InVisible Culture

The Somnophile's Guide to Cinema: An Interview with Jean Ma

Jean Ma, Patrick Sullivan, Madeline Ullrich, Amanda (Xiao) Ju, Julia Tulke

Published on: Apr 25, 2021

DOI: 10.47761/494a02f6.ab02c29f

License: [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC-BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Featured Image: Still from *Cemetery of Splendour* (dir. Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2015).

Jean Ma was the keynote speaker for the [12th Visual and Cultural Studies Graduate Conference in 2019, dedicated to the theme “Rest and the Rest: Aesthetics of Idleness.”](#)

Since the inaugural event in 1995, the biennial conference has convened scholars from a variety of fields, such as film studies, museum studies, art history, and cultural anthropology, in accordance with the interdisciplinary approach of the program. This interview took place during Professor Ma’s visit to the University of Rochester in April 2019. Before the conference, students from the graduate program of Visual and Cultural Studies and the English department formed a reading group, which read and discussed parts of Ma’s first two books—*Melancholy Drift: Marking Time in Chinese Cinema* and *Sounding the Modern Woman*—as well as a portion of her current book *At the Edges of Sleep*, forthcoming with University of California Press. The excerpt combined writings from two chapters, both of which closely engage with the work of Apichatpong Weerasethakul and demonstrate how Ma’s approach to the question of sleep in this project is inspired by his films and art.

This conversation between Professor Ma and the three co-initiators of the reading group took this new project on sleep and cinema as its point of departure. Moving through the centrality of psychoanalysis as a framework for film studies and sleep, the conversation covers discussions on phenomenology, sleep science, and the ambiguous depiction of “real time” in Apitchapong’s films. It then moves on to the logistics of writing (and writing a dissertation), grappling with the difficulty of writing a feminist historiography and of learning from objects that hold contradictory values. Ma also shared her experience as a graduate student at a time when Chinese film studies was an emerging field, and later as a film scholar based in an art history program.

Interview edited by Amanda (Xiao) Ju, Julia Tulke, and Madeline Ullrich. Annotations by Amanda (Xiao) Ju and Jean Ma.

Madeline Ullrich: In preparation for this interview, we read part of *Melancholy Drift*, as well as your introduction and the *Mambo Girl* chapter from *Sounding the Modern Woman*, which we really liked.¹ But I want to begin with this new project on sleep and cinema. From the manuscript, we see that you unpack theorists of sleep such as Sigmund Freud and Jacqueline Rose in conversation with each other. If you could have a short definition of sleep that undergirds your analysis of your objects, what would that look like?

Jean Ma: When I first started thinking about this project, people would ask, “What are you working on?” And I would say, “I’m working on a book about cinema and sleep.” It was then surprising to me how many people immediately took this to mean that my project was about dreams. Dreams are such a rich topic for cinema. This idea that cinema is like a dream is woven throughout all of film history. Think of the surrealists, just one obvious example. In the movie theater, we dream with our eyes open, as Jean-Luc Godard said. A great deal has been explored and written about this relationship of dreaming and cinema. But I realized that’s really not what I wanted to focus on. I want to think about sleep, which is obviously linked to dreams, but dreaming is not the only thing we do when we sleep. A big part of the night is spent in non-REM sleep.

I’ve been reading deeply in sleep science. I actually audited a sleep science class at Stanford, one pitched for non-science majors. If you think of Sigmund Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the text that all modern discussions of dreams refer to, his assertion that there is some kind of meaning encoded in the dream implanted a certain fascination with dreams throughout the twentieth century.² So I wanted to try to break

from that paradigm. One way to frame a shift from dream to sleep is to think about the displacement of psychoanalytic models that interpret dreaming as the activity of the unconscious mind.

Dreaming is the thinking that happens when we're asleep. This model gives way to neurophysiological approaches to the study of sleep.³ Freud had to rely largely on his patients' reports about their dreams, and he was aware that was very limiting. He knew that people only remember some of their dreams, and they probably weren't accurately reporting. This is why he often talks about his own dreams in *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

But then with inventions such as electroencephalography in the 1920s, there arises a wholly different approach to the study of dreams that is based on monitoring the body's processes—brain waves, muscular movement, eye movements. That allowed research into sleep to go farther, into those parts of sleep that we don't remember, that we can't recall and report on in the form of dreams. These technologies have brought about an important shift in the way we think about sleeping and dreaming.

So much of sleep science today is really based on the central methodology of polysomnography. These technologically generated readings of the human body inform popular discourses on sleep. There is a great deal of interest in questions such as: What is it that people do when we sleep? How do other species sleep? And why do we sleep. These foundational questions remain unanswered by sleep scientists.⁴ In other words, we are realizing more and more that dreams are not the only part about sleeping that's interesting or significant.

In fact, the distinction between non-REM and REM sleep is crucial—REM sleep being when we dream, and non-REM being when we're in deeper sleep states. The view in the scientific community is now that the difference between REM and non-REM sleep is actually as significant as the difference between being awake and being asleep. So the basic opposition between sleeping and waking is being called into question in very interesting ways. I'm trying to absorb all of these shifting understandings of sleep and to bring these frameworks into dialogue with works of film and art explore sleep.

Sleep is inclusive of dreams, but also involves other states. I've been trying to move away from this idea of sleep and dreams as states that one can flick on and off like a switch, to thinking about an entire spectrum of sleep and wakefulness. During non-REM sleep, for example, one can actually experience images which are not dreams but what scientists describe as hypnagogia and hypnopompia. During sleep we move

through phases and cycles. So the process itself is modulated by temporal fluctuations. I want to bring all of that into thinking about sleep and why Apichatpong Weerasethakul and other contemporary artists are drawn to the subject of sleep.

I found Jacqueline Rose's close reading of Freud to be really helpful in splitting sleep from dream. Her article "Not Being Able to Sleep" is the first piece I read that very correctly identifies an antagonism between sleep and dreams in Freud's study. He tries to set sleep to the side at the beginning of the book, but is forced to return to it in the seventh chapter.⁵ This is interesting because the seventh chapter is the one where he says: "Here, I'm going to stop talking about specific dreams, stop demonstrating this method of dream interpretation that I've developed throughout this study, and instead adopt a meta-psychological approach to the relationship between sleeping and dreaming." This is the most self-contradictory chapter in the entire book [*laughter*], and it is also the chapter that gets taken up in the greatest detail by film theorists.

Both Christian Metz and John-Louis Baudry published articles about the meta-psychology of the film spectator. Both Metz and Baudry are reading Freud very closely, but they are also working through that seventh chapter not just as a guide to dreams, but a means to grasp sleep and dreams and ultimately subjectivity in a more complex formation. This leaves an important legacy for film studies at a moment when psychoanalysis was providing compelling models for the subjectivity of the spectator.

Figure 2. Still from *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone* (dir. Tsai Ming-liang, 2006)

Amanda (Xiao) Ju: I have a question that follows up with psychoanalysis being a major theoretical model for film analysis. What is interesting to me is how you are able to mobilize your argument (in this manuscript) between a psychoanalytic framework, which you engage with contention, and objects (such as *Cemetery of Splendour*) that are very much about collective experiences.⁶ Psychoanalysis for me is perhaps the one theoretical framework most recalcitrant to a collective thinking, retaining so much to the opacity of an individual experience that is not shared as a collective. Can you speak more to this mobilization between individual psyche and images of collective dormancy?

Ma: It's really hard not to at least address psychoanalysis and Freud when writing about sleep. Because he's such an important figure, and because *The Interpretation of Dreams* does more than any other text to shape our understandings of the dream in the twentieth century, it felt really important to me to start with him. But I only take his work as a starting point—from which I move on—rather than a theoretical framework that guides and shapes the entire book.

I wouldn't say that I'm arguing that we should think about works like *Cemetery of Splendour* from a psychoanalytic perspective. I think talking about sleep requires us to actually move beyond psychoanalysis, to place it in dialogue with other theories about consciousness and unconsciousness. One objective of the book is to put psychoanalysis

into dialogue with phenomenology, another set of discourses interested in the so-called “unconscious” or “passive” states. Merleau-Ponty writes extensively about sleep, as does Emmanuel Levinas; Henri Bergson has an intriguing view on dreams.⁷

Merleau-Ponty has been very helpful for me in understanding sleep as a state where our self-conscious volition and autonomy does not define our experience. In many ways phenomenology offers helpful framings of sleep that go beyond those of psychoanalysis. At the same time, both psychoanalysts and phenomenologists share a doubt about whether we can know if we’re fully awake.

