

INTRODUCTION: FROM SLOW CINEMA TO SLOW CINEMAS

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This is the first book to compile a collection of essays on ‘slow cinema’, a term that has acquired remarkable visibility in film criticism over the last decade, thus arriving attached to particular cultural phenomena and inserted within specific public debates. Before delving into an analysis of the cinematic style with which the term has become associated, a brief survey of these phenomena and debates is immediately required.

DISCOURSES

Though slowness may be identified as a constitutive temporal feature of previous films, schools and traditions, the notion has gained unprecedented critical valence in the last decade. One of the first to coin the expression ‘cinema of slowness’ was the French film critic Michel Ciment, in 2003, citing, as exemplary of this trend, directors such as Béla Tarr (Hungary), Tsai Ming-liang (Taiwan) and Abbas Kiarostami (Iran) (Ciment, 2003). In 2008, taking up Ciment’s expression, Matthew Flanagan would expand its theoretical application in his influential article ‘Towards an Aesthetic of Slow in Contemporary Cinema’ which he described as based on ‘the employment of (often extremely) long takes, de-centred and understated modes of storytelling, and a pronounced emphasis on quietude and the everyday’ (2008). One could mention, for example, the unbroken shots in Tarr’s films in which viewers simply follow characters walking aimlessly under torrential rain for more than five minutes; or the contemplative landscape imagery in the films of Carlos Reygadas

(Mexico), Lisandro Alonso (Argentina) and Lav Diaz (Philippines). Or the quotidian, narratively insignificant chores recorded in minute detail and real time in the work of these and many other film-makers who have become associated with the trend.

It was not until 2010, however, that the term slow cinema would become popularised among Anglo-Saxon film critics and cinephiles. On British shores, this was sparked chiefly by a few articles in the magazine *Sight & Sound* (see, for instance, Romney, 2010) and especially its April editorial 'Passive-Aggressive', by Nick James, who called into question the critical validity and political efficacy of 'slow films' as they demand 'great swathes of our precious time' (James, 2010). James's piece acted as the major catalyst of a heated and polarised public debate that soon encompassed other media outlets, film critics and even film scholars, such as Steven Shaviro, for whom slow cinema was aesthetically retrograde (2010).¹ Across the Atlantic, a similar debate around the worthiness of slowness would emerge a year later in the pages of the *New York Times* and beyond. Spurred on by Dan Kois, who equated the slow cinematic fare of the likes of Kelly Reichardt (United States) with unpalatable 'cultural vegetables' (Kois, 2011), film critics Manohla Dargis and A. O. Scott jumped 'In Defense of the Slow and the Boring' (Dargis and Scott, 2011) in the pages of the same newspaper. This discussion forum subsequently provided David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson the cue to historicise, in their blog *Observations on Film Art*, a 'polarized film culture: fast, aggressive cinema for the mass market and slow, more austere cinema for festivals and arthouses' (Bordwell and Thompson, 2011).

As these discourses demonstrate, the question of slowness in the cinema has generated controversy over its aesthetics and politics, aspects to which we will return in the course of this introduction. Let us note for now that the topic has accordingly gained momentum in academia, with studies such as Flanagan's *'Slow Cinema': Temporality and Style in Contemporary Art and Experimental Film* (2012; unpublished PhD thesis), and the publication of three books in 2014: Ira Jaffe's *Slow Movies: Countering the Cinema of Action*, Song Hwee Lim's *Tsai Ming-liang and a Cinema of Slowness* and Lutz Koepnick's *On Slowness: Toward an Aesthetic of the Contemporary*. While Flanagan historically situates a cinema of slowness within a post-war modernist and experimental tradition, Jaffe's study focuses on a wide intercultural range of contemporary films, though devoted almost exclusively to textual analysis. For his part, Lim focuses specifically on the Taiwan-based director while, nonetheless, using his films as a vehicle through which to formulate a rigorous conceptual framework for the study of slow cinema as a whole. Koepnick, finally, proposes to examine slowness not in terms of cinematic duration or a durational aesthetic but, rather, in relation to varied contemporary art practices premised upon the operation of slow-motion photography.²

In many ways, the present collection naturally chimes with these studies, though perhaps a bit more strongly with the first three in that many of the following chapters are concerned with the durational aesthetic more commonly associated with slow cinema. Nevertheless, as we shall see, it is also one of the aims of this book to question and expand the frameworks that have generally informed slow cinema debates up until now, thus repositioning the term in a broader theoretical space while illuminating the aforementioned film-makers, as well as several others, in the hope of mapping out contemporary and past slow cinemas across the globe. Of course, the book is by no means exhaustive, and there are important film-makers identified with the slow trend who are not covered here owing to space constraints, including Alexander Sokurov (Russia), Ben Rivers (United Kingdom), Chantal Akerman (Belgium), Albert Serra (Spain) and Nuri Bilge Ceylan (Turkey). That said, we believe that the volume's scope and coverage offer a sufficiently wide panorama of slow cinema as a global phenomenon, with individual chapters further attending to the specific contexts and traditions from which many slow films emerge – an approach which, in its depth and breadth, only a multi-authored study could undertake.

Slow cinema is, then, a rather recent phenomenon in conceptual terms, and one that furthermore shares its discursive genesis with a much larger socio-cultural movement whose aim is to rescue extended temporal structures from the accelerated tempo of late capitalism, as Lim notes in Chapter 5. Indeed, the term 'slow' has noticeably become a convenient prefix for a number of grass-roots movements such as 'slow media', 'slow travel' and 'slow food', the last famously created by Carlo Petrini in Italy in the mid 1980s. This is not to say, however, that the directors subsumed under the 'slow' banner are engaged with, or even aware of, other slow movements – which, incidentally, would sit in stark contrast to the 'accelerationist' project (see Noys, 2010). Rather, slow films would seem to share narrative and aesthetic features that lend themselves to a prevailing discourse of slowness which here finds its cinematic materialisation, even though, of course, not the same directors will crop up in the discourses mentioned earlier. This reveals the novelty of the moniker, appropriated as it is to describe a still-in-the-making and shifting canon that impresses not only in terms of its intercultural and global dimension but also because it crosses the boundaries of fiction, documentary and experimental film. Whereas there is little doubt that the usual slow-cinema contenders make fictionalised narrative films, experimental, documentary and semi-documentary film-makers, such as James Benning (Lam, in Chapter 14; Ross, in Chapter 18), Pedro Costa (Jorge, in Chapter 11), Abbas Kiarostami (Remes, in Chapter 16) and Wang Bing (Smith, in Chapter 12) among others, are equally discussed in relation to the current.

In this respect, it could be argued that the promiscuity of the 'slow' descriptor risks weakening its own methodological vigour as it is applied too

indiscriminately, and the appropriateness of the term in relation to the corpus it generally describes has not gone unquestioned. Harry Tuttle, for example, vociferously rejects it as ‘a mischaracterisation that induces contempt and caricature’, adopting instead the more positive designation ‘CCC’, an acronym for ‘contemporary contemplative cinema’ (2010). We agree that the term ‘slow’ demands a judicious usage if its theoretical and critical potential is to be retained and exploited, and, indeed, one of the aims of this book is to provide more nuanced and localised understandings of cinematic slowness, including the questioning of its applicability and usefulness (see Nagib, in Chapter 1; Walsh, in Chapter 3).

That said, we believe that the ease with which the concept navigates across different cinematic modes, movements, practices and even media is, in fact, one of its strengths. It offers the opportunity to illuminate these afresh from a new angle and, in so doing, it opens up a space for theoretical reconsiderations on underexplored aspects of filmic temporality and beyond. While we concur that slowness often betrays a pejorative connotation, the sheer pervasiveness of the term, together with its wider sociocultural resonance and usage, demand that it be examined seriously in its discursive foundations and conceptual ramifications, rather than simply dismissed.

In this light, slow cinema can be seen as an unstructured film movement made up of disparate films and practices that are conceptualised as a grouping thanks to their comparable style. Yet, to borrow Bordwell’s words, if we are to view cinematic style as that which mobilises ‘a rich ensemble of concrete choices about camerawork and lighting, performance and cutting’ (2008: 260), what choices are consistent across the body of films normally identified with a cinema of slowness and why are they considered slow?

STYLE

To examine the stylistic features mobilised by slow films is paramount if we consider that slowness, understood as a mode of temporal unfolding and as an awareness of duration, is a fundamentally subjective experience. As Matilda Mroz notes, ‘[w]hat for one viewer might seem too long for another might offer a moment of elongated rapture’ (2013: 41). It is often the case, however, that slow time is made manifest and felt in those instances in which one is confronted with the impossibility of shaping temporal rhythms according to one’s will, such as when we find ourselves stuck in a long queue or waiting for the next train. As Elizabeth Grosz, building on Henri Bergson, argues, the phenomenon of ‘[w]aiting is the subjective experience that perhaps best exemplifies the coexistence of a multiplicity of durations, durations both my own and outside of me’ (2004: 197; see also Mroz, in Chapter 20).

As far as the cinema is concerned, one of its fundamental properties is, of course, its ability to record time and impose duration. While the new spectatorial modes evinced by portable devices are defined by an ever-greater flexibility in terms of temporal manipulation, when watched under fixed-time conditions cinema strictly enforces its own temporality. In fact, as Mary Ann Doane has shown, the ‘linear, irreversible, “mechanical”’ temporality of the cinematic apparatus already constituted a major source of anxiety at the time of its appearance insofar as cinema’s recording of time becomes immediately ‘characterized by a certain indeterminacy, an intolerable instability. The image is the imprint of a particular moment whose particularity becomes indeterminable precisely because the image does not speak its own relation to time’ (2002: 163). Subsequently, cinema becomes concerned with the production and recording of ‘events’ whose conceptual existence is premised upon and structured around the elision of ‘dead time’, that is to say, ‘time in which nothing happens, time which is in some sense “wasted”, expended without product’ (Doane, 2002: 160). It is against this background, Doane goes on, that the vertiginous emergence of narrative structures in early cinema should thus be examined: for this emergence bespeaks a desire to structure unregulated cinematic time; to make duration more tolerable, or indeed invisible, by instrumentalising it according to clearly defined and legible narrative parameters.

If slow cinema, by contrast, makes time noticeable in the image and consequently felt by the viewer, it can be argued that this is often achieved by means of a disjunction between shot duration and audiovisual content. To return to Tarr’s famous walking scenes, five minutes is an unjustifiably long time to show an event seemingly devoid of narrative significance and/or momentum. As Ivone Margulies notes in her book-length study of Chantal Akerman, the definition of ‘nothing happens’ in the cinema is ‘appended to films . . . in which the representation’s substratum of content seems at variance with the duration accorded it’ (1996: 21). In this respect, a popular method to evaluate and measure the slowness of a given film has been to examine its average shot length (ASL), a quantitative analysis achieved through dividing a given film’s duration by its overall number of shots. This method would readily lead to the conclusion that the slow style is firmly predicated upon the application of the long take.

Yet, as Lim notes, ‘how long is too long? Aside from the subjectivity of the idea and experience of time, it is striking that within film scholarship there does not seem to be a definition for how long exactly is a long take’ (2014: 21). By the same token, the ASL of a given film is arguably not an entirely reliant indicator of slowness. Take for instance *Lola Montès* (1955), a film in which Max Ophüls, as Barry Salt notes, ‘was continuing on his commercially dangerous course of using very long takes (ASL = 18sec.)’ (1992: 312). Even if we admit that the duration of eighteen seconds amounts to a ‘very long take’

(it certainly does not in contemporary slow films, the ASL of which easily crosses the mark of thirty seconds), one cannot fail to notice that the long takes found in *Lola Montès* can hardly be considered 'slow'. Not only are they manufactured through a dazzling display of choreographed and sweeping camera movements, they are equally populated by hundreds of characters and extras hectically moving from one side to the other as they perform acrobatic numbers in a circus, the film's main setting. Long-take films such as Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948), Mikhail Kalatozov's *I am Cuba* (*Soy Cuba*, 1968) or Orson Welles's *A Touch of Evil* (1958), to give a few more examples, are likewise hard to be classified as slow owing to their wildly eventful *mise en scène* and/or kinetic camerawork.

