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# THE WEATHER IN TSAI

## SLOW CINEMA AND SLOW VIOLENCE

Lakshmi Padmanabhan

### PROLOGUE: GIVEN TIME

*Time, in any case, gives nothing to see.*

—Jacques Derrida, *Given Time*

The first scene of Tsai Ming-Liang's eighth feature, *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone* (2006), is a soporific ode to sleep. For about three minutes, the static camera frames a medium wide shot of a body asleep on a hospital bed in a spare, sunlit room. A fluttering curtain hanging by an open window is visible as a reflection in the mirror behind the bed, and the shallow rise and fall of the sleeping man's chest tells us he's alive. These are the only visible movements, which mark the slow passage of cinematic time. The viewer, lulled into a somnolent state of contemplation, perhaps feels the urge to accompany the body on screen in her own little nap. Already the film has lived up to its titular desire: the body on screen is no longer alone in a state of arrest.

This kind of oneiric long take, and minimalist mise-en-scène, has come to be associated with the trend of "slow cinema," and it is not always viewed with kindness. Tsai's films have been described as a test of our cinephilia (Weigel 2016). Slow cinema, as its critics have described it, is a "passive aggressive" (James 2010) endeavor because these long takes demand too much of the audience's time for too little reward, often circulating as film festival fodder and remaining inaccessible to a wider audience. In the process, as Nick James has suggested, they make the lives of film festival programmers easier since they commission these films, valorize their slowness as inherently "more profound," and make for quicker description and discussion because they involve so little detail that discussions can remain brief.

As Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge explain in their edited volume on slow cinema, critical suspicion of slow cinema's aesthetic interventions in the present moment stems from three broad issues (2015, 12): First, its circulation within the film festival market, which is an expensive proposition for any prospective audience member. Second, that such film is aesthetically rigorous, often demanding a rarefied aesthetic education in order to appreciate its excessive duration and lack of conventional entertainment value, and finally, that it perhaps indexes a nostalgia for preindustrial temporalities and a turn away from the realities of the present.

More generous readers of slow cinema have argued for understanding the rise of a slow aesthetic as a response to the increasing speed of contemporary life. Song Hwee Lim, for example, in his reading of Tsai Ming-liang's aesthetic within the broader emergence of slow cinema, argues, "This cinema comprises aesthetic acts that promote new modes of temporal experience, new ways of seeing, and new subjectivities that are politically committed to an ethos of slowness" (Lim 2014, 33). Lim draws on the film philosophy of Jacques Rancière and Gilles Deleuze to make this claim about the ethos of slowness as a political commitment that allows access to "new ways of seeing."

Rancière, in his writings on Bela Tarr's cinema, goes even further in his valorization of the slow cinema aesthetic as a political intervention. Through a discussion of Tarr's juxtaposition of characters who are often "abandoned by history" and the filmmaker's aesthetic attempt to restore their dignity (one could also describe Tsai's filmmaking in a similar fashion), Rancière argues that the filmmaker provides a kind of "poetic justice" where the suffering, exploited figures in the diegetic world are provided some restitution within the image: their struggles are indexed by the fatigue in their bodies, which the camera lingers on and emphasizes through the long takes of slow but determined movement, even as those who wrong them within the narrative are doomed to "cinematographic insignificance" (259). Rancière describes this disjunction between the narrative of suffering and the valorization of these figures through the duration of the take, as constructing a "dissensus, an opposition of two sensible worlds, which reopens time as the site of the possible" (260). What is missing from such proclamations is any critical analysis of the film's construc-

tion, which elides how the film formally manifests his mystifying conclusion that the film renders “time as the site of the possible,” begging the question: Possible of what?

Yet Rancière’s poetic mystification is only one egregious instance of an enduring vein in contemporary discussions of slow cinema aesthetics, one that is echoed in a range of writing drawing inspiration from Gilles Deleuze’s concept of the “time image” (1989) to Jonathan Crary’s critique of the 24/7 temporal logic of capitalism (2013). For example, in his writing on the rise of slow cinema aesthetics and specifically the long take, Lutz Koepnick (2017) argues that the rise of this aesthetic strategy in contemporary art cinema adheres to the promise of a world in which

humans can experience the wondrous and act with generosity precisely because they experience time and perception as something they don’t and can never own, as something that makes and unmakes our fragile position as subjects in the first place, and as something whose substance cannot be measured by the clocks, spreadsheets, news tickets, and bandwidth rates of our agitated present. (Koepnick, 252)

Here, Koepnick is arguing that the slow temporal register of the long take allows the viewer to experience a sense of phenomenological plenitude: an experience of the diegetic world that holds out the promise of time as pure lived duration or immediate sense perception, locating in that fantasy realm a place that escapes quantification. This point recurs in slightly different forms throughout the writing on slow cinema: that the embodied perception of time escapes and therefore challenges the rigors of clock time.

While such an argument makes explicit ethical claims for the long take, it also makes implicit ethical claims about the task of aesthetic critique: faced with the overwhelming nature of what is immediately available to the senses through the long take, the critic’s own account of the film’s ethical work dissipates into subjective description of the immediate encounter with the image and the synthetic argument dissolves into an oceanic feeling.

Lim, for example, concludes his magisterial study of Tsai Ming-liang’s films with this final claim:

In the spirit of the temporality, materiality, aesthetics, politics, and ethics of a cinema of slowness, I shall therefore remain still and silent while allowing my cinephilic musings to get lost, slowly and imperceptibly,

like a slow-motion car crash that helps us to see better, feel better, and fail better. (2014, 155)

While Lim renders his own muteness in the face of the “slow-motion car crash” that is Tsai’s film, William Brown draws on his joyful encounter with the long takes in Lav Diaz’s *Melancholia*, as the duration provides him with time to attend to the quivering of raindrops on a branch, a movement that imbues life itself into the image (121). In such critical essays conceptualizing the rise of slow cinema aesthetics, the phenomenological experience of watching a beautifully framed long take is frequently narrated as a more authentic form of attunement to the world beyond the screen; a way of dissolving cinematic mediation into the immediacy of subjective phenomenological experience, frequently blurring that subjective experience with the conceptual work of critique through a hazy or open-ended claim to universality and possibility.

While this move is seductive in its apparently progressive attentiveness to the fullness of experience, it also veers toward substituting the unthought immediacy of subjective experience for the more difficult task of politically committed conceptualization and reduces the horizon of film analysis to merely repeating what is already accessible by watching the film itself. Frankly, why bother?

While Deleuze’s *Cinema 2* is often cited as the source for this phenomenological experience of slow cinema aesthetics in the rise of the “time image,” which grants the spectator access to “time in its pure state” (1989, 17), I would argue that Deleuze’s conception of the relationship between reality and the “real” time of the long take is not easily equivalent, as evidenced by his explicit statement in the preface to *Cinema 2*: “What is in the present is what the image, “represents” but not the image itself, which, in cinema as in painting, is never to be confused with what it represents. The image itself is the system of relationships between its elements” (1989, xii).

For Deleuze, the real image of time that cinema provides access to is one that emerges through a semiotic analysis of the codes of cinema, not a confused embrace of their dissolution into the immediacy of phenomenological experience. Yet, this basic insight seems continuously elided in the narration of Deleuze as the cornerstone of slow cinema’s conceptual emergence, often due to Deleuze’s own blurring between

phenomenal and transcendental claims in his readings of films throughout this work. In any case, the increasing purchase of such blurry diagnoses of slow cinema's aesthetic, and the timid political horizons that such writing sets for cinema as such ("to see better, to feel better, to fail better"), allegorize the seeming exhaustion of critique as an enterprise worth pursuing in film studies more broadly.

At this point, one might ask: Why now? Why has slow cinema emerged as a ubiquitous aesthetic style, particularly in independent filmmaking from non-Western urban milieux including as a dominant form associated with the Taiwanese New Wave?<sup>1</sup> What affective experience does the long take mediate? In what follows, I approach these questions through a close reading of the long-take aesthetic in Tsai Ming-liang's film, arguing that the rise of such an aesthetic of narrative collapse, the absence of the cut, and the ambient toxicity of the diegetic environment mediate the affective experience of "slow violence" or the condition of survival in what is now called the Anthropocene. I do so through an attention to anxiety, an affective experience that endures through the film, and one I approach as a conceptual problem that reflects the broader affective experience of slow violence and its diagnosis in our dystopian present. Such an experience of anxiety seems as palpable while listening to the news emerging from the radio within the diegesis as it does when listening to the news in our daily lives.

