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Attention, Distraction and the Distribution of the Senses: ‘Slow’, ‘Reflexive’ and ‘Contemplative’ between Cinema and the Museum

“Slow”

In recent years the term “slow” has acquired a certain reputation among the cinephile community, connoting a range of positive cinematic qualities that brings (mainly non-Hollywood) filmmaking into proximity with “slow food”: locally sourced, traditionally prepared and part of a sustainable eco-system. In a discussion of the difference between *still* images and *stilled* images, I once described slow cinema as an “act of organized resistance” to the relentless acceleration of contemporary life in all its aspects (Elsaesser, 2011, 117). It has also been defined as “a genre of art cinema film-making that emphasizes long takes, and is often minimalist, observational, and with little or no narrative,”¹ in which case, it can also stand for an act of organized resistance to the kind of “intensified continuity” discussed by David Bordwell, Steven Shaviro and others². There is remarkable unanimity about

¹ “Slow Cinema”, Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slow_cinema (accessed 8 June 2019).

² See D. Bordwell, “Intensified Continuity Visual Style in Contemporary American Film”, *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 55 No. 3 (Spring 2002), 16-28, and Steven Shaviro, “Post-continuity: An Introduction”, in Shane Denson and Julia Leyda (eds), *Post-Cinema* (Falmer: Reframe Books, 2016), a. o. <http://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/post-cinema/1-2-shaviro/> (accessed 8 June 2019)

which directors qualify for the honorific “contemporary contemplative cinema”³: Chantal Akermann, Alexander Sokurov, Lav Diaz, Apichatpong Weerasethkhul, Abbas Kiarostami, Carlos Reygadas and Nuri Bilge Ceylan are most often mentioned, to which are sometimes added, retroactively: Robert Bresson, Michelangelo Antonioni, and Andrei Tarkovsky, who wrote: “what a person normally goes to the cinema for is time”⁴. If this is an impressive pedigree for slow cinema, let me not conceal the fact that not everyone is equally convinced: there is also a body of opinion that calls “slow cinema” the “precious and pretentious name for films that are likely to be impenetrable to even the most well-informed audiences”⁵.

Leaning more towards the former than the latter, I can name two directors whose work typifies for me some of the aesthetic virtues, but also some of the ethical and physiological demands that typify such slow cinema: Bela Tarr’s *The Turin Horse* (2011) which runs to 2 hours 35 minutes, and Pedro Costa’s *In Vanda’s Room* (2000) which runs to 2 hours 51 minutes. They epitomize much of what the positive evaluations have in mind: their uncompromising reduction of narrative and spectacle, their focused concentration on the sacred moments of the ordinary, their close attention to the everyday, their steadfast gaze on the characters who want neither sympathy nor open themselves to empathy, since we are told very little about them. Among the qualities that keep one riveted are the films’ attention to the materiality of objects and the figures’ rapport with the spaces they inhabit, physically specific yet universal in their minimalism; and finally it is the characters’ refusal to be treated as either victims or case studies, however peculiar their way of life and however dire or abject their socio-economic condition: all this designates them as protagonists of a special kind of cinema⁶.

Rather than analysing them in the context of “slow cinema”, I want to discuss – and this may be stretching the idea of cinema altogether – these qualities of attention and focused concentration in the contexts of a different kind of post-

³ The writer who blogs under the name Harry Tuttle at *Unspokencinema* gives a number of contexts and definitions for what he calls “contemplative contemporary cinema”. Here he gives a timeline: <http://unspokencinema.blogspot.com/2009/06/ccc-timeline-2008.html> and here he defines ‘ccc’ as “not to tell us a story but to paint a state of mind” <http://unspokencinema.blogspot.com/2007/01/minimum-profile.html> (accessed 9 June 2019).

⁴ This is quoted as the opening statement of Sukhdev Sandhu’s “‘Slow cinema’ fights back against Bourne’s supremacy.” *The Guardian*, 9 March 2012 <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2012/mar/09/slow-cinema-fights-bournes-supremacy>

⁵ For an excellent recapitulation and reflection on the debate (“spat”), see Dan Fox, “Slow, Fast and Inbetween”, *Frieze* 24 May 2010, who also lists an additional number of films and installation works. <https://frieze.com/article/slow-fast-and-inbetween> (accessed 8 June 2019)

⁶ I have discussed these directors’ style also in Thomas Elsaesser, *European Cinema and Continental Philosophy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 131-132.

cinema, namely “cinema after museum”, or “cinema of attention in the midst of distraction”. Two detours will be necessary, before I can illustrate what seems to me to be at stake, with examples from pioneering filmmakers such as Chantal Akerman, video installation artists Dan Graham and Sharon Lockhart, as well as the sound installation artist Anri Sala.

Cinema and Museum – The Benefits of Being in Crisis

The first detour concerns the relation between “cinema” and “museum”, and why I think together they have both a historical and a theoretical contribution to make to the topic of slow or contemplative cinema, in that it mitigates the notion that slow cinema is only reactive, but also nuances the notion that it is somehow a return to a more ‘natural’ cinema. While the marriage between “cinema” and the “museum” has been one of the most remarkable success stories of the arts in the 21st century, this does not diminish the degree to which these are fundamentally antagonistic dispositifs, both historically and experientially. For the first 100 years of the history of cinema, there was little contact between filmmakers and the art world and museum practice, with the possible exception of the brief period of surrealist films (Salvador Dalí, Luis Bunuel, Man Ray). This is not the same as the efforts or aspirations to declare cinema an art form – the 7th art! – quite the contrary: the attempt to validate cinema as art must be seen as part and parcel of an often outright hostility towards museums, regarded by filmmakers (as indeed by much of the avant-garde) in the 1910s and 1920s as antiquated, outmoded and reactionary institutions. On the side of the museum, there was not only the seemingly unbridgeable gulf between high culture and popular culture, but equally problematic was the different aesthetics of stasis and movement: the canons of classical art such as they manifest themselves in painting and sculpture *suggest, intimate and represent* movement (and sound) through stasis and silence, whereas cinema *presents, enacts, embodies and performs* movement (and sound). One only needs to recall Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, fervent advocate of speed and movement, demanding that museums be either burnt down or turned into factories to get a whiff of the outright hostility.

Less radically and less categorically, one can perhaps draw up a map of pertinent parameters, around which the inherent antagonisms can be positioned as differences of degree, or as points on a continuous spectrum: for instance, when it comes to motion and atmospherics, moving images are viewed by a fixed spectator, while the museum houses fixed images with a peripatetic spectator. The museum’s ambiance is – wherever possible – created by natural light, whereas the cinema shuns natural light, and thrives on artificial light as well as artificial

darkness. Hence we have become used to the somewhat simplifying juxtaposition of black box (cinema) and white cube (museum)⁷.

The question, then, becomes: why – despite these differences – have moving image and museum nonetheless found each other since the 1990s, to such a degree that they are now almost indispensable to each other? One obvious answer is that both cinema and museums – considered as comparable institutions besides being ontologically distinct dispositifs – are in crisis: with the rapid conversion of cinema to digital, in all aspects of (post-)production, distribution/delivery and reception, yet another ‘death of cinema’ was announced and dissected⁸, before settling for the idea of a ‘migration’ or ‘re-location’ (Casetti, 2012) of cinema as the more appropriate description of the transformations cinema has undergone in what has also become known as the ‘post-cinema’ or ‘post-film’ era (see Stewart, 2007). I have argued elsewhere that this ‘death of cinema’ sentiment has allowed the museum to take over as the repository of the cinema’s heritage and legacy, of which the relocation to art spaces constitutes one end of the spectrum, while the invention (and rapid obsolescence) of the DVDs, the popularity of streaming platforms and ubiquity of mobile screens make up the opposite end (see Elsaesser, 2014).

The crisis of the museum is a more complicated story, but manifests itself above all in the slow but seemingly irreversible transformation of both the classical museum (the Louvre in Paris, the Metropolitan in New York, the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam) and the modern museum (the MoMA in New York, The Tate Modern in London, the Reina Sofia in Madrid) into a multifunctional assembly of art-spaces and tourist museum complexes, following the template of the Museum of Contemporary Art (spectacular architecture, usually near a park or waterfront, and dedicated to temporary exhibitions rather than permanent collections), a concept which is itself modelled on the site specific, city-based but impermanent and individually curated biennials, biennales and documenta’s. It makes the museum not only welcome the moving image on monitors as well as screens: it also aligns the institution art with the typical institutional form of (non-Hollywood) cinema, namely the film festival circuit. The resulting synergies can be quickly summarized: there has been a mutually beneficially trade off of their differences, across economic considerations: as museums have trans-

⁷ For a fuller treatment of the relevant parameter, see Erika Balsom, *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013) and Thomas Elsaesser, “Ingmar Bergman in the museum? Thresholds, limits, conditions of possibility,” *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, 1:1 (2009), 1-9.

⁸ The “death of cinema” debate has been going on for a longer time than anyone can remember. With respect to digitisation and the end of celluloid, it has been most fervently argued in Paulo Cherchi Usai, *The Death of Cinema History, Cultural Memory and the Digital Dark Age* (London: British Film Institute, 2001).

formed themselves from elite temples of the arts into a mass medium, catering to a broad public and to international tourists, they welcome the popularity of moving image, itself an emblem of a more fluid modernity, rather than a representative of austere modernism. Furthermore, as costs rise and patronage becomes ever more problematic, also from an ethics point of view⁹, museums become ever more dependent on merchandizing, while also integrated into city branding, and thus fully integrated into an experience economy that is eminently cinematic. Conversely, as to the crisis of notably independent and avant-garde cinema, being hosted in the museum means additional prestige, cultural capital, and legitimacy. Equally important, museums have become, for the filmmaker-installation artist *the* most important source of commissions for new work, while also providing attractive and technically well-equipped spaces for exhibition, performance and display.

There have thus emerged a number of convergences and a benign mutuality; but cinema and museum have, paradoxically, also come together by remembering and performing their more antagonistic mutuality. What I called the ‘ontological differences’ of their respective dispositifs have not disappeared: rather, they return as aesthetic resources and artistic incentives and thus have given rise to a “cinema after the museum”, or “post-museum cinema”. For this, we need to think of the dispositif less in Michel Foucault’s sense, as the assemblage and interaction of various institutional, physical, and administrative mechanisms and knowledge structures that maintain the exercise of power within society or a given social practice (such as visiting a museum or going to the movies), and more as a re-distribution of the senses, how they are internally coordinated and how they interface with the mediated environments of these dispositifs: in short, how museum and movies are experienced as ‘live’ events, in ‘real time’.

The classic experience of the museum is that it is a space of intense concentration and contemplation, with all attention focused on sight and the eyes, and with other stimuli – deemed to be unwanted distractions – reduced to a minimum. An atmosphere of hushed silence prevails, shutting out the noise and sparing our ears. The sense of touch, too, is muted in the museum. It may be elicited by the sensuousness of surface textures, of rich hues of paint and the roughness of canvas, as well as, of course, by the sinuous lines and smooth

⁹ For instance, one of the largest donors to museums in the US and UK, the Sackler Family Trust, owners of Purdue Pharma, has been suspended its charity activities, following lawsuits and controversy over its role in the opioids crisis in the US. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/mar/25/sackler-trust-halts-new-philanthropic-giving-due-to-opioid-crisis-lawsuits> and <https://www.insidephilanthropy.com/home/2019/3/29/domino-effect-have-sackler-donations-finally-become-toxic> (accessed 11 June 2019).

surfaces of a sculpted body or a carved shape that beckons and reached out to be touched. But this very desire to touch a sculpture has to be sublimated and translated into the cognitive or ocular register: *Look, but don't touch* – the very concept of the ‘haptic’ (Alois Riegl) – as opposed to the tactile – hinges on this sublimation and transferral of sensory perception. Clearly, while many a museum of contemporary art has since given up on strictly enforcing this particular regime of concentration and contemplation, it lingers on as a constraining threshold, to be recognized (as taboo), before it is crossed and transgressed.

A (similarly contradictory) set of historically variable conditions define the typical movie experience. Here, too, one can point to a kind of ideal, which in practice is more often flouted than observed. Ideally, people in the darkened auditorium are silently fixed on the screen, the darkness minimizing distraction, and the individualized seats ensuring isolation from one's neighbours. But the theatrical cinema experience is also communal, with a large audience making sounds that bespeak of excitement and anticipation, a festive mood of shared pleasures, mixed with whispered conversation and laughter. And while the events on the screen are intended to generate narrative suspense and thus are aimed at focusing attention, eating popcorn and sipping coke stimulates other senses as well, and can easily be experienced as distraction (for other spectators, if not for one's own body). By aligning both museum visit and cinema experience with the range of sensory stimuli, bodily movement and motor coordination in the way we interact with our environment, we open up our inquiry in a new direction – one for which the traditional division between attention and distraction provides a useful, if perhaps only preliminary compass.

Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht: Alert Distraction over Attention

This then, brings me to my second detour, which requires a closer look at the history of the relation between attention and distraction. By taking attention and distraction as two major poles of sensory – ocular, auditory and cognitive – engagement with an environment, one can clarify the antagonistic mutualities that in the 21st century bind together museum and cinema, and in particular, get a better understanding of how and why their inherent tensions can become an aesthetically *productive* contradiction.

But what exactly is ‘attention’? The dictionary will inform us that ‘attention’ is, “the selective perception of a particular stimulus, sustained by means of con-

centration and the willing exclusion of interfering sense-data"¹⁰. In other words, attention is predicated on a conscious effort, usually one that requires additional acts of exclusion, separation, filtering and forgetting. Yet in our contemporary knowledge and information society, attention has arguably risen to the status of a universal currency, while also becoming this society's scarcest resource. As such, attention paradoxically emerges as both a problem (for child psychologists, cultural critics and advertisers) and a solution (for audiences and spectators): consider how on-line life and especially social media constantly solicit our attention and spare no effort or expense to retain it. Attention is the *problem* for parents and educators, under the name of *attention deficit disorder*, and for cultural critics who lament the general superficiality and amnesia in our culture, blaming television or video games. But attention is also the *solution* when considered as a response to the dilemmas of overload and over-exposure, because as an act of selectivity, as an ability to shift or switch, it allows for a mode of perception – and by extension, when thinking of cinema, a form of spectatorship – that refuses to be absorbed or drawn in, that resists contemplation or depth, and instead stays resolutely on the surface and remains alert. As Bertolt Brecht once advised his theatre audience: “glotzt nicht so romantisch” – “don't stare like a love-lorn romantic”¹¹.

