamiliar places such as Columbia.

Yet like flowers, these memories exist in states of ongoing decay. The beauty of flowers is predicated on their impermanence. Ryōsuke Ōhashi argued that flower arrangement[9] was predicated on an act of 'cutting off' as a recognition of the beauty of life, as it is only in the initiation of its death that its impermanence comes into full view: "The blazing light of the noonday sun only becomes visible, as if in a double exposure, when the brilliance dims at sunset… The fullness of the flower disappears in its fading" (Ōhashi 2011, 1192). In an earlier essay, Nishitani Keiji argued that the Japanese practice of *ikebana* flower arrangement was "by its very nature something temporary and improvised… [a] beauty that embraces time, a beauty that is manifest out of the impermanency of time itself" (Nishitani 1953 [2011], 1198).

Like his mother's flowers, Apichatpong's memories are transitory and impermanent. Recollections always entail some amount of loss, some failure to fully account for that which is now absent. The recorded voice and grainy black-and-white photograph of his mother in *0116643225059* intimate the presence of his mother, but this presence is delayed and ephemeral. The photograph of his mother does not hold her presence but rather defers her absence, in much the same way that the electrical signals of the phone call allow for moments of contact despite the

[9] The Japanese term *ikebana* refers to an art of flower arrangement centred on emptiness and impermanence. *Ikebana* is a deeply ambivalent term: it translates into English as "making flowers live," but entails the act of initiating their death by cutting them off from their roots and placing them in an alcove cut off from direct light (Parkes and Loughnane 2018).

vast geographical distances between them. Dialectically situated in opposition to the empty space of his Chicago home, the image of his mother is therefore one of ambivalence, simultaneously investing her presence in his home and registering her absence. Similarly, the memories of his past represented in *My Mother's Garden* are sensuous yet ephemeral, tracing memories over objects and images are not related to them—in this case literally tracing hand-drawn images over the image itself. The loss of the Real entailed in representation corresponds with the experience of detachment and alienation from home implicit Apichatpong's work itself. Just as his representations are unable to fully recreate the past, the home imagined in Apichatpong's cinema is always in some sense absent or incomplete, manifested not as a sense of belonging but of *homesickness*.

As a portrait of two hospital spaces imagined as a love letter to his parents' life before he was born, *Syndromes and a Century* manifests a similar homesickness. The film is divided into two halves, each settled on a different hospital: one rural and the other urban. Apichatpong equates these two halves with his past and present, imagining the country hospital of the film's first act as "a space reminiscent of the world in which [he] was born and raised," and the second as "a more contemporary space much like the world the film-maker lives in [now]" (Weerasethakul 2007c). Like the final shot of *Mekong Hotel* described in chapter four, *Syndromes and a Century* also memorialises Apichatpong's father who died of kidney failure shortly before *Tropical Malady* entered production, and whose dialysis later inspired Boonmee's medical treatment in *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (Shen 2017, 17). Memories of Apichatpong's parents persist throughout his films, their latent presence breaking through as *punctum* at unexpected moments in time.

When asked to describe the role of memory in the film's production, Apichatpong stated that:

> It may be the only impulse! Everything is stored in our memory, and its in the nature of film to preserve things … But I never set out to recreate my memories exactly. The mind doesn't work as a camera.
>
> (Weerasethakul and Rayns 2006)

Rather than accurately reproduce memories from Apichatpong's childhood, *Syndromes and a Century* incorporates elements from his collaborators: for example, Toey's lines of questioning at the beginning of each act were inspired by her actor Nantarat Sawaddikul (who holds a master's degree in psychology), although Nohng's response to the question "What does DDT stand for?" was drawn directly from a story of Apichatpong's father. Rather than perfectly recreate memories of the past, Apichatpong states that, "The pleasure for me is not in remembering exactly but in

recapturing the *feeling* of the memory—and in blending that with the present" (Weerasethakul and Rayns 2006), replacing historical precision with a sensuous, haptic engagement with the past.

We see this use of cinema as memorialisation repurposed again in *Cemetery of Splendour* in order to register Apichatpong's sense of loss and disappointment with the state of Thailand following the 2014 coup d'état. Like *Syndromes and a Century*, *Cemetery of Splendour* functions as an architectural portrait of place, but its scale stretches from the immediate space of a hospital to encompass Khon Kaen and the broader state of affairs in Thailand. Apichatpong described the film as "a search for the old spirits I knew as a child. … My world was the patients' ward where my mother worked, our wood house, a school, and a cinema. The film is a merging of these places" (Weerasethakul 2015). *Cemetery of Splendour* is set in an abandoned school, which is coded as a site of personal history and memory. On a larger scale, Khon Kaen is framed as a site of national memory since the school is said to be built on the site of an ancient king's palace, a symbol of the region's past before its colonisation by Siam. In the second half of the film, Jen is given an imaginary tour of the palace by the Mediator, during which she recalls her own memories of the city and her life growing up there. In these ways, *Cemetery* (whose original title *Rak Ti Khon Kaen* translates into "Love in Khon Kaen") memorialises the city as Apichatpong remembers it, its ghosts connected to both his own history and that of the Thai state.

These works demonstrate the entanglement of memory, absence and impermanence in Apichatpong's filmmaking, in which home is framed as a place of ambivalence, simultaneously conveying connections to the past while also acknowledging the disappearance of these connections. Memory implies absence of the thing being remembered: of his mother in another country, of his father, and of places in his hometown that have since disappeared. In this way, Apichatpong imagines cinema as a process of memorialisation, a preservation of the orienting significance of home intervening in the present.

Non-places and the *unheimlich*: *Cemetery of Splendour* (2015), *A Letter to Uncle Boonmee* (2009), and *Constellations* (2018)

This ambivalence of dwelling and memorialisation is preserved in the *unheimlich*. Derived from the German *Heimlich* referring to that which is 'familiar,' 'native,' or 'belonging to home,' the *unheimlich* inverts the familiarity of home and manifests as a spatialised experience of unsettlement emerging from a place of intimacy (Freud 1919, 2). If home orients the individual by providing a safe and stable dwelling place, the *unheimlich* represents confusion, or disorientation in the world. For Freud, the *unheimlich* emerged from historical crises of modernity precipitated by the

cataclysmic violence of the First World War, the collapse of its empires and the social reorganisations that followed, but also with the collision of enlightenment scientific worldviews and perceptual technologies with premodern forms of cultural understanding (Schlipphacke 2015, Gunning 2008). As Gunning argued, Spirit Photography is an example of this "optical uncanny," toying with the scepticism of modern spectators by manipulating the seemingly realistic conditions of photography and thereby challenging their scientific understanding of the world and reimposing "the inertia of primitive modes of thought that have supposedly been superseded" (Gunning 2008, 75).

As a cultural trope in the West, ghosts embody this 'being out of place' in the *unheimlich*, tied to the physical and emotional space of homes emptied of people and histories. In his essay "The Architectural Uncanny" (1987), Anthony Vidler described Victor Hugo's experience of empty houses on a trip to the Channel Islands as a series of uncertainties, questioning:

> Who were the original inhabitants? Why the abandonment? Why no present owner? Why no one to cultivate the field? These questions, all inexplicable without some unknown and metaphysical cause, added to the atmosphere…
>
> (Vidler 1987, 10)

For Hugo, the haunted house encapsulated these uncertainties. The house was not a *house* but a *tomb*, and was not empty but rather "a sepulchre with windows allowing the spectres to look out" (1987, 10). Vidler later noted that the house was a favoured site for uncanny disturbances, "its apparent domesticity, its residue of family history and nostalgia, its role as the last and most intimate shelter of private comfort sharpened its contrast with terror of invasion by alien spirits" (Vidler 1999, 17). This feeling of unsettlement was particularly acute in the site of the empty home, whose emptiness unsettled previous homemaking practices and stripped it of objects and memories through which to orient our experiences of the world. As an inversion of familiarity, the failed domesticity of the empty home transforms into a space of uncanny haunting and spatio-temporal dislocation.

Cemetery of Splendour narrativises a crisis of home in Khon Kaen, simultaneously representing places of personal memory while also showing the erasure of those places through military presence and excavations, rendering its places uncanny. Sixty-three minutes into the film, Jen returns to the school and wanders through one of its abandoned classrooms at night. Initially lit by a small flashlight and shot from Jen's point of view, the camera is angled down to her feet as

she passes through the space, the floor blanketed by an accumulation of leaves and abandoned school materials. When she is finally able to turn on the lights, a static camera lingers in a wide shot of the room, mixing broken chairs, tables and educational posters peeling from its walls with the debris on the floor, positioning Jen's body as small and decentred in the frame. Jen pulls out a mobile phone and calls her husband (whose voice on the other end is inaudible), first speaking in English:

> Honey, I am the only one who is awake here. I just remember a homework I forgot to send to the teacher long years ago, and also a strange animal in the lake.

She then code switches to Thai:

> To this day, I don't know what it was. In the water it was weightless and calm. It's now in my head… In my heart… I…

At this point, Jen hangs up the phone, unable to finish her thought. Jen's historical connection to the school heightens the sense of dislocation invoked by its emptiness and decay that is intensified by her personal isolation. By associating her memory of the school with the "strange animal in the lake," Jen verbalises the unsettling architectural uncanniness of returning to the decayed site of a personal memory.

This mise-en-scène echoes the uncanny spaces of *A Letter to Uncle Boonmee*. The film was shot in multiple homes across the town of Nabua as part of Apichatpong's *Primitive* project, ostensibly as a form of location scouting for the title character's home in *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*. As I discuss in chapter three, *Primitive* was conceived as a response to the regional traumas and repressed memories of Thailand's northeast stemming from the anti-communist purges of the late-twentieth century. The empty spaces of *A Letter to Uncle Boonmee* gesture towards both the absence of the dead in the present and the impossibility of proper memorialisation. Its sparse mise-en-scène foregrounds the absence of its original occupants, begging questions of where they have gone.

We see a similar remediation of grief and trauma in Apichatpong's installation *Constellations* (2018), but he relocated its setting to South Korea. Staged as a site-specific installation at the abandoned Gwangju Army Hospital in South Korea as part of the 12th Gwangju Biennale, *Constellations* reflects on the failed 1980 Gwangju Uprising, thereby indirectly responding to the

authoritarian excesses of contemporary Thailand. The decaying structure of the Gwangju Army Hospital is architecturally uncanny, paint peeling from its walls, water damage collapsing sections of its roof, and abandoned objects lying strewn throughout its otherwise-empty rooms. Apichatpong intervened in the space by adding shadow plays and mechanically altering objects such as billiard balls to move on their own, mechanising the memorial haunting of the hospital itself. Through the abandoned spaces of *Constellations*, Apichatpong stages traumatic memories from the site's own past while indirectly reflecting upon Thailand's own contemporary and historical struggles with repression.

The empty spaces of *Constellations*, *Cemetery of Splendour* and *A Letter to Uncle Boonmee* are linked by the presence of soldiers engaged in a mysterious act of digging. In *A Letter to Uncle Boonmee*, Apichatpong shows soldiers digging outside with no discernible purpose, the film's soundtrack dominated by the sounds of their shovels and their voices as they speak with one another. Like the ghost sleeping under a canopy in one of its bedrooms, the soldiers of *A Letter to Uncle Boonmee* are an alien presence in the house. Throughout *Cemetery*, Apichatpong shows shots of mechanical diggers on the school grounds supposedly to build a new telecommunications project, but it is implied that the soldier's primary interest is in the spiritual ruins buried beneath the school. By the end of the film, much of the school grounds have been overturned by the excavators, ruining what had previously been a site of memory and familiarity. In this sense, the excavators represent the disorienting thrust of state-sponsored modernity. The unsettling of the soil represents both the architectural disappearance of places from Apichatpong's childhood and his growing disaffection with the political situation in Thailand, both embodied by the ceaseless colonisation of modernity.

Haunted houses are frightening precisely because they undermine the orienting and comforting certainties of the places in which we are supposed to feel most 'at home.' They unsettle notions of history and progress by marking where the orienting fullness of home collapses into uncertainty, uncanniness and anxiety. Yet beneath their horror, haunted spaces also allow for the 'return of the repressed', resurfacing otherwise inexpressible cultural and political traumas, thereby providing a means of reckoning with the past.

Ghosts of modernity: *Morakot (Emerald)* (2007)

Despite its premodern associations, the *unheimlich* is intimately associated with modernity, particularly as it relates to spiritualism. Thai vernacular spiritualism syncretises Theravada Buddhism with pre-Buddhist Thai supernaturalism (Bräunlein 2014, 41-42), emerging as a

complex web of intersecting beliefs and practices. Ghosts sometimes haunt empty places, tied to objects and people as remnants of the past, or phantasmatic bodies interfering with subjects in the present as disruptive and often-sinister presences lingering on the fringes of society and perception. The ravenous spirits (*phi pob*) of north-eastern Thailand are formless and invisible, have the capacity to possess unsuspecting living creatures, and are often blamed for clusters of misfortunes, sudden illnesses and inexplicable deaths in local communities (Wattanagun 2018, 80). Andrew Alan Johnson compared the Thai word *lon* with its English equivalent 'haunt,' and notes that both words convey "a frightening recollection of a past event," but notes that the Thai word prioritises the trickery of spirits, its common combination with the word *lok* (*lok-lon*) conveying "a trick, fool, cheat, cruelly deceive" (Johnson 2014, 27). Despite its associations with premodernity in the West, Thai spiritualism operates alongside mainstream worldviews according to an attitude of "not belief, not respect" (*mai chua ya loplu*) (Wattanagun 2018, 84), or "You may not believe, but never offend the spirits" (Bräunlein 2014, 41). Thai spirits therefore occupy an ambivalent position within modern society: on one hand, hostile spirits represent a threat to human life and prosperity, and on the other friendly spirits can be bargained with for patronage and spiritual prosperity.

The deep enmeshment of spiritualism within Thai society has meant that it has increasingly incorporated demographic shifts and technological change. Cinema's emergence in Thailand at the turn of the century coincided with the country's changing relationship with the West, representing a simultaneous shift in the technologies of vision and the social, political and economic conditions of Southeast Asia. The technology of photography was doubly uncanny, simultaneously enabling the optical uncanny described by Gunning while also representing an uncanny shift in social fabric of Thai life through its collision with Western colonial modernity. Traces of this collision can still be seen in the practice of projecting open-air film screenings for spirits, which are paid for by petitioners as ritual transactions for good fortune and prosperity with spirits at local shrines (MacDonald 2017).

Situated in this way, haunting in Thailand is intimately entangled with issues of technology, commerce, and socio-cultural progress. Thongchai Winichakul argued that the twentieth century saw the increasing conceptual entanglement of material and spiritual progress in Thailand, conjoining the Buddhist concept of *siwilai* with the state-sanctioned pursuit of national civilisation (Winichakul 2000, 528). Writing in response to the spectre of twentieth century industrial progress, Johnson argued that the haunted apartment buildings and abandoned housing estates of Chiang Mai embodied the failures of globalisation and national development. Echoing Thongchai, Johnson noted the connection in Thailand between spiritual progress (*charoen*) and economic development, noting that the accumulation of material prosperity became increasingly entangled with spiritual

growth over the course of the twentieth century (Johnson 2014, 9, 29). The rapid industrialisation of Thailand following World War II reshaped the social, economic and physical conditions of the country, moving women into the workforce and reconfiguring the fabric of domestic space (Ainslie 2014, 163), but rather than leading to increased secularism, the economic booms of the 1980s and 1990s led to new forms of spiritual participation among Thais, particularly among spirit mediums and prosperity religions (Bräunlein 2014, 41-42). As a result of this entanglement of material and spiritual prosperity, economic failures took on an increasingly spiritual dimension:

> …the twentieth-century project of national development thus occurred under the auspices of supernatural forces that secured the motion of *charoen* and the forward march of progress. … It is now, however, as crisis after crisis challenges these assumptions about progress, that uncanny spectres gain ever greater power.
>
> (Johnson 2014, 14)

This dual failure of capitalist futurity and spiritual progress led to the return of that which had been nationally repressed in the pursuit of modernisation, leading to the uncanny re-emergence of "those thought-to-be overcome elements… in the form of ghosts and migrants" (Johnson 2014, 14). The site of the haunted house reconstitutes on a domestic scale the economic and spiritual crises affecting the Thai nation as a whole, the failed towers of Chiang Mai echoing Derrida as stand ins for the failure of spiritual/capitalist futurity, a 'time out of joint' with logics of progress.

Dwelling within the emptiness of non-place, ghosts manifest ontological and historical uncertainty. Home – both as a spatial imaginary and as a dwelling place – is destabilised by modernisation, transforming places of intimate social meaning into depersonalised, ahistorical spaces. Marc Augé defined 'place' as "relational, historical, and concerned with identity," which he opposes to 'non-places' – supermarkets, hospitals, train stations, airports, refugee camps – that dominate modern society and redefine habitation as something impersonal and disintegrated—strictly non-relational, non-historical and unconcerned with identity (Augé 1995, 77-8). These non-places were intermediary points, lacking historical or emotional attachment to the people who move through them, engaging only with monadic individuals in a perpetual state of movement (111). Dwelling within such places is impossible, as previous determinants and relations give way, and "He becomes no more than what he does or experiences in the role of the passenger, customer or driver" (103). Stripped of the continuity of dwelling-at-home, occupants of non-place are reduced

to a sequence of impersonal characteristics – "name, occupation, place of birth, address" (111) – and to routines of production and consumption.

These themes of displacement, unsettlement and failed progress converge in Apichatpong's interest in the quintessential non-place of the hotel. As a temporary dwelling place populated by strangers, the hotel is an *unheimlich* non-place, often serving as an intermediary point while travelling from one place to another. This liminality allows for the hotel to serve as a space of suspended morality, facilitating affairs or cruising in manners forbidden within the morally demarcated borders of the bourgeois family home. This sense of moral disturbance is embodied in the haunting of *lok-lon*, associating the trickery of spirits with the actions of criminals and deviants. Therefore, despite the hotel's status as an impersonal commercial enterprise, it is entangled with issues of temporary intimacy and passing familiarity conducive to haunting. Given his regular international travel over the past two decades, Apichatpong has spent much of the past twenty years staying in hotels, an experience that finds its way into his practice. Although *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* primarily takes place in Boonmee's country estate, the film ends with a shot of Tong and Jen watching television in a Bangkok hotel. *Mekong Hotel* similarly takes place in the non-space of a commercial hotel, a setting shifted to Hong Kong in his accompanying short film *M Hotel* (2011b). Apichatpong's fascination with the hotel culminates in his *SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL* (2018) installation, fusing video installation with a functioning overnight hotel (which I discuss further in chapter eight). In each of these cases, Apichatpong imagines temporary hotel guests as beings equivalent to ghosts, as partial, transitory figures stuck in moments of unsettled transition.

Shot in a derelict Morakot hotel abandoned after the 1997 East Asian financial crisis, *Morakot (Emerald)* (2007) is composed of shots tracking through the failed hotel, showing images of empty hallways, unmade beds, open windows and staircases underscored by the sound of an atmospheric rumble of an air conditioner. Each image is digitally overlaid with impressions of dust particles floating in their air like goose feathers from burst pillows. The particles accumulate over time until they eventually fill some of the bedrooms, their slow contingent movement highlighting the otherwise-total stillness of the empty hotel. Within this non-place, Apichatpong superimposes semi-translucent images of three regular actors – Jenjira Pongpass, Sakda Kaewbuadee and Nitipong Thinthupthai – in a state of sleep, accompanied by voiceovers describing their dreams and memories. In an artist's statement, Apichatpong compares *Morakot (Emerald)* as a response to Karl Gjellerup's Buddhist novel *The Pilgrim Kamanita* (1906) – a story in which its protagonists are reincarnated as two stars who spend centuries telling stories to one another until they cease to exist – and imagines the Morakot hotel as "a star burdened with (or fuelled by) memories" that

have faded over time (Weerasethakul 2007a). By retelling their own stories, Apichatpong's collaborators "re-supply the hotel with new memories" (Weerasethakul 2007a). Much as the site of the empty homes of *A Letter to Uncle Boonmee* and the abandoned hospital in *Constellations* gesture towards the disarticulated memories of a traumatic past struggling to persist into the present, the abandoned hotel of *Morakot (Emerald)* intimates the failure of modern ideals of futurity and progress.

Ghosts in empty houses

Apichatpong's ghosts are entangled with issues of haunting, place, photography and memory. Ghosts are ontological uncertainties suspended between presence and absence, lingering in liminal, vacated and destabilised places. As ontological uncertainties, ghosts manifest as uncertain objects of photographic history, as double exposures that complicate photography's indexical relationship with historical reality by colliding two discontinuous moments in the same image. Through this, we can see that haunting is not only a crisis of place but also of time, a crisis in the persistence of history and in modern values of progress, marking a failure to fully move on and become modern. These issues powerfully converge in contemporary Thailand, where early photography emerged alongside the colonial influence of Western modernity, producing an uncanny unsettlement of traditional values. On these terms, ghosts emerge from the fissures of modernity's failures, at sites of abandoned progress and resurfaced historical traumas.