At the other end of the spectrum we have directors, such as Robert Bresson and Yasujiro Ozu, who, while often invoked as precursors of cinematic slowness, made films that were entirely reliant on montage and short-length shots (see Nagib, in Chapter 1). In fact, the intriguing nature of Ozu's slowness was the subject of a 2000 lecture-turned article by Jonathan Rosenbaum, in which the film critic tentatively identifies the slowness of a film such as *Tokyo Story* (*Tokyo Monogatari*, 1953) not in its form but in its content, namely 'an elderly couple whose movements are slow, and who are seen sitting more often than standing' (2000). There is arguably far more here to Ozu's slowness, however: consider, for instance, his resolutely static camerawork, his attention to narratively insignificant incidents, and especially his focus on settings devoid of human presence, his so-called 'pillow shots'. Quantitative cutting rate, then, does not in itself explain why a film can be considered slow but needs to be analysed qualitatively in relation to other elements of film style.

In this respect, Lim has advanced a more encompassing analytical framework for a cinema of slowness that includes other stylistic parameters such as 'silence' and 'stillness' and, within the latter category, variations such as '*content of the shot*', '*camera movement*' and '*camera angle and camera distance*', among others (2014: 79–80, emphasis in original). Schoonover, in his chapter, also contributes to a more in-depth understanding of how slowness is produced in the filmic image through an analysis of non-professional performance, while Jaffe has noted the ways in which 'long shots frequently prevail over close-ups' in the slow film (2014: 3). Yet here we are also aware that this listing of devices and strategies might unwittingly reinforce the idea that slow cinema is 'formulaic and anonymous' (Smith, 2012: 72). This is a notion too often invoked in rebuttals of the slow style, which reveals the implicit assumption that it is easy to forge owing to its economical means, and the explicit one that it has become fossilised because of the immutability of its main properties.

Of course, a particular style is by no means a guarantee of quality. Yet to dismiss a group of films which adhere to comparable stylistic features seems similarly unwise. In fact, as many of the following chapters will attest, a more

or less predetermined aesthetic framework often triggers the opposite result in terms of original filming approaches and creative *mise en scène* strategies. One of the objectives of this volume is to challenge essentialist ideas about the slow style through localised and close readings, moving thereby from a generic idea of ‘slow cinema’ to the concrete particularities of slow cinemas. In this respect, one section of the book, Part II, will be entirely devoted to ‘contextualising slow cinema’. The aim here is not only to illuminate how expressions of slowness are uniquely materialised in a certain film or *oeuvre* – such as Tsai Ming-liang’s aesthetics of temporal drifting (Lim, in Chapter 5) or the stills and stillness in the work of Apichatpong (Glyn, in Chapter 6) – but also how slow films are often strictly indebted to local settings and traditions – such as the specifically Philippine roots of Lav Diaz’s long slow films (Brown, in Chapter 7), the American cinematic idiom and sense of place animating the work of Kelly Reichardt (Gorfinkel, in Chapter 8), and the rapidly transforming reality of China depicted in Jia Zhangke’s films (Mello, in Chapter 9).

In fact, the strict adherence to realism and reality that is a trademark of slow films means that they are, quite often, naturally very distinct which leads us, in turn, to the question of the style’s genealogy. That is, while slow cinema is doubtless a recent discursive phenomenon, the aesthetic models and narrative systems mobilised by the style to which such a discourse lends critical valence can arguably be traced back to previous theoretical models and filmic schools across world cinema.

LINEAGES

From the outset, the slow film immediately attests to a rehabilitation of the tenets historically associated with cinematic realism as envisioned by its most illustrious proponent, French film critic André Bazin. Starting from the premise that film has an ‘ontological’ relation with reality owing to its photographic basis, Bazin celebrated the fact that cinema allowed ‘for the first time, the image of things [to be] likewise *the image of their duration*, change mummified’ (Bazin, 2005: 15, emphasis added). Various inspired by the philosophical currents in vogue at his time – including Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology and Bergson’s notion of *durée* – Bazin cherished films that, in opposition to an aesthetics of fragmentation based on montage, preserved the continuum of reality through the use of non-professional actors, location shooting and, more remarkably, the application of depth of field and the long take, the combination of which produced what he famously conceptualised as a ‘sequence shot’ (2005: 35).

All of the above is by now a commonplace in film history. It is also a reductive account of Bazin’s complex cinema theory. Calling the ‘montage vs. sequence shot’ binary ‘the textbook version of Bazin’, Philip Rosen (2014) has recently reminded us that such a version injects a rigid notion of cinematic specificity

into Bazin's realism when the latter was, in fact, open to the fundamentally unspecific nature of cinema in its historically situated relations with other arts and the world at large, as Nagib further elaborates in her contribution to this volume. At any event, Bazin remains an important theoretical springboard for reflections on slow cinema not only because the films normally subsumed under the moniker would seem to radicalise his 'textbook version' but because a cinema of slowness is also taken to give continuity to cinematic modernism (see Flanagan, 2012; Betz, 2010) which equally finds in Bazin its conceptual genesis.