Mentioning Brecht is a cue to bring into the debate Weimar Germany's most astute defenders of cinema's modernity, Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin. Their interest in cinema, the metropolis, and within cities, in urban spaces of spectacle as well as contemplation made them reflect on the impact that new cultural technologies were having on the senses. Among those cultural technologies, besides cinema, they counted daily newspapers, photography, illustrated weeklies, concerts, trade fairs, exhibitions, night clubs, cabaret reviews, sports, , neon advertising - mediated through economics, institutions and technology, but also through demographic factors, such as crowds, open markets, mass rallies, street fights, political demonstrations and the individual sensorium. Benjamin found in Charles Baudelaire his guide and diagnosticians to this new world, who had defined and diagnosed 'modernity' across a new temporality and time experience: that of ephemerality, chance and the fugitive moment. Baudelaire

¹⁰ There are many definitions of attention, depending on the discipline that studies it. For a good overview see “Attention”, Wikipedia <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attention> (accessed 8 June 2019).

¹¹ The phrase was printed on a sign that Brecht posted in the auditorium during the premiere of his first performed play *Drums in the Night* (*Trommeln in der Nacht*) at Munich's Kammerspiele in September 1922. “Trommeln in der Nacht” Wikipedia https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trommeln_in_der_Nacht (accessed 8 June 2019).

associated it not only with the metropolis and its eroticized anonymity, but also with a new technical medium: the emergence of photography, with its confusing and hyper-stimulating *l'émeute du détail* ('riot of detail'), given a heroic-ironic embodiment in the urban rag-picker and the *flâneur*, but also – even more emblematic for our purposes – typified in the 'man of the crowd', a figure taken from the eponymous story by Edgar Allen Poe¹².

Despite its title, Poe's protagonist is not immersed in the ebb and flow of the pullulating boulevards, but glued to his window as if to a screen, watching the crowd over a whole day and night cycle, both switching focus and varying speed. It is as if Poe's narrative anticipates or emulates some typically 'cinematic' techniques of montage and editing, as well as 'televisual' ones, of fast-forward and action-replay, and thus the protagonist becomes not only the well-known boulevard flâneur of the metropolis in Benjamin's interpretation, but already the attention-flâneur of media-immersion and media saturation.

The mode of 'distracted viewing' and the 'montage of attraction' especially advocated in Benjamin's 'Artwork'-essay is, however, best understood as a complex counter-stance not only to bourgeois *Versenkung* (immersion: sinking into the work) seen as necessary to avoid *Zerstreuung* (distraction) but also as a response to a revolution other than the Communist one. For with the emergence and rapid dissemination of mechanically reproduced sounds and images at the turn of the twentieth century, there began a data-flow previously unknown in human history, whose main material supports were the cinema, photography, radio and the gramophone. Time and the fugitive moment could now be stored, without the intervention of any kind of symbolic notation, such as a musical score, verbal language or a chronometer.

The recording and transmission of sights and sounds, thanks to the camera and the phonograph, also meant the proliferation of acoustic and optical data in quantities, and with a degree of physiological presence as well as signal precision ('fidelity') hitherto unimaginable. The impact can be measured negatively: widely resented as a threat to the established arts and their creators, the cinema also occasioned medical warning about eye strain and mental disorders, besides the better-known moral panics about sexuality, drink and other 'depravities' or 'degeneracies' associated with the movie theatres. But mechanical reproduction also gave rise to what has been called 'haunted media' (see Sconce, 2000) extremely popular para- and pataphysical experiments that accompanied

¹² Charles Baudelaire discusses Poe's story in *The Painter of Modern Life and other essays* ([1863] London: Phaidon Press, 1995), pp. 7-8.

the discovery of electricity, electro-acoustics, electromagnetic fields and radio waves. Jeffrey Sconce (who coined the term) has documented some of the rich folklore and fantasy-literature accompanying the introduction into everyday life of the telephone, the telegraph and the wireless— as well as the equally rich futurist predictions, from which it becomes clear that the late 19th century was not waiting for the cinema, and instead expected television and the telephonic transmission of images and sound sounds: in short it was waiting for satellite technology, the mobile phone and Skype, rather than the *Arrival of a Train* or *Workers Leaving the Factory*.

A materialist media theory, such as proposed by Friedrich Kittler (Kittler, 1999, pp. 2-19) would go some way towards answering to Benjamin's dual concerns, namely to identify cinema as the medium appropriate to technical modernity and to elaborate a theory of spectatorship that *combines distraction with attention*. For Benjamin, cinema exposes the contradictions between *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis* (two kinds of 'experience': the first, integrated and continuous, the second, shock-like and intermittent), and in this sense cinema becomes, in Benjamin's words, modernity's optical unconscious: both hiding and revealing the contradictions of modernity, both the poison and the antidote of modernity¹³.

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Poison and its antidote: on the one hand, cinema is, of course, a capitalist invention, and as has been argued, its role is to replenish at the weekend the labour power that the system takes out of the body during the working week. But also antidote, in that for Benjamin, shock is the signature of perception in modernity, meaning that film is the right medium/ medicine for a perception that has to anticipate, protect from, and react to changing sensual stimuli and, insofar as it

¹³ Walter Benjamin first used the term "optical unconscious" in his essay "A Short History of Photography" (1931), *Screen* vol. 13, issue 1 (March 1972), 7. It has since been widely deployed and commented upon.

does this successfully, is *a priori* in the mode of alert distraction. In a footnote, Benjamin described distraction as a physiological phenomenon akin to catharsis. What we have to remember, however, is that the cinema Benjamin was thinking of are the films of Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov (i.e. montage), or that of Chaplin (i.e. slapstick), and not the classical Hollywood cinema based on linear narrative and temporal suspense, intended to bind distraction back into attention, in order to lead the viewer to resolution and closure.

Siegfried Kracauer on Distraction

Kracauer's essay "Kult der Zerstreuung" (Cult of Distraction), first published in 1926 in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, was most likely one of the inspirations for Benjamin's thinking. Kracauer analyzed the rise of large cinema theatres and saw them, quite naturally, as the sites of mass distraction. But unlike other cultural critics, Kracauer did not judge this a negative feature, that is, he did not argue from the superior value of concentration, but recognized that in these large luxury theatres, as well as at other popular sites of mass entertainment such as amusement parks, distraction – i.e. the shower of different sensory stimuli – is both pleasurable and restorative – countering the intense attention needed to work at machines, or wherever the body is subjected to the rigid regime of the time-keeping clock and the work-day routines – very unnatural for a population that only a few years earlier had migrated from the countryside, where the rhythm of the working week was dictated by the weather, by the seasons and by the bodily needs of the farm animals, and not the unforgiving demands of the factory assembly lines.

Kracauer therefore argues that distraction is, for a modern urban population, a legitimate mode of aesthetic experience, more truthful to their actual situation than the objects or experiences put in circulation as high culture, needing concentrated attention and cognitive immersion. He thus anticipates Benjamin's Artwork essay where distraction also becomes the specific mode of cinematic perception: *Rezeption in der Zerstreuung*. If this "reception in distraction", then, is the default value of the cinema experience for Kracauer and Benjamin, it becomes tempting to keep their model in mind when we think about the contemporary art museum as a mass medium, and of the tendency to turn the museum experience into a spectacle of special effects, complete with a narrative trajectory, and into the register of 'event and experience', modeled on the modern theme park and Benjamin's amusement arcade.

