

2013: A SLOW YEAR

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When I say that 2013 has been a slow year, what I really mean to say is that slow cinema seems to have dominated many of the conferences that I have attended in the past few months.

Even at a conference as vast and as fast as SCMS (The Drake Hotel, Chicago, 6-10 March), there was already time for Tina Kendall (2013), Karl Schoonover's "Embroidered Time: Slow Gays, World Cinema, and Classical Film Theory" (2013), Scott Richmond (2013) and Eugenie Brinkema's "An Oasis of Boredom in a Desert of Horror: Language and Time in *Pontypool*" (2013) to address the topic of slow cinema via the concept of boredom. But while slow cinema found a tiny niche at the behemoth of SCMS, it is perhaps fitting that, to appropriate the title of Tina Kendall's talk in Chicago, boredom and slowness are found mainly *in extemis* — that is, on the margins of film studies, in smaller, more specialised locations than the hub of film (and media) studies that SCMS incarnates. Indeed, as Kendall argued, after Mackenzie Wark, boredom requires certain conditions in order to come into being — and the hyper-stimulation that is going to SCMS perhaps does not provide the best conditions for thinking slowly and/or about boredom.

Fittingly, it is Kendall herself, then, who, together with Neil Archer, created the conditions for assembled scholars to think about slowness and boredom at the *Fast/Slow: Intensifications of Cinematic Speed* symposium at Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge, on 4-5 April. Given that the symposium explicitly mentions "fast" in its title, its subtitle also being "Intensifications of Cinema Speed," it seems strange that the overwhelming majority of papers given at the symposium were on slow cinema. It is as if the rise of long take, not-much-happens films (think of works by Hou Hsiao-Hsien, Jia Zhangke, Belá Tarr, Abbas Kiarostami, much recent Romanian cinema — as Diana Popa's "Slowness in Contemporary Romanian Cinema" [2013] discussed, and even relatively mainstream films like Nicolas Winding Refn's *Drive* [2011], as considered by Miklós Kiss and Anna Backman Rogers's "Dead Time and Intensified Continuity in Nicolas Winding Refn's *Drive*" [2013]) are somehow more noteworthy than the enormous number of mainstream films that employ super-rapid editing

and fast-paced plots. As if we were resigned now to acceleration and the velocity of contemporary mainstream cinema, even if, as Henry K. Miller's "1922 Fast, Too Continuous: Fast/Slow Cinema and Modernism" (2013) reminded us at the *Fast/Slow* symposium, previous generations have also argued about these same issues for many years, as his case study of the same concerns as aired in 1922 onwards made clear.

Overall, slowness at the *Fast/Slow* symposium was approached from the perspective of politics and/or ethics — Asbjørn Grønstad's "The Ethics of Slow Cinema" (2013) is an example. That is to say, slow cinema is a political act that, broadly speaking, involves resistance against the acceleration engendered by the all-encompassing forces of neoliberal capitalism and globalisation, translated in cinema into kinetic mainstream action spectacles. Much like the "slow movement" elsewhere (in food, in gardening, in travel, etc.), it is a conscious protest of sorts, an "ethical" choice on the part of the filmmaker, much as tracking shots were once considered a question of morality. Indeed, it is perhaps also part of a validation of the real and realism in cinema, since many "slow" films allow events to unfold in their own time (and spaces), rather than rapidly and in an (often literally) animated fashion. As Sean Cubitt's "Chronoscapes and the Regulation of Time" (2013) so convincingly argued in his *Fast/Slow* keynote, this is not simply a case of analogue indexicality versus digital simulation, since the analogue image's indexical relationship to reality has long since been unduly fetishised by film theorists given that the chain of reactions that must take place for light to register on a strip of polyester is in fact far from neat and without mediation. Rather, this is about time and imaging different rates of change.

However, given the fact that so many "slow" filmmakers are the doyens of film festivals around the world, and given that buying a Jia Zhang-ke film on DVD will likely cost four or five times as much these days as would a year-old blockbuster, "slow cinema" is also a by-word for a cinema of the wealthy and the cultured — for those who have the time to enjoy some time out. For this reason, then, slow cinema might in fact be less oppositional as always already a reinforcement of the accelerated mainstream, as perhaps a crossover film like *Drive* makes clear, even if the success of that film was also in part enabled marketing and the opportunity to ogle the internet meme-friendly Ryan Gosling. In this sense, Kiss and Backman Rogers' identification of the combination of "dead time" and "intensified continuity" in *Drive* is quite telling: *Drive* in fact embodies how both tendencies, fast and slow, are flip sides of the same coin.

