In the Shadow of the Homoglobal:  
Queer Cosmopolitanism in Tsai Ming-liang's  
I Don't Want to Sleep Alone  

Ani Maitra*  

In this paper, I ask: what does queerness mean once global capital begins to commodify homosexuality with a vengeance? How can queerness reinvent itself as an aesthetic and political optic to critique the commodity form and global capital's production of unglamorous or discarded commodities? The introductory section of the paper briefly examines the emergent trend of U.S. as well as transnational commodification of the married queer couple. This emergent cultural regime of the 'homoglobal', I argue, evades the complexity of the social and subtly combines the rhetoric of lesbian and gay rights with a fetishisation of the cosmopolitanism and consuming privileges of queer conjugality. The second section of the article attempts to provide an antidote to this regime through an analysis of Tsai Ming-liang's film I Don't Want to Sleep Alone (2006). Tsai's queer lens, I argue, is invested in a rigorously non-heteronormative exploration of the dark underside of the phallic regime of commodification and unequal globalisation.  

I. FROM THE HOMONATIONAL TO THE HOMOGLOBAL  

In a 2008 The New York Times Magazine article titled “Young Gay Rites,” the surveying journalist notes: “A 2008 study of gay and lesbian couples in Vermont, California and Massachusetts – three states that offer some form of legal recognition for gay couples – found that couples who choose to legalise their same-sex relationships [...] are overwhelmingly European American.” While the article interviews white men from different backgrounds in Massachusetts, including lawyers, waiters, and office managers, there is a certain consistency in its representations of the men in various states of wedded bliss. Remarkably well-dressed, photographed against chic or visibly affluent backgrounds, the couples in these images glow in their poses of leisure and domesticity.  

It is somewhat obvious that the journalist picks couples who are more than financially secure and makes an effort to describe their spacious  

* Visiting Assistant Professor of World Cinema, School of Humanities, Arts and Cultural Studies, Hampshire College, USA <maitra.anil@gmail.com>.  
and well decorated apartments with marble fireplaces, their slim-fitting corduroys and initialized house slippers, fancy Oscar parties and lavish nights in upscale hotels. It is not a stretch to see a class, gendered, and racial element in the journalist’s portrait of the young married American homosexual. Married lesbians, transsexuals, LGBT couples of colour and indeed all queers who do not fit into these positions of consumption and coupling are not part of this line-up that stands for an urban, yuppy, and confident brand of homosexuality. That is to say, while the article is by no means explicitly discriminatory, its visuals and descriptions do make certain selections to advertise the twenty-first century American gay couple as a kind of ‘wish-image’. In these images, the choice or selection of the situations of these married couples – a combination of their looks, clothes, accessories, and lifestyles that seem rather attractive and not in any sense ‘deviant’ – are transformed into commodities that readers are invited to admire. In other words, these images present gay domesticity as a cult of consumption to be envied and aspired to, perhaps even by its straight readers.

A number of North American scholars like John D’Emilio and Rosemary Hennessy have noted how the consolidation of lesbian and gay politics in this country was possible not just through activism but through corporatisation and free-market capitalism and because the non-heteronormative subject was encouraged to consume through general and niche markets catering to her/his needs. Others like Alexandra Chasin and Janet Jakobsen have suggested that while the heteronormatively-disposed nation does not fully accept lesbian and gay citizens, the latter are promised national citizenship through personal consumption offered by the neoliberal state. However, as the images above demonstrate, legislations of same-sex marriages not only grant the necessary civil liberties but also promote further consumption in the form of engagement and wedding celebrations, honeymoons, co-proprietorship and the maintenance of conjugal establishments.

The discursive idealisation of this ‘model’ queer couple no doubt needs to be seen as part of what Jasbir Puar has termed “homonationalism” – that contingent assemblage of representations, behaviours, and


affects that engender the homosexual as the law-abiding citizen who finds inclusive networks, friends, gentrified neighbourhoods, and conforms to neoliberal dictates of being a responsible citizen. The ideal homonational then would also be one who consumes to contribute to the national economy, both generally (as any tax-paying citizen would) and specifically (to maintain his/her queer ‘particularity’) by responding to niche markets for lesbian and gay entertainment, tourism, shopping and real estate. Importantly, this model of national homosexuality, as Puar tells us, does not include all homosexuals and discriminates against those who do not match this prescription – perversely racialised and sexualised queers-of-colour and religious minorities, for instance, targeted particularly after the attack on the Twin Towers in New York City in September 2001.4

Puar’s theory of the nationalisation of lesbian and gay identities continues to be a useful framework to examine the changing forms of bio-political interpellation of U.S. citizens as docile sexual subjects. As the ‘hailing’ of Asian-American Lt. Dan Choi (as the U.S. army’s poster-boy for the repeal of ‘Don’t Ask Don’t Tell’) demonstrates, gay U.S. citizens of colour are now by no means outside the self-calibrating homonational radar. At the same time, a more nuanced picture emerges if we examine popular representations of lesbian and gay transnationalism produced by the absolute non-congruence between ideals of democracy, the distribution of wealth, and the transnational movement of capital. Oddly enough, in this emergent regime, the lesbian or gay transnational couple, based in the U.S. but seen as delightfully ‘international’ in their outlook and comportment, are strictly neither homonationals nor demonised racial-sexual others.

Exhibit A

The Spring/ Summer 2012 issue of San Francisco Brides features “A Worldly Romance,” as its pièce-de-résistance. The brides featured in this article are two men of Indian origin – Navin Manglani and Navin Dargani, who, as the magazine journalist notes: “travel the globe on a treasure hunt for the perfect ‘water and earth’ wedding details.”5 The article goes on to chronicle how Navin and Navin, after vacations together in Europe and the Caribbean and Skype dates with mirroring dinners of pasta and Merlot when they were in different countries, decided to have

a globally produced and themed wedding. A trip to Hong Kong yielded the ‘perfect material’ for matching suits that were tailored in Manila. Their traditional sangeet with high chai at the prestigious Bentley Reserve Convention Center in San Francisco was themed ‘Streets of Asia’ with a backdrop of colorful saris, pan-Asian food carts and a create-your-own noodle bowl station. The actual event itself at Jacuzzi Family Vineyards was guided by the ‘Water and Earth’ theme with herbaceous décor, varieties of wood, bark, moss and boutonnieres of cotton and citrus. The wedding day itself ended with a pajama party at the couple’s Le Méridien penthouse suite and was followed by a farewell ‘South Indian-style champagne brunch’ the next morning.

This article, placed at the centre of the San Francisco Brides issue and featuring two men of colour, at once stands out from and exemplifies the magazine’s agenda of selling wedding planners, wedding rings and couples’ retreats. On the one hand, Navin and Navin are not exhibits typically found in this magazine that is mostly in the business of manufacturing white femininity in pink and white bridal paraphernalia. On the other hand, the article also takes part in a kind of branding of the gay couple that is markedly different from The New York Times Magazine article published four years ago. Navin and Navin are portrayed as being connected to their Hindu-Asian traditions but, more importantly, as global cosmopolitans with purchasing powers worth writing home about. That the two men chose and were chosen to be ‘San Francisco brides’ (even though they legalised their marriage in City Hall in New York City) is also significant given the history of San Francisco, its transformation from being the site of homophobic oppression in the 70s and 80s to the mecca of white gay capitalism in the U.S. since the 90s.

