

CONTEMPLATING POST-1989 SLOW CINEMA

NADIN MAI



Nadin Mai is the founder of “The Art(s) of Slow Cinema”. After having finished her PhD on the films of Lav Diaz in 2016, she became a freelance writer and critic. She has written for the British Film Institute; Multiplot!; photogénie; Lo specchio Scuro, and more. In 2018, she joined the programming team of “The Slow Film Festival.

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FERNANDO JOSÉ PEREIRA

INTRODUCTION

5

NADIN MAI

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9



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One of the great aims of this Doctorate in Fine Arts has been to make visible the points that assert the current porosity of the several various borders existing in the art world. Those cracks, increasingly wider, have turned the artistic practices of our time into some sort of ecosystem in which different ways of producing knowledge coexist. Prejudices regarding the various possibilities present are in clear decay. It no longer concerns only the different subjects in the field of the visual, but all other possible hypotheses at the level of what we know as senses. And, yet, one decisive element, unites all exteriorities in a single interiority: time. Today's artistic practices are daily confronted with their necessary resistance to the instantaneity of the present. The de-realization to which images, above all, and reality in general, are subject to, bound by a time that is no longer theirs, that was stolen from them, in favour of another, machinic, artificial, requires a deep reflection on this very structural feature of our existence.

In the already distant year of 1962, George Kubler referred, quoted by Nicolas Bourriaud in his last book: "Actuality is when the lighthouse is dark between flashes: it is the instant between the ticks of the watch: it is a void interval slipping forever through time (...) Yet the instant of actuality is all we ever can know directly. The rest of time emerges only in signals relayed to us at this instant by innumerable stages and by unexpected bearers. These signals are like kinetic energy stored until the moment of notice".¹ Despite being distant, this is a statement that gains an unusual power these days.

Arts in general need a mediating element to embody and materialize their existence, both physical and significant. It is precisely this element that determines the moment in which the spectator is confronted with the work and in which it reveals to him a whole other time, which comes from behind, and which configures the possibilities of asserting himself as such. Peter Osborne says that the extended time that artists sometimes need to develop their work is decisively reflected in the way the viewer will receive them. This necessary time is, perhaps, the most important political element that artists can count on to continue producing works in really adverse conditions, that is to say, in times without time. In times without reflexive possibility.

The notion of contemplation was attacked for almost a century by a society that was fascinated with the "potentialities" offered by the new fast life that the last century began to offer. It was wrong on several levels, as we clearly see today. From

the outset, because that speed, as Walter Benjamin very lucidly warned us through his angel of history, would lead us to a catastrophe. We are living it today at the various levels that we may want to call it: in the innumerable migratory currents; in endless wars as a causality of inhuman conditions for multitudes of refugees; in the imposition of a time that is absolutely external to a large part of the world's population and which, this time, causes the aforementioned catastrophes, among many others. It is the time of the totalitarian imposition of digital speeds that are of great interest, for example, to the financial system, but which introduce a continuous disruption in our lives.

Therefore, the time has come to rethink the notion of contemplation. As a way of resistance to all these circumstances. Nadin Mai, the author of this book, ends her text by stating that what is known as "slow cinema" is a human form of cinema. She is absolutely right. This slow and contemplative making of cinema (like other arts) wants to reflect in itself and in a positive way the relationship with the human that is being taken away from us.

Information technologies, the so-called digital transitions, the closure that they seem to condemn us to by concentrating our entire lives on a single digital device is taking us away from our human condition and the necessary time we need to continue to be human.

In past texts I developed a notion that is consistent with that of "slow cinema". I called this notion *paragem*: halt.

Because within the Portuguese word there are two paradoxically antagonistic verbs: stop (*parar*) and act (*agir*). And this stopping and acting is nothing less, nothing more, than an affirmation of the contemplative possibility, stripped of its pejorative character of connection with passivity. It is a question of restoring a truth here: contemplation was never passive, quite the contrary. It is, therefore, an active contemplation that is opposed, rather, openly to a contemporary passivity based on the instantaneity that is imposed in everyday life.

"Slow cinema" as a human form of cinema is exactly this required attention to, let's call it, necessary time. A time that is essential to be able to judge, to be able to appreciate, to be able to enjoy. A time that escapes the dictatorship of the machinic, the hyper-fast, the techno sublime, Jameson would say. And this is the time that art claims and that, in doing so, puts it in the position it always wanted to have. The one that enhances it as an alternative possibility to communication, which places it in that enviable

position of "useless expense" as Bataille stated. A useless but truly human expense, far from the temporalities imposed by the idea of continuous growth, by the presence of catastrophe.

The text of this book is, therefore, of the greatest importance for all those who are interested in reality and its enjoyment, that is, in life. It is about life, about our lives, that the films mentioned by the author speak. And that life, referred to in this book, no matter how much global capitalism tries to suppress it with the instantaneousness of the "current", needs all the time to be seen, referred to and, we risk, enjoyed, through the resistant (non-an-aesthetic, to use a notion dear to me) images they present.

If they are uncomfortable temporalities, if they provoke a kind of exteriority in the frenzy of daily life, rightly so. It is these truly important characteristics that make these forms of artistic practices and, in this particular case, that component of the art world known today as time-based art and, more specifically, of cinema, that give them the ability to continue. That put them, no longer in a closed dome, but in a situation of intrusion into reality. That they have the ability to cause a startle, if nothing else, because of the strangeness, even if familiar, that they exude when they assert themselves in such a strangely different way from the pandemic production of imagery in our timeless time. The latter are just leftovers and traces, "slow cinema" is the image in all its splendour.

And yet, let there be no misunderstandings. This whole discussion is absolutely outside any problem of formalism. These images, by being offered with the necessary slowness, bring us the increased possibility of their meanings asserting themselves without fear, without ambiguity. Exactly because they present themselves as carriers of a time that allows and enjoys all of that.

Nothing better than ending this short introduction with a quote from the author of the book, because it condenses in it an entire universe that we are trying to describe here:

"Slow cinema is not surface cinema. It is a mirror of our soul, it is a mirror of what is usually invisible, both on screen and off screen. What we see there is often what happens inside ourselves, but whose presence we do not recognize".

Fernando José Pereira
October 2021

1 Kubler, George (1962). *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the history of things*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press. p.17.

NOTE The positioning of the images is closely related to the design of the book and that determines a position turning between the two versions. It seemed to us that the placement of the images in this way allows their correct viewing in both directions of reading the book.

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Le monde a perdu le temps faute d'avoir gardé le goût de cette recherche du temps perdu. (Alain Fleischer)

Le temps est notre chair. Nous sommes pétris de temps. Nous sommes le temps. (Roberto Peregalli)

It is Monday morning. I'm attending the 2019 edition of Visions du Réel in Nyon, Switzerland, for an industry talk on the opportunities and challenges of digital publishing. But first, I grab a slowly brewed coffee with Nicolas Graux, director of *Century of Smoke* (2018), a film which had impressed me a couple of weeks earlier. With the early spring sun gently heating up the terrace, Graux and I have a long in-depth discussion about his film, his approach to film in general, the world of Béla Tarr and Lav Diaz, and about what constitutes, or might constitute, Slow Cinema. It was an inspiring conversation, of which I had several over the years with filmmakers and viewers alike, all speaking about films in a way that I hadn't been used to before I became interested in Slow Cinema.

Each exchange about Slow Cinema turns out to be personal, about a painful point, perhaps even a deep-seated but covered wound that a slow film reopened and that one feels the need to talk about. It was never about intellectualising the films. Conversations I had about Slow Cinema – at festivals, at special weekends, or at other events which put me in touch with likeminded people – always became the more personal the longer they lasted.

Admittedly, the personal aspect of slow films wasn't entirely new to me by April 2019. When I saw my first slow film ten years earlier, in summer 2009, I could feel something which I could neither name nor describe. Many years later, in autumn 2016, British director Scott Barley sent me a cut of his first feature film *Sleep Has Her House* (released the following year), an experimental film shot on an iPhone with no human presence. Each frame was the result of a long layering process of several images recorded at different locations around Great Britain.

Perhaps it was the layering of the images, perhaps it was the absence of a human presence or simply the overwhelming image-sound combination – something in Barley's film made it feel similar to a shamanic journey, something which I had taken up around the time of my first viewing to help me through a long period of severe depression. Maybe it is because of my personal (psychological) investment in the films that I have often strug-

gled (and still do) when I was asked to define Slow Cinema. Even after many years ‘in the field’, I’m still unsure as to what to say to people who launch the famous question: what is Slow Cinema?