If slow films inspire, or run the risk of inspiring, boredom, then it is perhaps not surprising that Emre Çağlayan's "The Aesthetics of Boredom: Slow Cinema and the Virtues of the Long Take" took his paper from *Fast/Slow* also to the Society for Cognitive Studies of the Moving Image (SCSMI) Conference at the Universität des Künste, Berlin, which took place on 12-15 June — for boredom must surely be a matter of cognition. After Çağlayan's paper (2013), which took the work of Belá Tarr as its template for films that inspire or run the risk of inspiring boredom, there followed an intense discussion about boredom as an emotion, or, if it is not (quite) an emotion, as a sensation. Can boredom be considered — as Çağlayan suggested — a positive sensation/emotion? That is, as his paper suggested, can 10-minute long takes in which little to nothing (from the perspective of plot-driven narrative) happens have any benefit for viewers? The discussion seemed quite universally to surmise that boredom cannot be positive, or an emotion/sensation that can yield positive results. For, if in feeling bored I in fact come to reflect upon the nature of time or the minutiae of human house construction — I am thinking of shots in *Sátántangó* (1994) of window frames, curtains and walls — then I probably technically am not bored anymore. In other words, boredom can only be a negative emotion/sensation (even if boredom is a sensation/emotion that has, from the evolutionary perspective, developed in order to inspire action in order for boredom to be quelled, which in turn induces motion, blood circulation, a bit of exercise and thus fitness, if nothing else).



Sátántangó.

What was in particular interesting about this discussion was the possibility that boredom can be proof of cinema's very real effect on audiences. By this, I mean to say that boredom provoked by a film is not tempered by any meta-emotional response, as per fear (I am

afraid, but I also know that I am only watching a film and therefore I am not afraid). Instead, if I am bored by a film, I am *really* bored (I may say to myself that I am only bored because I am watching a film and therefore not really bored, but this would be to be not really bored; *real* boredom, as provoked by a film, can only be to be *really* bored). Now, it may be that *Sátántangó* does not “really” inspire boredom, but that it instead is simply “slow” — with slowness certainly being able to have positive impact on viewers (time to think, to begin to scan the image for oneself rather than at the rhythm dictated by the filmmaker, etc.). Nonetheless, to stick with the issue of boredom, one wonders that the discussion of boredom at SCSMI points to a more generalised boredom in society and, in particular, among filmgoers.¹

This generalised boredom was pointed to by Scott Richmond in his talk at SCMS, “Vulgar Boredom: On Detachment, Time, and Some Boring Films by Andy Warhol and Christopher Nolan.” In addressing boredom in films by Andy Warhol and Christopher Nolan, Richmond suggested — at least indirectly — that boredom can and perhaps does take place not just in art(y) films (Warhol), but also in mainstream films (Nolan). I am reminded of Tina Kendall’s (“Boredom *in extremis*,” 2013) point at the same conference that, again via Mackenzie Wark, that which “suspends” boredom in fact creates it. To take this discussion in my own direction, then, we have here the possibility that those very films that are supposed not to inspire boredom in fact can and very often do — and these may even include very profitable films such as those made by Nolan.

Let us elaborate on this a bit further. It is in a discussion on cinephilia that Thomas Elsaesser evokes the overlapping concepts of disenchantment and *déception* (a French *faux ami* most commonly translated as disappointment). Elsaesser suggests that disappointment is an important part of the film experience because it “redeems memory at the expense of the present.”² In other words, to feel disappointment with a film allows us to feel that “they don’t make them like they used to” (memory, which is the storage place of images from those old films that we refer to as the ones “they used to make,” is redeemed at the expense of the present). In the same collection of essays as Elsaesser’s, Drehli Robnik suggests that the mobilisation of cinephilia in part accounts for the success of *Titanic* (1997), but that its commercial triumph was also based upon “the common fact that many people found they had liked the movie after they had paid to see it.”³ What is remarkable about this phrase is that Robnik in fact puts his finger on a very common cinematic experience: that many people find that they have *not* liked a movie after they have paid to see it — and that films like *Titanic*, which

people *actually like*, are few and far between (hence *Titanic*'s status at the time as the most profitable film in history).

