Poetics of Slow Cinema

Emre Çağlayan

Poetics of Slow Cinema

Nostalgia, Absurdism, Boredom

palgrave
macmillan

Emre Çağlayan
School of Arts and Cultures
Newcastle University
Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK

For my family, Hande, Ufuk and Kıvılcım

Preface

Medium close-up: the façade of a stone mansion with wide-open windows, reflections of rustling leaves on the glass. Just outside, two green shrubs, still. Chirping birds. Through one of the windows, inside, sits a drum kit. Immediately behind it, a blond man, wearing a sand-coloured cardigan, holds an electric guitar and jacks it into an amplifier, all barely visible. The camera slowly glides away from the window and reveals a large tree on the left. The man starts playing the guitar: a steady low beat, an unassuming arpeggio, followed by jarring high notes and syncopated accents. The two rhythms are looped together in an unsettling contrast to what could be described as tranquillity. The tracking motion continues, the cold greyness of the mansion now receding into the distance, while another green shrub enters the frame, above the barren soil that is gradually uncovered from the bottom. The man moves to the opposite side of the room, picks up another guitar, adds feedback noise and sustained chords to the loop. He turns up the volume: the warped distortions become more prominent, but there is still harmony in this intricate cacophony of musical chaos.

Moving to the middle, the man screams into a microphone, his voice added to the loop in a descending pitch, before taking a seat at the drums. The camera is now far behind its starting position and keeps moving in the same direction, eventually scaling down the building in an extreme long shot, its edge visible on the right. There is a wooden door to the left and more windows upstairs. We can see the branches of the tree, forking upwards. The man continues the solo jamming session by hitting cymbals, then drumming frenetically. He slows down the rhythm: a few more drum

fills, splashes on the cymbals, and he scratches the strings of his guitar, emanating a harsh, dissonant tone. A couple more screams into the microphone. The camera stops. And in a matter of seconds, he switches off the loops, one by one.

When I first watched this scene, which occurs halfway into Gus van Sant's *Last Days* (2005), I knew it would make a good opening for a book. Few films succeed in depicting the enigma of artistic creativity from such a distance and yet retain an aura of mystery. The camera's slow retreat seemingly trivializes musical ingenuity, as if it were just another prosaic routine for passing the time, but in fact its placid manoeuvre has a fascinating life of its own: it invites a glimpse through the window and then withdraws backwards, encouraging a more attentive concentration on the music, which, as emotional as this may sound, undoubtedly expresses pain, and at the same time, the steady tracking movement conveys an apprehension of how this music—this pain—relates to the distinctive environment that is, little by little, unveiled before our eyes. To top it off, the unbroken, uninterrupted long take, clocking in at just over four minutes, directs the spotlight onto the spontaneous nature of the musical improvisation, which is performed in real time and with genuine talent by the actor who is present, alone, in the scene. Though it was released in 2005, it must have been 2007 when I watched *Last Days* at the İstanbul Film Festival, resisting the circulation of pirated copies just to experience it in the cinema—riveted to my seat, my mouth agape in wonder, and my mind enthralled by this particular scene's discordant mix of harsh sounds and serene camerawork. There is a method to madness, after all. The film is loosely inspired by the last days of Kurt Cobain, the front man of the famed Seattle grunge band Nirvana, before he tragically committed suicide at the age of 27. But this is no ordinary biopic: far from it. As the closing credits explicitly state, it is an entirely fictional imagination of a musician slowly succumbing to his own demise, through a mystifying series of situations as opposed to a conventional dramatic arc. Exhausted by the media attention, Blake (Michael Pitt) tries to escape the pressures of being famous by playing hide and seek from his fellow band members, record producers, publicity agents and even a detective in an isolated mansion. At times we see him wandering through a nearby forest, mumbling to himself, drenched in mud. At others, he prepares a quiet breakfast, leaving the milk out on the kitchen slab while tossing the cereal box into the fridge. He is a heroin addict, remember, and fresh out of rehab.