In Apichatpong's cinema, these issues manifest in the place of the empty home, reflecting a failure of familiarity. Much of his work is concerned with memory and placemaking, intersecting photographs of his mother with shots of his Chicago apartment in *0116643225059*, remediating memories of her orchid plants through shots of Dior jewellery and hand-sketched drawings in *My Mother's Garden*, and layering ghosts into an empty hotel through double exposure in *Morakot (Emerald)* in order to "re-supply the hotel with new memories" (Weerasethakul 2007a). In all of these cases, Apichatpong's cinema itself serves as a form of haunting, creating spaces for the memorialisation of the past through the projection of light and the photographic preservation of past events. However, for Apichatpong, memories are impossible to recreate or fully preserve, as something is always lost in the latent process of representation. Instead, he frames the act of remembering as a generative and improvisational process, open to the contributions and reformulations of others. Rather than obscure the uncomfortable ontological uncertainty of haunting, Apichatpong leans into it, lingering in *unheimlich* states of uncertainty and unsettlement.

In the next chapter, I further explore Apichatpong's relationship with place and alienation, exploring how his characters survive within these uncertainties and vacant spaces. Just as the *unheimlich* marks a crisis in the orienting place of the home, I argue that his subjects are often characterised by a sense of homelessness and disorientation as they struggle to find their place in the world. Crucially, however, I argue that the strays – both human and non-human – in Apichatpong's filmmaking represent an alternative logic of place, finding ways to dwell within the uncertainties and liminalities of empty space.

Chapter Six

Strays

The final scene of *Mysterious Object at Noon* presents a dog being casually abused by a group of children. Split over nine shots, the encounter begins with a two-shot of the children crouching in a garden playing with a toy car, before cutting to a closeup of their hands, and then panning over the shoulder of one of the children to a dog looking on from behind them. It cuts again, this time to a goat watching from the edge of the garden, then to a wide shot of the children grabbing the dog, followed by a close up of the dog as it struggles against the children tying a rope around its collar. Then four cuts in quick succession: the dog runs away, the children chase after it, the shocked goat retreats behind a tree, and the dog flees in panic, dragging the toy car tied to its collar behind it. Coupled with the blur and unpredictability of the handheld camera, the unusually rapid editing of the four final shots (2 seconds, 2 seconds, 2 seconds, 4 seconds) induces a state of alarm, a disorienting flourish to end a structurally disorienting film. In this moment, Apichatpong separates us from his human subjects to instead invest our sympathies in the experiences and suffering of a non-human animal. Other than the first shot in the sequence, he refuses to show the children's faces, and instead shows the face of the dog – its expression a mixture of confusion and concern as the children tie it to the toy car – accompanied by the sound of the children's laughter. The children are treated as impersonal tormenters, and our sympathies are guided to the body of the suffering dog.

Strays litter Apichatpong's cinema. They wait in train stations (*Mysterious Object at Noon*), in security checkpoints (*Blissfully Yours*), or approach characters looking for food (*Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*). Jenjira Pongpas is shown with dogs in most of her feature film appearances, walking a pair of dogs through a garden in *Syndromes and a Century*, feeding a stray dog fruit in *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*, and greeting a dog who approaches the rotunda in the second act of *Cemetery of Splendour*. As Jessica wanders throughout Bogota in

Memoria, she is followed by a mysterious dog whose presence uncannily echoes a story from her sister earlier in the film regarding a dog she mistakenly left at a veterinarian's office. Yet despite their consistent presence, dogs occupy a marginal position in Apichatpong's films, and more time is spent in cars, in doctors' surgeries, or among spirits and soldiers than with wandering dogs, but when viewed collectively, they form an incidental-yet-important presence at the centre of Apichatpong's ethics and creative practice.

In this chapter, I trace the ethics of Apichatpong's filmmaking through the stray, a figure that allows us to reconcile the queer, migrant and animal subjectivities at the centre of his work. The concept of the stray was explored in-depth by Barbara Creed in her book *Stray: Human-Animal Ethics in the Anthropocene* (2017), in which she argued that being stray blurred categorical distinctions between humans and animals, given that both are alienated from human society and are forced to survive tactically on its margins. By acknowledging what is shared by both human and animal strays – lost dogs, the homeless, unregistered migrants, socially-excluded queer people – we can also begin to understand how this shared alienation can serve as grounds for ethical relationships between them. Whereas previous chapters concentrated on empty spaces and periods of empty time, this chapter predominantly engages with issues of orientation, disorientation and reorientation within Apichatpong's cinema in order to investigate how these experiences of estrangement open up new experiences of others and the world.

I begin this chapter by unpacking the theoretical nuances of straying, placing Creed's work in conversation with Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida in order to establish a queer human-animal ethics grounded on blurred categorical distinctions between animals, migrants and queers. Building on this, I address the place of straying in Apichatpong's early filmmaking, examining his first three major films: *Mysterious Object at Noon*, *Blissfully Yours* and *Tropical Malady*. I first consider how straying functions as both a social practice and a relationship with time, functioning like queer temporality as a disengagement from the conventional rhythms and expectations of everyday life and a reinvestment in the moment-by-moment realities of present existence. Building on this, I consider how straying blurs categorical distinctions between humans and animals and can therefore facilitate intimate encounters between strays otherwise excluded by dominant society. Finally, I consider how Apichatpong incorporates straying into his creative practice, and address how he prioritises improvisation and collaboration over planning and narrative closure as a method of ethical filmmaking. Through this, I argue that Apichatpong's unusual rhythms and production processes create inclusive spaces for human-animal intimacy and the reconciliation of queer, animal and migrant subjectivities in his films.

Stray ethics

Strays evade. They survive tactically on the margins and have uneasy relationships with institutional authorities whose sheltering conformity refuses to acknowledge their existence or right to exist. Consequently, the act of 'straying' is definitionally blurred, encompassing a wide range of marginal beings and practices. Creed resisted defining 'stray' as a single unifying concept, but broadly characterised her as "an outsider, the other, an exile – the one who lives apart from the mainstream," applying the concept to both humans and animals who "…have drifted from their normal path, separated themselves from their kin, or been banished, rejected or abjected from their society because of their nature, situation, status or species" (Creed 2017, 7-8). As historical homes are lost to anthropogenic climate change, colonisation, conflict and environmental exploitation, both humans and animals are forcibly uprooted from their ordinary dwelling places and forced to become strays. As such, Creed's stray is not defined by its own characteristics but rather by conditions through which and in which it is excluded. As she insists, "The concept of the stray helps civilised, settled societies define what it means to be civil and proper, obedient and law abiding. The stray is the 'other' of the symbolic order" (Creed 2017, 8). Straying is a tactical manner of being-in-the-world – as Michel de Certeau describes, "an art of being in between" – characterised by a refusing to conform to abstract social norms and instead a drive to find new "novel *ways of using* the constraining order of the place or of the language" (de Certeau 1984, 30, original emphasis).

Humans, animals and things can all *stray* from established paths, places and ways of doing things, and in the process are become *strays*: refugees *stray* when they escape across borders in pursuit of safety; dogs *stray* when they live without an owner; criminals and deviants *stray* when they trespass beyond the laws of the state. To relate back to de Certeau's 'tactics,' strays:

> …trace 'indeterminate trajectories' that are apparently meaningless, since they do not cohere with the constructed, written, and prefabricated space through which they move. They are sentences that remain unpredictable within the space ordered by the organizing techniques of systems.
>
> (de Certeau 1984, 34)

Our thoughts can stray (like Walter Benjamin's *flânerie*) diverging from our established tasks to creatively consider other objects of our attention (Creed 2017, 17), just as queer bodies stray from the conventional intimacies and lifestyles of heteronormative society (Halberstam 2005,

Schoonover 2012). The stray's survival tactics are not recognised by the organising principles of the systems they inhabit, and must make do on the vacated, unmapped fringes of that system.

Strays experience abandonment and exclusion, not only by specific communities but also by the conditions of anthropocentric modernity itself. As Creed writes, strays all lack one thing: "a place to belong, a sense of belonging and a sense of feeling cared for and/or loved" (Creed 2017, 10). Yet this very exclusion can serve as grounds for an emergent ethical relationship between strays who cohabitate these margins. Strays transgress the socially imposed demarcations separating human and non-human animals, placing their suffering and marginalisation in continuum with one another. "Straying," Creed writes, "is therefore not always an act of separation, but… can potentially unite human and animal, particularly woman and animal, living on the fringes of society" (Creed 2017, 9). By recognising that all strays – human and animal, migrant and queer – are alienated by intersecting social, economic and environmental forces, we can thereby recognise each other's shared needs and the mutual ethical demands taking place between them.

This relational otherness places Creed in contact with French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, whose 'ethics' hinges on the obligations between Self and Other.[10] Across his writing, Levinas assembled an ethical philosophy centred on the hospitable treatment of outsiders, in which the wellbeing of the Other is elevated over my own. For Levinas, the Other comes to me from a position of weakness. She is "the stranger, the widow, and the orphan" who arrives at my doorstep starving, cold and alone, and whom I am obligated to assist (Levinas 1979, 215). Yet Levinas insists that the other is not only partially or circumstantially different to me but rather "remains infinitely transcendent, infinitely foreign," a being of "Absolutedifference" (194-5), who cannot be fully encompassed by my own rational understanding. For Levinas, this ethical demand hinged on the moment of a face-to-face encounter, an event which precedes identification or rational understanding. According to Levinas, when I come face-to-face with another person, I enter into a "primordial discourse" (Levinas 1979, 201) that obligates me to her, and places her well-being and right to existence above my own. To see the face of the other is to recognise the precarity of her life and to acknowledge the reality of her suffering.

[10] Levinas' used the term 'ethics' differently from its conventional definition. Across his writing, Levinas was less concerned with specific moral questions of right or wrong than with interrogating the very conditions by which human beings can behave ethically at all. For further discussion, see: Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980), 111.

Levinas insisted that my obligation to the other is not contingent on similarities between us, as to do so would reduce otherness to sameness. The Other was wholly other: she was unfamiliar to me and came from a place outside of my immediate community of social obligations. By arguing that the other comes to me from a place outside of my home or tribe, Levinas ruptured nationalistic logics that demand ethical obligation only to those *like me*, as the other is *nothing like me*. Yet the Levinasian encounter with Otherness was not about reducing the other to a comfortable sameness, but rather operates by leaving the alterity of the other intact, "to regard [difference] without destroying it" (Bergen-Aurand 2006, 109). Rather, to genuinely accept the Other, I must accommodate her without reducing her differences to terms I am comfortable with or understand. In her reading of Levinas in *Precarious Life* (2004), Judith Butler argued that:

> To respond to the face, to understand its meaning, means to be awake to what is precarious in another life or, rather, the precariousness of life itself. This cannot be an awakeness, to use his word, to my own life, and then an extrapolation from an understanding of my own precariousness to an understanding of another's precarious life. It has to be an understanding of the precariousness of the Other.
>
> (Butler 2004, 134)

A stray is by its nature *Other* and approaches me from outside my immediate community of obligations. Rather than reject the stray on the basis of this difference, Levinas calls for the stray to be accepted on the basis of its alterity, for me to recognise its needs and treat it hospitably accordingly.

However, unlike Creed, Levinas ultimately excluded animals from his ethics, and denied that an animal can make ethical demands like a human being. Following Heidegger, Levinas maintains an ontological distinction between humans and all other beings, refusing to accept the evolutionary assertion that "the human is only the last state of the evolution of the animal," and insists instead that "*the human is a new phenomenon*" (cited in Clark 2004, 56). In his essay "The Animal That Therefore I Am," Jacques Derrida argues that Western philosophy from Descartes to Lacan has perpetuated the belief that "the animal is deprived of language" (Derrida 2008, 32). Without language, the animal is deprived of the capacity to transcend their imminent circumstances and behaviours, of subjectivity and a recognisable place in the world, stripped of "the power to name, to name oneself, and indeed to answer for one's name" (Derrida 2008, 19). Instead, the word 'animal' is used by humans "to corral a large number of living things within a single concept"

(Derrida 2008, 32) in order to designate, as a single homogeneous group, "*all the living things* that man does not recognise as his fellows, his neighbours, or his brothers" (Derrida 2008, 34). Following this tradition, Levinas argued that an animal's lack of language precluded it from rationality and subjectivity, preventing us as humans from engaging in ethical discourse with it. The silence of animals excludes them from the human neighbourhood, marking them as inhuman and therefore outside of ethics.

Apichatpong rejects this categorical distinction between humans and animals. Following a Buddhist logic of reincarnation, his films collapse categorical differences and understand human and animal existence in continuum with one another: humans become animals, animals become humans in an ongoing chain of death and reincarnation. In a director's statement for *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* released at Cannes in 2010, Apichatpong noted his belief in continuity between human and animal, stating that "I believe in the transmigration of souls between humans, plants, animals, and ghosts. Uncle Boonmee's story shows the relationship between man and animal and at the same time destroys the line dividing them" (cited in Bergstrom 2015, 11). Contrary to Levinas, this cosmology of reincarnation assumes the fundamental relatedness of all sentient beings, such that by extension the act of harming an animal is equivalent to harming my mother, sister or son from a past life (Finnigan 2017, 9). Apichatpong's cinema places humans and animals in ontological continuum with one another and and understands the medium of cinema as uniquely suited to express this relationship. Boonmee's past lives – both human and animal – are rendered with the same photographic technologies that do not depend upon language to function.

This shared silence also serves as grounds for violence against migrants and queers who, like animals, are silenced within dominant discourse, stripped of the capacity to name themselves and thereby exposed to social exclusion and violence. Migrants and queers, who like animals are silenced, are united by their shared exclusion within dominant discourse, transgressing modern delineated boundaries of species, state borders and sexual normativity to exist in a state of social otherness. Yet through this very act of shared exclusion and the sliding metonymy of the 'animal-migrant-queer,' this shared exclusion can serve as grounds for a new ethical neighbourhood, a stray ethics that does not turn away but rather revels in ethical possibilities of categorical disorientation (Ahmed 2006, 544). Without speaking, the dog at the end of *Mysterious Object at Noon* addresses us to consider its treatment ethically, and to recognise its needs as valid and meaningful.

Stray temporality: *Blissfully Yours* (2002) and *Primitive* (2009)

Strays navigate empty time. Alienated from institutional logics of progress, their indeterminate trajectories are unregistered within capitalist systems of value, meaning that their relationships with time conventionally registered as wasteful or unproductive. Stray temporality emerges from the tactical exigencies for survival, a focus shift from conventional social priorities of futurity and progress to moment-by-moment conditions of life. Defined by precarity, stray existence demands strategies for survival – "sleeping rough, foraging, begging" (Creed 2017, 64) – and therefore unites human and animal strays in the tactical demands of the here and now. Consequently, stray temporality is characterised by a jarring alternation between moments of frantic activity and long periods of comparative inaction, commingling desperate acts of survival with extended periods of listlessness. To stray entails periods of languished wandering, of generalised disinterest in particular tasks or objects, and a fluid relation to time and activity.

Given its alienation from conventional forms of social productivity and unconventional uses of time, stray temporality exists in continuum with the similarly non-normative structures of queer temporality. In his description of queer temporality, Jack Halberstam argued that in the shadow of the AIDS crisis, the "constantly diminishing future" of queer existence places "a new emphasis on the here, the present, the now, and while the threat of no future hovers overhead like a storm cloud, the urgency of being also expands the potential of the moment and… squeezes new possibilities out of the time at hand" (Halberstam 2005, 2). For Sara Ahmed, queerness is both a socio-sexual and phenomenological disorientation, a state in which conventional landmarks of family, progress and normative embodiment slip away. By Ahmed's reckoning, queerness becomes "a way to inhabit the world at the point at which things fleet" (Ahmed 2006, 566). Rather than pulling back from this uncanny disorientation, Ahmed suggests that one "might even find joy and excitement in the horror," to relish this disappearance of purpose and productivity (Ahmed 2006, 544). Given the stray's expertise in tactically navigating empty time, her temporal practices also offer insight into how we can navigate cinematic emptiness itself.

Stray temporality and acts of temporal rebellion manifest across all of Apichatpong's films but are most overt in *Blissfully Yours*. As May Adadol Ingawanij and Richard MacDonald argue, the border town is represented "as a space of alienation and repressive authority," within which different characters are restrained by overlapping social forces of work, family and nation (Ingwanij and MacDonald 2010, 128-9). In the film's opening scene, the two women take Min to a doctor to medicate his skin condition but he is unable to speak without exposing his identity as a Burmese immigrant and must leave before his condition can be medicated. Unable to speak for himself, Min's status is reduced to that of an animal. After leaving the clinic, Orn takes Min to visit her husband at work. She expresses her desire to have another child, but her husband is disinterested

and instead blames her for the unexpected death of their first. Roong works in an antiseptic, windowless factoring where she paints dozens of identical porcelain *Looney Tunes* figurines (a curious juxtaposition of American escapism with the stifled conditions of her own life) and must feign illness to escape work with her friends. As their lives interweave with each other over the course of a morning, Apichatpong presents subtle overlapping forms of institutional repression: Min is marginalised and silenced as an undocumented Burmese migrant; Roong struggles with the stifling conditions of her low-status work as an industrial worker; Orn is frustrated as a married woman dependent upon a disinterested husband and lives a life devoid of emotional intimacy. These repressive conditions push the three characters to physically move beyond the boundaries of the town to nearby jungle – to stray beyond the social confines of their everyday lives – where they spend the remainder of the film walking, eating and sleeping together by the side of a river.

In this act of socio-temporal straying, all three characters adjust their relation to time, productivity and progress. As an unregistered migrant, Min has strayed from the legally defined borders of his home country and survives precariously through the support of Orn and Roong. Min's social vulnerability leaves him under the authority of his female hosts, inverting the traditional disempowerment of women in Thai society but restricting him under yet another rubric of control. For the first half of the film, Min exists as an accessory to the women of his life, carrying shopping bags and waiting for them to finish their errands, with limited control over his own life schedule. However, when he and Roong return to the jungle the power differential is inverted, and Min is able to stray on his own. Apichatpong conditions the wilderness as a space devoid of institutional authorities and the imposition of conventional time, allowing the two lovers to drift between places and activities. Rather than follow a strict path through the forest, Min guides them by memory, crossing cliffs and ravines until they find a rocky outcrop looking out onto a valley where the two prepare a picnic lunch. By showing Roong leave work earlier in the day, Apichatpong places this liberated temporality in direct contrast to expectations of work and productivity. Their actions in the forest do not serve a material purpose – or even work towards narrative conclusion – but rather present a manner of existence detached from those expectations of progress. As viewers, we are given no indication of where the narrative will progress and must instead (like characters on screen) experience the film world haptically, intimately engaged with the immediate conditions of existence.

As I discussed in chapter four, this temporal straying also permeates the film form itself. Like its diegetic strays, *Blissfully Yours* prioritises momentary and immediate pleasures over narrative progress and resolution. Instead of motivating spectatorship through the promise of narrative payoff, Apichatpong invests our attention in the moment-by-moment unfolding of its action,

without following conventional mandates of pacing and developmental progress. As spectatorial strays, viewers follow the film's temporal unfolding with our 'nose to the ground', confronted only by what is immediately and sensorially present-to-hand.

This stray temporality also emerges as a key feature of *Primitive* (2009). In *Primitive*, rather than restage the traumas of his subjects directly, Apichatpong chooses to instead pass time with the young men playing games, shooting footage and building a mock spaceship out of wood in the middle of a field (Inouye 2011, 12). One video channel of *Primitive, Phantoms of Nabua,* shows the group playing soccer with a flaming soccer ball on a field surrounded by projector screens. When a screen catches fire, the men watch on as the fabric disintegrates and collapses with little regard for the consequences of their actions. *I'm Still Breathing*, another channel of *Primitive*, was shot as a music video and shows the men running through the dirt roads of the town with no clear direction or purpose; they simply keep running. Acting under the shadow of possible military conscription, the actions of the young men reject the militarisation of Thai society—the very military responsible for purges decades earlier. Like Schoonover's queer "wastrels of time" (2012), the actions of these young men do not lead them anywhere, produce anything or serve a discernible purpose, and thereby steadfastly refuse to be regimentalised. In the act of straying, the young men reject the structures and restrictions of ordinary life and offer an alternative way of living in the world.

Stray intimacy: *Tropical Malady* (2004)

This focus on immediate existence and entailed forms of non-normative temporality also serves as grounds for divergent forms of intimacy. Intimacy entails physical, emotional or social closeness between beings, a comfortable familiarity shared between intimate partners, within families or close-knit communities. As a condition of shared vulnerability, to be intimate (sexually or otherwise) is to be exposed to someone else. Intimacy is also temporal. Intimacy can last for years or just moments, but entails a shared sense of time, spending time together, 'stepping into' someone else's time rather than an imposition of one's own. Given its social and emotional significance in human life, intimacy is regulated by society and culture, setting strict parameters on how, when and why we can be intimate, and with whom. For these reasons, intimacy strays, forming improvised and unexpected relationships between people, places and things in patterns outside of delineated social boundaries.

Issues of intimacy recur across Apichatpong's films, but are felt acutely in *Tropical Malady*, a queer love story in two acts. The film plays with the distinction between humans and animals, a theme established in its opening credits with the quote from Ton Nakajima:

> All of us are by nature wild beasts. Our duty as human beings is to become like trainers who keep their animals in check, and even teach them to perform tasks alien to their bestiality.

Positioned at the start of the film, this quote introduces the film's negotiation of boundaries delineating human and non-human life, contrasting the cultivated practices of human civilisation with the impulsivity of animality. In doing so, Apichatpong also retraces the Thai cultural dichotomy of town and country that associates city living with Western modernism and moral decay, and life in the country as economically regressive but morally upright and self-sufficient (Boehler 2011, 292-3). The original title of *Tropical Malady* – *Satpralat* (สัตว์ประหลาด) – translates into English as "monster," but is the compound of the Thai words "sat" (animal) and "pralat" (unusual). Within the film, this "monster" refers both to the shapeshifting tiger of Thai folklore which appears in the film's second act, and to its use in early-1980s queer magazines as gayspeak for male homosexuals (Anderson 2012, 149). This threefold meaning – unusual creature, monster, homosexual – highlights the permeability of these categories and the social monstrosity of queerness, and lays groundwork for the film's central dramatic conflicts between civilisation and animality.