Ullrich: When I think about passivity in cinema, also when you mentioned Metz and Baudry, I think about, apparatus theory. How they’re thinking about cinema as an ideology that shapes us as subjects. This then makes me think that at the end of your chapter “Somnolent Journeys” you were starting to discuss sleep both as a political regime of sorts—one wanting its subjects to be asleep, and to be passive—and a potentiality for sleep to be emancipatory, a flight from reality.

Ma: For a long time, sleep has served as a metaphor for an acquiescent position, an acceptance of one’s powerlessness. Such an understanding certainly informs psychoanalytic film theory. We’re just submitting to the operations of the apparatus, our subjectivity reduced to that punctual position. So there is a way in which sleep often stands for a foreclosure of agency and of critical thought. Those are very powerful associations that have endured for a long time. They go far back in Western philosophy, but it’s really in the Enlightenment period that sleep began to represent everything that the ideal of the autonomous subject cannot admit of itself. If you think of our political discourse today, like the use of the word “woke,” it’s clear how these associations continue to endure.

Yet when I look at films by Apichatpong, who does refer to these “negative” meanings of sleep, I also see an unwillingness to let that conflation of sleep with passivity be the final definition of sleep. Johnathan Crary makes a great point that sleep actually is a very multivalent thing, where it can mean both a lack of resistance to power or a resistance to power.⁸

Is sleep a defense, or is it a surrender? I sense that question being worked through in a film like *Cemetery of Splendour*. Perhaps we can condemn sleep in the same way we condemn escapism. But maybe these are both terms to unpack when it comes to the question of survival—namely, how does one actually survive in a challenging political situation, under an authoritarian regime?

There's always a danger of idealizing sleep, once you reject its definition solely in association with these "negative" attributes. That's another thing to be careful about.

Ju: We actually read the manuscript first and then watched *Cemetery of Splendour*. I am interested in your reading of sleep in Apichatpong's work as a kind of haunting and reincarnation, a projection of the self beyond its usual psycho-temporal boundaries. But beyond hauntology, you also stressed the lived reality of this haunting, and I think watching the film made that very clear. For those who already live with specters of the past, a film like *Cemetery of Splendour* is not so much "an encounter between the present and past" but a kind of being alongside—in your words, "taking a position alongside those who already live with this past and making space for their dreams."⁹ Can you tell us more about your thinking about this living history of past specters and how it is manifested in the image of the dormant collective?

Ma: I feel like those things are mixed up and very much woven together in the film. The sense I always get in Apichatpong's films is that it is very hard for an audience to know whether the scene she is watching is in the present or if it's in the past. There are these unseen forces that ripple through his films—often through details of the dialogue and the décor. Yet, even when the image seems to be given, showing something in the present tense, there's always a kind of double meaning pointing to things that are not in front of us.

The characters in *Cemetery of Splendour* constantly make casual references to their past lives. So we are never really allowed to, I think, make that distinction. It's not as if, oh, here, in this moment, we're operating in an objective realm, and now in this other scene, we've shifted into a subjective one.

Ju: So that's another phenomenological aspect of experiencing the film.

Ma: Apichatpong is often described as belonging to a group of long take directors, who build their films in long chunks of real time. These long takes do immerse us in a phenomenally rich present tense. But I think the question of what is real time is a very complicated one in his films. There are always these shadows, and real time is never as straightforward as we think. That actually makes him quite different from many of the other directors brought into the category of slow cinema.

Ullrich: Something I really appreciate about your work is that you can see a theoretical lineage, but I also don't feel like I'm drowning in theory when I'm reading it. So this is, I guess, more of a logistical question: What is your methodology for

balancing theory and your objects, and how do you use a scholarly influence in your work. Miriam Hansen, for example, was a big influence on *Sounding the Modern Woman*.

Ma: It's funny that you bring up Miriam. I remember at one point I turned in an early draft of my dissertation, and I had long chunks of explicating of this theoretical framework by this thinker, and so on. I worked really hard on it—trying to figure out what exactly they were saying, and how it all came together around the question I was thinking about, which was national cinema in a global age. I remember Miriam looked at it, and she said, "You need to cut all of this. Just winnow it down to what's relevant to your argument." And she said, "Of course you have to demonstrate that you've read certain things, but don't go overboard." I think she was actually encouraging me to not just write a dissertation, but to write well.

There's often this belabored performance of scholarly expertise that one feels impelled to produce when writing a dissertation. Paying dues to "the state of the field." It is a part of dissertation writing that usually gets taken out when you are undertaking revision for publication.

Ju: Chinese film studies now is a very developed field. When you were producing that dissertation was it like that, or not at all?

Ma: It was so different back then [*laughter*]. There was a point when I decided on my topic and thought, "Let me go and read everything that has been written about Chinese cinema," and it didn't take me very long [*laughter*]. Now I don't think it would be possible to do that. It's quite stunning.

Ju: I work on Chinese contemporary art, and it is sort of in a similar moment. I still feel like I am able to dive in and read everything. Here in our graduate program, I am producing a dissertation with a committee of experts whose academic "specialty" share partial overlaps with this dissertation. I wonder if you had a similar experience of having to produce a dissertation with teachers who share a lot of knowledge, but not necessarily the field that you're trying to work on?

Ma: I also felt that I had to bring together a committee where each member brought a very important perspective on my project but no one really represented, in their primary expertise, the area I was working on. I had film scholars on my committee, members who were very strong theorists, as well as one Chinese modern literature and film scholar, Tang Xiaobing. Tang Xiaobing is quite unusual. He was at Chicago

when I was there. He's written important books on modern Chinese literature, but also has written quite a bit about film. And then went on to reinvent himself as an art historian too.¹⁰ I think so often now students go into the programs where there's one faculty member who really represents what they see themselves doing, but my committee came together in a much more patchy way.

Patrick Sullivan: I was also wondering about your experience being a film scholar based in an art history program. And if I heard you correctly, you are also branching out to write about installation art.

Ma: I think so many people working in film and media didn't come to their work already fully prepared with exactly the kind of training one would expect. I think one of the interesting things about the field is that so many people have come to it by way of a jagged path.

But it's been continually evolving field. Many of the people I worked with started off in other disciplines like literature and then came into film. That's true of many of the most brilliant thinkers we have in the field. That makes me think it's never bad thing to have an unusual path, or to not have everything clearly set out in advance. In my case, I went into an English program because Cinema and Media Studies did not exist as a freestanding PhD program at the University of Chicago back then. It now does, but I was taking a lot of English courses in grad school, along with art history courses, and some in other departments. My first job was in a proper film department that was focused primarily on production. And then I ended up in an art history department. Which actually felt very much like a natural move. Because I was interested in objects like photography, it seemed to work. Given that I'm very invested in doing close visual analysis, I was able to find a kind of shared language and methodology. And I think being in an art history department has really helped me, especially in this current sleep project, which is not strictly confined to film. I am trying to engage other areas because some of the figures I'm writing about are artists. Apichatpong is an artist and has produced a large number of installation works that have received great acclaim.¹¹ So just being in that department has helped me to kind of engage with this material in a way I might not have if I were in a different kind of program.

Ullrich: To depart from our more visually focused discussion today: with *Sounding the Modern Woman*, what drew you to sound more literally as a field or a discipline? And how did you insert yourself into that, or were you familiar with sound studies before you worked on that project?

Ma: That's actually the project that got me engaged with sound studies. Before I wrote that book, a wave of important works of sound studies came out.¹² That field was starting to announce itself, and to shift the way we think about film and media studies, transition from an emphasis on the visual to the audiovisual or audio. So that was a shift I'd already started to engage in my teaching—trying to get my students to think about film in these terms. When I began work on that book, I realized there's a whole conversation to be forged between Chinese film history and sound. Zhang Zhen's important book, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen*, a study of Shanghai cinema of the 1920s and 30s, includes a chapter on sound.¹³ So I read that, and I thought, "Wow, there's so much more to say!" We can apply questions about sound, not just to this particular moment when the film industry in China was transitioning from silent to sound filmmaking, but also to how we think about the sonic forms of Chinese cinema going forward. I wanted to put these two areas together, Chinese film studies and sound studies, in my book. I was also really fascinated with Grace Chang, who I came to know through watching Tsai Ming-liang's *The Hole*.¹⁴ I knew that most of her films were produced in Hong Kong. So I went to the Hong Kong Film Archive to see what I could find about her and her films, which were not that easy to get ahold of in the US.

I wanted to find out more about her stardom and the film culture in which she emerged, so I spent time in the archive, watching as many films as I could from the 1950s to the early 60s. And I realized how prevalent scenes of song performance were in this period. I didn't know that this was a feature of Chinese cinema. And in fact, this period was completely unknown to me, even as somebody who had spent a lot of time studying Chinese cinema. I realized there was historical research to be done on this period, about which very little has been written, and in which songs were so central. And that there was more to say about the stakes of sound and music in Chinese cinema.

Ullrich: It's interesting too to think about how song, in some of the films you discuss, is typically thought of as a break, or an interval in the main narrative action, and how you are trying to challenge that notion. Sleep is similarly one of those things that we typically see as not being crucial to the storyline, or what typically gets left out.

Ma: That's fascinating. I never thought of that.

Ullrich: I didn't either, until you were just saying it, and I thought, "Wow. I could see how these fit together." Or how, in thinking about temporality, there are these moments that are just not considered important diegetically, at least in mainstream cinema.

Sullivan: It seems like this temporality thread continues right through your work, with historiography and this kind of representation, and then—how Maddie framed it—with sleep as nonnarrative. Do you see that as a persistent thread through your work?

Ma: When I look, I say, “Yeah, it’s definitely there!” [*laughter*] When I was writing it, I didn’t necessarily think that, “Oh, here—let me talk about it in this way now. My research program is to consider temporality in all of these different facets.” It just shows up, no matter what I think I’m writing about.

Sullivan: It just comes back to haunt [*laughter*].

Ju: I had a question about feminist historiography, which I was hesitant to ask, because this is one of those methodology questions that seems impossible to answer. But many of us are just beginning to form our dissertations, and dancing around with objects, possibilities, and thinking through the simple—but also a complicated—question of how exactly to write a feminist project without sort of ghettoizing it into simply writing a history about women-produced films? Or reaffirming a male-dominated history with female subjects. I wonder if you have any advice on that.

Ma: That was a question I grappled with in the songstress films, because obviously most of those films have pretty regressive gender messages attached to them. They’re extremely constrained roles that women could play onscreen. It is difficult to write about them, because it’s not the same as writing about women filmmakers or directors. How do you find the agency? But then to react by saying, “Okay, these films are just reflections of the gender prejudices and ideologies of their time”—that’s not very satisfying either. I needed a different way to discover my stake in the films. For me, feminist writings on silent cinema have been helpful; there’s been a rich body of work on screen images of the modern woman.¹⁵ I look to how these writers have grappled with the contradictions of their material.

Figure 3. Flyer for *Mambo Girl* (dir. Yi Wen, 1957).

You don't want to deny these performers all agency, and to see them as mere puppets. They do leave us with something important, right? And yet, obviously we can't quite celebrate them as agents, ignoring the problematic presentation of modern femininity. It's a somewhat contradictory or a paradoxical project. One has to be aware of the perils of reading these in too optimistic or too pessimistic of a fashion. It's not that these contradictions are there in our relationship to the material, but they're actually in the material itself. When you look closely at what may seem on first glance to be a seamless surface—or clear-cut ideological message—you often find undercurrents or elements that undercut the performance. Details can actually undercut the message the audience is supposed to get, what the narrative seems to be trying to tell us versus what so many other parts of the film—the details of the image, the sound, certain gestures—transmit.

I chose the films I wrote about because of these contradictions, and to me, that was a way into unpacking these films that would give me some more space as a thinker.

Sullivan: I was interested in what you said about shifting from psychoanalysis to a physically based understanding of dreams versus sleeps, and this graphic technology of kind of writing the body. And cinema being seen as kind of—I'm thinking of Muybridge—this kind of early cinema. Do you draw any connections between those in your contemporary work?

Ma: It's not a connection I've explored that much, but I think there's something interesting about cinema as not just a medium that represents sleep, but cinema as part of a history of technologies for dissecting the micro-movements of the body: making the invisible visible to the eye. The larger question of imaging technologies that produce sleep as visual data to be read is quite fascinating. And that's something I'd have to think about more. It seems like an important dimension of this connection between cinema and sleep.

Sullivan: On a different note: does sound play into the new project in any sustained manner, or is it much more so making the visible versus invisible? I don't know of any technology. Like, there's probably no reason they would personify some dimension of the body to measure, right? We tend to be visual in that kind of graphing.

Ma: Yeah. I don't think they do. If you think of EEGs—these squiggly lines on paper—it is all visualization. In polysomnography, you have this visualization of electrical activity in the brain, along with other sensors that are tracking muscular contraction and metabolic processes. So I think that sleep science, as it's based on polysomnography, very much involves a visual reading of the body's data.¹⁶ And I believe now there is a turn to computational data analysis tools to make that information more accessible, to compress it. And I haven't come across any tools having to do with sound in that field.

Some have incorporated sound into sleep studies, for example, in looking at the relationship between sleep and learning. Sleep helps the brain to consolidate memory. If you stay up all night cramming for an exam and take the test the next day, you won't do as well as if you cram a little bit and go to sleep. Some have tried to identify exactly when that memory consolidation happens, and how the cognitive processes that happen during sleep connect to what we can recall while awake. There have been studies that involve sensory triggers, including sonic ones, to see what that teaches us about the connection between what our brain is doing when our bodies are awake and when they are asleep.

But that's the only thing I can recall having to do with sound. To the extent that sleep involves some kind of severing of our sensorial bonds to the world, it really does center

on what happens very obviously in the realm of the visual, right? Most people close their eyes when they're asleep. But sounds can still leak in. We can hear in semi-sleeping states. Our senses become more porous to sound during REM sleep, in the beginnings of sleep, and as we're coming out of our sleep.

One of the things I experienced last year was Apichatpong's installation work *SLEEPCINEMAHOTEL*, which was exhibited at the Rotterdam International Film Festival. It consisted of a 20-hourlong film projection in a space that included some seats, but also an interlocking constructure of beds in the main space.¹⁷ It was like a cinema, an installation, but also a hotel, because you had to reserve your space. And so the whole point is to allow the audience an overnight screening where they would experience the film in different states of consciousness. That was the objective.

Ju: Fascinating. I'm writing a chapter of my dissertation on Wang Bing, so this is making me think of his 15-hour work in a gallery space and how one can never experience the art in its entirety.¹⁸ But the idea of making it into a hotel is an entirely different experience.

Ma: The space was quite designed. The architecture was meant to evoke a maritime setting. It was set up so that every bed was at an angle to the screen. And actually, only one bed had an entirely clear view of the screen, and all the other views were slightly obstructed—in a way that I think was quite deliberate. The projection screen was a big, round oculus. It was like looking at the moon. And the film consisted of found footage from the Nederlands Filmmuseum. Some of it very early footage, from the early twentieth century, and some more recent. Most of it was kind of landscape imagery and old actuality films.

Figure 4. Apichatpong Weerasethakul, *SLEEP CINEMA HOTEL*, 2018. Installation view, Postillion Convention Center WTC, Rotterdam.

So this found footage montage was playing on screen, but the sound was really interesting too. All of his films have these lush sounds of nature so that you feel like you're in a jungle. You hear the insects. You can sense the rain, the humidity, rushing water. It was the same sound designer who works on his films who also created the soundtrack for this piece. And it was playing pretty loudly in a very cavernous space. So it was kind of like being inside a huge sleep machine. And sound really contributed to the sense of envelopment. It was very transporting.

It did feel like a different reality, with not just the strangeness of this big moon, the screen that's almost like an eye looking back at you, but also the soundscape. I spent the night and slept very well, even though I normally am not a good sleeper. And my experience was as much a product of the sound as the image and the visuals. So, I think there's something more to think about there. I haven't written that material up yet. But I do want to think more about the role of sound.