Perhaps, one answer could be: Slow Cinema is a democratic form of cinema. While the boredom with our life, with our surrounding, leads us to take extreme political decisions, slow films remain steadfast in their offer of an individual experience. Flicking through interviews with directors shows that there is no one way of reading the films. Although all films express something about our human condition(s), they also leave it open as to what exactly we (would like to?) see in the films. The human condition, albeit communal and collective, is also a deeply personal and individual experience. Even though we all share the present, the actual experience of it is individual and depends on many factors. These factors influence the ways in which we imagine our future and that of our societies. The open structure of slow films, the long observations which do not force the viewer to look at a specific part of the frame but instead leave it open to them to explore and discover, allow for individual choices. In the words of the great Andrei Tarkovsky:

12

A film is bigger than it is – at least, if it is a real film. And it always turns out to have more thought, more ideas, than were consciously put there by its author. Just as life, constantly moving and changing, allows everyone to interpret and feel each separate moment in his own way, so too a real picture, faithfully recording on film the time which flows on beyond the edges of the frame, lives within time if time lives within it; this two-way process is a determining factor of cinema. The film then becomes something beyond its ostensible existence as an exposed and edited roll of film, a story, a plot. Once in contact with the individual who sees it, it separates from its author, starts to live its own life, undergoes changes of form and meaning. (1986: 118)

I have always found that this was particularly true of slow films because their very aesthetics make it possible to feel, and therefore to read, the films in ways that differ from what the director, perhaps, and also other viewers see in the same moving images. They can become like books, which depend on the reader to imagine that which is not said, the characters which exist on paper but need to be turned into people made of flesh in our minds.

Slow films focus on the unseen, the invisible, stories from the margins of our societies. They tell stories that happen daily around the world, events that, perhaps, happen to our next-door neighbour. Yet, these stories remain silent because they are stories that are ordinary and therefore removed from view. In today’s hyper-modern news environment, only extraordinary shock moments, which catch readers’ and viewers’ attention, count. These make for only a small part of our daily life, however. Looking at the big picture, our human life is mundane, ordinary, full of routines and repetitions. And it is those routines that have disappeared from view, those routines which make us human, which make us who we are.

There are migrant workers on a cargo ship who try to earn a living (*Transatlantique* by Félix Dufour-Laperrière). There are people who are forced to leave their home because their island threatens to disintegrate (*Fogo* by Yulene Olaizola). There are people who leave prison after many years and who search for what is left of their families (*Los Muertos* by Lisandro Alonso). There are young women who flee from forced prostitution (*By the name of Tania* by Bénédicte Liénard and Mary Jimenez). Trees are felled, processed and shipped to the other side of the planet (*Walden* by Daniel Zimmermann), houses are destroyed and rebuilt after war (*Taste of Cement* by Ziad Kalthoum), animals negotiate their life between safety and imprisonment (*Bestiaire* by Denis Côté). A family makes dumplings (*Oxhide II* by Liu Jiayin), a little boy struggles to speak after the sudden death of his beloved father (*Bal* by Semih Kaplanoğlu), a man lives removed from society in the wilderness (*Two Years at Sea* by Ben Rivers).

People eat, people sleep, people long for someone else, they love, have sex. They work, they struggle, are frustrated and hopeless. They are bored. And slow films show the whole spectrum of what it means to be human. The good, the bad and the ugly.

Luke Hockley writes in his book *Somatic Cinema* (2014) that a film can have three possible meanings. The first one is based on a simple reading which regards its aesthetics: what does the mise-en-scène look like? What colours are used? Is the camera static or mobile? The first reading is a simple stating of facts, which tends to be enriched with Hockley’s “second meaning”. What does the colour red stand for? How can we interpret the camera angle? In what way does the light contribute to a char-

13

acter's personality on screen? The analysis of a film's aesthetics generates an image of what the director might want to say. It is a helpful tool in getting a quick overview of the narrative's pro- and antagonists, as well as of the relationship between them. But what Hockley calls "third meaning" has always been the most dominant one for me personally when I was watching a slow film. Hockley writes about feeling the image: "This new meaning does not come directly from the screen, nor does it come from the intellectual investigations of consciousness" (2014: 135). A film can touch us in a way that we cannot always explain. It touches the unconscious, and it can take a very long time before it becomes clear just why we had a certain reaction to a film.

When I saw my first slow film – Béla Tarr's magnificent *The Man from London* (2007) based on a novel by Georges Simenon (1933) – I could feel something indescribable. It was neither bombastic nor deeply emotional or overwhelming. Slow films touched me in a particular way. These films were uncanny, provoking an experience which I had not made with any other form of cinema before. From the moment I saw my first slow film, cinema became an experience that wasn't easy to describe. It was one thing to speak about the aesthetics of slow films, which can be straightforward if one focuses on the basics. It was another not to sound boring. Throughout the years, it has been a challenge to speak about Slow Cinema because the rejection of it usually came quicker than the willingness to be part of an experience that does not resemble popular cinema. It was Julian Jason Haladyn (2015) who looked at what makes us reject or engage with so-called boring art. To him, the reactions are simple, bipolar oppositions: yes-boredom and no-boredom. The latter is effectively the viewer's refusal to create meaning in an artwork that is everything but straightforward and which demands a longer-than-usual engagement with it. Haladyn's yes-boredom describes the acceptance of such an engagement, the acceptance to let oneself be immersed while also accepting that not everything must have meaning.

I more and more slipped into slow films and I began to realise just how essential it was to become complicit in the director's project, to become an active agent in completing, or at least in continuing, the narrative once the end credits have rolled. At the first Slow Cinema symposium in London in 2015, I gave a talk on my work after having written about it for three years. When I was asked how I would decide that one film was slow but

not another, I answered for the first time that I could feel it. "It's in my guts," I said, and I have never since tried to describe Slow Cinema in any other way lacking a better way to explain what was happening inside my body and mind when seeing a film.

The more films I had seen, the more I realised that what I felt was what Roland Barthes called the punctum in *Camera Lucida*: marks, wounds, something that stings and bruises (2000: 27). An image can pierce you, wound you, and which you can feel as a result. Slow Cinema is a cinema of punctums, of wounds often created in the past and shaping the present. A cinema of wounds that will extend into the future. It is thus impossible not to speak of pain, of trauma, of loss and absence in the context of Slow Cinema because these films speak about us, about our human condition and even though we perhaps often wished it was different, to be human means above all to suffer, to make mistakes, to lose loved ones, to struggle. Each film I'm speaking of in this book is a wound and in order for wounds to heal, they need to be confronted and worked through.

Throughout my ten-year period of writing about Slow Cinema, I could not help but reach out to other art forms: painting, photography, and literature. Especially the latter has accompanied and influenced me during my writing process. It is difficult to bypass the writing of W. G. Sebald, who has regularly explored aspects of memory, of remembering and forgetting, in a language that resembles the cinematic language used in slow films. There is a lived *durée*, there is a breathing narrative and Sebald pursues thoughts and memories as they arise. There is also Laurent Gaudé, whose novels resemble an assemblage of non-linear first-person thoughts, intimate, personal, often nerve-wrecking and painful. Several of his books not so much push a narrative forward but look at what happens inside the characters. Sebald, Gaudet, John Berger – those writers whose books have accompanied me had never been interested in a story as such, but in the ways in which the readers react to a condition they are exposed to. Their writing is vertical.

Maya Deren, experimental filmmaker, voice of the avant-garde in the 1940s and 1950s, once suggested that a film had a horizontal and a vertical axis. The former is the axis of the narrative, which is perpetually driven forward. The vertical axis, on the other hand, is the axis of mood and of feeling. It is the axis of a poetic

archaeological journey, a way of looking at the psychology of characters, and of the conditions that turned them into who they are today. My first experience with this vertical axis did not happen in the context of Slow Cinema, but with Denis Villeneuve's *Polytechnique* (2009). Based on real events, the film depicts a mass shooting at the École polytechnique de Montréal in 1989 in which fourteen people died. Similar to Gus van Sant's *Elephant* (2004), which is a cinematic rendering of the Columbine High School shooting, Villeneuve doesn't put emphasis on the visual rendering of the shooting. While he does depict the shooting itself, which develops on the horizontal axis and pushes the narrative forward, Villeneuve spends considerable time in the third part of the film on exploring the post-traumatic stress of the survivors, their help- and hopelessness, their inability to 'wash off' the stains, their despair over the scars that will follow them like a shadow. Villeneuve slows down the narrative progression to give way to a vertical exploration of what it means to survive, of what it means to have escaped an atrocity which killed long-time friends for the sole reason that they were women. *Polytechnique* resonated with me in a way, which I only rediscovered in slow films, the sense that there is space and, above all, time for looking into the characters and not only at them. Over the years, I have come to realise that the deeper the journey, the slower (or the more contemplative) a film feels.

16

It is the same perceived slowness, which is considered problematic for a number of viewers. Yet, this vertical exploration has been common and appreciated in literature, for example, in particular in classic literature such as in the works of Fyodor Dostoyevsky and of Leo Tolstoy, admired by Lav Diaz, for instance, and used as inspiration for his films. But there is also Orhan Pamuk from Turkey, whose books not only investigate a country, a society torn between oriental traditions and occidental lifestyles, but also the ways in which the drastic changes in the last couple of decades affected individuals in their day-to-day life. It is perhaps the very nature of literature, which is in large parts based on the reader's imagination and which has a natural space for a vertical exploration of pain and confusion, of love and joy, short of the whole range of human emotions, that facilitates a combination of literature and Slow Cinema.

Yasujiro Ozu, Michelangelo Antonioni, Vittorio De Sica, Roberto Rossellini - there is quite a number of classical directors that

have been associated with Slow Cinema, either as precursors or as fully fledged slow-film directors themselves. Positioning Slow Cinema temporally in the history of cinema is challenging because while the term, Slow Cinema, is a relatively recent creation (dating back to a 2004 review by critic Jonathan Romney of Tsai Ming-liang's *I don't want to sleep alone* (2003)), the long-take aesthetics and the focus on the ordinary members of society have been with us for almost as long as cinema. And yet, there is something specific about contemporary slow films that make them stand out in the larger picture of film history. They have not only become longer and slower. They have also become more personal, more vertical, going deeper into the psychology of our actions, our decisions, our behaviour. There is Lav Diaz, for instance, who uses film as a form of therapy for himself and Philippine society, using it to work through the traumas he himself experienced during president Ferdinand Marcos' Martial Law from 1972 to 1981.

For one, it's a cleansing process, personally. And ... the cleansing process adjusts to my culture, to my people. We need to confront all these things, all the traumas, all these unexamined parts of our history, of our struggle, so that (we) can move forward. It's a kind of cure. ... I always want to tell stories about these struggles. Personally, I want to cure myself of the trauma of my people. (Diaz, 2014)

17

There is Chantal Akerman, who has always tried to come to terms with the scars the Holocaust had left on her family, on her self, negotiating the effects of trans-generational trauma on those who are temporally removed from the original event. There is Tsai Ming-liang, whose fetish actor Lee Kang-sheng becomes his alter ego through which he can simply be, as he explained in his film *Afternoon* (2016). There is Wang Bing, who wants to learn about the history of China no one has officially written.

Unconsciously, I have always focused in my writing on films that have been made between 1994 and 2018. Today I know that it this is not a coincidence. When I look at this time period, the films have all been made throughout my tumultuous childhood full of conflicts and war on television, my adolescence which was marked by 9/11 and the subsequent fracturing of the world into 'us' and 'them', and whose repercussions we can still feel today.

Finally, my adulthood marked by my decision to emigrate, “to dismantle the center of the world,” in the words of John Berger, “and so to move into a lost, disoriented one of fragments” (1984: 57). My life as a migrant, uprooted and searching, was marked by the financial crisis in 2008 and the subsequent rise in nationalism, but also by the discovery of other lifestyles, people of nationalities other than my own, people of different religions with different world views, allowing me to understand that, regardless of our respective and individual heritage, we share the current fight against this sometimes frightening human condition that we become more and more aware of today. Retrospectively, it seems slow films have existed in a parallel world, if not in a parallel universe. Since 1989, with the fall of the Berlin Wall (I was less than two years old), then, two years later, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the world has become more global, and that at breakneck speed, but it has also become more fragmented, a paradoxical development which remains the cause of confrontations all over the world today.

In fact, the year 1989 shook the world to its core. It rocked the very foundations millions of people had grown up with. There was not only the fall of the Berlin Wall, the fall of the Iron Curtain which had divided Germany for twenty-eight years. There was not only the bloody uprising in Tian’anmen Square in the heart of China. After nine years of occupation, the Soviet army left Afghanistan. The Velvet revolution in Czechoslovakia as well as the revolution in Romania took hold of the East bloc in late 1989. The Pinochet era in Chile ended. 1989 was Year Zero, the second in less than fifty years. As the Second World War came to an end in 1945, the world, in particular Europe, had to start anew, had to rebuild cities, industries, and societies. It was the year of reckoning, just as the year 1989 would later become one. Both ends and new beginnings were accompanied by a surge in slow films which focused on those people who were at the losing end of the new developments, those who found themselves at the margins.

Europe’s first Anno Zero gave rise to Italian Neo-Realism, often cited as a precursor to today’s Slow Cinema, which was marked by a preference of non-professional actors, the use of long-take cinematography and the depiction of day-to-day struggles of people at the margins of societies which try to rebuild themselves after years of devastating physical and moral destruction. Even though slow films continued to be made throughout what became known as the Trentes Glorieuses in

France, designating a three-decade long period of economic prosperity, or as the Wirtschaftswunder in West Germany, I consider the year 1989 as the second large turning point, the second Year Zero in cinema, which became the starting point for a second, much more international wave of slow films. Entire countries disappeared before people’s eyes, ideologies, political systems and approaches were gone overnight, leaving millions of people disoriented, spiritually and politically lost and in search for meaning. Initial euphoria, created by the end of the Soviet-Afghan war, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union has, over the years, given rise to feelings of exhaustion and of anger; anger over betrayed promises, over lost ideals and moral guidance, over an increased exploitation at the workplace with cheap labour used by major companies and the rise in zero-hour contracts as well as micro-travail, or turking.

And while there is the global on the one side, there is a deeply individual, a deeply personal life and experience on the other, which filmmakers from around the world focus on to a larger extent than they had done before.

The 1990s and the early 2000s saw a surge of slow films onto an international stage. Tsai Ming-liang had a particularly prolific career at the time with a new feature film on average every two years. *Rebels of the Neon God* (1992), *Vive l’Amour* (1994) and *The River* (1997) stand at the beginning of two decades of feature-film directing, in which he explored gender identities as well as the anonymity and loneliness of the modern city dweller. Meanwhile, Béla Tarr brought to perfection what he had started in 1988 with his film *Damnation. Sátántangó* (1994), *Werckmeister Harmonies* (2000) and the two following (and last) films *The Man from London* (2007) and *The Turin Horse* (2011) are an example of how corruption, secrets and propaganda can have violent consequences and how the individual is pushed to extreme choices. With *Casa de Lava* (1995), *Ossos* (1997) and *In Vanda’s Room* (2000), Pedro Costa made a name for himself as a director who shines light into dark city districts where Cape Verdean migrants and other people on the margin of society try to survive. For Lav Diaz, the true beginning arrived in 2001 with his film *Batang West Side* (2001). Over the years, with films such as *Melancholia* (2008), *Death in the Land of Encantos* (2009) and *Century of Birthing* (2011), Diaz explored the meanings of cinema and how it could help a society to come to terms with its brutal past. Fittingly after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of

the Soviet Union, Theo Angelopoulos began to work on his Trilogy of Borders, comprised of *The suspended step of the stork* (1991), *Ulysses' Gaze* (1995) and *Eternity and a Day* (1998). He could never finish his trilogy of modern Greece before he died in 2012.

Costa, Diaz, Angelopoulos and especially Béla Tarr are today part of the 'big names' of Slow Cinema. Their early works in the 1990s and early 2000s have created an awareness of a form of cinema, which looks at the psychology of characters and the human condition they are traversing. Today, in this second decade of the 2000s, this work is continued by a multitude of young directors from around the world who go even deeper in their exploration of what it means to be human today, in an age and time which marginalises and ostracises an increasing number of people, regardless of her origins.

It wouldn't be entirely wrong to say that the films mentioned above fall into the category of contemporary cinema. The term 'contemporary', however, can be misleading because it inevitably suggests a temporal link. And yet, the very nature of Slow Cinema rejects this link and challenges the way we have thought about the contemporary so far. More useful in this context is the work of Giorgio Agamben, who defines the contemporary not in terms of time, but in terms of content: "the contemporary is the one who fixes his gaze on his time in order to perceive not the lights, but the darkness. ... The contemporary is (...) the one who knows how to see this darkness" (2008: 19–20).

With few exceptions, such as the films of Albert Serra, slow-film directors have traditionally looked at the shadows, at the dark side of life. Their films focus primarily on alienation, on isolation and loss, on the breakdown of basic social bonds, and of low-earning jobs. The films' *mise-en-scène* are the shadows we traverse today and the consequences we are facing, consequences of lives previously lived. If one watches a large selection of slow films, the feeling that those films speak about a condition cannot be shaken off. Over and over again, the films' narratives merge, resemble, become one. Each film adds to a larger puzzle. Their narrative is one about our condition as humans and if I use the term Contemporary Slow Cinema, I speak about the contemporary as a condition, not as a temporal bracket in which certain films can be positioned.

As well as being a democratic form of cinema, then, I propose that Slow Cinema is a cinema of conditions, not of events;

of vertical storytelling, not of horizontal narratives; of long-lasting aftermaths, not of short-term consequences. Slow Cinema is not a cinema of time as a form of healing wounds, but of deepening those wounds and the pains that they cause. Directors don't focus on the instant, on the events which our current human condition are the consequences of. Instead, the filmmakers look into the *après*, into the what is, and with that, they stand in contrast to popular cinema, which often pictures events but which investigate neither the characters' wound nor their suffering.

Slow Cinema is a cinema of being, not of becoming. Of course, there are exceptions. Certain slow films speak about a development, about a gradual disintegration of an entire industry, as is the case with Wang Bing's *West of the Tracks* (2003). One must also mention Michelangelo Frammartino's *Le Quattro Volte* (2010), which is, in many ways, a film about becoming. Yet, it remains true that Slow Cinema is not so much about movement and development, but about stasis; a cinema about being in our world, in our societies. It is difficult to find a better description than the following in the words of John Berger: "One was born into this life to share the time that repeatedly exists between moments: the time of Becoming, before Being risks to confront one yet again with undefeated despair" (2007: 19). Of this, there is no better example than Hu Bo's *An Elephant Sitting Still* (2018).

Slow films are journeys, fragments of memories, traces. None of the films seeks to create a coherent image of the whole. Rather, each film is part of a larger puzzle which, eventually, emerges from the connection they have with one another.

I would like to note one final characteristic. What I can feel in contemporary Slow Cinema is a deep exhaustion, which neither the films nor their protagonists can recover from. The essence of those films is their exhaustion, their slow breathing, their resignation. The people it captures are worn out, drained by the life they are living, often forced to live. Today's action films represent real life even less than ever before. Time has taken its toll. This is not only about speed, about the ways in which our lives have become faster and more unpredictable. There is also the burden of memory, the burden of time. It feels as though we carry the heavy burden of memory with us, a memory that paralyses us.

There is something else as well. Gabriel De Broglie (2017) and Eric Hobsbawm (1994) describe the 20th century as a century of excess and extremes. It was not only excessive in the

number of wars and genocide, but also in its fast and drastic changes in society, in the arts, in literature, in medicine. The 20th century was a breathless century, which continuously chased new advancements, new radical movements that would shape the present we are living in today. The galloping of time remains the strongest impression of the last century, which left people around the world gasping for air. Slow Cinema is breathtaking in that it allows the viewers to breathe in and out, to hold their breath if necessary, and to take their time. It is a way of working through what has been, through the rampant violence which took hold for several decades and destroyed so many lives. The silence and the deliberate forgetting and/or suppression of history's darkest moments, the wounds that have been provisionally covered by economical enrichment, a boost of wealth and scientific progress, all of which led to a substantial increase in life quality – those wounds are reopened by slow-film directors today to provide for necessary healing.

It's been 110 years since Filippo Marinetti published his Manifesto of Futurism. In it, he advocated the beauty of speed and technology, of patriotism and war. The Futurist movement gained popularity throughout the teens of the 20th century and, in some ways, its nationalist ideals could be considered a precursor to the large military shock that rocked Europe in the middle of 1914. The glorification of war and of the army, two cleansing elements for Futurists, had major ramifications because it idolised the oppression of people in the name of progress and of speed.

We are on the extreme promontory of the centuries! What is the use of looking behind at the moment when we must open the mysterious shutters of the impossible? Time and Space died yesterday. We are already living in the absolute, since we have already created eternal, omnipresent speed.

We want to glorify war – the only cure for the world – militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of the anarchists, the beautiful ideas which kill, and contempt for woman.

We want to demolish museums and libraries, fight morality, feminism and all opportunist and utilitarian cowardice.

The aim of futurism was the suppression of the past, of memories, of life before time and space died. To some extent, parts of

what Marinetti had originally imagined is coming true today, with time not so much dying but with speed annihilating memory. The sheer volume of images which are addressed to us at any given point during our daily life, prevents us from remembering most of them. Memory primarily exists today because we have developed digital prostheses to help us. Memories, especially traumatic memories, always resurface if not worked through but merely suppressed. Speed doesn't allow for an experience of life, because we are simply pushed through it. On and on, higher, faster, longer.

Slow Cinema is the anti-dote to what Marinetti had envisaged, it is an opposing world where the human takes centerstage, where the people are shown as what they are, and not what they should aspire to. The wars took their toll and the only true hygiene of the world, as Marinetti called it, broke people and nations alike. War wasn't a period of cleansing for the people, but a period which created a long shadow into the future instead. Marinetti's dream turned into a nightmare, and slow films show the effects of it.

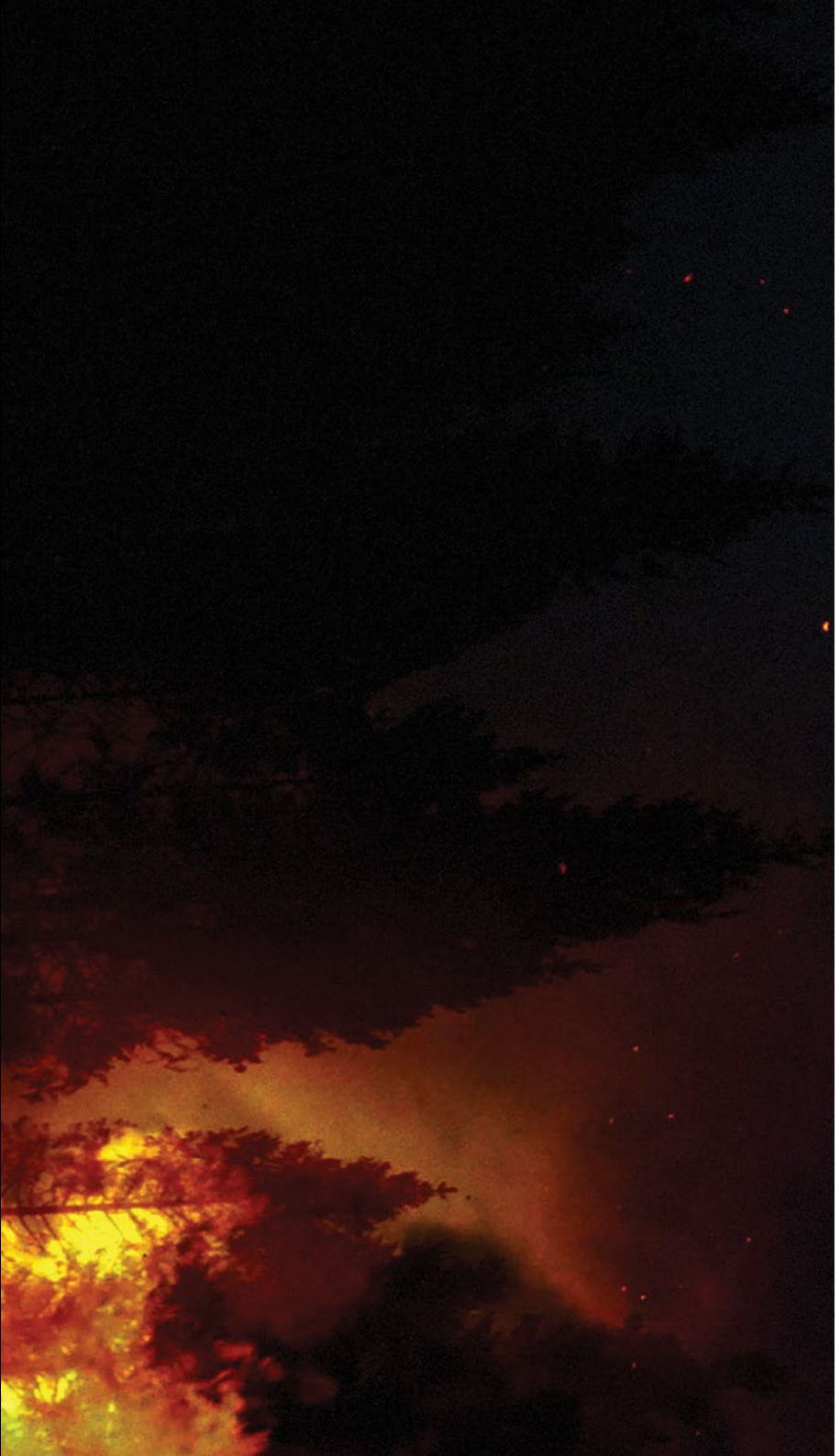
Edhem Eldem, historian of the Ottoman Empire, once suggested that if one could answer a given question quickly and assuredly without much thought, then the question was too easy (2018). As a historian specialised in an empire that was not only vast but also complex in its position between two continents, between two religions, an empire torn between its desires on the one hand and its fears on the other, Eldem knows that there is a complexity to developments in society, in the political landscape and, therefore, also in our individual development. When I watched my first couple of slow films, I was confronted with a complexity which I hadn't been used to before. Even though the films looked minimalistic and told a rather simple story, at the end of the screening I always felt as though I had pushed a heavy rock up a mountain with all my might like Sisyphus. The apparent simplicity of the film carefully hid the complexity of life that it wanted me to discover.

Slow films ask difficult questions, often uncomfortable questions about our behaviour, our morality, and the answers they are looking for can only be the result of a lengthy look at ourselves. They ask the viewer to become more active, more engaged and involved in the creation of meaning. The meaning of a film can be as manifold as the reactions to it.

Slow Cinema is a human form of cinema. Regardless of the subject the directors are engaged in, all of them show a deeply human experience, an experience shared by many people in multiple countries. The films do not scratch on the surface of life, but they dive deep into the experience of life today. Slow Cinema is not surface cinema. It is a mirror of our soul, it is a mirror of what is usually invisible, both on and off-screen. What we see on screen is very often what happens inside ourselves, but whose presence we don't acknowledge.

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1 This text is an abridged and slightly amended version of the chapter "Contemplation" in my book "Human Condition(s) – An aesthetic of cinematic slowness" (2021).



Century of smoke



Nicolas Graux



Sleep Has Her House

Scott Barley