By beginning from the experience of anxiety as fostered by the slow cinema aesthetic and arguing that the formalization of anxiety in the long take mediates the affective anxiety of watching slow violence<sup>2</sup> on screen, I move past the false dichotomy plaguing film critics on the slow cinema debate: either it is bad because it makes us feel bad, or it is good because it is a more authentic experience. Instead, my argument stems from the possibility of taking seriously the bad affects of slow cinema (anxiety, exhaustion) as worth theorizing. My argument also takes as axiomatic the necessity of close reading as a method that attends to how affect is formalized within the image and, subsequently, how film, as an aesthetic object, mediates cultural anxieties. In doing so, I follow Eugenie Brinkema's generative critique of the sense of immediacy that has commonly adhered to the invocation of "affect" in contemporary aesthetic criticism. As she notes, "The turning to affect . . . does not obliterate the problem of form and

representation" (xiv). In fact, it is precisely through mediation that affects are generated and therefore perceptible, as we shall see in what follows. The rest of my argument will unfold this claim through close readings of specific scenes in the film. In the final section, I return to the broader question of theorizing mediation in the face of overwhelming immediacy, locating the problematic of slow cinema and the chronic violence it mediates as one way to understand the "slow violence" of environmental catastrophe (see Nixon) cinematically.

## NOT NOTHING: CHRONIC VIOLENCE AND REPRODUCTIVE LABOR

*I Don't Want to Sleep Alone* was commissioned by a film festival in Vienna to commemorate Mozart's 250th birth anniversary. When asked what his film had to do with Mozart or his music, Tsai is rumored to have said, "Nothing." Like the rest of Tsai's oeuvre, *Sleep* isn't about much, but it's not quite nothing. The narrative, such as it is, follows the lives of two figures, one who is paralyzed and another who is a homeless drifter; they both try to survive in an unmarked corner of the city. Both are played by Lee Kang-Sheng, Tsai's longtime collaborator and muse.

The paralyzed man is cared for by a nurse, who also works at a bar downstairs for his mother, while the drifter is often cared for by Rawang, a Bangladeshi laborer who is also falling in love with him. While the cause or diagnosis of the paralyzed man's illness is never provided, early in the film, we see the drifter get beaten up and left on the street. Rawang finds him in this state of collapse and nurses him back to health while falling in love with him. Yet none of these characters exchange a word, apparently unable or unwilling to speak the same language. Their lives are held together as a loose sequence of scenes, which is also the way they share physical space—as silent partners rather than shared community—and the only apparent narrative throughline is the amount of time devoted to reproductive labor and care work of all kinds, largely undertaken by the nurse and Rawang. The lack of continuity editing, as well as the lack of proper development of the romance plot between the drifter and the nurse or Rawang, leaves us as stuck in their uneventful story as the characters themselves. In the final third of the film, a toxic smog emerges from

nowhere, slowly creeping up to smother the entire frame in a soft brownish-gray blanket that speeds up the attrition of the bodies on screen. Finally they are choked to such an extent that they all keel over and fall asleep.

In the opening scene of the film (figure 1), a mirror on the dresser reflects on a corner of the room that otherwise remains off-screen, revealing a concrete joint where two walls meet, which divides the interiority of this diegetic space from the outer world. This uncanny frame gives us a view of a corner of the room the camera isn't facing, already breaking a basic rule of narrative cinema by jumping the line to reflect on a technically obscure (off-screen) view. The spatial logic of the scene sets up the expectation of seeing ourselves reflected in the mirror, yet instead we are confronted with our own absence from the image, a palpable ambivalence formalized by the surprising presence of the view across the line, and the ambient sense of something missing in the reflection.

That passive reflection of the off-screen space, revealing nothing other than the constitutive physical barrier that produces this world mirrors the way the rest of the film formalizes the ambient unease that accrues in the corners of the diegetic world of Kuala Lumpur's seedy by-lanes and dark streets. Early in the film, the drifter is brutally beaten and left for dead. The still camera and languid takes lend an air of banality to the violence, conveying the sense that nothing important



Figure 1. First scene, paralyzed man asleep.



is happening. All the figures who wander these dark streets struggle under the weight of the structural neglect that hangs heavy in the air. By the end of the film, a dense smog floats in, literally choking the onscreen characters into an exhausted submission. The lack of dialogue and the absence of point-of-view shots convey a wider collapse of social bonds, each figure seemingly alone in their own struggles for survival, unable or unwilling to ask for help. These choices also leave us, as spectators, adrift in the image, wandering through a seemingly postapocalyptic urban milieu in search of causal narrative amid the fog of silence. As the film unfolds through a series of temporal adjacencies rather than linear progression, the absence of meaning accrues an affective weight, wearing the spectator down into an exhausted passivity that echoes the chronic violence the bodies experience on screen.<sup>3</sup>

For example, early in the film, we're given an extremely wide static frame of an open city road in a dark night, lit only by streetlights. The camera's location on a sidewalk orthogonal to the road provides a lesson in stratigraphy, with the screen neatly layered in sharp lines formed by a wall in the extreme background, a sidewalk, then a road in the middle ground, and a sidewalk in the foreground. For several moments, the only movement appears to be an occasional car zooming by until we eventually realize that the extremely minor movement in the background is Rawang and his friends carrying the mattress that they have scavenged from a dumpster and are carrying home. The juxtaposition of their extremely small size in contrast to the wide road and the speeding cars, as well as their physical struggle with the unwieldy inanimate object of the mattress, renders the scene into a tragicomic encounter: a study in both physical comedy and neo-realist seriousness.

The scene achieves this contradictory effect through the sheer amount of time it takes for them to cross the wide road and emerge into the foreground, which highlights the chronic nature of their condition. The long takes that allow us to experience the sense of time's unfolding in this film certainly grant us more time to contemplate the richness of the phenomenal world in detail. As in all of Tsai's films, the lingering gaze of the camera and the careful attention to light and shadow imbue the detritus of this urban milieu with the sublime beauty generally accorded to more pastoral visions.

We can pay attention to the stark contrasts of light and dark and the soft glow of street lights shining over the mostly empty street, taking long seconds to notice that the drifter has slowly wandered into the foreground and collapsed from his injuries onto the pavement. When Rawang eventually makes it to the foreground, he finds the drifter curled up there, moaning in pain. Once more Rawang talks his unnamed companions into lifting a heavy object found on the side of the road: this time it's the body of the drifter who is gently but unceremoniously dumped on top of the mattress to be carried home and cared for along with the mattress he's laid on.

These long takes allow us ample time to view the wearing out of the body in the process of reproductive labor, to contemplate the remains of laboring bodies and the laboring body as a remainder of its exertions. While the first few moments of this tableau could be physical comedy, by the end, it is also a lesson in exhaustion and endurance for the spectator as well as the bodies on screen, thematizing the failures of infrastructure and social welfare that conditions their world into a form of training in living with the chronic nature of structural violence. Here, as in every other long take in this film, it is the absence of the cut that makes its presence felt: an absence marked by the expectation of its eventual arrival and its ongoing deferral. This extended scene affectively shifts registers from the comic to the tragic and eventually to the merely boring or exhausting as we watch more and more of almost nothing happen.



Figure 2. Rawang and the drifter cross paths.

Within the world of the film, it appears that a complex interplay of inhuman forces, all arbitrary and impersonal—most explicitly the smog—render the onscreen figures completely exhausted and unable to move. While the paralyzed man is horizontal in the first scene, the other figures also slowly drift downward into their own forms of stillness, manifesting an attrition of physical capacity that occurs in the very activity of existence. If *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone* is about anything, it is about the chronic violence of reproductive labor in the face of the destruction of the social as such. What the film makes visible through the bodies of the characters is that exhaustion is a condition of temporal continuity, a chronic condition. Exhaustion is an effect of time's passing and the object's continuity. This becomes even more apparent when we consider the entirety of Tsai's films, where we see this attrition take place on just one laboring body: that of Lee Kang-Sheng.

Jean Ma has written about Tsai's attention to Lee's body, an enduring concern for the filmmaker whose most recent film, *Days* (2020), strips the narrative even further down into a sequence of scenes that document Lee's degenerative illness and search for a cure, which he briefly finds within the film in the capable hands of the massage therapist and migrant worker, Anong Hounghueangsy, whose presence also echoes the figure of Rawang from *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone*. While *Days* largely consists of long takes of these two men and their domestic lives in Taipei and Bangkok respectively, Ma argues that the "durational accumulation of visual details can exert a counterindexical force even as they faithfully capture a preexisting nonfictional world" (2022a, 16) focusing attention on the endurance of the body and its materiality rather than providing more insight into the psychic reality of the characters.

Elena Gorfinkel points out that this poses a particular problem for our understanding of cinema, which is often understood as the capture of bodies in motion through a unified diegetic time. Yet, these exhausted bodies on screen indicate the inverse: the passing of time, and the enduring of the body, or what Gorfinkel has called "enduration." Through readings of Kelly Reichardt's *Wendy and Lucy*, and the Dardennes' *Rosetta*, Gorfinkel argues that the emergence of this kind of sleepy figure of exhausted labor in recent art cinema is to be viewed as cinematic meditations on the post-Fordist expansion of work time

into leisure time, and the chronic fatigue of an increasingly proletarianized workforce. J. D. Rhodes locates the historical emergence of “art cinema” in the mid-1960s alongside the crises of surplus labor engendered by the increasing mechanization of industrial labor under post-Fordism and the emergence of the category of “immaterial labor,” connecting the stylistic of interpretive difficulty and ambiguity in art cinema to the historical conditions of the political economy within which it emerges.<sup>4</sup> I follow Rhodes’s suggestion here that the aesthetic of slowness in art cinema, particularly the long takes and absence of the cut, lay bare the problem of labor not only for the bodies on screen but also for the spectator. Rhodes reads the scenes of domestic labor in Chantal Akerman’s classic *Jeanne Dielman* as a cinematic investigation and corrosion of earlier art cinema’s investment in portraying individual interiority; instead, the long takes of domestic labor insist on the material difficulty of care work. Similarly, I would argue that Tsai’s careful attention to the reproductive labor that occurs in *I Don’t Want to Sleep Alone*, from Rawang’s patient cleaning of the drifter’s body to the nurse’s brisk care for the paralyzed man, and the spectatorial labor of enduring such long takes, shifts focus from the labors on screen to our embodied labor in front of it.

How long will we sit here watching almost nothing happen? And to what end? Rhodes argues that art cinema’s aesthetic difficulty can be viewed as an extension of the problem of surplus labor under post-Fordism. In his reading “art cinema itself—the attitudes, preoccupations, affects, and yes, the labors that it inculcates and extracts from its spectators” is a “mode of absorbing the surplus labor power” of an educated middle class (Rhodes, 104). While this is of course true and extends to all forms of entertainment in distinct ways, I would suggest that the specific form of the long take and the endurance it demands, serves as an affective training ground for an audience granted a certain spectatorial distance from the forms of reproductive labor on display. For those of us who are not unnamed itinerant drifters unable to find work in a strange city and find ourselves sitting in film festivals and arthouse cinemas watching such difficult labor, the long takes of reproductive labor on screen provide us with a spectatorial experience of watching societal collapse at a distance, generating our own forms of value that contribute to the international division of different forms of reproductive labor.

Is there a continuum between the immaterial labor of film spectatorship and art cinema appreciation and the reproductive labor represented on screen? What do we want to see when we look at these bodies at work? This is the question that the film raises for us multiple times throughout by weaving our spectatorial desire to see something through the embodied discomfort of seeing too much of almost nothing. As I will outline in the next section, the film ultimately reframes this loosely Marxist line of questioning about art cinema's immaterial labor into a psychoanalytic one by making visible the enduring affective structure of anxiety, which cuts across the different registers of violence under consideration here from the psychic to the sociological and laying bare the embodied intersection of the libidinal and political economy. In *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone*, this conceptual knot is laid bare in a scene of sexual violence that occurs about two-thirds of the way through the film.

The scene begins with the same mirrored reflection in which we see the nurse massaging her employer while the paralyzed man lies in his bed behind them (figure 3). The lady interrupts her massage by gently holding the nurse's hand and applying some lotion on it, a gesture that initially appears to be the first recognition of the nurse's labor that we have seen so far. This sweet moment of care for the care worker quickly turns into a scene of violation as the lady leads the nurse by her hand to the paralyzed man on the bed. Once there, she calmly



Figure 3. The nurse massages her boss.

inserts the nurse's hand into the paralyzed man's underwear, forcing her to give him a hand job. While the nurse tries to resist, the paralyzed man betrays no emotion, continuing to stare in silence toward the ceiling. The entirety of the scene unfolds in front of the mirror's reflection, and the camera's placement once again locates us as spectators on both sides of the action. We are perversely approaching the cinephilic fantasy of total vision, while simultaneously playing out the impossibility of such vision precisely because the camera, as one object among the others in the frame, cannot exceed its material boundedness in time and space: even as it promises us the voyeuristic satisfaction of serving as a prosthetic extension of our embodied limits.

Watching the scene in the mirror's reflection (figure 4) lends an air of impersonality to the violence unfolding before us, the doubling of technical mediation—both mirror and camera—doubles down on the mechanical labor of reflection, automatically reflecting and capturing anything that is placed in front of them. Except, as I already discussed above, this uncanny reflection is still missing the spectator who is nevertheless clearly present, attested to by the very feelings of embodied discomfort one feels in watching the scene unfold. The earlier unease at the absence of our reflection on screen turns into the stronger negative reaction of discomfort as the violation continues, chronically accruing an affective density that gathers momentum even though barely any actions are registered on the screen.



Figure 4. Reflecting violation.

The visual splintering of the nurse's body, with her hand in one frame of the mirror and the rest of her body visible in another, as well as the minor mechanical movement of her hand being dragged back and forth, carries a perverse echo of the mechanical automation of the mirror and the camera. The nurse's initial resistance gives way to silent, jerky movements as if the visual fracturing of her body was also a psychic fracture, a separation between hand and embodied subject. The scene's extended take forces us to endure our own discomfort in this visual representation of nonconsensual labor and sexual violation. This gift of temporal plenitude is experienced as violent because of what is absent within the frame: the signifiers of the subject's desire on screen. While the nurse visibly resists her subjection, the paralyzed man appears unable to consent to the tasks being performed on him. Both figures remain mute, their desires opaque to the viewer; and it is this absence of relation that provokes anxiety and discomfort. If, for example, both figures gestured their assent or enjoyment of these actions, the scene's affective register would shift from anxiety and dread to a whole range of other affective responses ranging from titillation to disinterest. In other words, the scene evokes anxiety as a signal of an experience that is both palpable yet missing signification: we don't know what these onscreen figures want.

### **ANXIETY, MEDIATED (NOT NOTHING REDUX)**

*Anxiety is when there appears in this frame something which is already there much closer to home.*

—Jacques Lacan, *Seminar X: Anxiety*

It is easy enough to observe that we live in an anxiogenic world, one where paying attention to current events involves constantly confronting a litany of threats to survival: a raging pandemic, rising temperatures, warming oceans, environmental destruction, the militarization and increased brutality of policing against Black and Brown people transnationally, the election of authoritarian governments, endless wars, the dismantling of social welfare institutions, the targeting of queer and trans children, the ongoing forms of sexual violence and misogyny, as well as the impending obliteration of nuclear disas-

ter. This inexhaustible list of contemporary horrors makes it obvious enough to understand why anxiety is seemingly in the air: palpable through an offhand comment or overheard conversation, an update shared on a friend's newsfeed about flooding in a faraway land, or news broadcasts about raging fires on another coast: all made ever more literal by the existence of invisible airborne pathogens leading to a global pandemic.

Closer to the concerns of this writing, anxiety is easily apparent in the explosion of academic debates within the humanities on problems of defining and representing the Anthropocene as our current epoch, particularly symptomatic in the proliferation of terms that attempt to capture the causes and gestalt of the contemporary moment including Capitalocene, Plantationocene, and Chthulucene (cf. Haraway; Moore; Yusoff). I raise these terms not to debate their merits but rather to point out that the very existence and vehemence of the debates surrounding these terms betray the atmosphere of anxiety within which our intellectual work is being undertaken.