As a remarkable achievement of the generation of entrepreneurial and successful gay immigrants, Navin and Navin’s San Francisco nuptials were also featured in Rediff’s India Abroad as the “first Indian-American gay wedding.” Their wedding extravaganza was a spotlight event for this magazine that calls itself “a leading voice of Indian-Americans.” Unlike the coverage San Francisco Brides one, however, this article makes an effort to represent the couple as diasporic Indians who have had to negotiate homophobia and their comings out in particular cultural and religious contexts before fearlessly planning a ‘desi-infused’ wedding that left “tongues wagging from East Asia to North America.”

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7. Id.
Here the focus is on, as one of the brides/grooms says, how to be "role model"queer Indian-Americans. Additionally, the India Abroad article wants to underscore the evolving mindset of the Indian diaspora (supportive parents of the couple for instance) who are delighted to see Navin and Navin happily settled in Murray Hill in Manhattan. The couple's celebrations in the Big Apple are to be found on the website So You're Engaged, where the journalist is thrilled to see that the couple "went around New York City for their engagement shoot and totally rocked it out!!"8 Here, they are seen posing casually as trendy New Yorkers in casual clothing and formal wear. Thus, from media production of three different kinds, Navin and Navin emerge as globe-trotting San Franciscan brides as well as desi gay New Yorkers.

Exhibit B

Also in the summer of 2011, Nepal had its first lesbian wedding. This event, widely covered by the international press, was organised and hosted by the Nepali NGO Blue Diamond Society and its own and newly-opened travel agency Pink Mountain Travels & Tours (Pvt.) Ltd. The brides, however, were not Nepali. U.S. citizens Courtney Mitchell (a college professor) and Sarah Welton (a lawyer) from Denver, Colorado tied the knot in a Hindu Nepalese ceremony at the Dakshinakali temple in the outskirts of Kathmandu. The Huffington Post reports:

"A Hindu priest performed the ceremony. The couple offered flowers, fruits and money to the fire and gods at the traditional ceremony. The couple put flower garlands on each other while Mitchell put red vermillion powder on Welton's forehead, which is equivalent of exchanging of rings in a Christian wedding."9

Although not legally recognised in Nepal, the Mitchell-Welton wedding has been seen as a politically significant event by Nepali activists, a country that has only recently begun to draft laws to recognise and support sexual minorities. For Sunil Pant, a Nepali parliamentarian, gay activist, and founder of Blue Diamond Society, the wedding "was a huge achievement for gay rights campaign in Nepal."10 According to the Blue Diamond Society website, Pant and other activists have, in fact,

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10. Id.
opened the travel agency because they are “hoping to bring in foreign gay couples […] for weddings and honeymoon (sic).”11 The website also lists as one of its recent achievements the organisation and management of a gay wedding between a Briton and an Indian.

Not Just Same-Sex Marriage

On the surface of things, citizenship and national belonging seem to be minor matters for these transnational brides and grooms. These are couples who have ‘surmounted’ national barriers of race and ethnicity. Their internationalism and ‘agency’ could therefore seem to be a rebuttal of Puar’s charges of Western homonationalism or of what Joseph Massad calls the missionary impetus of the primarily White and male “Gay International.”12 No longer is the gay wedding a photo-op with only White American men, it is a transcultural celebration of and demand for recognition of same-sex love that ‘already’ includes non-Whites and women, and which can now presumably be spread across the globe.13 This regime of representation, which we may tentatively term the ‘homoglobal’, can therefore appear to have transcended patriotism and imperialism by showcasing a multiculturalism that combines disparate worlds and cultures. As its queer members express their love for both sameness and difference, the homoglobal can celebrate marriage as a cosmopolitan future that other queers can also aspire to have and be.

However, things are less egalitarian if we investigate the abstractions involved, in particular the forms of privilege that continue to be at work in these two examples. Without trivialising the activism that made the Nepal government wake up to the oppression of sexual minorities (or that allowed queer couples to get legal recognition in parts of the U.S.), I would argue that the move from sexual rights advocacy to ‘worldly’ marriages warrants queerer critical reflections on both the politics and

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13. Of course, there are important distinctions to be drawn between Exhibit A and Exhibit B. Navin and Navin display their globality by performing their multi-ethnic origins in San Francisco. The ethnic labours and wages bought in Hong Kong and Philippines only enhance cultural identities that they ‘naturally’ possess. San Francisco is the queer, White, Western canvas to which they bring the East. In contrast, the White lesbian couple undertakes the task of taking Western values (the democratic right to same-sex marriage) to the developing East. Embracing local customs and traditions and less spiffy settings, they show a benevolent desire to be actively involved in and give shape to queer politics and activism in Nepal. At the same time, the two events are also similar insofar as they are both given a ‘modular’ aura by journalists and the couples themselves; the marriages seem to be standardised events that should be repeated by other couples in other places in the world. Both spectacles are meant to inspire same-sex couples all over the world, particularly in the Indian subcontinent.
economics of sexual visibility and invisibility in a transnational context. We should note, for instance, that the homoglobal is asking non-heteronormative citizens of the world (but perhaps specially the global South), regardless of the nature of their non-heteronormative desire and socio-economic positions, to embrace the form of monosexual coupling constructed by a certain commodification of cosmopolitanism. We should also note that the aesthetically pleasing images of this future-for-sale are less about rethinking sociality through local sexual diversities and socio-economic contingencies produced by uneven globalisation, and more about somewhat superficial performances of the unions of the West and the non-West. Finally, we cannot miss that these glamorous weddings acquire ‘meaning’ primarily as spectacles premised on the privilege of transnational mobility and spending.

The importance of the task of confronting heterosexism in all its social and political guises cannot be overestimated. But what exactly are diasporic-international media and the transnational queer politics of cultural assertion doing when they collectively glorify spectacular weddings between members of the upwardly mobile cosmopolitan class as crowning achievements and models to be followed?

Feminist-Marxist scholarship from within the U.S. can be instructive here. In her analysis of the relationship between commodity capitalism and homosexual visibility, Rosemary Hennessy reminds us that the images of ‘achievement’ of lesbian and gay visibility often rest on the invisible labours of those who do not have access to the privileges that these images of the gay consumers exude. While Hennessy does not deny that cultural visibility can pave the way for the protection of sexual desires that are not validated or respected, she argues that this visibility is often a matter of commodification that reduces the non-discursive materiality of the social to the discursive material of ‘the cultural’. For Hennessy, these non-discursive material aspects like “labor and wealth, or social resources like health and health care, the distribution of food and shelter,” are representationally or “discursively mediated and regulated, but at the same time their materiality is not simply discursive.”

Using Marx’s notion of ‘commodity fetishism’, Hennessy shows how spectacle-oriented North American queer activism (as well as anti-identity queer theory) of the ‘90s said little about altering systemic inequalities that accompanied the production of the commodity, even as it disrupted normative perceptions of sexuality. Even as anti-assimilationist groups

inserted non-normative spectacles into heterosexual sites of consumption by holding hands in malls, staging kiss-ins, or promoting gay ‘styles’, they ended up encouraging the fundamental form of assimilation encouraged by consumption – genuflection to an imaginary that hides poverty and exploitation underpinning commodity capitalism. As Hennessy writes in *Profit and Pleasure*:

Commodity fetishism entails the misrecognition of the structural effects of certain social relations as an immediate property of one of its objects, as if this property belonged to it outside of its social history. This fetishizing is enhanced and encouraged under late capitalism when the spheres of commodity production and consumption and the social relations they encompass are so often widely separated.\(^{15}\)

The fetishism of the queer activist/theorist here has its origins in the assumption that non-heteronormativity as a democratic culture can be attained and sustained in isolation from the non-discursive material social and by simply ‘occupying’ the space of the spectacle of the commodity.

Hennessy's critical engagement with North American queer theory and practice is particularly useful to analyse the cultural and political implications of my two worldly exhibits. As suggested above, in spite of their racial and gender differences, the subjects of the two sets of images and reportage play comparable roles in producing lesbian and gay visibility on the transnational stage. In both cases, we are not talking about *just* same-sex marriage. What needs to be examined is something more insidious – the notion of same-sex marriage and coupling as a ‘world culture’ celebrated through a phantasmagoric union between the ‘developing’ East and the ‘enlightened’ West. In both cases, this culture is produced through a hegemony of the West where the East continues to be sold as a collection of exotic consumables (Exhibit A) or as that where local activism needs to be propped up through Western cultural and economic support (Exhibit B).

Put simply, this is a celebration that comes not just from a desire for social change but also from the capacity to earn in U.S. dollars or British pounds and purchase labour in Nepali rupees or Filipino pesos. It is clear that this transnational spending is revenue for the Nepali tourism industry. As *Time* magazine notes in the context of the Mitchell-Welton wedding: “The ceremony marked the beginning of a potentially lucrative niche market in Nepal, aimed at tapping into the $670 million global gay-tourism industry.”\(^{16}\) But will it necessarily contribute to long-term

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15. *Id.* at 129.
social, political, and economic change in Nepal or a truly democratic and transnational queer alliance?

Contemporary evaluations of cosmopolitanism would say otherwise. In his astute reassessment of celebratory accounts of cosmopolitanism as a post-national political consciousness, Pheng Cheah notes that such ahistorical formulations fail to take into account the persistence of citizenship, income, conspicuous consumption as normative forces underpinning transnational lessons in global cultural diversity:

One should cast a more discriminating eye on the various emergent forms of cosmopolitanism and distinguish them in terms of how they are connected to the operations of neoliberal capital. For instance, over and above interventions on behalf of [...] minority communities on an ad hoc basis, to what extent can activist cosmopolitanisms take root in the latter in a consistent manner to generate a genuinely pluralised mass-based global political community [...] as distinguished from the defensive identity politics of ethnic, religious or hybrid minority constituencies? Can these cosmopolitanisms be embedded in a global community in the South forged from transnational media networks? 17

There is no reason to believe that marriage-happy and world-touring homosexuals should be exempt from Cheah’s well-founded scepticism. On the contrary, several studies of gay and lesbian tourism fit in rather neatly with this more general analysis of neoliberalism. For instance, in their study of gay tourism, Gordon Waitt and Kevin Markwell argue that not all homosexual tourists are necessarily visible as ‘gay’ travellers. They show that a certain amount of cultural and economic capital is necessary to seek out and assert countercultural spaces such as the pride parade, the dance party, the gay resort. 18 While tracing a genealogy of homonationalism, Puar, also notes that it is precisely through such privileged niche tourism that U.S. gays and lesbians have, over the last couple of decades, simultaneously evaded national discrimination and spread the light of sexual enlightenment: “The equation ‘travel = freedom’ references both the notion that travel can function as an escape from national heteronormativity and the promotion of U.S. exceptionalism regarding freedom and democracy.” 19 The tourist destination, here, is simultaneously a retreat and a field of demonstration and instruction, not just for sexual rights and identities but also for modes of consumption and lifestyles that may not be viable for the majority of the local population.

http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2083711,00.html.

19. Puar, supra note 4, at 65.
The dazzling entry of the global South into the transnational gay and lesbian tourism industry is therefore a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it promises a boost to the economy if local populations tolerate homosexuality in the form of ‘tourist marriages’ because it means more business and employment. An estimated 32.7% Indians still earn less than $1.25 per day.20 30% of Nepal’s population still lives below $12 per person per month.21 On the other hand, what is socially and culturally most legible here is, in fact, the ‘foreignness’ of the homosexuality and the homoglobal participation, the staging of a norm whose foundations are starkly different from the realities of the postcolonial state. Unfortunately, when the Mitchell-Welton wedding is held up as the high point of lesbian and gay activism of Nepal, this discursive visibility completely eclipses the material lives of queer subjects living in Nepal who have to, for instance, deal with 12-hour-long power-cuts in the country every day in addition to sexual discrimination. Similarly, nothing of the non-discursive material lives of the Filipino and Chinese labourers – when the materiality includes but is not confined to their sexualities – is visibly retained in the enviable suits showcasing the cosmopolitanism of Navin and Navin.

It should be clear by now that my intention is not to wag a finger at lesbian and gay identity politics in emergent and fledgling economies in the global South. But I am interested in representational and reading practices that seek alternatives to this ‘cosmopolitanism from above’, this view of globalisation of homosexuality as a steady march toward homoglobal conjugality. More specifically, I am interested in non-heteronormative attempts to sketch the lineaments of what Tariq Jazeel calls a “cosmopolitanism-from-below,”22 or what Paul Gilroy calls a “demotic” or “vulgar” cosmopolitanism,23 not only as a desirable future but as a contemporary predicament with an uncertain future and outside the purview of sheeny lesbian and gay globalisation. In other words, I want to ask: what else can queer visibility and cosmopolitanism mean when global capital generates the obstacle of homonationalism only to circumvent it through the emergent and exceptional regime of the transnational lesbian and gay benevolence? How do we visualise queer cosmopolitanism aesthetically and politically as a standpoint or a theoretical consciousness that assaults hetero and homonormativity

without forgetting that globalisation is a profoundly unequal process? Needless to say that I am not opposing critique to activism but rather attempting to rethink the critique that motivates the activism. It is with these opening questions that I now consider Tsai Ming-liang’s I Don’t Want to Sleep Alone (2006), not so much as ‘the answer’, rather as a necessary provocation in the time of homoglobalism.

II. FROM HOMOGLOBALISM TO POSTCOLONIAL BOHEMIANISM

Born in Malaysia and a resident of Taiwan, Tsai Ming-liang is well-known in the international art cinema circuit for his auteurist eccentricities, such as the use of long takes and silences in his films. And yet, Tsai’s I Don’t Want to Sleep Alone, I want to suggest, insists on harnessing aesthetics and formalism to provide a critically queer image of globalisation. Here is how the DVD company Strand Releasing describes the film:

An erotic love triangle finds a young drifter, beaten by thugs and rescued by an immigrant worker who nurses him back to health. The drifter develops a crush on a waitress and the three young people find love, solace, and comfort in each other’s companionship in the moody backdrop of modern day Kuala Lumpur.