As Lúcia Nagib argues in her chapter, realism and modernism are mutually implicated categories in Bazin's thought. Yet, here, Bazin has to dismiss the modernist cinemas of the 1920s and modernism's obsession with speed as a whole in order to define his own notion of modern cinema as one largely premised on 'extended duration' and an 'accent on the everyday', both of which, as Margulies has shown, provided in the post-war period the 'traditional conjunction of modernism, realism, and politics' in film (Margulies, 1996: 22–3). Celebrating on the one hand the sequence shots of Welles, Wyler or Renoir and, on the other, neorealism's loosened narratives and empty everyday moments, the cinematic modernity championed by Bazin is predicated on ambiguous images whose indeterminate narrative import and/or temporal flow open up a space for reflection and intervention on the part of the spectator. No doubt, in hindsight, some of Bazin's favoured films may appear somewhat constrained in terms of their relatively timid temporal elongations, circumscribed as they were by dramatic and even theatrical structures (see Wollen, 2004: 252; de Luca, 2014: 18–21). For the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, however, the films illuminated by Bazin are already the seeds of a cinema concerned with 'direct presentations of time' (Deleuze, 2005: 39).

Deleuze's hugely influential cinema books are by now well documented and duly invoked in many studies on slow cinema (and chapters in this volume) owing to his conception of the 'time-image' regime which updates Bazin's notion of modern cinema in the following terms:

Now, from its first appearances, something different happens in what is called modern cinema . . . What has happened is that the sensory-motor schema [of classical cinema, or movement-image] is no longer in operation, but at the same time it is not overtaken or overcome. It is shattered from the inside. That is, perceptions and actions ceased to be linked together, and spaces are now neither co-ordinated nor filled. Some characters, caught in certain pure optical and sound situations, find themselves condemned to wander about or go off on a trip. They are pure seers . . . The relation, *sensory-motor situation* → *indirect image of time* is replaced by a non-localizable relation, *pure optical and sound situation* → *direct time image*. (Deleuze, 2005: 39, original emphasis)

Though Deleuze's pantheon is monumental in scope, his conceptualisation of the time-image thus comes to legitimise it as a by now well-known version of modernist art cinema characterised by observant and errant characters, elliptical and dedramatised narrative structures, minimalist *mise en scène*, and/or the sustained application of elongated and self-reflexive temporal devices such as the long take.³

Initially associated with the likes of Carl Theodor Dreyer and Michelangelo Antonioni, this aesthetic axiom would bloom in the 1960s and 1970s with the rise of art cinema European auteurs, such as Andrei Tarkovsky, Theo Angelopoulos and Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, on the one hand, and the more radical and non-narrative experiments practised across the Atlantic by the likes of Andy Warhol, Michael Snow and Hollis Frampton, on the other, with film-makers such as Chantal Akerman further bridging these complementary tendencies in their own work. For David Company, 'the embrace of the slow' represented by many of these film-makers 'was a sign of increasing uncertainty about the recorded image in general' and the result of a sense of disenchantment with speed and montage which, once revered for their creative and critical power in the 1920s, started 'degenerating from the promise of mass mobilization into mass destruction. The accelerated image world began to feel dehumanizing, repetitive and monotonous. In this context *slowness*, the deliberate refusal of speed, became central in vanguard art and culture' (Company, 2008: 36, original emphasis). Peter Wollen strikes a similar chord and contends that 'the turn towards slowness which we see in the work of many avant-garde filmmakers [in the 1960s and 1970s] could best be interpreted as a reaction against the increasing speed of mainstream movies, whether it was intended or unintended' (2002: 270).

It is tempting to chart the evolution of cinematic slowness as one that finds its inaugural expressions in Bazin's pantheon, forks into modernist and experimental tendencies in the 1960s and 1970s, and arrives in the 1990s and 2000s wholly matured but now on a decidedly global scale. Yet this evolutionary approach does not come without shortcomings. For one thing, it legitimises a history of film style that is decidedly teleological and also Eurocentric. For another, it risks overlooking the aesthetic and contextual differences of individual directors and film movements by subsuming them all under the same modern and/or slow umbrella. As a result, rather than merely looking at contemporary slow cinemas as a means to examine how they rearticulate the structures and tendencies of the aforementioned films and traditions, in this book we shall also propose that these films and traditions be themselves retroactively illuminated from today's theoretical vantage point of slowness, as illustrated by Part I, devoted to 'historicising slow cinema'.

Slowness thus emerges here not only as a privileged vehicle through which to recalibrate and bring context and nuance to well-documented slow-cinema

precursors, such as Dreyer (Thomson, in Chapter 2), Straub and Huillet (Brady, in Chapter 4) and 1960s durational cinema (Walsh, in Chapter 3). It also presents the historical opportunity to rethink, or even challenge and reject, traditional genealogies of film history and teleological determinism. This is what Nagib proposes in Chapter 1 in which she questions the Bazinian–Deleuzian notion of modernity as the political project of slow cinema by resorting to the case of two Japanese film-makers, Ozu and Mizoguchi, whose differing ‘slow’ styles cannot be accommodated by traditional world cinema chronologies and Eurocentric organisations. Julian Ross, in Chapter 18, also forges new links in film history by examining the unlikely connection between American film-maker James Benning and the 1960s collective of Japanese film-makers associated with *fūkeiron* (landscape theory) as unexpected precursors of slow cinema. More broadly, Part V of the book will attempt to move ‘beyond “slow cinema”’ in an attempt to expand the application of slowness in the cinema to new areas of theoretical enquiries (Mroz, in Chapter 20) and unexplored generic filmic practices, such as heritage cinema (Stone and Cooke, in Chapter 22) and the road movie (Gott, in Chapter 21).

MECHANISMS

If slowness can be, however tentatively, traced back to earlier waves in film history and attributed to different causes, the question of why it has acquired a greater visibility in our time as a global cinematic tendency nevertheless remains. That both modern life and mainstream cinema seem to have become even faster at the turn of the millennium is perhaps something to bear in mind. As Robert Hassan notes, the ‘increasing rapidity at which we produce, consume and distribute commodities is now the core process, the central factor in the “economy of speed”’, which ‘represents an immense . . . transformation of the cultural and social forms that spin out from its epicenter’ (2009: 21). Paramount among these cultural forms is, of course, cinema and, more specifically, Hollywood cinema, which, as David Bordwell (2002) tells us, now operates on the principle of an ultrafast formal aesthetics of ‘intensified continuity’ based on rapid editing, close framings and free-ranging camerawork. If, however, reaction to an increasingly fast world and cinema alike may provide some points of entry for ruminations on the ideological underpinnings of contemporary slow cinema, such underpinnings still fail to explain the material and institutional conditions that make such a cinema *de facto* possible.