In the end, Benjamin and Kracauer recognize that the cinema is a training ground and exercise yard for the senses: to watch a film attentively in the movie

theatre, means to train the senses for the reception in the mode of distraction, which is necessary, because life-saving, in modern environments, such as cities. These environments are replete with different visual, aural, and tactile stimulations like traffic signals, noises, or passers-by in a crowded street. Formulated in the late 1920s, such insights lead to the question of what bundles of sensations or bodies of distraction we are inhabiting today, where it is less the traffic in the street that demands our vigilance, and more the traffic in the digital realm that solicits our attention.

It is the reed rather than the rooted tree that weathers the storm of data and the assault of images, and it is the cork, bobbing on the water, that survives a flood of media messages. What if the attention economy today demanded choices being made between being 'reed' or 'cork', i.e. between staying put and tactical bending, or altogether cutting loose and 'going with the flow', rather than, as used to be, between 'active' and 'passive' spectatorship, or between 'identification' and 'distanciation'? Today's savvy media users spend days in front of the screen playing video games that train rapid reaction (the reed), or watch their movies on their smartphones or tablet 'on the go': in the train, the plane or by the beach (the cork). The much-maligned figure of the channel hopper, or the alert but pressed-for-time museum goer who spends less than 30 seconds in front of a painting (of which 25 with reading the caption), may yet turn out to be the unlikely heroes of these new 'flexible' modes of perception: witting or unwitting vanguard figures, parrying the double-binds of interactivity like erstwhile Baudelaire's fencers, their bodies engaged with images as if they were objects or people, because images are no longer there to be contemplated, but require different motor-skills or hand-eye coordination in order to be 'grasped'. At once target and survivor, these hard-boiled user-spectators handle the mouse, the track pad or the joystick as much to ward off the ever-increasing army of attention-grabbing spectacle events, as s/he selects avatars in order to appropriate them.

Towards a Genealogy of Distraction

In other words, although we are used to seeing attention and distraction as two opposite poles of our sensory engagement with art, Benjamin (and Kracauer) suggest otherwise: besides breaking up the dichotomy and pointing to their interdependence, they intimate also that attention and distraction are modalities not restricted to aesthetic experience. Instead, attention and distraction pose problems at the workplace and the work-space, especially in a society more and more relying on the eye to steer, to guide and to monitor machines and produc-

tive operations, and to navigate an urban environment where flows of stimuli and perceptions need to be processed at speed, in order to stay safe and to survive.

The takeaway from these observations is that an art which understands itself as contemporary has to solicit or *elicit attention from within distraction, rather than against distraction*. And it is this axiom that I want to ponder, when asking how artists in the 21st century enter into and engage with both cinema and museum, as the traditional, if distinct spaces of focused attention, and how they do so with installation strategies that recall, as well as revive, cinema.

Today's perspective on attention and distraction must take account of a heightened distribution of senses – the ear and touch, besides the eye – manifest in the variability of the sources of sensory input, and in the rapid switching of perceptual focus and register, captured by such terms such as “multi-tasking” or “distributed attention”. Insofar as these qualities are often said to be more developed in women, trained as they are to doing household work, while also minding children and attending to other tasks, the topic has something to do with “affective labour”¹⁴. There is a scene of a housewife multitasking in Robert Altman's *Short Cuts* that illustrates how such affective distribution of attention might work today: she changes her baby's nappies while earning some extra money with telephone sex. The scene is also a sardonic pastiche of post-Fordist “flexibility” under conditions of economic precariousness. A different issue arises with conditions at the extremes of attention (such as autism) and the extremes of distraction (such as attention deficit disorder): what, elsewhere, I have called society's “productive pathologies” (Elsaesser, 2009, p. 13–41). The oxymoron flips the sides, in order to reveal the other face of the phenomenon, whereby a nominally pathological state (“autism”, “attention deficit disorder”) becomes a special aptitude. If certain forms of autism have already become sought-after skills for debugging code in software¹⁵, it may well be that ADD will become known as “rapid reaction response capability” – much the way the wireless mutated into the radio and the horseless carriage became the automobile.

Given the many technologies we use to interact with the world and the many sources or channels of input we keep open, we are all data-multitaskers, making it evident that distraction is in some circumstances already prioritized as the new

¹⁴ For a discussion of affective labour, see Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (2004) and Juan Martin Prada, “Economies of Affectivity”, *Caring Labor* (July 29, 2010) <https://caringlabor.wordpress.com/2010/07/29/juan-martin-prada-economies-of-affectivity/> (accessed 9 June 2019)

¹⁵ Miguel A. Perez, “Autistic People as Software Testers”, *Blogthinkbig* (7 September 2013) <https://blogthinkbig.com/autistic-people-software-testers> (accessed 9 June 2019)

normal¹⁶. What is perhaps more surprising is that such a prioritizing of distraction has itself a long history and a venerable philosophical pedigree. Again, to start with a definition: “Distraction is a state of mind in which we resonate with and respond to a variety of external and internal stimuli that affect the body at the same time” (Löffler, 2013, p. 8). Petra Löffler, from whom I take this definition and parts of the subsequent argument, goes on to explain:

In the late eighteenth century, [for instance] a debate on distraction arose that questioned the pros and cons of several modes of distraction— absentmindedness on the one hand, diversion on the other. Distraction was no longer only regarded as a destructive and dangerous mental force that must be controlled, but also as a necessary activity of the human body. [...] From then on, the term had also a positive meaning, because bodily diversions such as promenading, horse riding, or ball games were recommended as a helpful medicine against mental stress, depression or potential nervous breakdown. (Löffler, 2013, p. 9)

As Rudolph Gasché has argued, already Immanuel *Kant* in 1798 had defined distraction as distributed attention and had distinguished between two modes: *voluntary* (dissipatio) and *involuntary distraction* (absentia): “Distraction (distractio) is the state of diverting attention away from certain ruling ideas by dispersing attention among other, dissimilar ones. If the distraction is intentional, it is called dissipation; but if it is involuntary it is absentmindedness” (Gasché, 2009, pp. 1-28).

According to Kant, distraction is part of the art of living and should be trained and exercised, in order to keep the mind alert, flexible and open to new ideas. Although he did not go quite as far as the surrealists or Freud in praising the virtues of free association, Kant made another important point: to be distracted in the mode of dissipation for Kant meant first of all to be part of and be stimulated by a community, whereas distraction as absentmindedness was un- and even anti-social (Löffler, 2013, p. 15).

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the former opposition between attention and distraction was reformulated as a problem of time and simultaneity. The question was now: Can one be attentive to different things at the same moment of time? The answer offered in 1835 by the German ophthalmologist

¹⁶ Whether multitasking makes us more efficient or more stupid, and whether information overload will permanently alter our brains are much-debated topics in both the social sciences and the neurosciences. For an overview of the state of research, see John Wihbey, “Multitasking, Social Media and Distraction Research Review”, *Journalists’ Resource* (July 2013) <https://journalistsresource.org/studies/society/social-media/multitasking-social-media-distraction-what-does-research-say/>

Carl Heinrich Dzondi was “Yes”, because the human mind is able to switch between different objects very quickly, in an unnoticeable fraction of a second¹⁷. He had studied eye-movement and saccadic cycles – something that has taken on an entirely new dimension, in the form of eye-movement tracking, and the way it is said to revolutionize film making as well as film interpretation.

