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Time Flows: Rhythm in Slow Cinema

For over two decades slow cinema has stayed one of the most poignant tendencies in contemporary art-house cinema (although it is slowly disappearing according to some researchers and film critics – Schrader, 2017; Syska, 2019, p. 23). It is a widely observed, transnational phenomenon which is concentrated in the peripheries mostly. Slow cinema is not particularly known for any distinct themes - instead, its significance lies within its idiosyncratic narrative formula. Its roots could be found in modernist cinema (Syska, 2014), avant-garde cinema (especially in the structuralist tradition of Michael Snow and Chantal Akerman, and in film tableaux of Andy Warhol) and in the relation between movies and visual art in galleries. All these contexts have emphasized temporality which becomes the main theme within themselves. In slow cinema, time determines characters' lives, interferes with diegetic structures and is incorporated by spectators. The chronotopes of slow cinema can be described by their tangibility, embodiment, and somatic resonance. They offer a rhythm that is not subjugated to the outside factors (editing measurements), but interior ones¹.

¹ In this article I have used some reflections from my book about slow cinema (see: M. Stańczyk, *Czas w kinie. Doświadczenie temporalne w slow cinema*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2019).

The division between inside and outside reflects the temporal dynamics – it can be also described by juxtaposing quantitative and qualitative factors. This first, quantitative group is adjacent to the description of music, poetry, and film theoretical concepts which refers to the former two. For example, Germaine Dulac believed that film narrative structure should be similar to musical compositions (Helman, 2007, p. 33), and Levi Merenciano has written that a long shot is an autonomous segment in which the rhythm is minimised (Merenciano, 2014) (here, rhythm would not seem typical of slow cinema which I would disagree with, based on such cinema's inherently timely and narrative nature). In the case of movies this would be reflected by the length of shots edited according to the visible pattern. The second, qualitative or interior group of factors could be described by words written by Andrey Tarkovsky years ago: "The distinctive time running through the shots makes the rhythm of the picture; and rhythm is determined not by the length of the edited pieces, but by the pressure of the time that runs through them. Editing cannot determine rhythm (in this respect it can only be a feature of style); indeed, time courses through the picture despite editing rather than because of it" (Tarkovsky, 1989, p. 117). The meter of film can be omitted in the case of slow cinema, but equally, time becomes an intensely experienced dimension due to its slow passing. Among other means of expression which highlight this temporal experience are: reduced editing, long shots (Matthew Flanagan has distinguished exemplary length of shots in Béla Tarr's, Albert Serra's or Paz Encina's films, compared it with mainstream, Hollywood cinema and determined that their duration multiplies regular shots [Flanagan, 2008]), dedramatization strategies, and preference for static camera devoid of its narrative functions (for example it can become independent from the main character and his or hers onscreen presence as in *La libertad* [2001] by Lisandro Alonso, or focusing on space composition and not storytelling as in the *Malmkrog* [2020] by Cristi Puiu).

Visceral rhythmology

This intense temporal experience can be compared to boredom. I do not put it in a negative context as is common – feeling bored is similar to the internalized time flow for me. This temporal affect is protracted, slow and therefore the spectators are influenced intrasubjectively (because, as Vivian Sobchack has written, "There are always two embodied acts of vision at work in the theater, two embodied views constituting the intelligibility and significance of the film experience. The film's vision and my own do not conflate, but meet in the sharing of a world and constitute an experience that is not only intrasubjectively dialectical, but also intersubjectively dialogical" [Sobchack, 1992,

p. 24]). “Rhythm, then, is not the metrical sequence of pieces; what makes it is the time-thrust within the frames. And I am convinced that it is rhythm, and not editing, as people tend to think, that is the main formative element of cinema” (Tarkovsky, 1989, p. 119) – the time-thrust Tarkovsky wrote about is a common, embodied sensation due to our bodily dispositions, physical existence and perceptive repository. It is easier to describe the rhythm of Hollywood cinema because it has significant dynamism, acceleration and conventionalised narrative structures. Slow cinema, on the contrary, forces viewers to reject habits learnt from mainstream cinema. Our perceptory system resists that effort and the imposed observation, but – eventually – our body can surrender and allow time to flow through it. Adam Dziadek believes that rhythm is the way to discover signs of embodiment in a text: “Body emits rhythms and signs, it is a source of life and immortality. Rhythm mediates between writing body and reading body” (Dziadek, 2014, p. 24). This scientific stance assumes some level of indefiniteness; because the inner rhythm is elusive and unstable, we cannot anticipate it and therefore it connects with our somatic rhythms. Inner rhythm influences the spectator through irregular beating or even subtle pulsating. Time flow is stabilized thanks to experiencing, material body.