On the one hand, this is an adequate summary of the film because there is not much to add to its so-called plot. At the same time, it is also an incomplete description in that ‘love’, ‘solace’, and ‘comfort’ take on intriguing forms in the film that takes as its moral prerogative the representation of intimacies between labourers and migrants from the working class. I say ‘intimacy’ and not ‘sexuality’ because the intimacy is not articulate as ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian’ either as a verbalised identity or in terms of sexual acts. Instead, a bisexual or more aptly a ‘bisuggestive’ sociality informs Tsai’s tableau of intimate strangers living through the globalisation of the local and the localisation of the global.

If we accept ‘art cinema’ as a category of films that is internally heterogeneous but nevertheless defined by a certain impurity – its location somewhere between fully experimental and unapologetically commercial cinema, and its tenor always transnational and comparatist – then we see that the representation of sexuality becomes a key concern of the genre’s practitioners and its critics. As Steave Neale, Mark Betz and others note, a soft-core display of both female and male bodies constitutes a

24. I DON’T WANT TO SLEEP ALONE (Centre National de la Cinématographie, 2006).
‘formal bisexuality’ by which art cinema challenges the heteronormative assumptions underpinning narrative cinema.26 However, as Maria San Filippo points out in her essay “Unthinking Heterocentrism,” while art cinema’s explicit eroticisation of the male and female body has the potential to de-stabilise the normative underpinnings of narrative cinema, its ambiguous bisexuality can also become a marketing strategy to reach out to both straight and gay consumers:

As a means to provocatively distinguish and broadly disperse product in a supersaturated global mediascape that holds dire distribution prospects for non-studio films, bisuggestibility milks the studio’s age-old dictum: ‘appeal to everyone, offend no one.’ [...] Bisexuality, like queerness generally, habitually risks being colonised and commodified by straight and gay camps.27

Filippo thus warns us that the verdict on the use or suggestion of homo or bisexuality should come from a case by case consideration of these films. A film can be politically radical only if it resists this commodification and preserves a space that is not monosexual.

Filippo also connects art cinema’s bisuggestive milieu to a cosmopolitan flânerie, and to a particular figure – the ‘bohemian’ – whose affluence and elitism make the fluidity of desire possible in the first place. The bohemian, Filippo writes:

[...] conjoins bisexuality and art cinema through their shared connotation as an effect of displacement from mainstream values. Typically a white Western figure born of privilege and/or blessed with vocational agency, the bohemian straddles two worlds: the historically dominant Western patriarchy [...] and an alternative social sphere shown to be seductive yet potentially dangerous and disturbing. In rejecting social convention in favour of a liminal existence and sexual freedom, the bisexual bohemian becomes susceptible to representation as decadent, deviant, naively idealistic, and destined for redemptive rescue or pessimistic ruin.28

The White and Western bohemian of art cinema, in Filippo’s analysis, represents a failure of sorts, when the lines blur between hippie countercultural ideals and hedonistic self-absorption.


27 Maria San Filippo, Unthinking Heterocentrism: Bisexual Representability in Art Cinema, in Global art cinema 75, 80 (Rosalind Galt & Karl Schoonover eds., 2010). [Emphasis in original.]

28 Id. at 81.
Both the issues of bisexual representability and bohemianism are relevant to Tsai’s *I Don’t Want to Sleep Alone*. However, I am interested in examining the ways in which the film departs from Filippo’s analysis of art cinema and teasing out the possible lessons for queer transnationalism in that departure. Filippo, as noted above, links bohemianism as a role diegetically made possible by the character’s affluence and cultural mobility. The fluidity of the character’s desire has its origins in cultural and economic privilege. But if we turn to the history of the term ‘bohemian’, we find that, as the description of a lifestyle, it was first used by artists in nineteenth-century France to represent Romani immigrants or ‘gypsies’, and that it gained purchase in Europe as a short-hand for the criminal underclass.

As is well known, Marx himself uses the word in that sense in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* when he refers to ‘vagabonds, demobbed soldiers, discharged convicts, runaway galley slaves, swindlers […] pickpockets, conjurers, card-sharps, pimps […] day-labourers […] tanners and beggars, in short, the whole amorphous, jumbled mass of flotsam and jetsam that the French term bohemian.928 This reference to bohemianism allows Marx to separate the ‘lumpenproletariat’ from the working class that can achieve class consciousness and move towards revolutionary struggle. Bohemians constitute that slippery (and in that sense ‘fluid’) part of the proletariat that cannot be itemised and included in socialism’s (and eventually communism’s) programme for useful socio-economic production.

Marx’s attitude toward this drifting and unproductive section of the working class has been critiqued by later scholars, especially those writing from anti-colonial and postcolonial perspectives. Frantz Fanon, for instance, insists that the ever-proliferating urban poor in former colonies should not be written off and instead seen as agents of spontaneous revolutionary action.30 Writing on the postcolonial Jamaican context, Obika Gray sees the lumpenproletariat as neither overtly assertive as a political entity nor fully crushed by hegemonic forces:

[…] the social orientation and sensibility of the lumpenproletariat in Jamaica’s postcolonial context do not fit the rigid classical portraits […] harsh postcolonial politics and deeply conflictual social relations in Jamaica instead encouraged the formation of a lumpenproletariat that was more variable in consciousness, more deeply politicised and self-owning, and possessed of more social power than the classical appraisals would allow.31

Gray thus argues for the need to see beyond both Marx’s exclusion of the bohemians and Fanon’s desire to see them as violent revolutionaries. In spite of their differences, however, Marx, Fanon, and Gray agree on two defining aspects of the bohemian lumpenproletariat. All three attest to its existence at the margins of the social order. All of them also see its persistent instability as being linked to the unequal distribution of wealth. Fanon and Gray in particular interpret the urban bohemian’s wandering rootlessness and fluidity not as a class privilege but rather as an effect of deep-set inequality. Fanon warns against the mercenary nature of the lumpenproletariat, always ready to switch sides between the oppressor and the oppressed, depending on which side gives it maximum attention and exploits its capacity for violence.32 Similarly, Gray emphasises the Jamaican lumpenproletariat’s “errant engagements” with power, vacillating between complicity with the state and reacting against it.33 It is against these readings of bohemianism and errancy — not as a Western, White bourgeois privilege but rather as an urban postcolonial predicament — that I now want to turn to bisexuality in Tsai’s Sleep Alone.

**Proletarian Cosmopolitanism in Urban Malaysia**

As Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh and Darrell William Davis note, Tsai’s films are noticeably “provincial” insofar as they invariably include characters from the local working class — taxi drivers, petty thieves, street hawkers, the elevator operator, the pornographer — whose vocational and social positions are highlighted by costumes, lighting, and the set design.34 While Yeh and Davis focus on films shot in Taiwan and on Tsai’s depiction of the working class in Taipei, I will examine how Sleep Alone — shot in Kuala Lumpur — recreates the provincial in terms of a heterogeneous, transnational and queer hub of Chinese, Malay, and Bangladeshi labourers.