I was in graduate school studying film when *Last Days* came out and there were several discussions about it during our seminars. "What's with the rustling leaves," asked one fellow student, "what was *that* supposed to mean?" This was a reference to a recurring scene in which we see Blake running away from visitors. Outside the mansion, he descends a short flight of concrete stairs, runs across a stretch of grass towards the camera and jumps left off-screen. The camera follows suit by panning about 30 degrees left, stopping short at the background as soon as Blake is out of sight—at an ordinary patch of ground with green vegetation, and the wind blowing through it. In fact we see this scene twice, though it is not the only scene that is repeated across the film's elliptic narrative structure. In the first instance, the film cuts to Blake walking alongside the shore of a lake, but in the second, the camera dwells on this background for a little longer than 30 seconds. I cannot recall whether anyone provided an adequate answer to the question as I did not venture into that discussion; my main concern was not with what this seemingly banal moment meant, but rather with the unassailable impulse to ascribe a specific meaning to it: a narrative function, so to speak. Why does anything need to mean something? Can it not just be what it is? Why are we still troubled by images that do not clearly denote an aspect of a film's story? Could it possibly be an image about itself or about the conditions of viewing it? Perhaps that was the whole point of this aesthetic exercise: to make us think about what it means to look upon rustling leaves for longer than 30 seconds, or more precisely, what it means to look at its audiovisual mediation at a time when we are already bombarded with, overwhelmed by, and perhaps even fed up with images that are saturated with details, texts, meanings, messages.

The moments I describe above are emblematic of what later came to be known as slow cinema, perhaps today's most prominent production trend on the international film festival circuit and a filmmaking practice that is increasingly affording attention by studies in film theory, history and criticism. As a discrete strand of contemporary art cinema, slow cinema's distinguishing characteristics pertain ultimately to its aesthetic design, which comprises techniques associated with cinematic minimalism and realism. These films retard narrative pace and elide causality, displacing conventional storytelling devices for the benefit of establishing and sustaining a mood and atmosphere, which are often stretched to their extreme in order to impel the viewers to confront cinematic temporality in all its undivided glory. Though this style can best be described as oblique or reticent, it continues to attract, challenge and provoke audiences. The films' aesthetic

trademarks include a mannered use of the long take and a resolute empha-
sis on dead time: devices that foster a mode of narration that initially
appears baffling, cryptic and incomprehensible, but offers, above all, an
extended experience of duration on screen. As a distinctively global phe-
nomenon, slow cinema springs from myriad national and regional tradi-
tions, waves, movements and schools, with a long list of proponents
including, though not limited to, Béla Tarr (Hungary), Tsai Ming-liang
(Taiwan), Nuri Bilge Ceylan (Turkey), Carlos Reygadas (Mexico), Kelly
Reichardt (USA), Abbas Kiarostami (Iran), Bruno Dumont (France), Lav
Diaz (Philippines), Lisandro Alonso (Argentina), Šarūnas Bartas
(Lithuania), Albert Serra (Spain), Jia Zhangke (China), Pedro Costa
(Portugal), Ben Rivers (UK), Roy Andersson (Sweden), Theo
Angelopoulos (Greece), Cristi Puiu (Romania) and Sergei Loznitsa
(Ukraine).

This contemporary current emerges from a historical genealogy of real-
ist and modernist art films that for decades distended cinematic temporal-
ity, which were supported, critiqued and shaped by a host of discursive
practices. This book investigates slow cinema in its two salient aspects:
first, in terms of its aesthetic materiality, namely the formal attributes of
the films, their effects on constructing a contemplative and ruminative
mode of spectatorship, and the ways in which this particular film style can
be situated within prevailing conceptual paradigms and how it has evolved
in parallel with national and international idiosyncrasies; and secondly, as
a set of institutional and critical conditions, with historical roots and a
Janus-faced disposition in the age of digital technologies, which influ-
enced the concomitant historical context of the films' mode of produc-
tion, exhibition and reception. In other words, inasmuch as the films are
definitively identified by their aesthetic properties, the institutional and
industrial background from which they arise demands unequivocal atten-
tion in order to fully understand the phenomenon as an integral canon of
global film culture.