Interpreting eye-movement in relation to works of art has its precedents, as explained by David Bordwell:

In 1965 the Russian psychologist Alfred Yarbus reported the results of experiments that tracked eye movements. In some of them, he used Ilya Repin’s classic painting *They Did Not Expect Him* (aka *An Unexpected Visitor*, 1884). The dramatic image depicts a hollow-eyed man, gaunt and wrapped in a patchy coat, striding into a comfortable middle-class parlour. First Yarbus simply let his subjects view the picture without any instructions from him. Their saccadic patterns were recorded [resulting in a diagram where] each line represents the fast movement of the eyes from one location to another (saccades) and clusters of lines are the traces of fixations. The denser the lines, the longer and more often a point was fixated. Then Yarbus tried asking his subjects questions about the image, [...] asking one of his subjects to estimate the material circumstances of the family. A very different trajectory of attention emerges. Now the scanning was more purposeful, and it focused on the areas most likely to fulfill the task of identifying the family’s social class –clothes, the piano, the children, and other items. Moreover, when given more time to examine the picture, subjects did not roam around every cranny of the frame but returned constantly to the areas they had already examined, the ones that were most relevant to the task. Artists often claim that color, composition, and other features attract a viewer’s attention. But Yarbus concluded that while some sorts of visual material, chiefly faces and bodies, were targeted during the undirected scanning, many other features, such as color, edges, light or dark regions, and so on were not¹⁸.

Already in 1910, Hermann von Helmholtz in his *Treatise on Physiological Optics* had shown that switching attention was normal: “It is natural for the

¹⁷ Karl Heinrich Dzondi, *Die Augenheilkunde für jedermann welche lehret, die Gesundheit der Augen zu erhalten*, Halle, 1835 and especially Dzondi’s entry for “Aufmerksamkeit [attention]” in Johann Friedrich Pierer (ed.), *Medizinisches Reallexikon*, vol. 1 (Leipzig/Altenburg: F.A. Brockhaus, 1816).

¹⁸ David Bordwell, “Observations on Film Art” 6 February 2011 <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2011/02/06/the-eyes-mind/> (accessed 9 June 2019)

attention to be distracted from one thing to another.”¹⁹ More recently, the entire discussion about attention and distraction has shifted to the neuro-sciences, picking up with PET scans, EECs and tomography where Helmholtz’ physiology of optics and Alfred Yarbus’ eye-scanning experiments had left off. The basis for “distributed attention” is now sought in the neurological organization of the brain, where the different areas of the brain have different tasks, and where neural networks and nodes constantly create new pathways and “fire” to forge associations. As Tiziana Terranova has argued, “activities such as multi-tasking and reading online hyperlinked texts produce [...] a shift of neuronal activity from the *hippocampus* (where brain scientists usually locate activities such as focused reasoning and long term memory) to the *prefrontal cortex* (which is occupied by repetitive tasks and short term memory)”²⁰.

If Helmholtz’ findings easily connect to the neuro-sciences, they were also given a Foucaultian twist by Jonathan Crary, perhaps the most acute scholar of attention and distraction, in his *Suspension of Perception* (Crary, 1999, pp. 29-30). Coming from an art historical perspective, Crary argues that the ways we intently look at a painting or listen to a piece of music is not something innate, but results from crucial changes in the nature of perception that can be traced back to the second half of the nineteenth century. Seurat’s *Parade de Cirque* – in 2016 on show in a separate exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, serves Crary as one key example.

Crary also highlights the paradoxical nature of modern attention. Attention is both a fundamental condition of individual creativity, supported by the idea of the modern artist as a solitary studio-worker, matched by the silent and solitary nature of the aesthetic experience in front of a painting or sculpture. Yet attention is also a central element in the efficient functioning of disciplinary institutions such as factory, schools, clinics and laboratories – these are the recto and verso of attention, which may explain why attention can be approached from an affirmative and a critical position, either focusing on the inner individual resolve or highlighting the outer, disciplinary power-relations exerted by attention on collective bodies²¹.

¹⁹ Hermann von Helmholtz, *Treatise on Physiological Optics* (New York: Dover Publications, 1962), 498 [quoted in Crary, footnote 27].

²⁰ Tiziana Terranova, “Attention, Economy and the Brain”, *Culture Machine*, vo. 13 (2012), 1-19. Terranova goes on: “Exposure to new media would thus cause a remodelling of different types of memory within individual brains, making individuals faster at carrying out routine tasks, but at the same time less efficient in the ways they carry out those tasks and weaker at deeper comprehension and understanding.”(5) <https://culturemachine.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/465-973-1-PB.pdf> (accessed 9 June 2019)

²¹ See also Fredric Jameson and Anders Stephanson, “Regarding Postmodernism: A Conversation with Fredric Jameson,” in Douglas Kellner (ed.), *Postmodernism, Jameson, Critique* (Washington, D.C.: Mouton de Gruyter, 1989), 43–74.

Suspensions of Perception thus relocates the problem of aesthetic contemplation within a broader encounter with the unstable nature of perception—in psychology, philosophy, neurology, early cinema, and photography, as well as the socio-economic forces of capitalism. In doing so, Crary provides a historical framework for understanding the current crisis of attention amid both our contemporary technological culture, and its potential for being harvested or monetized amidst a general state of distraction. *Again, distraction turns out to be not the opposite of attention, but more like the* multiplication of sites and the proliferation of moments of intense, if partial attention.

In other words, scholarly reflections on the nature of distraction are extensive, ranging from Kant's observations to Alois Riegl's notion of distributed attention in the sensory encounter between the viewer and the work of art, through Benjamin and Kracauer privileging distraction, and citing the example of film and cinema, to Crary's intervention and the neurological approaches in art history as well as the "new media." The various approaches have become intertwined: some are trying to dissolve the binary opposition by reversing the value hierarchy of the two terms, others are speculating on major changes taking place within human perception – affecting the senses, cognition as well as motor-coordination – which makes distraction, multi-tasking and a sensory division of perceptual labour the new normal.

Katherine Hayles and Bernard Stiegler – each taking a slightly different stance – offer yet another distinction: that between the *psycho-power* of *deep attention* and the *bio-power* of *hyper attention*²². They are particularly concerned with the changing nature of attention in the school and educational environment, but one wonders whether the new terminology in fact recycles the old-fashioned attention (positive) versus distraction (negative) debate. Equally significant seems to me another paradox: as our attention is sought for commercial gain, and benefits the likes of Google, Facebook and Amazon, it becomes a scarce commodity and thus it increases in value. However, this value, in turn, requires the skills of variable attention, since anyone participating in the information society and the experience economy – and both movies and museums are fully participant players – has to manage active distraction. Sherry Turkle has documented how in heavily mediated environments, the combinations of different activities, such as listening to the radio while using the keyboard of a laptop and looking at its screen simultaneously have become important social skills, but also new performance anxieties²³.

²² N. Katherine Hayles, "Hyper and Deep Attention: the Generational Divide in Cognitive Modes," *Profession* (2007), 187-199 and Bernard Stiegler, *Economie de l'hypermateriel et psychopouvoir* (Paris: Mille et une nuits, 2008).

²³ See also Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).