What exactly is anxiety? Psychoanalytically speaking, it is an affect that has to do with something that is not nothing. As early as in 1895, Sigmund Freud had denoted anxiety as a signal and an affect. While his initial forays into anxiety focused on castration and repression,<sup>5</sup> in his later texts, particularly, *Inhibition, Symptoms, and Anxiety* (1959/2001), Freud develops his argument of anxiety as an affective trace or signal of danger, a reaction that originates in the traumatic experience of birth. Trauma itself is defined as the experience of absolute helplessness (*hilflosigkeit*), first encountered by the infant who is completely dependent on another for survival. Anxiety's occurrence as a signal of danger then warns us of an impending trauma: a potential threat against which the subject feels helpless (166). Freud argues that this sense of anxiety is experienced when the danger is indefinite and without a specific object. Indeed, if there were a specific object of danger, that would inspire fear instead. Anxiety is a signal that lacks an object cause, and its familiarity comes from the sense of traumatic repetition—it is an affective sense of something out of place, displaced from the original traumatic experience and relocated temporally into the presentiment of a future state. Already in Freud's work we see the kernel of the form of anxiety I described in the image: as a signal of something missing yet palpably felt. However, for Freud, there is still



an interval between anxiety and the threat it warns of, a temporal distance between the affective signal and its certain future. Freud remains inadequate for thinking anxiety's contemporary manifestation largely because the temporal delay implies a sense of linear progression, which he outlines as, "anxiety—danger—helplessness (trauma)" (1959/2001, 166). However, the experiences of helplessness I've described so far as anxiety inducing, from the experience of watching environmental disasters at a distance, to the passivity of spectating cinematic violence, are contemporary with the signal of anxiety rather than in its aftermath.

Jacques Lacan's reformulations of Freudian anxiety reorient its structure from temporal to topological. While Freud insists on anxiety's specific quality as being without object, Lacan insists that anxiety is "not without" an object: it is not nothing. In fact, anxiety has a specific object, that which in Lacan's topology is designated as *objet a*. We can already sense *objet a* in the absence that inspires anxiety: the unease one senses in the missing reflection in the mirror in the first scene of the film already indexes the cinephilic desire to see something when what is found is nothing. But it is not just any form of nothing, the scene specifically captures nothing enframed.

In a passage that strikingly echoes this exact scene in the film,<sup>6</sup> Lacan describes anxiety's appearance in the reflection of a hypothetical mirror:

This mirror allows the subject to see something from a point located somewhere within the space of the mirror, a point that isn't directly perceivable for him. In other words, I don't necessarily see my eye in the mirror, even if the mirror is helping me to perceive something that I wouldn't see otherwise. What I mean by this is that the first thing to be put forward concerning the structure of anxiety—and which you always neglect in the observations because you're fascinated by the content of the mirror and you forget its limits—is that anxiety is framed. (2016a, 73)

It is *objet a* that is the invisible occupant of the frame—unseen yet indexed by the anxious certainty of its presence. *Objet a* is thus not a phenomenal object; in fact, in his later seminars, Lacan repeatedly insists that this object has no substance or being as such. Instead, it is postulated or inducted: "We observe desire, and from this observation of desire we induce the cause as something objectivized" (2016b, 26). This also allows us to reorder Freud's linear progression into one of

levels: while the object cause (objet a) is present as a real effect of the image, it is not visible at the level of the symbolization. Todd McGowan (2013) argues that objet a is the cinematic object par excellence, one that is evoked through a range of aesthetic strategies including the close-up, montage, and gestures, as moments that puncture the linear narrative of films with the signifying gap that introduces objet a and courts cinephilic desire.

This understanding of the structure of anxiety: as a certain affective, embodied signal indexing a traumatic helplessness that remains unsymbolized or difficult to put into language (not enough in the realm of the symbolic, in Lacanian terms) allows us to understand the common occurrence of the affective response of anxiety to the disparate scenarios I evoked earlier: reframing the problem of spectatorial complicity in exploitation into a sense of mute helplessness and a loss of understanding.

Colette Soler, in her elaboration on Lacan's theory of affects, argues that this is the dominant affect of capitalism. She translates Lacan's use of the French term *angoisse* as anguish rather than anxiety, stressing the valence of absolute destitution that adheres as an existential condition rather than a temporary feeling. Soler's claim, which is tested repeatedly in Tsai's films, is that the dominant mood of capitalism is anguish because it is the logic of capital that destroys social bonds, replacing subjective attachments with their objectification through commodities. Anguish, in Soler's writing, describes the loss of social symbolization and the attendant loss of subjectivity. Instead, humans understand their social relations through a world of commodities,<sup>7</sup> appearing to themselves in their own objectified form: their laboring capacity.

*Sleep* makes these arguments literal: populating the diegesis with figures who have no names and seem unable or unwilling to speak to each other. Their greatly inhibited social interactions are largely limited to forms of reproductive labor. Brief moments of intimacy most often appear mediated through specific objects: the drifter gives the nurse a plastic light in a rare display of genuine affection. He flirts with her by knocking over her tray of teacups, even sensually stealing a sip before she runs back to work. In Rawang's world, the mattress repeatedly appears as an object that requires collective effort, its transport, cleaning, and use generating the only intimacy he shares with his roommates and the drifter. It even inspires his final rage, when the drifter steals the

mattress so he can have sex with the nurse: ultimately it becomes the site for all three figures to share their final collective embrace. While all these examples illustrate Soler's point, these discussions of anxiety also give us a mode of reading the singularity of cinematic objects.

Anxiety, which is always enframed, only appears in what Eugénie Brinkema has called the "mise n'en scene." Anxiety needs to be read, that is, in "what is not put into the scene; what is put into the non-scene, and what is not enough in the scene" (46). It requires us to follow the multiple ways in which absence structures the world.

Tsai has also linked his use of the long take to the problem of anxiety. Discussing his editing choices during an interview, he explains:

So, for instance, in some films, to show that the hero has been waiting for quite a time you'll be shown five cigarette stubs in the ashtray. Normally, for a scene like that I will film the character for as long as it takes him to smoke five cigarettes. That's real time, but it's very difficult to handle because the audience will get bored. But I think I do this deliberately because I want them to feel that the hero *is in a state of anxiety*, waiting for something that may not happen, etc. I don't just want them to know logically that the hero has been waiting for a long time; no, I also want them to feel this real waiting time. (Rivière 1999)

Here, Tsai equates the feeling of anxiety with its formalization in the long take, a choice he makes with the risk of courting boredom and narrates it as the "real time," that is, the duration of the embodied experience. It is perhaps intuitive to read Tsai's remarks about the "real time" in this scene as an attempt to dissipate the mediation of the screen into the immediacy of shared experience between the bodies on screen and those offscreen, as the theorists of slowness above suggest. However, an attention to anxiety as the affective signal that this form inspires requires rethinking such idealist understandings of the relationship between the diegetic world and the profilmic reality it evokes. Anxiety demands a closer attention to what exactly is the "real" that arises in the relation between spectator and image.

In reading Tsai's films, I draw on two genealogies of understanding the real in the "real time" of the long take, and they both converge in the problematic of what is missing in the image. The first, which I have discussed above, is the real that is evoked as an absence or gap in signification: objet a. The second genealogy of the real draws on debates within film theory, particularly the writings of André Bazin

and the critics associated with the journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Bazin's theorization of the long take, and his broader valorization of cinema's link to reality has been discussed at length for over half a century within film studies, and I will not rehash those debates here (cf. Henderson; McCabe; Wollen; Rosen; and Andrew). However, for the purposes of this writing, it is relevant to attend to his initial elaboration of the long take aesthetic and the phenomenological claim of temporal realism that he is most well known for. For Bazin, the development of the long take aesthetic in documentary film, such as in Flaherty's attention to the entire duration of an event, and more clearly in his discussion of neorealism—the unflinching focus on the entire scene of action unfolding before the camera—marks what he describes as, “a form of self-effacement before reality” (Bazin 2005a, 29). Such a claim would neatly align him with the slow cinema scholarship I began this essay with. However, as later commentaries discuss, the apparently naïve understanding of temporal realism in Bazin and his valorization of the humanism of the long take, are complicated by Bazin's insistence that “real” that is being evoked is not simply the profilmic reality. Instead, it is precisely what is missing in the image and evoked in it through the language of cinema. This reading of Bazin is already apparent in his comments on neorealism, where he argues, “The flesh and blood of reality are no easier to capture in the net of literature or cinema than are gratuitous flights of the imagination” (2005b, 25). He goes on to state this more forcefully:

Realism in art can only be achieved in one way—through artifice . . . We would define as “realist,” then all narrative means tending to bring an added measure of reality to the screen. Reality is not to be taken quantitatively. The same event, the same object, can be represented in various ways. Each representation discards or retains various of the qualities that permit us to recognize the object on the screen . . . At the conclusion of this inevitable and necessary “chemical” action, for the initial reality there has been substituted an illusion of reality composed of a complex of abstraction (black and white, plane surface), of conventions (the rules of montage, for example) and of authentic reality. It is a necessary illusion but it quickly induces a loss of awareness of the reality itself, which becomes identified in the mind of the spectator with its cinematographic representation. (Bazin, 2005b, 26–27)

Phil Rosen, commenting on these passages in Bazin, argues that Bazin's theorization of the long take already proposes the problem of

mediation (2001, 13), of the film's aesthetic task of mediating a reality that cannot be easily captured in the net of the cinematic image; instead this requires an aesthetic cultivation that involves the spectator's own understanding of the reality that is being invoked but isn't immediately given in the image. Dudley Andrew (2010) develops a longer discussion of this line of argument in Bazin and traces its evolution through the writings of a range of film critics associated with *Cahiers du Cinéma* who were influenced by Bazin. He summarizes this fundamental insight through a quote from the film critic Serge Daney, "The cinema has a fundamental rapport with reality and that the real is not what is represented" (5). While the debates on what constitutes "realism" in Bazin and in cinema more broadly involve a lively thread within film theory from its earliest moment (one that I cannot summarize here),<sup>8</sup> Andrew's invocation of this maxim condenses the structure of the contradictory concept of the real under discussion: cinema has a rapport with reality, yet the real is not represented. Taking his cues from a close reading of Bazin, Andrew goes on to argue that the cinephilic attachment to cinema is drawn not to its spectacular pleasures but to the haunting absence and the "aesthetic of discovery" (48) that structures the plenitude and guides the eye to continue its search across the screen. In Andrew's discussion of the *Cahiers* line of film criticism, it is the search for the world that cinema fosters, precisely because it is structured through absence, made literal in the techniques of editing that provide a film with its rhythms: where ellipses and omissions convey a phenomenological experience of reality by subtracting images and imposing structure through the introduction of cuts. In Andrew's reframing of Bazin's insights, it is the ability of cinema to elicit expectations and for the long take to thwart the ease of narrative closure by fostering a spectatorial position that requires attentiveness to the image, one that is fundamentally insufficient purely as mechanism of recording, that grants the image its dignity and the weight of its truth claims (89). For example, in a common horror movie aesthetic, the use of handheld shots and a shaky camera results in blurry footage, all these techniques convey the experience of a subject in real physical danger or psychic distress while making very little reality visible on the surface of the image. Such techniques are the "necessary illusion" in Bazin's words, that foster the experience of the real by the spectator.

In Tsai's narration of the fictional scene of watching a figure smoke a cigarette and wait, the figure on screen is waiting for something to happen within the diegesis. But what exactly are we, as spectators, waiting for when we're anxiously awaiting some action to happen on screen? What do we desire in our wish for the cut? I'd suggest that this desire for the scene to end, especially such a scene in which we're provided with the multiplied view on the action as the one I discussed above, is a desire for narrative closure or subjective ordering. The presence of a cut implies the work of construction, and the satisfaction it provides arises from the possibility of finding a cause for this effect—perhaps the next scene will provide justice for this violation; perhaps we can learn something about these characters that would explain such moments of discomfort. At the very least, its artificial interruption could provide comfort in the fact of that artifice itself, its implication that some absent figure arranged these images in a logical sequence, even if that logic is currently illegible. In short, it is a desire for some kind of symbolic intervention to structure this affective plenitude: a search for a missing cause. The absence of the cut thus cultivates the affective experience of anxiety and exhaustion precisely because it marks the frustration of spectatorial desire and the dissolution of cinematic conventions; it also forces us to sit with an event that is at once violent and seemingly without narrative cause.

Let me reiterate this observation within the broader argument I have developed so far: the long take aesthetic and the attendant bad affect of anxiety signal the expectation of and thwarted desire for narrative explanation or subjective ordering for some kind of intervention that implies an invisible cause for the events unfolding on screen. I'd argue that the emergence of this long take aesthetic needs to be read within the broader shift to immaterial labor and the generalized anxiety provoked by the dissolution of the structured ordering of time between production and reproduction and the attendant dissolution of subjectivity into the destitution and objectification of desire that Soler identifies and is made literal in Tsai's film.

While the laboring bodies in Tsai's films raise fundamental questions about the relationship between reproductive labor and waged work, between desire and political economy, they do so within a particular environment rendered as impersonally and without symbolic markers as the characters themselves. The film deals with space much

the same way it deals with people: there are hardly any proper names, no explicit historical markers, and barely any personal claims to either selfhood or ownership. Yet the environment that the characters wander through does fundamentally shape their daily lives: from the construction site and the giant pool of water that Rawang works into the cramped quarters that the nurse and her employer live and work within, and finally to the smog that dramatically settles over the city at the end. In the following section I argue for an understanding of environmental anxiety within the film that mirrors the anxieties about environmental disaster more broadly, exploring how this film grapples with visual representations of weather and climate to reflect on cinema's role in reflecting the anxieties of the Anthropocene.

### THE WEATHER IN TSAI

The arc of Tsai's films has focused on the body of Lee Kang-Sheng, the camera patiently following his embodied form as it ages, beginning from his youthful role in Tsai's first feature, *Rebels of a Neon God* (1995), to his most recent document of Lee's struggle with his illness and search for a cure in *Days* (2020), the films are an archive of embodied duration and exhausting labor. While it is commonplace now to find reviews of Tsai's films that emphasize Lee's role in them—indeed, it is obvious to anyone who has seen them all that these films are an archive of Lee's body—the other animating force in the narrative is the inhospitable environment within which characters find themselves.

In *The River*, Lee's Hsiao Kang develops a mysterious neck pain after spending some time in a polluted river while playing the role of a dead body in a film shoot. In *The Hole*<sup>9</sup> (1999), Lee's character is largely confined to the small shop he runs and his apartment building located in a cordoned-off section of the city as a mysterious plague affects Taipei, making people act like insects before losing their sanity and eventually their lives. The narrative of this dystopian satire of the Y2K bug and fears of technological collapse focuses on the embodied form in which this illness manifests: infected adults crawl around on hands and knees, scampering into dank corners of dilapidated buildings as government officials dressed as exterminators spray buildings down and hunt for the sick hiding in the detritus of urban life. While

we're carefully watching Lee's body for signs of infection, it is the incessant rain and overwhelming damp that finally makes his world and that of his neighbor (Yang Kuei-mei) unlivable. A small leak in his pipes quickly turns into to a giant hole in his living room floor, while Yang, who lives below him, finds her apartment flooded and the wall-paper peeling off her walls as the water seeps into the structure of the entire building. Yang's absurdist solution appears to be stockpiling toilet paper, as if she could wipe up the torrential rain outside.

*Wayward Cloud*, loosely considered a sequel to *What Time Is It There?* (2001) reunites Lee's Hsiao Kang and Chen Shiang-Chyi's characters in a Taipei that is now facing a drought, with watermelons quickly coming to play a dominant role in slaking thirsts of all kinds. Several films later, Lee's character in *Stray Dogs* is employed as a human advertisement. He stands on the median of a busy intersection, a still figure surrounded by the buzzing swarm of dense traffic with only a plastic sheet to protect him from the wind and rain, the wind blowing so hard that we see his body quiver with the effort of standing still. While this film is still set in the urban milieu of Taipei, the city's wealth and material comforts appear as inaccessible to the unnamed and unhoused figures on screen including Lee and two children in his care, as if they lived in the wilderness.

In *Sleep*, the seedy hostel in which Rawang and the other migrant labor live and the cramped building where the nurse and her boss live and work already reflect the general decay of urban life, but it is the smog rolling in through the film that wears these bodies down into a state of exhaustion. The smog initially appears as an insignificant detail in the environment. It is first visible on screen as Rawang and the drifter fall asleep on the scavenged mattress together. Rawang has slowly nursed the drifter back to health, clearly betraying his desire for physical intimacy through the longing looks and tender ways in which he cares for the drifter, while the drifter appears equivocal in his responses to this affection. Nevertheless, they share this mattress and fall asleep one night in the empty building where Rawang works.

Across the darkness of the scene, a faint wisp of smoke floats by, initially an inconsequential detail of the environment, accompanied by the mournful and indistinct sounds of traffic. By the next scene, this insignificant atmospheric detail creeps into the rest of the diegetic environment, entering through open windows and the holes in





Figure 5. Smoke wafts in while Rawang and the drifter are asleep.

buildings. A few minutes later, we see the paralyzed man's room again. This time, he is covered in a clear plastic sheet to protect him from the smoke that envelops his room. On either side of his bed are the nurse and her boss, each of them wearing makeshift cloth masks across their faces that provide little protection from the smog they are choking in. In the background, a voice from the radio speculates about the source of the smoke, blaming illegal migrants for their suffering. The smoke, we learn from the news, has become a matter of international diplomacy and is veering toward a humanitarian crisis as air pollution climbs to toxic levels, and there is a shortage of gas masks in the country. Unseen voices discuss the crisis, reflecting a range of opinions that sound like prescient responses to COVID. Their rapid speculation betrays a fundamental anxiety about how to survive this banal catastrophe, with little comfort or instruction provided to their public about managing the toxic environment in which they find themselves.

Throughout, the still camera frames the nurse and her boss's doomed attempts to protect the paralyzed man from the smoke with their ineffectual fans and plastic sheets. As the narrative wears on, the smoke fills every interior space, covering everything in a gray-brown haze, and characters wander about with faces covered in hospital masks and plastic bags. It even interrupts the drifter and nurse as they try to have sex, choking them as they hold each other on the mattress,

too exhausted from their shared coughing fits to continue with their attempts at physical pleasure.

Even this quick survey of the weather through the films of Tsai makes one basic fact clear: the lingering long takes contemplate the environmental degradation as the banal condition of urban life in metropolitan centers of Asia through which these figures wander. It is easy enough, for example, to see in the dense smog of Tsai's Kuala Lumpur the ongoing air pollution of Delhi or the torrential rains of Tsai's Taipei as the cinematic equivalent of the historic rainfall and flooding that affected over thirty-three million people in Pakistan in 2022. I raise these real-world comparisons not to suggest that these films faithfully represent these realities but rather to point to the exact problem of representation: How do we read the toxicity of the diegetic environment in relation to the toxicity of the world beyond the screen?

We can answer these questions in the terms already outlined: Tsai's films mediate the affective structure of anxiety and the anguished helplessness of living in a toxic world. More specifically, they mediate the sense of violence as that which accretes—a chronic condition that distends the temporal structure of cause and effect, its presence indexed through the affective excess of anxiety. In formalizing violence through its temporal accretions, these films make legible what Rob Nixon has termed “slow violence” (6), which describes the forms of environmental degradation and climate change that are accretive, durational, and often distended from or imperceptible in their origins. In Nixon's writing, “slow violence” names the recognition that the recently visible effects of environmental degradation are part of longer, sometimes hidden histories of political economic discrimination and highlights the fact that their effects unfold in uncertain temporal scales. Examples of slow violence include the long-term public health catastrophe in the Marshall Islands due to extensive atomic bomb testing by the United States and the effects of nuclear radiation, or the enormous death toll and ongoing health crisis in Bhopal, India, including genetic defects and chronic illnesses experienced by communities that survived the toxic gas leak from the Dow chemical plant in 1984. Nixon's conception of “slow violence” and environmental disaster is exemplary of the chronic problem that arises in debates around climate change and its representation. As he observes, “The explicitly temporal emphasis of slow violence allows us to keep front and center the representational

challenges and imaginative dilemmas posed not just by imperceptible violence but by imperceptible change whereby violence is decoupled from its original causes by the workings of time" (11).

"Slow violence" attends, particularly, to the uneven distribution of structural neglect: the higher rates of pollution in poorer neighborhoods housing Black and Brown people in predominantly white settler countries including the United States and Canada. And the increased burden of climate change borne by the former colonies and poorest nation-states in the world appear through Nixon's analysis as violent effects of actions undertaken by the wealthy and the powerful to protect their interests. We can read in Nixon's historically oriented analysis a shared concern with what political philosopher Achille Mbembe has diagnosed as "necropolitics" or the consigning to death of certain populations as the price paid for the survival and management of (wealthy, colonial) life itself in the era of the Anthropocene. We can also locate in Nixon's attunement to the effects of such capitalist resource extraction on the racialized and colonized populations an understanding of slow violence as the ongoing effect of racial capitalism alongside what Lauren Berlant has theorized as "slow death" (95). As Nixon observes, "Slow violence provides prevaricative cover for the forces that have the most to profit from inaction" (40). In other words, the diagnosis of slow violence and the indeterminacy of its causes, whether through the intentional cultivation of doubt in climate science, or the absence of corporate accountability for environmental pollution, often directly leads to profits for those who are direct perpetrators of such violence. As Nixon continues, the transnational legislative infrastructure of the Washington Consensus has fueled the rapid globalization and commodification of vast swaths of the planet, and "heightened capitalism's innate tendency to abstract in order to extract, intensifying the distancing mechanisms that make the sources of environmental violence harder to track and multinational environmental answerability harder to impose" (41).

What is "abstracted" in Nixon's words, when we discuss slow violence, is the recognition that slow violence's protracted effects on the environment appear distended from their causes: the objectification of the environment into resources for the extraction of surplus value. Raymond Williams's (1980) Marxist critique of the idea of Nature as a singular or abstract category, independent of human inter-

vention, clarifies Nixon's claims. Williams argues that both Man and Nature work as abstractions that foster the logic of capitalist exploitation by separating the complex field of social and natural relationships into raw material and products: separating human collectivity into producers, products, and consumers; and separating, once more, products from by-products. Williams's insistent recognition is that the "product," such as coal and the smog that arises from its consumption, is the result of human activity. Indeed, as Williams argues, human bodies are also, in this sense, products of the same system of relations that produce the toxic environment we live in (1980, 83).

It is also useful at this point to return to Karl Marx's theorization of "labor" (1992) that Williams is drawing on to make these observations. In his theorization of the production of surplus value through labor, Marx begins from an understanding of man and nature as indelibly entwined or co-constitutive and labor as the mediation between these seemingly distinct entities.<sup>10</sup>

In Marx's complex description of labor, it is a meeting ground between several forces of nature, one of which is a person constituted as an individual laborer through this encounter even as he constitutes the nature he finds into raw material and eventually into objects that accrue social or exchange value and thereby turn into commodities (1992, 283).

Read in this light, Tsai's films provide complex meditations on labor and slow violence, moving beyond the loose narrative focus on alienated individual laborers and their exhausting attempts to find work. The ruined environments in which these characters find themselves are also aesthetic representations of alienated labor's structural exploitation and systematized neglect, leading to the destruction of human and nonhuman nature simultaneously.<sup>11</sup>

Let us return, for example, to the scene of the smog in *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone*. The smoke appears as a nonhuman agent of slow violence, seemingly untethered from any laboring body and antithetical to human labor itself, making it harder for the bodies on screen to continue their work. It also appears to affect everyone, though even in its immediate embodied effects we can see the difference between those healthy enough to continue surviving in the toxic atmosphere—Rawang, the drifter, and the nurse carry on with their lives by wearing plastic bags over their faces—while other unknown bodies pass out and litter the scene in the bar and streets. Yet it is clearly also a material

trace of labor and resource extraction. To state this observation in the language of cliché: no smoke without fire. And no fire without some human intervention elsewhere, burning matter and releasing the carbon into the atmosphere. The smoke is the material trace of the social relations of labor generating surplus value. As the smog swirls in the light and the figures stand in silence, the whirring fan is interrupted by the sound of newscasters on the radio who run through a range of uncertain scenarios to provide explanations for the smog. Their anxious attempts within the diegesis to grasp at knowledge signal the desire to comprehend the ambient toxicity, to isolate causes and effects, and to provide meaning to this excessive phenomenal experience. Once again, an attention to anxiety's formalization within the diegesis reframes the smog from a merely phenomenal detail into an anxiogenic affect. This is made apparent in the ambient anxiety conveyed accretively through the visual metaphors of helpless figures wandering through a literal fog—and the invisible subjects of the radio broadcast conveying a related wandering through their speech—in search of an explanation to ease their collective anguish.

### SLOW VIOLENCE AND SLOW CINEMA

In *The Climate of History* (2021), his influential contribution to debates in eco-criticism, Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued that the epoch of the Anthropocene in which humans have become geological agents requires a new form of humanistic thought, one that exceeds the critique of capitalism pursued by Marxism. Chakrabarty elaborates on this point by arguing that because the history of climate change cannot be entirely encapsulated within the history of capitalism (which he locates within the category of “human history”), having emerged as a “combination of intended and unintended consequences of a cascade of human decisions and actions, and it *shows, only through scientific analysis*, the long-term planetary effects of our actions as a species.” (2021, 44, emphasis mine.) There are several problems with his argument. For example, his separation of “geological history” and “human history” utilizes disciplinary categories such as “geology” and “biology” as ontological distinctions when they are only representations produced through scientific discourse (i.e., products of

human understanding and labor). His presentist claim that these distinctions have now collapsed is rendered incomprehensible given that such concepts were never distinct in the first place. It also leads him to conclude that there is no aesthetic mediation adequate to translating these crises to the scale of human perception. As Sandeep Banerjee, in his generative critique of Chakrabarty's argument observes,

By equating labor to a geological force—an unthinking physical force, unmoored from its societal context—these theorists also provide a fetishized representation of it. Further, this dehumanization of labor also dehumanizes human beings, reducing them to the level of mere matter, obfuscating social hierarchies. The category of the Anthropocene, then, conceptualizes, and represents living labor (and the human subject) from the perspective of capital, as an object or thing. (2017, 6)

For the purposes of this writing, the point here is that the anxieties of climate catastrophe inspired by the Anthropocene demand a clearer understanding of mediation, of what can and cannot be represented and to what ends. Rather than lapsing into conceptual obfuscations engendered by terms such as nonhuman agency or geological agents, an attention to mediation allows us to understand the relationship between the phenomenological appearance of seemingly stochastic, immediate, and inexplicable events of weather as accretive effects of labor, following Marx and Williams, where labor is a relation between human and non-human nature.

Indeed, as Chakrabarty acknowledges explicitly, the Anthropocene condition is only legible through the emergence of climate science, that is, of anthropogenic techniques to mediate and represent the concept of the “climate.” To the extent that cinema is also a technique of mediation, we can turn to cinema to examine the ways in which it mediates these concerns.

Film and media studies has lately developed a range of arguments about cinema's role and the possibilities for grappling with environmental disaster. While some scholars have turned to the dystopian narratives of climate catastrophe or human intervention in the environment in narrative cinema as potentially educating viewers into ecological consciousness (Kaplan 2015), others hold up experimental aesthetics (MacDonald) as perhaps helping us form more progressive relationships to environment or by reading—or at least by inspiring—some uncertainty and defamiliarizing our relationship to the image (Fay 2022).

This concept of anxiety I outlined above already gets us past certain false starts around the question of film's role in representing or diagnosing environmental catastrophe by acknowledging the toxicity of an environment that has historically been produced and managed for the profit of some and to the detriment of others. The long histories of colonial extraction have rendered life in the postcolony an inhospitable one, with the effects of slow violence borne unevenly across populations: most clearly evident in the organized abandonment of the most marginalized communities to bear the worst effects of slow violence.

What follows from this insight in terms of cinema's task eliminates the kind of environmental disaster narratives that set us in an apocalyptic near future to show us horrors that inspire us to act in the present. Instead, tracking anxiety requires attending to the attritional and palpable effects of what I've described as "chronic violence," linking its appearance within the image with the broader sociological claim of Nixon's slow violence.

It is beyond the scope of this writing to summarize the full scope of debates on environmental criticism in film and media studies,<sup>12</sup> particularly when understood through the broader question of mediation as such, rather than cinema as a specific medium. However, as the coeditors to the special issue of "Media Climates," James Cahill, Brian Jacobson, and Weihong Bao summarize, there are three broad strands of argument that recent film and media studies writing has used to consider this question (2022, 3). First, that cinema as an industrial technology not only represents anthropogenic climate change but also embodies it through its origins in the studio system and its advancements in technologies aimed at producing and managing artificial environments. Second, that the camera as a technology allows a decentering of human vision. Third, that media technologies are often detrimental to our shared world, contributing to the destruction of natural resources and warming of the planet. All these three strands could be summarized by the basic Marxist insight that cinema as a product of human labor simultaneously reshapes the natural world that brings it into being.

However, as Jennifer Fay (2017) argues, there is a specific history to the role that cinema has played in the contemporary diagnosis of the Anthropocene. Fay's argument begins with the provocative claim that "the Anthropocene is to natural science what cinema, especially

early cinema, has been to human culture" (2017, 3) and goes on to observe that "cinema helps us to see and experience the Anthropocene as an aesthetic practice" (4). Fay's approach locates in the industrial origins of the technology the same anthropogenic creation and management of environment that is now a planetary problem. Her early examples include Buster Keaton's films on location and the nuclear test films produced in Nevada's Atomic Testing Site, where the occasion of filmmaking led to the elaborate production and destruction of built environments.

While Fay's initial argument emerges from the history of film, her later chapters read specific filmic texts for their documentation of an increasingly diminished and inhospitable world, situating digital filmmaking (no-analog) as the cinematic mode for representing the Anthropocene (as a no-analog world). In her reading of Jia Zhangke's *Still Life*, for example, she reads Jia's surrealist atmosphere enabled through his use of digital technology as a supplement to the genres of perceptual realism, indexicality, and witnessing, which she argues are the ethical terms of viewership inaugurated by celluloid (2017, 131). However, her reading of the film itself attends only to the literal objects on screen—the dam, the destroyed factories and homes, the everyday objects that denote the lives of the workers, and eventually the building that launches into the air. What remains unstated in such a reading of objects and their diminishment is what social relations they embody and reify beyond representing their mere quiddity.

In other words, what do these objects—and films as cinematic objects—mediate? I attend this closely to Fay's project because it is the most explicit theoretical attempt to reconcile the material history of filmmaking with the philosophical questions posed to film by slow violence. Yet, what remains unclear in Fay's work, and what I am attempting to work through here, is a mode of reading that is attentive to mediation as a conceptual problem and to attend to the problematic relationship between film and reality.

Mediation, drawing again on Raymond Williams's (2014) writing and in Anna Kornbluh's (2021) tracing of the term in his work, is "the sense making and sensuous rendering of the mode of production, a vocation for representation to render 'relatable' and thinkable the abstract, systemic conditions of social life." An aesthetic theory attentive to mediation necessarily challenges the understanding of aesthetic



texts as mere reflections of the world, or what I have located in Fay's reading as an attention to the objects on screen as mere reflections of the world they conjure beyond the screen. In Williams's words,

The most damaging consequence of any theory of art as reflection is that, through its persuasive physical metaphor (in which reflection simply occurs, within the physical properties of light, when an object or movement is brought into relation with a reflective surface—the mirror and then the mind [and we could add of the recording surface of the film]), it succeeds in suppressing the actual work on material—in a final sense, the material social process—which is the making of any art work. (1977, 97)

By reframing the problem of “slow violence” into one of mediation, I am suggesting that it is not a problem of whether films mediate the violence of environmental disaster; it is simply a given that, as cultural texts, they already do. The question is, rather, what mode of reading is attentive to the way in which such a world is mediated? The problem of mediation returns us to the maxim “Cinema has a rapport with the real, yet the real is not represented” and the seeming contradiction that it names.

In the case of *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone* this contradiction is formalized, as I've argued so far, through the affect of anxiety that accompanies the absence of the cut. In fact, the film itself carries a critique of reflection that echoes the insights that Williams advances here. For example, let us return once more to the scene of mirrored violence.



Figure 6. Violation's reflection.

The scene (figure 6) in which the camera seemingly captures the world in front of it just as the mirror merely reflects what is placed in front of it, in fact already fractures the scene across multiple surfaces. The mirror is itself an object of human labor, reflecting the laboring body placed before it. The only apparent movement, of a hand at work, reflects on the labor that violates both the body at work and the body being worked upon. If we, as spectators, are reflected in this scene, the only person with which to be mirrored is the body on the bed, forced into stillness as the violation unfolds. The scene's affective mediation of our discomfort thus already elaborates a critique of aesthetic reflection that also emerges, as argued above, in the broader debates around art cinema's aesthetic demands of immaterial labor. The questions of consent and desire alluded to earlier can also be rewritten here through a problematic split between "nature" understood as merely biological existence and human labor as a social process. As the scene unfolds, the nurse's forced labor appears increasingly mechanical while the paralyzed man's immobility renders him a merely natural object to be worked upon, his sexual pleasure seemingly irrelevant or subsumed to the biological need for sexual release. The caretaker's own role in this drama, her care for her charge through this violation, cuts a line between sexual release as merely biological and sexual relation as a social process that requires reproductive labor to occur.

### WASTING TIME

"Queers seem to have time to waste," observes Karl Schoonover in his critical response to the slow cinema debates (73). For Schoonover, as I've been arguing above, slow cinema's temporal interventions explore techniques of tethering value to time and labor to bodies. Schoonover goes on to argue that when we're "dickering over the use-value of the excessive image . . . we are suddenly taking a referendum on queerness, questioning the validity of queer lives. In the broadest sense, then, the debates over slow cinema may be about the question of queerness" (73).

