Staying on, or Getting off (the Bus): Approaching Speed in Cinema and Media Studies

by Tina Kendall, editor

It seems only appropriate to introduce this In Focus by invoking the 1994 Jan de Bont movie *Speed*—a film peculiarly fixated on the spectacle of human bodies moving at dangerous velocities, whether trapped in elevators, handcuffed to runaway subway trains, or (most memorably) hurtling down a half-constructed freeway on a Santa Monica bus rigged with a bomb set to detonate if its speedometer drops below fifty miles per hour. Much of the suspense of this high-concept movie hinges on the pressure that such fast-paced movement puts on both characters and spectators to react physically and affectively in time with the flow of action. Protagonist Annie Porter (Sandra Bullock) acts as both the focal point of the drama and surrogate for the audience as she takes command of the bus, weaving it dexterously through rush-hour traffic, deflecting danger, and thwarting disaster at regular micro-intervals. At a moment of particular dramatic intensity, Annie approaches a freeway exit; with the bus flanked on both sides by traffic, she looks anxiously at police officer Jack Traven (Keanu Reeves), shouting at him to make the call: “Stay on or get off? Stay on or get off?” As with other climactic moments in the film, *Speed* responds to this question not by slackening pace but by ramping it up and pushing straight through—each of its suspenseful situations being “resolved by acceleration.”¹ On the one

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hand, this film confirms the long-standing axiom that speed equals danger but that danger is thrilling, suspenseful, and makes for good cinema; on the other hand, it also admits to a less openly avowed—but perhaps increasingly nagging—cultural suspicion that “to slow down is to die.”

From our vantage point, Speed’s central conceit that we have no choice but to accelerate seems like a particularly prescient description of the condition of technological, economic, and cultural speed-up that characterizes daily life in the twenty-first century. In recent years, questions about speed, tempo, and pace have become the focus of keen and often polarized debate across a range of aesthetic, political, and critical contexts. It has become something of a truism to say that we live in “a 24/7, always on, and on-the-go world,” defined by ever-accelerating rhythms of media, technology, and capital. As the dust jacket of James Gleick’s Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything apocalyptically warns, “We have reached the epoch of the nanosecond. This is the heyday of speed. . . . Our computers, our movies, our sex lives, our prayers—they all run faster now than ever before. . . . We have become a quick-reflexed, multitasking, channel-flipping, fast-forwarding species. We don’t completely understand it, and we’re not altogether happy about it.” In response to this context of technological and economic speed-up, a set of “slow” cultural practices have emerged—from slow food and tourism movements to slow media manifestos, slow art and film festivals, and slow technology and computing movements. These cultural practices figure slowness as an emblematic mode of resistance for our time, offering the kind of hope denied by Speed: namely, that it may be possible, after all, to simply pull the hand brake and get off the proverbial bus.

Such anxieties about speed as a symptom of our cultural malaise have likewise transferred over onto debates about cinema aesthetics. On the “fast” side of the spectrum, critics and film scholars have noted the emergence of “intensified continuity,” “post continuity,” or “accelerationist aesthetics” in contemporary cinema, terms that refer to the flamboyantly hyperkinetic, adrenaline-charged style that has been embraced by recent blockbuster films, including franchises such as Transformers (Michael Bay, 2007–2014), Bourne (Doug Liman, Paul Greengrass, and Tony Gilroy, 2002–2012), and Fast & Furious (Rob Cohen, John Singleton, Justin Lin, and

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3 Sarah Sharma, In the Meantime: Temporality and Cultural Politics (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 5; see also Jonathan Crary, 24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep (London: Verso, 2013); Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian, #Accelerate#: The Accelerationist Reader (Falmouth, UK: Urbanomic Media, 2014).
James Wan, 2001–2015). In both form and content, these “fast” films reaffirm the visceral thrill of speed as part of what Siegfried Kracauer identified as the medium’s basic affinities, citing the chase scene in particular as a “cinematic subject . . . par excellence.” Similarly, it was cinema’s basic attraction for the speed of movement—and the mixture of delight and terror that it could conjure for spectators—that was registered in Maxim Gorky’s now-famous account of the first screening in Paris of the Cinématographe Lumière in 1896. He wrote, “From far off an express train is rushing at you—look out! It speeds along just as if shot out of a giant gun. It speeds straight at you, threatening to run you over.” However, what sets these contemporary blockbusters apart from earlier forms of narrative cinema is the way that they intensify the affective and visceral impact of velocity through cinematographic techniques and editing practices that emphasize pace and energy in ways that are sometimes seen as antithetical to narrative coherence and spatiotemporal continuity. Lutz Koepnick summarizes:

If regular feature films once consisted of a few hundred shots only, today they easily extend beyond the 1,000 mark, resulting in an acceleration of narrative speed amplified by the use of cuts in the middle of movement, of cutaway tracking shots, of hectic rack zooms and jerky reframings, and of unfocused whiplash pans. In much of mainstream filmmaking today, nervous editing and rickety camera moves impart a general sense of speed, energy, and arousal, but particularly in action cinema they often do so at the calculated cost of legibility.

Encapsulated in the notion of legibility is a whole host of anxieties, including the fear that as average shot lengths shrink, cinema is beginning to move faster than the human eye can perceive it or than the brain can process it, leading to what Tim Blackmore calls the “speed death of the eye.” Such perspectives foreground the stark differential imagined to exist between human and technological modes of perception. While an awareness of the difference between human and machinic vision forms part of a much longer history—which includes, for example, Dziga Vertov’s embrace of the “kino-eye” and its ability to convey an experience of speed beyond the limits of human embodiment—it has been put under considerably greater pressure in an age of digital media, when time is measured and managed in milliseconds. As Steven Shaviro


notes, the kind of illegibility and incoherence that is generated through postcontinuity cinema’s use of “rapid cuts,” “extreme or even impossible camera angles,” and “violently accelerated motions” is a symptomatic part of the “structure of feeling” of global neoliberal capitalism that these films help express.\(^\text{12}\)

Meanwhile, in the “slow” corner, a growing corpus of scholarly work has consolidated “slow” or “contemplative cinema” as a significant global tendency, which offers a vital counterperspective to late capitalism’s celebration of instantaneity and speed.\(^\text{13}\) For example, in their polemic “In Defense of the Slow and the Boring,” Manohla Dargis and A. O. Scott defend the “deliberately paced” cinema of directors such as Kelly Reichardt, Andrei Tarkovsky, Hou Hsiou-hsien, and Béla Tarr on the basis of the space for contemplation that it arguably opens.\(^\text{14}\) As many critics have noted, slow pace takes on at least a symptomatic value in a context where culturally endorsed spaces for pause and contemplation have been put increasingly at a premium. In *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, Jonathan Crary notes that today the nature of experience is being transformed not so much by specific technologies and networks but by the particular “rhythms, speeds, and forms of accelerated or intensified consumption” that they facilitate. He goes on to argue:

One of the forms of disempowerment within 24/7 environments is the incapacitation of daydream or any mode of absent-minded introspection that would otherwise occur in intervals of slow or vacant time. Now one of the attractions of current systems and products is their operating speed: it has become intolerable for there to be waiting time while something loads or connects. When there are delays or breaks of empty time, they are rarely openings for the drift of consciousness in which one becomes unmoored from the constraints and demands of the immediate present. There is a profound incompatibility of anything resembling reverie with the priorities of efficiency, functionality, and speed.\(^\text{15}\)

Seen from this point of view, slow cinema takes on value as a downright recalcitrant temporal engagement, refusing the frenzied pace of contemporary life and allowing for the kinds of absentmindedness and reverie that now constitute ever-diminishing forms of experience. As Dargis and Scott suggest, slow cinema offers spectators precisely such an opportunity to “meditate, trance out, bliss out, luxuriate in our own thoughts, think.”\(^\text{16}\) However, in characterizing slow cinema as a cozy retreat from the world, such claims also run the risk of occluding the value of speed as a potential mode

\(^\text{12}\) Shaviro, “Post-Continuity.”


\(^\text{15}\) Crary, *24/7*, 88.

\(^\text{16}\) Dargis and Scott, “In Defense.”
of critique, reducing it to an indulgently solipsistic pleasure—the cultural equivalent of incense or bubble bath. As Crary suggests, this danger is actively encouraged by the development of digital media and the marketing and consumer profiling strategies that track and target us according to our aesthetic proclivities and viewing habits. This leads to what Crary argues is a magnification of our sense of “privileged exemption” from a “world in common.”\textsuperscript{17} A vital task for cinema scholars from this point of view is to take stock of slowness as a variety of speed that might help to show us our desire for a “privileged exemption” from a 24/7 culture of intensified consumption, even if it can’t provide a definitive escape from it. As Koepnick argues, grasping the value of speed as “a medium to ponder the meaning of temporality and of being present today” does not mean finding “islands of respite, calm and stillness somewhere outside the cascades of contemporary speed culture.” Rather, it requires a “special receptivity to the copresence of various . . . beats and rhythms in our temporally expanded moment.”\textsuperscript{18}

While debates about “fast” versus “slow” cinema have sometimes had a tendency to reinforce presumed dichotomies—between passive consumption and active viewing, Hollywood cinema and global auteur filmmaking, commercialization and art—they nevertheless help us grasp the significance of speed as an increasingly significant facet of life in the twenty-first century while reminding us that the affective and visceral attraction to speed was always one of cinema’s defining traits. A vital undertaking for “speed theorists,” then, consists of elucidating how notions of fastness or slowness emerge as complex forms of relationality, always in dialogue with a range of other speeds, temporal experiences, and forms of attention within a broader media ecology. This In Focus suggests entry points for analyzing speed as part of cinema’s long and varied history and as an increasingly significant part of the social, political, and cultural landscape of the twenty-first century.

Contributors to this In Focus begin by asking precisely what we might mean by speed in the first place: how we define, gauge, and qualify speed as a meaningful aspect of cinema and media studies. The contributions included here approach speed from a range of different perspectives, defining and elaborating its role as a property of the diegesis (a way of describing movement within the shot and a thematic element of the narrative); as an element of film style (a means of analyzing qualities of pace, rhythm, tempo); as an index of specific technologies and modes of production; and as a facet of exhibition and consumption, including the interactive role of the spectator in fast-forwarding or slowing the flow of images. Indeed, Timothy Corrigan’s contribution to this In Focus reminds us that “speed describes not one dimension or relationship but potentially many” and that a vital task facing audiences today is the question of how they might “execute their insertion into this rapidly moving media culture.”\textsuperscript{19} Focusing on the Bourne franchise and Trinh T. Minh-ha’s The Fourth Dimension (2001), Corrigan’s contribution excavates both the dangers and possibilities presented by acceleration.

\textsuperscript{17} Crary, 24/7, 53.
\textsuperscript{18} Koepnick, On Slowness, 3, 10, 6.
and reflects on the productive potential of “still speed” as a mode of engaging with, and negotiating one’s place within, digital network culture.

Karen Beckman’s rich contribution to this dossier signposts the value of speed for a range of critical contexts, including feminist film theory and practice, third cinema, and queer theory. As she reminds us, recent discussions that characterize cinema as “fast” or “slow” often overlook the centrality of notions of pace, tempo, and duration to these foundational theoretical legacies and so run the risk of depoliticizing discussions of speed and “narrowing the field’s sense of what counts as cinema.” Turning her attention to the field of animation, she looks at the development of techniques for animating speed and argues that such an appreciation for the creation of speed within cartoons can help to challenge and draw attention to “cinematic tempo norms in ways that prove useful to contemporary debates.”

Similarly, Neil Archer’s piece takes up an analysis of speed in relation to the often-overlooked aspect of sound in debates about slow cinema. Evoking a history of “fast talking” in cinema and television, from *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1942) to *The West Wing* (NBC, 1999–2006), Archer looks at how a focus on aspects of dialogue and sound help complicate some of our assumptions “around shot duration and its related ‘speed.’” Ultimately, he argues for an acknowledgment of the flexibility and variability of visual forms that are often assumed to produce a monolithic effect, arguing that a “‘slow’ aesthetic” can also critically explore “fastness.”

Dudley Andrew’s piece provides both a historical snapshot of the evolving techniques for producing and varying narrative tempo and an account of the “epic” sensibilities of “slow cinema.” Crucially, Andrew’s contribution provides a broader history within which to locate slow cinema’s affinities for duration. Through a patient analysis of Hou Hsiao-Hsien’s *A City of Sadness*, he demonstrates how slow cinema requires us to “shift gears” and inhabit a mode of experience that is perhaps alien to our contemporary sensibilities, and which has roots in precinematic traditions such as the medieval book of hours or the Homeric epic. As Andrew concludes, this “epic” dimension of slow cinema has value as a mode of affective engagement and as a form of memorialization.

Writing from a different perspective, Kim Knowles similarly foregrounds cinematic practices that engage temporalities outside of the modes of efficiency and speed of late capitalism. Her contribution focuses on the analog film practices of contemporary artist filmmakers—including the work of Alia Syed, David Gatten, Jürgen Reble, Emmanuel Lefrant, Tomonari Nishikawa, and others—which explore “alternative forms of temporality” that are embedded in the “deep geological or environmental time” of biochemical decay and the “rhythms of the natural world.” For Knowles, considerations of speed are crucial to understanding how this area of film practice is giving rise to new conceptions of embodiment, which speak both to posthuman and postcapitalist sensibilities.

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new materialist perspectives on “the interconnectedness of matter, both human and non-human.”

Finally, Lisa Purse’s contribution brings into focus the vital importance of affect for the consideration of speed in contemporary cinema. Noting the centrality of notions of optical-spatial intelligibility in debates about cinematic velocity, Purse argues that the spectator’s sensory and affective involvement in diegetic action is not always reducible to narrative or spatial coherence. Instead, she argues that the spectator “can be imaginatively oriented toward particular diegetic trajectories” without having a fully coherent visual rendering of them. Drawing from Sarah Ahmed and Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s notion of embodied orientation, Purse argues that speed is above all a means by which the film orients the spectator affectively and imaginatively to the shared world that it produces.

There is still much work to be done to explore the broader significance of speed, both historically and in relation to our contemporary context of acceleration. Whether from the vantage point of staying on or getting off the proverbial speeding bus, this involves thinking past the binaries of fast and slow to acknowledge the simultaneity and copresence of a wide range of speeds, velocities, and rhythms that confront us through our interactions with media culture. We hope that the range of reflections included here will continue to provoke questions and to yield new insights from future speed theorists working in the discipline of cinema and media studies.


One of the most visible challenges in contemporary film and media cultures today is negotiating the increasing velocity of film form and culture. This is at once a challenge to what Jacques Aumont identifies as ocular time and programmatic time, the configuration of temporality on the screen and the temporal experience of watching those images. A character in Douglas Coupland’s 1995 novel *Microserfs* comically collapses both dimensions of media speed: to watch contemporary movies, he discovers an “incredible time saving secret: foreign movies with subtitles! It’s like the crack cocaine equivalent of movies. . . . All you have to do is blast directly through the subtitles, speed-read them, and then blip out the rest. It’s so efficient it’s scary.” Indeed, the solution proposed by Coupland’s character may casually suggest not only the velocity of contemporary ocular and programmatic temporality but also the promise and opportunity they offer. From this perspective, the purported challenge of contemporary media time zones might potentially promote a related value in how viewers intervene in and negotiate an imagistic culture of accelerated disappearance, namely *efficiency* as the critical link between the speed of film aesthetics and the consumption of those films. While the so-called slow cinema of filmmakers like Terrence Malick or Kelly Reichardt represents one attempt to counter a cinematic speed and restore a contemplative vision and its attending values, a counterdirection here is to embrace the increasing velocity of film culture in order to establish a more critical or productive relationship with it, one grounded in the efficiency of execution.

Following Aumont, the kinds of cinematic speeds that elicit this challenge range from methods of film production to the pace of movie narratives to patterns of reception. While mainstream movie production, especially of the blockbuster kind, typically plods along, digital technology has allowed both professional and amateur filmmakers to quickly make and release films at a speed not witnessed since the early twentieth century—exemplified recently in the ten-day


shooting schedule of Joss Whedon’s *Much Ado about Nothing* (2012). Paralleling the speed of film production in the form of on-screen temporalities, contemporary movie narratives, such as *Minority Report* (Steven Spielberg, 2002) and *Inception* (Christopher Nolan, 2010), become ultimately about surviving speed through rapidly pursued and resistant subjectivities and social selves. Finally, faced with myriad quickly appearing and disappearing reception venues and delivery systems (from iPhones to Netflix), the speed of audience engagement and reception—both visual and manual—has become a distinctively contemporary form of cinematic reception whose textual paradigm might be fast-paced video-game interactivity and whose social model might be the binge-viewing that condenses months of a television series into one evening.

Often overlooked in this imagistic frenzy is that speed describes not one dimension or relationship but potentially many: not only different rates of velocities and accelerations but also the intervals, pauses, and integrals that form the transitions between shifting velocities and accelerations as a “depth of speed.” Within the movements and experiences of speed as various temporal degrees or “gears,” in short, there potentially exist spaces of interpellation in which actions, thoughts, decisions, and emotions may adjust, redirect, or even control the flow of speed. These are the critical spaces in which temporality and speed may be executed—efficiently or not, successfully or not—and the cinematic value of speed may accordingly be most suggestively condensed and addressed as a question of execution, or how successfully, rapidly, and productively individuals and audiences execute their insertion into this rapidly moving media culture.

In this context, the series of *Bourne* films, from 2002 to 2012, becomes emblematic (or at least one of my favorite examples) of contemporary media speed, not only because their obvious velocity of action and style infuses so much of their textuality but also—as a significant distinction from the James Bond series they seem to mimic—because those accelerated images merge with the central question of identity or, more precisely, the loss of identity, as Jason Bourne struggles to physically and psychologically interpellate a self into temporal movements that continually and literally blur the places he inhabits. Adapted from Robert Ludlum’s novels of the 1980s, the first three and the most suggestive of these films—*The Bourne Identity* (Doug Liman, 2002), *The Bourne Supremacy* (Paul Greengrass, 2004), and *The Bourne Ultimatum* (Paul Greengrass, 2007)—map a frenetic global espionage game in which Bourne races to discover a self whose identity has been erased in a failed assassination attempt for a US intelligence agency, an agency that now relentlessly pursues him through ubiquitous technological surveillance. While these films confront social and ideological issues that speak directly to a post-9/11 audience, Bourne’s fast-paced efficiency as a killing machine creates both multiple (real and passport) identities and ultimately culminates in an (amnesiac and real) instability of identity and subjectivity.

Bourne becomes an electronic application that threatens to fall off the global network grid he inhabits, propelled through swift flights across various international places whose long-shot identifications tend to disappear in the close-up actions that race through them. In an important sense, these global capitals and countries, from New York and Paris to Berlin and Moscow, transform into a kind of nonplace—to borrow Paul Virilio’s term—of continuous urban speed defined by flash pans, dramatic zooms,
and rapid edits that seem to vanquish clear spatial geographies. In one of many chase sequences, for instance, Bourne returns to a traumatic hotel room that, through a rapid series of flashbacks, visually collapses his past and present; immediately afterward, he frenetically dashes through trains, across river barges, and down streets, via a dizzying movement of space that is repeated later in a car chase through Moscow. Darting through clashing layers of history as he searches desperately for a future, Bourne clings to a sense of identity as tenuous as that sense of place, both blurred in the speed of a reality that approximates an out-of-control video game, its figures tending to disappear within its quick pace. Recognizing the anonymity into which his images of the world fade, Bourne confesses at the end of the first film to the daughter of two of his victims: “I can see their faces. Everyone I’ve ever killed. I just don’t know their names.” Here speed induces an ephemerality that in turn produces disappearance and blindness across many levels, from the psychological to the industrial.

The crisis represented by Bourne’s global landscape of speed, wavering subjectivity, and disappearing spaces has been increasingly addressed and often lamented in numerous frameworks, most theoretically by writers such as Jonathan Crary and Paul Virilio, whose positions provide a broad and illuminating backdrop for film and media culture as they intersect experiential questions of time, space, and subjectivity. Crary’s 24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep, for instance, provides a culturally broad position on the deleterious effects of speed as it affects the fundamental relationship between memory and subjectivity, central thematics in the Bourne films. In today’s nonstop environment as in Bourne’s nonstop world, the “contemporary phenomenon of acceleration is not simply a linear succession of innovations in which there is a substitution of new items for something out of date. . . . [I]t is also part of an expansion in the number of points at which an individual is made into an application of new control systems and enterprises.”

The chronology of speed thus tends to eviscerate the chronologies of history itself as a collective memory: “The acceleration of novelty production is a disabling of collective memory, and it means that the evaporation of historical knowledge no longer has to be implemented from the top down. The conditions of communication and information access on the everyday level ensure the systematic erasure of the past as part of the fantasmatic construction of the present.”

As with Bourne’s justifiably paranoid search for a self, experience now consists of sudden and frequent shifts from absorption in a cocoon of control and personalization into the contingency of a shared world intrinsically resistant to control. The experience of these shifts inevitably enhances one’s attraction to the former, and magnifies the mirage of one’s own privileged exemption from the apparent shoddiness and insufficiency of a world in common. Within 24/7 capitalism, a sociality outside of individual self-interest becomes inexorably depleted, and the human basis of public space is made irrelevant to one’s fantasmatic digital insularity.

3 Jonathan Crary, 24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep (New York: Verso, 2013), 43.
4 Ibid., 45.
5 Ibid., 89.
In the end, for Crary and Bourne, “there is a profound incompatibility of anything resembling reverie with the priorities of efficiency, functionality, and speed.”

In *The Lost Dimension*, Virilio’s more theoretical argument turns primarily to the spatial implications of speed, reflecting on the particular problem of the evisceration and disappearance of traditional spatial configurations whereby the “instantaneity of ubiquity results in the atopia of a singular interface.” Here spatial and temporal divisions and distances have become transformed as a “speed distance” that “obliterates the notion of physical dimension. Speed suddenly becomes a primal dimension that defies all temporal and physical measurements. . . . The old agglomeration disappears in the intense acceleration of telecommunications, in order to give rise to a new type of communication: the concentration of domiciliation without domiciles, in which property boundaries, walls and fences no longer signify the permanent physical object.” Not far from Bourne’s fragile mind and homeless environment, speed generates a transformation of representation across the movement from “the esthetics of the appearance of a stable image—present as an aspect of its static nature—to the esthetic of the disappearance of an unstable image—present in its cinematic and cinematographic flight of escape.”

As the central shape in what he calls the “dromos” of contemporary life and its architectural and social agenda, for Virilio, value—like the ethically corrupt political economy of Bourne’s back-room world and its attendant erasure of Bourne as no more than an application or screen image—becomes one of the first casualties of this intense acceleration of spatial representation:

> The imbalance between the direct information of our senses and the mediated information of the advanced technologies is so great that we ended up transferring our value judgments and our measure of things from the object to its figure, from the form to its image. . . . Instead we encounter in the interface a form-image in which time more than space makes the “surface,” since the only depth is that of the primitive dimension of speed, the emptiness of the quick.

Bourne as interface thus becomes metaphoric of an “integral cinematism” that locates speed within a series of endless and valueless transitions in the disintegration of space: “[t]he perspectival effects of classical ornaments and the cinematic characteristics of certain styles . . . is replaced by integral cinematism, an absolute transitivity, involving the complete and thorough decomposition of reality and property.”

Against the critical backdrop of the negative spaces and subjects of speed, Trinh T. Minh-ha’s film *The Fourth Dimension* (2001) and her commentary on it in *The Digital Film Event* provide a valuable alternative position within these disintegrating and disappearing spaces and identities, a position that redirects cinematic speed, I

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6 Ibid., 88.
8 Ibid., 45.
9 Ibid., 78.
10 Ibid., 118.
believe, in a more productive direction. Through the use of the compositions and decompositions of digital technology, her film explores the mobile frames of Japanese culture as specifically various layers of temporality and velocity, traveling across past, present, and future vectors that intersect the rituals, ceremonies, and performances of everyday Japan. Not too surprisingly, Trinh recognizes her film as a variation on Virilio’s book, distinguishing her differentiations of the dimensions of speed: “[I]n weaving this mutable light tapestry that is film, I work with uneven and heterogeneous speeds, rather than a homogenized space of linear time.”

As she notes in The Digital Film Event, the subject of The Fourth Dimension “is not exactly Japan or Japanese culture, but the Image of Japan as mediated by the experience of ‘dilating and sculpting time’ with a digital machine vision.”

“Rather than producing linear, homogenized time,” she continues, “digital sound designing allows me to work intensely with other speeds, those that come not only with the diverse motions in an image, but also with stillness, or with an image emptied of visible action.” These other temporal dimensions within speed create a “depth of time,” in which “coming and going can happen in the same move.” Here, that depth in turn offers a place within its velocity as “still speed”: “unexpected moments of stillness in the midst of rapid cuts and movements. . . . Speed is here not opposed to slowness, for it is in stillness that one may be said to truly find speed. And rather than merely going against speed, stillness contains speed and determines its quality. Speed at its best in digital imaging is still speed. The speed of a flower mind.”

What I consider most important about Trinh’s notion of still speed is its pinpointing of a relationship with speed that is not only about the loss of certain experiential dimensions, such as space and subjectivity, but also about a more productive spectatorial position that allows for an almost pedagogical advance in how speed is engaged and activated. In his essay “Speed and the Cinema,” Peter Wollen explores the attraction of cinematic speed from the 1920s through to the present and notes how the thrills produced through high speed expose the viewer to “unfamiliar situations . . . far removed from the zones of safety and normality.” In that exposure, the experience of cinematic speed is consistently counterpointed, for Wollen, by viewers’ distance from and control of those virtually violent thrills, making the encounter both therapeutic and pedagogical as viewers learn to adjust to speed as a way to live with a modernist environment.