Such everyday multi-functionality generates new bodies of distraction. Linda Stone, a former Apple and Microsoft executive, has labelled such distributed attention “continuous partial attention.” Whereas continuous partial attention is a constant crisis-state with a high level of adrenalin output, gendered multi-tasking is limited in temporal extension and focused on special goals. That is why Stone concludes that continuous partial attention is only useful for a certain period of time. Generally, she believes that the time for continuous partial attention should be over, replaced by what she calls “the Age of Uni-focus”, i.e. people who are using mobile media with headsets or ear buds in order to exclude external sensual stimuli, first and foremost environmental sounds. The turn to uni-focus also encompasses such countervailing trends as Yoga, mindfulness and meditation, slow food and indeed, it includes contemplative cinema: all of these activities or practices becoming integral parts of that which they oppose, namely, distraction and acceleration. In other words, even slow cinema does not escape the system, and risks being merely another way of commodityfying attention, increasing its value by emphasizing its scarcity²⁴.

A particular point of interest for film scholars and art historian, however, about any kind of realignment of the senses is the disengagement it promises of the notion of attention from the near total spotlight on its repercussions for visibility and looking – or at any rate, upright, frontal looking which treats the frame – whether of a painting or in a film – as a window on the world, or a mirror to the self. It is symptomatic in this context, how the view from above, or what Hito Steyerl calls “Vertical Perspective” has become part of this reorientation²⁵. One finds it in filmmakers, Wes Anderson²⁶ for instance and installation artist Omer Fast’s *5000 Feet is best*²⁷, the latter hinting at one possible reason for such reorientation, namely the militarization of our perceptual field under the paradigm of surveillance.

The Experience Economy

The reverse side of the surveillance paradigm as symptomatic of the automation of continuous partial attention ‘from above’, would be the so-called “experi-

²⁴ Linda Stone, “Thoughts on Continuous Partial Attention” Lecture given at the DLD conference, Munich, January 21–23 (quoted in Löffler, 21 [footnote 20 above]). <http://www.neuegegenwart.de/ausgabe51/continuouspartialattention.htm>

²⁵ Hito Steyerl, “In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective”, *e-flux* 24 (April 2011) <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/24/67860/in-free-fall-a-thought-experiment-on-vertical-perspective/>

²⁶ kognada, “Wes Anderson From Above” <https://vimeo.com/35870502>

²⁷ Omer Fast, *5000 feet is best* (UK, 2011, 85 mins) See <https://www.filmgalerie451.de/en/filme/5000-feet-best/> A 30-minute extract can be found on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K8dW1dg7KY>

ence economy”, which compensates for “adrenaline fuelled crisis states of continuous partial attention”, now increasingly outsourced to machines, by converting Benjamin’s *Erlebnis* (perception as shock and trauma) into *Erfahrung* (embedding perception into life-world). It also builds a bridge to my main topic – the interplay of attention and distraction in cinema and the museum – because it provides yet another way of understanding the crossover (or takeover bid) having taken place between the cinema and the museum. The “experience economy” is a term used descriptively by historians, but of course also critically, mainly by scholars who from a Marxist perspective analyse what they see as the next stage or phase of global capitalism and the commodification not only of health and well-being, of education and creativity, but of all of affective life (think once more Facebook’s “likes” and Amazon’s “preferences”), as well as our emotional and social needs, like sharing and belonging.

To briefly stay with the more descriptive meaning of the “experience economy”. For the social historians Joseph Pine and James Gilmore, for instance, the experience economy is simply the name for the dominant contemporary economy, following the agrarian economy, the industrial economy, and the service economy. The characteristics of the experience economy, according to Pine and Gilmore, are that a product or a service needs to have the capacity to generate a memorable narrative for their customers, and that the (anticipated) memory of this event (documented in the form of media: memorabilia, photos, Facebook entries, tweets, etc) should itself be thought of as part of the product – now re-labeled as “the experience”²⁸. In this sense, the commodity called “experience” includes interactive, immersive, relational and other forms of aesthetic encounters, and therefore, of course, it includes par excellence the cinema, now understood as a service, designed to produce affects, life-enhancing narratives, events and memory. But it also includes the museum. For the museum adds to an interactive encounter with the artwork also the memory and the feel of place: in fact it amplifies the experience thanks to the importance of its architecture. Often now considered a work of art in its own right – think Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Bilbao or Daniel Libeskind’s Jewish Museum in Berlin – the museum building is not just a container or a display case, but is increasingly designed to function as the site of proto-narrative “events”, within which a certain set of stories and encounters can take place.

²⁸ B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, *The Experience Economy* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1999).

Degrees of Attentiveness and Distraction

The Berlin writer Volker Pantenburg has suggested that instead of opposing the mobile, peripatetic visitor in the museum to the stationary, fixed and sedentary viewer in the cinema, we should distinguish between the museum and cinema not on the basis of mobility and stasis, but by analyzing the different degrees of attentiveness and attention:

Attention is a two-part construction, extending between two poles, one of which is that of *perception*, which transforms something arbitrary, ordinary into something of particular interest, allowing phenomena to become tangible to perception in the first place. The other aspect of ‘attention’ is *selection*. Which category of things, due to their mode of appearing, their ephemerality or velocity, their particular shape or form, their novelty or redundancy demand attention. Here one would ask how attention chooses its object, that is, according to which rules or restrictions, and due to which medial or cultural contingencies. Furthermore, the particular manner in which a given object appeals to one’s attention may also be significant, that is, in which fashion does an object draw attention to itself? (Pantenburg, 2014)

Pantenburg’s redefinition, above all, highlights the traditional function of the museum – its aesthetics of “display”, the “museum effect” of removing one context and substituting for it another, the “diectics” of the gesture of showing, the way an art-work says “here” and “now” (Benjamin’s aura), and the self-referential “look at me” of the art object. By recalibrating perception in so many different ways, the museum is both a slow-motion decelerator (of time) and an amplifier or magnifier (of space), because it can accentuate and intensify both aspects of attention: it can slow down ordinary processes and events, so as to make us rediscover what is attention, even under conditions of movement and distraction, and it can modulate space and recalibrate scale by emphasizing selection, either through juxtaposition or by isolating an object.

There are a number of artists – both filmmakers and installation artists – in whose work the challenges of how to refocus attention against the background of everyday distraction can be studied: Chantal Akerman’s *News from Home* (1976) would be one such (well-known) example, where the director splits our attention between the banal, but highly evocative sights of New York street life along 10th Avenue and other typical places) and the banal, but highly manipulative letters written to Akerman by her mother, living (and left behind) in Brussels, while on another level, the sounds of New York – subway, cars, pedestrians, children, the

permanent din and hum so well known to anyone who ever lived in New York – accompany, but sometimes also swallow up the sound of Akerman’s own voice reading, indeed ventriloquizing her mother’s plaintive, longing letters, chiding her daughter for not writing more fully and more frequently.

Sharon Lockhart’s *Lunch Break* (2008) is another well-known example of a film – most often presented as an installation – where the viewer’s attention is the main focus, being both slowed down and magnified by the lack of any narrative development other than what the spectator might project into this single tracking shot along a line of shipyard workers in Maine taking their lunch break. A normally busy and noisy place is observed at its own moment of rest or repose, but is then re-animated by the tracking shot, which is subjected to the museum’s conventional mode of perception: reflexive, introspective and contemplative. Lockhart’s film decontextualizes the site but recontextualizes the time of the event, and thus reorients attention to that which is suspended or absent: assembly line work, labour laws, unionization that safeguards lunch breaks: but it does so with a slow but relentless forward movement that itself mimics the assembly line the workers are temporarily liberated and relieved from.