The film's first act centres on a gay romance between Tong (a young man from the country, or *chao baan*) and Keng (a soldier visiting Tong's family home), and follows the pair as their relationship blossoms across a series of dates in town. Whereas the town of *Blissfully Yours* is explicitly repressive, the city of *Tropical Malady* is a space of greater ambivalence. As moral strays deviating from conventional expectations of their sexuality, the public spaces of the city allow them to spend time with one another while freed from the expectations of home, spending time together in music lounges, movie theatres and night markets where their intimacy is more permissible. In one of the film's more utopian scenes, Tong is invited on stage at a live performance, where he performs a ballad to Keng sitting in the audience. As Anika Fuhrman noted, this "seemingly unopposed public homoeroticism" ran counter to the usually-conservative representations of queer sexuality conventionally represented in Thailand, and, by situating their relationship in moments of leisure rather than narratives of overcoming adversity, challenges the conventional representation of its working class protagonists (Fuhrmann 2008, 183-84).

Nevertheless, the utopian dimension of *Tropical Malady* is stifled by the conditions of its protagonists' everyday lives. Born into a poor rural family, Tong cannot read, write or drive, placing him in a position of socio-economic vulnerability. He is shown multiple times working at a factory where his job entails cutting large cubes of ice—loud, uncomfortable and dangerous work that runs counter to the pleasurable conditions of his leisure time with Keng. Apichatpong frames this as the dissatisfying rhythm of Tong's everyday life through repetition, placing two near-identical sequences at the ice factory less than two minutes apart near the beginning of the film, interspersed with scenes of him playing volleyball and catching a bus. In the next scene, Tong struggles to drive a military truck under Keng's instruction and stalls next to a lake. The rhythms of these everyday failures, placed one after the other in an exhausting line of events, emphasise the depressing pace of Tong's everyday life but also his crushing sense of inadequacy in comparison to Keng, whose status as a soldier places him in a position of comparative power. Tong craves recognition from the system that privileges Keng's life over his own, to the point that he wears Keng's military uniform to search for better work in town. These overlapping social pressures have an obvious toll on Tong. Later in the film, as the pair sit in a gazebo on the edge of the forest, Keng notices a series of cuts along Tong's arm, who quickly turns away and changes the topic. At each moment, Tong is marginalised: he is illiterate, unhappily employed and implicitly at odds with his family over his sexuality, undermining the socio-sexual freedoms of his life with Keng.

Just as Min's powerlessness in *Blissfully Yours* is tied to his inability to speak without revealing his marginal identity, Tong's illiteracy is linked to his incapacity to articulate his sexuality or transcend the immanent circumstances of his social class. By contrast, Keng is better able to articulate his sexual identity. He chats amicably with another gay man in a restroom and shares knowing smiles with an aerobics instructor, gesturing towards past intimacies and a comfort in cruising. Tong remains silent with his family, diverting attention from a love letter his mother finds while washing his pants. Like an animal, Tong has lost the power to name, to name himself, or indeed to answer for his own name (Derrida 2008, 19), and is reduced to a state of deprivation and helplessness. He is, in the Derridean sense, poor-in-the-world twice over: first due to his social marginalisation as a queer *chao baan*, and second due to his illiteracy and corresponding incapacity to articulate his sexuality on his own terms. Due to this barrier, there is an irreconcilable difference between the two men, for whom differences in social status prevent them from being fully intimate with one another. Socially alienated, Tong retreats into the darkness of the jungle at the film's midpoint, abruptly ending the relationship with Keng and beginning the film's transition to its second act.

At this point, *Tropical Malady* shifts genre from realist romantic drama to supernatural horror. Its second act is framed as the journey of a soldier (Keng) into the heart of the jungle in pursuit of a malevolent shapeshifting tiger spirit, the *satpralat* (Tong). This second act is almost entirely devoid of dialogue, and Keng spends the majority of the time alone and on guard, prepared to be attacked at any moment. In contrast to the bright, open spaces of *Blissfully Yours*, the jungle of *Tropical Malady* is dense, claustrophobic and impossible to navigate. Unlike the differentiated social spaces of the first act, the jungle of the second is a homogeneous space devoid of landmarks, treated through a mixture of shallow focus and dense foliage to confuse our spatial orientation. As Keng moves through the jungle, he is observed by the *satpralat*– taking the form of Tong's naked human body – through the tree line, eventually fighting one another on the verge of the forest where Tong steals Keng's equipment and irreparably damages his radio (the last vestiges of modern civilisation in the wilderness). Reduced to a state of desperation, Keng's own physicality becomes increasingly animalistic, fishing in mud pools with his bare hands and making animal noises instead of speech. Understood on these terms, the second act of *Tropical Malady* inverts the social dynamic of the first: whereas the city (as a domain of language) represents a space of cultivated social hierarchy, the jungle collapses those differences into animal horizontality. As an animal space without language and civilisation, Tong and Keng exist in the jungle on equal footing for the first time in the film.

This equality is realised in the final scene of the film, when Keng and the *satpralat* –which has transformed into the shape of a magnificent tiger – finally come face-to-face. In this moment of cathartic intimacy, the social distinctions that previously separated its human and animal characters dissolve. This reconciliation is stated to Keng by the film's final lines of dialogue from the *satpralat*, who through Tong's voice speaks:

> Once I've devoured your soul, we are neither animal nor human. … I give you my flesh, my spirit, and my memories. Every drop of my blood sings our song. A song of happiness. There, can you hear it?

In this moment of face-to-face encounter, Keng and Tong not only reconcile with each other, but also resolve the seemingly oppositional states of humanity and animality. As a space inhabited by talking monkeys and speechless humans, the jungle of *Tropical Malady* collapses the distinction between human and animal, thereby allowing Tong to communicate intimately with Keng in ways they could not when they were both fully human. As in *Blissfully Yours*, therefore, the jungle of *Tropical Malady* presents a space devoid of institutional (human) authority within which his

characters can develop new ethical relationships with each other, with animals and with time. The spatio-temporal uncertainty of straying disorients conventional social structures, allowing for Apitchatpong's characters to enter into divergent forms of intimacy outside of those established systems.

Stray practice: *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000) and *Memoria* (2021)

Forced to exist in an almost-perpetual present, strays wander, unguided by belief in teleological outcomes to their actions. Just as this tactical temporality emerges within Apichatpong's films in the actions of his characters, it also cuts across his films as a guiding feature of his creative practice. As the excluded 'Other' of the dominant order, straying diverges from conventional styles and values, and instead provides grounds for new relationships between artists, communities and their work. Apichatpong exhibits three key characteristics of stray practice: first, an openness to improvisation and comfort with unplanned or unintended outcomes; second, an emphasis on process over outcome, with a disinterest in resolution; and finally, a focus on communality over hierarchy, taking an inclusive approach to creative practice that allows for the contributions of different voices and subjectivities.

The act of straying has been historically marginalised in filmmaking practice due to its heightened risks and incompatibility with industrial systems of production. The historically high costs and institutional complexity of film production have meant that the insecurity of straying is often excised from studio production processes, guided instead by the securities of scripting, rehearsal and previsualisation. In Thailand, the dominance of studio bosses has made it harder for independent producers to film and release their work locally, a challenge acutely felt in Apichatpong's early filmmaking (Anderson 2012, 162-63). This industrial management of risk has often limited straying to independent and subaltern film communities.

Consequently, stray filmmaking manifests as a marginal exercise. Italian Neorealism, whose production restrictions necessitated the use of location shooting and unprofessional actors, integrates straying into its filmmaking process. This straying is keenly felt in the post-war films of Vittorio De Sica, such as *The Bicycle Thieves* (1948) and *Umberto D.* (1952) where, rather than concentrating on his characters achieving narrative goals towards an inevitable conclusion, De Sica emphasised the moment-by-moment conditions of their everyday lives. Likewise, Tsai Ming-liang exclusively presents his characters wandering through the uncertainties of modern life in Taipei, extending from *Rebels of the Neon God* (1992) to the aptly named *Stray Dogs* (2013). Yet beyond

Neorealism, straying also manifests in ethnographic and Surrealist filmmaking, which prioritise uncertainty and chance within the production process. The Surrealists prioritised chance operations, treasuring incongruous and unexpected outcomes, while ethnography, according to James Clifford, seems to observe "artifacts of defamiliarized cultural reality" (1981, 542), and instead seeks to encounter the social reality of Others unencumbered by prewritten schemas of cultural difference. David Teh (2011) notes the importance of Surrealist ethnography in *Mysterious Object at Noon*, arguing that Apichatpong anchors his work in the social reality of his marginalised subjects without forcing them into structures of narrative sense.

In *Mysterious Object at Noon*, Apichatpong blends these influences with the ethnographic film practices of American experimentalist Bruce Baillie in a way that structurally embeds straying into its production process. Even by Apichatpong's standards, the film is stylistically unusual. Shot on a low budget by an inexperienced crew with financing from the Hubert Bals Fund, the film diverges from many characteristics of Apichatpong's 'signature style' (as I discuss in chapter four). In contrast to his later work shot in colour, *Mysterious Object at Noon* was shot on low-resolution black-and-white 16mm stock, leaving the film visually chaotic and difficult to read, but opening space in the production process to improvise and film in spaces otherwise inaccessible with larger equipment. The film's plot is structurally difficult to follow, blending narrative and documentary sections, and rapidly cutting between locations and points of view in ways wholly inconsistent with the contemplative editing of Apichatpong's later works.

Apichatpong's improvisational approach to production operated as a form of creative straying, decentring predetermined outcomes to instead find meaning through uncertain processes of collaboration. *Mysterious Object at Noon* is structured as an 'exquisite corpse', a Surrealist parlour game where collaborators contribute to a single work by adding new details to a piece without seeing the whole in progress. Using this method, Apichatpong filmed a series of interviews across Thailand in which he invited his subjects to improvise new additions to an evolving story about a disabled boy and his carer, Dogfahr. Apichatpong then interspersed these interviews with scripted recreations by actors, although the distinction between scripted narrative and improvised documentary segments is not clear at first glance. Through this approach, Apichatpong abdicated narrative control – exchanging his director credit for "conceived and edited by" – thereby allowing the film's narrative to evolve over time without his direct interference. Dogfahr's story only ends when a group of children decide to have her killed and eaten by a tiger, and even then, Apichatpong kept shooting until he ran out of funding and film stock, providing a natural limit to the filming process. His comfort with improvisational straying facilitates an inclusive approach to creative practice, allowing both greater diversity among human collaborators and leaving room for the

unexpected actions of animals. Apichatpong's long take, deep focus coverage method allows characters and objects to move more freely within the frame, allowing both humans and animals to improvise without disrupting continuity. At one point in *Mysterious Object at Noon*, one of his child actors breaks character and asks when the catering will arrive. Rather than stop the camera, Apichatpong calls cut but keeps the camera rolling, stepping into the frame himself to converse with his actors. The rest of the scene shows actors rehearsing, Apichatpong conversing with his crew, and children playing on-set, further blurring the distinction between the film's scripted narrative and a documentary about the film production process itself. Through this production strategy, Apichatpong refused to orient his narrative towards a predetermined destination, and instead prioritised the moment-by-moment decisions of his collaborators.

This improvisational approach to production is also incorporated into Apichatpong's more heavily scripted productions. In the production script for *Memoria*, Apichatpong incorporated a mixture of conventional dialogue scenes and extended sequences of speechless activity. In his production script used on-set, Apichatpong frequently edited dialogue while shooting, adjusting phrasing, cutting lines and even shifting from English to Spanish on the day (Marchini Camia and Brady-Brown 2021). For other scenes, Apichatpong's script writing diverges entirely, listing shots within a scene and including a "film limit" in minutes to guide its duration, leaving the specific actions and sounds within the scene to greater chance (Marchini Camia and Brady-Brown 2021). This comparatively unstructured approach to production leaves room for contingency and creative straying within the ordinarily stressful, goal-oriented procedures of film production.

Yet perhaps the clearest manifestation of Apichatpong's stray practice is in his approach to preproduction. He prepared for *Memoria* with an extensive, open-ended research trip in Columbia, taking photographs of Bogota and the countryside, collecting articles on parasitic infections and archaeological digs, and conducting interviews with locals on their experiences and collective memories (Marchini Camia and Brady-Brown 2021). This open-ended research process was integral to Apichatpong's habituation within Columbia, allowing him to come to terms with the place before embarking on the script. This creative straying manifests within *Memoria* itself as Jessica (Tilda Swinton) spends much of the film wandering aimlessly through Bogota and the Columbian countryside. Jessica's straying within the diegesis retraces Apichatpong's own steps in the preproduction period, drawing comparisons between her own uprootedness and Apichatpong's cultural alienation working in a foreign country. Apichatpong researched *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* in much the same way, embedding himself within the everyday lives of a group of young men in the small Isaan town of Nabua, whose families survived the anti-communist purges of the twentieth century. His time in Nabua resulted in a series of improvisational

experiments with the young men, a process he recorded and developed into his multimedia installation *Primitive* (2009d).

In both *Memoria* and *Primitive*, pre-production was as an open-ended process of straying, as a means of inhabiting the rhythms of his subject's everyday lives, clearing space for production to be more improvisational and open to change. This open-ended approach to production and pre-production presents an alternative logic to the financially intensive, goal-oriented procedures of conventional film production, clearing space for collaboration and contingency open to the involvement of his collaborators.

Strays in vacant landscapes

As Apichatpong's career has progressed and the political controversies surrounding his work have intensified in Thailand, straying has become an act of political necessity. Citing the increased risk to himself and his crew following the 2014 coup d'état, Apichatpong stated that *Cemetery of Splendour* would be his last feature film shot in Thailand under the current regime, electing to instead shoot *Memoria* in Columbia—his first feature film produced outside of Thailand. Apichatpong described this creative migration as an alienating process, a fundamental separation from spatial and cultural memories that he can count as his own. Describing the new setting of his film, he states that "I cannot represent a genuine memory there. As an outsider, you just feel like you cannot and will not understand certain things. You're really on the outside" (Wham 2018). Forced into a position of political vulnerability, Apichatpong strays from the familiar conditions of Thailand to a place in which he is an unsettled outsider. Apichatpong's disorientation is materialised within the diegesis in Jessica's own straying. Mirroring her director, Tilda Swinton is herself out of place, speaking a foreign language (Spanish) while straying through spaces and histories that are not her own. Yet by accepting their shared status as outsiders, Apichatpong and Swinton demonstrate that the act of straying serves as both a means of personal survival and tactical political resistance, a method of exceeding and evading the authoritarian structures of present reality.

Apichatpong incorporates straying as an ethical principle into every level of his practice: in the diegetic lives of his characters, as a temporal feature of his film form, and as an approach to film production. His characters are temporal rebels, diverging from conventional expectations of productivity and progress to focus on the immediate (pleasurable) conditions of everyday life. He attempts to liberate his creative practice from expectations of progress, structure and resolution, concentrating instead on moments of chance and improvisation. Rather than trying to limit the

movements of his subjects (human or animal) to predetermined schemas, Apichatpong instead allows them to roam freely within the frame, challenging the conventional expectations of blocking and dramatic storytelling. More deeply, Apichatpong's filmmaking deploys a stray temporality unfazed by expectations of narrative progress or resolution, and instead concentrating on the moment-by-moment experiences of his characters and the camera. Through this, Apichatpong creates space for intimate interpersonal encounters – between both humans and animals – collapsing socially imposed ontological distinctions between them and liberating them from the restrictive structures of modernity. In these ways, although straying does not manifest emptiness as directly as in some of the earlier case studies in this thesis, it is directed towards the same ends by destabilising preconceptions and reorienting perceptions of the world.

In the next chapter, *Intimate Boredom*, I build upon this concept of ethical encounter and consider the ways in which Apichatpong's durational film style can serve as grounds for intimate contact between spectators and the screen. Situating Apichatpong's practice within the filmmaking legacy of Andy Warhol, I argue that both filmmakers use excessive duration as a means of eliciting 'profound ontological awareness' through boredom, that is, a recognition of the needs of the Other through an imposition of time.

Chapter Seven

Intimate Boredom

In 2007, Apichatpong released *TEEM*, a silent three-channel video installation of his then-boyfriend Chaisiri Jiwarangsan slowly waking up in the morning. Shot over three successive mornings, he used the low-resolution digital camera of a Nokia mobile phone that rendered the close-up of his face pixelated and out of focus. In 1963, Andy Warhol released *Sleep* a 320-minute black-and-white film of his then-lover John Giorno sleeping. Shot in 3-minute takes over several nights using Warhol's 16mm Bolex camera, the film contained only 30 minutes of original footage (Murphy 2012, 31), but was then recut, reordered and repeated in elaborate patterns over its runtime (Walsh 2016, 65). The film's minimalist premise and extreme runtime therefore concealed its intricate construction, with some critics at the time mistakenly assuming that the film was shot in a single take (Curtis 1971, 189).

The similarities between their two works are as striking as those between the artists themselves. Apichatpong cites Warhol as a foundational influence on his art practice dating back to his studies in Chicago, describing Warhol as:

> …a combo of Einstein and Buddha because he changed my way of looking at time. Apart from having the same initials as me, he showed me the importance of scenes (such as an old man walking his fat pug), which in fact, can be any moment when you are just aware of your existence.
>
> (cited in Quandt 2009b, 15).

Warhol's conceptual influence on Apichatpong's practice can be felt in his radical departures from conventional cinematic time, his fluid transitions between contemporary art, media installation, narrative cinema and still photography, and the centrality of queerness in his work. Warhol was committed to durational long takes to the point that P. Adams Sitney described Warhol in his history of American experimental cinema as "…the first film-maker to try to make films which

would outlast a viewer's initial state of perception" (2002, 351). Going further, Sitney argued that through this experience of extreme duration he drew spectators into states of "ontological awareness" in which they become acutely aware of the passage of the time, of the rhythms of their own bodies, and of the world around them (2002, 351-352). Warhol himself articulated the relationship between formal emptiness and 'ontological' or 'existential awareness' in his work, writing that, "The more you look at the exact same thing, the more the meaning goes away, and the better and emptier you feel" (cited in Remes 2015, 45-6). For both Warhol and Apichatpong, this presentation of cinematic empty time facilitates an experience of boredom that ruptures conventional means of looking at the world, drawing spectators into elevated states of sensitivity to their own bodies, to those of others, and to the world.

These connections between boredom, contemplation and existential awareness have attracted considerable attention from scholars, but the examples of *Sleep* and *TEEM* prompt us to reconsider the often-introspective focus of these discussions. Both films present sleeping lovers whose unconscious bodies are both vulnerable and beautiful, implying a voyeuristic dimension to the spectator's gaze. However, this voyeuristic detachment is complicated by the experience of boredom. Through boredom, we are drawn into time outside of our control. In the durational emptiness these films, time imposes itself on us, making us uncomfortable and goading us to look away while at the same time offering intimate knowledge of another human being. The 'existential awareness' facilitated by these experiences of boredom is not simply of our own bodies and places in the world, but rather serves as a point of intimate contact.

In this chapter, I investigate Apichatpong's manipulation of empty time as a means of facilitating deep spectatorial boredom, and through comparative analysis with the films of Andy Warhol, argue that this boredom is an intimate and interpersonal experience. Rather than frame boredom as a purely subjective or solipsistic experience (in which *my* thought experiences *its own* duration), I propose that it is better understood as an *intimate boredom*, a moment in which I come into contact with the time of the Other.

This chapter is divided into four sections. In the first, through Heidegger, I theorise boredom as an intrinsically modern experience of the uncomfortable imposition of time dragging or slipping away. It is a paradox of modernity that although contemporary life offers more ways of passing time and evading boredom than ever before, life has become increasingly boring and detached from the lived conditions of being-in-the-world. As a temporal confrontation, boredom has the profound capacity to reorient our experience of time, sensitising us to the otherwise-obscured temporal conditions of everyday existence. In pursuit of this, I argue that Apichatpong's durational filmmaking challenges this temporality by refusing to pass time and instead imposes itself upon us

by lingering within extended moments of empty time. In contrast to slow cinema's ocularcentrism and conventional focus on the long take, however, my analysis also addresses Apichatpong's durational sound design produced in collaboration with Akritchalerm Kalayanamitr, which offers a different – albeit still deeply affecting – form of duration. I conclude by examining how Apichatpong's long take style produces spaces of intimate encounter with bodies on-screen, concentrating on a comparative analysis of Warhol's screen tests with the performances of Jenjira Pongpas. Through this, I argue that this formal manipulation of boredom challenges the conventionally smooth passage of cinematic time presented within entertainment media, clearing space for moments of intimate contact between themselves, others and the cinematic image.

Theorising intimate boredom

Boredom is a temporal confrontation, an experience of time dragging as purposeful ways to pass time escape us. It is the conspicuous and often-uncomfortable perception of the passage of time congealed into a mood of indifference and lost productivity often understood as a state of malaise, as "some dispiriting combination of frustration, surfeit, depression, disgust, indifference, apathy, and confinement" (Lomas 2017, 1), or as "a generalised loss of meaning or interest" (Quaranta 2020, 2). Through the German term for boredom – *Langweile* – Heidegger saw an etymological link between boredom and time: under boredom, the passage of time (*weile*) is drawn out and becomes long (*lang*) (Heidegger 1995, 78, original emphasis). Through this drawing out, time becomes conspicuous and "we stand with respect to time," develop "a feeling of time," and are 'led' to "the problem of time" that is concealed in everyday modern existence (Heidegger 1995, 80). Despite these conventionally negative assumptions, however, boredom also has the capacity to reorient our experience of time and the world, shifting the ground from under us by exposing us to temporalities outside of our control.