Given the overwhelming attention to all forms of nonnormative desire in Tsai's films, including the homosociality of cinephilia itself, several critics have already discussed at length the queerness of Tsai's

films (Lim 2006; Lim 2014; Chan 2013; Chang 2015; Ma 2010, 2022a, 2022b; Martin 2003a, 2003b, 2003c; De Villiers 2022). In his recent monograph on the queer affects in Tsai's oeuvre, Nicholas de Villiers insists that the queerness of Tsai's films extends beyond his representations of same-sex desire. While Tsai himself has expressed a certain frustration at the repeated labeling of his films as "gay films" (Cheung), De Villiers argues that the queer affects in Tsai's films exceed the sense of queerness as a sexual orientation and instead models an understanding of queerness that deconstructs sexual identity and treats sexuality and desire as iterative acts (20). Developing a related line of argument, Rey Chow reads the scene of incestuous sexual intimacy in Tsai's earlier film, *The River*, as a challenge to heteronormative kinship structures within which the possibility of gay desire remains invisible.

When viewed within the terms of the argument I have developed so far, about the exhausting forms of reproductive labor on display, it is apparent that the drifter already invites a queer reading in his refusal of both productive and reproductive forms of labor. In refusing to get a job, money, or even a regular place to sleep, it is tempting to hold up the drifter as a model of the kind of queer antisociality or failure that queer theorists have argued for (Edelman; Freeman; Halberstam).

Despite the general absence of explicitly gay sex in the film, the tender intimacy of Rawang's care for the drifter and their intimate coupling, particularly on the mattress that they share, is impossible to ignore. The Mandarin title of the film, *hei yan quan*, literally translates to "black circles under the eyes" either as shadows from lack of sleep, or as traces of physical violence. The allusion to homophobic violence is reiterated in the repeated attention to the mattress, which plays such a pivotal role in the narrative. Tsai has explicitly linked his use of the mattress with the ongoing trials against sodomy that were underway in Malaysia at the time, when a high-ranking government official was accused of sodomy: the proof brought against him was a mattress carried into the court, allegedly as the site of this illegal coupling. The absurdity of a mattress serving as proof of sexual intimacy is reimaged in the film to perversely serve exactly that function. Rawang finds the drifter on the mattress in the nurse's attic and flies into a murderous rage, threatening to kill him. It is left ambiguous whether his rage is jealousy over the drifter's implied sexual relationship with the nurse, attested to by the mattress's presence in her space, or merely

its theft. What's left indeterminate, in other words, is the drifter's sexual desires. While I've repeatedly explained how the film thwarts spectatorial desire in its refusal of the cut, the lack of dialogue and continuity editing, and finally, in the character's refusal of expressivity, the characters' own desires particularly in relation to each other are also repeatedly thwarted: whether it is Rawang's desire for the drifter who never quite reciprocates and ultimately betrays him by stealing the mattress, or the drifter and the nurse whose repeated attempts at sexual intimacy are thwarted by the lack of privacy and then the smoke. However, the final scene arrives as if to rectify all these heartbreaks, giving us a scene of almost beatific queer intimacy.

In a six-minute long take, the scene begins with a black screen, followed by a few glimmers that break this monochromatic surface. These details inform us that it is nighttime, and we're staring at the surface of the black pool of water inside the construction site where Rawang works during the day. This building, which has already housed the scenes of homosociality between Rawang and the drifter, is now barely visible in the water's reflection. Eventually, the edge of the mattress appears in the top of the frame. And as the scene unfurls, the mattress floats down the screen, eventually followed by the small toy that the drifter had gifted the nurse as a sign of his affection. On the mattress lie the drifter Rawang and the nurse, both entangled in the gentle intimacy of rest. A haunting ballad sung by Lee Hsiang-lan (a cover of "Eternally," set to the music of Charlie Chaplin's *Limelight*) interrupts the spare soundscape of the film, a lullaby in the background for the sleepers who bob slowly down the screen. Once again the plaintive expression of desire in the title seems fulfilled, but this time it is the spectator who appears extraneous—a passive intruder rather than a conspirator to this fantasy of social relation. It is easy enough to read in this scene a kind of queer temporal interruption, the finding of a utopian queer social relation—one free of the animosity of interpersonal strife. Indeed, compared to the earlier scene where Rawang nearly kills the drifter for stealing the mattress and escaping with the nurse, it appears that this temporary intimacy is a respite from jealousy. Even the smog appears to have dissipated, leaving them in a brief interval of time outside the linear progression of diegetic temporality, momentarily freed from the endlessly accumulating horrors of their waking world.



Figure 7. Final scene, at rest.

Such speculations return to the crux of the question I have developed in this writing: about the relationship between the figures on screen and the figures in front of it. As I have argued so far, cinema is a technique of mediation rather than reflection, one that demands an attention to the absences enframed in the film as much as the presence it lures us with. Such an interpretation steers away from searching for models of queer life on screen or hopeful visions of a future. Instead, as I have illustrated so far, what *Sleep* mediates is the ambient anxiety of living in the present, a time of ongoing environmental disaster and the increasing commodification of social life. If there is a utopian impulse in Tsai's films (and I agree with Rey Chow's reading of his work that this is so), it stems from the ruthless open-endedness of each scene. Precisely because of the uncertainty that haunts each scene, the dissolution of narrative and the increasing abandonment of character and plot, the very anxiety that the film cultivates is also the possibility for it to end differently. Indeed, as anyone who has watched more than a few of Tsai's films knows, it is likely that the same figures will probably arrive into another unknown world only to grapple with new forms of immiseration. There are no heroes to be found here, only new configurations of unexpected intimacy. This is a quotidian insight to draw from this film, but it is also perhaps a basic reminder of what this study in late capitalist affect has provided: we need to invent forms of social relation that are not solely mediated by objects, even when those objects are cinematic.

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## Notes

1. Jean Ma's *Melancholy Drift* (2010) approaches a related set of questions around the aesthetics of temporal dislocation in Chinese cinema, theorizing the work of Tsai, Hou Hsiao-Hsien and Wong Kar Wai among others through their explorations of melancholia in relation to debates around national cinema and Chinese cinema's location within global art cinema.

2. Juan Llamas-Rodriguez's generative essay, "Toward a Cinema of Slow Violence" (2018) raises concerns relating to my writing, grappling with the cinematic representation of the violence of narcoculture through a reading of the film *Heli* (Amat Escalante, 2013). While Llamas-Rodriguez argues that the film's representations of violence exceed the extreme spectacles of torture that it contains, he nevertheless concludes that the "cinema of slow violence" is an orientation of the spectator to the film, that is, an ethical position of the spectator toward the image, whereas my argument is attentive to the slow violence that is mediated through the encounter between image and spectator.

3. For a very different approach to Tsai's temporal interventions, particularly in relation to the longer tradition of the long take in Taiwanese and Chinese cinema and the postcolonial condition, see Ma 2010 and Martin 2003c.

4. While I invoke the category of "art cinema" here in relation to Tsai, Ma (2010) provides a rich discussion of Tsai's films and the Taiwanese new wave (*xin dianying*) as problematizing what constitutes "art cinema" as a category.

5. While I won't trace the entire trajectory of Freud's thought on anxiety and its relation to other philosophical investigations on anxiety, Brinkema tracks some of these lines of thought more explicitly. For a more thorough discussion of Freud's changing understandings of anxiety, see James Strachey's "Editors Introduction" to Freud (1959/2001).

6. For a related reading of anxiety in cinema, see Kenneth Berger, "Cinema against Communication: Spectacle, Anxiety, and the Aesthetics of Refusal," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 31 no. 1 (2020): 1–35.

7. Jen-Yi Hsu grapples with a related set of questions about Tsai's representations of late capitalist globalization through readings of *The Hole* and *What Time Is It There?* See Hsu, 133–57.

8. While the problem of representing reality is central to almost every text of film theory from its earliest origins, some key texts that inform my thinking on temporality, realism, and narrative include Doane; Rosen; Margulies; and Nagib. In a related though distinct trajectory, Miriam Hansen's reading of Siegfried Kracauer's cinematic realism is also relevant to these questions.

9. For a longer discussion of *The Hole's* gender politics and environmental concerns see Chang, 25–44.

10. "Labour is, first of all, a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature. He confronts the materials of nature as a force of nature. He sets in motion the natural forces which belong to his own body, his arms, legs, head and hands, in order to appropriate the materials of nature in a form adapted to his own needs. Through this movement he acts on external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature." See Marx, 283.

11. For different approaches to the representations of "imperceptible" or slow violence, see Pringle.

12. Key texts include Mitman; Ingram; Bozak; Maxwell and Miller; Ivakhiv; Narraway and Pick; Starosielski and Walker; Cubitt; Fay; and Vaughan. See also the themed sections: Peterson and Uhlin; Guan and O'Brien.

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