Two examples may serve to bring me back to my starting point, namely how ‘slow’ or ‘contemplative’ cinema might be regarded as ‘cinema after the museum’, or ‘cinema of attention in the midst of distraction’, in the sense of making the very differences of the respective dispositifs ‘cinema’ and ‘museum’ productive in the antagonistic mutuality of their necessary encounter. In the case of one of Dan Graham’s exemplary works from the 1970s, *Past Future Split Attention*, modes of distributed attention – theatre, dance and performance – normally thought as alien and extraneous to the museum that disorient and disrupt the space, and in the case of Anri Sala’s *Answer Me* and *Ravel Unravelled*, nearly forty years after Graham, it is sound, noise and live musical performance that reorganises the senses and reorients the museal space, in a gesture as radical as it is contemporary, letting the ear and its ability to orient us in space coax attention out of the amplification of distraction.

Dan Graham’s Past Future Split Attention

Dan Graham’s *Past Future Split Attention* (1972) is delicately poised between a video that has recorded a unique and single performance, and a template or script for live action, inviting future – repeat – performances. Minimal instructions sketch the situation: “Two people who know each other are in the same space. While one predicts continuously the other person’s behavior, the other

person recounts (by memory) the other's past behavior. Both performers are in the present, so knowledge of the past is needed to continuously deduce future behavior (in terms of causal relation)²⁹. One can call *Past Future Split Attention* a dance piece or a 'stand-up Beckett' play, but it is also an encounter that loops a therapy session with a boxing match. Like the latter, there are some ground rules, and a set of (creative) constraints; like the former, there is room for free association and massive transference. The two protagonists share the same space but live in different time zones, as it were. One is conjuring up the past while the other is commenting on the present, but as one predicts what we are about to see, the other one has already consigned it to a memory. Words anticipate actions as if by remote control, while physical gestures are being cornered into the past tense. Having apparently shared a lifetime in each other's company (the Beckett situation), the two performers draw on background knowledge; but such is their 'talking past each other' that they also have to stay in the moment, in order to keep up the flow, chasing each other's words while keeping in sync with each other's movements. It is certainly one of the strangest and disconcerting experiences of split and distributed attention one can imagine, as an extract on YouTube makes evident³⁰.

Graham has described *Past Future Split Attention* "a figure-eight feedback-feedahead loop of past/future"³¹. In a more technical language, one could say that it is the test-run of a system of transfer and exchange where positive feedback and negative feedback are not opposed to each other, but alternate with each other: negative feedback not regulating input-output but tending towards entropy, while positive feedback neither amplifies the signal nor feeds on itself, but pushes its excess energy towards a future that might never arrive.

Describing *Past Future Split Attention* mostly in terms of the temporalities that it intertwines, overlays and loops forgets that the piece also functions as a mirror: a two-way mirror for the characters on the move, so sometimes one of them can 'see through' (to) the other, at other times, the other is completely opaque and only sees him/herself in the mirror, a mirror that incidentally also reflects the spectators. So the audience, too, has to decide: are they included, according to conventional theatrical space of the invisible fourth wall, giving them transparency and access to the action before them, as if looking through

²⁹ Dan Graham, "Past Future Split Attention", cited in the *Electronic Art Intermix on-line catalogue* <https://www.eai.org/titles/past-future-split-attention> (accessed 9 September 2019)

³⁰ Dan Graham, "Past Future Split Attention", performance at the Walker Art Center, 12 March 2009 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zV-JCEtI_bA (accessed 9 June 2019)

³¹ Dan Graham, "Past Future Split Attention", cited in the *Electronic Art Intermix on-line catalogue* <https://www.eai.org/titles/past-future-split-attention> (accessed 9 September 2019)

a window? Or, as spectators, are we becoming so intensely aware of ourselves, our bodies, our fatigue, our nervous laughter, our embarrassment at watching painful and painfully performed acts of self-exposure, that the performance is in fact a mirror: designed to be opaque, so as to make ourselves see ourselves in the act of seeing. Combining the conceptual sophistication of a mind-game film with the immediacy of a live performance, its presentational site is indeed the reflexive space of a museum or art gallery, where it is now mostly displayed as a video-installation on a monitor, which forms another loop, across the different media and their separate modes of representation.

Anri Sala, Answer Me

Some forty-four years on, split attention has returned in Anri Sala's 2016 exhibition at the New Museum New York³², under conditions, where the museum of contemporary art is a mass medium precisely in the sense that it is a place of distraction. If Graham's work must still be seen against the background of a museum of modern art, in which Past Future Split Attention functioned as part of an 'institutional critique', Sala's work belongs into the mainstream of the museum of contemporary art where at first glance it answers distraction with distraction. Its title "Anri Sala: Answer Me", however, initially evokes an interpellation or appeal for reciprocity in dialogue, perhaps echoing the dictum attributed to Jacques Lacan that "you never speak from where I listen", but in either case immediately referring to sound, voice and ear. Yet it also resonates with Graham's description of *his* piece: "One person's behavior reciprocally reflects/depends upon the other's, so that each one's information is seen as a reflection of the effect that their own just-past behavior has had in reversed tense, as perceived from the other's view of himself"³³.

Sala trained as a filmmaker and came to international attention with *Intervista* (1999), a film that confronts his mother in the present with 16mm 'found' footage of twenty years earlier, when she was a Communist youth leader, making fiery speeches, but whose sound was either not recorded or was lost. When a lip reader recovers the words, and the transferred video is played back to her, Sala's mother is faced not just with her youthful image, but with the lost ideals and dashed hopes of her younger self. Here, split attention structures the unbridgeable historical gap between Stalinist Albania in the 1970s and the political chaos and moral disorientation of the country's first post-Communist decade in

³² "Anri Sala: Answer Me", *New Museum* 02/03/2016 – 04/10-2016 <https://www.newmuseum.org/exhibitions/view/anri-sala> (accessed 10 June 2019)

³³ Dan Graham, *Electronic Art Intermix on-line catalogue* (footnotes 43, 45)

the 1990s, but it does so across the split between sound and image as distinct affective registers and technological dispositifs.

As Sala disengages ‘attention’ from its usual associations with the visual, by dramatically contrasting face and voice as well as past and present, he deploys one of a filmmaker’s most basic tools, the montage of sound and image. Sala splits the visual and the aural field and then re-assembles them, not to synchronize them, but in order to force the spectator to engage with the separate registers of sight and hearing while still trying to focus on them as both distinct and belonging together. This is not only owed to the specific circumstances of *Intervista* (the fate of his family and his home country), but constitutes the basic structuring principle of much of Sala’s oeuvre: a fact amply demonstrated in “Anri Sala: Answer Me”, where almost every piece, taken by itself, is a variation on the sound image split, or even more frequently, on the sound-sound split. It is true of “Air Cushioned Ride” (2007), where the signals of two radio stations – one playing Bach, the other Country Music – interfere and alternate, as a car cruises and circles the parking lot of a 18-wheeler truck stop somewhere in the South or the Western United States. It is true of “Der Lange Jammer” (2005), a 13 minute film which shows a musician, his face in close up playing the saxophone, somehow suspended on the outside of a mile-long housing estate in Berlin, while in the exhibition – and thus in the here-and-now – another musician is trying to sync himself with the musician on the screen: a screen which is furthermore suspended and divided into front and back, each side showing a different image. The piece is reminiscent of Andy Warhol’s *Outer and Inner Space* (1966) and Michael Snow’s *Two Sides to Every Story* (1974), but the dimensions, live performance and the often-extreme close-ups and non-locatability of the saxophone player require the visitor to constantly recalibrate scale, space and orientation, within an already taxingly complex sonic environment. The effect is exhilarating, in the way the experience addresses and sharpens several of the senses, including the inner ear: what at first seem distracting elements serve a richer kind of attention, as the need, but also the desire to focus and concentrate makes one aware of how open our senses are to being engaged separately.