Not all boredom, however, is profound. Heidegger distinguished between three forms of boredom: being bored *by* something, being bored *with* something, and *profound boredom*. In its first form, to be *bored by something* means that my attention is dominated by a situation that leaves me unfulfilled and unsatisfied—such as the experience of waiting for a delayed train. Under this first form, the objects of my attention withhold fulfilment from me and time begins to impose itself on me as a now-conspicuous aspect of my experience (Slaby 2010, 108).

In its second form – being *bored with something* – boredom lacks an intentional object but rather permeates the entire situation. In contrast to the obvious example of the first form, Heidegger's cites the example of attending a dinner party in which time passes and seems pleasant

in the moment, but which was in retrospect hollow and meaningless. Unlike the first form where time is held in limbo, the second form is left empty as "boredom and passing the time become intertwined in a peculiar way" and "Passing the time creeps into our becoming bored and [is] diffused throughout the whole situation" (Heidegger 1995, 113). We forget that we are bored because "we are immersed in an act of passing the time" (Quaranta 2020, 4-5), a time that ceases to hold us in a meaningful way. Defined by its detachment from and disinterest in the experiential conditions of lived experience, this form of boredom is a fundamentally insensitive way of being-in-the-world, passing time without ever fully grasping it. This manner of boredom manifest within modern entertainment technologies which, while allowing us to pass (or even *kill*) time, do not present anything novel or meaningful to us.

These manifestations of boredom are bound up with the experience of modernity. Heidegger's metaphor of waiting for a delayed train is the modern experience *par excellence* and establishes immediate connections with the train journeys of early cinema and with Apichatpong's fascination with travel. Lars Svendsen argued that although forms of boredom were historically present across cultures and periods, it was fundamentally a "'privilege' of modern man" (Svendsen 2005, 21-22). For Svendsen, modern life was cluttered by a "pell-mell rush of amusements" to pass time in this way, from "the cult of celebrities, where one gets completely engrossed in the lives of others because one's own life lacks meaning", to our infatuation with mass entertainment media (2005, 26-27). Byung-Chul Han argued that modern existence was characterised by an "excess of positivity" originating from "overproduction, overconsumption, and overcommunication" (Han 2015, 4-5). He wrote:

> Excessive positivity also expresses itself as an excess of stimuli, information, and impulses. It radically changes the structure and economy of attention. Perception becomes fragmented and scattered. Moreover, the mounting burden of work makes it necessary to adopt particular dispositions toward time and attention; this in turn affects the structure of attention and cognition.
>
> (Han 2015, 12)

Modern attention economies teeter on a paradox of boredom: at once, they are saturated with intensified amusements used to pass time and prevent us from being bored *by* our activities (the first form), but in the process make us bored *with* those very activities used to pass the time (the second form). The very diversions used to bypass boredom in Heidegger's first form themselves

become boring in his second form. The increased availability of digital media, the multiplication of screens in domestic and public spaces, and the global rise of leisure culture have meant that empty moments can be filled with increasingly intense arrays of content, but that content does not resolve the boredom underlying the homogeneous, empty time of modern existence.

Against these conditions of modernity, Heidegger proposes a third form: *profound boredom*. For Heidegger, profound boredom was an overpowering experience defined by a complete inability to pass time, which also "brings ourselves into the possibility of an *exceptional understanding*" (Heidegger 1995, 136, original emphasis). Profound boredom is not relative to a particular object or situation like the first two forms but "can occur out of the blue, and precisely whenever we do not expect it at all", such as the experience of "walk[ing] through the streets of a large city on a Sunday afternoon" (1995, 135). Such boredom facilitates profound introspection, which Heidegger regarded as a vital precondition to philosophical thought. Jan Slaby argued that for Heidegger, "the experience of profound boredom, understood in its full existential depth, makes manifest that a human being is the free and responsible creator of whatever meaning there is in one's life" (Slaby 2010, 102). For Han, profound boredom cures the malaise of modernity, facilitating deep and attentive contemplation: "We owe the cultural achievements of humanity," Han writes, "to deep, contemplative attention" (Han 2015, 13). In contrast to the shallowness of the first two forms, Heidegger's third form of boredom provokes profound existential contemplation, marking a heightened sensitivity to the passage of time and one's being-in-the-world.

By replacing action with empty duration, slow filmmakers create contemplative spaces in which spectator attention drifts from the objects on screen to other topics on their own time. David Company argued that slow aesthetics create "space for philosophical and aesthetic reflection *within* the film" (Company 2008, 37), while Song Hwee Lim argued in his analysis of Tsai Ming-liang's sleeping scenes that "the audience is effectively abandoned by the characters, thrown into an empty time and space in which stillness and slowness prevail… left to drift in these empty moments of stillness" (Lim 2014, 106). Responding directly to Heidegger, Chiara Quaranta insisted that the disruptive and unconventional aesthetics of art cinema challenged the conventional temporalities set up by mainstream entertainment cinema, and were therefore "more likely to stimulate a phenomenologically 'profound boredom' by challenging customary forms of perceptual engagement with a cinematic world" (2020, 18). By challenging these conventional organisations of cinematic time to instead linger in extended periods of empty time, extreme duration facilitates experiences of profound and reorienting boredom among spectators.

This experience of profound boredom is often described as an introspective or self-oriented experience as opposed to one shared with others. In his exploration of the relationship between

boredom and modernity, Siegfried Kracauer argued that boredom "provides a kind of guarantee that one is, so to speak, still in control of one's own experience" (Kracauer 1995, 334). As Svendsen concludes, "The Romantic self becomes a solipsistic self, one that has no belief in anything outside itself – for there cannot be any meaning other than what it has produced itself" (Svendsen 2005, 70). The image Heidegger uses to describe profound boredom – 'walking through the streets of a large city on a Sunday afternoon' – appears at first glance to be a contemplative solipsism, a state of detachment from daily routines and obligations to others. By these accounts, boredom is framed as an existential precondition to *self*-realisation, as means through which I develop meaning on my own terms and in my own time.

Despite this understanding of boredom as a solitary experience, however, it can also be productively understood as a condition of intimate interpersonal knowledge. Laura Marks defined eroticism as something that transcends sexuality and instead corresponds to an "ability to move between control and relinquishing… to have your sense of self, your self-control, taken away and restored—and to do the same for another person" (Marks 2002, xvi). As boredom entails a loss of control of one's time, it also involves an erotic exposure to temporality exterior to oneself. As Misek articulated, profound boredom:

> …involves reconciling ourselves to, and even embracing, the emptiness that exists within and beyond the limited time of our lives. Being bored to death is not a morbid attitude, however. In fact, it is profoundly ethical. It involves an appreciation of the fact that time is not under our control, that we cannot actually 'kill time' at all. Time passes, we die, and time continues to pass. Appreciating this fact makes us better equipped to appreciate the various temporalities that exist beyond our own.
>
> (Misek 2010, 783-4)

Boredom, therefore, is a confrontation with an exterior temporality, a rhythm out of sync with my own. Boredom allows me to acknowledge the existence of temporalities inconsistent with my own, to accept my inability to totally control the structures of my own experience and to step into the temporal alterity of the Other. In this way, boredom is not a turning away from the world, but rather a potential sensitivity to its contents. Apichatpong's subjects are rarely bored by themselves but exist in relation to others – whether through physical contact, sharing space, or social and emotional connections. Apichatpong's boredom is profound but not solipsistic, reorienting us towards intimate knowledge of the Other.

Architectural temporalities: *Empire* (1964), *Mekong Hotel* (2012) and *Cemetery of Splendour* (2015)

In its first form, boredom is an imposition of time – an experience of time dragging into indifference – that manifests within extreme duration. This boredom is cinematically embodied in *Empire* (dir. Andy Warhol, 1964), an eight-hour static view of the Empire State Building shot over six 48 minute reels and projected at a rate of 16 frames per second. Through its eight-hour runtime, *Empire* was not intended to be viewed in a single sitting and undermines conventional practices of film viewership, offering few (if any) pleasures for attentive spectators. The film is radically depersonalised and dedramatised: the sun sets, lights gradually turn on or off, and Warhol and Jonas Mekas can occasionally be seen changing the reels, each minute element of change highlighting the passage of time in the otherwise-static composition (Remes 2015, 14). By slowing projection down to 16 frames per second, Warhol further denaturalises its temporality, producing an experience alien to conventional spectatorial practices. Apichatpong has acknowledged the conceptual importance of *Empire* on his filmmaking, clearing space for him to experiment with temporalities and rhythms ordinarily excluded by conventional entertainment cinema.

Yet beyond its experimentation with extreme duration, *Empire* rejected many of the values of individual expression that defined earlier experimental film movements, a level of personal distance reflected in the works of later 'Structural' filmmakers. In contrast to other contemporary artists like Stan Brakhage (who carved his signature into each work of celluloid art), Warhol eschewed many signifiers of individual expressive genius and instead "adopted a deliberate attitude of cool distance towards his subject matter" (Rees 2011, 75), leaving many 'creative' choices to the filmmaking apparatus itself. Building on the foundations of Warhol's work, the loosely-identified Structural film movement – composed of prominent experimentalists such as Michael Snow, George Landow, Hollis Frampton, Paul Sharits, Tony Conrad, Ernie Gehr, and Joyce Weiland – expanded on these principles to produce works of highly-simplified formal structure predetermined by the film material itself (Sitney 2002, 347-8).

Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967) abided by a similar structural minimalism as *Empire*, substituting obvious creative inventions for a focus on the materiality of film itself. *Wavelength* was organised around a single slow, continuous zoom across the room of a loft towards what is eventually revealed to be a picture of waves. As the zoom makes its way across the room, film stock changes, colour shifts and the soundtrack is ruptured by the intensifying hum of a sine wave. Four minor human events occur on screen – a woman guides two men in placing a bookshelf, then

later has a conversation with a female friend, a man collapses dead on the floor, the woman makes an emergency phone call – but that action takes place at the edge of the frame and assumes secondary importance to the zoom's inexorable creep forward. While Snow is active in the physical movement of the camera lens, his body and creative actions are reduced to extensions of the machine. Through this radical depersonalisation and mechanical emphasis on the film material itself, both *Empire* and *Wavelength* abandon most forms of overt creative expression, stripping out elements of film form to engage spectators.

This formal emptiness elicits experiences of introspective boredom, confronting spectators with an architectural temporality. In his analysis of *Empire*, A.L. Rees argued that the absence of significant visual change "provokes the eye to scan the screen for nuances and change, leading persistent viewers to examine their own experience of viewing the film" (Rees 2011, 75), a sentiment reflected by Justin Remes, for whom "The spectator of a film like *Empire* witnesses movement: not the movement of the building on the screen but the movement of time itself" (Remes 2015, 14). Denied other means of managing their attention, the spectator's attention drifts towards states of heightened sensitivity to themselves and those around them—a spectatorial experience comparable to the sensitising silence of John Cage's *4'33"*. For Giuliana Bruno, the 'dead time' (*temps morts*) of *Empire* contributes to a heightened state of meditative reflexivity among spectators:

> Watching them *be*, simply exist, in space and time, as in Warhol's *Empire*, is to experience the expanse of geological time – an earthly lingering. … This cinema lets us meditate on the time of the body. It gets us close to interior time. Slow motion finally reveals an interior landscape.
>
> (Bruno 2004, 87, original emphasis)

Echoing the ecological dimension of Cage's philosophy, Bruno posits that the dead time of *Empire* allows spectators to navigate "the leftovers of time" left by the convetionalisation of cinematic time (Bruno 2004, 87). The boredom of *Empire* reflects a communion of sorts with the world beyond the subject, exposing spectators to the ordinarily concealed temporalities of non-human architecture.

This temporality permeates almost every level of Apichatpong's filmmaking but is keenly felt in *Mekong Hotel*—Apichatpong's most overt manipulation of cinematic boredom. With an ASL of 70.64 seconds, *Mekong Hotel* is Apichatpong's slowest film, an experience intensified by the film's minimalist plotting and durational approach to sound design. Shot in a hotel overlooking the river on the Thai-Lao border, the film centres on a young woman (Maiyatan Techaparn) accompanied by her mother (Jenjira Pongpas) and her male suitor (Sakda Kaewbuadee) as they lounge around the hotel chatting, sleeping and gazing out over the water. Apichatpong described *Mekong Hotel* in his own words as "a portrait of a hotel" (Weerasethakul 2012), further emphasising its architectural temporality.

Mekong Hotel plays into this architectural temporality by frequently prioritising objects and spaces over human characters. The film opens on a 35 second static long take of a hotel balcony overlooking the river. A statue holding a torch above its head stands motionless in the centre of the frame, flanked by two palm trees blowing gently in the breeze. These contingent movements of the palm branches – like the slow movements of the river in the background – serve as visual reminders that the shot is not a static image or slide, but rather a deliberate stylistic choice to eschew movement and action (see: Carroll 1998, 327). The motionlessness of this image elicits a degree of heightened reflexivity for spectators, posing the question of when (or even if) the image will be cut or otherwise transformed through action.

The camera remains static for every shot of the film, even as characters get up and move around the frame. Shot in deep focus wide shots with minimal lighting, characters are poorly visually differentiated from the spaces they inhabit, as if the camera is as interested in their actions as in the rooms, balconies and staircases of the hotel. As I analysed in chapter four, many other shots in *Mekong Hotel* are devoid of human characters entirely, showing highway traffic through an upstairs window (25 seconds), a bed covered in blood (16 seconds), or the long shot of a digger excavating sand at the shore (73 seconds). As the title suggests, the primary subject of *Mekong Hotel* is not its human characters but the space of the hotel itself, marginalising human action in deference to architecture.

Mekong Hotel's final 277 second extreme long shot of the Mekong River produces a similar effect, confronting spectators with an extended sequence of unstructured duration. In their analysis of this shot, Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt described it as a matter of "embroidered time," enclosing multiple simultaneous events and time signatures (the water skiers, the cars in the distance, the inexorable currents of the river) (Schoonover and Galt 2016, 285). In this moment of visual emptiness, the viewing experience becomes highly individualised, drawn to different elements on screen without a single compositional or temporal centre.

In *Cemetery of Splendour*, Apichatpong takes this architectural temporality further by absorbing human bodies into the environment itself. Around the film's midpoint, a sleeping man sits slumped in a wheelchair, his head resting on his left shoulder, his arm propped up by the armrest of his wheelchair, his feet resting on the ground, motionless. Compositionally, the shot is almost entirely devoid of movement, as the still body of the man in the wheelchair is the only person in the frame, and beyond the laundry blowing in the wind on the right side of the frame, no other element of mise-en-scène is in motion. The static bodies of sleeping soldiers, organised neatly in rows of beds, are absorbed into the architectural temporality of the hospital room. They are not active, agentive subjects but rather inanimate objects in space.

Building on Warhol, Apichatpong's architectural temporalities present an alternative sensitised logic of cinematic time. Apichatpong blurs divisions between human bodies and architecture, calls into question narrative cinema's privileging of human action and invites a new form of viewing that invites spectator attention and introspection. Through confrontation with an architectural temporality that draws them in to a state of boredom, through which attentive spectators are challenged to question their own perceptual tendencies and to be drawn into states of introspection. As in Warhol's *Empire*, the confrontation with the stillness of architectural temporality triggers an ontological awareness of the world, a form of vision facilitated by boredom that allows spectators to, as Bruno describes, "[watch] them *be*, simply exist, in space and time," and to thereby "lets us meditate on the time of the body" (Bruno 2004, 87). Such boredom facilitates contemplation, and an opening up to the world without the pressure of action or narrative.

Durational sound design: *Mekong Hotel* (2012) and *Cemetery of Splendour* (2015)

Despite slow cinema's conventional prioritisation of vision over sound, sound often inconspicuously establishes spatial continuity or discontinuity between shots, and – like the film's visual track – can be manipulated to produce experiences of extreme duration. Whereas Warhol's films generally lacked synchronised soundtracks, Apichatpong takes inordinate care in his sound design produced in collaboration with Akritchalerm Kalayanamitr, who has designed Apichatpong's soundscapes since *Tropical Malady*. Across this shared career, their distinctive sound design departs from conventional narrative practice to emphasise ambient and environmental sounds over dialogue in the same way. In her analysis of his sound design, Philippa Lovatt argued that Apichatpong amplifies environmental ambient noises over narratively relevant dialogue, leaving the sounds of insects more audible than the voices of characters speaking on screen, guiding

viewers away from narrative interpretation towards a more affective viewing practice. As Lovatt described:

> …the sound of the environment is often so dominant that it dismantles our reliance on the verbal or the linguistic to ground our understanding of what is happening in the narrative, and instead encourages (or rather *insists* upon) an embodied, phenomenological, engagement with the scene.
>
> (Lovatt 2013, 62)

In this way, Apichatpong and Akritchalerm's ambient-rich soundscapes marginalise the human voice and decrease narrative legibility, producing homogeneous spaces that durationally maintain sameness and deepen the boringness of the film.

Throughout their collaborations, Apichatpong and Akritchalerm use continuous soundscapes to generate implicit experiences of duration. The montage at the midpoint of *Cemetery of Splendour* embodies this durational sound design. Fifty-six minutes into the film, Apichatpong begins a sequence after Jen's dinner with Itt and their trip to the movie theatre and is composed of eight shots over 385 seconds. It begins in the military hospital with a shot of a ceiling fan lit by the changing fluorescent light connected to the soldiers' life support systems, shot from a low angle as if from a soldier's bed-bound point of view. The shot continues for 42 seconds, during which time the light shifts from blue to red, then cuts to a 17 second shot of a soldier sleeping next to one of the lights, and another 17 second shot of a different soldier. The montage then migrates to people sleeping or relaxing in spaces outside hospital grounds – to a group of sleeping homeless people adjacent to a public wall (32 seconds), to two people sitting by a canal (38 seconds), to a person sleeping at a bus stop (49 seconds), to Itt being carried down an escalator outside the movie theatre (102 seconds) – before finally dissolving back into the hospital bedroom (88 seconds). Interestingly, the exterior spaces are lit using the same colour shifting lights from the hospital, casting an eerie glow without diegetic sources and tying the otherwise discontinuous images together.

This continuous lighting is accompanied by a continuous soundscape that persists across the montage. The first shot pairs the rhythmic diegetic sound of the ceiling fan with the low hum of the life support systems, which both continue into the second shot. The third shot continues both the rhythmic beat of the fan and the mechanical hum while adding the sound of birds chirping, with the visible diegetic origin of an open window positioned behind him. From a realist standpoint, the continuous sound of these three shots is unproblematic because they can all be assumed to take

place in the same spatio-temporal moment. However, the soundscape continues after the montage cuts to spaces beyond the hospital, fading out the ceiling fans while adding other diegetic sounds such as insects, dogs and motorcycles. In the final shot, the mechanical hum fades out, ceiling fans fade back in, and a faint, high-pitched musical score hovers just below the volume of the other sounds. As the visuals cut between different spaces, Apichatpong and Akritchalerm avoid conspicuous auditory breaks, opting instead to crossfade sounds underpinned by a low, continuous hum to establish a clear sense of auditory continuity. In conjunction with the visual continuity of lighting changes, this continuous soundtrack blends discrete spaces as if they were continuous.

Together, these sounds and images establish a highly regulated rhythm across this sequence. The visual pattern of the rotating ceiling fan is synchronised to the rapid tempo of its sound, a tempo synchronised with the bird squawking in CS76 and the insect chirping of CS75 and CS77. These rapid tempos harmonise with the slow visual shifts in lighting, which persists even as the sequence cuts to other spaces beyond hospital grounds. Later visual cues such as the appearance of an escalator in shot CS79 and the reappearance of ceiling fans in CS80 reinforce this audio-visual rhythm, establishing a hypnotic continuity between these images even as they visually cut. In this way, by creating a durational soundtrack while cutting the visual image, Apichatpong creates an *implicit* experience of duration in conflict with the visual change taking place on screen. This paradoxical blend of aural continuity with spatial discontinuity gives the sequence an illogical, dream-like quality, as if it was the wandering perception of one of the sleeping soldiers.

In *Mekong Hotel*, Apichatpong underscores the entire film with a single guitar played by childhood friend and classical guitarist Chai Bhatana. The sound of the guitar begins after short silence in the black of the opening credit sequence and begins with Apichatpong's voice speaking with the guitarist. After the opening shot of the balcony, the image cuts to diegetically present the musician picking at his guitar with Apichatpong himself listening attentively, positioned to his right with an open notebook on his lap. From this point onwards, the sound of the guitar remains constant, a soothing aural reminder of the undulating rhythm of the tide just out of view that persists at the same rhythm and intensity even as the image cuts to the extreme images of its characters eating bloody flesh. This singular guitar produces a strong sense of auditory sameness that recalls Erik Satie's musical composition *Vexations* (1893), which instructs the musician to repeat the same 32-bar piece 840 times, equating to roughly 25 hours of performance (Higgins 1968, 1-2). The conceptual influence of Satie filters into Akritchalerm's sound design via Cage, who attempted the first full performance of *Vexations* in 1963 (Remes 2015, 32). The constant, unyielding score diminishes narrative and visual shifts, as well as character dialogue, drawing a state of boredom through an absence of change.

Sit still and try not to blink: Warhol's *Screen Tests* (1964-66), *Blissfully Yours* (2002) and *Cemetery of Splendour* (2015)

Beyond *Empire*, many of Warhol's early films pay close attention to erotic details, excising all dramatisation to focus exclusively on the minute details of human faces and bodies. Despite its graphic title, Warhol's *Blow Job* (1963a) does not explicitly depict the sex act on screen but rather shows a close up of a young man's face as the act is performed on him off-screen. Warhol's camera lingers on his face, recording how his facial muscles loosen and contract, how his head shifts from side to side, licks his lips or lights a cigarette. Projected at 16 frames per second, his facial movements are rendered artificial and unrealistic, denaturalising the otherwise ordinary appearance of a human face on-screen. Warhol's *Screen Tests* (1964-6) follow a similar format but are confined to a single reel: subjects were left unattended in front of his Bolex with the instruction to "sit still and try not to blink" until the camera ran out of film (Murphy 2012, 2). He produced more than 470 different *Screen Tests* in the mid-1960s alone, many featuring famous subjects including Bob Dylan, Dennis Hopper, Edie Sedgwick and Susan Sontag, further parodying the 'screen test' format of the Hollywood star system. Perhaps his most iconic *Screen Test*, however, was of Ann Buchanan (1964-1966), a friend of Allen Ginsberg and a guest at Warhol's Factory. J.J. Murphy described her screen test in detail, unpacking the minute details captured by Warhol's camera:

> Her left cheek is a bit hotter than the one on the right, which makes her left eye more prominent. We see two points of light reflected in her left eye, while a single point appears in her right one. Her hair is unkempt; her facial expression is remarkably neutral. Buchanan stares directly at us, almost as if transfixed by the camera. Her eyelids quiver ever so slightly at one point, but she doesn't blink. Her throat and cheek also move imperceptively, but Buchanan never loses her concentration. A half-minute afterward, a tear falls from it, followed by another ten seconds later. Nearly three minutes into the film, a new tear drips from her chin, followed by a tear from her left eye, which continues for the rest of the film.
>
> (Murphy 2012, 1)

The structural simplicity of Warhol's *Screen Test*s facilitated this deep attention to human gesture and expression, subtracting all forms of narrativisation to instead centre on the human face as the

sole object of attention, as Murphy's account demonstrates. As the image was emptied of narrative meaning, Murphy's gaze was drawn towards Buchanan's facial expressions and movements, eliciting a highly intimate spectatorial experience.

Within Warhol's cinema, the alterity and irreducibility of these faces is central to their appeal. In his analysis of *Blow Job*, Douglas Crimp described his experience on these terms:

> We cannot make eye contact. We cannot look into this man's eyes and detect the vulnerability that his submission to being pleasured surely entails. We cannot take sexual possession of him. We can see his face, but we cannot, as it were, *have* it. This face is not for us.
>
> (Crimp 2012, 7, original emphasis)

This issue of alterity resurfaces in Buchanan's *Screen Test*, similarly, where the origins of her *Screen Test* are unexplained. Although the long take provides a detailed catalogue of human gestures, the subject behind those gestures remains impossible to fully grasp. In her analysis of Warhol's *Screen Tests*, Orna Raviv draws from Levinas to frame them as ethical encounters with alterity that cannot be fully grasped or mastered. As I outlined in chapter six, for Levinas the Other makes an ethical demand of me not because of her similarity to me, but in her total and irreducible difference from me. The Face of the Other is presented to me not as an object to be grasped, but rather as a pure exteriority. For Raviv, Buchanan's *Screen Test* embodies this alterity. Her face is static and seemingly expressionless before she starts crying, a stillness reinforced by the slower frame rate. Buchanan's *Screen Test* is also stripped of characterisation and narrative, leaving no intellectual trace or indication of who she is or what she is doing in front of Warhol's camera. For Raviv as for Levinas, characterisation erases the Other's alterity by presenting them in terms of characteristics that can be grasped and understood (2016, 55). To approach Warhol's *Screen Tests* ethically (in the Levinasian sense) asks us to reject them as something to be grasped, possessed or entirely understood, and instead to leave them in their radical, unconquerable alterity.

Apichatpong's *Mysterious Object at Noon* operates in a similar fashion to Warhol's *Screen Tests*, fixating on the minute details and expressions of his subjects. Shot in large part through long take close ups of faces, *Mysterious Object at Noon* operates as an ethnographic study of its subjects, his camera trained expressions, gestures and speech patterns of his characters as they continue the story. The first storyteller, a young woman selling fish sauce from a van in the city, begins by telling the story of how her parents sold her services to a relative out of desperation. After she finishes, Apichatpong asks her off-camera to tell a story, beginning the story-within-a-story that

structures the film's *exquisite corpse* narrative. As the young woman speaks, she occasionally looks away from the camera and fiddles with a small object in her hands. In a later interview, an old woman continues Dogfahr's story by adding the bizarre twist that the object that fell out of her skirt transformed into a young boy. The old woman starts drinking alcohol, laughing loudly and inexplicably putting on a pair of sunglasses. For both women, their contributions to Dogfahr's unfolding story are narratively unimportant, but rather serve as pretence for the camera to watch their behaviours and listen to their patterns of speech. In this way, the narrative incoherence facilitates a form of spectatorial intimacy, as our attentions are reoriented from narrative comprehension towards sensitive perception of the nuances of their facial expressions and gestures.

These issues of cinematic intimacy converge with Jenjira Pongpas, whose face is central to many of Apichatpong's films. Born in Nong Khai, Jenjira was a seamstress and home economics teacher before moving to Bangkok to pursue a career as an actor. Owing to her lack of professional acting training, Jenjira's performance style is naturalistic and improvisational, drawn from and often inspired by her personal experiences. Shortly after appearing in *Blissfully Yours*, she was involved in a motorcycle accident that crippled her right leg, forcing her to undergo a series of painful surgeries and physical therapies that Apichatpong documented in his video installation *For Tomorrow, For Tonight* (2011a). Rather than view Jenjira's disability as a creative limitation, Apichatpong has noted its transformative importance on their collaborative practice, with much of their work together addressing the progress of her healing and transformation of her body as it ages over time (Kasman 2015). Apichatpong describes *Cemetery of Splendour* – their closest collaboration – as "an accumulation from other projects on which we worked together, I feature her writing, her diaries in other art works, and her legs, also in the film and video" (Kasman 2015).

The temporality of Jenjira's body is braided into the Apichatpong's filmmaking, intimately informing its rhythms at every level of their collaboration. In *Cemetery of Splendour*, Jen is first shown in a 42 second shot of her walking down a corridor at the military hospital on crutches. Filmed in deep focus, the shot begins with an uninhabited space before Jen moves from behind the camera to the midground, where she engages in conversation with someone on the other side of a door. The shot compositionally foregrounds her disability by including her whole body in frame and immediately connects the film's pacing with the rhythm of her body, allowing her to completely move through the space at her pace. Throughout the film, Jen's footsteps metronomically inform the movements of other characters and indeed the speed of the editing itself, both slowing down to the undulating pace of her movements. Here, Apichatpong's long take style serves as an inclusive filmmaking practice that facilitates the performance of an alternative bodily temporality, one ordinarily excluded within action-oriented storytelling. As spectators, we are

sensitised to her gestures and movements, drawn into an intimate state of spectatorship with her body on-screen.

Jen's longing for intimate contact reaches a climax in the film's final moments. In the preceding scene, after Itt falls asleep during a picnic by Bueng Khan Nakhon Lake, Jen leaves for a walk through the park where she meets the Mediator, who is working at a sales meeting for an unusual skin treatment product. After a short conversation, the pair return to Itt's sleeping body after which the Mediator guides Jen through an imaginary tour of the ancient spiritual palace buried beneath the park. The conversation takes turns between the Mediator's supernatural descriptions and Jen's real memories of Khon Kaen, her recollections of life during the war and recent work planting flowers with other seniors on nearby trees. Eventually, their conversation settles onto a bench overlooking the lake, followed by two pillow shots of water turbines nearby, a shot of a water droplet drifting across a camera lens, and two shots of the empty picnic space from before, with no sign of Itt.

Finally, Apichatpong returns to a shot of Jen and the Mediator sitting on a secluded park bench surrounded by greenery. As Jen sits looking out on the lake, the Mediator slowly rolls up her trousers to expose her wounded leg, applies ointment to it, and then slowly starts kissing the wound, before Jen gradually breaks into tears. Apichatpong holds this shot for 349 seconds, making it the longest take in the film. The shot is compositionally simplified: Jen is positioned on a bench in the centre of the frame and remains seated for the entire shot length, with most movement completed by the Mediator as she kneels in front of Jen and kisses her leg. This compositional stillness is reflected in the auditory sameness of the soundtrack, maintaining the unmodulated sound of wind through trees heard for the previous several minutes. The shot eschews conventional means of narrativising or emotionally reinforcing the action taking place on screen, refusing to cut, provide musical score, or through dialogue explain the significance of the scene.

This intimate long take of Jenjira in a position of emotional vulnerability recalls an earlier shot in *Blissfully Yours*, in which Apichatpong holds on a shot of her character Orn as she slowly breaks into tears. There is a curious structural symmetry between these two shots, each shot situated in the final moments of the film as a point of emotional climax. In *Blissfully Yours*, Orn breaks into tears after being rejected by Roong and ostracised on the other side of the riverbank. In the preceding scene, Apichatpong's editing emphasises Orn's alienation by using a rare shot-reverse-shot exchange between her and Roong, followed by a wide-angle establishing shot showing her physical separation from the younger couple. In the next shot, Apichatpong holds on a mid-shot of Orn as she becomes visibly distressed and breaks into tears—a shot he holds for the seemingly unbearable duration of 120 seconds. In this moment, the absence of cuts, dialogue or super-diegetic

score produce an experience of unsettling sameness, of being held in place as another person experiences a moment of extreme yet unexplained distress.

In both shots, Apichatpong's use of the dedramatised long take conveys an experience of intimacy, manipulating duration in pursuit of eroticism. In this shot from *Blissfully Yours*, Jenjira is stripped to her underwear and left to dry off in the sun after an earlier stint in the water, while in *Cemetery of Splendour* her trouser leg is rolled up so that the Mediator can gently kiss and caress her wounded leg. In each moment, Jenjira is presented in a position of vulnerability and as an object of desire, but this is only part of the scene's eroticism. As boredom entails a loss of control of one's experience of time, it can be reframed as an experience of erotic intimacy, of stepping into the temporal alterity of the Other, of time outside of our control. In these long takes, time imposes itself on us and we are held in states of spectatorial uncertainty, unsure of what will happen or when the shot will end.

Warhol's request for his *Screen Test* subjects to "sit still and try not to blink" is therefore a dual address: on one level, he addresses his subject to hold the camera's stare, to uncomfortably expose themself to its impersonal, mechanical gaze; on another, it is an instruction for spectators to hold the gaze of the face on-screen, to linger in an uncomfortable moment of face-to-face contact, a moment of time outside of their control. Apichatpong makes a similar demand in his durational filmmaking and fascination with human faces, placing spectators in positions of uncomfortable intimate contact with his subjects on-screen. The formal boringness of these shots is inseparable from their erotic intimacy, simultaneously directing us towards minute expressions, gestures and movements of faces on-screen while exposing us to an uncomfortable time outside of our control.

The more you look, the better and emptier you feel

Boredom is an imposition of time outside of my control, an experience of time dragging or slipping away from me. However, as a rupture in the flow of everyday experience, boredom entails a perceptual reorientation that reshapes my experience of the world. Cinema is intimately entangled with the history of modern boredom, simultaneously providing entertainment to escape boredom while at the same time generating a procession of content through cultural production that we are soon bored with. Against this, art cinema has the potential to invert the ordinary structure of cinematic time, intentionally exposing spectators to extended sequences of durational empty time to expose spectators to alternative and oftentimes uncomfortable flows of cinematic time. These sequences facilitate contemplative introspection, but they also serve as grounds for forms of

spectatorship sensitised to the temporal alterity of exterior bodies and spaces, facilitating experiences of intimate boredom shared with others.

In his filmmaking practice, Apichatpong manipulates cinematic duration to challenge conventional structures of cinematic time, concentrating on extended sequences of empty time to prompt experiences of spectatorial boredom. Situated in relation to Warhol's film practice and the Structural tradition of American experimental filmmaking and building upon his background in architecture, Apichatpong's filmmaking often lingers in non-human spaces stripped of almost all action and activity, facilitating moments of spectatorial drift. In fashions reminiscent of Erick Satie and John Cage, his sound design often serves similar purposes, generating moments of extended auditory sameness to produce experiences of implicit duration underneath changes in the visual track. Conversely, his long takes often settle on human faces and bodies, sensitised to their gestures and movements through space through the absence of elaborate staging or goal-oriented plotting of mainstream narrative storytelling. By stripping out narrative ornamentation and instead concentrating on the body on-screen, Apichatpong's filmmaking facilitates forms of sensitised spectatorial engagement with the cinematic image. Apichatpong's treatment of cinematic boredom therefore functions on two levels: first as an empty space for introspective contemplation, and second as a space for contemplating the time of the Other by being drawn into intimate contact with bodies on-screen and around us.

A lingering question from this analysis is the relationship between cinematic and installation conventions in Apichatpong's practice. The extreme durations and gallery settings of Warhol's *Sleep* and *Empire* distinguish them from the cinematic exhibitions of *Mekong Hotel* and *Cemetery of Splendour*, which would ordinarily demand a shift in methodology. Yet as I have argued in previous chapters, Apichatpong folds the conventions of narrative cinema and media installation onto one another, understanding spectatorship not as a process of linear comprehension but rather as a space of architectural movement. In my final chapter, I build upon these discussions to explore Apichatpong's restructuring of the apparatus of cinema itself with his *SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL* installation at the International Film Festival Rotterdam, concluding my analysis of cinematic emptiness and Apichatpong's art of looking.

Chapter Eight

Sleep Cinema

Apichatpong has an unusual fascination with sleep. *Blissfully Yours* concludes with a four-minute shot of Roong slowly falling asleep, surrounded by pillow shots of the mountains and valleys surrounding her to visualise her experiential drift. In *Morakot (Emerald),* Apichatpong double exposes sleeping bodies onto the unmade beds of an abandoned Bangkok hotel, drawing connections between their partial state of consciousness and the partial, uncanny presence of spectres haunting its empty spaces. *Cemetery of Splendour* centres on a group of Thai soldiers paralysed by a mysterious sleeping sickness, gesturing towards the political malaise engulfing Thailand in the aftermath of the 2014 coup d'état, reflecting a public sphere paralysed by government censorship and a military institution unable to move beyond the imagined glories of the past. Apichatpong's fascination with sleep and dreaming places his work in intimate conversation with that of his influences: with the durational emptiness of Andy Warhol's *Sleep*, the oneiric imagery of Maya Deren and the incongruous, denaturalising strangeness of the Surrealists.

Yet Apichatpong's interest in sleep extends beyond the diegetic contents of his films and into his understanding of the architecture of cinematic attention itself. His cinema is both *a cinema of sleep* (in which sleep is represented), but *a cinema that is sleep* (in which cinema and sleep exist in continuum with one another). He stated:

> I always believe that we possess the best cinema. We don't need other cinema, meaning that when we sleep, it's our own image, our own experience that we edit at night and process.
>
> (Weerasethakul 2018a)

He has also noted his comfort with spectators sleeping through his films. In 2011, he stated that "[he was] fine when people say that they fall asleep in my movies. They wake up and can patch things together in their own way" (Carrion-Murayari 2011, 14). He reiterated this disinterest in disciplined forms of spectatorship in 2018, stating:

> I want to have a cinema specifically for sleeping. I feel because, for me, over the years I have become less and less interested in watching movies. Even [in] my own films, I sleep.
>
> (Weerasethakul 2018a)

In these statements, Apichatpong revised conventional frameworks of cinematic experience, diverting from conventional Western practices of film spectatorship characterised by active, continuous and disciplined spectatorship towards passivity, distraction and indiscipline. These statements radically reimagine cinematic spectatorship by placing sleep, cinema and dreaming in ontological continuum with one another.

In this chapter, I conceptualise Apichatpong's 'sleep cinema,' address its connections and divergences from conventional practices of cinematic spectatorship and explore the implications of sleep cinema within his reimagined architecture of cinematic attention. Images of sleeping characters are ordinarily excised as dead time, given that their passive, inert bodies are fundamentally incompatible with the goal orientations of classical narrative, whose characters are presented as continually conscious and constantly active subjects who drive narrative forward through their actions. In opposition to the action-driven narratives of classical continuity storytelling, Apichatpong lingers with sleeping bodies and dreamlike uncertainties, manipulating film form to generate hypnagogic states on the fringes of consciousness.

Apichatpong's reconceptualisation of cinema is a surreal reimagining of its apparatus. Like Apichatpong, the Surrealists were fascinated by the experiences of sleep and dreaming, along with the uncertainties contained within them. In his first *Manifesto on Surrealism* published in 1924, André Breton described Surrealism as a gesture towards "the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality," which he labelled "*surreality*" (Breton 1969, 14, original emphasis). Breton, along with Luis Buñuel and Ado Kyrou treasured cinema for its blurring dream and reality, and for its capacity to juxtapose incongruous imagery in opposition to Enlightenment ideals of rational sense-making.

Surrealism is often reduced to a style of strange, dreamlike imagery embodied by Salvador Dalí or Luis Buñuel, the adjective 'surreal' used to denote strangeness, unexpected juxtapositions

and incongruity, however this reduction of surrealism to a style is fundamentally a misinterpretation. However, surrealism cannot be reduced to a set of stylistic concerns or influences, but rather exists as a concept with "broadening horizons" (Richardson 2006, 3). In his first manifesto, Breton stated that he did "not believe in the establishment of a conventional Surrealist pattern any time in the near future" (Breton 1969, 40), instead asserted the group's "complete nonconformism" (47). Paul Hammond argues against a strict stylisation of Surrealist cinema, describing it instead as "a marginal, utopian enterprise, at once scandalous and prefigurative, ludic and lucid" (1978, 4), a sentiment echoed by Michael Richardson: "surrealism is dynamic or it is nothing" (2006, 14), thereby demanding that we understand it through the day-to-day practices of its practitioners. Michael Richardson argues that surrealism is not embodied by a particular film or style of films, but rather emerges as a phenomenon through the environment of cinema itself, "created by the relationship the audience creates with the screen" (Richardson 2006, 6), and moreover, by spectators using films in ways that were not intended by their creators (Lowenstein 2014, 3).

Despite Apichatpong's historical detachment from the original Surrealists, traces of their influence can be felt in the radical non-conformism and constant hybridities of his film practice. He first encountered surrealism while studying at the Art Institute of Chicago (Teh 2011, 597), leading to the surrealistic structure of *Mysterious Object at Noon*. Other writers have note the influence of surrealism on Apichatpong's film practice in his blurring of fantasy and reality (Promkhuntong 2016, 84), phantoms and materiality (Kim 2011, 52) and in his ethnographic attention to detail (Teh 2011). Apichatpong described Thailand as intrisically surreal due to its cultural emphasis on hybridity, stating that:

> In Thailand, reality is that way. There's no sense of its being strange or surreal. The architecture mixes everything, like Greek columns, with other styles, but no one sees it as unusual. Simply looking at things is fascinating for me, and I just put it in my films.
>
> (Quandt 2005)

Given these connections, Apichatpong's sleep cinema is best understood not as a concrete proposal for an alternative institution but rather as a 'broadening horizon' of the cinematic apparatus, an experiment with the conventional structures of cinematic attention directed towards the reconciliation of dream and reality in the shared space of the cinema.

This chapter explores Apichatpong's own artistic experimentations with sleep cinema, looking beyond the representational qualities of his films to focus on his reimagining of the architectural structure of cinema itself. My analysis is derived from fieldwork completed at the International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR) in January 2018 where Apichatpong staged his first (and to-date only) fully realised sleep cinema, titled *SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL* (2018c). This installation fused a cinema space with a functioning overnight hotel, with paying guests staying overnight in a communal sleeping space illuminated by continuous, non-repeating film projection. *SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL* reimagined the cinematic apparatus by dismantling the monodirectional relationship between film screen and spectator, actively encouraging viewer inattention and drift. I argue that these diversions from the ordinarily disciplined organisation of the conventional cinematic apparatus open space for new spectatorial experiences and intimacies by building on the film practices of the Surrealists.

This chapter is divided into five sections. In the first, I consider why sleep is opposed to conventional cinema with reference to Jonathan Crary's examination of human perception under capitalism in the late-nineteenth century (Crary 1990, 2001). Rather than accept sleep and cinema as incompatible states of perception (or non-perception), I argue that Apichatpong's sleep cinema assumes spectator inattention, producing an experience that spectators are incapable of paying whole or total attention to. Through this, I elaborate upon Jean-Luc Nancy's claim that sleep is without phenomenology and consider the ways in which sleep cinema challenges the situation of a stable, consistent and attentive subject at the centre of the cinematic apparatus (Nancy 2009). As a sleeper's attention is necessarily partial and fragmentary, sleep cinema mandates that we reconsider the position of a stable spectating subject and imagine alternatives open to indeterminacy and incompletion.