These critical methods will be configured across three key case studies,
which, dedicated to exploring the films of Béla Tarr, Tsai Ming-liang and
Nuri Bilge Ceylan, have been consciously selected to demonstrate both
the global spread of this type of film practice and its interconnection to
national waves—in my examples, Taiwan New Cinema, New Turkish
Cinema, and Tarr's unique work as a distinctive residue of European mod-
ernist film. Each of these close readings has generated concepts that, to
various degrees, illuminate what I think are intrinsic dimensions of slow

cinema. Indeed, through my analysis, I propose to conceptualize the slow cinema tradition as both an aesthetic experience and an institutional discourse rooted in nostalgia, absurdism and boredom, which I investigate in detail in parallel with the aforementioned filmmakers. My aim in the rest of the book is to demonstrate that nostalgia, absurdism and boredom are not only useful concepts that explain the material effects of the films' aesthetic features but more importantly, that they can function as film-theoretical tools for illuminating an uncharted history of aesthetically unique films whose modes of production, distribution and reception were inextricably shaped by institutional forces.

Why does any of this matter? For one thing, films are not produced in a vacuum. Examining the significant roles played by institutions gives us important insights into how, for example, film festivals fund, exhibit and distribute these films, and how these films, sometimes deliberately packaged, sometimes purely original, speak to a global niche, notwithstanding their articulation of local cultures. Moreover, slow cinema comprises aesthetically peculiar films that can make us think and feel differently and have the potential to shape our way of looking at the world. To be sure, cinema is singular in its capacity to show us the world in a different fashion and to offer glimpses of reality that we would ordinarily miss in our day-to-day experience. But slow cinema goes a step further: because the films expand duration, they encourage audiences to rethink and repurpose temporality and its value at a time when the world seems to revolve at an ever-quicker speed. In other words, the extended experience of duration enables the absorption of a mediated reality with a luxury that we no longer possess in our daily lives, and the films are in many ways *making* us look and listen—and the longer we do, the more differently we can see and hear. Finally, slow cinema occupies a special position within film criticism, because as a canon it demonstrates the convergence of realist and modernist traditions in film aesthetics, which were previously conceived as conflicting paradigms. Despite slow cinema's frequently referenced technical association with a realist genre of film practice (the use and overuse of long takes, depth of field, on-location shooting, non-professional actors and so on), I will argue that its provocative protraction of cinematic temporality and its mystifying opaqueness of narrative motivation can equally relate to a modernist impulse.

This book aims to present a comprehensive account of a global current of cultural practice that offers a radical, and at times paradoxical, reconsideration of our emotional attachment to and intellectual engagement with

moving images and sounds. It envisions slow cinema not as a self-conscious, complacent cinema devoid of meaning or impossible to interpret but as a dynamic relationship between the specificities of national film cultures and an international, cinephile sensibility around what cinema ought to be. Indeed, *Poetics of Slow Cinema* asks some of the most pressing and vital questions concerning the role of cinema today: how do these films that are produced under very localized conditions, travel halfway across the globe, transcend national and cultural boundaries, and manage to speak to different groups of people that share similar sensibilities concerning cinema and its aesthetic, cultural and political functions? In the wake of mainstream blockbuster dominance, what does it mean to be engrossed in watching calculated slow films and to take refuge in boredom? What are the historical conditions, influences and trends that inform the development of slow cinema, and how can we make sense of these films that are deliberately reticent and actively suppress narrative progression?