“I make my films as if I was making musical instruments, and I treat an exhibition as an orchestra”: Sala’s musical metaphor is apt. It describes the New York exhibition, though he might have added that insofar as each room connects to the others by way of a visual cue (often hands) or an auditory motif or instrument, carrying over from one to the other, the parcours or trajectory is also a score, one which each visitors performs. Nowhere is this more clearly in

evidence than in Sala's best-known work, *Ravel Ravel Unraveled*, first shown at the Venice Biennale in 2013, and integral part of "Anri Sala: Answer Me".

The installation consists of three films, responding to the words in the title, and screened in two separate rooms. In the first room are shown two filmed performances of the same piece, Maurice Ravel's 1930 Concerto in D for the Left Hand, originally commissioned by Paul Wittgenstein, Ludwig's brother, a concert pianist who had lost his right hand in WWI. "Each film is focused on the choreography of the left hand encompassing the entirety of the keyboard, while the right hand remains still".³⁴ Projected simultaneously in a specially soundproofed (an-echoic) chamber to absorb sound-reflections such as echo and reverberation, the performances differ in tempo and rhythm. Because they are slightly out of sync, they give the impression of a musical dialogue, an effect that Sala describes as wanting the "space [to] resound consecutively to the temporal gap between the two performances; to paradoxically create an 'other' space in an environment conceived to annihilate the sense of space (by suppressing echoes)". This 'other' – brain-space, as one might call it – is where the visitor processes, besides the music, the visual echoes or mirroring effects of the two left hands, one on top of the other. Moving to the next room, more hands, this time a film of a woman DJ with two turntables, mixing the two versions of the Concerto and trying to bring them together again in a fleeting synthesis, which does not pretend to be a unity.

As has hopefully suggested itself, this arrangement is a composition in both temporal and spatial succession, yet however different in content, location and ambition, *Ravel Ravel Unravel* also structurally repeats many elements of *Intervista*, Sala's first film about his mother (-country) by someone who has since divided his time between Paris and Berlin. Interestingly enough, at Venice in 2013, *Ravel Ravel Unravel* was France's contribution to the Biennale, but it was actually installed in the German Pavilion, echoing the close *entente* between the two nations, who had fought the war that had cost Paul Wittgenstein his hand almost a century earlier.³⁵ It also – in its sophisticated play with spatial a-symmetry and temporal a-synchronicity within a fragile and unstable dialogical configuration – once more recalls Dan Graham's *Past Future Split Attention*.

³⁴ Cited in Stefano Cernuschi, "55th Venice Biennale: Anri Sala at the French Pavilion", *Mousse Magazine* (n.d.[2013]) <http://moussomagazine.it/55vb-french-pavilion/> (accessed 11 June 2019)

³⁵ For further extrapolations of the historical entanglements, transnational echoes and architectural reverberations of *Ravel Ravel Unravel*, see Christopher Mooney, "Anri Sala", *ArtReview* (Summer 2013) https://artreview.com/features/feature_anri_sala/ (accessed 11 June 2019)

Conclusion

It may seem that the two detours I have taken through the once antagonistic mutuality of cinema and museum, and the equally interdependent mutuality of ‘attention’ and ‘distraction’ have led me a long way away from the kind of “slow cinema” of Bela Tarr or Carlos Reygadas. But that was my intention: first to put the issue of “slow” at some distance from its opposition with “fast”, where it risks being the subservient term in an always-already-in-place hegemonic power-relation, and instead embed it in the reflexive turn that I associate with the new alliance between cinema and museum, each using a crisis as an opportunity. This allows me to speak of “cinema in the museum” as also “cinema after museum” (which is also “cinema after film”). Secondly, I wanted to disentangle both “slow” and “attention” from its association with measurable parameters (e.g. “average shot length”, “saccadic eye movements”) and instead re-entangle them with the viewer’s experience of temporality, but also of space, scale, synesthesia: against the background not of acceleration, but of distraction and distributed attention. Thirdly, I wanted to argue that the heightened attention and attentiveness which is one of the key characteristics of slow cinema is best seen not in opposition to distraction, but can emerge out of distraction, and even be a special case of distraction. If the conceptual and institutional proximity of the museum is useful for characterizing slow cinema, it is because a museum, ideally, frames attention, so to speak, in analogy to a painting being framed: marking a boundary, a threshold, a liminality within a continuum. This in contrast to instrumentalizing attention, which is the case of the on-line and real-world experience economy, from whose effects, however, neither slow cinema nor video installations are immune or unaffected. And as I tried to show, the museum can frame attention even with means and techniques that seem alien to the fine arts and belong more to the cinema and other time-based arts, such as the introduction of performance, dance, music and sound. Finally, I wanted to bring slow cinema into the complex conceptual spaces and mental architectures that I have explored elsewhere in mind-game films, and films as thought experiments, by adding – in the examples discussed above – the films and installation work extending from the 1970s (Chantal Akerman, Dan Graham) to the 1990s and the present (Sharon Lockhart and Anri Sala). The choice was in some sense arbitrary, more personal than representative, since I could have chosen James Benning and Tacita Dean, or Bill Viola and Eija Liisa Ahtila as filmmakers who migrated to museums or relocated in art spaces, while continuing to be interested in the questions posed by slow cinema: stillness and movement, narrative and attention, and sound, silence and their a-synchronicity with image and sight.

It is through these registers of reflexive complexity and both ‘framed’ and ‘distributed’ attention that slow cinema can be understood as a critique of mainstream cinema now often considered a site of distraction and acceleration, but also as a critique of museums as sites of contemplation and absorption and thus as elite institutions, enforcing high culture canons of taste and distinction. The slow cinema I am proposing here – filtered through the institution ‘museum’ and infused by the practices of video installations when engaging with time, space and the spectator’s body – may at first glance have little in common with “locally sourced, traditionally prepared”. Yet precisely by often being site specific (i.e. *local*) and actively challenging the two-hundred year *traditions* of the museum, ‘cinema after the museum’ is in line with slow cinema: the more so because it invests its reflexive potential (for disorienting the mind) and its aesthetic capacities (for recalibrating the senses) in staying resolutely contemporary.

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Abstract

A classic definition of attention designates it as “the selective perception of a particular stimulus, sustained by means of concentration and the willing exclusion of interfering sense-data”. In our sense-data rich environments, attention has become a scarce commodity, increasingly valued and sought after, but with the paradoxical consequence that the very pursuit of attention cannot but register as distraction. How do artists confront and art spaces cope with this paradox, and how has the moving image in the museum changed the articulation of time, space and information that is narrative?

Key words: attention, distraction, senses, cinema and museum