Building on this discussion, I outline the structure of Apichatpong's *SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL*, and examine the ways that Apichatpong's prototype 'sleep cinema' diverged from the conventional spectatorial organisations of art cinema by incorporating elements of video installation. In the following three sections, I analyse the major effects of this new architecture of cinematic attention, explore the implications of these divergences, and trace the connections between the architecture of *SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL* with the representational qualities of his other works. I first consider how sleep cinema models an inattentive form of spectatorship that decentres narrative comprehension and understanding, focussing instead on the drifting embodied experiences of the spectator. I then address the collective experience felt by spectators sharing in a moment of vulnerability and explore how sleep cinema facilitates a form of intimate collective drift. Finally, I consider how Apichatpong imagines sleep as a space for individual and collective liberation

through dreaming, of shared travel to alternative spaces to dominant reality. Instead of being a form of enabling passivity, sleep opens space for the imaginative contemplation of alternate realities, allowing resistance in spite of state power and the attentive structures of capitalist modernity.

Conceptualising sleep cinema

As a state of partial inattention, sleep counters the spectatorial conventions of Western cinema characterised by highly disciplined forms of attention. In *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (2013), Jonathan Crary argued that sleep presents a natural limit to continuous processes of production and consumption within "24/7 capitalism." Under 24/7 capitalism, human existence is reduced to capital and is subjugated to a logic of constant, uninterrupted productivity "composed of incessant, frictionless operations" (Crary 2013, 29). Crary argued that the contemporary conditions of subjectivity and perception are not natural conditions, but rather products of historical and economic transformation over the past 150 years (Crary 2001, 1). Across his work, Crary traces the transformation of human perception under capitalist modernity in which the logics of factory production and urban living increasingly concentrated human attention towards a small range of tasks, inculcating a "disciplinary regime of attentiveness" for modern subjects (Crary 2001, 13). Sleep – "in its profound uselessness and intrinsic passivity" (Crary 2013, 10) – is incompatible with this arrangement:

> Sleep poses the idea of a human need and interval of time that cannot be colonized and harnessed to a massive engine of profitability, and thus remains an incongruous anomaly and site of crisis in the global present. In spite of all the scientific research in this area, it frustrates and confounds any strategy to exploit or reshape it. The stunning, inconceivable reality is that nothing of value can be extracted from it.
>
> (Crary 2013, 10)

The cinematic apparatus of a conventional Western theatre – its darkened hall, monodirectional seating, socially-imposed codes of silence – all feed into a highly-disciplined spectatorial experience and serve to attract spectatorial attention towards a narrow band of visual stimulation. As an extension of these processes, conventional cinema concentrates attention, to diminish external stimulation and to deliver an experience as direct and uninterrupted as possible as part of a broader concentration of human attention under modernity. This tension similarly manifests

within digital media technologies, whose consumptive practices offer a hyperattentive excess of stimuli in every element of modern life (Han 2015, 13). In 2017, Netflix CEO Reed Hastings joked that the streaming service's main competitor was not other media companies but rather the structure of human attention itself, noting that "we're competing with sleep, on the margin" (Sulleyman 2017). Against these technological efforts to colonise every element of human attention, sleep functions as a space detached of these intensities, a state of relaxed inattention. In its opposition to concentrated organisations of time, sleep is empty time *par excellence*, an escape from the productive demands of capitalist modernity to instead linger in states of suspended indeterminacy.

Along the same lines, the Surrealists worked to critique the conditions of enlightenment modernity. Breton argued that modernity improperly "banish[ed] from the mind everything that might rightly or wrongly be termed superstition, or fancy," preventing "any kind of search for truth which is not in conformance with accepted practices" (Breton 1969, 10), against which sleep offered an opportunity "to stop imposing… the conscious rhythm of my thought" and to instead open up a space of poetic irrationality (Breton 1969, 12). Theodor Adorno who argued that, unlike psychoanalysis, surrealism cannot be reduced to a psychological dream theory opposed the reduction of surrealism to a psychological dream theory, or even as a representation of dreams, arguing instead that "Dreams… treat the elements of the real the way the method of Surrealism does" (Adorno 2019, 103). Dalí believed that the poetic potential of cinema lay in its capacity to enact "a traumatic and violent disequilibrium toward concrete irrationality" (cited in Hammond 1978, 63). Just as Crary frames sleep as a space of unconquerable non-productivity, dreaming is a state of unconquerable alterity. As Martin Fuller articulated:

> Dream is the place where thought sabotages itself, begins to dance, drunkenly potted in its own fermented juices… [where] Thought's own chartered organs congeal something other than reason, the sense of a subject, something that can be remembered and held onto, turned into a proper sentence.
>
> (Fuller 2018, 4).

Rather than simply referring to a stylistic strangeness, therefore, the Surrealists actively challenged the disciplined organisations of attention and meaning demanded by capitalist modernity, turning to ritual and incongruity as a means of opening up alternative experiential realities.

The Surrealists treasured cinema as a ritual space of collective dreaming. Cinema was framed as a sacred space. Breton compared his "way of going to the cinema [to] the way others go to

church," and argued that "it is there that the only *absolutely modern* mystery is celebrated", while Albert Valentin stated that "you would not cross the threshold of a cinema without a feeling close to the one you get going into a church" (Hammond 1978, 74, 95, original emphasis). As Valentin describes, the humbling experience of cinematic spectatorship mimics that of Christian church attendance, as "in both cases someone is counting on a weakness of ours to trick us: in the temple, on the feebleness of our understanding; in the darkened theatre, on a defect in our retina that delights in visual puns and cannot succeed in isolating the succession of forms moving at speed" (95). For Breton, the mystery of cinema was not a stylistic invention, but rather emerged from the apparatus of cinema itself:

> From the instant he takes his seat to the moment he slips into a fiction evolving before his eyes, [the spectator] passes through a critical point as captivating and imperceptible as that uniting waking and sleeping (the book and even the play are incomparably slower in producing this release).
>
> (cited in Hammond 1978, 23)

As Hammond summarised:

> …entering the dark auditorium was like closing your eyes. Your isolation from the crowd, your body submitting to a feeling of depersonalisation; the droning music obdurating the sense of hearing; the stiffness of the neck necessary for the gaze's orientation: all this was like going to sleep.
>
> (Hammond 1978, 23)

This framing of the cinema as a religious space recalls the disciplinary environment of a Catholic cathedral whose Gothic architecture and edifices of authority impose submission on subjects present within it. For the surrealists, cinema provided a space to play with the architectural conventions of authority, to tactically invert its hierarchies and present new ways of relating to the world.

Ritual and inattention converge in the Thai history of animistic film screenings, a practice of conducting film projections as offerings to spirits at local shrines. These screenings often use old equipment and are exhibited in unusual locations such as alleyways or courtyards, with limited regard for seated spectators. Rather than charge for admission, these screenings are paid for by petitioners as a transaction with local spirits in return for supernatural intervention in personal

problems (such as help conceiving a child, assistance with an exam, or winning lottery numbers) (MacDonald 2017, 156). The sponsor of each screening rarely requests specific screenings or even attends in person, rather, these screenings are exhibited primarily *for* spirits, decentring human spectators within its apparatus (MacDonald 2017, 155-158). Rather, Richard Lowell MacDonald observes that the human spectators of these screenings were usually itinerant workers found on the street at night – motorcycle taxi drivers, hawkers, laborers and the homeless – who would only stay for part of the screening (MacDonald 2017, 160). Although not intentionally surreal, the mixture of ritual and inattention within these Thai animistic screenings model alternative structures to the disciplined forms of attention demanded by capitalist modernity and expected by the conventional cinematic apparatus.

These histories and practices intimate the surreal possibilities of sleep cinema and its diversions from the conventional architecture of cinema. As a state of partial or fragmentary attention, sleep cinema undermines the disciplined forms of attention demanded by capitalist modernity, presenting a space of inattentive non-productivity through which we can reorient our sense of the world. Sleep cinema breaks with modern expectations of disciplined attention and leaves space for personal drift between states of consciousness, offering opportunities for reorienting experiences within the space of reimagined cinema.

Spatialising sleep cinema: *SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL* (2018)

Apichatpong's *SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL* emerged as an outworking of his ongoing relationship with the IFFR. The installation was staged over five days in a converted conference space on an upper floor of Rotterdam's Postillon Convention Centre and consisted of a main hall serving as both a cinema and sleeping space, an observation platform overlooking the main hall on a mezzanine level, and a small lounge space situated outside the main hall that served as both a reception area and private bar for overnight guests. Overnight guests ("guests") stayed in a communal sleeping space segmented into individual 'sleeping pods' suspended by a grid of metal scaffolding at varying heights from the floor and separated from one another by mesh screening and semi-transparent privacy curtains. The sleeping pods were rudimentary: each platform contained a bed, side table and lamp, with a single geometric structure comprised of scaffolding that supported the pods at the centre of the room. Overnight sleeping pods cost €75 for a single bed or €150 for a double bed, but members of the public ("visitors") were able to visit the installation for free but only able to access the observation platform on the mezzanine floor. In the main hall, a large window — which was covered at night by thick stage curtains that blocked out external light — looked out onto the

city street a few levels below. A large, double-sided circular screen suspended by wires between the window and the sleeping structure was visible from both inside the installation space and from the street outside.

Video was continuously projected throughout the duration of the installation, with a short break between 2:00pm and 4:00pm each day to reset the space for the next night's guests. In contrast to Apichatpong's usual work (which prior to 2020 was almost exclusively shot in Thailand), the footage for *SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL* was sourced from the Dutch EYE Filmmuseum and the Netherlands Institute of Sound and Vision using archival films of boats, water, clouds, sleeping people and sleeping animals (IFFR 2018). Apichatpong claimed that throughout the installation's five-day run, no piece of footage was repeated such that every moment within the sleep cinema was visually unique (IFFR 2018). This video projection was paired with a looped soundscape of wind, rustling leaves and ocean waves prepared by Akritchalerm Kalayanamitr, reflecting the mood and contents of the found footage on screen. In concert, these sounds and images created a soothing spectatorial environment, and, as there was no evident logic governing the montage on-screen, spectators could fall asleep at any time without missing relevant information.

Without a narrative thread and with no discernible order to the images or soundscape, the sleep cinema decentralised spectatorial attention, marginalising their presence within its apparatus. The built structure of the sleeping pods obstructed spectators' views of the screen from almost every angle, preventing clear access to the screen from most positions within the main hall. Rather than face the same direction, beds were positioned at a 45-degree angle to the screen, further interfering with spectatorial views of the screen. Complimenting this structural obscurity, the walls of the installation space were made from a polished wood that curved as it connected with the double-height roof made from the same finish, resembling the interior inverted hull of a ship. The effect at night, when the screen became the dominant light source in the room, cast distorted reflections across the polished surfaces of the walls and roof that were visible from the beds. Although a small viewing space was set up at the front of the room with bean bags to allow guests to watch the screens directly, the primary form of participant engagement with the screen was from their beds via the indirect light of the reflections.

As the scaffolding intentionally obstructed my view of the screen from my bed, I found myself looking around the space at the other sleepers, listening as they whispered to one another. For visitors on the mezzanine level above, the scaffolding structure partially blocked their view of the screen, directing their attention down towards the metal structure and reclining bodies contained within it. Expanding the layers of observation of *SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL*, the circular screen was

double sided and positioned in front of the window, attracting attention from pedestrians on the street below. These architectural conditions exposed overnight guests from all directions: to the light of the projections, the looks of their fellow guests, the spectatorship of visitors in the upper level, and the attentions of pedestrians on the street.

Three features of Apichatpong's sleep cinema are particularly significant. First, by de-centring the screen within the space and implementing circumstances that allowed spectators to drift in and out of the space, and between states of consciousness and unconsciousness, Apichatpong decentred the spectating subject within his sleep cinema. This open structure and 'drift' contrasted with the conventional organisation of mono-directional spectatorship in Western cinema. Second, the *SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL* was arranged in such a way that guests were repeatedly exposed to other guests and viewers within the installation, producing a state of heightened vulnerability and intimacy between them. Whereas conventional cinema directed attention away from other spectators toward the screen, Apichatpong's sleep cinema encouraged guests to 'spectate' on each other. Finally, by using seemingly arbitrary footage and allowing spectators to make free associations between them, Apichatpong's sleep cinema created a space of epistemic freedom for spectators, surrealistically opening them to new, disordered organisations of meaning in which they freely associated between the imagery, reflections and experiences within the space. Together, Apichatpong's sleep cinema divergences radically reorganised the conventional architecture of cinematic attention and established new forms of spectatorial participation and community.

A cinema without subjects

Upon checking into *SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL*, guests were provided a selection of hotel accoutrements: a towel, single use soaps and shampoos, bottled water, a bar menu, and a *blindfold*. This seemingly innocuous inclusion of a blindfold in the cinema space signalled the sleep cinema's opposition to the conventional structure of cinematic attention and subjectivity, in which spectators are guided to direct their uninterrupted attention towards the screen for the entire duration of the work through architectural features of blackout lighting, monodirectional seating and manageable run times. By giving guests the means to block out light, Apichatpong's *SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL* decentred active, attentive subjects within its apparatus and asked its guests to look away. Apichatpong's *SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL* continued in spite of our inattentions, and actively attempted to disrupt our perceptions of the screen. By relaxing these demands and allowing

spectators to drift between consciousness and unconsciousness, presence and absence, his sleep cinema modelled a structure of cinema in which human subjects were either decentred or absent.

SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL challenged the conventional structure of cinematic attention by removing the attentive subject at its centre. Jean-Luc Nancy argues that "There is no phenomenology of sleep" (2009, 13), insisting that the fall of sleep entails a relinquishment of "attention and intention… [an] unravelling of plans and aims, of expectations and calculations" (Nancy 2009, 13). For Nancy, sleep marked a disappearance of self and subjectivity, the body giving up its status as an active, perceptive being:

> [When] I fall asleep … 'I' no longer exist, or else 'I' 'exist' only in that effacement of my own distinction. In my own eyes, which no longer look at anything, which are turned toward themselves and toward the black spot inside them, 'I' no longer distinguish 'myself.'
>
> (Nancy 2009, 7)

Echoing Nancy, Martin Fuller argued that "The sleeper becomes a null field, a placeholder for a thinking being something that will come back to its senses in due course" (Fuller 2018, 11). For both writers, a sleeping body ceases to be a subject and assumes the status of an object, becoming helpless, imperceptive, inert. This description of a sleeping body as a null field draws immediate comparison with the Buddhist doctrine of *anatta*, or not-self. Just as *anatta* entails "being void of self, or void of having anything as self or as belonging to self" (Buddhadāsa 1994, 27, 43), Nancy's sleep marked a disappearance of self, an absence of subjectivity in which 'I' ceased to be an object of my own concern. This conceptualisation of sleep as absence of subjectivity establishes its connection with emptiness and voidness, prompting us to consider its phenomenal possibilities of state of spectatorial engagement.

Despite all this, however, Nancy idealised sleep as an absolute absence of perception, a uniform state common across all human and non-human existence that ignored the diversity and embodied complexities of real sleep. Nancy stated that "Sleep itself knows only equality, the measure common to all, which allows no differences or disparities. All sleepers fall into the same, identical and uniform sleep" (Nancy 2009, 17). Contrary to this framing, sleep is not a singular, uniform experience but rather a bundle of physiological states and stages through which bodies transition over the course of the night, a mixture of perception and oblivion. Rather than exist as a unified state, eight hours of sleep for a healthy young person is ordinarily divided into periods of varying depths each lasting only a few hours each night and intermittently punctured by **"**fifteen to

twenty episodes of thirty to sixty seconds of wakefulness" (Fuller 2018, 80-81). As Simon Morgan Wortham described, "sleep is not a blanket state of total unconsciousness but, more properly observed puts living creatures into various states of *semi*-consciousness, whereby they in fact remain alert and responsive to some stimuli but not others"—such as the sound of their name, or the abrupt sound of a car engine (Morgan Wortham 2013, 4). Therefore, sleep is better understood as a liminal state of partial perception and semi-consciousness, rather than a state of absolute unconsciousness.

Within Apichatpong's films themselves, Apichatpong typically presents sleep as a state of liminal consciousness as opposed to an absolute absence of perception. Apichatpong himself suffers from insomnia connected with his rare condition of 'exploding head syndrome,' in which his sleep is frequently interrupted by loud bangs that jolt him awake—an experience he incorporated into the plot of *Memoria*. In the opening shot of *Memoria* (2021), Jessica Holland (Tilda Swinton) wakes to the sound of a loud thud somewhere in the distance. She sits up, her body barely distinguishable from her surroundings in the faint evening light cast through her bedroom window. In the following shot, she gets up from her bed and walks through her empty house, the camera panning with her as she passes into her living room in a state of partial consciousness. Over the course of the film, Jessica searches throughout Bogota for the source of the sound, drifting from place to place in an almost-hypnagogic fugue state. Her time in Bogota is riddled with unexplained occurrences from the automatic chain reactions of security alarms in parked cars to the unexplained tendency of lights turning off in rooms she inhabits, reflecting a dream-like illogic in her everyday experiences. Later in the film, Jessica visits a doctor to receive medication for her insomnia, but instead of medicating her tries to convert her to Christianity. For Apichatpong, therefore, sleep is not framed as a total perceptual oblivion or total absence of self, but is rather a state of liminal perception permeably suspended between consciousness and unconsciousness, presence and absence.

For Apichatpong, the absence of disciplined attention is not an issue to be overcome, but a key feature of even his narrative cinema. His comfort with inattention partially explains the non-linearity of his narratives, as their episodic structures allow spectators to disengage and reengage at any point without diminishing the experience. The events of his films are already incongruous and do not make any more sense to spectators who have been paying close attention than those who have just woken up. Instead, each spectator is allowed to "patch things up in their own way." In this way, Apichatpong's sleep cinema not only rejects the assumption of a *continuous* viewing experience, but also that of a *consistent* viewing experience. Whereas conventional narrative cinema reduces spectatorship to a form of mechanical reproduction in which the narrative of each

screening is consistent for every viewer, the discontinuities of sleep cinema mean that each spectator's experience is functionally unique. As each sleeping spectator will miss particular details and invent explanations for others, the experience of sleep cinema is evanescent and non-reproducible.

SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL realises this viewing experience by presenting a work that cannot be viewed in its entirety in one sitting. Echoing Warhol's *Empire*, the 120-hour duration of *SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL* outlasts the viewer's "initial state of perception" (Sitney 2002, 351), preventing any individual spectator from observing a complete or comprehensive text. The installation allowed for both attentive and physical drift, allowing its guests to move freely throughout the space at their own leisure. During my stay, I spent approximately thirty minutes at the start of the night watching the screen directly. Its images were disconnected from one another: underwater seaweed rocking at a gentle pace with the tide, black-and-white footage of a puppy waking up, an alarm clock, a puddle in the Dutch countryside adjacent to a forest, a small church sitting in a field. Accompanied by the atmospheric sounds of flowing water and wind coming from the speakers, I found the ritual experience of watching the screen to be very calming, and found my thoughts drifting to other things: what would I see at the rest of the festival? Where would I travel after my fieldwork? Where would I go for dinner? Like the montage on-screen, my thoughts were disintegrated, drifting from the seemingly arbitrary combination of images on-screen to other thoughts of my own. After thirty minutes, I accepted that no transformation would occur and that its images would not coalesce into something symbolically greater than its parts, and I left my place at the front of the room and went to find a nearby restaurant. After an hour away, I returned to the space and lay on my bed, watching the reflections of the screen on the ceiling, before gradually falling asleep. Rather than attracting my attention, the screen of the sleep cinema repelled it, insisting upon the textual irrelevance of its own contents.

In contrast to conventional cinema's monodirectionality, my experiences in Apichatpong's sleep cinema were defined by a decentred multiplicity. Its abundance of choices reversed the usual focus experienced in a cinema space, challenging me to make uncomfortable decisions about what I perceived and how I moved throughout the installation space. Simultaneously, the continuous procession of visual content reinforced my marginal position within its apparatus, and that my perceptions will only ever be partial and incomplete.

Collective drift

In place of subject-centred linear narrative, sleep cinema prioritises an experience of collective drift, embodied by the shifting lights of *Cemetery of Splendour*. In what is perhaps the film's most visually recognisable scene, the lights surrounding the bodies of the sleeping soldiers slowing change colour, shifting from blue to pink to green. The slow, inexorable rhythm of these lighting changes is matched by the audible rhythm of the ceiling fan cutting through the air above them, which together create a sense of movement despite the stasis of the images themselves. Song Hwee Lim describes drift as a state of "still objects in motion" (Lim 2014, 104), of bodies moving through space without intention or action. As Leo Charney argues, such existence is intrinsic to modern life, a "directionless passivity" that emerges as a reaction to the emptiness of everyday modern existence (Charney 1998, 13). Yet Charney also insists that drift is not merely a means of giving into the malaise of emptiness but rather functions as a means of "appropriating it, manoeuvring within and around it" (9), also operating as a strategy for survival. Building on this, I argue that Apichatpong's sleep cinema facilitates moments of collective drift, pulling spectators along through the shared rhythm of projected light.

The Surrealists valued cinema as a space of spectatorial immersion through which bodies were transported to an alternate state of being—itself a form of drift. As a young man, Breton would visit the cinema without checking what was screening and would drop into film screenings at any point in the show and leave at the first sign of boredom to rush off to another cinema and repeat the process (Hammond 1978, 72-73). For Breton, this itinerant spectatorial experience was 'magnetizing,' a chance operation free of deliberation or judgments in which he and his friends gave into a generative experience of disorientation. We can see obvious correspondences between Breton's restless filmgoing, the itinerant human spectators in Thai animistic cinema and the sleeping spectators of Apichatpong's *SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL*, all of whom occupy decentred positions within the apparatus and drift—both spatially and between states of consciousness. For Breton, cinema – regardless its narrative or formal contents – absorbs spectators into its unfolding, an experience "as captivating and imperceptible as that uniting waking and sleeping" (cited in Hammond 1978, 73-74). Understood on these terms, Surrealistic cinema is not a space for visual representation but a vehicle through which immersed spectatorial bodies are transported to another state of being. Apichatpong's sleep cinema built upon this Surrealist tradition of spectatorial restlessness but extends physical movement in and out of the cinema into viewer consciousness, allowing them to drift in and out on their own terms.

We can understand sleep cinema as a vehicle through which spectators can move to an alternative state of being. Throughout his career, Apichatpong has described cinema as "a vehicle transporting the audience to uncharted territories" (cited in Römers 2005, 44), stating that:

> Sometimes it is just beautiful to look and not think—like when you journey to a foreign land.[11] Sometimes you let your mind drift off, so there are double narratives going on. That's very interesting to me.
> (cited in Römers 2005, 44)

Nancy describes the state of sleep as one of drifting or sinking – as if floating on a body of water – in which "everything has become indistinct … The boat gently leaves its moorings, and drifts" (Nancy 2009, 1). He returns to this nautical metaphor later in his book, writing that "Sleeping together comes down to sharing an inertia, an equal force that maintains the two bodies together, drifting like two narrow boats moving off to the same open sea" (2009, 19). Breton similarly describes the experience of dreaming as one in which you "Let yourself be carried along, events will not tolerate your interference. You are nameless" (Breton 1969, 13). For Apichatpong, Nancy and Breton, therefore, the disappearance of subjectivity under sleep is closely connected to an experience of travel by allowing oneself to be pulled along by a current without active personal intervention.

Apichatpong played into this nautical metaphor in the design of his sleep cinema, which was structurally reminiscent of a ship. The walls of the *SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL* were made from polished wood that curved as it connected with the double-height roof made from the same material, resembling the interior hull of a ship. For Apichatpong, the hull-like interior of the convention space (itself an homage to Rotterdam's history as a port city) was an important feature of its design, which he explained was:

> …because it is a boat [and] you are sleeping with other people in the vehicle. You go through … and that's why this image of the sea and the circle has so many memories and references with each people [sic] but for sure it brings back something about, how you call it, when you look through this telescope, when you see, when you explore a new territory.
>
> (Weerasethakul 2018a)

[11] Apichatpong's wording here is interesting, as he plays into the colonial othering of Thailand as a 'foreign land,' embracing the otherness that external observers often apply to his work.

Together, the hull-like roof, periscopic screen and nautical imagery was reinforced by marketing material connected to the installation, which wrote that "Just like one can never step into the same river twice, any instant in the *SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL* is as unique as it is ephemeral" (IFFR 2018). As a wooden vehicle, *SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL* was structurally reminiscent of the wooden spaceship from his *Primitive* exhibition which he built with his teenage subjects. The *Primitive* spaceship was itself 'primitive', built from wood bent to curve into a roughly spherical shape resembling a boat, which in an artist's statement published on his website, Apichatpong linked to the memory of a ship from Nabua's boat race that capsized due to leaks (Weerasethakul 2009a). In one channel of *Primitive*, Apichatpong shows his subjects sleeping inside the spaceship, their bodies propped against the curved sides of the ship, blanketed in red light. In an unpublished artist's statement for *Primitive*, Apichatpong compared the installation with Georges Méliès' *A Trip to the Moon* (1902), as "*Primitive* is a meditation on those voyages in fabulous vehicles that bring about the transformation of people and of light" (cited in Comer 2009). Framed in this way, the image of a group of people sleeping together in the sheltering hull of a vessel as they travel to a foreign land not only reverberates through Apichatpong's own filmmaking, but also through the very history of cinema itself stretching back to Méliès. The mystery of cinema exists not in its capacity to represent or even realistically reproduce reality through photographic images, but to transport spectators to another state of being.

Apichatpong's sleep cinema shifted focus from narrative representation to collective drift. *SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL* differs from comparable works of extreme durational video installation such as Christian Marclay's *The Clock* (2010), which presents a twenty-four-hour montage of clocks pilfered from film history edited together to present the clock time of the place in which it is exhibited (for example, an on-screen clock will read 11:46 at 11:46pm). Similar to *SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL* and Warhol's *Empire*, *The Clock*'s excessive runtime exceeds the attention spans of its spectators, but unlike *SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL*, presents a play of recognition for attentive spectators that Julie Levinson describes as both "a riveting game of 'name that movie'" for cinephiles and a "gimmick of synchronizing real and reel time" (Levinson 2015, 89). By contrast, *SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL* does not draw spectatorial pleasure from a play of recognition; as found archival footage, its images are devoid of representational or iconic meaning, disconnected from Apichatpong's broader career and symbolically irrelevant to its spectators.

Rather, the representational emptiness of *SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL*'s redirects focus from what is projected on-screen to the very act off projection itself. It is structured such that no-one can have a complete picture, and that each viewing experience is functionally unique. The 120-hour unrepeated, uninterrupted flow of footage meant that no single spectator could watch the entire

work due to the necessity of sleep, even leaving aside the issue of boredom. Consequently, sleep cinema makes a different demand of conventional cinema: rather than request disciplined, uninterrupted attention expected by conventional cinema, spectators are instructed to disengage from the diegetic action on screen and allow themselves to drift, immersed in the flow of projected images.

Sleeping with strangers

Despite its dominant association with private domestic space, therefore, sleep is, in a sense, a fundamentally social state of being. While sleeping, the body exists in its most vulnerable state, losing the capacity to pay active attention to its surroundings and thereby protect itself from harm. Martin Fuller writes:

> Sleep, as with love, makes one vulnerable. This is one of its pleasures. But it is also one of the reasons that social forms arrange themselves around sleep, with those who are willing to share their somnolence, and sleep together having at least a certain trust in the cohort of others around them.
>
> (Fuller 2018, 73)

Given this vulnerability, Nancy also understands sleep as a site of privileged interpersonal intimacy, stating that "Sleeping together opens up nothing less than the possibility of penetrating into the most intimate part of the other, namely, precisely into his or her sleep" (Nancy 2009, 18). When we consider the representation of sleep in Apichatpong's narrative cinema, sleep is framed as a moment of intimate social contact between people. He frequently depicts groups of people sleeping together – from the young men of *Primitive* to the sleeping soldiers of *Cemetery of Splendour* – under ceiling fans or bodies of water, with sleep treated as a reasonable response to the tropical heat. In *Uncle Boonmee*, Apichatpong includes a shot of Jenjira sleeping under a canopy by a window where she is watched over by Huay, the ghost of Boonmee's wife. This composition is duplicated in *Cemetery of Splendour*, in which Jenjira spends much of the film sitting by Itt's bedside caring for him. In both shots, the sleeping body is treated as an object of care by the observer, representing a moment of privileged spectatorial intimacy. While discussing his video installation *TEEM* at Rotterdam, he described the experience as one of "Love and at the same time trust as well, because when you sleep you have no protection, and that's why we sleep in caves, in something small, so for him to allow me to record is a sign of trust" (Weerasethakul

2018a). In his short film *Blue* (2018), Apichatpong shoots Jenjira sleeping under a thick blue blanket in an abandoned courtyard at night, with footage of an open flame double exposed over her sleeping body. As in *TEEM*, the sleeping body is placed in a position of vulnerability, creating a high level of spectatorial intimacy between her body and the spectator.

To this end, *SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL* was designed to maximise the vulnerability of its guests by placing them in constant visual contact with each other and with other spectators. Rather than making efforts to maximise visitor privacy, Apichatpong echoes Breton in removing the doors from each guest's hotel room and leaving them to wake up surrounded by companions that they did not choose. The question then becomes why he would create a space of communal vulnerability through exposure, and what he intended to achieve through that shared vulnerability. Although each platform housed a self-contained sleeping pod, the interlocking grid of scaffolding formed a single structure, such that guests could feel the reverberated movements of people in other pods. Similarly, the privacy curtains of each pod only covered the sides of each pod, thereby partially exposing their sleeping space to the view of visitors on the mezzanine level. Not only was it possible for visitors to look into the sleeping spaces of the guests but they were actively encouraged to do so through the scaffolding's partial obscuring of the screen. In these ways, sleepers were exposed from multiple directions—to the light of the projections, the looks of their fellow guests, the spectatorship of visitors on the mezzanine, and to the attentions of pedestrians on the street, who could see the projector screen through a large window that opened onto the street outside. Rather than being a private, enclosed experience, Apichatpong's *SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL* was built to be a public experience, blurring the division between *viewing subject* and *viewed object* for its guests.

Apichatpong's sleep cinema is intimately social, differentiating it from private forms of ambient consumption. The ritual atmosphere of the space was maintained by the collective actions its guests and would therefore be unreproducible in a private viewing space isolated from other spectators. The structure of *SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL* turned spectatorial attention from the screen to the presence of others sharing the space, constantly reminding its guests of the existence of others through their visual exposure to one another and by cohabitating a single architectural structure. This social experience establishes sleep cinema *as* cinema, and therefore fundamentally different from other forms of private inattentive spectatorship.

Dreaming of freedom

I conclude the analysis of this chapter (and with it, the analysis of this thesis) with an exploration of sleep cinema's political potential as a space for dreaming alternative realities. In public statements about his work, Apichatpong rarely differentiates between sleep and dreaming, but views the two states as mutually constitutive. His filmmaking is frequently described as formally 'dream-like', prioritising juxtapositions and incongruous events over clear lines of narrative causality and meaning. In 2005, Apichatpong described the importance of dream imagery in his work, associating his films with "Dreams. Floating. I like free forms," before stating that "Images flashing by have more weight than a coherent narrative" (Römers 2005, 44). Apichatpong understands dreaming and cinema as ontologically continuous, as part of the same overarching process. As he describes, "We don't need other cinema … when we sleep it's our own image, our experience that we edit at night and process" (Weerasethakul 2018a). For Apichatpong, therefore, we can understand cinema's relation to sleep and dreaming. Sleep entails dreaming, cinema allows oneself to dream while still awake, and by allowing us this space to dream – and thereby transport ourselves to alternative realities – cinema has the potential to be politically emancipatory.

As I have discussed, dreams were of major interest to the Surrealists, who saw them as vehicles of chance and illogic through which to challenge the restrictive structures of modern existence. Breton once defined the Surrealist movement as "the prehensile tail" of Romanticism, rejecting Enlightenment rationalism that they believed alienated them from the world (Hammond 1978, 1-2). Spurred by the violence of the Great War and absurdity of modernity, the Surrealists followed the Romantics in privileging poetic imagination as a method of authentic understanding and existence in the world. Richardson writes:

> What the dream offered the surrealists more than anything was an experience of otherness. For them the unconscious did not simply contain the detritus of everyday life, nor was it principally the realm of repressed memory. … Dream was also – and perhaps principally – an arena of unknown experience, one that was contained within the individual, but was also projected onto the collective.
>
> (Richardson 2006, 9)

Although the Surrealists celebrated Freud for redeeming dreams as serious objects of inquiry, they fundamentally differed in how they addressed them. Whereas Freud attempted to *demystify* and interpret them as objects of scientific inquiry, the Surrealists cherished them for their very obscurity and inexplicability, and therefore attempted to *remystify* them (Lowenstein 2014, 3). Breton refused

to reduce dreaming to rational interpretation, or as he described, "to reduce imagination to a state of slavery," on the grounds that "Imagination alone offers me some intimation of what *can be*…" (Breton 1969, 5, original emphasis). For Breton, the fall of sleep offered an opportunity for surrender "in order to stop imposing… conscious rhythm [on his] thought" (12). As experiences that resisted rationalisation, they served as vehicles for imaginative resistance against the rationalising impulses of modernity. Understood on these terms, dreams offered emancipatory spaces of liberated imagination, spaces in which conventions no longer applied and subjects were able to more freely engage with repressed or concealed expressions and experiences.

Although Apichatpong's life and practice in twenty-first century Thailand seem divorced from the streets of Post-War Paris, we can see echoes of Surrealism in his anxieties over the excesses of Thai authoritarianism, his nostalgia for premodern forms of existence in the border zones of the Isaan jungle, and his general disinterest in rational narrative in favour of the ineffable. As I discuss in chapter four, the governing regime of Thailand heavily regulates public expression, and the state's application of these powers has intensified since the junta led by General Prayut Chan-ocha came to power in a coup d'état in 2014. Under this regime of suffocating political repression, Apichatpong has sought creative means of imagining political alternatives to military rule that reduce risk to himself and his artistic collaborators. For Apichatpong, therefore, dreaming evades censorship as it is a profoundly personal form of expression that resists regulation. Due to the floating, dream-like 'free forms' his filmmaking cannot be stabilised into structures of national meaning.

This raises the question of how *SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL* – a project conspicuously devoid of political representation – can be regarded as politically resistive. On one level, *SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL* itself serves as a space of emancipation for Apichatpong himself. Staged only four years after the 2014 coup d'état, the offer to produce a project in a liberal European country allowed Apichatpong the opportunity to express himself artistically despite political pressures at home (one of many international projects he has taken since 2014). In this way, Rotterdam is itself an alternate reality, an alternate landscape fundamentally dissimilar to the jungles, borders zones and small towns of his home country in Isaan. Despite the seemingly apolitical nature of the sleep cinema's disconnected montage, its political engagement operates on two levels: first, as an illogical sequence of 'free form' images that resist standardisation, and second as an escape from the restrictive structures at home. By refusing to impose "conscious rhythm" on his creative practice, and instead leaning into chance and illogic, Apichatpong echoes the Surrealists in using cinema as a vehicle to challenge conventional forms of thought and imagine alternative ways of being in the world.

Yet we can conclude the politics of Apichatpong's sleep cinema by returning to its three primary functions: inattention, collectivity and intimacy. First, as a form of inattentive spectatorship that prioritises the 'free forms' of dreams over stable representational content, Apichatpong's sleep cinema is incompatible with national forms of understanding as it dwells in a space of epistemic instability. As such, rather than make a direct political statement on the political state of Thailand, the radical passivity of Apichatpong's sleep cinema reflects a disengagement from national discourse itself and a refusal to participate in its discourses. Second, by prioritising collective experience over privacy, his sleep cinema rejects solipsistic spectatorship and instead redirects attention to the coexistence of others sharing the space. This structure renders the sleep cinema intrinsically cinematic, rejecting other forms of private viewing. Finally, by creating a space of shared vulnerability, the sleep cinema allows space for intimate contact between strangers, thereby foregrounding ethical encounters between them. This is not to argue that *SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL* fully embodies the political potentials of sleep cinema; to the contrary, I argue that as a prototype it is an incomplete embodiment of this ideal, indicating without resolving its political potential. As such, rather than restrict sleep cinema to the temporary installation space of *SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL,* I argue that its principles can and should be applied to Apichatpong's broader cinema and guide our expectations of spectatorship contained therein.

Sleeping together

Apichatpong's sleep cinema departs from conventional narrative cinema by inverting dominant hierarchies of attention and textual understanding, emphasising incompletion and drift. Rather than demanding an attentive and continuous spectator, sleep cinema assumes discontinuous attention, dismantling concepts of whole or complete texts and subtracting the stable of a subject-spectator from its cinematic apparatus. Beyond its focus on inattention, sleep cinema also provides means of collective experience and intimacy, sharing the vulnerability of sleep in a public space and entering into new forms of communality with other spectators. Through these radical revisions of conventional cinema, Apichatpong proposes an alternative form of spectatorship in which communality, vulnerability and intimacy are prioritised and cinematic experience is understood as something unique and unreproducible. As a vehicle of collective drift, sleep cinema provides a means of unstructured, imaginative political escape, "some indication," echoing Breton, "of what *can be*" (1969, 5).

As Apichatpong's most ambitious and unconventional project, *SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL* provides an excellent opportunity to reflect on his distinctive art of looking. To echo Paul

Hammond's description of Surrealistic cinema, Apichatpong's filmmaking practice is "a marginal, utopian enterprise, at once scandalous and prefigurative, ludic and lucid" (Hammond 1978, 4), characterised more by its gaps, transitions and non-conformities than its strict obedience to the technical expectations of the medium. Just as the Surrealists were committed to using cinema in unexpected or unintended ways, Apichatpong's sleep cinema reflects an attempt to use cinema in a wholly original way, to invert the conventional structures of attention and instead create an experience that is simultaneously *intimately personal* (such that no two spectatorial experiences are the same) and *inherently communal* (as the bodies of his guests are constantly exposed to the attentions of others).

Consequently, sleep cinema addresses many of the underlying themes that have emerged across my analysis of Apichatpong's work as a whole. First, it demonstrates Apichatpong's continued anxieties about the state of modern existence – particularly as it relates to the regulation of human attention and the consolidation of meaning into systems of national understanding – which it resists by creating a space of concentrated inattention and leaving each spectatorial experience as partial and non-reproducible. Second, sleep cinema expands upon Apichatpong's interest in human intimacy, but extends this intimacy into the structure of spectatorship itself. Rather than watch diegetic intimacy on-screen, spectator bodies are incorporated into the work itself, leaving guests momentarily to enter into intimate relations with other spectators in the space. Third, instead of functioning as a space of static consumption, Apichatpong understands cinema as a vehicle of collective experience, through which spectators can drift (or stray) into other territories and ways of being, reflecting Apichatpong's broader interest in travel and transformation. Finally, sleep cinema shows Apichatpong's unorthodox understanding of cinematic ontology, collapsing the distinction between human dreaming and the film itself. In these regards, the success of his prototype *SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL* is not in its full material embodiment of its possibilities as, like all utopian enterprises, it cannot fully realise its own ideals. Rather, by speaking to the broader themes of his practice, *SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL* allows us to further conceptualise Apichatpong's art of looking, and to consider the implications of its reimagining of conventional cinema.

Conclusion

Cinematic Emptiness

Throughout this thesis, I have conceptualised cinematic emptiness as a multivalent concept encompassing film form, signification and spectatorship. Rather than reduce emptiness to a simple absence of audio-visual content, I have understood emptiness as a voidness of individuation and concretised meaning within moments of presence that facilitates spectatorial contemplation of the world. Whereas industrially dominant modes of narrative film production privilege action, spectacle, and direct representational meaning – excising as 'dead time' all that which does not abide by intensified logics of narrative utility – Apichatpong's filmmaking practice prioritises moments of cinematic emptiness, treasuring moments in which nothing seems to happen while concentrating on the ephemeral, contingent and intimate details of living in the world. Cinematic emptiness manifests across Apichatpong's filmmaking in multiple forms and scales, operating formally through compositional stillness, auditory silence and extended duration, discursively through his engagement with silenced histories and political critiques, and spectatorially through the facilitation of spectatorial contemplation, boredom and sleep in ways that decentre spectatorial comprehension and reorient their attentions towards the ephemeral, contingent and non-human. Through these manifestations of cinematic emptiness, Apichatpong strayed from the conventional patterns and structures of narrative cinema to instead foreground contemplative moments that facilitate reorienting experiences of the world. In conjunction, the stylistic, experiential and discursive dimensions of Apichatpong's reoriented art of looking clear space for the emancipatory imagination of and participation within alternative ways of being-in-the-world.

Thesis questions and overview

This thesis was organised around three overarching questions: first, how does cinematic emptiness manifest within Apichatpong's creative practice? Second, how is Apichatpong's creative practice situated within broader histories of cinematic emptiness, and how does it develop, challenge, or build upon these histories? Third, what are the broader implications of cinematic emptiness, and what sorts of experiences and critiques are made possible through these empty moments? Through these questions, I have investigated the varied formations of emptiness in Apichatpong's cinema, expanded the critical vocabulary through which to understand them, and advocated for the value of cinematic emptiness in opposition to intensified logics of narrative progress and signification.

In chapter one, I explored the body of existing research on philosophical emptiness and examined its conceptual applications in cinema. Drawing from Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu's Theravada Buddhist understanding of *suññatā* (voidness), I approached emptiness as a concept encompassing impermanence, and interconnectedness and the emptiness of self (*anatta*). Through this, I separated emptiness from absence, challenging its conventional framing as a negative concept associated with lack and insufficiency to instead understand it as a generative state through which we can reorient our understanding of the world. Instead of understanding emptiness as an absence of presence, I argued that it was better understood as a state of presence-for-itself, a moment that treasured itself without being obscured by the demands of continuity and signification. Following Buddhadāsa and Martin Heidegger, I argued that emptiness could not be reduced to a single, positive object of enquiry (Heidegger 2008a, 97), but nevertheless insisted that the contemplation of emptiness is a generative experience that has the reorienting effect of challenging conventional ways of being in and experiencing the world.

From there, I explored the history of cinematic emptiness, tracing connections between John Cage's silent composition *4'33"* (1953), the blank screen of Nam June Paik's *Zen for Film* (1964), the history of monochromatic painting, the static compositions of Andy Warhol, the durational aesthetics of Béla Tarr and Tsai Ming-liang, and the sensuous temporalities of Andrei Tarkovsky. This historiography primarily built upon histories and aesthetic traditions established by recent studies in slow cinema (Flanagan 2012, Lim 2014, Koepnick 2014, de Luca and Jorge 2015, Schrader 2018), which work traces the expansive lineage of slow cinema dating back to Robert Bresson, Yasujirō Ozu and Gilles Deleuze's history of post-war art cinema found in *Cinema II: The Time Image* (1989). My work expanded upon these histories in two key areas. First, by way of Jonathan Crary (1990, 2001) and Mary Ann Doane (2002), I shifted the origins of slow cinema from post-war art cinema to the origins of cinema itself, entangling discourses of slowness with the industrialisation of human perception and the increasing rationalisation of human experiences of

time under modernity. By reorienting my historiography in this way, I relocated the intervention of slow cinema away from existing slow cinema scholarship's focus on the "intensified continuity" style of the 1990s (Bordwell 2002) to the very origins of modern perception. As I trace across the body of my thesis, much of Apichatpong's work tacitly critiques the conditions of Western modernity, seeking alternative logics and temporalities that challenge the rhythms and expectations of modern life. Second, existing slow cinema discourses have placed disproportionate emphasis on duration (particularly visual duration measured in average shot length (ASL)), at the expense of other dimensions of film form. Through my analysis, I challenged this prioritisation of the visual, looking for spaces of cinematic emptiness within Apichatpong's sound design, performance, visual editing and narrative structure. Through these interventions, I sought to broaden the horizons of slow cinema discourse to better engage with the diverse implications of cinematic emptiness, and to facilitate later discussions on its impacts and interventions.