In the remaining pages, I will seek answers to these questions both by tracing the historical precedents of slow cinema and through close readings of contemporary films and their contexts of production. Current thinking and writing on slow cinema places too much emphasis on the shared political vigour of the tradition, as if the films emerged simultaneously from remote corners of the world in response to the accelerating and homogenizing effects of global capitalism. While this may be true in a number of cases, the real picture is far more complex, with filmmakers reacting to and being influenced by localized film industries, and working in tandem with a global circulation of aesthetic debates, critical concepts and through institutional conditions. With that perspective in mind, this book will pick out nostalgia, absurdism and boredom as conceptual themes that, when combined, are a meaningful way to account for slow cinema's distinctive allure and historical genealogy. The films I will examine are nostalgic, because they aesthetically and sentimentally resemble a type of cinema long thought to have vanished from our screens. They explicitly lament the eclipse of the difficult, ambiguous modernist film, while capitalizing on the nostalgia for its absence. They are often viewed as films that belong to a different era of film history, regarded with a sense of anachronism coupled with a stylistic indeterminacy that defies rational explanation, verging on the absurd. Indeed, the perceived seriousness of the films is often undercut by an absurdist sense of humour, an underexplored spectatorial position and a form of comedy that recalls the Theatre of the Absurd, a key influence in which laughter is out of synch, out of place and

out of time. Boredom is perhaps just another response to the films' arcane intertextual references and their cryptic sensibility in restraining the flow of narrative momentum, but as a mode of experience it deserves more critical attention than merely the accusation denoting evaluative exasperation. In contrast to boredom's conventional handling as a negative emotion, slow cinema uses it as a formal strategy: these films demand patience, attention and imagination, and are designed to transform idleness and monotony into a productive and aesthetically rewarding experience. Nostalgia, absurdism and boredom have all received varying, albeit on the whole a meagre level of critical treatment in film historiography, and they will be reformulated as conceptual tools in the following chapters, with the intention of opening up a discursive space that will help us better understand and appraise the complexities of the slow cinema tradition.

Chapter 1 begins this exploration by contextualizing the slow cinema phenomenon and functioning as a broad introduction to the subfield. I start by outlining the critical terms of the Slow Cinema Debate, which evolved from a journalistic polemic into a succession of academic treatises that seemingly raced to fill what appeared to be a lacuna in film studies scholarship. Following a critical evaluation of the slow cinema discourse, I move on to situate its relationship to global art cinema, another subfield that concomitantly received rigorous scholarly attention. Following an extensive definition of slow cinema, I conclude the chapter by summarizing the critical methodologies employed throughout the book.

In the subsequent chapters I examine slow cinema through three case studies, devoted to the works of Béla Tarr, Tsai Ming-liang and Nuri Bilge Ceylan respectively. These directors emerge from distinct historical and industrial backgrounds, which are contextualized at the beginning of each chapter and are then followed by an analysis of key films in light of nostalgia, absurdism and boredom as conceptual paradigms. The case studies have been chosen on the basis that they are of well-known figures in slow cinema and demonstrate slow cinema's diverse stylistic features as well as its geographical spread across the globe. One drawback of this selection is the lack of a filmmaker representing the Americas, North or South. Perhaps, however, readers will identify the greater concern as being that of the absence of a female director as an in-depth case study. This, admittedly, is true—just as in the rest of the film industry, there are more male directors working in slow cinema than there are female directors. Women filmmakers such as Kelly Reichardt, Lucrecia Martel, Sharon Lockhart, Liu Jiayin, Tacita Dean, Naomi Kawase and Angela Shanelec have all

contributed to slow cinema in different ways, and there is absolutely an urgent scholarly need to link discussions of their work to the existing literature on slow cinema.

Chapter 2 considers the work of the Hungarian director Béla Tarr, perhaps one of the most frequently cited exemplars of contemporary slow cinema. I begin by outlining the function and evolution of the long take and its centrality to Bazinian realism with specific examples from Tarr's films. Dead time as a dedramatization technique also receives lengthy treatment in this chapter, first, through a brief examination of Gilles Deleuze's time-image and secondly via Gerard Genette's descriptive pause. Tarr's combination of the long take and dead time leads to a unique mode of address that simulates the activity of looking, and I use the *flâneur* figure as a metaphor to describe Tarr's contemplative aesthetic, in which both characters and the camera stroll with an observational purpose. In addition to camera and figure movements, I focus on Tarr's framing strategies, which are stylistically reminiscent of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's claustrophobic mises-en-scène. This aesthetic lineage motivates my discussion of nostalgia and of the ways in which slow filmmakers referenced modernist art cinema through cinematographic means, developing what I call a retro-art-cinema style that appears both out of date and *à la mode*. However, I argue that Tarr's films are nostalgic but not in a regressive sense, and then move on to examine the functions of black-and-white photography, another distinguishing element of the dark, macabre tone so often associated with Tarr's works. The chapter concludes by situating Tarr's aesthetic in the regional and geopolitical context of Central-Eastern European art cinema.