Within the first ten minutes of Tsai’s film, we encounter characters that Marx would have excluded from his theoretical consolidation of the working class: a vagabond, swindlers, and day-labourers. The nameless drifter, played by the actor Lee Kang-sheng, is first seen staring at a sizzling wok in a night market in Kuala Lumpur. Lee’s character, appearing as ‘the homeless man’ in the credits, does not speak Malay

32. **Fanon**, supra note 30, at 87.
34. **Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh & Darrell William Davis**, *Taiwan Film Directors: A Treasure Island* 223 (2005).
(or any other language for that matter) throughout the film. It is never entirely clear where he comes from, what he does or used to do for a living.

Dressed in a crumpled shirt, a pair of jeans, and carrying a plastic bag, the man drifts into a group of swindlers selling ‘lucky’ lottery numbers to migrant laborers. The swindlers ask him for money and beat him up when he does not respond or pay up. Another group of Malay and Bangladeshi labourers, while carrying back a mattress picked up from a dumpster, finds the homeless man unconscious and brings him back to their shared tenement.

One of them, Rawang, takes care of the homeless man and shares the mattress with him. Rawang feeds the stranger, gives him a sponge bath, changes his clothes and underwear, and even helps him urinate. But there is no verbal exchange between the men, nothing overtly sexual, and nothing to suggest a same-sex ‘relationship’. The homeless man stays with, and allows himself to be taken care of by, his attentive host. But he also follows a waitress around and shows sexual interest in her. Even as he returns to Rawang (and to the mattress) at night, the bohemian drifts through the city, attempts to be sexually intimate with the waitress at a construction site and masturbates her female employer in a dark alley.

There is no narrative thrust behind these wordless representations of intimacy between the drifter and the other characters. The characters say almost nothing to each other in the course of the film. Silent exchanges of looks and tactile intimacy give spectators little insight into the characters’ motives and intentions. Simultaneously, that the homeless man shows no particular affection for any of the characters adds to the ambiguity of the narrative and his sexuality. As Filippo writes of Tsai’s films in general:

Tsai populates his films with the disaffected youth [...] for whom sexual relations are but half-hearted attempts at human connection [...] Denied (over)identification with would-be protagonists, we are forced to observe Tsai’s characters from the same remove as if meeting them in life. The import this has for bisexual representability is noteworthy: Not only is their erotic potential kept from being immediately definable and self-defining, but these recurring characters and their accumulated episodes across films enable a cumulative appraisal of sexualities in continual flux.\textsuperscript{35}

\textsuperscript{35} Id.
The homeless man in *Sleep Alone* thus becomes the epitome of this undefined or incompletely defined potential that Filippo describes, a sort of postcolonial equivalent of the Western bisuggestive bohemian who lures hetero and homosexual desire both inside and outside the film. However, by that logic, how is Tsai’s film any different from art cinema that is easily appropriated by identity politics claiming ‘gay’ and ‘straight’ readings? What does ‘postcolonial’ mean here other than the fact that the bohemian is a character played by a Taiwanese actor in a film shot in contemporary Kuala Lumpur?

Bohemianism, as I have suggested above, has also been a representational strategy to discursively individuals and communities at the fringes of the social. Tsai’s film, I will argue, draws on both these strands — the bisexual bohemianism of art cinema and the discourse around proletarian bohemianism — urging his spectators to reflect on the aesthetics and politics that can emerge from the uncomfortable juxtaposition of one against the other.

The drifting of the homeless man in *Sleep Alone* is thus repeatedly placed against and within the daily lives and labours of other characters whose bohemian circumstances suggest not fluidity but fixity and social immobility. Rawang is seen brooding at his construction site and exhausted after washing, drying, and dragging the heavy and flea-infested mattress to his room all by himself. The waitress is caught sleeping in a tiny and cluttered loft, routinely nursing her employer’s younger relative lying paralysed in a room below her attic and putting up with the employer’s abusive behaviour. The employer too, in spite of her harshness and apparent proprietorship, emerges as a lonely woman locked in a position of subordination, living at the mercy of the paralysed man’s brother who owns and wants to sell the property she lives on. In other words, Tsai’s depiction of mobile queer desire constantly bumps up against forms of habitation and co-habitation that are classed, gendered, and ethnicised. Even the drifter is attacked and assaulted by the swindlers after they suspect him of being ‘Chinese’.

This proletarian bohemianism may be further unpacked by examining two coalescing registers at which the social underclass is simultaneously represented in the film. Towards the beginning, the film alerts the audience to the culturally hybrid and polyglot nature of this underclass in Kuala Lumpur: migrants from Bangladesh are seen negotiating with the swindlers in Malay. We hear snippets of Bengali and Malay as the labourers pick up the mattress and attend to the homeless man. The
camera observes labourers in their shared living space watching Tamil love songs on television.

Later in the film, Chinese love songs are heard on the employer’s radio. There is, in other words, a quasi-ethnographic impulse behind the camera that foregrounds the multilingual and multicultural nature of this proletarian space. This ethnographic ‘gaze’, however, professes no desire to objectify or completely ‘penetrate’ these subjects of language and culture. The camera stands at a distance and offers no close-ups when the migrants are seen or heard talking. None of the speaking subjects is visually singled out even as he is heard and his speech is offered as a subtitle. It is as if the camera is more interested in gesturing toward a cultural and economic condition rather than individual subjects.

In other words, if the camera speaks of a particular condition of proletarian cosmopolitanism lived by these migrant labourers in Kuala Lumpur, its aesthetic is close to what Trinh T. Minh-ha would call “speaking nearby,” a mode of representation that “does not objectify, does not point to an object as if it is distant from the speaking subject or absent from the speaking place.”

However, there is also another register through which the main characters of the film gradually come to the fore, a mode of filming that makes the ethnographic a background ‘hum’ from which the characters are separated out: Rawang sits apart from his fellow labourers as they socialise and watch television. The homeless man and the waitress eat in silence with tired faces and stare at each other in the restaurant as we hear exchanges between the other customers and the server.

The stillness and activities of these characters are filtered from the ethnographic mode and become the film’s objects of investigation. These characters, we might say, are ‘objectified’ and hence commodified by the camera. But here the commodification is performed against a background and over a duration that slowly turns the commodity ‘inside out’. That is to say, even as the film cannot avoid commodification in this second aesthetic register, it does not exhibit the commodity in its shiny and vendible form. Instead, the commodity is presented as labour, more specifically as labour that is exhausting itself in the face of inadequate recognition and replenishment.

Progress as Stasis

While Tsai’s homeless drifter may recall unemployed parasites from a Pasolinian utopia, his entry into this proletarian world also introduces the spectator to intersecting nether zones that Rawang and the waitress inhabit as labourers who are neither essential nor expendable. Rawang, in particular, is associated with labour that could potentially be useful to an emerging economy. He is a construction worker. But the labourer here, appears to be caught in a situation where he cannot sell his labour power.

The scenes most evocative of this crisis are shot in a half-finished building used in the film. Construction at this massive site, located near the Pudu Prison in Kuala Lumpur, was actually abandoned after the Southeast Asian financial crisis of 1997. In Tsai’s rendition of this failed project, Rawang is the only labourer left at the site, and his only Sisyphean task seems to be pumping out stagnant water from the base of the building. Long static shots, used throughout the film, are particularly striking in this location.

Nothing happens in this wall-less skeleton of a high-rise that was once the very scene of industrial labour. A high-angle shot captures Rawang climbing flights of stairs without stringers. In the subsequent shot, he appears as a speck walking along the exposed columns on the fourth or fifth floor with the lower floors disappearing into a bottomless pit. He is then captured in another long shot sitting on his haunches, smoking and staring into the water. The final shot in this sequence is a close-up of his profile where the camera focuses not on the object of his gaze but on the mute and pensive act of looking. Shots of a bustling metropolitan Kuala Lumpur used in the film are both a contrast to and contemporaneous with the labourer’s dispirited attachment to this site.

Through Rawang’s peculiar relationship with the building, the failed project, and hence the ’97 crisis, Tsai represents stagnation not in opposition to but as an effect of rapid economic progress and the over-accumulation of capital. Thus, the disaffection and bohemianism that Filippo ascribes to Tsai’s characters is in the film inseparable from Rawang’s inhabitation of this dereliction as a commodity that is at once trapped, exhausted, and devalued by the city.

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The city itself turns into a dystopic site of impending disaster when it suddenly finds itself choking on noxious fumes from a mysterious fire. The film does not reference any particular event but could easily be alluding to the Southeast Asian haze, caused annually by ‘slash and burn’ cultivation in Indonesia and affecting a number of neighbouring countries like Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand. The haze was particularly prolonged in ’97 – the year of the economic downturn38 – and again in 2006, the year *Sleep Alone* was made. While he represents the haze as an event that affects one and all, Tsai also uses it to ironise social hierarchies and differences. On a radio news report we are told that, according to local police “the fire may have been started by illegal workers who burn their rubbish in the open. These foreign construction workers live in makeshift houses nearby.” In order to protect themselves from the haze, all residents put on masks but of distinct types that mark their class positions—the waitress’ employer has access to a proper surgical mask, while Rawang, the drifter, and the waitress wear disposable bowls and plastic bags.

*From a Fucking ‘of’ the World to Caring and Surviving ‘in’ One’s World*

The gender and sexual politics of *Sleep Alone*, I will argue, is also inflected by this attention to social hierarchies, in particular to the local devaluation of the worker-as-commodity. The camera’s non-heteronormative gaze and the possible intimacy between the two men are signalled early on in the film, when Rawang brings home the bruised and feverish drifter and helps him urinate. Rawang holds the homeless man while he struggles to unzip his jeans standing in front of the bathroom drain. Finally, Rawang has to unzip him and pull his pants down so that he can urinate. Rawang looks in the direction of the flowing urine, looks away and out of the window, and then looks back to see if the man is done. The camera holds them both in a mid-shot, so that we can see Rawang’s profile as he stands behind the man. The latter’s naked bottom is in view for as long as he urinates. A non-heteronormative charge materialises from both the positioning of the characters and the spectator: a bare-chested Rawang stands behind and holds the man, their bodies loosely forming the ‘figure’ of homosexual *coutes in ano*. The spectator, in her/his turn, takes the penetrative position of the camera behind the two men.
We could argue that this soft-core toilet shot presents viewers with a scene of impersonal intimacy between the characters, ambiguous erotic possibilities that heterocentrism narrative cinema would not ordinarily allow. For those familiar with contemporary North American queer theory, the setting (a public/ shared toilet) and the men’s positions would resonate with counterpublic and anti-identitarian articulations of thinkers like Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner.

In fact, the shot could be read as Tsai’s cinematic version of Berlant and Warner’s celebration of the “tropism toward the public toilet.”

We will recall that for Berlant and Warner, sexual encounters between men in a shared or public toilet trouble both hetero and homonormative definitions of physical intimacy. Tsai’s shot, we could argue, suggests such impersonal erotics between Rawang, the homeless man, and the spectator. The latter is invited, we might say, to visualise “kinds of intimacy that bear no necessary relation to the domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form [...].”

The figure of the coitus in ano formed by the strangers in a shared toilet might also call to mind Leo Bersani’s anti-social re-thinking of sexual intimacy. Bersani, we will remember, theorises this figure as “the sexual opportunity that is behind,” a non-romantic sexual position that could lead to an anti-relational politics of sexual pleasure not based on monogamous intimacy. Investing in the idea of fucking and being fucked from behind, Bersani contends, can produce a new politics of “objectless or generalized ejaculation, a fucking of the world rather than each other.” By isolating the raw and pornographic valence of the image of coitus in ano, Bersani reformulates sex and sexuality as radical bohemian pleasures indifferent to and negating community.

Tsai’s filmmaking, I will suggest, not only leads us to consider a non-normative locality that is ignored by the globality of pink capitalism that I briefly sketched in the previous section but is also in a critical conversation with Bersanian models of apolitical sexuality. When the two men huddle in the labourers’ toilet, spectators have little knowledge of how their ‘relationship’ will develop. This moment of intimacy between them is unexpected and not driven by any narrative logic. The exposure

40. Id. at 558.
42. Id. at 165 -166.
is, in that sense, anti-social and pornographic. At the same time, a more careful reading of the same shot challenges us to grapple with the problem of separation of sexual desire from the heterogeneous effects of capitalism on the social. Here, it is important to note that the naked bottom is not the focal point of the camera and that its erotogenicity is placed alongside its socio-economic milieu. It is framed as an element among others in the shot -- the broken tiles of the makeshift toilet, the asbestos sheets on the wall, exposed pipes, and a plastic tap -- whereby the spectator is prompted to weigh sexual desire against an equally emphatic representation of Rawang's economic circumstances. The visual commodification of the bottom and anti-social sexual intimacy are thus evoked as possibilities but not as the film's only concern. After the homeless man finishes urinating, Rawang holds him with one hand and supports himself leaning against the wall. He then reaches out for a vessel floating in a plastic bucket to flush the urine into the drain. The abject social scenario, postures, and objects around which the bottom is revealed and covered up -- pointing to the pitiful condition of the homeless man and the care extended by Rawang in spite of his own indigence -- de-reify a politics of sexuality and place it firmly within a specific context of urban proletarianism in the postcolony.

If Tsai de-privileges the genitalisation of same-sex intimacy through an economy of destitution and solicitude, heterosexual encounters also take on unfamiliar valences in the film. Tsai's previous work has satirised heterosexist and monogamous notions of coupling by introducing closeted husbands and bigamous wives. But *Sleep Alone* strikes a slightly different chord that is at once absurd and apocalyptic. After the drifter and the waitress fail to rent a room in a hotel because the drifter does not have any identification papers, the couple try their luck at the construction site. However, at this point in the film, the haze has set into the city. Taking shelter under the mosquito net hung over the mattress at the construction site, the drifter and the waitress take their masks off and begin with the foreplay. But the smoke intervenes before they can take their clothes off and move past kissing. The waitress starts to cough and has to put her mask back on. The drifter also has trouble breathing and cannot continue with the caressing. The scene ends with the two enervated figures holding each other, using the bottoms of the drifter's jeans to breathe through. Here, Tsai moves rapidly from a scene of heterosexual arousal to a scene of suffocation and survival.

43. See The River (2010).
Heterosexual intimacy is problematised in yet another scene where the waitress' employer, while massaging the belly of the paralysed younger man, slowly moves to his pelvic area. Because the relationship between the two characters is unclear – she could be the mother, the wife, an older sister, an aunt, a cousin – the implied tactile intimacy could be read in terms of sexual perversion, incest, or even abuse. But the very context within which this intimacy occurs prompts us to reassess the morality governing such readings. In *The American Heritage Dictionary*, masturbation is defined as "excitation of one's own or another's genital organs, *usually to orgasm*, by mutual contact *other than sexual intercourse*."\(^{44}\) Implicit in this definition is masturbation's "inferiority" in relation to penetrative sexual intercourse and orgasm/discharge as the necessary telos of that private act. The definition also assumes that although masturbation can be a substitute for penetrative sex and can lead to orgasm, it is not the 'real thing'. This theory is shared by theorists of social reproduction, for whom masturbation is an unproductive activity that involves private fantasies without a purpose, unproductive reflection without actual action or a sense of communal responsibility.

As Marx and Engels write in *The German Ideology*: "Philosophy and the study of the actual world have the same relation to one another as masturbation and sexual love."\(^{45}\) Both "the study of the actual world," and reproductive sex, for Marx and Engels, are necessary preconditions for the workers' self-preservation and progress toward socialism. In contrast, through its dystopian portrait of the netherworld of workers without a telos, of figures for whom all progress has come to a halt, *Sleep Alone* reverses and displaces the hierarchical oppositions between sexual love/masturbation, historical materialism/idle fantasy. It does so by moving away from the notion that masturbation is an 'auto-erotic' enterprise where the self is focused on gaining orgasmic pleasure.

If the older woman fondles her paralysed relation to take care of what she thinks he might 'need', the touching does not simply 'replace' penetrative sex. It is an attempt to attend to a sexual need from a standpoint that cannot be contained within the term 'sexual'. The woman perhaps wants to provide sexual pleasure to the paralysed man. Yet this act of giving also becomes an *intersubjective and communicational gesture* of showing care. It is a masturbatory attempt, but only in that


transitive sense, ‘to stir up’ an undead and wasting body. It is significant that Tsai does not, in any way, sensationalise this scene: we hear a tragic love song on the radio as the woman massages the lifeless man staring at the ceiling.

The scene described above also anticipates the woman herself being stirred up by the drifter in a dark alley. Here it is the drifter who takes the position of the woman in the previous scene. He does not have any demands of his own and places his hand wherever the woman indicates she wants. The woman groans to the movement of the drifter’s hand, making this shot the only moment in the film where the characters somewhat succeed in obtaining and giving pleasure, in reviving and being revived. In other words, through both these scenes involving the older woman, the film de-naturalises the all-too-familiar act of masturbation that usually plays second fiddle to consummative coitus. Here coital jouissance seems impossible in the given apocalyptic moment and masturbatory contact becomes an act of queer hospitality, a process that the masturbator willingly undertakes in the hopes of the temporary vitalisation of the social other. Additionally, what Tsai emphasises is the effort of a character at another’s revival through transitive masturbation. He does not offer an image of orgasmic release; we never know if the paralysed man gets an erection, or if his relative is able to ‘get off’.

However, it is important to note that this queer allegorical space is by no means egalitarian. Much like Charles Baudelaire’s allegorical representations – where hollowed-out commodities still bear traces of violence – Tsai’s atopian aesthetics cannot exclude the classed and gendered exploitation of labour even as it queers normative attitudes toward intimacy. This violence emerges most vividly in the scene where the older woman forces her employee (the waitress) to serve the disabled man’s penis. We might ask if this scene is gratuitous and why Tsai seems so drawn to the penis that does not ‘deliver’. Is it a sign of his persistent phallocentrism even as he troubles normativity? Or is it, in fact, a mockery of phallocentrism whose cast-offs and dark underside Sleep Alone represents? If, as J. K. Gibson-Graham argue, the phallus is not just any “master signifier” but one that maintains capitalism as the dominant economic form, then this economic organisation is also kept

46. This notion of reanimation is found in the Latin etymology: manus (hand) + turbare (to stir up or unsettle).
in place through a valorisation of the male penis, a socially sanctioned phallic fetish that undergirds patriarchal violence and defines both straight and gay masculinity. In Tsai’s allegory, this phallic fetish fails to live up to its phantasmagoric image. It either needs extra assistance (the paralysed man) or is thwarted by economic contagion (the drifter in the haze). Thus, the paralysed man finally emerges as the doppelganger of the drifter, a connection reinforced by the director’s use of the same actor for both characters.

**The Sociality of Unglamerous Commodities**

Tsai’s film also de-reifies sexuality through its treatment of props. The camera dwells on the tossed mattress, plastic bags that Rawang uses to drink out of and a lamp that the drifter picks up from the pavement for the waitress. The film consistently draws the spectator’s attention to these vendibles that are not particularly glamorous. Yet these unglamorous objects stand out because they gain distinctive values under proletarian circumstances: the plastic bag of cold drink serves as a cold compress for the febrile drifter, the lamp makes the dark and dingy loft seem more inviting and habitable than usual. Appearing as an innocuous prop when the labourers pick it up, the mattress becomes a particularly conspicuous presence in the film and mediates the relationships between Rawang, the drifter, and the waitress.

As I have already noted, tactile intimacy between the two men cannot be interpreted in terms of an impersonal sexual pleasure. Rawang nurses, cleans and feeds the drifter. The drifter accepts his care, sleeps next to him and scratches his back when it itches from insect bites. However, through this ‘ethics of care’ the film makes no effort to make a spectacle of (and hence to define) a same-sex relationship. Although Rawang and the drifter sleep next to a wall with a poster that somewhat campily announces ‘I Love You’, at no point do spectators gain an insight into Rawang’s sexual desires or witness explicitly sexual acts between the men. What is clearer, however, is the sociality that Rawang builds through the mattress with the ‘beat-up’ drifter (whom he also ‘salvages’). The men forge a bond while using and taking care of the mattress, casting glances at each other while lying on it, carrying it out to the construction site to sleep there. There is a certain parity that emerges between the labourer, the mattress, and the destitute filaneur, not so much as bearers of the fetish as undervalued or discarded commodities who need each other.

The allegorical power of Tsai’s treatment of the mattress is perhaps
more easily understood when seen against Malaysian politics, specifically the sex scandal that smeared Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim’s reputation in the late 90s. In what many commentators see as a politically motivated offensive, Ibrahim was charged with sodomy and corruption, convicted with both and given a fifteen-year prison sentence. At the centre of this trial was, in fact, a mattress that Ibrahim’s prosecutors produced in court claiming that it had been stained with semen from the alleged illegal sexual acts of the accused. The mattress, used as public display of the ‘evidence’ of Ibrahim’s sexual depravities, became the very ‘image’ of the scandal that was consumed by the homophobic law, the prosecution using that law to its advantage, as well as an international audience.49

While Tsai’s film makes no explicit references to the trial or to charges against Ibrahim, some of his critics have made the plausible connection. For instance, Kai-man Chang points out that the Chinese title of Tsai’s film — *hei yan guan* or “dark eye circle” or “black eye” — could be a reference to the Prime Minister’s black eye, caught on camera soon after he was arrested by police, and speculated to be signs of police brutality.50 In his review of the film, Ian Johnston does not cite a source but similarly claims that “Tsai has himself stated how through both this title and the mattress of the story he is referring to the case of Anwar Ibrahim.”51 However, what interests me here is not so much a possible allusion to mainstream politics but rather the film’s distance from it, a distance that is queer insofar as it is neither apolitically anti-social nor identitarian. If the film does indeed ‘cite’ the mattress from the trial, it is not really a re-appropriative *detournement* of the spectacle through a vague recollection of the original contexts of the elements. Rather, it is a creative and political invention of the mattress’s social afterlife of the spectacle.

By emphasising the mattress’s presence as a kind of ambiguous erotic shelter and refuge for the drifter and Rawang on the one hand and the drifter and the waitress on the other, the film makes it clear that it has little interest in ‘confirming’ monosexual unions in its proletarian ethnoscape. Instead, Tsai gestures toward a form of intimacy that remains invisible in neoliberalism’s discourse of self-governance. As

50. Chang, supra note 37, at 337-8.
Rey Chow suggests, by making the mattress a “fourth character,” Tsai constructs a “groupuscule, one that goes beyond the twosomeness of conventional heterosexual and homosexual couplings.” This desire to make visible the invisible without violating its social overdetermination and undefinability emerges rather palpably toward the end of the film, after the drifter and the waitress move the mattress from the construction site to the waitress’ attic. In this scene, we see Rawang attacking the drifter when he is asleep, holding the sharp edge of the lid of a can against his neck. The drifter wakes up, surprised, and cries out in pain, tears well up in Rawang’s eyes. He blinks and pauses, moving the can away from the drifter’s skin. The drifter removes Rawang’s mask, holds up his hand to touch Rawang’s cheek, and wipes away his tears. Rawang grabs the hand, kisses it, and then nods slowly and understandingly. In many ways, this shot is the emotional ‘climax’ in which Rawang finally ‘discloses’ his feelings of anger and attachment and in which the drifter shows reciprocation by touching Rawang, perhaps acknowledging his welter of emotions. At the same time, the scene raises several questions: Why is Rawang angered and upset? Is it because the drifter has ‘eloped’ with the waitress? Or is it because they have moved the mattress without him? Or is it because he feels he has suddenly been left out of and unmoored from their sanctuary?

The film does not fully answer any of these questions but it does move toward an illuminating closing sequence. After the scene between the drifter and Rawang, we see the waitress climbing back into her loft. She turns on her little lamp and lies down beside the sleeping drifter who turns around to hold her. The movement of a third person in the dark loft and on the other side of the drifter suggests that Rawang is also sleeping on the same mattress. The camera cuts to the eyes of the paralysed man looking up, as if in the direction of the loft.

In the next and final shot of the film, we are moved back to the dark pool of water at the construction site. The mattress, now fully afloat, slowly drifts into the frame. Asleep on it are the waitress, the drifter, and Rawang. The drifter has his arm around the waitress and holds Rawang’s hand. After the floating and drifting mattress with the trio crosses the centre of the frame, the glowing lamp appears at the upper left corner. The vocalist Tan Soo Suan sings of being united with her one and only lover in the springtime.

We could of course dismiss the shot as the fantasy of the paralysed

man, since it directly follows his gaze. However, to do so would be to see his fantasy as that of the film itself, since this shot also offers a perfect assembly of the different strands of Tsai's queer vision of a community facing devaluation and collapse. First, the final shot returns us to the notion of bohemianism that I began my reading with—as a drifting marked by dispossession and social abandonment. Second, it reinforces the film's non-heteronormativity through a bisuggestive tableau that unsettles ideologies of monosexual coupling and domestic intimacy. Although not explicitly sexual, the image of the drifter affectionately touching both the waitress and Rawang offers a strong counterpoint to the closing song of monogamous love.

Finally, this precarious community is not presented as the product of a radical rebellion outside of the social. It is given to us as a contingency produced by an apocalyptic flooding and/or a doomful paralysis. At the same time, the final shot is also an image of a calm co-endurance that cannot be defined in terms of the politics of visibility and identity. Through the flood, Tsai also stages a levelling of sorts between the various hollowed-out commodities—the lamp, the mattress, and its inhabitants. In other words, the final shot articulates the film's desire for a desire that dare not say its name under the reign of commodity capitalism that also drives homoglobal cosmopolitanism: the desire to de-fetishise identity, whether gay or straight, by exploring the margins of the grand narrative of globalisation.

III. CONCLUSION

In my reading, *Sleep Alone* repeatedly returns us what Hennessy refers to as the gap between the non-discursive and the discursive, something that the regime of the homoglobal (and my two opening wedding exhibits) work hard to cover over. It is the non-discursive social that Tsai's camera insists on capturing without attempting to 'discursify' it fully and without ignoring the violence produced by the discursive categories of difference. Thus, Chow's description of Tsai's cinematic style as "discursivity in production," is particularly apt for *Sleep Alone*. The most important aspect of this style, Chow notes, is that it insists on keeping the production/discursification incomplete.53 However, operating within the cinematic medium, whose history also cannot be separated from the history of capitalism, it is perhaps obvious that Tsai

cannot evade the commodification of his subject matter and his films (as products to be sold and distributed). We may therefore legitimately ask: does Sleep Alone, particularly its last shot, not aestheticise poverty, subalternity, and dispossession?

It will be useful to return to Hennessy here, particularly to her critique of postmodern theory's Foucauldian turn to the aesthetic. Hennessy argues that cultural intervention through radical aesthetics has regrettably moved away from ideas of social change toward artistic self-invention. Quoting Foucault from his essay called "Ethics," she insists that the philosophy of life-as-art is a luxury for the privileged:

In one of his last interviews, for instance, Michel Foucault protests, 'But couldn't everyone's life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an object, but not our life? [...] From the idea that the self is not given to us, I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art. [...] Queer theory and activism's conception of identities as performative significations anchored in individual psychic histories is not very far from this notion of identity as self-fashioning. For here, too, visibility is theatrical, a spectacle that shows up the always precarious stylisation of identity. Foucault's equation of lamp, house, and life as "created" objects elides the different social relations that go into their making by securing them in individual creation. But the answer to why everyone's life couldn't become a work of art could take us somewhere else, to another story, one that makes visible the contradictory social relations the aestheticisation of social life conceals.\footnote{Rosemary Hennessy, Queer Visibility in Commodity Culture, (29) Cultural Critique 31, 59 (Winter, 1994-1995).}

While it is true that Foucault's quick equation of a lamp with one's life is enigmatic and risks being turned into a spectacle that obscures inequity, could we argue that Tsai's cinematic configuration of the same equation produces a different line of social inquiry and exploration? For if we look back at Sleep Alone, the lamp, the house (mattress), and life (queer sociality) are finally comparable precisely because they are discarded and drifting objects without fetish-values. Thus, we may say that Tsai's aestheticisation does not suggest that life should become art. Instead, through its ambitious attempt to represent a postcolonial bohemia and a proletarian 'cosmopolitanism from below', he shows what lies in the shadow of the 'triumph' of the homoglobal. Sleep Alone points in the direction of an aesthetics that turns itself inside out and questions dominant aspirations that shape the fragile and temporary commodity
called 'life' as well as the differential distribution of those aspirations. Transnational activism informed by such a reflexive aesthetics could perhaps mark the beginning of a new, queer, and truly cosmopolitan materialism.