Visceral rhythmology – as I call the reflection about inner rhythm which is symptomatic for slow cinema – intersects with the reflection typical for corporeal narratology. This research on narrative modes is based on the human body which creates many possible structures of storytelling. “Narrative is corporeal not simply because it needs to use character bodies as a natural part of the stories that it tells, but also because the very ways in which we think about narrative reflect the paradoxes of the body—its ability to give rise to and resist pattern, its position in the world and outside of it, and so on. Narrative, then, always first and foremost depends upon a corporeal hermeneutics—a theory of how the text can be meaningfully articulated through the body—even if narratology has frequently treated it, or seemed to treat it, as something quite different” (Punday, 2003, p. 15). It is an important methodology for this paper but the research is built upon the tradition of existential phenomenology (Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy mainly) which is commonly used in sensuous theory and affect theories. It offers methodical tools for conceptualizing our embodiment in the world, which was prevalent in the film research of Julian Hanich or Vivian Sobchack.

Rhythmology withdrawing metrics and proportions is not a new approach – theoreticians opened up to such experience already in the beginning of 20th century. The issue of rhythm became one of the prevailing subjects in film theory very early on – to mention only Germaine Dulac, Vsevolod Pudovkin,

Semyon Timoshenko, and Václav Tille. Polish theoretician, Karol Irzykowski, created a substantial reflection about rhythm. In *X muza* (Eng. *The 10th Muse*, 1924) he wrote about “optic rhythmisation” (Irzykowski, 1977, p. 238) – the movement of scenes and the movement of matter are dependent on musical rhythm. It is subjective and incorporated by the artist. This concept is based on the lyrics of movement and kinaesthetics, two notions which were proposed by Irzykowski in the same book. Edward Adolf Sonnenschein wrote the essay *What Is Rhythm?* a year later, in 1925. He paid attention mostly to psychological aspects of feeling rhythm, how it is generated in the mind of spectator: “rhythm is the feature in a sequence of events in time which produces in the mind which perceives it an impression of proportion between the durations of the events or groups of events which comprise the sequence” (see: Mitry, 2000, p. 104). For him rhythm is a subjective phenomenon – it is distinctly sensational, not physical. The perspective juxtaposing rhythm with spectators’ embodiment became more popular in the second half of the XX century. Jean Mitry in *Esthétique et psychologie du cinéma* (Eng. *The Aesthetics and Psychology of the Cinema*, 1965) focused on physiological and partly phenomenological sense of rhythm by emphasizing perception, intentionality and consciousness in a more or less direct way: “rhythm is a kind of dialectic of time rather than a continuity whose intermittent variations distort for us the normal flow of time. In fact, it develops according to a pattern of alternating tension and rest- the expression merely of a constantly renewable conflict. Moreover, if rhythm is rhythm only insofar as it is perceived, its framework is inevitably the limits of our sensory capacities” (Mitry, 2000, p. 104). And quoting Émile Benveniste (*Problèmes de linguistique générale*, Eng. *Problems in general linguistics*, 1966), rhythm „designates the form in the instant that it is assumed by what is moving, mobile and fluid, the form of that which does not have organic consistency; it fits the pattern of a fluid element (...). It is the form as improvised, momentary, changeable” (Benveniste, 1971, p. 285-286). In *Éléments de rythmanalyse* (Eng. *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, 1992) Henri Lefebvre also refers to rhythm: “Rhythm appears as regulated time, governed by rational laws, but in contact with what is least rational in human being: the lived, the carnal, the body” (Lefebvre, 2004, p. 9). Derek Attridge in *Poetic Rhythm: An Introduction* (1995) connects rhythm with energy impulses on physiological and psychological level (see: Dziadek, 2014, p. 32). All these theories led us to understand rhythm as closely linked to temporal affectivity which is experienced by the spectators of slow cinema.

Somatic resonance

So how can this somatic resonance typical for rhythmical affect in slow cinema be described? I will not be designating average shot lengths (which is a unit of measurement used by Barry Salt in his cinemetical research), editing dynamism, and patterns of onscreen movement, set lighting or camera perspective. Rather than that, I would like to define rhythm as something pulsating between screen and viewer's body. This kinaesthetic affect mirrors corporeal dynamics and primal, vital intensities. To highlight physical rhythm is to petrify an experience: rhythms is put in numbers, it is described, parameterized, analyzed, and that is why we could lose its quality as experienced, affective temporality. It is also shown that, as Karen Pearlman says, in editors' confessions about their work – contemporary editors are emphasizing intuition and feeling rather than mathematical approach (Pearlman, 2013, p. 1). The author of *Cutting Rhythms* writes about two physiological activities which are fundamental for creating and perceive rhythm in editing: kinaesthetic empathy (based on somatic memory and personal experiences connected with movement and mobility) and mirror neurons (responsible for blurring the border between action and observation) (Pearlman, 2013, p. 10-13). This is a physical evidence that onscreen movement and rhythmization of narrative development are rooted in embodiment – firstly, creators' embodiment, but secondly – through the film body – that of viewers'. They share somatic foundation and “affective condition” (Markowski, 2014).

Slow cinema changes popular understanding of rhythm as a metrical dynamism because of its almost immanent reduction – of pace, story, *mise-en-scene*, acting expression and dialogue, simplistic emotionality, non-diegetic music and editing. Instead of that, it offers a space which is minimalistic, devoid of spectacularity and infiltrated with time. The “aesthetic of slowness” (Flanagan, 2008), based on dedramatization and long shots, activates spectators on another level, through generating rhythm experienced differently. Viewers are pushed to search for it in some way and, consequently, they turn inwards, exploring intrasensorial tension (Sobchack, 1992). Whilst perceiving art (including films), their body stays in the state of readiness and it is directed intentionally so that without any significant stimulus it becomes oriented in the opposite direction – toward itself. This is why it could feel its somatic dimension and experience temporality. When we ourselves as well as our environment are static, we can feel our body and hear its inner rhythms. As Michel Henry wrote, we connect with it or renew this contact in the act of self-experience (Henry, 2015). “Suspension of perception” (Crary, 1999) reveals the dynamics which links humans with immanent matter all around them. “Withheld”, “dead”, slow images are

dominated by the flow and the expression of time and they are autonomous or independent from our intentions and expectations. They exuberate energy that is felt as an inner rhythm of film and is reminiscent of the stream of meanings and affects. In the words of Elena Vogman, “The rhythm of film organizes a whole series of sensual zones of conflict at the level of the material itself. The effects of poetic montage, the departure from the everyday, or even its sudden return, carry political consequence in those moments when cinematic rhythm realizes its potential for opening up new temporal spaces of action both in and through history” (Vogman, 2015).

In that sense, slow cinema creates a particular form of viewership. Lutz Koepnick withstands it with the aesthetic of astonishment which is specific for the cinema of attraction. He names perceiving subject as a wondrous spectator who searches for the sense of novelty, singularity, and self-revelation of the world: “Neither connected to shock nor to the sensational, the concept of wonder registers as quiet and pensive, judicious and discriminating responses to phenomena that strike the viewer as rare and first time. It initially exists outside the realm of the will, defers any demand for instant reply and communication, and defies impatient efforts of narrative integration” (Koepnick, 2017, p. 8). Prolongates (or long takes) are essential, because they suspend our rationalized habits of teleologicality and linearity of thoughts (see: Koepnick, 2017, p. 23) which are typical for the reign of physical, scientific time. Perception becomes more conscious – both the diegetic world with its characters, and the viewers themselves in their embodiment are omnipresent, unreduceable, immanent and substantive. Koepnick writes that the aesthetics of long takes unveils time: “They stretch or deflate time not to frustrate our attention spans but to intensify perceptual processes and sharpen our attention for what the rush of the contemporary renders mostly invisible” (Koepnick, 2017, p. 2).

The archipelagos of time

Slow cinema experiments with expanded temporal structures – it lingers, retards, slows down. It can be divided into two intersecting tendencies: Tarrian which is immersed in modernist tradition and creates meandric chronotopes and ornamental time flows, and Diazian which operates with so-called empty time, but also with real time due to accurate representation of space and psychophysical condition. This second tendency is more interesting for me because it highlights alternative time realities habituated by people living on the margins of the contemporary world who either do not want access to it themselves, or are excluded from it. The best film examples to illustrate this are Lav Diaz’s movies

as they are the core of this tendency: *Melancholy* (2008), *Florentina Hubaldo*, *CTE* (2012) or *The Woman Who Left* (2016). Time extensions are often read in Bazinian, revelatory way – long takes should reveal the truth about the world and allow us to experience reality. But “The aim (...) is neither to provide redemptive meanings nor cling to nostalgic images of the past. Rather, they embrace slowness as a medium to ponder the meaning of temporality and of being present” (Koepnick, 2014). Emphasizing the now and restoring it to viewers means also simplification and fetishizing of time. In the time of bringing great narrations down and relativisation of every frame of reference, the cinema of duration, based on reduction of editing and using long takes, cannot be amounted only to being in the world. Such notion infantilizes slow cinema showing it as a mere counterargument to the contemporary cinema of acceleration and the speed of our society. And the creators of slow cinema do not emphasize the nowness – they reach for historical costume (as in already mentioned *Malmkrog*, or *Zama* [2018] by Lucretia Martel and *Jauja* [2014] by Lisandro Alonso) and, moreover, present the fragments of diegetic world as spaces where different temporalities are juxtaposed and intersected: social, subjective, past or present temporalities. In this sense “slowness negotiates today’s desires for both memory and presentness by allowing us to reflect on the now in all its complexity” (Koepnick, 2014).