Ullrich: What's interesting too in *Cemetery of Splendour*, is that a lot of the interaction between the two main characters, Jenjira and Itt, unfolds when Itt is

asleep. It's interesting to think more about that relationship between what you can hear and what you cannot hear when you're asleep, and what that means then for the category of sound in film—where sound is already kind of considered a secondary object. I feel like that's been disproven at this point, but we still tend to rely on that notion as scholars of visual culture.

Ma: There are many moments in *The Interpretation of Dreams* where Freud talks about how sounds break into the perception of the sleeper; crowing roosters, or noises from the street outside. They get absorbed and transformed in the dream. So he's also talking about this kind of leakage, how sounds can leak between the waking world and the world of the sleeper. They enter dreams and undergo some kind of metamorphosis.

Ju: I was also thinking how a project like *SLEEP CINEMA HOTEL* really takes immersive art to a whole new level, given how much these gigantic, immersive art installations populate biennials these days. But they're usually immersive in visual forms, and then in the case of the hotel, it's immersive in all sorts of sensorial experiences. Being almost forced to experience it with someone else, throughout the night, is another immersion that you don't expect.

Ma: Yeah, often we associate immersion with a very large image that overwhelms our visual field, and I think it's interesting in that piece. The point is that you can close your eyes, so visuality does not define the experience of immersion. It is about other things like the sound and the three-dimensional space.

Ju: How many beds are there again?

Ma: There were only twenty beds, I think. Sleeping among strangers can be a little bit disconcerting. It was very controlled, with a small number of people, and you needed to have a reservation; it's not like the public could just wander in during the middle of the night. So there was a deliberate attempt at controlling the space and creating a sense of privacy even though it was a shared space, and that's different from certain art installations where people can just come in and lie down, but it's just a bunch of mattresses on the floor; a more open invitation to bodies to occupy spaces they wish. And here, it was more controlled, I think, by deliberate design.

Ullrich: Was there a film that had sleep in it that inspired your project?

Ma: It was *Cemetery of Splendour*. When I was watching *Cemetery of Splendour* for the first time, I also thought of Tsai Ming-Liang's *I Don't Want To Sleep Alone*, which has many sleep scenes. The images of the characters sleeping have remained in my

head long after watching it. And I think there's some interesting dialogue between the two of them. They both show sleeping characters in these very drawn out moments of stillness. There's this one great scene at the end of *I Don't Want To Sleep Alone* where the three main characters are asleep on this mattress floating on a dark pool of water. Sleep slowly drifts into the frame, and it's gorgeous.

Figure 5. Still from *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone* (dir. Tsai Ming-liang, 2006).

[Jean Ma](#) is the author of *Melancholy Drift: Marking Time in Chinese Cinema* (Hong Kong UP, 2010) and *Sounding the Modern Woman* (Duke UP, 2015). Her editorial work includes the anthology *Still Moving: Between Cinema and Photography* (Duke UP, 2008), a special issue of the *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* on sound and music, and a book series at the University of California Press on "Music, Sound, and Media." Her writing has appeared in *Grey Room*, *Camera Obscura*, *Criticism*, *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, and *Film Quarterly*, as well as in numerous edited volumes. She is an Associate Professor in the Department of Art and Art History at Stanford University, where she teaches in the Film and Media Studies Program.

Footnotes

1. Jean Ma, *Melancholy Drift: Marking Time in Chinese Cinema* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010); Jean Ma, *Sounding the Modern Woman: the Songstress in Chinese Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015). [↵](#)
2. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (New York: Basic Books, 1955). [↵](#)
3. See Jennifer Fay, "Bankers Dream of Banking: Against the Interpretation of Dreams," in *Deep Mediations: Thinking Space in Cinema and Digital Cultures*, ed. Karen Redrobe and Jeff Scheible (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press 2021), 123-42. [↵](#)
4. Verlyn Klinkenborg, "Awakening to Sleep," *The New York Times*, January 5, 1997, <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/01/05/magazine/awakening-to-sleep.html>. [↵](#)
5. Jacqueline Rose, *On Not Being Able to Sleep: Psychoanalysis and the Modern World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003). [↵](#)
6. *Cemetery of Splendour* is a 2015 feature film written and directed by the Thai director Apichatpong Weerasethakul. The film's loose sense of plot revolves around a mysterious sleeping sickness that has fallen to a group of soldiers employed to dig up a building site for a government project. [↵](#)
7. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 2002 {1945}), chapter 5; *Institution and Passivity: Course Notes from the Collège de France (1954-1955)*, trans. Leonard Lawlor and Heath Massey (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2010); Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978); Henri Bergson, "Dreams," in *Mind-Energy: Lectures and Essays*, trans. Wildon Carr's (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1920), 104-132. [↵](#)
8. Crary's exact quote goes as follows: "Paradoxically, sleep is a figure for a subjectivity on which power can operate with the least political resistance and a condition that finally cannot be instrumentalized or controlled externally—that evades or frustrates the demands of global consumer society." Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (New York: Verso, 2013), 24. [↵](#)
9. Jean Ma, "The Narcoleptic Visions of Apichatpong Weerasethakul," for the book *At the Edges of Sleep*, forthcoming with University of California Press. [↵](#)

10. See Xiaobing Tang, *Chinese Modern: the Heroic and the Quotidian* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000); *Origins of the Chinese Avant-Garde: The Modern Woodcut Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); *Visual Culture in Contemporary China: Paradigms and Shifts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). [↵](#)
11. For example, in 2009, Apichatpong installed a constellation of seven video piece, *Primitive*, at the New Museum in New York. This project, commissioned by the British arts organization Animate Projects, Haus der Kunst in Munich, and FACT in Liverpool, also includes two short films (*A Letter to Uncle Boonmee* and *Phantoms of Nabua*{both 2009}), an artist's book, and a feature film, *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*, which was the winner of the 2010 Palme d'Or at the Cannes film festival. See, <https://www.newmuseum.org/exhibitions/view/apichatpong-weerasethakul-primitive>. Other examples include *Dilbar* (2013), made by Apichatpong and Chai Siris, in response to a commission from the Sharjah Art Foundation to inaugurate a new exhibition space, and *SLEEP CINEMA HOTEL* (2018), installed in the Zaal Staal of Rotterdam's Convention Center, offering twenty beds on platforms of varying heights where audiences can book for an overnight stay to take in the 120-hour-long film that Apichatpong produced and projected on a large circular screen. See <https://www.shanghartgallery.com/galleryarchive/work.htm?workId=24846> and <https://www2.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/comment/festivals/sleepcinemahotel-apichatpong-weerasethakul-rotterdam>. [↵](#)
12. James Lastra, *Sound Technology and the American Cinema: Perception, Representation, Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003). [↵](#)
13. Zhen Zhang, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896-1937* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). [↵](#)
14. *The Hole* is a 1998 Taiwanese film directed by Tsai Ming-Liang. Grace Chang (born 1933) is a Hong Kong-Chinese actress and singer popular in the 1950s. Chang appeared in 33 films including *It Blossoms Again* (1954), *The Wild Wild Rose* (1960), and *Mambo Girl* (1957). She also provided vocals for multiple soundtracks. [↵](#)
15. Jennifer M. Bean and Diane Negra, eds., *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); *Camera Obscura* 20, no. 3 (2005),

special issue on "New Women of the Silent Screen: China, Japan, Hollywood," ed. Catherine Russell. ↵

16. Cornelius Borck, "Recording the Brain at Work: The Visible, the Readable, and the Invisible in Electroencephalography," *Journal of the History of the Neurosciences* 17 (2008): 367-369. ↵

17. *SLEEP CINEMA HOTEL* (2018) was installed in the Zaal Staal of Rotterdam's Convention Center. See Travis Jeppesen, "Lazy Sunday," *Artforum* February 15, 2018, <https://www.artforum.com/film/travis-jeppesen-on-apichatpong-weerasethakul-s-sleepcinemahotel-74262>. ↵

18. In 2017, Wang Bing's fifteen-hour long film *15 Hours* (2017) was installed at the National Museum of Contemporary Art (EMST) in Athens as part of Documenta 14. See <https://www.documenta14.de/en/artists/7364/wang-bing>. ↵