“Wait For It”: On the Aesthetics and Ethics of Slow Spectatorship

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1. Introduction: On Slowness

Amongst the most pressing and widely shared concerns about the quality of life in our contemporary, Western society (in both popular imagination and critical theory), we can prominently count the problematics of an experienced increase in the pace of life, a felt shortage of time, and a sensed diminishing of available attention. Indicators of what we could call, even more emphatically, a cultural anxiety or obsession with these global, modern-day social phenomena are the counter-tendencies they have provoked. For instance, think of the steady growth of a global slow movement which encompasses such widely varying practices as slow food, the slow city and interestingly also slow scholarship. All of them are bound by a broader slow philosophy or slow theory (see Carl Honoré’s book In Praise of Slow, for an introduction); they’re bound by a common concern over and a shared discontent with the catastrophic consequences of what Hartman and Darab in their ‘Call for Slow Scholarship’ characterize as the ‘political rationality of neoliberalism’ that pervades more and more areas of our lives.

In this paper, I suggest a new type of slow intervention, namely the employment of a particular media practice - watching slow cinema, I’ll get to it in a minute - as a peculiar temporal agentic strategy to slow and take time matters in one’s own hands again. The appeal of such a slow spectatorship for me lies not merely in its aesthetic possibilities (it’s not a hedonic, or worse yet solipsistic explanation), but also, and for this paper more importantly, in its ethical potential. In a nutshell, my argument will be that slow spectatorship entails a form of waiting, a retreat into the self-chosen silence and solitude of the cinematic event that affords the viewer a sufficient distance from everyday life and plenty of time, unburdened of utilitarian demands, to reflect on and reshape his relations with the world.

2. Slow Cinema: A Definition

But first, what is slow cinema? Slow cinema has been defined by Matthew Flanagan in his dissertation as ‘a field of cinema that shares common traits and aesthetics: an emphasis on the passage of time in the shot, an undramatic narrative or non-narrative mode, and a rigorous compositional form that is designed for contemplative spectatorial practice’ (2012:5). Professor Ira Jaffe concisely notes that in slow cinema, ‘emotion as well as motion is curtailed’ (2015: np). So, slow cinema comprises a group of minimalist art house films that in both their depicted stories, events and characters as well as their stylistic and formal features are austere and restrained, all which have given them their alleged slow and boring traits. To drop some names, a hall of fame of contemporary
slow cinema directors could list acclaimed auteurs such as Tsai Ming-Liang, Abbas Kiarostami, Carlos Reygadas, and Aleksandr Sokurov.

In the rest of this paper, I turn attention away from slow cinema’s *formal features*, and instead propose to employ the metaphor of *waiting* to describe the *experience* of watching slow cinema – so the ‘how’ instead of the ‘what’, or the effects rather than the construction of film. Moreover, I argue that this experience can be considered to have a certain *value or function* for spectators – so the ‘why’. Of course, I hear you object that waiting is a potentially problematic term, because it is not exactly positively evaluated by most people. However, I have a particular understanding of waiting in mind that differs drastically from our everyday use of the word. To understand this, I’m taking you on an excursion into Christian mysticism.

3. Waiting: An Interval

For French philosopher and mystical thinker Simone Weil, waiting is best understood as an *interval*, or an in-between state. One could suspect divine intervention here, but as it happens this holy matter is best understood as a *triad*, so in this interval, 1) a distinct time experience takes hold of the subject, 2) a certain self-relation arises, and 3) a form of attentiveness emerges. From this interval, creativity and – yes – “love” spring forth, giving this experience its ethical potential. But more on that later.

3.1 Eternity

Firstly, pertaining to the *temporality* of this interval, I note that unlike our everyday understanding of waiting, this consciousness is not anticipatory; it is not directed at any particular future state or event. The temporal vector of the inner-time experience of waiting does not point clearly and strongly forwards into the future, so to say. It is rather an interval in the sense of a distinct quality of lived time, a time experience that stands out from everyday life. The difference is that it is a time that is *not* anticipatory or functional. This interval is thus a state of *emptiness* or perhaps better: *not-yet being*. As Weil writes, this interval means

> To *stop time at the present instant*. This is also the acceptance of death. [...] The past and future hinder the wholesome effect of affliction by providing an unlimited field for imaginary elevation. That is why the renunciation of past and future is the first of all renunciations. [...] [We] reach the point of causing a *sense of perpetuity* to be born in the soul, through contemplating this perpetuity with acceptance and love, we are snatched away into eternity’ (2002: 12, 19-20, italics added).

This eternity, in the case of watching slow cinema, is thus the fullness of the lived-present; a time-image of pure duration; the present instant of boring affliction stripped bare of any expectation of *future reward* in the form of plot closure or character development, and without possible alleviation...
from our present deprivation of any form of preconceived meaning through memory recollection in the form of past salient story elements or more tacit generic knowledge.

3.2 Impersonal self

Furthermore, with regards to the self-relation that characterizes the interval of waiting, Weil writes we need ‘to detach our desire from all good things and to wait. Experience proves that this waiting is satisfied. It is then we touch the absolute good’ (2002: 13, italics added). In classical conceptions of the mystical, enlightening religious experience, one enters a state of being from which concept and language disappear, an altered consciousness drained from all form of intention, a ‘destruction of the ‘I’ from the inside’, as Weil also phrases it elsewhere (2002: 26). Waiting thus comprises an emptying of the self; one becomes an impersonal self, so to say.

Watching slow cinema bears the characteristics of this detachment, which is not absolute, in two important ways. Firstly, there is something interestingly empty or detached about slow cinema itself. And secondly, the film’s formal features encourage the viewer to adopt the appropriate viewing mode of waiting, to adopts a mental frame of disinterestedness or non-functionality. Hence, we might conceive of a remarkable mirroring of the subjectivities of film and viewer – a ‘reversibility’, as Vivian Sobchack would have it (1992). The viewing experience necessarily exists in a dynamic film and viewer relation, a relation that is more like a feedback loop than a causal connection.

So firstly, with reference to Daniel Frampton we might say the slow film has particular detached ‘filmind’ similar to but distinct from the viewer; the slow film too does a particular kind of impersonal, non-functional ‘film-thinking’ (2006). We could label slow cinema’s formal structuring as non-functional, or in Deleuzian terms a ‘time-image’ of pure duration (2005). I refer here to the ‘undramatic narrative mode’ Flanagan describes slow cinema with: an episodic, non-teleological narrative form. Instead of unrolling a dramatic story that propels the viewer into the future in anticipation, suspense, or dread, the film situates the viewer in a flow of pure duration in which he stands in a detached, non-functional relation to time and his viewing self. The film thus challenges the viewer to imaginatively engage with his own boredom, as it refuses to provide any definitive meaning for the spectator - or even making the promise of such a possibility at all.

And then secondly, the viewer lacks a sense of self in the meaning of an intentional or functionally-oriented relation between the self and the world (both filmic and actual), i.e. he lacks a meaningful interpretation of the filmic and cinematic event he partakes in. Put differently, consciousness is not governed by a functional cognitive and emotional demand to react (not by the world from the outside), but is instead focused on the here-and-now (on the world on the inside).
3.3 Look of Love

And finally, following the temporality of the interval (eternity) and the impersonality of the self (non-functionality), another important aspect of waiting is that it generates a particular form of attention. In this waiting, the viewer becomes attentively aware of both himself and the film. He becomes more receptive and alert to the world – of both film and reality. I tend to think of this renewed relation to the world as a sensitivity to Otherness or alterity, as a look of love, a notion I take from Kelly Oliver’s article of the same name. She writes that

recognition is a form of love that requires witnessing to that which is beyond recognition, witnessing to what cannot be seen. [...] Love is witnessing to that which is between us. [...] It is precisely what we do not see that attracts us to each other (Oliver 2001: 64-65).

So for Oliver, love exists only in this not-knowing, in ‘difference, [...]recognized as irreducible, [...] recognized beyond recognition’ (Ibid.: 64). In other words, love exists only in waiting, in this space in-between, in the interval of not-yet. If it were not for this state of recognition of the irreducible difference between “I” and “You,” love could not exist: ‘When I think that I know you, our relationship is over’, Oliver writes (Ibid.).

Now, I take this look of love to be an interesting metaphor to enhance our understanding of slow cinema spectatorship. Moreover, it finally brings us to the aspect of ethics, of the function of slow spectatorship, as it provides insight into relation of the particular (individual) to the general (social) - it links aesthetics with ethics.

In the first place, it elucidates the particular, the mode of attention of watching slow cinema; a patiently loving gaze with which the viewer regards and values the film - like lovers tenderly behold each other and acknowledge their difference. Weil muses that ‘We must not want to find: as in the case of an excessive devotion, we become dependent on the object of our efforts [...]. It is only effort without desire (not attached to an object) which infallibly contains a reward’ (Weil 2002: 117, italics added).

Similarly, watching slow cinema we let go of expectation of a linear plot by devoting ‘absolute unmixed attention’ to the film (Ibid.). We must not want to find out ´whodunit´ or what’s next. Rather, we suspend our own will and make an ‘effort without desire’. Slow cinema invites the viewer to adopt a look of love: its durational aesthetics (its stylistic minimalism and de-dramatized narrative) makes one fall madly in love with the film’s sound-image all over again; to attend to its every little graceful sensory detail; to regain the fascination of early cinema spectators who were, in the words of Lesley Stern, ‘fascinated by incidental details such as the foliage blowing in the wind behind the Lumières feeding their baby’ (2001: 338).
Moreover, the look of love indeed also points us to the *general*: *a renewed attention to the world*, a look of a viewer who is *in-love*. Like the experience of falling in love, it means that a person perceives and experiences not just the beloved and desired other in particular, but the whole world in general through this ecstatic and exalted outlook. Love works as a relation of the particular (it is *that* person whom *I* love) with the general (*I’m* completely *in love*, *I’m* feeling like a different person).

Likewise, film can function as a particularity (a medium, a formal system) that alters one’s whole being-in-the-world; it engenders a renewed perceptual relationship of the viewer with the world, a ‘mutation within the relations of man and Being’, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty put it (2004: 310). Waiting, or loving slow cinema is thus a form of attentive engagement with the temporality of the other and the divine eternal Otherness of God, with one’s own finitude ultimately.

### 4. Conclusion: Film and Ethics

Hence, I see an *ethical potential* of slow spectatorship imagined as a look of love. Slow cinema poses itself as an untimely filmic Other, as an irreducible temporal difference that opens up for the viewer a mental space of reflection. The viewing experience allows for this reflective attitude because it is non-functional: it is a lived eternity in the present, an interval of time unburdened from both external (wordly) future and past pressure as well as internal (filmic) temporal anticipation and recollection. Slow cinema is philosophical: not by dint of its content, but through its formal bracketing that enables the viewer to suspend his natural, Husserlian attitude of judgement. Through the film, the viewer starts to see the (filmic and actual) world anew in a mode of loving attention. Art’s aesthetic remove from the world doesn’t necessarily mean that it has lost contact with reality, that it is not engaged, or that it is self-obsessed. Rather, it’s autonomy is what makes it so valuable, it is exactly through the disinterested reflection it affords us – as viewers and citizens alike – that we can even begin to think with engagement and to act ethically.
References