I do not discuss this as an excuse to “come out” about *Titanic*. Rather, it is to suggest that we live in a state of generalised *déception*, with most films, which promise to be our friends, in fact turning out to be *faux amis*, both deceptive and disappointing. Whether or not this is a strategy, conscious or otherwise, on the part of viewers to validate memory, *à la* Elsaesser, in the face of the present is not my focus of concern here — but by definition the films that we like most will be films that we have seen in the past, since we cannot like most films that we have not yet seen, though we might be forgiven for suspecting that this is so, because films are now pre-sold so heavily to us via marketing strategies that it can often feel as though we have already seen a film by the time we see it, and we often feel that we are going to (or rather, we *want to*) love a film before we have actually seen it. Two things arise, though: the first is that, precisely as a result of the marketing strategies of the major studios and of other film distributors and exhibitors, we are encouraged to anticipate films so much that it is almost inevitable that most will be disappointing; they cannot live up to their hype, and we realise that Hollywood does not make trailers for films, but it makes films in order to use trailers as the real money-making part of the film industry.⁴ And secondly, since we are so often disappointed by movies, this points to and perhaps only reinforces the way in which marketing — the promise of a future experience that will be great — speaks of a culture of boredom in and with the present. If *ennui* used to signal existential angst, it is now the baseline of post-industrial existence, the best friend of the marketing guy because it means that we will always be hoping for something other than boredom.

This might explain why — even though I find the *Transformers* films (2007-present), as well as the work of Christopher Nolan in general, rather tedious — I keep on going back to the cinema to watch them. (And this is a personal example; I am sure many people do in fact truly like Nolan's films — unless they are victims of an *inception* by Nolan and his publicists, believing that they believe for themselves that Nolan is a great filmmaker, when in fact this is an idea planted in their brains by, precisely, Nolan's publicists. Indeed, some people might even like *The Transformers* movies. But whether audiences like Nolan and/or *Transformers*, they may nonetheless feel *déception* at many of the other films that they see — and which I may personally quite like.) In other words, boredom is inherent to the contemporary condition — which is why it is impossible to tear people away from the screens of

their phones, touchpads and other devices, because unmediated reality has become practically intolerable. Meanwhile, movies promise a break from this boredom, although most in fact reinforce it upon delivery. Paradoxically, however, “slow” films, which ostensibly are boring, become quite interesting — provided one attends to them.

I use the term “attends to” quite deliberately. For, while the other keyword uttered most commonly at the conferences that I have recently attended — especially “Beyond Film,” the title of the Film-Philosophy Conference at the University of Amsterdam, 10-12 July — was most likely “affect,” I wonder that the term “attention” is in some respects a better one for describing how most contemporary films (are designed to) work. Affect is a common aspect of the film experience, and one that evades or sits alongside rational analysis and interpretation of films — and thus is definitely worthy of study. However, films also perhaps quite simply function as stimuli for my attention (just as parents might shove their kids in front of the TV to keep them quiet, regardless of what is actually on). My attention is drawn to the screen as a result of numerous cinematic techniques (fast cutting rates, close ups of human faces, bright colours, loud noises and more), and that is all that matters for the movie studios and their affiliated companies: the only thing that matters is that I am watching, because the only form of bad publicity is no publicity. Enjoyment has little to do with this experience; indeed, getting a movie fix can, like any number of cigarettes, alcoholic beverages or fast food meals, make one feel unhealthy and/or unhappy. So while studying affect is no doubt key, studying the elicitation of attention might be equally important. Indeed, a discussion of boredom seems most important to a conference like the SCSMI, because so many of the psychologist participants thereat speak of cinema as a tool for arousing attention, regardless of the emotions elicited; a film that cannot maintain our attention is almost antithetical to the cinema that these scholars so often study (and take, sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly, for being the “real” or the “best” cinema). A mainstream film might arouse our attention, but a slow film might be something that we instead *attend to*. Many viewers might find this invitation to attend intolerable (and this is not just a matter of an ADHD-infected youth; my mother, who is a great corrective in my life to my enthusiasm for art house cinema, said to me once that she would “rather die” than watch the second part of *Sátántangó* with me, so anaesthetising had she found the first part). Raised on mainstream films, we (some viewers) come to expect everything to rush at them, for it all to be served on a (fast food, fast cinema) plate, our attention filched from us, not something that we give

or pay. It takes a trained viewer to want to watch a film to which we must attend, a film that requires effort. And to do that, one has to flirt with boredom and to get to understand and perhaps even to like boredom, however paradoxical that might sound.

In summary, then, 2013 has been a “slow” year. But the tortoise that is slow cinema seems to be keeping pace with the fast and brained hare of the nimble mainstream. Indeed, by taking part in the same race, it seems that the two mutually reinforce the system that sustains them. Both, then, speak of the generalised boredom that seems the condition for contemporary cinema (and cinema not just as the condition for boredom). Nonetheless, studying fast or slow cinema, 2013 has involved numerous pleasures at numerous conferences as I have heard numerous excellent papers. My thanks to all those organisers who made this possible. At whatever pace it can keep going, may film studies continue to yield such excellent scholarship for a long time to come.

1. To reference another conference in which slowness and boredom were discussed recently in relation to Belá Tarr, I should mention papers given by Elzbieta Buslowska’s “‘Give me a Body, then’ — Belá Tarr’s World of Non-Human Becoming” (2013) and Calum Watt’s (2013) discussion of Tarr’s films, “Belá Tarr’s Disastrous Bodies,” at *The Body in Eastern European and Russian Cinema*, University of Greenwich, 21-22 June.

2. Thomas Elsaesser, “Cinephilia or the Uses of Disenchantment,” in *Cinephilia: Movies, Love and Memory*, ed. Marijke de Valck and Malte Hagener (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), 33.

3. Drehli Robnik, “Mass Memories of Movies: Cinephilia as Norm and Narrative in Blockbuster Culture,” in *ibid.*, 60.

4. The drive to pre-sell movies is only made all the clearer by crowd-funding schemes like Kickstarter. By 2012, 10 per cent of films screened at the Sundance Film Festival were funded at least partially through Kickstarter, accessed 23 Aug. 2013, <http://www.kickstarter.com/year/2012#sundance>. By 2013, fully professional filmmakers like Zach Braff and Spike Lee were using the site to raise major budgets for their projects — see Ben Child, “Zach Braff’s Kickstarter campaign closes on \$3.1m,” *The Guardian*, 28 May 2013, accessed 23 Aug. 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/may/28/zach-braff-kickstarter-campaign-closes>; Eliana Dockterman, “Spike Lee Film Raises \$1.4 Million on Kickstarter,” *Time*, 21 Aug., accessed 23 Aug. 2013, <http://newsfeed.time.com/2013/08/21/spike-lee-film-raises-1-4-million-on-kickstarter>. Initially the preserve of the truly independent, the site quickly seems to be turning into a space where professionals raise the money for their films, while at the same time functioning as an excellent marketing tool. Why would the studios not follow suit? Indeed, given that Hollywood studios encourage viewers to watch their products repeatedly (at the theatre, on DVD, the Special Edition, the Director’s Cut, the Anniversary Edition, the upgrade to Blu-Ray, the 3D re-release, the 3D Blu-Ray, and so on), thereby inviting audiences serially to invest in the same film, it only makes sense that the studios would get their audiences to buy the film in advance. What could be more logical? Fifty thousand people ‘invest’ in a film; only a handful will not go to see the film when it comes out — especially if they get to scour the end credits to see their name on the big screen. And then why would they not buy the DVD, since they are part of the magic? Meanwhile, the stories of how much each film is raising would be excellent marketing fodder, it would remove risk from many films, especially the possibility of flops (if the film did not meet its investment target, it would not get made — standard Kickstarter policy), while really taking the public’s money at the outset, investing none of its own money, but yielding pure profit as a result merely of facilitating the relationship between filmmaker and viewer. Capitalism would have melted into air — in a terrifyingly exploitative fashion.