

Slow Cinema

**TAKING OUR TIME // FOR AN OVERTHROW
OF HOROLOGY**

By Minh Nguyen



Abbas Kiarostami's film *Seagull Eggs* (2014) begins where it ends, with a close-up of water crashing into a sea embankment. Three eggs wobble on a rock as waves lash them in a loose rhythm. That's all that happens. I viewed this bare piece at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago for an event honoring Kiarostami's work. As a packed audience, we faced the film's unwavering repetition—the surges of water blending into an undulating pattern, the gull-calls and ocean roar sprawling into a sonorous drone. As it pressed on, my focus grew restless, spiraling outward. I peered at others shifting in their seats and sensed a faint, shared agony. *When will it end and release us from its grip?* I saw us mirrored in the shaking eggs. There we were, battling for grounding, for stillness and peace, against distraction and other present-day forms of being swept-away.

—How to think about the slow film as a cultural product born from this frenzied, escalated world? As contemporary life becomes increasingly stripped of pause, this genre's popularity suggests eagerness to design speed bumps for time's passage. 'Slow cinema' is generally defined as "nothing is happening," when there is little editing, dialogue, or action. Imagine a snail-paced pan shot across a barren wheat field landscape. Or a close-up of a character's expressionless face, where only flutters of flyaway hairs confirm that the image is, in fact, moving. Though on-screen inaction has existed as long as cinema itself, this latest iteration of the genre, according to critics, came of age at the turn of the millennium. Jonathan Romney, credited for popularizing the term in a 2010 article for *Sight and Sound*, describes 'slow cinema' as "a cinema that downplays event in favor of mood."¹ The canon is as porous as the definition of 'slow', but of this recent wave of practitioners there is likely mention of Pedro

Costa, Chantal Ackerman, Jia Zhang-ke, or Apichatpong Weerasethakul. As a form of endurance sport, slow cinema may be best represented by Béla Tarr's *The Turin Horse* (2011), an outrageously austere 146 minutes of a farmer attempting to feed his horse during a windstorm, filmed in black-and-white and only thirty long takes.

—This wave seemed a direct retort to mainstream cinema's fast-and-furious industry complex, a defense against the endangerment of what Susan Sontag, in her 1998 essay "The Decay of Cinema," deemed the "vanished rituals—erotic, ruminative—of the darkened theatre."² Reflecting on the centennial of the filmic medium, Sontag lamented that what used to be sensorially transportive had become assaultive, the craft reduced to "the unprincipled manipulation of images to make them more attention-grabbing."³

—A defense of vanished erotic cinematic rituals, yes, but for others, slow cinema's lack of action amounts to a torturous sadism that yields no fruit. Its dominance in the film-festival-circuit over the past decades has transformed it into a homogenized trope, spurring fatigue and resentment. A popularly cited 'breaking point' in the discourse is critic Nick James' exacerbated review of Semih Kaplanoglu's 2011 film *Honey*. He raises concern that these films are just ways pretentious people torture themselves for cultural credibility:

"Admit you're bored and you're a philistine."⁴ He questions the genre's payoff: "[These movies] demand great swathes of our precious time to achieve quite fleeting and slender aesthetic and political effects."⁵

—In James' point, a ring of truth. Time does feel precious in the sense that to "waste" it means spilling one's incalculable, yet finite, reserve. His comment locates the particular relationship between the 'precious time' of our lives and the 'dead time' of slow cinema (translated from the French *temp morts*, meaning minimalist long takes). Is the former the sunken cost of the latter? *Dead time*: sinister sounding, not only for its characterization of life's end, but for its evocation of a sink hole through which time is irretrievably vanishes. Since in capitalism, time is a labor relation, the idea of *dead time* strikes fear into our hearts as potential that burns away, to nothing. The calculation is internalized: *if I exchange my time for (insert any possible activity), what will be the nature of my returns?*

—Since its beginning, cinema has always been viewed dialectically, as both a product of capitalist time and a tool for its rebellion. As Moira Weigel expands in "Slow Wars" for *n+1*, the medium came of age under the Fordist arrangement of leisure and labor. Filmgoing—traveling to the theatre to succumb to the larger-than-life screen with others—became inscribed as a sociality that

complemented existing time-folds: the film's roughly two-hour-run easily slotted between after work and before bed.⁶ Yet film has always carried a radical promise of digging its fingers into time, kneading and pulling apart its sticky mass. Henri Bergson noted its potential to antagonize modern society by militarizing against what he called *spatial time*, which parceled time into discrete units of experience, represented by the form of the clock.⁷