In chapter two, I presented a linear history of Apichatpong's life, creative influences and the evolution of his practice over time. Many discourses surrounding Apichatpong and his work have described him as a 'Thai director' in an attempt to justify his atypical divergences from conventional film practice by situating him within an orientalised fantasy of cultural difference. Although the specific cultural, creative and political conditions of Thailand are crucial to his work, this reduction of his influences to his ethno-linguistic context misinterpreted the diversity of his influences—a reality increasingly felt in his recent shift towards international production. I organised Apichatpong's biography around four key locations in his life – Khon Kaen, Chicago, Cannes and Columbia – and explored how each of these sites informed the gradual transformation of his practice. Situated in the north-eastern Thai province of Isaan, Khon Kaen stands in for Apichatpong's cultural origins and local influences, contextualising his later interest in Thailand's traumatic history and providing a rich history of local Thai cinema from which his later work draws heavily. Isaan and memories of his early life feature prominently in many of his later works, with much of his practice centred on the remediation of memories and cultural traumas experienced in and around the regional hospitals of his childhood. Despite Khon Kaen's importance, Apichatpong's formal art education took place in the United States, situating his practice within the aesthetic traditions and working practices of Surrealism, European art cinema and the post-war American avant-garde. This training in western art traditions provided a diverse vocabulary of artistic influences from Andy Warhol to Tsai Ming-liang, whose anti-classical practices heavily influenced his later work and contributed to his highly individualised approach to creative production. Following the international success of *Blissfully Yours* at the Cannes Film Festival in 2002, Apichatpong's creative practice was increasingly facilitated by the highly internationalised

capital of the international art scene and film festival circuit, providing extraordinary levels of artistic independence from local film financing and censorship conditions. However, these newfound artistic freedoms brought him into increasing conflict with local government censors and Thai film studios, complicating the distribution of his idiosyncratic films at home. Following the coup d'état in 2014, large-scale film production in Thailand became increasingly challenging for Apichatpong, forcing him into a form of creative exile from the country in which he had shot all of his feature films up to that point. Due to these challenges, Apichatpong elected to shoot *Memoria* in Columbia, marking the beginning of a 'post-Thailand' period in his filmmaking practice. Through the complexity of these influences and factors, serious investigation of Apichatpong's work demands interdisciplinary analysis of his work, situating his practice within a dynamic and internationalised set of creative influences.

Having contextualised my investigation of cinematic emptiness and Apichatpong's creative practice in chapters one and two, the next six chapters each analysed a different dimension of cinematic emptiness in his filmmaking. In chapter three, I explored the politics and aesthetics of silence in Apichatpong's cinema, shifting from the dominant understanding of silence as an absence of sound to instead understand it as the multiplicity of unrecognised sounds always and already in the world. As John Cage argued:

> There is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make a silence, we cannot.
>
> (Cage 1973, 8)

For Cage, the experience of silence drew us towards elements of the world that were ordinarily excluded from our perceptions. Cage saw an ecological dimension in this pursuit of silence, arguing that this newfound sensitivity to the ordinarily obscured parts of the world "leads to the world of nature, where, gradually or suddenly, one sees that humanity, and nature, not separate, are in this world together" (Cage 1973, 8). Understood on these terms, there is a dual emptiness to silence: on one hand, it refers to an absence of formal sound, while on the other it gestures towards the impermanence and interconnectedness of beings in the world.

In my exploration of Apichatpong's silences, I connected Cage's theorisation with Thongchai Winichakul's exploration of silence and unforgetting in Thai history and political discourse. Echoing Cage, Thongchai posited that:

> Silence is usually the result of the conscious effort to suppress memory, either by power or authority (being silenced) or voluntarily (being silent). Silence, however, is also a symptom of obedience to authority, especially in an authoritarian society such as Thailand.
>
> (Winichakul 2020, 17-18)

Apichatpong's silences therefore functioned on multiple levels. Silence at once operated as formal audio-visual silences (blank screens and absences of speech), through references to historical silent genres (as in *The Adventure of Iron Pussy* (2003)), and as gestures towards repressed histories and national traumas that have been silenced within dominant discourse (*Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2011)). Apichatpong's work constantly negotiated with the emptiness of silence, engaging with its ecological possibilities while also trying to unsilence discourses that have otherwise been suppressed. Yet amongst this, silence also served as a means of political survival – 'a proposal for camouflage' – within the politically contentious conditions of contemporary Thailand, a mark of refusal to participate within dominant discourse and to instead linger in the subaltern, unrecognised register of conventionally demarcated silence. Rather than simply being a site of audio-visual absence, therefore, silence allowed for the contemplation of the non-human world and of silenced histories, reorienting our understandings of the world and its histories.

In chapter four, I analysed the recurrence of empty shots in Apichatpong's filmmaking, which I situated within the historical tradition of 'pillow editing.' Inspired by the 'pillow word' of classical Japanese poetry, the term 'pillow shot' is a western construct coined by Noel Burch (1979) to understand Yasujirō Ozu's unusual yet systematic use of discontinuous shots of empty spaces and unattended objects as visual rests between sequences of narrative action (expressed through the aesthetic concept of *ma*). By settling on objects and spaces devoid of human presence, pillow shots created moments of emptiness between sequences of action, allowing for greater moments of spectatorial contemplation. Pillow shots recurred throughout Apichatpong's filmmaking but were deployed in an increasingly systematic fashion as his career progressed and he became more assured in his own visual style. Despite its shifting place in his work, however, Apichatpong's pillow editing gestured towards the existence of objects, lives and spaces beyond the immediate projects of his characters, sensitising spectators to things in the world (*mono no aware*). Much like Cagean silence, pillow editing gestured towards impermanence and interconnectedness of human and non-human beings in the world, collapsing socially demarcated distinctions while facilitating contact with the immanent conditions of human existence.

Ghosts and spectres are among the most prominent tropes within Apichatpong's cinema and recurred at almost every level of his practice. In chapter five, I explored their status within his art of looking in relation to the site of the empty house—another key (yet under-examined) motif within his filmmaking. Ghosts manifest on multiple registers across his cinema: as remnants of pre-modern animistic traditions, as the resurgence of silenced traumatic memories resurfacing in the present, and as traces of the past registered through photography. Amongst this, ghosts are entangled with the place of the home imagined as an orienting centre of human life and belonging (Bachelard 1994, Blunt and Dowling 2006, Heidegger 2008a). Haunting reflects a failure in this home-making, an incapacity to settle down and comfortably dwell in the present alongside memories of the past and investments in capitalist futurity (Derrida 1994). Like photographs, Apichatpong's ghosts are never wholly present nor entirely absent, but exist in an uncanny (*unheimlich*) suspension between these states, unable to fully move on. Ghosts are therefore intimately entangled with Apichatpong's understanding of time and memory, reflected in his recollection of childhood memories (*0116643225059* (1994) and *My Mother's Garden* (2007)), his meditations on traumatic histories and economic failure (*A Letter to Uncle Boonmee* (2009c) and *Constellations* (2018)), and his meditations on double exposure and photographic memory (*Morakot (Emerald)* (2007), *Video Diary*: *One Water* (2013) and *Ashes* (2012). In these ways, Apichatpong's ghosts reflect the destabilising influence of emptiness, the failure to fully reckon with absence and the struggle to reconcile himself with the persistent feeling of alienation and homesickness.

These themes of alienation and homelessness were developed further in chapter six, where I explored the status of strays in Apichatpong's work. Like ghosts, strays recurred across his films, reflected in his treatment of animals, queer characters, and migrants. Barbara Creed described the stray as "an outsider, the other, an exile – the one who lives apart from the mainstream," applying the concept to both humans and animals who "…have drifted from their normal path, separated themselves from their kin, or been banished, rejected or abjected from their society because of their nature, situation, status or species" (Creed 2017, 7-8). Straying reflects a tactical relationship with time and space focussing on the immediate exigencies of survival and the conditions of present existence. Like queer temporality (Halberstam 2005, Ahmed 2008, Schoonover 2012), straying serves as a means of navigating the world when conventional orientations give way to uncertainty, pushing strays to find new "novel *ways of using* the constraining order of the place or of the language" (de Certeau 1984, 30, original emphasis). Straying manifests in Apichatpong's cinema as a strategy for film production that is open to improvisation and cultural immersion, as a languishing temporality opposed to goal orientations, and as a form of emergent intimacy between

human and non-human animals sharing in the state of alterity and uncertainty. Straying models a practice of navigating the unsettlement of emptiness and the deterritorialised conditions of modern existence.

Building on these discussions of time and the ethical dimensions of straying, chapter seven explored Apichatpong's experimentations with duration and boredom. Through Heidegger, I challenged boredom's conventional definition as a negative state and instead considered how it draws out time to become conspicuous so that "we stand with respect to time" and develop "a feeling of time" (Heidegger 1995, 80). This understanding of boredom challenged entertainment cinema's conventional passing (or even *killing*) of time, instead proposing new and reorienting uses for cinematic duration. In this chapter, I traced Apichatpong's exploitation of boredom to the influence of Warhol's durational film style and explored how their practices challenged conventional organisations of time and reoriented perceptual experiences of other bodies and of the world. I investigated how Apichatpong creates moments of architectural temporality in the tradition of Warhol's *Empire* (1964), and posited that this focus on non-human time facilitated both spectatorial contemplation and a sensitivity to geological time and the non-human world (Bruno 2004). Like his use of pillow shots, the architectural temporalities of Apichatpong's films – his empty hotel rooms and protracted non-human long takes – challenge anthropocentric understandings of the world, sensitising spectators to the rhythms of the non-human world. At the same time, he used duration as a means of framing human bodies and creating moments of intimate interpersonal encounter between spectators and bodies on-screen, generating experiences of intimate boredom sensitised to temporalities outside of the individual's control. In these ways, the experience of empty time serves as a space for intimate, contemplative encounter with alterity, forcing spectators into temporal confrontations with lives outside of their control.

Chapter eight addressed Apichatpong's fascination with sleep and its relationship with cinema. Sleeping bodies recur throughout his filmmaking despite their conventional absence in classical narrative cinema, appearing in many of this feature films, short films and installations. Parallel to this, he has frequently described his comfort with spectators sleeping through his films, understanding the processes of dreaming and spectatorship as ontologically indistinguishable from one another. For André Breton, sleep and cinema were both emancipatory spaces freed from the creative constraints of conventional reality. For the Surrealists, dreaming offered an experience of otherness, "an arena of unknown experience, one that was contained within the individual, but was also projected onto the collective" (Richardson 2006, 9). Sleep – like cinema – offered a state of heightened interpersonal intimacy and shared vulnerability, facilitating moments of intimate contact between bodies (Fuller 2018, 73). Yet even more deeply, sleep is a relinquishment of

individuated subjectivity, a moment in which 'I' no longer exist and assume the status of something closer to an object (Nancy 2009, 7). In this way, sleep approximates the emptiness of not-self (*anatta*), corresponding to a state of "being void of self, or void of having anything as self or as belonging to self" (Buddhadāsa 1994, 27, 43). These issues converged in Apichatpong's experimental *SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL* (2018) staged at the International Film Festival Rotterdam, in which Apichatpong challenged the conventionally monodirectional apparatus of narrative cinema to instead create a space of shared interpersonal intimacy in which spectators collectively sleep through a non-repeating 120-hour film. Within this reimagined cinematic apparatus, the disciplined organisation of cinematic vision (Crary 1990, 2001) gives way to an unstructured experience of collective intimacy, serving as a surrealistic reimagining of the 'expanding horizon' of cinema.

Across these chapters, several threads emerged in relation to Apichatpong's creative practice and negotiation with cinematic emptiness. His work is grounded on a deeply ecological understanding of the world informed by Buddhist philosophical traditions in which human beings are impermanent and intimately interconnected with the totality of the world. Rather than present his human characters as distinct or unique, Apichatpong places great emphasis on non-human animals, objects, and places, situating all of these things in ontological continuum with one another. Echoing the reincarnational logic that underpins many of his narratives, human beings are not imagined as separate or special, but are rather inextricably part of the world. This speaks to the ethical dimension of his filmmaking, which concerns itself with the lives of marginalised entities, human or otherwise.

Second, Apichatpong diverges substantially from the conventional structures of film form and spectatorship, treasuring rather than excising material that does not conform to ordinary logics of utility. Whether through his interest in silence, empty spaces, unattended objects, compositional stillness or incongruous narrative diversions, his stylistic decisions often challenge or divert rational expectations, offering an experience that resists straightforward understanding. In this way, Apichatpong does not direct his work towards linear comprehension but rather towards a non-linear, contemplative sensitivity to the world, "to observe our surroundings, emotions, actions, time, impermanence" (Weerasethakul 2020).

Finally, there is a consistently resistive dimension to his filmmaking, challenging dominant hierarchies and proposing new ways of being-in-the-world. Whether through his engagement with silenced histories, repressed traumas or his challenging of conventional organisations of human perception and attention, he is consistently non-conformist, resisting attempts to organise or

rationalise his ideas in coherent fashions. In this way, the cinematic emptiness of Apichatpong's work is a revolt against convention—in whatever form it takes.

Thesis findings

In this thesis, I have demonstrated a filmmaker-oriented approach that seeks to position the filmmaker not as an inert or passive agent useful only for exploring secondary theories, but as a source of knowledge (theory) in himself. This represents a methodological intervention in the field. The act of filmmaking is already a theorisation of the world, a way of organising its contents to produce new meanings and reflect upon what it means to be in the world. As an intimately modern art practice, filmmaking has the capacity to illuminate otherwise obscured elements of the world, playing with our experience of time and the arrangements of objects for us to experience. Throughout this thesis, I have avoided subjugating Apichatpong's work to an overarching theoretical framework, leaving the work itself – in all of its breadth and inconsistencies – as a source of immanent theory through which we can interpret it.

Consistent with this filmmaker-oriented approach, I have established a study of the interrelationships between Apichatpong's film practice, style, politics and ethics. As the first single-author systematic study of Apichatpong's work encompassing his feature films, short films, installations and published discussions of his own work, my thesis presented the most comprehensive account of his 'art of looking' and its influence on his idiosyncratic film practice. Although Apichatpong has not articulated a systematic approach to film practice, his work is guided by a personalised film philosophy that incorporates elements of American experimental filmmaking, international auteur cinema, Theravada Buddhism along with Thai politics, culture and film history. Throughout this thesis, I have examined the 'connective tissue' between Apichatpong's work and these conceptual influences and expanded upon their politics and spectatorial effects.

My analysis and method demonstrate that we should reappraise the value of empty moments in cinema as stylistically, politically and experientially vibrant, and that these moments can serve as grounds for new forms of spectatorial sensitivity and political resistance. These moments are not simply 'dead time' to be excised or avoided. Rather, the unstructured, open time embodied by Apichatpong's cinema prompts us to reconsider the temporal affordances of cinema to both structure and challenge our conventional experience of the world. Silence does not demand sound, but rather invites active practices of listening in order to sensitise us to the ordinarily obscured elements of everyday existence. In contrast to financialised logics of productivity, sleep – even

sleep in a movie theatre – can serve as a vital space for interpersonal intimacy and unstructured imagination. The empty spaces of Apichatpong's cinema do not provide clear routes of narrative meaning, but rather provide space to stray, for our attentions to drift and contemplate other elements of ourselves and of the world. Although these values are distinct from those ordinarily attributed to cinema, they all remain intimately cinematic, bound up with Apichatpong's art of looking at the world.

An Apichatpongian cinema

The best way to trace the implications of this thesis and further avenues for research is to examine the implications and futures of Apichatpong's own influence. Christopher Makato Yogi's *I Was a Simple Man* (2021) follows an old man (Steve Iwamoto) as he nears the end of his life on the Hawaiian island of O'ahu and is visited by the ghost of his ghost of wife, Grace (Constance Wu). Stricken by incurable cancer, his frail body resembles his ramshackle house on the fringe of the tropical forest, a stark contrast to his youthful, idealised memory of his former wife. As his illness degenerates, so to do the boundaries between material and spiritual worlds, artificial and natural, past and present, as his home is overrun by creeping vines and stray spirits from his almost-forgotten past. The narrative similarities between *I Was a Simple Man* and *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* are obvious, as both films centre on a dying man's attempts to reckon with memories of his past, yet Makato Yogi's film also draws substantial stylistic influence from Apichatpong. Although *I Was a Simple Man* cuts more rapidly than Apichatpong's typical editing and makes more extensive use of close up framing and handheld camera, the film still communicates a similar sense of slow, sensuous temporality directly inspired by Apichatpong's creative practice. Crucially, Makato Yogi shifts Apichatpong's story of repressed traumatic memory from Isaan to Hawai'i, where ongoing processes of colonisation continue to erase the kanaka maoli land, memory and history. Apichatpong's art of looking models a means of mediating this grief without fully resolving it, of finding pleasure within moments of sensuous empty time detached from logics of capitalist progress.

In David Lowery's *A Ghost Story* (2017), somewhere in Texas, a younger man (Casey Affleck) dies in a car crash after an argument with his wife, then wakes up in a hospital morgue wrapped in a plain white sheet. Now a ghost invisible to everyone from his former life, he returns to his old home and silently watches as his grieving wife eats an entire chocolate pie—presented on-screen over in an uninterrupted four-minute take. The ghost's experience of time begins to unwind. He watches on as years pass and his former wife begins to move on from her grief, leaving

the house to a string of new inhabitants passing through the increasingly derelict house until it is knocked to the ground and replaced by an artificial high-rise city somewhere in the far future. The ghost's cosmic experience of time folds back on itself, returning to the origins of the house and his troubled final moments with his wife, reliving his past life as a silent, helpless observer. As for Makato Yogi, Apichatpong offers Lowery an alternative cinematic logic to Hollywood continuity editing, detaching action from logics of narrative progress and economy. Instead, Lowery's film lingers within moments of extended empty time as if to reflect the fallow emptiness of its decaying home. On a deeper level, Apichatpong's minimalist film style also facilitated the film's small-scale production, reducing the need for large crews to instead facilitate a small, intimate filming experience.

In Ernesto Contreras' *Sueño en otro idioma* (*I Dream in Another Language,* 2017), a linguist Martín (Fernando Álvarez Rebeil) travels from Mexico City to a remote community to preserve the last remnants of Zikril, a fictional Indigenous language that gives its speaker the power to speak with animals, but which only has three surviving speakers. When the third speaker dies unexpectedly, Martín depends upon a conversation by two elderly men – Isauro (José Manuel Poncelis) and Evaristo (Eligio Meléndez) – who have not spoken to each other for fifty years, gradually unearthing a troubled queer love story between the two men that has remained repressed for that time. As memories of their past intimacy resurface, their relationships with each other and with the natural world are drawn closer, eventually fusing at the moments of their death. Like *Tropical Malady*, *I Dream in Another Language* is governed by a sense of queer liminality, complicating distinctions between human and animal, past and present, meaning and sense.

By tracing Apichatpong's influence in the work of others, we can begin to see the implications of my research and the avenues for further study by tracing its application and developments within broader art cinema. *I Was a Simple Man*, *A Ghost Story* and *I Dream in Another Language* all draw from Apichatpong's sensuous approach to memory, his fluid transitions between states of being, and his durational approach to the experience of time. His influence stretches beyond Thailand and Southeast Asia and is now incorporated into the practices of a broad range of transnational filmmakers from every continent. In each case, Apichatpong's art of looking counters the continuity principles and sensibilities of conventional narrative filmmaking, offering an alternative approach to structuring cinematic experience in opposition to these dominating structures. Through its integration of style, politics and ethics, Apichatpong's cinema facilitates forms of resistance against the structures and imaginings of established orders while also proposing new ways of reckoning with the world.

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Syndromes and a Century. Directed by Apichatpong Weerasethakul. Thailand: 9/6 Cinema Factory & Firecracker Films, 2006.
Tears of the Black Tiger. Directed by Wisit Sasanatieng. Thailand: Aichi Arts Center, 2000.
Thirdworld. Directed by Apichatpong Weerasethakul. Thailand and USA: School of Art Institute of Chicago, 1997.
The Turin Horse. Directed by Béla Tarr. Hungary: Másképp Alapítvány Cirko Film, 2011.
To Parsifal. Directed by Bruce Baillie. United States: Canyon Cinema, 1963.
A Trip to the Moon. Directed by Georges Méliès. France: 1902.
Umberto D. Directed by Vittorio De Sica. Italy: Dear Film, 1952.
Video Diary: One Water. Directed by Apichatpong Weerasethakul. Thailand and Maldives: Kick the Machine, 2013.
Vive L'Amour. Directed by Tsai Ming-liang. Taiwan: Strand Releasing, 1994.
Wavelength. Directed by Michael Snow. Canada: 1967.