The more contemporary implications of this productive potential of still speed appear between the lines of Thomas Elsaesser’s essay “The Mind-Game Film.” There the focus is a particularly recent genre of films that includes—or could include—a variety from Memento (Christopher Nolan, 2000) and Donnie Darko (Richard Kelly, 2001) to Inception (Christopher Nolan, 2010) and, more recently, Birdman (Alejandro

12 Ibid., 3.
13 Ibid., 7.
14 Ibid., 8.
15 Ibid., 13.
González Iñárritu, 2014). For Elsaesser, one way to view these mind-game, smart, or puzzle films is pedagogical, to the extent to which they describe and demand a way of learning to see and engage the contemporary world through the “productive pathologies” of paranoia, schizophrenia, and amnesia—all of which resonate with the near-hysterical predicaments that describe Jason Bourne. In losing control, immersed in twisted and shifting perspectives and time zones, spectators of these films, like those described by Wollen, “gain a different kind of relation to” the contemporary world. Learning to see this world through the quickly changing rules of these new games becomes an exercise in negotiating the rapid and disjunctive velocities within which both protagonist and viewers must assume a hermeneutical position in a version of still speed: in mind-game films, “the most intriguing and innovative feature is this insistence on temporality as a separate dimension of consciousness and identity, the play on nonlinear sequence or inverted causality, on chance and contingency, on synchronicity and simultaneity . . . [and] thus the spectator’s own meaning-making activity involves constant retroactive revision, new reality checks displacements, and reorganization not only of temporal sequence, but of mental space.” Reflecting the new communication technologies and mobilities that increasingly define the contemporary subject, these films “make ‘mind games’ out of the very condition of their own (im)possibility: they teach their audiences the new rules of the game, at the same time as they are yet learning them themselves.” They teach, in short, increased subjective efficiency in navigating and executing the new representational orders of a digital world—including its new rapid and disjunctive velocities.

As a pathological denizen of these speeding puzzle-worlds, Jason Bourne must keep pace with and adapt to their new and often unpredictable rules, and most critically, he must learn to execute—as both a player and a subject—the games of rapid movement and change that define him. As I suggested earlier, the films often resemble a series of intense video games in which Bourne and the US intelligence agency constantly play against each other in a series of quick and reactive moves. At one point in The Bourne Supremacy, Bourne arranges a surreptitious meeting with a British journalist who has classified information about his identity and history. As the encounter develops at a breathtaking pace in a crowded Waterloo Station, cell phone communications, tracking data, and visual surveillance cameras quickly crisscross the spaces and masses of the station, as they are visually orchestrated on the multiple computer screens with multiple images in the US headquarters across the Atlantic. For Bourne to survive here, as in much of the series, he must anticipate, reflect, and execute in smaller and smaller increments of time. He must fashion a still speed within increasing velocities of speed so that he can see and out-think the network that entraps him. For him and for most of the inhabitants of the fast-paced networks that surround us, speed has become a dominant experiential shape, and executing a subjectivity

18 Ibid., 31.
19 Ibid., 21.
within those speed zones is perhaps the best and only alternative to being swept away and “disappeared” by it. Other values are of course implied in the efficiency of that execution, including the ethical and the political. Those, however, are questions for another time, another sequel.

The Tortoise, the Hare, and the Constitutive Outsiders: Reframing Fast and Slow Cinemas

by Karen Beckman

Where exactly do cinematic speed and slowness reside, and what kinds of instruments do we need to measure them? As this dossier works to bring fresh energy to existing conversations about fast and slow cinemas, we might usefully consider which cinemas have not been invited to join the “race,” how the multiple locations of cinematic tempo interact with one another, and what is at stake in each of these interactions.

Contemporary discussions of fast and slow cinema can fall into somewhat rigid polarizations that caricature Hollywood as fast, uncritical, ballistic, and sensational (rather than intellectual) and global art cinema—cast as taking its cues from a European and primarily male modernist cinema—as slow, intellectual (rather than physical), and offering a greater spectatorial freedom than its Hollywood counterpart. In addition to noting the obvious overgeneralization of these sketches, it’s worth highlighting that participants on both sides of the debate tend to share a kind of normative amnesia (with the exception of frequent dutiful nods to Chantal Akerman) regarding the centrality of discussions of tempo, duration, and patience to earlier critical discussions now often characterized as passé because of their relationship to identity politics: feminist film theory and practice in the 1970s and 1980s and their attention to what Teresa de Lauretis described as a “temporality and rhythm of perception” defined by “a woman’s actions”; third cinema theory’s exploration of cinema’s multiple “chronotopes”; and more recently, queer film scholarship on duration, backwardness, and drag in the work of scholars such as Douglas Crimp, Jean Ma, Homay King, Elizabeth Freeman, and Judith Halberstam.1 This amnesia maps a cognitive landscape

1 See Paul Willemen, “The Third Cinema Question: Notes and Reflections,” in Questions of
in which contemporary global cinema seems thinkable only through Hollywood or male-dominated European art cinemas, failing to bring into view a richer network of continuities and ideas, depoliticizing fast and slow discussions, and narrowing the field’s sense of what counts as cinema.

The brevity of this essay prevents a full exploration of earlier, politically charged, and now often overlooked discussions of cinematic tempo, so I briefly consider only the example of how third cinema theory might enrich contemporary debates before turning my attention to animation, another zone of filmmaking that is pertinent to but excluded from this debate. In 1985, Teshome H. Gabriel argued in “Toward a Critical Theory of Third World Films” that the time-space relations and rhythms of non-Euro-American films were different from those found in Euro-American films. Slowness, silence, cyclical progression, excess, gaps, longer duration, and a fixed camera perspective are all qualities that he aligned with films growing out of local traditions, out of folk and oral rather than print and literary art forms. However, as the late Paul Willemen points out, Gabriel was immediately criticized for prematurely homogenizing what Willemen calls the “Third Cinema chronotope,” a variety of which we may be in danger of repeating today.  

In his 1986 essay “Triangular Cinema, Breaking Toys, and Dinknesh vs. Lucy,” the Ethiopian filmmaker Haile Gerima similarly associated the distracted and rapid movement of Western news cameras covering African wars with a disinterest in, and a turning away from, African bodies. Yet ultimately, although Gerima’s films could be described as both slow and long, aesthetic pace is not his priority. Rather, his comments about cinematic tempo focus on the need for “a cinema of long-term objectives to change, if necessary to rearrange our disgraceful existence,” and on the extended duration of audience building: “The audience we have inherited was built slowly, painfully stacking up person by person.” In addition, he calls attention to the long and slow process of film education and visual literacy, and on the discrepancy between the Anglo-Saxon filmmaker, who is allowed to experience step by step what Gerima calls “the stages of development,” and the African American filmmaker, who is denied the chance to “learn how to spell in motion pictures.” Gerima’s career exemplifies this patience and commitment to sustainable, community-oriented cinema in which the empowerment of what Toni Cade Bambara has called the “authenticating audience” constitutes the filmmaker’s fundamental priority. Louis Massiah, filmmaker and executive director of Scribe Video Center, points out that change often occurs gradually, imperceptibly, in different ways, and at differentiated speeds within and


4 Gerima, “Triangular Cinema,” 76, 77, and 89.

among individual members of any audience, and so the speed of change as a sign of the success or failure of films that do “culture work” is a complex—and perhaps unhelpful—thing to measure. Coco Fusco makes a similar point in her response to October’s questionnaire on the efficacy of artistic responses to the war in Iraq when she writes, “Too often, art that addresses political issues is written off as having failed if it does not generate an immediate calculable result, even though judging any kind of art in terms of immediate and quantifiable effects is terribly shortsighted.”6

If fast and slow scholars alike have paid little attention to the intersecting histories and legacies of feminist, queer, and third cinema engagements with cinematic tempo, they have also tended to focus on live-action cinema to the exclusion of animation. This seems especially odd, given how extensively animators have explored duration, single or variable-frame processes, and variable shooting and projection speeds.7 Although these branches of film practice may seem remote from one another, they share an investment in differentiated tempos.

But where does animation’s tempo occur? How it is produced and experienced? How do we think about speed, slowness, and rhythm differently in the context of various forms of animation? What role, if any, does the interaction of camera movement and editing rhythms play—and what is the equivalent of “shot length” for a film made with a frame-by-frame process anyway? Discussions of cinematic stillness in debates about live-action cinema often take us, as they did Roland Barthes, back to a frozen photographic frame; but what would it mean to think through the micro-unit of a line or a lump of clay instead?8

Digital systems offer Hollywood editors the possibility of shaving off a frame at a time in a process known as “frame-fucking.”9 As David Bordwell points out, this may represent a limit case of high-speed editing that he links to an accelerated cinematic experience. Yet this attention to the individual frame creates an overlap between fast live-action cinema and animation, which is generally perceived as one of the slowest and most labor-intensive forms of cinematic production, an extreme sport requiring extraordinary powers of duration. (In an interview from 1965, experimental animator Harry Smith admitted, “All of my films were never quite completed. Most of the material was never shot because the film dragged on too long . . . it was just too exhausting.”)10

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7 Experimental film has similarly explored these temporal aspects of cinema, but unlike animation it has played a role in contemporary discussions of cinematic speed and stasis.
8 In “The Third Meaning” (1970), Barthes sees the “specifically filmic” as residing within the film still, not in “animation, flux, mobility.” Roland Barthes, “The Third Meaning,” Image-Music-Text, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 52–68, 66–67. The still “throws off the constraint of filmic time,” a constraint Barthes sees as blocking “the adult birth of film,” its birth into theory (“film has still to be born theoretically”) (67). For Barthes, the still has everything to do with cinematic tempo. While he sees reading time as “free,” he points out that “for film, this is not so, since the image cannot go faster or slower without losing its perceptual figure” (68).
Motion and speed are, as Maureen Furniss has argued, centrally important to animators, and perhaps in a more self-conscious way than for other filmmakers, because animators have to create rather than record the movement in question. She writes, “Animators study the laws of physics to learn how gravity impacts the way in which an object travels through space. . . . They consider the factors of acceleration and deceleration on a figure in movement, which affect the spacing of images in sequential frames.”11 For Stanley Cavell, the uncertainty of how the laws of physics will be applied in the animated realm distinguishes it from what he calls “the movies”; and, like silent slapstick, which, Cavell notes, “is often under-cranked, which feels semi-animated,” animation can challenge and draw attention to cinematic tempo norms in ways that prove useful to contemporary debates.12

Like everything else in animation, speed is never “just there” to be recorded. Michael Barrier has argued that cartoon animators had to learn how to depict speed, often tapping, as David Kunzle, Chris Lanier, and Scott Bukatman have all pointed out, the visual rhetoric of early comic-strip pioneers like Rodolphe Töpffer.13 Kunzle writes, “Caricature and comic strip were always in the vanguard of a kind of graphic speedup.”14 The development of the “squash and stretch” technique marks an essential moment in this process of discovery, and it is not surprising that Disney’s Silly Symphony The Tortoise and the Hare (Wilfred Jackson, 1935) was one of the key cartoons for honing this technique. Director Wilfred Jackson claims, “Before that time nobody had dared to move a character clear across the screen in five frames.”15 But speed and slowness are not just about frame counting; they are also about audiovisual aesthetic choices. Restaging an ancient race between the fast and the slow, this cartoon highlights the conundrum of how “normal speed” is defined and conveyed in an animated context where movement is invented rather than recorded. Indeed, perhaps part of the appeal of cartoons is that they put the very idea of “normal” under a great deal of pressure.

In this Aesopian example, slowness is visually indexed by the excessive stretch of the tortoise’s neck and limbs, while at the audiovisual level is suggested by a use of Mickey Mousing it belabored. The tortoise’s movements have a sense of drag both because they are inescapably tied to the music’s rigid beat, implying that acceleration would be impossible, and because the tortoise’s speech is so drawn out. While live-action speed often takes the form of a blur as an object rushes past the camera, a motion blur that, as Stephen Prince points out, photorealistic computer animators learned to imitate,

11 Maureen Furniss, Art in Motion: Animation Aesthetics (Sydney: John Libbey, 1998), 75.
15 Barrier, Hollywood Cartoons, 132.
cartoon speed has its own visual rhetoric. Speed mechanizes the organic body—legs swirl like bicycle spokes; the hare impacts the surrounding environment, producing clouds of dust, displacing the physical world, and animating proximate objects such as his robe as if hyperkineticism were contagious. Speed’s sound is not that of a rhythmic musical beat but the panic-inducing wail of an arrhythmic siren.

When we think of cartoon speed, we may well think of the chase, but as Norman M. Klein points out, “chases are not necessarily ‘faster’”; their significance lies in “a lot of contrast, not simply velocity.” Speed in cartoons functions differently from its appearance in live-action films. As Klein illustrates, “No matter how quickly that crazy Dodo bird moves through Wackyland, the scene does not register in that architectonic way that makes the train really speed along madly.” Thomas Lamarre makes a related point in The Anime Machine in arguing that in cel animation, objects tend to move not into but across the image, and vision and vehicle are rarely aligned. In contrast to the “ballistic vision” developed in Paul Virilio’s theory of cinematism, Lamarre offers a theory of animatism: “Insofar as animatism arises in the same world as mobile apparatuses (the world that, in Virilio’s view, gives rise exclusively to cinematism), animatism not only implies a different way of perceiving things in an accelerated world but also promises a different way of thinking about technology and of inhabiting a technology-saturated world.”