Interestingly, Bordwell’s own observations on the fast Hollywood model may illuminate the processes which have occasioned its alleged antithesis, for the same digital technology that enables faster shooting methods and editing patterns (2002: 22) has also contributed to the production and circulation of slowness at the turn of the millennium. As the relatively inexpensive and

flexible digital equipment offers the ability to record much longer stretches of time, it enables hitherto untenable modes of production and recording based on duration and observation. As demonstrated by no fewer than eight chapters in this volume (see Jorge, Mello, Lovatt, Brown, Smith, Lim, Remes and Ross), each of which focuses on a different director, contrary to the accusation of nostalgic purism and technological backwardness that the slow film has received (see Shaviro, 2010), its proliferation around the globe is, in fact, inextricably connected to the arrival of digital technology in film production.

As far as institutional support goes, slow cinema also circulates within a specific economic and cultural sphere that has largely enabled not only its global promotion and consumption but also its production, namely: the international film festival. As Mark Betz reminds us:

[O]ne must acknowledge the international networks of exchange within which many [of the practitioners currently identified with slow cinema] are working, in terms of not only their geographic range but also the transnational provenance of the film production (many by European finance), reception, and dissemination, frequently by major European film festivals. Increasingly, festivals are themselves commissioning and producing the work of these filmmakers, potentially binding them to a marketplace that cannot but have an effect on the stylistic choices that they make. (2010: 32)⁴

To give a privileged example, a film festival such as Rotterdam is now famous for its Hubert Bals Fund (HBF) which has financially helped many slow-cinema suspects in Latin America and Asia, such as Reygadas, Alonso, Apichatpong and Diaz.

By admitting that slow cinema circulates within, and is in turn supported by, the international film festival circuit, we are therefore not only situating slow cinema within the larger category and institution of art cinema as much as we are following Lim's call to liberate such a category 'from its economic closet to acknowledge its status as a global niche market with attendant institutions, mechanisms, and agents' (2014: 27–8). This seems especially paramount as slow cinema is often accused of catering to this particular niche market and its corresponding association with elitism and the overly aesthetic. Indeed, this accusation appears to gain in significance when we consider that the art gallery has consistently lured practitioners interested in slowness over the last decade, with directors such as Akerman, Costa, Tsai, Apichatpong and Kiarostami, among others, crossing over into the realm of the museum and making moving-image installations that often recycle and expand on their own feature films.

Through navigating within institutional realms premised upon art cinema and art practices, slow cinema is thus caught up in another debate that

calls into question its cultural and political integrity. As many slow films come from Iran, Asia and Latin America, and are accordingly financed by European agents and institutions, questions hinging on power relations and national authenticity come to the fore. Miriam Ross, for example, draws attention to the ‘expectations placed’ on the films that are produced under the HBF scheme, including ‘the desire to fit within art cinema, and the belief that they will engage with film festival audiences’ (2011: 267). While Ross does not specifically address the slow style that is a recognisable trademark of many HBF films, her contention that the scheme ‘restricts the access national audiences have to these works through an emphasis on film festival circulation’ (267) resonates with many contemporary film-makers discussed in this book, who are often accused of turning their backs on national audiences by aestheticising their own local cultures to a privileged international elite.

There is no doubt that an examination of contemporary film and cultural production must take into account the ways in which an uneven confluence of financing sources and international institutions support and subtend such productions. And yet, can we speak of a purely ‘national’ or ‘independent’ film today? Deborah Shaw, for example, alerts us not to fall into the equally essentialist notion ‘that more authentic images are presented when the funding of a film relies on purely national sources’ (2013: 168). Dudley Andrew has similarly reminded us that the ‘very idea of “independent cinema” has been altered by what is now a fully global network that makes *every film* quite “dependent”’ (2012: ix, emphasis added). We refuse to see slow films as automatically suspicious owing to their dependence on transnational frameworks in the same way that we ‘refuse to underestimate the potential of the international’ (Galt and Schoonover, 2012: 10).

The scepticism, however, with which a cinema of slowness has been received goes beyond its reliance on international funding and circulation. Two other, and often interrelated, assumptions uphold the suspicion appended to the slow film, namely: that it is excessively aesthetic and that it is also retrograde in its nostalgic longing for pre-industrial temporalities and corresponding facing away from the complex multiplicity of time. As such, slow cinema ultimately raises questions related to the politics of its aesthetics, to which we shall turn by way of concluding this introduction.

POLITICS

As far as the first assumption is concerned, slow cinema’s eminently aesthetic dimension, as observed in meticulously composed visual and aural compositions, would seem to sit uneasily with the subject matter of such a cinema, which Matthew Flanagan aptly summarises as follows:

The distinctive aesthetics of slow films tend to emerge from spaces that have been indirectly affected or left behind by globalisation, most notably in the films of Alonso, Bartas, Jia, Costa and Diaz . . . [M]any individual works by these filmmakers turn their attention to marginal peoples (low-paid manual labourers, poor farmers, the unemployed and dispossessed, petty criminals and drug addicts) subsisting in remote or invisible places, and depict the performance of (waged or unwaged) agricultural and manufacturing work that is increasingly obscured by the macro volatility of finance-capital's huge speculative flows. (2012: 118)

Several chapters readily attest to Flanagan's remarks, with Part III of the book specifically addressing the question of marginal labour that is at the core of many slow films. And while such a focus on the underprivileged would not constitute a problem in itself, the glaringly aesthetic, even austere, style through which these films choose to depict marginalised places and peoples brings with it the old suspicion that 'art cinema's formal surpluses' are 'semantically bankrupt, aesthetically decadent, or simply apolitical' (Schoonover and Galt, 2010: 18).⁵

Indeed, aesthetics and politics are often deemed irreconcilable in film studies, a perception in part derived from the discipline's long-standing alliance with cultural studies and its corresponding emphasis on the representational politics of popular culture. For the French philosopher Jacques Rancière, however, aesthetics and politics can be said to operate exactly on the same principle. This principle destabilises the 'consensual' social order through unexpected reframings that accordingly reconfigure modes of sensory experience by overturning the idea that only certain subjects, bodies and themes belong to the domain of the aesthetic and the sensible. Aesthetic interventions, in this sense, are not political because they have a clearly defined and didactic goal that is translated into collective action on the part of the spectators. On the contrary, aesthetics is to be deemed political because it accepts its own insufficiency as a mode of experience, one that does not give lessons and cannot predict results; one that is content with being 'configurations of experience that create new modes of sense perception' (Rancière, 2011: 9).

As Rancière elaborates in Chapter 17, which opens Part V, on the 'ethics and politics of slowness', the politics of Béla Tarr's films is not to be found in matters of plot. Rather, it resides in the rift produced by a representational focus on purely idiotic characters who are, nevertheless, 'given presence and density' through an aesthetics that is committed to 'the materiality of time' and which as such reopens 'time as the site of the possible'. Elsewhere the philosopher has also elaborated on another slow-cinema suspect, Pedro Costa, and noted how his attention 'to every beautiful form offered by the homes of the poor, and the patience with which he listens' to its inhabitants are 'inscribed in a different

politics of art [that] does not seek to make viewers aware of the structures of domination and inspire them to mobilize their energies' (Rancière, 2011: 80). Rather, '[t]he politics of the filmmaker involves using the sensory riches – the power of speech or of vision – that can be extracted from the life and settings of these precarious existences' (81). While Costa knows his films will be 'immediately labelled film-festival material . . . and tendentiously pushed in the direction of museum and art lovers', he 'makes a film in the awareness that it is only a film, one which will scarcely be shown and whose effects in the theatres and outside are fairly unpredictable' (82). Cinema, Rancière concludes, thus 'must split itself off; it must agree to be the surface on which an artist tries to cipher in new figures the experience of people relegated to the margins of economic circulation and social trajectories' but it can never avoid 'the aesthetic cut that separates outcomes from intentions' (82).

Rancière's remarks can be productively extended to many practitioners under consideration in this book, who, like Tarr and Costa, are equally concerned with registering the experience and lived time of the marginalised. Directors such as Tsai, Jia, Benning, Diaz, Reygadas, Wang, for example, are all aware that a film is only a film; that it cannot transcend its status as a commodity dependent on particular institutions and networks, and that all a film can do is illuminate given realities through aesthetic interventions that may refresh the affects and perceptions of such realities. Unflinching in their minute observation of pressing local and global issues, these film-makers nonetheless refuse to offer facile, schematic or ready-made interpretations, opting instead to observe, with attention and patience, all kinds of significant as well as insignificant realities. In so doing, slowness not only interrogates and reconfigures well-established notions of aesthetic and cultural worthiness – what is worthy of being shown, for how long it is worth being shown – but also what is worthy of our attention and patience as viewers and individuals, and thus ultimately of our time and what we do with such time.

In their durational quest, however, to capture the riches of lives, realities and temporalities seemingly at odds with, or else at the margins of, dominant economic systems and networks, slow films are confronted with another accusation, that of a certain escapism as they allegedly 'turn their backs to the exigencies of the now so as to fancy the presumed pleasures of preindustrial times and lifestyles' (Koepnick, 2014: 3). Koepnick, for example, cautions that 'the wager of aesthetic slowness is not simply to find islands of respite, calm and stillness somewhere outside the cascades of contemporary speed culture' but, rather, to 'investigate what it means to experience a world of speed, acceleration, and cotemporality' (2014: 10), an operation that he locates not in durational films but, as previously mentioned, in slow-motion art practices. The political project of the slow movement as a whole has also been called under suspicion as it 'appear[s] to be about getting away, main-

taining distance from the temporal and the complex multiplicity of time' (Sharma, 2014: 111).

To be sure, these accusations cannot be entirely discounted and, as Part IV shows, slow cinema's veritable emphasis on rural lifestyles and animal life should also be examined within the larger context of discourses such as 'ecocriticism' (Lam, in Chapter 14) and the 'non-human turn' (de Luca, in Chapter 15; Remes, in Chapter 16). That said, the assumption that slow cinema simply inverts speed, or else faces away from the conflicting temporalities of the now, is in need of qualification. As many chapters demonstrate in this book, a durational aesthetic is more often than not appropriated as the means by which to confront, and reflect on, the 'experience of a world of speed, acceleration, and cotemporality', to use Koepnick's own words. In this respect, the fact that so many slow cinemas come from East Asia and China is noteworthy when set against the historically unprecedented pace at which modernisation has taken place in many of these regions in the last thirty years. As Mello, Lovatt and Smith explore in their chapters, directors such as Jia Zhangke (Chapter 9), Liu Jiayin (Chapter 13) and Wang Bing (Chapter 12) all deploy slowness as a strategy not to turn away from the vertiginous speed of industrialisation processes and societal changes but as a vehicle through which to confront and make sense of these processes and changes.

Similarly, slow time does not exist in a sealed-off vacuum in durational cinemas but is often resorted to as a medium to actualise and negotiate conceptually different temporalities and competing visions of time, which is to say that many cinemas under consideration here not only offer the phenomenological experience of distended time but that they are also, epistemologically, 'about' time: historical time (Rancière, in Chapter 17; Stone and Cooke, in Chapter 22), cosmological time (Brown, in Chapter 7), evolutionary human time (Mroz, in Chapter 20), non-human times (Part IV). Durational slowness, then, can be variously moulded according to a given object of attention and specific formal and narrative strategies as a means to ponder over the co-existence of multiple temporalities. This includes what it means to live in the midst of today's wildly entangled temporal configurations as well as non-human conceptions of time. More broadly, as Lim (Chapter 5), Grønstad (Chapter 19) and Schoonover (Chapter 10) respectively explore in their chapters, in a world where speed is the normative ideological paradigm underpinning late capitalism's economic labour systems, social values and the contemporary audiovisual and cultural regimes, slowness necessarily intervenes in wider political debates insofar as it speaks to this paradigm and opens up a space to look at, reassess and question these systems, values and regimes from a new sensory-perceptual prism.

As Jonathan Crary has observed, if the everyday, as a critical and aesthetic category, rests on the preservation of the 'recurring pulsings of life being lived'

(2014: 69), then the preservation of these pulsings of lived time acquires a new urgency given the current erosion of ‘distinctions between work and non-work time, between public and private, between everyday life and organized institutional milieus’ (Crary, 2014: 74). As the unattended temporalities and folds of everyday life become increasingly controlled, dominated and disciplined by digital networks that infiltrate every aspect of lived experience, this ‘relentless capture and control of time and experience’ entails an ‘incapacitation of daydream or of any mode of absent-minded introspection that would otherwise occur in intervals of slow and vacant time’ (Crary, 2014: 40, 88).

It is therefore in this context that the politics of slow cinema should be examined and understood, for it is not a coincidence that its emergence in the last three decades coincides with the period in which Crary rightly sees ‘the assault on everyday life assum[ing] a new ferocity’ (2014: 71). As the following chapters will, we hope, attest, a slow cinematic aesthetic not only restores a sense of time and experience in a world short of both, it also encourages a mode of engagement with images and sounds whereby slow time becomes a vehicle for introspection, reflection and thinking, and the world is disclosed in its complexity, richness and mystery.

CHAPTER OUTLINES

Through its wide range of contributions, the book combines an array of approaches and perspectives whose organising principle will be the developing notion of slowness as applied to cinema. Part I, ‘Historicising Slow Cinema’, sheds fresh light on canonical directors and movements with a view to mapping out a slow genealogy in film history. In Chapter 1, Lúcia Nagib provides a re-evaluation of the diachronic line marking out classical and modern cinemas through a comparative analysis of the differing slow styles of Kenji Mizoguchi and Yasujiro Ozu. Defying world cinema classifications based on evolutionary and Eurocentric models, Nagib instead draws on the Bazinian concept of ‘impure cinema’ in order to interrogate and challenge the classical–modern debate and its most recent expression as encapsulated in the fast–slow binary. C. Claire Thomson, in Chapter 2, examines Carl Th. Dreyer’s film style by focusing not on the director’s contemplative feature films but instead on his writings and lesser-known commissioned shorts which, she argues, offer a productive foundation upon which to revisit and bring a more nuanced perspective on the slowness commonly attributed to this film-maker. Michael Walsh, in Chapter 3, provides a historical and theoretical account on what he terms ‘the first durational cinema’ of the 1960s, contending that the experimental films of Andy Warhol and Michael Snow, among others, can be seen as a springboard that in some sense informs the

aesthetic of contemporary slow cinema. Closing this section is Chapter 4, by Martin Brady, which retraces the slowness of a film such as Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet's *History Lessons* (*Geschichtsunterricht*, 1972) to a specifically Brechtian notion of materialism and in the light of Walter Benjamin's materialist historiography and his conception of 'dialectics at a standstill'.

Looking specifically at contemporary films and directors, Part II of the book is devoted to 'Contextualising Slow Cinema', illuminating how the slow style can be variously embedded in local roots and indebted to distinct cultural, intermedial and cinematic traditions. Chapter 5, by Song Hwee Lim, explores the distinctive crystallisation of slowness in the cinema of Taiwan-based Tsai Ming-liang as one based on the stillness of diegetic action and stationary camerawork. These features, however, are complicated by the visual trope of objects in movement which Lim conceptualises as conjuring a 'temporal aesthetics of drifting'. Like Lim, Glyn Davis, in Chapter 6, also examines cinematic stillness in Apichatpong Weerasethakul's films, though he does so in relation to the presence of photographic stills and freeze-frames in the work of the Thai director, and as an opportunity to rethink and theorise the ways in which slowness, stasis and stillness are interconnected in slow cinema. In Chapter 7, William Brown looks at Lav Diaz's *Melancholia* (2008) as a peculiarly 'long' iteration of slow cinema owing to its excessive running time, while further situating the film's aesthetic adherence to realism and real time within specifically Philippine cultural, social and rural contexts. Elena Gorfinkel, in Chapter 8, analyses the American cinematic idiom informing Kelly Reichardt's 'anti-Western' *Meek's Cutoff* (2010), and calls attention to its aesthetics of austerity and dispossession as one that conceptually resonates with the United States's current neo-liberal policies. Chapter 9, by Cecília Mello, concludes this section by exploring, through an intermedial approach, the slowness of Jia Zhangke's cinema as an aesthetic response to the speed of transformations in China as well as a quest to register the country's ephemeral cityscapes as materialised in disappearing walls.

Part III, 'Slow Cinema and Labour', focuses on the question of labour and its theoretical and political ramifications for the study of slow cinema. Karl Schoonover, in Chapter 10, harnesses the slow cinema debate as an opportunity to reconsider the conceptual stakes of labour, value and productivity as foregrounded by the category of art cinema. Focusing on the figure of the 'cinematic wastrel', Schoonover examines the ways in which this non-productive on-screen body makes visible the off-screen labour of viewing, thereby intervening in debates on the politics of spectatorship. In Chapter 11, Nuno Barradas Jorge discusses the artisanal labour and long production time that went into the making of Pedro Costa's *In Vanda's Room* (*No Quarto da Vanda*, 2000) as a consequence of the director's utilisation of digital technology, which enabled a slow film-making process based on the repetitious

observation of everyday routines in a marginalised Lisbon community. Patrick Brian Smith, in Chapter 12, similarly investigates the ways in which the application of digital technology makes visible the physical human labour involved in the recording of Wang Bing's *Tie Xi Qu: West of the Tracks* (2003). As this nine-hour film documents the labour activities in a declining industrial community in China, Smith examines its style as one that foregrounds labour as a process happening simultaneously behind and in front of the camera. Another Chinese film-maker, Liu Jiayin, is the focus of Chapter 13, by Philippa Lovatt, who draws attention to the ways in which the duo *Oxhide (Niupi, 2005)* and *Oxhide II (Niupi er, 2009)*, like *West of the Tracks*, foreground both the labour involved in the making of the film and that of the main protagonists as they engage in rituals of cookery. Resisting a purely visual approach, Lovatt further focuses on the ways in which sound is an essential component of the sensory experience offered by the slow film.