This chiasmatic link between past and present is exemplary for films about (post)war trauma. Aside from Lav Diaz’s movies we can mention *Hamaca paraguaya* (2006) by Paz Encina. The shots of everyday duties are taken in full shot and are used alternately with the ones in long shot – two elders are sitting in a hammock, facing the camera. We hear their dialogue, revealing that they are waiting for their son who has never come back from the army (Paraguay has been torn apart by frequent coup d’états and armed rebels of guerilla Paraguayan People’s Army has started in 2005). The sound is superimposed on the image – they are disjunctive so significantly that sound seems unreal and coming from inside. This is accentuated by static take and distance between characters and camera. The audial sphere becomes closer to that of mental dialogue which is full of longing and the characters are blended into a green, jungle background. The prolongates expose deep layers of time. The rhythm and tension are created not by editing, but by an intense sense of lack and nostalgia. The film with its means of expressions becomes a tale about memory. The reduction of *mise-en-scène* and the use of static camera open the viewer to the content of the frame and, therefore, to the flowing time. A similar effect is achieved in *Corn Island* (2014) by George Ovashvili about Georgian-Abkhazian conflict, *The Forsaken Land* (2005) by Vimukthi Jayasundara about the civil war on Sri Lanka, and films by Apichatpong Weerasethakul (for example *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Re-*

call *His Past Lives* [2010] or *Cemetery of Splendor* [2015]) that can be interpreted as allegories about former wars in Thailand which haunt the present (Loska, 2019). This social perspective is supplemented by personal angle. The main character from *Vitalina Varela* (2019) by Pedro Costa travels on the border between past and present, life and death. After the death of her husband who abandoned her years ago, she moves from Cape Verde to Portugal. She inhabits her deceased spouse's house on the suburbs of Lisbon and shares every day with ghosts. Dark photos and almost baroque darkness all around her are the background of this nocturnal narrative in which the characters cannot and do not want to leave the past behind them. They are still living accompanied by the visions of their former life, now full of ghosts, grief, sorrow, longing and remorse.

If slow cinema discovers the present, it is not through epiphany or apology. Monotonous rhythm reveals cracks in which traumas and anxieties can be seen. Among these anxieties there is a place for dehumanizing routine and violent spaces. In *Sangre* by Amat Escalante, *Parque via* (2008) by Enrique Rivero, *The Seventh Continent* (1989) and *71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance* (1994) by Michael Haneke repeated actions are mechanical – there is spiritual and emotional void in their characters and in the world they are living in. People become automatons due to regular reproduction of particular gestures which is enforced by the capitalist system where belonging to a concrete social class is more important than the sense of community. This contemplative monotony is disrupted violently by the act of aggression in the end. The cruel ending is a logical consequence of systemic and individual, mental and physical violence because every diegesis is full of camouflaged oppressiveness and microaggressions. Exposing brutal truth about these worlds leads us to listen intently to the rhythm of previous takes – we seek its anomalies retroactively. This ostensible sameness is important in the context of time. The characters are imprisoned in it, the rhythm of everyday life is not chosen. Films emphasize malaise, apathy and daunting invincibility which make apparent that the change is impossible. Due to this hopelessness, the future vanishes – people are doomed to the present and the past. Directors who often show lives that are not meaningful are for example Tsai Ming-liang (*What Time Is It There?* [2001]) or Pedro Costa (*Colossal Youth* [2006]) – the characters in their films are not only alone but lonely in spite of living in big cities full of people. The metropolises are indifferent to them, and the passing of time highlights that contemporary acceleration is superficial.

When writing about *Los muertos* (2004) by Lisandro Alonso, Jacques Aumont notes: “there is nothing to see, nothing to figure out, time passes, shapeless, empty, unstructured. This idea of time is not new, of course, it partly comes from

video art, which practised these durational forms before the cinema did, but to transpose them to the universe of narrative cinema is a new sensation” (Aumont, 2017). This is why in slow cinema one can experience kinesthetic empathy (as Karen Pearlman calls it) – we are corporeally synchronized with the other through shared common temporality. Chronotopes of diegesis and embodied perception are coordinated and by that somatic resonance allow us to approach a different reality. Slow cinema engages spectators through time.

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Abstract

In her article, the author describes slow cinema as one of the most important tendencies in contemporary art-house cinema, simultaneously focusing on its temporal emanations. The text emphasizes the notion of rhythm and divides it into two subcategories: external and internal rhythm. The latter is close to the embodied experience, therefore it influences viewers affectively, as a somatic resonance. It enables a spectator's intensive engagement in slow films. The author's argumentation is based on rhythm research and existential phenomenology.

Key words: slow cinema, time, rhythm, embodiment