—Fordist time parcels still persist—as the 'work shift,' the 'weekend,' or the 'lunch break'—but since this period of cinema, these measures have overgone the dissolution that neatly separates leisure and labor. The expansions of digital labor, per-task contractual work, and information as an economic product, have all smudged the line. Vanished too is *filmgoing* as an intentional experience. Today's film viewing is more casual and decentralized, on screens of varying sizes at home and in semi-public spaces. Museums are a part of this, reflecting a larger shift in contemporary art. According to Claire Bishop, in their article "Black Box, White Cube, Gray Zone," this phenomenon is transformed from *event time* into *exhibition time*.⁸ Whereas *event time* entailed a set of temporal and behavioral conventions (arriving at a venue for a seat and watching from beginning to end), *exhibition time*'s conventions are much more diffuse. A film plays on loop in a museum, and the viewer joins whenever—unsynchronized

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with others, and the film itself. If a viewer brings their personal device, they can tend to both screens simultaneously. Perhaps this is part of why the popularity of slow cinema is so vexing, because it is unclear (always so unclear), whether visual experience is pressing or passing, significant or trivial. An event in itself, or fleeting stimuli.

In *Chronophobia*, Pamela Lee examines new media art as stern commentary “on the accelerated pace of life as naturalized.”⁹ One piece she referenced was Michael Snow’s *La Region Centrale* (1971), a three-hour recording of a Canadian landscape established by a camera setup rotating around itself. Lee writes that such experiences of slowness can enable the viewer to parse their present with a distance, “[restoring] to the

everyday some degree of agency, perhaps some degree of resistance.”¹⁰ In considering the stakes of looking at something that is slow, for attentional resistance to disentangle time from labor relation, I think about how the urban environment renders visual experience as information. Ever-advancing systems of mass communication (news media, advertisements, the Internet), continually change our perceptual ability, the way we register what is around us, mine it for digestible capsules. In this regard, can a slow film be a small act of ‘anti-information’, a method of transgressing accelerated life by remaining still?

Slow cinema presents a paradoxical issue, a cultural product that provides a salve for afflictions that its industry exacerbates. Yet, its enduring popularity reveals a vested interest in art that provides a locus of temporal and visual deceleration. The genre is often delegated into the elitist corners of academia, but its glimmering possibility—to defy not only the standardization of time but against perception as “information”—is relevant to us all. Attention, Bishop writes in “Gray Zone,” can be simultaneously experienced with “trance, reverie, daydream, hypnosis, meditation, and dissociation.”¹¹ These internal states, once regarded as essential to a rich inner life, are in today’s calculations devalued as nonproductive. They are under-practiced, and even when practiced, are co-opted to serve the logic of productivity. Rest becomes a way to recharge the battery of activity, daydreaming a way to harness the entrepreneurial spirit. But slow cinema’s potential is not art that provides another form of horology (the study of the measurements of time), but as its overthrow. As practice of chucking one’s inner watch, set to the outer watch, into the ocean.

- 1 Jonathan Romney, “In Search of Lost Time,” *Sight and Sound* 20.2, 2010, 43-44.
- 2 Susan Sontag, “The Decay of Cinema,” *New York Times Magazine*, February 25, 1996.
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 Nick James, “Passive Aggressive,” *Sight and Sound* 20.4, 2010, 5.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 Moira Weigel, “Slow Wars,” *n+1*, Issue 25: Slow Burn, Spring 2016.
- 7 Pamela Lee, *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004.)
- 8 Claire Bishop, “Black Box, White Cube, Gray Zone: Dance Exhibitions and Audience Attention.” *TDR: The Drama Review*, Volume 62, Number 2, Summer 2018, 22 – 42.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 *Ibid.*

TITLE PAGE:

Béla Tarr, Still from *Turin Horse*, 2011. Courtesy of Cinema Guild.

CURRENT SPREAD:

Apichatpong Weerathasekul, Still from *Cemetery of Splendour*, 2015. Courtesy of the artist and Kick the Machine.

