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, batting 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.” 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.” 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.”

———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.” 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.”

———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 (translating 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 labor, 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. Filming—a 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. 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 parcelled time into discrete units of experience, represented by the form of the clock.

———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. 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

“What is the relationship between the ‘precious time’ of our lives and the temp morts, or ‘dead time’ of slow cinema? Is the former the sunken cost of the latter?”
“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.”
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.”8 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-advanc-
ing 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 accelerat-
ed 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 aca-
demia, 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.

3 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.

TITLE PAGE:

CURRENT SPREAD: