Closed Faces, Open Spaces

Towards a Poetics of Slowness in the Films of Sharunas Bartas

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Abstract

This thesis discusses the supposed and highly debated slowness of slow cinema, a contemporary film trend that can formally be characterized by its minimalist narrative and its austere stylistics. The thesis tries to get a grasp of what constitutes the experience of slowness and why it evokes diametrically opposing forms of strong appreciation and depreciation. It does so by a close analysis of the so far understudied oeuvre of Lithuanian filmmaker Sharunas Bartas. The thesis takes interest in this specific director’s oeuvre as it distinctly uses slowness as a poetic strategy to reflect on the human existence. It will ask which poetic strategies of stillness Sharunas Bartas applies in his works and what their possible functions and effects are.

Previous work on the topic of slow cinema has failed to adequately address the issue of slowness, because it has generally misplaced slowness as a property of the film itself, rather than as a subject-object relation of viewer and film. This thesis adds to the debate by providing an account of slowness from the methodological angle of a poetics of cinema, thus enabling the author to combine formal analysis of films with phenomenological description of the viewing experience. It argues that the stylistics features of slow cinema function as a set of affordance that are conducive to the experience of slowness, which is conceptualized as a heterogeneous temporal experience, in other words a heightened awareness or a foregrounding of empty protracted time.

It proceeds by, first, outlining the characteristic formal and stylistic features of slow cinema and, following, it advances to describe the experience by taking implications from the philosophy of time, notably Edmund Husserl, Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze, as well as synthesizing these accounts with more contemporary film phenomenology, as theorized by Vivian Sobchack, Laura Marks and Julian Hanich. The thesis proposes to understand the temporal experience of film to exist on a continuum with at its ends, on the one side, the pole of stillness and, on the other side, that of restlessness. Slow cinema as a Deleuzian time-image can thus be situated at the stillness end of the continuum, as it characteristically features a stillness-in-the-image (eventful uneventfulness) represented through stillness-of-the-image (extended duration) in the form of a stillness-between-the-images (serialized narrative). It thus affords an experience of slowness, or a contingent consciousness of time.
and self. This can rightly be described as a pensive or contemplative mode of viewing that is to be distinguished from related but different affects such as boredom.

This paper thus provides a better, more fine-grained understanding of the spectatorial experience of time in film by taking a closer look at the experience of slowness. The research findings function imply a complication of the easy dichotomy of fast versus slow that is ubiquitous in the discourse on the temporal experience of contemporary life that took hold in the debate on modernity. Moreover, in our time of the proliferation of viewing habits, this thesis, by focussing on the cinematic experience, can have relevant implications for the study of the varying temporal experiences in different screening contexts than the cinema, such as the mobile screen or the moving image installation in the museum.

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