For Klein, the cartoon chase film is nothing less than “a hapless war between incompatibles[]. . . . incompatible atmospheres, incompatible graphics, volumes, even ideologies.” It is the “collision of improbables,” Klein argues, that makes the chase look “so very, very fast” even when it’s not actually so fast, and he links these graphic collisions directly to the Second World War and the Cold War, which provide the context for many American cartoon chase films.

Cartoons may seem too childish for engaging real war, but perhaps we have something to learn about the relationship between speed differentials and power by viewing and thinking the world through a child’s perspective. In Roland Barthes’s 1977 lecture series How to Live Together, he notes, “From my window (December 1, 1976), I see a mother pushing her empty stroller, holding her child by the hand. She walks at her own pace, imperturbably; the child, meanwhile, is being pulled, dragged along, is forced to keep running, like an animal, or one of Sade’s victims being whipped. She walks at her own pace, unaware of the fact that her son’s rhythm is different. And she’s his mother! → Power—the subtlety of power—is effected through disrhythm,

18 Ibid.
19 See Thomas Lamarre, The Anime Machine: A Media Theory of Animation (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 6. For other particularly relevant discussions of speed and stasis in animation, see also xxiv, xxv, and 72.
20 Klein, 7 Minutes, 163.
21 Ibid., 164.
then again, as Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles (Chantal Akerman, 1975) had illustrated through its depiction of the rhythms and routines that dominate a single mother’s life only a few months prior to Barthes’s observation of this scene of maternal torture, there are always at least two sides to every tempo.


Speeds of Sound: On Fast Talking in Slow Movies

by Neil Archer

In an essay published in 2008, Matthew Flanagan put forward his argument for what he called an “aesthetic of slow” in contemporary film. Partly a series of observations on tendencies in world cinemas, partly a manifesto for a specific form of countercinema, Flanagan sets out several stylistic motifs characteristic of slow film: a focus on “dead time” and the “de-dramatization” of events, a tendency to linger on the space of (in)action beyond any narrative happening or apparent significance, and a focus on characters drifting without obvious narrative destination. What ties all of these together stylistically is the sequence shot, and it is this to which Flanagan gives his most focused attention. “Long takes,” Flanagan writes, “act as the primary mode of formal presentation, signaling a renewal of the shot as an individual entity where montage is countered by unity, and restlessness offset by delay.” And behind such renewal, perhaps inevitably, is the writing of André Bazin, in particular his observations on the planséquence in the first volume of What Is Cinema? Notes Flanagan, “The work of many filmmakers cited here strongly invites a rehabilitation of


Ibid.

André Bazin’s criticism, in particular his formation of an ontological long take theory based on the artificial representation of objective reality.”

Flanagan might be the first to admit that his essay is riven with ideological and evaluative distinctions—distinctions that, while providing grist to the mill of slow cinema aficionados, do not really address the more nuanced questions of film style and signification. The essay is from its opening paragraph shaped by rhetorical oppositions: between “mainstream American” and “art” cinema; between the “presentation” aesthetic of the former and the possibilities for “reflection” involved in the latter. He writes of slow cinema’s “retreat from a culture of speed” and its “liberat[ion] from the abundance of abrupt images and visual signifiers that comprise a sizeable amount of mass-market cinema,” leaving the viewer “free to indulge in a relaxed form of panoramic perception.”

Such arguments for the “continuum of reality” or the “phenomenology of the real” embodied by such cinema are hardly unique to Flanagan’s piece; indeed, they have constituted an oppositional type of critical hegemony in recent world cinema studies. How such arguments understand slowness is clearly not limited to, or indeed reducible to, any one stylistic motif. Such arguments’ core belief in the long take is nevertheless worth interrogating, mainly for its failure to recognize the possibilities of a fast cinema, and indeed the culture of speed, within its own terms.

Significantly, the tendency to overlook aspects of sound in much of the slow cinema debates is a glaring (or deafening?) indication of an abiding ocular-centrism in this debate, and in film theory generally. I wish to dwell here not on visual bias per se but rather on the blind (deaf) spots in the slow aesthetic’s valorization of the sequence shot. Flanagan associates with the slow school what he calls “a cinema of walking,” embodied by films such as Gerry (Gus Van Sant, 2002) and In the City of Sylvia (José Luis Guerín, 2007). We may associate the organic unity of the walking-tracking shot with an aesthetic of slow, but how, then, are we to understand similar uses of this style in a highly cinematic show such as The West Wing (NBC, 1999–2006), which made the walking Steadicam shot its signature stylistic flourish? Interestingly, given that the so-called walk-and-talk mode attracts the critical ire of David Bordwell, who sees such practices as neglecting the classical virtues of ensemble staging, it fits within the terms of the “intensified continuity” style Bordwell defines, and to which slow cinema is aesthetically, ideologically, and industrially opposed. But when The West Wing frequently relies on extended sequences of unbroken action, where in fact is the difference from slow cinema’s continuum of reality?

There is a sense in which the supposed distinctions between fast and slow cinema are founded in institutional and political viewpoints and preferences, as much as any definite idea of aesthetic particularity. Granted, The West Wing uses such techniques within a wider range of formal devices, but it still raises the question of how we really understand the ontological value of the sequence shot across different contexts.

4 Flanagan, “Towards an Aesthetic of Slow.”
5 Ibid.
Sukhdev Sandhu has correctly identified a mainly non-Western focus in slow cinema discourse, partly because of its association with certain filmmakers (e.g., Jia Zhang-ke, Apichatpong Weerasethakul; I would add Tsai Ming-liang), but also, suggests Sandhu, because of the way their work is “infused with a respect for religious and spiritual notions of time.” Maybe so, but such readings risk imposing a predetermined and evaluative—possibly Orientalist—viewpoint that in itself avoids interrogating the specific meanings of film style.

My suggestion here is that the reliance on a visual framework for understanding the valences of cinematic speed, characterized by a fixation with the long take, is complicated by the work of sound and especially, in the instances being discussed here, by the work of dialogue. If, to draw one last time on The West Wing, the walk-and-talk aesthetic does not feel slow but rather fast, then this is logically due to an intrinsic quality of its dialogue, not its cinematography. Thinking about the effects of dialogue on the experience and cognition of film calls into question some of the assumptions around shot duration and its related speed. I hope to show that fast talking in slow movies is entirely compatible with, and even exemplary of, the type of theoretical paradigms associated with Bazin, but in the process, I suggest the limitations in viewing Bazin’s writings on the long take exclusively within slow aesthetic terms.

In her study of dialogue in American popular film, Sarah Kozloff looks to reverse the ocular-centric character of existing film histories. Rejecting the visually biased assumption that historical shifts in film style are “reconfirmed by an analysis of their dialogue patterns,” Kozloff argues that attitudes toward dialogue itself helped shape stylistic shifts. Kozloff’s key example is the script for Citizen Kane (Orson Welles, 1941). The significance of the sequence shot in Citizen Kane hardly needs stressing, although Kozloff’s rethinking of the film’s historical development points toward the considerable impact dialogue had on the film’s visuals. Indeed, we should note in Bazin’s writing on the long take that his approach is dialectical and historical. Any tendency to see “The Evolution of the Language of Cinema” as a defense of the sequence shot tout court overlooks Bazin’s point that the sequence shot simply brought to its most economical and expressive fruition the aims of classical narrative cinema. Crucially, though, and as Bazin adds, such an aesthetic was responding to the “bargain-rate reality introduced . . . by sound.”

The combination of deep-focus photography and the long take, by this logic, was a natural visual response to the possibilities afforded by synchronized sound dialogue. While Bazin insists on the sequence shot’s capacity to represent the world in an “objective” way, such objectivity does not prescribe the nature of the film’s content or its words. Dialogue speed is in fact an elusive concept, because, unlike a film’s visuals, sound “remains constrained to perpetual clarity and stability”; unlike film editing,
sound editing “has created no specific sound unit.”

Spoken language therefore always has its own continuum, regardless of its pace and density.

It is in the interweaving trajectories of the journalist and screwball genres (such as Howard Hawks’s *His Girl Friday* [1940]) that we find an emphasis on dialogue’s affectivity and complexity. Drawing on Pauline Kael’s revisionist study of *Citizen Kane*, which reaffirmed the importance of screenwriter (and former journalist) Herman Mankiewicz, Matthew Ehrlich has argued that the film “marks a transition from the screwball journalism films of the 1930s to the journalism noir films of the two decades to come.” This point is interesting in its emphasis on *Citizen Kane*’s formal connection to the screwball-journalist tradition through dialogue. Here, the long take gives this dialogue a head of steam.

Welles, for instance, lets one of the film’s most virtuoso monologues—Kane’s defense of journalistic principles before his benefactor, Thatcher—play out in a single take of more than two minutes, the only movement in which is the shifting of Kane from middle ground to foreground within the shot. The extreme pace and fluency of Kane’s speech has a rhetorical proficiency far beyond verisimilitude, building clause after subordinate clause to poetic effect. But beyond the linguistic virtuosity of Kane’s speech, it is worth taking note of its substance. Kane’s apparent defense of the free press predates Jürgen Habermas’s theory of the bourgeois public sphere (published in German in 1962) by twenty years. Yet the top and tail of the speech belie its central logic, given that it opens with Kane trying to fabricate a cause for war in Cuba and ends with a slightly smug acknowledgment of Kane’s own capital-driven weight, when he tells Thatcher that by losing a million dollars a year, he will have to close the *Enquirer* “in sixty years.”

In terms of content, the sequence exemplifies the way the journalist film is immersed in the uses and abuses of language for its particular ends. Language is rarely a disinterested tool in such films, but rather it constitutes their very subject matter. As Gerald Mast has argued, writers such as Mankiewicz or Ben Hecht conducted “a subtle . . . rebellion against the very studio system and values that produced [their films],” part of which involved separating dialogue from its purely instrumental function as the vehicle of narrative. The sequence shot plays a constituent role in this process because its static and presentational aspect runs counter to the informational logic of the then largely standardized continuity editing system. This is also because it assumes the compositional format and self-contained narrative value of the cinematic gag.

But who is the joke for? Kane’s smirk both reveals and conceals the ways in which economic publishing power, as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri later saw it, replaces

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Habermas’s communicative action with instrumental reason.\textsuperscript{15} The scene from \emph{Citizen Kane} explores this, allowing the seductive though possibly duplicitous content of Kane’s speech to be experienced. Like much of the film, the scene is about the politics of speech and, more specifically here, the relation between quick speech—its potential reduction, in fact, to mere \textit{sound}—and its status as communicative language. Crucially, and as Bazin would affirm, it is the unbroken sequence shot, its continuum and “objective reality,” that allows this to be perceived and understood. While we may understand the film here as fast, this is clearly distinct from the fast experience, say, of accelerated editing rates.

Such sequences are in line with the slow aesthetic’s valorization of temporal unity, rejecting as it does the potential redundancies and presentational aspects of montage. This, in turn, is in line with Bazin’s assertion that the sequence shot, in contradistinction to montage, promoted the possibility of ambiguity within the image. Bazin’s own argument on this point, though, is at best uneven: within three pages he manages to say that viewers of the long take have everything carefully mapped out for them but also have interpretive freedom; elsewhere he states that William Wyler’s films (despite sharing, via cinematographer Gregg Toland, \textit{Citizen Kane}’s visual approach) are “never ambiguous.”\textsuperscript{16}

Notable by its absence, especially in Bazin’s reading of Welles, dialogue is once again the missing component. While the sequence shot seems in itself no guarantee of interpretive ambiguity, the presentation of spoken language within the form of the sequence shot, as illustrated in \textit{Citizen Kane}, definitely is. We see this most overtly when a film conforming rigidly to the standard operating procedure of slow cinema makes language its central theme, indeed narrative—as is the case with the Romanian film \textit{Police, Adjective} (Corneliu Porumboiu, 2009).

The film revolves around the planned arrest of a schoolboy who has been selling hashish and an interpretation of what, in this case, constitutes the law and the role of the police. Toward the film’s conclusion a policeman, Cristi, and his Captain, discuss police ethics and various definitions (of conscience, morality, law) in a scene filmed as two static ten-minute sequences, broken only by the arrival of the Captain’s secretary with a dictionary. The scene is staged and to a certain extent structured following the theatrical gag format, making the interminable definitions a kind of joke—though without a punch line. In this way, the sequence draws attention to its primary focus on language. The immobile staging and the shot lengths emphasize performance and the awkwardness of duration. The definitions progress at pace, parroted rather than discussed: Cristi does not exactly fluff his lines, but he has to read them aloud, hurriedly, from the dictionary—as if from a script. The forced inertia of the mise-en-scène combined with its linguistic babble underlines the scene’s absurdity.

And yet, if it draws on the staging and rhythms of theatrical comedy, the film is pulled in two directions. Its excessive quality as staged event is consistently complicated by the eventual narrative function of the sequence within the terms of Cristi’s investigation (and the film’s status as a detective film of sorts). The Captain’s relentless


insistence not so much on the letter of the law but on the contents of a dictionary, wins in a conclusion that is both logical and unsatisfying because its unbroken pace brooks no reflection; from this perspective, the film actually parodies the overdetermined narrative drive of much detective cinema, precisely by replicating it with a torrent of words, all within the constraints of the fixed sequence shot. The protagonist of Police, Adjective, but also the viewer obliged to watch and listen, is here paralyzed by the insufficiency of language to resolve its narrative conflict.

Hurried as I am by the limits of this piece, I offer a brief, though not too hasty, conclusion. Given the common association between accelerated editing rates and contemporary Hollywood blockbusters, it is perhaps inevitable that oppositional film discourse should assume binary conceptions of speed through which to work. The problem here is the way such discourse, especially in failing to discuss sound, risks overlooking both the signifying flexibility of certain visual forms, especially the sequence shot, and its viability across varied narrative and thematic contexts. To assume in turn that the accelerated nature of contemporary experience produces, or is produced by, an accelerated form of cultural production underestimates the potential for a slow aesthetic to critically explore fastness. To put it more bluntly, the insistence on the slowness of slow aesthetics throws out the baby with the conceptual bathwater and instead of offering us the whole world as lived, risks offering us merely half a world.

Time for Epic Cinema in an Age of Speed

by Dudley Andrew

I still drive a stick shift. Perhaps that’s why in this excursus on screen tempo, I start in first gear with early theory, then shift into second to cruise alongside André Bazin, before upshifting to merge into the fast lane where contemporary issues and ideas jostle.

Evolving Techniques for Producing Narrative Tempo. Early spectators and critics had a firsthand feeling for cinematic speed because mechanical variation was built into the hand-cranked apparatus. Comic scenes and chases are recalled as quite frenzied and jerky, with hyperkinetic actors and racing automobiles or horses given a technological boost through undercranking the camera or overcranking the projector. Among the early theorists who fastened on this property, Jean Epstein was the most eloquent and insistent. The revelatory possibility of spatial magnification via extreme close-up shots, he argued, found its temporal analogue in the dilation achieved via stop-motion and time-lapse techniques. Starting with his own Chute de
la maison d’Usher (1928), Epstein demonstrated and theorized the dramatic possibilities of temporal distention or compression in films of the narrative avant-garde.\(^1\) And not just the avant-garde. So common was slow motion in movies of the 1920s to express the interior pressure of rising emotion that Buñuel and Dali satirized it in Un chien andalou (1929).

The sound era restored normalcy, both because the apparatus had by then become electrified, and thus regular, and because speech and sound effects became ridiculous if stretched or compacted. Coincidentally, a realist tendency began to dominate the industry and theory. Roger Leenhardt’s 1935 essay “Cinematic Rhythm” assumes that the editor’s basic unit is no longer “the image” (a moving pattern on the screen that represents something) but “the shot” (a continuous block of space-time captured by the camera, whether on location or in the studio). While editors in the silent era had felt invited to manipulate the image to the point of deforming the representation, only an extraordinary motivation could lead editors of the 1930s to rework the physics constituting the blocks of space-time that hung in strips in their editing bins and that would in most cases be married to tracks of sound of equivalent length, whether recorded simultaneously or added later. In any case, the job now was to order these shots for their best cumulative thrust, trimming each unit to its most effective length.

By 1945 Bazin, greatly influenced by his friend Leenhardt, would quarantine special effects like superimposition, slow motion, negative footage, and reverse action as quaint throwbacks to an earlier expressionist era. He considered these to be parasites, seldom healthy for the living organism of a narrative film, whether realist or fantastical. Yes, even fantastical films do well to respect common laws of motion, Bazin implied, since credibility evaporates when obvious technological manipulation seems imposed. Instead, after a baseline realism has been established, spectators can be nudged toward the eerie and the “fantastic” through suggestions of the preternatural.\(^2\) When he pointed out that the superimpositions of The Phantom Chariot (Victor Seastrom, 1920) may have originally been effective but seem quaint and so no longer usable in the 1940s, he could have added that the accelerated pace of Thomas Hutter’s coach taking us deep into Transylvania in Nosferatu (F. W. Murnau, 1922) would appear comical if used two decades later. The genre these films belong to requires ever-new techniques because spectators evolve, in tandem with developments in technology and their correlative applications.\(^3\)

Bazin’s “realism” is ample enough to accommodate expressionist deviations, so long as these register as distortions of a consistent norm.\(^4\) One such norm, the synchronization of motion-picture capture and projection, can be temporarily inflected by oneric or balletic techniques of the sort tried out in La belle et la bête (1946) and later Orphée (1950) by Jean Cocteau, Bazin’s close friend. And so I doubt

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3. Think of religious painting: today artists still find ways to render the sanctity of a figure, but halos no longer do the trick. New techniques are needed to renew functions that do not change.
this defender of realism would have objected to the return, shortly after his death, of elastic temporality in the evolution of dramatic films. The new-wave mentality of the 1960s renewed the directorial license over the temporal dimension. Films as different from one another as *Zazie dans le métro* (Louis Malle, 1960), *Daisies* (Věra Chytilová, 1966), *A Hard Day's Night* (Richard Lester, 1964), *A Man and a Woman* (Claude Lelouch, 1966), and *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967) are punctuated at key moments with visible shifts of speed. My favorite such highlighted moment was produced by another of Bazin’s friends, Orson Welles: the amazing battle of Shrewsbury in *Falstaff* (1965) comes to its grisly close when the brutal hacking is accelerated via undercranking, then followed by the slow-motion crumpling of bodies atop one another into the magma of a muddy field.

A generation later, new technologies in TV had attuned spectators to sports replays, stylish ads, and eventually MTV (where the speed of the image track is almost by definition modulated to accompany an aural rhythm), so that manipulation came to be deployed not just at dramatic moments as in the 1960s but across entire movies. Asia led the way, its martial-arts genre preparing audiences to relish the pan-generic style of Wong Kar-Wai, who molds pace like a composer. Wong’s signature techniques, fully on display in *Chungking Express* (1994), effectively superimpose two distinct temporalities in a single image. In part 1, a desperate Brigitte Lin, in her blonde wig, races through the Chungking Mansions and later escapes onto a subway car at a pace that appears simultaneously fast and slow thanks to stretch printing. Then in part 2, Cop 663 (Tony Leung), in the foreground at the California Restaurant, inserts coins in a jukebox so slowly he seems to be underwater, while people pass behind him rapidly enough for their staccato figures to blur. In this latter case, a single shot represents both the bustle of a place and a character’s melancholic reflections in its midst. Bazin could have taken this as a variation, fifty years later, of Wyler’s deep-focus technique in *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), which rendered two sensibilities in a single shot (Al [Fredric March] glancing up from the jaunty pianist in foreground to sense the dark mood of Fred [Dana Andrews] far back in the telephone booth). This is how new techniques can serve enduring narrative needs for an ever more sophisticated audience.

**Temporality without Technology around 1946.** Even if their dramas scarcely change, narrative genres evolve by updating the techniques that control things like the speed at which they unroll. Consider the drawn-out gunfights in spaghetti Westerns. As for other modes, especially documentary, technologies of speed are far more crucial because they permit analysis and perception of subjects otherwise hard for humans to discern. The physical effects of a head-on car crash are impossible to catch without slow motion, just as the growth of an organism—a potato, say—is visible only via time lapse. As the war ended, Bazin felt he was witnessing the birth of modern cinema

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6 Undercranked scenes whose eight or twelve frames per second can, in postproduction, be doubled or tripled so they move jerkily and with blur, and at a rate the director has some control over. See David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 277.

7 Jean Painlevé’s “experimental science” films belong to two nonstandard modes at once, and Bazin acclaimed him.
when he saw fiction films maturing via contact with documentary. In his day, the
technology and experiences provided by wartime newsreels resulted in a few bold films
that were shaped according to temporalities distinct from the standard ones laid out
in the classical system.

He challenged audiences to open themselves up to the shocking immediacy of
Resistance films like Espoir (André Malraux, 1939, 1945), Le bataille du rail (René
Clément, 1945), and Paisan (Roberto Rossellini, 1946), which exhibit the hypervigilant,
anxious cinematography of “the Bell and Howell newsreel camera. It is inseparable
from the hand and the eye—almost identical to the person behind it and in tune
with their attention.” Perhaps he had heard of Bell and Howell’s “Military 16mm
filmgun” that was hardly larger than an adult’s two hands but was normally bolted
to a fighter plane’s engine. Probably he had in mind the company’s earlier “eyemo,”
the portable one Robert Capa used during the Spanish Civil War. These cameras
were promoted for their prowess in on-the-spot situations. An operator carried an
eyemo the way we do a cell phone, ready to whip it out to grab emergent events on
the run. (Why not call them emergencies?) The resulting shots, often badly composed
and jostling about on the screen, induce the very anxiety or panic in the spectator that
triggered the operator’s quick reactions in the first place. This style impressed the jury
at the first Cannes Film Festival, where La bataille du rail took the International Jury
Prize. Note that speed in these cases generally resulted from sudden movement, not
from technically manipulating the flow of film stock in the camera.

Now, at that first Cannes festival in 1946, the International Film Critics prize
went to a film at the other end of the speedometer, Farrebique (Georges Rouquier,
1946), a poetic chronicle of a farmstead in central France that takes place across “les
quatre saisons” of a single complete year. Rouquier deliberately subtracts urgency and
contingency from this nearly eternal place, including references to the war that was
ongoing during production. What remains is the land, subject to changes of geology
and atmosphere, while the organisms the land supports, including an extended family,
carry on according to seasonal rhythms and the imposition of rituals like Sunday mass.
To grasp the sluggish mutation of socio-geographic forms, Rouquier poured cement
tripod footings at selected spots on the premises so that his camera (meant to be an
expensive variable-speed apparatus) could be inserted intermittently throughout the
year and retain an invariable composition. The preordained placement and schedule
of recordings transformed nature’s hidden and wild growth into something both
discernible and metrical.

This early example of slow cinema detaches the tension wire running from screen
to audience; instead of being occasionally or suddenly jolted by dramatic events and
images as occurs in the Resistance films, Farrebique uncouples drama from perception
to encourage us to recognize the resonances between people and land that emerge
with the changes brought on by each season of the year. Rouquier may well have

8 André Bazin, “Cinematic Realism and the Italian School of the Liberation,” in What Is Cinema?, trans. Timothy
Barnard (Montreal: Caboose Press, 2009), 236.
9 Rouquier’s “anecdotes” concerning production difficulties appear in Dominique Auzel, Georges Rouquier, cinéaste,
known of the monumental opus being completed after the war by Annales historian Fernand Braudel, who wrote of the Mediterranean world in what he labeled three distinct speeds. The first speed (geographic) and the second (socioeconomic) are what Farrebique renders; the third speed, which Farrebique seldom slips into, represents history as a series of punctuated events, the way most standard movies do. At feature length, and with profitable distribution in France and abroad (it played for weeks in New York), Farrebique never set out to be experimental; if it belongs to the nouvelle avant-garde promoted by Leenhardt, Astruc, and Bazin, it does so, strangely, by resurrecting a precinematic mode, the medieval “book of hours” that served as a calendar while putting diurnal patterns of life in line with cosmic time through devotion. Farrebique’s “devotion” can be felt when its earthy realist photography is lifted to abstraction in stop-motion accelerated sequences.

Already in the 1920s Epstein had noted that cinema’s congenital doubleness (image and thing) extends to the temporal dimension whenever the spectator feels an image propelled or slowed in relation to standard clock time. In ordinary sound films, including those by auteurs, temporal distortions express the supernatural or dreams (e.g., the underwater scene in L’Atalante [Jean Vigo, 1934]). Farrebique is nearly unique in deploying temporal acceleration to figure the simultaneous unrolling of social and natural time. While seldom expressed in our modern era, such a conjunction of temporalities formed the basis of Christian Europe for centuries, as is apparent in cultural expressions like medieval mystery plays. Bazin was only partly satisfied with Farrebique (he recoiled whenever it settled into the picturesque), but he heralded its anachronistic temporal perspective because he found it, paradoxically, quite modern, since it constituted a cinematic mode alternative to that of cause-effect fiction.

**Slow Cinema: The Epic Mode of Hou Hsiao-hsien.** Bazin’s ideas would seem quite congenial to slow cinema. Just as he paved the way for the nouvelle avant-garde of his day (Bresson, Varda, Resnais), we can imagine him standing behind certain auteurs in the 1980s who slowed narrative drive while still aiming for festival attention and theatrical distribution. The touchstone film here is unquestionably A City of...
Sadness (Hou Hsiao-hsien, 1989), because despite its across-the-board success (taking the Venice Golden Lion in 1989 while becoming Taiwan’s largest box-office hit to date), it nevertheless demands that viewers shift gears to follow its unconventional “mode” of experience. I use this term in just the sense David Bordwell defines it in Narration and the Fiction Film.\textsuperscript{13} Where he accounted for certain cases outside the norm by coining “parametric narration,” I use A City of Sadness to anchor the slow cinema of Jia Zhangke, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Béla Tarr, Cristian Mungiu, Lisandro Alonso, Carlos Reygadas, and others who deploy the “master shot style” of which Hou Hsiao-hsien is the recognized guru. A City of Sadness comes as close as modern cinema has to the ethos of the epic. In this it takes up the ambition of such rare precedents as Eisenstein’s Alexander Nevsky (1938) and Ivan the Terrible (1944), and of Mizoguchi’s 47 Ronin (1941), national myths represented in “monumental style.”\textsuperscript{14} A City of Sadness is equally monumental in the majesty of its distant view of great, tragic events in its nation’s formation.

Although its themes and scope may be à propos, these are not, however, what prompt me to identify A City of Sadness as epic. In fact, it doesn’t appear in the filmography of nearly two hundred titles taken up in Robert Burgoyne’s The Epic Film in World Culture.\textsuperscript{15} For A City of Sadness is at the antipodes of attempts to imitate classical epics (Cabiria [Giovanni Pastrone, 1914], 300 [Zach Snyder, 2006], Troy [Wolfgang Petersen, 2004], Gladiator [Ridley Scott, 2000]); nor does it fit either the standard template of the genre (like Gone with the Wind [Victor Fleming, 1939]) or some mannerist reworking (like Once upon a Time in the West [Sergio Leone, 1968]). First of all, Hou’s protagonists could hardly be deemed heroes, even in the movie sense of that term. While several are admirable, none successfully stands up to the circumstances that overwhelm the province he inhabits. And those circumstances, as harsh as they are, register as mere aftershocks in this backwater, with the decisive historical events mainly overheard via radio broadcast rather than represented. Still, I insist that A City of Sadness stands tall even among the outsized spectacles that populate this genre. Unflinching and confident in its presentation, its ethos firmly produces the memory that develops in its 157 minutes. The distinctive slowness of its long takes, their repetition and deliberate orchestration, evince the feel and the stature of epic. A City of Sadness is Taiwan’s Iliad.

How far can this analogy help pinpoint the place, if not the source, of this undisputed masterpiece? Whereas most fiction films open up space via agents and their doings, actions in epic arrive as if already contained within a preexistent volume of space and time. In this case the dates are precise and political: August 1945, when Hirohito capitulated and Taiwan became free of its Japanese colonizers, until December 1949, when Mao’s complete victory on the mainland sent the remaining Kuomintang army and its followers to this island retreat. The turbulence of the four

\textsuperscript{13} David Bordwell, Narration in the Fiction Film (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 150.

\textsuperscript{14} Darrell Davis, Picturing Japaneseness: Monumental Style, National Identity, Japanese Film (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995). The reader can add other examples, like Theo Angelopoulos’s Travelling Players (1976). My preferred example I nevertheless take to be a summit of this mode.

years and four months between these dates crosses Taiwan like uncertain weather, including shadows of clouds and monsoons portended by thunder.

In the picturesque northeastern region near the gold-mining town and port of Jiu-fen, an extended local family becomes embroiled in dealings with a Shanghainese gang, while across the entire island the KMT-controlled government redistributes power to mainlanders, many of them carpetbaggers. As in the Iliad, war puts the routine of law in suspension, and clans are driven into uncomfortable, often fatal contact with everyone anxious about retaining or gaining place and position. In the overheated black-market economy that accompanies war and its spoils, frictions inevitably erode the fragile bargains that constitute civil life. Inevitably struggles over power and honor ignite aggression and occasion revenge, like Achilles’ extended dispute with Agamemnon. And as in the Iliad, the women who hover nearby, whether protected, coveted, or abused, can only moan for the men whom they watch destroyed in personal vendettas or general assaults.

A City of Sadness recounts history by moving among and returning to a limited number of locations. The mining hospital, for instance, is the site of seven major sequences, most beginning with precisely the same master shot through the entryway, the camera set in a dark room behind a doorway. Hospitals in fact are ideal archives of history, for this is where agents and patients repair in the aftermath of events. Making their way through its entryway for admittance at various points during these years are the wounded, the dying, and the mad, as well as pregnant women in labor.

A single setup is used to establish the march of history, not just at the hospital but also for each location. This allows us to measure what has happened since last we found ourselves there. Such consistency in represented space is doubled by the film’s famously rigorous consistency in screen space. Each place is photographed, each time, from the selfsame angle, generally head-on and at a magisterial distance capable of taking in a broad field of action. Mark Nornes and Yueh-yu Yeh claim that axial cuts (rather than shot–reverse shots or cuts exploring angles of a scene) form the linchpin of this film’s firm style. Changing their metaphor but not their point, I believe the lines that pass from the camera through the center of each setting establish a taut grid atop which national and personal history transpire. Refusing to budge in search of a better angle or a closer view, the camera may miss the crux of a scene’s action. Locked to its imperturbable sight line, we often hear dialogue, cries, or commotion emanating from off-screen, growing louder to signal a scene’s increasing drama while “extras” in, say, the dining room, continue to serve or clear food. In short, places outlast the events that take place in or around them.

And seldom does an action open a scene. Instead, we are first made to settle into an increasingly familiar place. We witness street traffic, observe customers gambling, or watch nurses moving around their stations at the hospital. Many seconds later a person may charge into the shot from any angle, or a verbal or physical dispute may fall out among those already present. Yet the action of the scene—its reason for having been included—seems ignored by children and unidentified women who continue to cross

the screen or enter from behind the camera. Meanwhile that camera remains firm on its axis, unruffled though not indifferent.

As in Farrebique, permanent footings seem to have been installed to hold the tripod immobile in front of these settings. We thereby observe, season to season, the changes that occur within the permanence of what remains the same in each location. Farrebique chronicles a natural process of decay and renewal across four seasons, whereas A City of Sadness witnesses what seems a preordained historical tragedy in just over four years. The increasing weight of these years is marked, for instance, by the growth of the infant whose first cries open the film. When later on that cry is heard again we are quickly oriented to the concubine’s home, thanks to the ceiling light that Older Brother turns on in both scenes. That light and this baby—grown even larger and still wailing—return toward the film’s end, by which time the liberation of August 1945 has been strangled by the encroaching mainlanders, who are on their way to taking complete command of this province and of Taiwan overall.

A City of Sadness advances less like drama than like epic, propelled not by events so much as by its own formal repetitions and rhythm that memorialize a nation’s turbulent, formative years. Just as many sections of the Iliad begin with descriptive formulae, so Hou’s scenes characteristically hold for several beats before the action erupts that is presumably the reason for the scene’s inclusion. These master shots, within which each scene’s action flares up and may die out, constitute the medium through which historical experience becomes epic; the master shot is the cinematic equivalent of Homer’s dactylic hexameter. Its dignified stability honors locations and people, then absorbs whatever action ensues, often physically or verbally vicious.

As in epic, scenes and settings in A City of Sadness are seldom intercut; rather, they stand as nearly autonomous and are placed end to end. For example, the ritual of Older Brother’s funeral begins with a hawk circling a foggy mountain. Next, the family stands in a long take on the hillside, lined up frontally as if for a portrait. Wen Ching holds a photograph of the deceased while a priest in a saffron robe clangs cymbals on the right. An axial cut to a wider view brings into view a miniature pyre situated screen left. The glow of its embers, together with the priest’s garb, forms a kind of orange parenthesis that encompasses the blue-gray family group. The cymbals fade and eventually a cut takes us from the drizzle to a sunny landscape of the bay, perhaps close by the mountain of the funeral. But this view initiates another scene altogether, one that slowly develops before our eyes and ears. After some eight seconds of silence, different ritual music fades in and we begin to make out bits of red within the island’s green: a wedding entourage inches its way along an invisible road. The music forms a bridge to the familiar shot of the Lin family shrine room seen in long shot from the dining area, where we witness the marriage of Wen Ching to Hinomi.

Norres and Yeh have minutely analyzed the two and a half minutes of this wedding ceremony, showing that its four shots, far from bringing the spectator to identify with the couple, keep the family context in view, together with the event’s architectural framework. Even when he does cut into a sequence, Hou retains his penchant for

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17 Hsin-Yuan Peng alerted me to the particular poetic effect of weather patterns traversing a stable landscape. I am grateful to her, as well as to Shumay Lin and Jiwei Xiao, for their comments and advice on this essay.
“snapping the camera into the same angle every time he returns to a set.”\textsuperscript{18} The sequence that follows the wedding brings us back to the lovely shot of the market street. After some seconds Hinomi can be seen in white walking toward the camera, a basket on her arm. Her pregnant form tells us how much the calendar has advanced.

Two scenes later, her voice is heard atop the familiar long view of the bay. A mid-shot then shows her sitting before a table writing in her journal the words spoken by her in voice-over. On the left her infant prattles, then works his way in front of the table, partially blocking our view. She acknowledges the child but keeps writing. For more than two minutes the baby moves around the table, going completely off-screen for a time, only to return to grab a cup from the tea service that shares the table with Hinomi’s journal. Her narration is complete even before the baby’s unrehearsed gesture brings us into the full present of this room. Hinomi’s memories and her journal are thus put in their place and in their time by the peripheral movement of a baby, this “extra” who survives the scene and the film—and who may stand in for the filmmaker, since in 1948 Hou Hsiao-hsien was himself an infant in Taiwan.

This is how slow cinema moves. At regular intervals settings change, and long shots alight on one separate scene after the next. Each place retains its integrity, the camera almost never connecting even adjacent rooms. Instead, speech and music link certain places and events. Thus the stability of place outlasts the flash of action, starting with the rooms of Older Brother’s concubine, where the film opens as their baby is born. We come to realize this must be in the rough port town, since majestic shots of the small harbor and the larger bay precede later scenes with the concubine and infant, yet no decoupage orients us. Nor does any moving camera or matching action connect other places in the town, which includes the Little Shanghai bar that Older Brother runs, the gambling den and brothel, and the extensive Lin family home. The rooms of that home are kept entirely discrete. Characters may go from its kitchen to the hallway, dining area, or shrine room, but the camera doesn’t follow them, nor is there cutting on movement.

How far away is the mining town Jiu-fen, with its picturesque market street? We get to know that street and realize that Wen Ching’s photography studio and apartment sits by it, since the identical camera setup is repeated several times. The hospital where Hinomi comes to work must be just at the edge of town. She arrives there evidently after walking through the mountains on a thin road that winds through a ravine. That road probably connects Jiu-fen to Hinomi’s family’s manor, beyond which is the hidden retreat of her brother and his fellow dissidents, but no map will tell us, nor will any shot track or pan from one locale to the next.

One exception confirms this rule. Ah-ga in the restroom of the brothel is suddenly attacked by a knife-wielding Shanghai gangster; the camera doesn’t budge as they scuffle out the door. Cut to the Shanghai boss on the phone in foreground, as the belligerents rush into the hallway that extends behind him. Neither the boss nor the camera flinches as the men flail at each other and rush out. Cut to Oldest Brother gambling in mid-shot at Little Shanghai; now comes the rare pan, motivated by the growing noise of a chase, connecting Older Brother and his gambling space to the

\textsuperscript{18} Nornes and Yeh, \textit{Narrating Sadness}, 52–54.
café’s entryway that we have seen before (and from just this angle), though never knowing where it was situated. Ah-ga stags in bleeding and falls past the camera, which pans again, this time to keep his body in view as his stunned brother attends to him. There immediately follows a repetition of the shot of the brothel’s hallway, where the static rule again prevails. After some seconds we hear a commotion and Older Brother barges in, as if his café were proximate to the brothel. But we can only guess at the extent of the ellipsis that brings him, wielding his knife wildly, into quick confrontation with the Shanghai boss still at the phone in foreground. The latter calmly shoots Older Brother, who falls dead in the hallway. No close-up or change of angle registers this climactic moment.\(^\text{19}\)

Each of these settings, even on its second, third, or even seventh appearance, receives the dignity of something akin to exposition in both the literary and the art historical sense. What is exposed is a nation’s agony seen through the deterioration of the family. At the film’s outset a photographer memorializes the entire extended Lin clan in front of the Shanghai Café, the day it opens. Two and a half hours of screen time and four years of history pass until Wen Ching photographs himself posing with wife and child in their apartment on the eve of his arrest and certain execution. The people we have cared about are progressively evacuated so that the film concludes in the Lin home, where only the doddering grandfather remains, along with his lunatic son, while unnamed children and women wander in and out. The final shot is of the dining table, empty except for the elegant vase that has sat atop it throughout. A reference perhaps to Ozu’s Late Spring (1949), the vase now contains the history it has witnessed. It is an urn, holding the ashes of hope.

The vase, the hawk, the lamps, the electric wires above the roofs, and several other objects are intermittently interjected like poetic figures within the film’s epic discourse.\(^\text{20}\) They help constitute the lyricism of the narration rather than any logic of narrative, the way Homer’s epithets do or his formulae (e.g., “rosy fingered dawn” appears twenty times in the Odyssey, after alternating with “dawn of the yellow-robe” in the Iliad). Though representing characters more vividly than settings, Homer’s long poem is replete with “the repetition of words, the recurrence of themes and motifs, the parallelism of scenes.”\(^\text{21}\) And he does return us regularly to the ships on the beach, to Priam’s palace, to Zeus’s court, and of course to the plain of battle before Troy. As for speed, Homer is said to employ “decelerating” devices, the staple of slow literature, including “such mundane and recurrent events as dressing or eating.” Hou’s project leads to very similar strategies as well as to his own version (via diaries, letters, and songs) of Homer’s “prolepses (anticipations) of events to come or analepses (flashbacks) of events already told. [These are] a means of connecting episodes.”\(^\text{22}\)

\(^{19}\) This scene is followed by the circling hawk and the funeral.

\(^{20}\) For a fine account of the use of motifs and of Hou’s relation to Asian pictorial traditions, see Bérénice Reynaud, A City of Sadness (BFI, 2002). See especially page 74, where she anticipates my point about the priority of place over character and action.


\(^{22}\) Ibid.
Just as Homer “manages to compress into the final stage of the Trojan War its entire decade by using recollections and anticipations of characters and including scenes which mirror events that must have taken place before and after the Iliad,” so Hou concentrates into this out-of-the-way province many of the political and ethnic forces that have conflicted for a century in Asia, by introducing characters who speak Taiwanese (Min Nan or Fukeinese), Japanese, Shanghainese, Cantonese, and Mandarin. Despite its many peripeties and its thousands of lines of gruesome struggle, The Iliad proceeds with stately deliberation. Similarly, A City of Sadness “comprehends”—gets its great arms around—the violence that increasingly takes over this province; swords and knives may suddenly flash in ambush, but these thrashing gestures are buffered by the long view, including landscape shots; by the setup that precedes and remains after the combat; and sometimes by the prior or subsequent account it receives in oral or written form.

The formality with which epics are recounted—their set pieces, repetitions, and redundancies—have been attributed by scholars to the prerequisites for memorization. Oral poets relied on formulae, and so too did the audience; for the evocation and repetition of linked scenes amounts to the effort and possibility, as well as the contents, of cultural memory. If Homer made the Greeks feel the birth pangs of the contested values that brought their civilization into existence, so Hou Hsiao-hsien determined with this film to exemplify the arduous task of eliciting cultural memory from the black hole produced by four decades of white terror in which repression and censorship engendered amnesia. The annual repetition of the Homeric epics produced a common Greek heritage; presumably it also enabled an assessment of then-current social and political issues through the inflections given by each successive oral performer. So too, as he selected and colored the memories he uncovered in a newly opened archive, Hou Hsiou-hsien must have felt himself digging into the concerns of a society just breaking free of martial law.

Such a demanding process required a demanding film. Yet as challenging as it was for Taiwanese to follow (not just emotionally but also in terms of plot and character relations), A City of Sadness pulled them toward their difficult past and pointed them toward discussing their future: it became the most viewed native film to that point in the country’s history. In 1990, these citizens did not queue up for a dramatic heritage film; they entered the theater in a different “mode,” and they experienced something incomparable, a cinematic epic of their culture. In the context of a nation just finding its democratic voice, A City of Sadness was perhaps neither slow nor long enough.

23 This idea became clearer to me in discussion with my colleague John MacKay, who sees what I term “epic” at work in Eisenstein’s sound films.

24 At the antipodes of Hou Hsiao-hsien’s epic mode stands another birth-of-a-nation saga, Tsui Hark’s three-part Once upon a Time in China, which went into production a year after A City of Sadness and treats the rise of the new Chinese Republic out of the Boxer Rebellion. This mannerist comic spectacle also flaunts the standard cinematic mode, recovering something of the aesthetic of “Peking Opera,” which Tsui Hark had already explored in his masterpiece Peking Opera Blues (1986). These giddy films run at a frantic yet unpredictable pace. Lighting and color may shift scene to scene, and angles change within shots. Tsui Hark even dares to alter the temporal composition of some shots, eroding the very building blocks of realism. Fine analyses by David Bordwell and Adrian Martin in Esther Yau’s pertinently titled anthology At Full Speed: Hong Kong Cinema in a Borderless World (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001) probe the microphysics at work in this accelerated cinema where time becomes flexible. In his
As for us non-Taiwanese, by submitting, perhaps with difficulty or discomfort, to the distinct temporality of *A City of Sadness*, we have had to outgrow ourselves and relinquish our sense of what movies should be. This amounts to relinquishing our prosaic or dramatic manner of representing history and adopting this film’s quite different mode. This is a mode for which evidently (that is, on the evidence of this film), cinema was made, demonstrating once again that only in confronting what it has not yet been does cinema become what it is capable of being.*A City of Sadness* moves—and moves us—within an unaccustomed and literally memorable mode. Call it slow if you like. I call it epic.

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contribution, titled “Kungfu Gunplay, and Cinematic Expressivity,” Bordwell writes, “Doubtless, traditions of martial arts and Peking opera—cultural factors quite different from those governing Hollywood style—have been central to this aesthetic” (79). The background of this distinct mode is surveyed by Yung Sai-shing, “Moving Body: Interactions between Chinese Opera and Action Cinema,” in *Hong Kong Connections*, ed. Meghan Morris, Siu Leung Li, and Stephen Chan Ching-kiu (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2006), 21–34.

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**Slow, Methodical, and Mulled Over: Analog Film Practice in the Age of the Digital**

**by Kim Knowles**

From October 2011 to March 2012, the Tate Modern in London staged one of the most important artistic statements about analog technology in the digital era: Tacita Dean’s installation *FILM*. Standing thirteen meters high at the far end of the gallery’s Turbine Hall, Dean’s *FILM* was clearly more than just a film; it was a monumental paean to the analog medium that has, since the end of the twentieth century, been in rapid decline. Dean’s installation, with its epic proportions and cathedral-like setting, asked the gallery visitor to stop for a second, to contemplate the wonder, the mystery, the sheer magic of film, and to take part in a collective mourning of its passing. The experience was akin to that of being outside time, of being lost in a dreamlike space of liminality, not unlike the one in which film now finds itself—suspended between shifting economies and value systems, between a vibrant past and an uncertain future. The piece itself, as well as Dean’s public campaign to “save” celluloid, is part of a now-familiar and polarized discourse on the “death of film,” which I do not
rehearse here. Rather, I would like to use the installation as a springboard for thinking about how analog technology and obsolete media have become associated in recent years with a particular form of slowness. I argue that this contemporary framing, and its ethical implications, paves the way for new understandings of materialist aesthetics in the digital era.

In the catalog that accompanies the Tate installation, Dean outlines the fundamental technical differences between digital and photochemical modes of production and the specificities of film that drive her artistic practice. Unlike digital forms of image making, celluloid practice is “not fast and spontaneous,” she argues, “but slow and methodical and mulled over.” The relative ease of digital undoing and redoing, duplicating and erasing, which gives rise to spontaneity, is here pitched against the material finitude and unrepeatability of celluloid, which imposes contemplation and foresight. As problematic as this divisive dichotomy might be, it represents a recent attempt to carve out a position of autonomy for analog practice based on an oppositional temporality. Once the emblematic modernist technology of speed and dynamism, analog film, with its cumbersome mechanical processes and stubborn physical presence, now stands as the signifier of an old order, of times past. The continuation of obsolete practices is frequently perceived as a (nostalgic) refusal to move with the times, but it is also increasingly framed as responding critically to a “global culture of ever-increasing speed” with a corresponding slowness.

In this sense, the countercultural potential of film can be seen to operate on two interconnected levels: first, the use of old technology such as 16mm film emerges as an “archaic choice,” which outwardly rejects the forward drive of capitalist progress and its obsession with the “relentlessly new”; second, in an era of digital filmmaking, working with celluloid requires the analog artist to enter into a temporal contract with its physical materials that is at odds with modern society’s benchmark of speed, efficiency, and instantaneity. Analog film is therefore as much a meditation on time passing as it is a signifier of times past.

The recuperation and recycling of discarded machinery by increasing numbers of artist-run film labs, as well as a burgeoning culture of do-it-yourself film chemistry, has given new energy to artisanal film practices such as optical and contact printing, hand-processing, hand-tinting and -toning, the fabrication of film emulsion, and direct-on-film animation. Although these practices have long been central to the history of experimental film language, their aesthetic and political relevance is now differently inflected as the status of analog filmmaking shifts from the dominant to the residual. New paradigms are thus required for understanding the cultural relevance of film’s

material properties, and for thinking about how technologies of the past—with their concomitant temporal modalities—have the potential to inflect our relationship with the present, both materially and temporally.

Situated within the expanding (counter)culture of slowness, analog film practice might be seen as another form of “slow cinema,” a relatively recent label given to a body of films, from Andrei Tarkovsky and Michelangelo Antonioni to Béla Tarr and Lav Diaz, which offer an alternative to our fast and furious media landscape with a radically pared-down approach to both style and storytelling. The discussion of film aesthetics in slow cinema, however, often overlooks specific engagements with materials and processes, particularly obsolete ones. By concentrating on the relationship between analog temporality and the recent “material turn” in cultural and political theory, new directions open up for the field of slow cinema studies, where both the challenges and freedoms of technological obsolescence are addressed in terms other than simple nostalgia and technological fetishism. Here, it is necessary to shift the emphasis from the experience of time and duration within the film’s diegesis to the understanding of how time shapes, and is shaped by, physical encounters and material processes. A key consideration in this respect is the element of delay, which relates both to the successive nature of film images (the spatialization of time) and to the potential for change that is inherent to film’s organic physical makeup (the indexical trace of duration). The latter can be located in the (re)emerging discourses on materialism that emphasize the “performative power of matter.” In the context of film, the notion that matter has agency provides a framework for exploring alternative forms of temporality that complement current perspectives on the aesthetics of cinematic speed and slowness.

Productive avenues for examining the relationship between slowness and materiality can be found in the field of cameraless film practice, where physical engagements emphasize time as material and embodied. A particularly prevalent tendency is the act of burying or submerging the film stock in earth or water or exposing it to various weather conditions, all of which over time give rise to visible (and, in certain cases, audible) biochemical degradations. To make the short film Priya (2009), British artist Alia Syed buried rolls of film containing images of a classical North Indian dancer in her garden for different lengths of time, spanning a few days to several months. The progressive breakdown of the film emulsion, seen as bursts of textured color on the surface of the filmstrip, translates an organic indexical encounter with the earth and thus communicates temporality through touch. The haptic engagement is foreshadowed in the flattened spatial perspective of the figurative image, achieved by filming the dancer with a camera suspended on a rope above her head. This confuses time-space coordinates as the human movements collapse into, and merge with, the moving traces of the earth. Similar processes can be found in, among others, David Gatten’s

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8 Barbara Bolt, introduction to Carnal Knowledge, 6.
9 Ibid.
What the Water Said, Nos. 1–3 (1997), for which rolls of film stock were placed in crab traps and submerged in the sea for varying lengths of time; Jürgen Reble’s Zillertal (1999), a film “weathered” by being hung in trees for several months; Emmanuel Lefrant’s Parties visible et invisible d’un ensemble sous tension (The Visible and the Invisible of a Body under Tension, 2009), in which a single figurative image of a landscape dialogues with its corresponding earthly “other”—a roll of film buried at the same site; and Tomonari Nishikawa’s Sound of a Million Insects, Light of a Thousand Stars (2014), the result of burying film under leaves near the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station.10

In each of these works, film’s “ability to record the influence of the material world on its celluloid body” can be understood as both an aesthetic and an ethics of slowness. On the one hand, the process involves a temporal investment on the part of the filmmaker that implies the art of waiting; on the other hand, the films register a deep geological or environmental time that presents an alternative to human notions of efficiency and instantaneity embedded within a society predicated on speed. The dialogue that takes place between the material substrate and the environment (soil, plant life, water, air) can be registered only through time, as biochemical decay takes place as a result of prolonged contact with the elements. These “earthly” film processes therefore ask us to shift our attention to the rhythms of the natural world and to (re)consider, through the medium of celluloid, other possible ways of being.

Indeed, central to a consideration of slowness in analog filmmaking is the matter of bodily investment and agency. From Tacita Dean’s perspective, the “burdensome physicality” of analog technology counters the “body-less, human-less world” proposed by digital.12 A similar but less divisive view can be found in the writings of filmmaker Babette Mangolte, who argues that “film has a pulse. It measures time both physically and temporally.” Mangolte’s assertion that film is defined by its intermittent flicker, or “heartbeat,” returns us to the bodily metaphors of early film theory—for example, Hans Richter’s attempt to isolate film’s medium-specific properties through reference to its “rhythms of breath and heart-beat.”14 In a previous article on French avant-garde film in the 1920s, I argued that during this early period modern technologies of speed and the increasing role of machines in daily life gave rise to new conceptions of the modernist body.15 Films such as Abel Gance’s La roue (The Wheel, 1922), René Clair’s Entr’acte (1924), Fernand Léger’s Ballet mécanique (1926), and Man Ray’s Emak Bakia (1926) and Les mystères du château du dé (The Mysteries of the Chateau of Dice,

1928) elicited feelings of excitement and exhilaration by placing the spectator in the position of the moving camera and by employing rapid—or what Jean Epstein in 1925 fittingly referred to as breakneck—editing. Film technology could be used as an extension of, or as a stand-in for, the human body, translating to the viewer the feeling of being carried along at speed, with optical visuality giving way to a series of haptic impressions. What interests me here is how, almost a century later, the same technology is reconceptualized within the avant-garde as representing quite a different form of embodiment that hinges on a shared materiality between the human body and the film body. The shift is particularly evidenced in a recent comment by experimental filmmaker Bradley Eros, again in relation to the ontological differences between film and digital. “The digital is perhaps closer to synaptic brain processes, and the speed of thought,” he argues, “but more distant from the body that suffers.” Whether or not one agrees with this statement, particularly Eros’s division of body and mind, film and digital, the association of analog slowness with a form of physical human suffering and mortality, as dramatic as it may seem, opens up ways of thinking (through) analog materiality as a new form of embodied cinema.

This has been a feature of a number of cameraless films made in the past two decades, in which the flow of analog time is equated with the flux of bodily matter. Works by Vicky Smith (sobbingspittingscratching, 2012), Thorsten Fleisch (Bloodlust, 1998; Skin Flick, 2002), and Emma Hart (Skin Film, 2004) that bring the surface of the filmstrip into direct contact with skin and bodily waste such as saliva, tears, and blood elicit a form of corporeal empathy that speaks to current posthuman perspectives on the interconnectedness of matter, both human and nonhuman. Turning the body inside out, these films also function as reflections on the internal rhythms and slow disintegration of bodies as they make their inexorable progression toward death. It is the organic nature of film, thrown into relief in the age of the digital, which reframes the exhilarated speeding body as the dissolving, suffering body. However, embodied material approaches to slowness need not always have such melancholic overtones. Smith’s recent live physical performance pieces Bicycle Tyre Track (2012) and 33 Frames per Foot (2013), for example, demonstrate a self-consciously antithetical stance to the early avant-garde’s glorification of speed and modern travel by connecting analog film with slower, more ethical modes of transport such as cycling and walking. Spreading out clear 16mm leader across an open space, the artist cycles or walks a mixture of mud and paint along the film before projecting the results to the same audience. Here, the cinematic body is framed as that which leaves a physical trace without a carbon footprint. Smith humorously plays with these associations while also making a serious case for a productive and critical relationship between the materiality of film and the matter of the body, between technology and the environment, and between slowness and agency. As Craig and Parkins argue, “To declare the importance of slowness and to act upon it is a powerful expression of agency in a world that so strongly propels us

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This contemporary brand of arte povera thus highlights the extent to which materialist film practices—first theorized by Peter Gidal in the 1970s as a politics of representation—are able to reflect shifting political concerns and act as new sites of resistance.

Central to the artistic approaches discussed in this article is the element of craftsmanship, an embracing of the artisanal, and a corresponding rejection of the speed of capitalist change. Like the slow food movement, slow (analog) cinema can be seen as part of a wider ethics of embodied interconnectedness and a claim for the importance of alternative modes of physical engagement and being in the world. Important in this respect is the reconfiguration of the terms with which we speak about and value notions of speed and slowness in the cinema, particularly in relation to the body. While the early avant-garde filmmakers celebrated the ability of technology to create a sense of weightlessness through speed, these contemporary engagements with analog materials openly embrace slowness as a form of critical practice that emphasizes shared materialities and temporalities. What is needed now is a more sustained exploration of materialist film aesthetics in the context of new perspectives on speed and slowness. In framing photochemical film practice as a form of slow cinema, which responds in different ways to the speed aesthetics of early avant-garde film, I hope to encourage future steps in this direction.

18 Parkins and Craig, Slow Living, 75.

Affective Trajectories: Locating Diegetic Velocity in the Cinema Experience

by Lisa Purse

Cinema’s own speeds seem to be increasingly at issue. The contemplative “cinema of slowness” of directors such as Béla Tarr, Tsai Ming-liang, and Nuri Bilge Ceylan is valorized at the expense of a “fast” cinema—action-filled blockbusters like the Bourne films (The Bourne Identity [Doug Liman, 2002], The Bourne Supremacy [Paul Greengrass, 2004], The Bourne Ultimatum [Paul Greengrass, 2007], The Bourne Legacy [Tony Gilroy, 2012]) and the Transformers franchise (Transformers [Michael Bay, 2007], Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen [Michael Bay, 2009], Transformers: Dark of the Moon
[Michael Bay, 2011], *Transformers: Age of Extinction* [Michael Bay, 2014])—that is persistently dismissed for its formal and narrative preoccupation with acceleration.¹ The negative positioning of popular films that make the heightened diegetic velocity of bodies, vehicles, and objects their subject is not in itself new; but what is notable is its combination with a growing critical focus on these films’ presentational speeds.²

From David Bordwell’s writing on intensified continuity to Steven Shaviro’s work on postcontinuity, critics and film scholars have highlighted the quickening pace of editing and camera movement in mainstream American cinema, foregrounding the pressure this puts on continuity editing’s traditional role of marking out spatiotemporal relations in explicitly visual terms.³ In the ensuing critical discussion it has become commonplace to suggest that, as fast cinema has sped up, so the spectator has lost more of her sense of diegetic spatial relationships. I want to suggest that this critical commonplace obscures important aspects of both the relationship between speed and visual narration, and the experience of intense diegetic velocities.

In 2011, Matthias Stork published three video essays on what he called “chaos cinema,” illustrated with high-speed action sequences from films like *Transformers, Bad Boys II* (Michael Bay, 2003), *Quantum of Solace* (Marc Foster, 2008), and the *Bourne* franchise. This cinema, he suggested, deploys rapid editing and shaky camera movements to “overwhelm” and “overpower” audiences, and in doing so “trades visual intelligibility for sensory overload.”⁴ In the same year, Jim Emerson deployed video essays to undertake a pointed comparison of high-speed chase sequences in *Salt* (Phillip Noyce, 2010), *The Dark Knight* (Christopher Nolan, 2008), and older films like *Bullitt* (Peter Yates, 1968) and *The French Connection* (William Friedkin, 1971), in which *The Dark Knight’s* inconsistent deployment of screen direction is held up as an example of those films that deploy fast, mobile framing and high-speed dissection of space.

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² As Yvonne Tasker points out, this sector of film production has “consistently failed to meet the markers of aesthetic and cultural value typically applied within contemporary film culture.” In “Introduction,” *Action and Adventure Cinema* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2004), 2.


without sustaining “spatial integrity between elements within the frame or between shots,” thus producing “sensation without orientation.” Emerson and Stork are echoing David Bordwell’s long-established preference for “sensation” to be anchored by clarity of physical action and by a spatial legibility located in the image track and the cut. Yet such a preference carries echoes of what Adrian Martin has called “the baggage of classicism”: an overvaluing of coherence, narrative articulation, and formal balance that risks preventing adequate attention to those moments, sequences, or films constructed along other kinds of aesthetic principles.

The fact that so many writers are demanding this type of visually conveyed spatial clarity from the intense diegetic velocities and presentational speeds of popular cinema is symptomatic, it seems to me, of cultural anxieties about how we orient ourselves in relation to intensifying technological, social, geographical, and economic accelerations that have constructed a “speeded-up world in which . . . everyday life skids along on the plane of velocity”—and about, in particular, the “negation of space” these accelerations imply. Paul Virilio has influentially argued that the accelerating speeds of contemporary technologization and modern transportation are changing our relationships to geography, terrain, and territory, thereby producing an increasingly “fleeting figuration of the transfer” between different locations, or what he elsewhere calls the “ruin of the interval.” In the era of drone warfare, the circumstance of being unable to visually verify one’s spatial orientation in relation to fast-moving screen action might well reverberate with a more general unease about one’s orientation to the state and military capacities for near-instantaneous spatial penetration that Virilio has so astutely described. In this cultural context, a clearly visually mapped


9 Virilio, Negative Horizon, 105.

and spatially coherent mode of presenting the speeds of screen action may have a reassuring function, even a nostalgic one.

This is not a reason to preserve optical-spatial intelligibility as a dominant principle in the cinematic representation of intense diegetic velocities, however. Deborah Levitt reminds us that the “spatiality of physiological vision is not . . . easily diagrammed,” so that “the determination of the ‘truth’ of a particular vision cannot take place on the basis of a clear spatial mapping.” 11 Human beings make sense of the world through dynamic, holistic, and continual processes of synthesis and interpretation of different visual and proprioceptive stimuli over time, including information glimpsed or snatched on the fly—partial inputs that do not clarify orientation or environment in themselves but instead do so cumulatively. Why shouldn’t a cinema of speed reflect and speak to this contingency inherent in processes of visual cognition? Moreover, there are other ways in which cinema is able to orient the spectator in relation to the experience of diegetic speed. To illustrate this, let’s look at the final car chase of The Bourne Supremacy, which sits within a film franchise that garnered controversy for its allegedly “spasmodic” editing and obfuscatory “shaky cam” mode of visual narration. 12

The chase through Moscow’s streets lasts around six minutes, from Jason Bourne’s (Matt Damon) commandeering of a taxi through his attempts to evade a closing dragnet of police vehicles and an assassin, Kirill (Karl Urban), also in hot pursuit, to the crash in an underground tunnel that stops Kirill in his tracks. One section in particular would make Bordwell proud. Bourne’s taxi powers past the camera in a blur, leaving two police cars in the frame, gunning their engines to make up ground, their sirens getting louder as they get closer. The shared orientation and movement of the three vehicles mark out a spatially legible linear trajectory along the x-axis, with consistency of screen direction reinforced through eye-line matches as two sets of police drivers look toward their quarry and Bourne returns their gaze. A cut to the taxi interior picks up the accelerating police cars in the rear windscreen, before a whip-pan right frames Bourne anxiously looking in the rearview mirror to check just how close those police cars are. It is at this moment, when both Bourne’s and the spectator’s attention are on the pair of police cars gaining ground from behind, that a third police car slams into Bourne’s taxi sideways, unheralded except for the briefest screeching of brakes.

The side impact of the third police car is surprising not only because the edit withholds its approach but also because its trajectory interrupts, strikingly and suddenly, the trajectory within which the spectator has been affectively invested. Bordwell would argue that the experiential force of this interruption is founded on the spatial legibility of the preceding few shots I’ve described, which tie the chase’s trajectory to the literal linearity of the street the cars are traveling down. Yet if this is so, why not make

the whole chase spatially legible in this way? Instead, most of the chase scene consists of a shifting array of contradictory screen directions (Figures 1–4) alternated with blurry shots of car interiors (e.g., a close-up of Bourne’s face, a gear shift, the pedals). Only occasionally is this maelstrom of camera angles, movements, and cuts punctuated with brief revelations of spatial relations between vehicles at narratively significant moments, either through groupings of shots that momentarily sustain screen direction (for example, the parallel montage with appropriate alternations of screen direction and looks off-screen when Bourne and Kirill spot each other traveling parallel on either side of the river), an in-shot reframing or whip-pan (say, to reveal a Russian Federal Security Service vehicle or police car in pursuit), or the entry of a vehicle into the frame (as when a shot of Bourne’s taxi skidding left behind a moving tram is developed by Kirill entering frame right to converge on Bourne’s position; see Figure 5). Why persist in this spatial illegibility, this strategy of constantly switching visual-spatial orientations in relation to the unfolding speeds of action?

Put simply, the film spectator can be imaginatively oriented toward particular diegetic trajectories without having to continuously see them (or see them continuously
literalized); it is sufficient to understand the situation in which those trajectories develop or are asserted. As Sara Ahmed, following Maurice Merleau-Ponty, explains, embodied orientation is about more than measuring where we might literally be spatially situated. Orientations, she observes, “involve different ways of registering the proximity of objects and others. Orientations shape not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitation.”

The spectator’s understanding of the characters’ situatedness necessarily includes an awareness of generic and narrative coordinates that produce orientations beyond the literal. The generic terrain that the *Bourne* films occupy provides fantasies of bodily movement directed along what Erin Manning has called “vectors of emergence” that are characterized by propulsion and spatial penetration, exertion, and risk. The chase sequence locks pursuer and pursued into an intensely affective linear trajectory of fear, anticipation, shared exertion, and determined directedness, magnified by a narrative framing that aligns the spectator with a particular character’s asserted position along that trajectory. Throughout the chase in question, Bourne’s desire to escape invites imaginative investment in a particular vectorial aspiration—away from here, now, fastest—that remains in place regardless of whether the spatial relations of the scene are visually verifiable.

In his poetics of film thinking, Daniel Frampton cautions that it is “limiting to talk about film form in terms of our perceptual capabilities—film can do more than us, differently to us.” Popular cinema is free to think bodies-at-speed in ways other than the literal show-and-tell, and is increasingly doing so. In this so-called fast cinema,

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spatial legibility’s role begins to come into focus, the exception that proves the (new) rule, a tool for momentary emphasis, if it is needed at all. And yet this is not the “sensation without orientation” that Emerson alleged, for fast cinema’s affective trajectories remain as narratively situated as their spatially legible ancestors.

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