Part IV, 'Slow Cinema and the Non-human', addresses the emphasis on rural lifestyles and non-human environments that is a veritable hallmark of the cinematic trend. Stephanie Lam, in Chapter 14, channels Scott Mackenzie's notion of 'ecocinema' as a means to shed fresh light on film and media practices that have the environment as their object of contemplation. Bringing together the likes of Bill Viola, James Benning and online live-streaming nature cams, Lam argues that these otherwise unrelated practices are unified through the employment of an attentive gaze that elicits a renewed awareness of ecological processes. Tiago de Luca, in Chapter 15, examines the serendipitous and non-anthropomorphic quality that animates the depiction of nature and non-human living creatures in the slow cinematic aesthetic. Through a comparative analysis of two Latin American films, Carlos Reygadas's *Japón* and Lisandro Alonso's *Los muertos*, de Luca elaborates on the fascination with animal life and death that testifies to slow cinema's obsession with the contingent. Closing this section is Chapter 16, by Justin Remes, who looks at Abbas Kiarostami's *Five: Dedicated to Ozu* (2003) to examine the ways in which its non-human aesthetics, made up of lengthy shots of natural environments devoid of human presence, encourages an unorthodox mode of reception whereby the spectator is invited to sleep during the film's screening.

Part V focuses on the 'Ethics and Politics of Slowness'. Chapter 17, by Jacques Rancière, unpacks the politics inscribed in Béla Tarr's aesthetic commitment to the materiality of time, which the philosopher situates within the historical context of the end of the socialist utopia and the disenchantment of capitalism. In Chapter 18, Julian Ross expounds on the ethical implications of the landscape shot. Examining the work of the Japanese *fūkeiron* film-makers and James Benning, Ross identifies a striking similarity in their depiction of criminals in that both refuse to narrativise or judge events in

the manner of news media representations, thereby leaving room for the spectator to arrive at his/her own conclusions. Asbjørn Grønstad, in Chapter 19, discusses the political potential of filmic slowness in relation to how it spatialises duration and makes visible the passing of time through diegetic inaction. This produces a contemplative aesthetics of ‘presence’ that provides a springboard for an ethics of seeing based on the principles of recognition, reflection and empathy.

Part VI, ‘Beyond “Slow Cinema”’ expands the usage and theoretical application of slowness beyond the pantheon readily associated with the term. Matilda Mroz, in Chapter 20, draws on the Bergsonian concept of evolutionary performance as a means to interrogate and elaborate on the operation of duration, and the depiction and experience of temporal unfolding, with reference to Lucile Hadžihalilović’s *Innocence* (2004). Michael Gott, in Chapter 21, investigates the aesthetic and political links between the categories of slow cinema and the ‘negative’ road film. Looking at Abderrahmane Sissako’s *Heremakono* (2002) and Marian Crișan’s *Morgen* (2010), Gott examines the ways in which their pauses and delays provide political commentary on the slow journeys of immigrants to Europe and its immigration policies. Chapter 22, by Rob Stone and Paul Cooke, builds on Gilles Deleuze’s notion of crystal-image to examine the ‘occasion of slowness’ in the genre of heritage cinema. For Stone and Cooke, these slow moments, materialised in contemplative and languid long takes, halt the forward motion of narrative and allow competing notions of time to emerge within the image.

Rethinking the critical validity of slowness at localised levels and in the present context of film as a rapidly changing technological and institutional practice, the following chapters reposition slow cinema in a broader discursive and theoretical terrain, thus developing renewed sets of understandings that will refine and redefine the stakes of slowness in the cinema.

NOTES

1. For a comprehensive and perceptive account of the slow cinema debate, including its two-sided, gendered implications, see Schoonover, in Chapter 10.
2. Here it is also worth mentioning that recent books have equally explored the topic of filmic temporality broadly speaking, including Yvette Biro’s *Turbulence and Flow in Film: The Rhythmic Design* (2008), Jean Ma’s *Melancholy Drift: Marking Time in Chinese Cinema* (2010) and Matilda Mroz’s *Temporality and Film Analysis* (2013). More remarkably, issues relating to stillness and stasis in the cinema have been the central focus of many publications, such as Laura Mulvey’s *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (2006) and the anthologies *Stillness and Time: Photography and the Moving Image* (David Green and Joanna Lowry, 2005), *Still Moving: Between Cinema and Photography* (Karen Beckman and Jean Ma, 2008) and *Between Stillness and Motion: Film, Photography, Algorithms* (Elvira Rössak, 2011). As their self-explanatory titles indicate, however, these are books primarily

- concerned with the relationship between cinema and photography rather than slowness per se. For an engagement with some of these publications, and their relevance to slow cinema, see Davis in Chapter 6.
3. For two recent and illuminating studies on cinematic modernism, see Kovács, 2007 and Betz, 2009. For an exemplary collection on art cinema, see Galt and Schoonover, 2010.
 4. Dating from 2010, Betz's article lists practically all film-makers commonly associated with slow cinema but without making reference to the term.
 5. Whether implicit or explicit, most of the aforementioned rebuttals have decried slow cinema's overly aesthetic and artistic emphasis. See in particular Kois, 2011 and James, 2010.

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