Chapter 3 explores the work of the Malaysian-born Taiwanese director Tsai Ming-liang, and I begin my discussion by outlining his relationship to the Taiwan New Cinema movement. Following this institutional background, I investigate Tsai's filmography through the films' minimalist form and camp sensibility. I argue that from a narrational point of view Tsai's main strategy is composed of a structural delay, which preserves the rudimentary causal links between story actions, though with a glacial pacing in progression. By using dead time, stillness and ambiguity, Tsai delays conventional narrative comprehension, which results in a type of humour associated with the Theatre of the Absurd. I explore this art-historical genealogy through theories of humour, Tsai's use of sound and Jacques Tati with an emphasis on incongruity as the defining element of absurdism. A large part of my analysis concentrates on Tsai's *Goodbye, Dragon*

Inn (2003), a film that takes cinema-going as its subject matter, and I conclude the chapter by discussing the nostalgic overtones of cinephilic practice and the ways in which these debates find their critical voices in the realm of slow cinema.

The work of Nuri Bilge Ceylan is the focus of Chapter 4, which starts off with an exploration of the institutional history and contextual dynamics of filmmaking in Turkey. Just as with the previous artists under discussion, Ceylan is an art cinema director working on two fronts, with films that straddle a largely uninterested crowd of domestic film-goers and an eager mass of international cinephiles. But Ceylan is unique in terms of the ambivalent relationship between his film practice and the production conventions of the Turkish film industry. After detailing the production methods Ceylan borrows from the traditional industry, the chapter moves to investigate boredom as the underpinning aesthetic strategy that is responsible for the filmmaker's departure from those very customs. With Ceylan's *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* (2011) as a specific example, I argue that slow cinema has the potential to transform boredom into an aesthetically engrossing and politically liberating experience.

Chapter 5 concludes the book by examining slow cinema in a broader conceptual framework. I begin by addressing whether slow cinema is an official, structured or consistent artistic movement and examine it through the prism of *optique*, which refers to the function of aesthetic devices in a given historical period and enables a rigorous investigation of the relationship between film style and its target audiences, and of the ways in which spectators ascribe meanings to particular cinematic techniques. After re-emphasizing the complex global circulation of slow films over the past four decades and offering some insights into slow cinema's immediate future, I conclude by summarizing the case studies.

Canterbury, UK
July 2018

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Just as in the writing of any other book, this one also has a story. It is indeed a narrative comprising what I suspect could be the platitudes of academic research: a loose idea, extended periods of self-doubt, sleepless nights over originality, hopeless anxieties on sentences or paragraphs that never hanged together, and an eventual maturity in moving forward. Where this story might depart from an incessant roll of clichés is perhaps my realization of an illusion—an illusion of one's own constructed distance to the subject matter, of being detached far enough to be able to retain a form of critical objectivity. But the origin of the ideas presented in the following pages has little to do with an idealized pursuit of knowledge or making an intervention into a scholarly field. I simply wanted to engage with cinema in a way that transcended my already existing passion, which was driven by an ambition to explore how films affected our inner lives and shaped our way of looking at our outer world, and in doing so, to tell a story of how films came to be. In other words, what inspired this book is really the experience of watching the films that I wanted to write about in the first place. It is for this reason that I must start by thanking those who were involved in the films' production and distribution—not just the filmmakers, but everyone.

The more traditional version of this book's story begins at the University of Kent, Canterbury, where I was fortunate enough to be surrounded by supportive colleagues. I am sincerely indebted to Mattias Frey, whose intellectual guidance, expertise and inspiration was decisively influential. Murray Smith, Peter Stanfield and Cecilia Sayad provided valuable feedback in different stages of the project and I thank them again for their

CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES