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**‘You’ll never get it if you don’t slow down, my friend’:
towards a rhythmanalysis of the everyday in the cinema of
Jim Jarmusch and Gus Van Sant**

ABSTRACT

This essay offers close readings of films by the independent U.S directors Jim Jarmusch and Gus Van Sant with a particular focus on their slow-paced representation of everyday life. Building on the work of Henri Lefebvre, the author proposes that so-called ‘slow cinema’ can be read not simply as an aesthetic choice, but as an alternative and potentially oppositional rhythm in the era of fast capitalism.

In a scene from Wayne Wang and Paul Auster’s *Smoke* (1995), Auggie shows Paul his ‘picture project’: a series of photographs of a street corner in Brooklyn. Auggie explains that he has taken ‘more than four thousand pictures of the same place. The corner of Third Street and Seventh Avenue at eight o’clock in the morning. Four thousand straight days in all kinds of weather’. Paul respectfully skims this collection before describing the photographs as ‘all the same’ and Auggie offers the following gentle rebuke:

You'll never get it if you don't slow down, my friend ... you're going too fast. You're hardly even looking at the pictures They're all the same, but each one is different from every other one. You've got your bright mornings and your dark mornings. You've got your summer light and your autumn light. You've got your weekdays and your weekends. You've got your people in overcoats and galoshes, and you've got your people in shorts and T-shirts. Sometimes the same people, sometimes different ones.

Auggie’s picture project offers a *mise-en-abyme* for the film in which it appears and also for a supra-genre within contemporary world cinema. The ‘cinema of slowness’ is an umbrella term for an aesthetic sensibility evident in film-making in various genres ranging from neo-documentary to surrealism which are united in their implicit opposition to the global hegemony of speed and spectacle.¹ Whilst the dominant visual culture gravitates towards the *mise-en-scène* of music video and advertising (short takes, rapid editing, montage, close-ups, mobile camera and CGI), slow

¹ Michel Ciment is generally credited with coining the phrase ‘cinema of slowness’ in his inaugural address at the 46th San Francisco International Film Festival in 2003. Subsequently, writing for *Sight & Sound*, Jonathan Romney did much to promote and popularize the term ‘slow cinema’.

cinema cultivates a photographic, or painterly style based on the long take, long shot and fixed camera. Often, the 'project' of these 'pictures' is the evocative defamiliarization of the everyday through its artfully artless re-presentation. The narrative design in these films is minimalist and undramatic at least in conventional terms. An immobile camera patiently records the humdrum details of a banal interior or a vernacular landscape in scenes that are often so motionless they approximate a still life. Stillness is often accompanied by silence as though this cinema was aspiring to the condition of photography.² When speech is uttered it might sound mundane. Where movement occurs it typically involves a languid and directionless drifting.

Slow cinema, of course, is not a new development in film history. A genealogy would trace the work of late twentieth and early twenty-first century auteurs such as Béla Tarr, Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Abbas Kiarostami, Jia Zhangke and Apichatpong Weerasethakul back to mid-century Japanese (Kurosawa, Mizoguchi and Ozu) and European directors (Akerman, Antonioni, Bergman, Bresson, Dreyer and Tarkovsky).³ One of the defining features in recent American contributions to this tradition is a foregrounded familiarity with both its cinematic contemporaries and filmic forebears. The most prominent practitioners of U.S slow cinema and the focal point for

² Justin Remes's *Motion(less) Pictures: The Cinema of Stasis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015) offers a detailed study of the purest manifestations of this impulse.

³ A more detailed, but still far from comprehensive list of contemporary slow cinema could include, from Europe: Béla Tarr's epic *Satantango* (1994), *The Werckmeister Harmonies* (2000) and *The Turin Horse* (2011), Aki Kaurismäki's *The Match Factory Girl* (1990), Theo Angelopoulos's, *Eternity and A Day* (1998), Pedro Costa's *In Vanda's Room* (2000), Ceylan's *Distant* (2002), Aleksandr Sokurov's *Russian Ark* (2006), Albert Serra's *Birdsong* (2008) and Michelangelo Frammartino's *The Four Times* (2010). From the UK, the social dramas of Mike Leigh and Patrick Keiller could be included in this canon whilst Steve McQueen's shift from gallery-based video art to feature-length films underlines the affinities between slow cinema and analogous installation art. E.g. Douglas Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho* (1993) and *Five-Year Drive-By* (1995). The Swedish director, Anders Weberg, has announced the intention of releasing a slow film on December 31st 2020 which will last 720 hours (30 days). The first trailer for *Ambiancé* (2020) appeared in 2014 and lasted seventy-two minutes. A follow-up trailer in 2016 stretched to seventy-two hours. More modestly, at least in terms of durational breadth, from the Middle East one could note Kiarostami's *Taste of Cherry* (1997) and *The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999) from the Americas, the work of Carlos Reygadas (for example, *Silent Light* (2007)) and Lisandro Alonso (such as *Liverpool* (2008)). Asia is arguably the hub of global slow cinema and here a selective list could highlight Tsai Ming-Liang *Vive L'Amour* (1994), Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love* (2000), Kim Ki-duk's *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter ... and Spring* (2003) and *3-Iron* (2004), Hou Hsiao-Hsien's *Three Times* (2005), Hur Jin-ho's *April Snow* (2005), Zhangke's *Still Life* (2006), Hirokazu Kore-eda's *Still Walking* (2008) and the work of Weerasethakul including, most recently, *Cemetery of Splendour* (2015).

this essay are Jim Jarmusch and Gus Van Sant (and in particular the latter's 'Death Trilogy').⁴ In their films and interviews, both directors frequently allude to a Japanese and European cinematic lineage. So, for example, Jarmusch's *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* (1999) is intertextually ghosted by Jean-Pierre Melville's *The Samurai* (1967) and the 'Helsinki' segment of *Night on Earth* (1991) uses actors from Kaurismäki's 'Finland Trilogy'.⁵ Similarly, Gus Van Sant's *Gerry* (2002) alludes explicitly to shots from Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* (1971), Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman* (1975) and Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979) whilst offering 'Special thanks to Béla Tarr' in its closing credits. In terms of home-grown influences, Stanley Kubrick and Terence Malick are both seminal contributors to the slow tradition in U.S film-making and Jarmusch and Van Sant have respectively paid homage to the impact on their work of John Cassavetes. One should also acknowledge here the 'anti-films' of Andy Warhol about everyday activities including *Eat* (1964), *Sleep* (1963) and *Haircut* (1964).⁶ Warhol's *Empire* (1964) arguably stands as the pinnacle of U.S slow cinema.⁷

A genealogy of U.S slow cinema can be extended beyond film to other visual arts. Photography and painting feature prominently in the work of Jarmusch and Van Sant. On three separate occasions in *The Limits of Control* (2009) the 'Lone Man' visits the Sofia - Spain's National Museum of 20th Century Art - and stands transfixed before different portraits and landscapes

⁴ The 'Death Trilogy' is comprised of *Gerry* (2002), *Elephant* (2003) and *Last Days* (2005). A shortlist of other notable contributors to U.S slow cinema since the 80s would include Godfrey Reggio (*Koyaanisqatsi* (1982) and *Powaqqatsi* (1988)), Richard Linklater (*Slacker* (1991)), Harmony Korine (*Gummo* (1997)), Vincent Gallo (*The Brown Bunny* (2003)), Lodge Kerrigan (*Keane* (2004)), Kelly Reichardt (*Old Joy* (2006), *Wendy and Lucy* (2008) and *Meek's Cutoff* (2010)), Sofia Coppola (*Somewhere* (2010)), Matt Porterfield (*Putty Hill* (2010)), Peter Rinaldi (*In Passing* (2011)), Jem Cohen (*Museum Hours* (2012)) and Frederick Wiseman's *Ex Libris* (2017).

⁵ The 'Finland Trilogy' comprises *The Man Without A Past* (2002), *Drifting Clouds* (1996) and *Lights in the Dusk* (2006).

⁶ Taylor Mead, a regular in Warhol films including *Couch* (1964), appears in Jarmusch's *Coffee and Cigarettes* (2005).

⁷ *Empire* offers a single slow motion and fixed camera shot of the Empire State Building which lasts over eight hours.

which function as self-reflexive symbols of the film's own painterly style. In their choice of location (isolated figures are set against run-down nocturnal cityscapes, cafes, hotel rooms and country roads) and palette (deep blues, greens and greys mixed with splashes of vibrant red), Jarmusch's colour films are invisibly framed by the painting of Edward Hopper whilst his black-and-white oeuvre evokes the photography of Robert Frank. (By way of homage a collection of Frank's work appears on a coffee table in *Broken Flowers* (2005)). Jun, a Japanese visitor to Memphis in *Mystery Train* (1989), takes snapshots not of the tourist spectacle (Graceland, Beale Street, Sun Studios), but of commonplace objects such as curtains, lamps and carpet. As he explains to Mitsuko, his girlfriend: 'the hotel rooms and the airports are the things I forget'. In interview, Van Sant has testified to the influence on his work of William Eggleston – the pioneering colour photographer of commonplace American interiors and landscapes. Numerous shots in *Elephant* quote iconic Eggleston shots: young Americans in bright yellow and red clothing; the back of someone's head; a car in autumn leaves; a bathroom; a telegraph line; the sky. *Elephant*, like *Mystery Train*, also features a photographer in a leading role. Elias follows students around a high school with his camera and thus produces a multiple exposure within the film by acting simultaneously as a double for the director and for the film's other 'shooters' (*Elephant* delivers a largely 'undramatic' dramatization of the Columbine shootings).

Although the photographic, or painterly style of slow cinema diverges from the mainstream 'novelistic film', we can also trace a literary dimension to this genealogy.⁸ Jarmusch studied literature at Columbia University and has proposed that his work is 'more related to poetry as a form than to prose'.⁹ Poetic allusions are frequent in his oeuvre - Lautreamont in *Permanent Vacation* (1980), Robert Frost in *Down by Law* (1986) and William Blake in *Dead Man* (1985) – and reach a crescendo in *Paterson*. This slow-motion road movie charts the journey of a full-time bus

⁸ The phrase 'novelistic [romanesque] film' comes from Christian Metz's *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 104 passim.

⁹ From an interview with Stephen Rea in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (24 Dec. 1989).

driver and part-time poet and includes references to Petrarch, Emily Dickinson, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Wallace Stevens, Allen Ginsberg and Frank O'Hara. The key poetic landmark in *Paterson* is also a native son of Paterson, New Jersey: William Carlos Williams. In a quirky act of lyrical condensation, the title of the film refers to a bus driver, the city in which he lives and works and the epic poem by Williams named after his hometown.¹⁰ In the course of the film we see an edition of *Paterson* and a copy of Williams' collected early poems and hear quotations from both: '[t]o make a start,/ out of particulars' (the opening poetic lines of *Paterson*); 'no ideas but in things' (from 'A Sort of Song' (1944)); and the verse 'This is Just to Say' (1934). Framed photographs of the writer are visible on Paterson's desk and on the wall behind a bar alongside a business card which reads 'WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS, M.D'. The inspiration for Jarmsuch's choice of occupation for Paterson might be Williams's 'In the 'Sconset Bus' (1932). This imagist verse offers a meticulous sketch of a woman seated on a bus with a panting dog on her lap (Paterson also has a bulldog called Marvin). Each day during his lunch hour, Paterson sits in the park and looks at the Passaic Falls which feature on the cover of many editions of *Paterson*. On one of these occasions he is joined by a Japanese poet carrying a Japanese edition of *Paterson*. His response to discovering a shared passion with a stranger on a park bench continues the film's whimsical echoes: 'A bus driver in Paterson. Ahhh. This very poetic. This could be a poem by William Carlos Williams'. Poetic *son* follows in the footsteps of poetic *pater* by cultivating a fierce sensitivity to the aesthetics of everyday places, quotidian objects and activities: sleeping and eating, walking to work and walking the dog, the design of a matchbox and the circular rim of a beer glass. The veneration of the vernacular lay at the heart of Williams's poems about plums in an icebox, pieces of a broken green bottle lying in cinders next to a wall and most famously, a commonplace farming tool (which can be visualized by tracing a line around each of the four stanzas):

so much depends
upon

¹⁰ The five volumes of *Paterson* were published between 1946 and 1958.

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens..¹¹

The imagist aesthetic evolved in opposition to an accelerated modernity – Williams’ agricultural wheelbarrow is offered implicitly as a poetic brake on the Fordist speed-up of industrialization – and thus sustained a tradition which can be traced back to those nineteenth-century Transcendentalists who offered a dissident response to the increased pace of life in Jacksonian America. Walt Whitman features in *Down by Law*, but Henry David Thoreau is the afflatus on American slow cinema.¹² When Roberto, a devotee of *Leaves of Grass*, retires to a wooden house in the Louisiana bayou in *Down by Law*, or when Blake bathes in a waterfall and wanders through the woods next to a lake in Van Sant’s *Last Days* (2005), it recalls Thoreau’s withdrawal to Walden Pond away from the ‘infinite bustle’ of a burgeoning urban-industrial milieu.¹³ Thoreau stands as a muse for Jarmusch and Van Sant with his hostility to technological speed and commodity clutter, insistence on minimalism in life and art, celebration of the pleasures of slowness, stillness and solitude, meticulous observation of small details from nature, embrace of quiescence and the ‘art of walking’ which is the quintessential everyday activity in slow cinema.

Walking practices have been one of the focal points for research into the everyday most famously in Michel De Certeau’s ‘Walking in the City’ (1984), but also in the work of the theorist who led the way into this critical territory, Henri Lefebvre. Widely recognized for his emphasis on the social production of space, Lefebvre is perhaps less well known for his contribution to

¹¹ ‘The Red Wheelbarrow’ (1923). The two other poems alluded to here are ‘This Is Just To Say’ (1934) and ‘Between Walls’ (1934).

¹² Thoreau’s presence can be implicit as in the examples cited above from Jarmusch and Van Sant, or explicit as in Shane Caruth’s *Upstream Colour* (2013) which is enframed by *Walden, or Life in the Woods* (1854).

¹³ The phrase is from Thoreau’s ‘Life Without Principle’ (1863). ‘This world is a place of business. What an infinite bustle!’ In *Henry David Thoreau: Collected Essays* (Library of America: New York, 2001), 348.

understanding the everyday in relation to the ‘lived temporality’ which might be excavated from by a history of rhythms.¹⁴ Lefebvre’s injunction to look closely at ‘how we live ... for example, a day in the life of an individual, any day, no matter how trivial’ would serve as an epigraph for most of Jarmusch and Van Sant’s films.¹⁵ In his last book, Lefebvre sketched the possibility of a new discipline of *rhythmanalysis* which divided the diverse tempi of social time into two general categories: linear and cyclical rhythms. Linear rhythms are associated primarily with the metronomic beat of clock time and urban-industrial modernity. ‘Everyday life is modeled on abstract, quantitative time, the time of watches and clocks ... homogenous and desacralized ... *the measure of the time of work*’.¹⁶ In contrast with the mechanical and abstract pulse of linear time, cyclical rhythms are more endogenous and synchronized with the seasons, solar and lunar revolution. In one chapter from *Rhythmanalysis*, ‘Seen from the Window’, Lefebvre looks out at Parisian street life from an apartment and meticulously records a symphony of linear and cyclical rhythms in what might serve as a treatment for a slow film (and that resonates explicitly with the European café scenes in Jarmusch’s *Limits of Control*): different bodies in motion - ‘schoolchildren, shoppers, tourists’ – and types of traffic, the routine and the chance occurrence, the activity in bistros and stores and hotels, plant life, sunlight and shadow, moonlight and neon.¹⁷

Lefebvre sees everyday life as an ensemble of rhythms – a ‘polyrhythmia’ - but recognizes that some tempi are more insistent than others. The advent of transnational telecommunications and transport networks has enabled an ever more rapid movement of capital, goods and people. Currently, the rhythms of a hyper-accelerated capitalism enjoy such ascendancy that the very notion of the ‘day’ in ‘everyday’ is under pressure from the indefatigable flows of finance capital and 24/7 instantaneous global technology networks. Lefebvre’s assertion that the ‘media day never

¹⁴ Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life* (London: Continuum, 2004), 21.

¹⁵ Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life* (London: Verso, 2002), 43.

¹⁶ Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 73.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

ends' is also a key note in the pioneering work of Paul Virilio on 'dromology', or the science of speed: the 'electronic day of telecommunication is not identical any more with the astronomical day of the ephemerides'.¹⁸ Within the political economy of speed, slowness is typically stigmatized as an affront to capitalist efficiency. The cult of quickness has been met, however, by a countervailing global Slow Movement in a variety of fields including cinema that ranges from urban planning and design to technology and travel, medicine and food. At one point in Jarmusch's *Coffee and Cigarettes* a character suggests 'if you don't like it here we could go to Taco Bell ... or the International House of Pancakes'. The fast food franchises here signify a compulsive capitalist alacrity which is implicitly rebuked by the leisurely and at times lackadaisical locations in *Coffee and Cigarettes*. Jarmusch's grungy cafes and bars evoke and embrace the polyrhythmia of everyday life. More generally, the geography of slow cinema gravitates towards the margins of and the dead zones within accelerated culture. In these dilatory places and non-places, the spectator encounters the temporal tactics of deceleration and sometimes interminable delay. Whilst globalization races towards the abolition of space by time, slow cinema aspires to the abolition of time by space.

The antipode to slow cinema is the society of the spectacle. Contemporary visual culture is largely synchronized with the pulse of neoliberalism: the 24/7 proliferation and circulation of images in multiple media is structurally integrated with the political economy of speed. In this context, optical practices become increasingly saccadic as the eye flits between a kaleidoscope of constantly changing images on TV, PC and mobile devices.¹⁹ This might seem to suggest that the experience of slowness has been eliminated by a global cult of speed when, in fact, the opposite is true. As Lefebvre observes, the slow and cyclical pulse of nature and the tachycardia of

¹⁸ Ibid., 46. Paul Virilio, *A Landscape of Events* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 65.

¹⁹ In *Paterson*, the eponymous hero refuses to own a smart phone and refers disparagingly to this gadget as 'a leash'.

contemporary capitalism ‘enter into a perpetual interaction and are even relative to each other’.²⁰

Slowness can be understood as a variety of speed. Time-saving technologies often produce new experiences of slowness: traffic congestion, airport terminals, download times, being put on hold.

In an accelerated culture, the experience of slowness tends to be associated with the frustration of waiting, emptiness and boredom.²¹ Conversely, the carefully crafted counter-spectacles of Jarmusch and Van Sant aim to remind audiences of the pleasures of slowness.

Slow cinema lags willfully behind the capitalist imperative of speed and implicitly renounces its associated values of promptness and rapid turnover. Editing is crucial in this regard. Whilst mainstream cinema, to borrow a phrase from Adorno, ‘expels from movements all hesitation’, the tempo in Jarmusch and Van Sant relies on *rallentando* and *fermata*.²² The defining formal feature of slow film is a temporal pacing which eschews the kinetic cutting of mainstream visual culture for the stubbornly unhurried long shot. The average shot length in American cinema has been decreasing steadily over recent decades. David Bordwell has calculated that most Hollywood films before the 1960s ‘contained between three hundred and seven hundred shots, so the average shot length (ASL) hovered between 8 and 11 seconds’.²³ By the turn of the century, in action films such as *The Bourne Supremacy* (2004), there were over 2600 shots with an ASL of 2.3 seconds.²⁴ In 2002, the year that the first installment of the *Bourne* franchise was released, Matt Damon also appeared in Van Sant’s *Gerry*, a 103-minute film composed of approximately 90 shots with an ASL of 65 seconds.²⁵ Van Sant outlined his rationale for resisting the cut as follows:

²⁰ Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 90.

²¹ See Joe Moran’s *Reading the Everyday* (New York: Routledge, 2005) and *Queuing for Beginners: The Story of Daily Life From Breakfast to Bedtime* (London: Profile, 2007) for more on this process of devalorization.

²² Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life* (London: Verso, 2005), 19.

²³ David Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 121.

²⁴ These statistics are cited at the Cinemetrics website:

http://www.cinemetrics.lv/topic.php?topic_ID=333. Accessed: 23 February 2018.

²⁵ A single tracking shot towards the end of *Gerry* pursues Damon and his co-star Casey Affleck as they plod wearily across the desert for seven minutes, or enough time for 182 shots of high-octane action in a *Bourne* film. Van Sant credits Tarr in *Gerry* and it is worth noting that the ASL in *Sátántangó* (1994) is over 150 seconds.

Since 1915, when people started to use editing to tell a story, we've had the convention of the reaction shot: I say something, then we cut to your reaction ... But life is a continuous thing with a rhythm of its own, and when you cut to adjust that rhythm to suit the dramatic impact you create a new, false rhythm.²⁶

In the process of simulating the rhythm of the everyday, slow cinema allows the spectator's gaze a certain autonomy – a freedom to wander within the frame - that is occluded by the quick cut. In this regard, slow film challenges the opposition which Walter Benjamin drew between cinema and painting.

Let us compare the screen on which a film unfolds with the canvas of a painting. The painting invites the viewer to contemplation; before it, he can give himself up to his train of associations. Before a film image, he cannot do so. No sooner has he seen it than it has already changed. It cannot be fixed on ... 'I can no longer think what I want to think. My thoughts have been replaced by moving images' [Duhamel].²⁷

The long take on a still or slowly moving subject creates a visual field which permits the possibility of a contemplative gaze. The rapid editing of Hollywood style is accompanied in many genres by kinetic cinematography: jerky handheld cameras, whiplash pans and tilts, high-speed tracking shots and rack zooms. In slow cinema, the signature move is relative immobility. The staccato articulation of mainstream film is replaced by a measured *glissando* (glide): the hand of the camera operator and editor performs with restraint and delicacy of movement. In Jarmusch's work this formal signature is supplemented by a long fade to black (up to ten seconds in *Stranger than Paradise*) which encourages sustained reflection on the preceding image. The spectator of slow cinema is thus given space to look at that which is typically overlooked and time in which to consider the experience of time itself as it is embedded in different ways of looking. The genre encourages an acute sensitivity to the passing of minutes and seconds and time accordingly acquires a materiality which is largely erased by the rapid elisions and compressions of classic Hollywood style. So, for example, Paterson's first act in *Paterson* is to check his watch and this gesture is repeated at the start of each new day. Close-ups on watch faces and the non-diegetic

²⁶ S.F. Said, 'Shock Corridors', *Sight & Sound*, Volume 14, Number 2 (2004), 17.

²⁷ Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1969), 238.

sound of a clock ticking are accompanied by Paterson's poetic meditations on time as 'the fourth dimension'. The vampires in *Only Lovers Left Alive* think in terms of millennia and denounce the 'zombie time' of humans as impossibly evanescent.

Alongside these explicit ruminations, the general level of durational density in slow cinema produces a textured temporality that might be considered in relation to the Deleuzian concept of the 'time-image'. In contrast to the 'movement-image' which predominates in commercial cinema, Deleuze posits a 'time-image' which 'no longer has space and movement as its primary characteristics but topology and time'.²⁸ Whereas the movement-image is integrated with the linearity of classical Hollywood narrative, the time-image is characterized by synchronicity and temporal instability both of which are conspicuous features in the work of Van Sant and Jarmusch. *Night on Earth* deftly counterpoints five stories involving taxi drivers and their passengers which take place simultaneously in Los Angeles, New York, Paris, Rome and Helsinki. In a similar fashion, *Mystery Train* interweaves three stories that take place on the same night in Memphis whilst *Coffee and Cigarettes* and *The Limits of Control* repeat the same events in different settings. The temporal structure in Van Sant's *Last Days*, *Paranoid Park* (2007) and *Elephant* is purposefully rambling and loopy. We should recall here that for Lefebvre *Le Quotidien* is both the mundane and that which is repeated: 'no rhythm without repetition in time and space'.²⁹ Repetition and the repetition of repetition is integral to slow cinema. In *Elephant*, the paths of three students – Elias, John and Michelle – cross briefly in the corridor of their school and the apparent banality of this encounter is unfolded by its three-fold repetition from the perspective of each participant at different points in the film. Slow cinema encourages recognition of the extent to which the similar is not the same. There are instances of conventional dramatic action involving violence and death in *Elephant* and in some other slow films, but these scenes are fleeting, typically muted and appear

²⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image* (London: Continuum, 1989), 121.

²⁹ Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 6.

primarily to underscore subtle gradations of difference in the everyday moments which precede and follow. The shootings which take place at the end of *Elephant* return the spectator to the fundamental value of the humdrum happenings just witnessed: unstructured and taken-for-granted gestures such as walking into a building or looking up at the sky (for the last time). Van Sant's 'Death Trilogy' and Jarmusch's *Dead Man* are haunted by the idea of the end and the manner in which it can invest the superficially mundane with profound meaning. Forgettable moments, the experiences which occur *between* what are regarded by orthodox narrative convention as 'events', form the core of slow cinema. Jarmusch's cinema is squarely founded on 'the non-dramatic moments in life.'³⁰ This interest in the 'uninteresting' was evident from an early stage in his film-making career when Jarmusch asked Nicholas Ray for advice on draft film scripts: "[Ray] would say, 'There's nothing happening. You need action. The girl should pull a gun out of her purse and shoot the guy.' At which point I'd take the script home and remove even more of the action.'³¹ According to Blanchot's succinct formula: '[n]othing happens; this is the everyday'.³² And yet, in slow cinema, *so much nothing* is happening that an inversion or *enanitodromia* ensues: the anti-drama of dead time becomes a valorization of the micro-dramas of everyday life.³³ We will now turn our attention to the rhythmic patterns underpinning the specific acts, settings and props from which the micro-dramas of slow cinema are composed.

Activities which in commercial cinema might provide a backdrop or momentary digression often appear centre-stage in the film-making of Jarmusch and Van Sant. Drinking coffee and smoking

³⁰ Ludvig Hertzberg ed., *Jim Jarmusch: Interviews* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 188.

³¹ *New Statesman* 5 Jan. 1996.

³² Maurice Blanchot, 'Everyday Speech', *Yale French Studies*, Volume 73 (1987), 15.

³³ Jung developed the concept of *enanitodromia* from Greek philosophy to describe a process whereby a quality is pushed so far that it becomes its opposite.

cigarettes is the centrepiece of *Coffee and Cigarettes*. In *Last Days*, we watch Blake in the kitchen for several minutes as he does some washing-up, looks for a spoon, reads a post-it on the fridge and eats some cereal. In other scenes, the drama involves watching Blake comb his hair and attempt to change clothes. *Gerry* hones in on the act of tying shoelaces whilst *Mystery Train* and *Down by Law* both feature prolonged footage of someone polishing their shoes. As if impatient with even these minimalist gestures, slow cinema will often dwell on moments of stillness and inaction. Frequently in Van Sant's cinema what appears to be an establishing shot becomes the scene itself. In *Last Days*, there is a long hold (over a minute) as Blake sits on a bench to look at a lake. *Last Days* also offers near freeze-frame images of people sleeping on beds, in chairs and on the floor. Much of *Dead Man* focuses on another character called 'Blake' drifting in and out of sleep and characters in *Stranger than Paradise* and *Down by Law* are similarly soporific for long stretches of time. *Only Lovers Left Alive* opens with images of a vampire dyad sleeping in different parts of the world. For much of the rest of the film, these creatures of the night are far more sedentary than predatory and are repeatedly seen in bed and on chaise longue in a state of extravagant torpor. Needless to say, Jarmusch's contribution to vampire cinema features no scenes of violent blood-sucking. The opening moments of *Paterson* also focus on a couple sleeping and this image is then repeated throughout the film and supplemented by shots of their dozing dog.³⁴ The final segments of *Mystery Train* and *Night and Earth* both feature drunken bodies in semi-comatose conditions. In *Broken Flowers*, the minimalist acting style of Bill Murray is exploited to the full in scenes featuring his character, Don Johnson, sleeping or stationary on planes and buses, beds and couches. In repeated shots, Murray is seen fixed to his couch: looking at a glass of champagne or coffee, but not picking it up and resolutely not collecting his post or answering a phone call. He simply sits whilst, ironically, wearing a track suit. Similar levels of lassitude are on display in *Permanent Vacation*

³⁴ For Jonathan Crary, sleep is an increasingly endangered, but also productive state for those seeking alternatives to the non-stop processes of accelerated culture: 'sleep requires periodic disengagement from networks and devices in order to enter a state of inactivity and uselessness. It is a form of time that leads us elsewhere than to the things we own or are told we need'. Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (Verso: London, 2013), 126.

and *Stranger than Paradise* with long holds on ‘uninvolved protagonists’ yawning and sighing whilst they lounge around apartments and motel rooms, stare listlessly out of windows or slump in front of the TV.³⁵

The flamboyant indolence of these characters is complemented by the disciplined serenity of Jarmusch’s assassins in *Ghost Dog* and *The Limits of Control*. Both the eponymous Ghost Dog and the Lone Man achieve stillness through motion by practising Tai Chi and their gestures crystallize an equilibrium to which slow cinema aspires. To return to Blanchot: ‘[n]othing happens; this is the everyday. But what is the meaning of this stationary movement?’³⁶ The characteristic camera move in slow cinema is a gently gliding tracking shot which produces a sense of stillness and balance within the frame. In *Elephant*, for example, a Steadicam follows just behind a subject who appears fixed in place whilst the world slides past in slow motion. A similar camera placement in *Gerry*’s longest scene makes the two protagonists appear to be walking on the spot as they creep at a snail’s pace across the desert. Train travel is a recurring motif in Jarmusch (*Mystery Train*, *Dead Man* and *Limits of Control*) and the idea of staying still whilst moving extends to images of plane travel (*Broken Flowers*), escalators and moving walkways (*Limits of Control*) and canoes (*Dead Man* and *Down by Law*). The principal mode of stationary movement in slow cinema however is the car journey. *Night on Earth* transports the spectator across continents, but in each of the five stories we find drivers and passengers more-or-less static inside a taxi. Jarmusch’s explanation for this singular choice of location underlines his commitment to the everyday:

If you think about taking a taxi, it’s something insignificant in your daily life; in a film when someone takes a taxi, you see them get in, then there’s a cut, then you see them get out. So in a way the content of this film is made up of things that would usually be taken out.³⁷

³⁵ This coinage is attributable to Andrew Klevan in *Disclosure of the Everyday: Undramatic Achievement in Narrative Film* (Trowbridge: Flicks, 2000), 172. Klevan’s study draws on Stanley Cavell to uncover the capacity of undramatic cinema to ‘unconceal the significance which often remains buried in the habitual ... [to] do justice to the moments in life which do not proclaim their significance ... [and] the discreet ways in which film narration can bring the world to our attention’ (209).

³⁶ Maurice Blanchot, ‘Everyday Speech’, 15.

³⁷ Peter Keogh, ‘Home and Away’, interview with Jim Jarmusch, *Sight & Sound*, Volume 2 Number 4 (1991), 9.

Most of the taxi journeys in *Night on Earth* take place at night against a Hopper-esque neon cityscape. Coincidentally, the late night 'Paris' section is filmed not too far from the district around the *Arts et Métiers* where Lefebvre 'at three or four o'clock in the morning' observed 'a few cars at the red light Other times, there is no-one at the lights, with their alternating flashes (red, amber, green)'.³⁸ Jarmusch's road trips in *Night on Earth*, *Stranger than Paradise*, *Ghost Dog*, *Broken Flowers*, *The Limits of Control*, *Only Lovers Left Alive* and *Paterson* prioritize the journey itself rather than the destination. Driving is not an intersection between scenes, but rather the scene itself during which the spectator, like the driver or passenger, gets to gaze silently through a frame at parts of the city not normally seen. On the road with Jarmusch the camera always sticks to the slow lane: 'the car's going to be driving slowly, very slowly towards the city' (*Down by Law*).

The city seen from cars and buses is prominent in *Restless* (2011) and the road is an important symbol in Van Sant's early work (*Drugstore Cowboy* (1989), *My Own Private Idaho* (1991) and *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (1993)). The opening five minutes of *Gerry* follow a car as it drives into the desert to the accompaniment of Arvo Pärt's 'Spiegel im Spiegel'. The choice of a minimalist soundtrack mirrors the pared down aesthetic of a film in which one word – 'Gerry' – serves both as title and the shared name of the only two characters.³⁹ This minimalism is most apparent in a plot which, after the opening five minutes, focuses almost exclusively on 'the rhythm of their walking' as part of a startling formal exercise in observing an everyday activity most often taken for granted by the able-bodied.⁴⁰ In *Rhythmanalysis*, Lefebvre turns to '[o]ld films [which] show that our way of walking has altered over the course of the century'.⁴¹ *Gerry* looks at walking

³⁸ Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 30.

³⁹ As noted previously, a comparable concision is achieved by Jarmusch in *Paterson* where the title refers both to the setting and the lead character.

⁴⁰ Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 41.

⁴¹ Ibid. Lefebvre alludes here to films from the silent era, but in passing we might mention the modernist cinema of walking – such as, for example, Rossellini's *Viaggio in Italia* (1953), Antonioni's *L'Avventura* (1960), Varda's *La Pointe Courte* (1954) and Resnais's *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959) – as a shaping influence on contemporary American slow cinema.

from a distance, at medium range and close-up. *Gerry* offers images of walking from the front, the back and side-on, from above and below, from left to right and right to left, towards and away from the camera, in focus and out of focus. Gerry and Gerry walk uphill, downhill and on the flat across different terrains, in different lights, at different times of day in different weather conditions. They walk in different ways that range from a purposeful hike at the outset, through a military striding when they are lost and finally a zombie-like death march, but this is always walking without arrival. The second and third movements of the 'Death Trilogy' continue this fascination with walking: Van Sant's camera observes the trajectories traced in a high school by students in *Elephant* and the rambling of a suicidal rock star in *Last Days* as Blake meanders through the wilds around his country house. In *Paranoid Park* and *Restless* we follow teenagers traumatized by death as they cruise the rust belt and cemeteries in Portland, Oregon.

Walking is a similarly pivotal act in Jarmusch's cinema. Aside from a lengthy detour through the Louisiana back country in *Down by Law*, most of this peregrination takes place in the city. Lefebvre repeatedly visualizes his paradigmatic rhythmanalyst as '[h]e who walks down the street'.⁴² The opening slow motion images of Jarmusch's first film, *Permanent Vacation*, are of people walking in the city. The protagonist, Allie, drifts in from the edge of the frame and introduces himself in a voice-over: 'I go from this place, that person, to this place and that person, it doesn't really make that much difference'. Throughout the rest of the film Allie is seen sauntering through the back streets and run-down neighbourhoods of New York. After reading aloud a passage from *Maladoror*, Allie informs his girlfriend: '[y]ou have to start to drift'. Given Jarmusch's Francophilia and the influence of Lautréamont on the Situationists, it seems appropriate to read Allie's drifting in relation to the psychogeographical praxis of *dérive*:

What they [the Situationists] called the '*dérive*' (drifting) went beyond the voyeuristic strolling of the *flâneur* ... The hope, according to Chtcheglov, was complete liberatory disorientation through a kind of openness to the hidden wonders of urban space ... the practice of urban nomadism

⁴² Ibid., 28.

détourne the modern cityscape into a liberated zone in which authentic life would loosen the deathgrip of desiccated images.⁴³

It is precisely an ‘openness to the hidden wonders of urban space’ that seems to animate the unprogrammed wandering both of Jarmusch’s walkers and his camera. In *Mystery Train*, when Jun arrives at Memphis station he shuns the tourist itinerary and tells Mitsuko: ‘[l]et’s just walk around’. The same policy is pursued by Luisa, another visitor to the city, as she ambles on the streets between stores, diners and fleabag hotels far from the tourist hot-spots. The hit-men in *Ghost Dog* and *The Limits of Control* spend most of their time simply walking the streets of Jersey City, Madrid and Sevilla and the vampires in *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2013) indulge in decadent *flânerie* on the backstreets of Detroit and Tangiers. Jarmusch, like Lefebvre, sees the street as a site of more significance than the spaces it connects and ultimately as the epicentre of the everyday.

Lefebvre insists that the rhythmanalyst must ‘listen to the world, and above all to what are disdainfully called noises ... and finally he will listen to silences’.⁴⁴ Images of the everyday in slow cinema work in harmony with a distinctive soundscape which seems to take its cue from Bresson: ‘[a]gainst the tactics of speed, of noise, set tactics of slowness, of silence’.⁴⁵ Sustained silence often allows an unimpeded contemplation of the visual. It is rare for there to be any dialogue in the opening five minutes of a Jarmusch or Van Sant film and this initial reticence is then followed by long periods of shared or solitary quiet. ‘The pauses’, Jarmusch insists, ‘are more important, really, than the words.’⁴⁶ In *The Limits of Control*, the Blonde tells the Lone Man that her ‘favourite films are the ones where people sit there and don’t say anything’ following which, inevitably, the two sit together in silence. Different varieties of silence and accompanying nonverbal communication are evident in slow cinema: serene quietude (Blake and Nobody in *Dead Man*), inarticulate torpor

⁴³ Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: the denigration of vision in twentieth-century French thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 425.

⁴⁴ Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 19.

⁴⁵ Robert Bresson, *Notes on Cinematography* (New York: Urizen Books, 1977), 28.

⁴⁶ Ludvig Hertzberg ed., *Jim Jarmusch: Interviews*, 60.

(Willie and Eva in *Stranger than Paradise*), awkward intervals (throughout *Coffee and Cigarettes*), hostile inarticulacy (Jack and Zack sharing a prison cell in *Down by Law*) and oppressive muteness (the two Gerrys in the final stages of their walk). Often, when the silence is broken, the conversation in these films appears dumb. The longest colloquies in *Gerry* concern a video game and an episode of *Wheel of Fortune*. In *Elephant* the camera follows a trio of schoolgirls around a cafeteria and into the bathroom eavesdropping on five minutes of seemingly inconsequential prattle and many of the taxi conversations in *Night on Earth* appear equally banal. Whilst the dialogue in slow cinema lacks the polish of carefully scripted speech, its improvisatory quality more closely approximates the content and rhythms of everyday discourse. On occasion it seems to aspire to a vernacular lyricism. For Jarmusch, '[j]ust listening in a bus station is more valuable than watching mainstream films.'⁴⁷ Significantly, Jarmusch here does not refer explicitly to conversation and dialogue is not the only thing worth listening to in slow cinema. The soundscape during the bus journeys in *Paterson* is sometimes structured around idle conversation, but there are as many occasions where the sounds of the city and the mode of transport itself come to the fore. Sounds associated with *slowing down* such as air brakes and negotiating speed bumps are noticeable in this regard.⁴⁸ The protracted absence of scripted dialogue in Jarmusch's soundscapes permits us to hear random voices and sounds from the city, neighbouring apartments and the street. What might initially appear to be silence can in fact be an implicit deprioritisation of the human voice in favour of other frequencies within the spectrum of the everyday. During the long stretches of silence in *Gerry* one becomes increasingly attuned to other sounds: an increasingly laboured breathing which signifies 'the rhythms of the body... (respirations, pulses, circulations)', the crunching of gravel and loose rock underfoot, a wind which at times tantalizingly mimics traffic and a distant thunder promising a rain that never falls.⁴⁹ Similarly, though in an entirely different setting, the lack of

⁴⁷ Ludvig Hertzberg ed., *Jim Jarmusch: Interviews*, 152.

⁴⁸ It is worth mentioning that as fieldwork for *Paterson*, William Carlos Williams took lengthy bus journeys, wandered the city and sat in the park. Each of these activities feature prominently in Jarmusch's *Paterson*.

⁴⁹ Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 5.

dialogue in *Elephant* encourages attentiveness to a range of quotidian sounds from school life: the drone of chit-chat and echo of footsteps in the corridors, a muffled lecture, music and choir practice, sports and games from the gymnasium and fields. In slow cinema, the background noise of the everyday comes to the fore.

This figurative acoustic ‘rack focus’ is applicable both to sound and to the representation of space in slow cinema. Both Jarmusch and Van Sant favour medium and long shots which establish a balance between human subjects and the space around them. Slow cinema migrates towards low-tech, slower-paced environments and both directors offer long holds on images of trees, sky, water and birds. In *Gerry*, the natural landscape increasingly dwarfs the two men lost in the wilderness and in *Last Days*, during his traipsing, Blake is visually engulfed by trees. In one particular shot which resonates with Lefebvre’s contention that the rhythm analyst ‘does not only observe human activities’, Blake leaves the frame and the camera remains fixed for around forty seconds on some undistinguished foliage.⁵⁰ Although Jarmusch’s assassins live in the city, Ghost Dog spends much of his time on the rooftop caring for a flock of pigeons and the eye of the Lone Man is often drawn skyward by birdlife. In *Restless*, Annabel expresses a Darwinian fascination for how the each and all of nature ‘fit[s] together’ and makes naturalist sketches of birds and beetles. Paterson’s urban experience is interlaced with frequent flashes of the Passaic falls. With the exception of *Dead Man*, there is nothing approaching a Transcendentalist reverence for nature in Jarmusch and Van Sant, but there are elements of an environmental sensitivity in their counterpoint of social and natural rhythms which echoes Lefebvre’s definition of the rhythm analyst for whom

nothing is immobile. He hears the wind, the rain, storms; but if he considers a stone, a wall, a trunk, he understands their slowness, their interminable rhythm. This *object* is not inert; time is not set aside for the *subject*. It is only slow in relation to our time, to our body, the measure of our rhythms.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Ibid., 88.

⁵¹ Ibid., 20.

Nature comes to the fore in some instances of slow cinema, but in Van Sant and especially for Jarmusch, the milieu is predominantly urban.⁵² As we move between U.S and European cities in *Night on Earth* each sequence begins with a montage of the urban landscape that is precisely not the kinetic central business district or glossy stills from the tourist brochure: a taco van, garbage bins, boarded-up stores in a run-down neighbourhood. Jarmusch's cityscapes replace a high-velocity and smoothly polished visual culture with the sticky and striated landscapes of the everyday. The places, or what Augé termed 'non-places', that might be missed on the way to someplace else are foregrounded: 'a space such as a metro stop, a doctor's waiting room, or an airport terminal. It is an anonymous space people pass through ... a point of transit between places of "importance"'.⁵³ Instead of Augé's insistence on a standardizing supermodernity, however, slow cinema typically dwells on the singularity and quirkiness of these liminal locations.

On occasion, slow cinema also dwells on its own distinctiveness. Most of Jarmusch's films feature self-reflexive and ironic reminders of the sort of cinema we are *not* watching. In *Permanent Vacation*, Allie goes to the cinema and stands next to a movie poster for '*The Savage Innocents*' which promises 'SAVAGE, SENSATIONAL DRAMA IN THIS FANTASTIC ADVENTURE'. In *Rhythmanalysis*, Lefebvre reminds us that 'the worst banality [often] covers itself in this publicity label: "Here is the exceptional"'.⁵⁴ This reminder is not heeded in *Stranger than Paradise* when Willie, Eddie and Eva visit the cinema and for several minutes are seen looking up at the screen and occasionally scratching, fidgeting and munching popcorn whilst being blasted by a parody of an action film soundtrack (a relentless barrage of screams, grunts, explosions and martial arts

⁵² For a more sustained pastoral mode in slow cinema, one might mention here the landscape films of James Benning (*13 Lakes* (2004) and *10 Skies* (2004)), the studies of goats and a fir tree in Frammartino's *The Four Times* (2010), or Malick's *The Tree of Life* (2011).

⁵³ This is Deleuze's description of Augé's concept from *Cinema 1: The Movement Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 117.

⁵⁴ Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 50.

sound effects). The juxtaposition of a cinema of the everyday and everyday (or mainstream) cinema is also evident in the prison sequence of *Down by Law*. Breaking the generic rule-book of the Hollywood prison drama, Jarmusch spends thirty minutes with a camera locked down in a single cell simply watching the prisoners ostentatiously engaged in doing next to nothing. The inmates sleep, yawn, lie around and twitch mostly in silence. When one of the cell mates scratches the number of days on the wall his cellmate complains: '[d]on't you know you're making time go slow?' Unexpectedly, the possibility of more conventional drama is suddenly introduced:

Bob: Today, in the yard, I make a discovery, very interesting. And I think a film I have seen it in. Very good. An American film. Lots of action. It was a prison film. When a ... how do you say in English? When a ... when the man go out the prison and make away?

Jack: Escape.

Almost immediately after the prospect of escape is mentioned, however, there is a jump cut to images of the convicts running through a sewer and appearing on the other side of the prison walls. Jarmusch performs a similar vanishing act with the genre conventions of the hitman action drama in *Ghost Dog* and *The Limits of Control*. Each film follows a hit man, but is largely preoccupied with the episodes which occur before and after acts of violence. *Ghost Dog* spends much of his time tending to his pigeons or talking with an ice-cream seller and a small girl. When the climactic confrontation arrives, *Ghost Dog* remarks: '[t]his is the final shoot-out scene. It's very dramatic.' *The Limits of Control* sprinkles in some clichés from spy film formula - matchboxes with coded messages that have to be eaten, mysterious contacts and a sexy assistant whose murder necessitates vengeance – but most of the action involves images of the Lone Man walking, sitting, drinking coffee and lying down. Towards the end of the film the assassin arrives at a top security complex replete with guards, high walls, barbed wire, searchlights, cameras and a helicopter. Before the spectator has a chance to speculate on how anyone could infiltrate such a facility, Jarmusch simply skips the drama with a jump cut to the Lone Man sitting on a couch in the inner sanctum of his target. The 'American' is dispatched with the minimum of fuss before another eliding edit to an image of the Lone Man driving at night on his way to another airport terminal.

Whilst *Ghost Dog* and *The Limits of Control* playfully pare down the dramatic substance of the assassin and secret agent sub-genres, *Paterson*, at one point, threatens to allude to a specific and seminal action film. When Paterson's bus breaks down an old lady anxiously inquires whether 'it's going to explode into a fireball'. This suggestion is subsequently repeated by Paterson's girlfriend and a barman: '[t]he whole thing could have exploded into a fucking fireball'. Trained by Hollywood, the Pavlovian reflex response to this minor incident on public transport is to conjure up images from *Speed* (1994) in which a city bus is rigged with a bomb that will detonate if the vehicle drops below fifty miles per hour. Slow cinema, however, is resolutely anti-*Speed*. The bus in *Paterson* grinds to a halt due to nothing more menacing than a minor electrical failure and after a short wait the passengers are ferried onto another bus without any commotion.

The act of withholding conventional 'drama' in favour of the prosaic risks the disengagement of the audience and allegations of a cinema that is willfully boring.⁵⁵ In his epic critique of modernity, Walter Benjamin developed a typically idiosyncratic understanding of *ennui*. Benjamin mourned the fact that 'there is no longer any place for boredom in our lives'.⁵⁶ The contemporary valorization of speed and sensation was entwined with a loss of the slower paced rhythms of everyday life in pre-modern societies and a concomitant waning in the power of the story-teller. For Benjamin, this was regrettable as certain forms of ennui constitute 'the apogee of mental relaxation ... boredom is the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience'.⁵⁷ In this context, it might be contended that the ellipses and apparent entropy of slow cinema are not instances of nothing happening, but instead invitations for something unconventional to take place. Boredom, here, is a pre-requisite for the creation of a certain type of cinematic experience which requires a transition from the passive consumption of pre-packaged spectacle to the active

⁵⁵ This school of film-making is sometimes referred to as the 'cinema of patience' or even of 'endurance'.

⁵⁶ Walter Benjamin, 'The Handkerchief' in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings: Volume 2, Part 2, 1931-34* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press), 658.

⁵⁷ Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov' in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1969), 91.

production of meaning in unfamiliar and enigmatic images and sounds from the everyday. This mode of interpellation encourages ways of seeing and hearing that go against the grain of contemporary visual and auditory culture by requiring sustained contemplation. In this regard, it is important to underscore the extent to which slow cinema offers not only an alternative aesthetic, but a biopolitical intervention in the labour of perception.

In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx offers the stunning declaration that ‘the forming of the five senses is a labour of the entire history of the world down to the present’.⁵⁸ Rather than a biological given, Marx saw the senses as a product of complex social and historical forces. Modes of perception are structurally integrated with the means of production and reproduction. In his genealogy of vision from the middle ages to the digital revolution, Jonathan Crary acknowledges Marx’s insistence on the historical construction of the senses and builds on Foucault’s pioneering contribution to critical understanding of biopower.⁵⁹ According to Crary, the appearance of new optical technologies in the eighteenth and nineteenth century produced new visual practices and enabled refinements in techniques of social control. The manufacturing of sight in the industrial age meant that ‘[v]ision itself became a kind of discipline or mode of work’.⁶⁰ The body and the eye were increasingly disconnected and human attention was managed through new forms of spectacle, observation and surveillance. Developments in vision and attention management in the postindustrial era are, for Crary, ‘probably more profound than the break that separates medieval imagery from renaissance perspective’.⁶¹

Part of the cultural logic of capitalism demands that we accept as natural switching our attention rapidly from one thing to another. Capital, as accelerated exchange and circulation, necessarily

⁵⁸ Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (New York: International Publishers, 1964), 141.

⁵⁹ See Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: on Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1990), *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 2000) and *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London: Verso, 2013).

⁶⁰ Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, 18.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

produced this kind of human perceptual adaptability.⁶²

The scopic regime of late capitalism aims to discipline the senses and synchronize the mode of perception with the fiber-optic rhythms of finance capital. Attention is dispersed across and within multiple media and ideally becomes ‘attentive to everything but itself’.⁶³ The digital landscape is dominated by a proliferation of screens displaying a flux of imagery and information. Crucially, a mode of vision based on saccadic skimming across a visual field is likely to be complicit with dominant discursive and ideological frameworks.

One learns nothing new that way: it yields a world already known through habit and familiarity ... Only by patiently looking in a fixed way at local areas of the field does one begin to see its unknown texture, its strangeness, the unfathomable relations of one part of it to another ... the fixed, immobile eye (at least as static as physiological conditions ever allow) is what annihilates the seeming ‘naturalness’ of the world and discloses the provisional and fluid nature of visual experience, whereas the mobile glancing eye is what preserves the preconstructed character of the world. The latter is the eye that habitually, familiarly caresses objects, extracting only previously established relations among them. Once the eye stops moving, a potentially volatile situation arises: after a relatively brief period of time the immobile eye triggers a ferment of activity – it is the doorway both to trance and to perceptual disintegration.⁶⁴

In a similar vein, but a specifically filmic context, Roland Barthes’ homage to Antonioni remarks that ‘[t]o look longer than expected ... disturbs established orders of every kind, to the extent that normally the time of the look is controlled by society’.⁶⁵ The films of Jarmusch and Van Sant are founded precisely on the practice of looking ‘longer than expected’. The practice of slow cinema creates an arrhythmic cultural space in which the spectator might see and hear differently in ways that resist conditioned perceptual mechanisms and may disturb the dominant beat of ‘established orders’. With its stubborn insistence on staying put over incessant mobility, on delay over

⁶² Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA; MIT Press, 2011), 29-30. In a similar vein, writing in the sixties, Susan Sontag asserted that ‘[o]urs is a culture based on excess, on overproduction: the result is a steady loss of sharpness in our sensory experience ... What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to *see* more, to *bear* more, to *feel* more’. *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (Penguin: London, 2009), 13.

⁶³ Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, 359.

⁶⁴ Ibid. 298-300.

⁶⁵ Roland Barthes, ‘Dear Antonioni’ (1980) in Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, *L’avventura: BFI Film Classics* (London: BFI, 1997), 66.

immediacy and sustained contemplation of the singular rather than the fleeting glance across multiple streams, slow cinema constitutes an anti-aesthetic of fast capitalism; a cadence that lags behind prevailing modes of perception and the dominant temporal regime with which they are integrated. Crary reminds us that Marx understood how ‘capitalism was inseparable from [a] reorganization of time’.⁶⁶ Giorgio Agamben, another key figure in the development of biocriticism and who, like Crary, is indebted to Marx and Foucault, has similarly underscored the importance of temporality for radical politics: ‘every culture is first and foremost a particular experience of time, and no new culture is possible without an alteration in this experience. The original task of a genuine revolution, therefore, is never merely to ‘change the world’, but also - and above all - to ‘change time’.⁶⁷

In *Rhythmanalysis*, Lefebvre echoes Agamben and insists that ‘for there to be *change*, a social group, a class or a caste, must intervene by imprinting a rhythm on an era, be it through force or in an insinuating manner’.⁶⁸ So far, it has been contended that the practitioners of slow cinema compose a select social group whose film-making practice seeks to imprint by insinuation rather than force an alternative and potentially oppositional rhythm on the era of fast capitalism. Given the commitment to slowness in the work of Jarmusch and Van Sant, however, it might prove prudent to avoid a hasty valorization regarding the cultural instrumentality of their work. Chronopolitics are complex and cannot be condensed into a crude opposition between oppressive speed and liberating slowness. To begin with, one needs to recognize the extent to which the production and consumption of slow cinema is structurally dependent on fast capitalism and class privilege. Film-making and distribution is a hugely expensive commercial enterprise and the films surveyed here are often screened at venues such as art house cinemas, galleries and museums whose patrons belong to a cosmopolitan elite. Cultivating a leisurely stare and an aesthetics of

⁶⁶ Jonathan Crary, 24/7, 62.

⁶⁷ Giorgio Agamben, ‘Time and History: a critique of the instant and the continuum’ in *Infancy and History: Essays on the Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (London: Verso, 1978), 91.

⁶⁸ Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 14.

boredom might be a luxury affordable only to a global 'kinetic elite' rather than the '(s)lower classes'.⁶⁹ In his study of the *flâneur*, Benjamin recalls the vogue in nineteenth-century Paris for taking one's turtle on a walk around the city streets: '[t]he *flâneurs* liked to have the turtles set the pace for them. If they had their way, progress would have been obliged to accommodate itself to this pace'.⁷⁰ Benjamin's dialectical appreciation of this key figure for modernity recognized that whilst *flânerie* (not to mention the ownership of exotic pets) was not widely available to the Parisian masses, the practice of slow and serious contemplation still retained a counter-hegemonic potency in relation to the regimented time discipline of industrial capitalism. As one of the least hurried observers of the everyday, Benjamin offered the following cogent correction of Marx.

Marx says that revolutions are the locomotives of world history. But the situation may be quite different. Perhaps revolutions are not the train ride, but the human race grabbing for the emergency brake.⁷¹

Tempting as it might be to conclude with Benjamin's characteristically gnomic aphorism, it is necessary to add a final note of caution and acknowledge the possibility that the argument offered here in support of slow cinema has risked the possibility of derailment by its own methodology. A critical practice that followed the rhythm of its subject would, of course, have spent far more time observing the granular detail in slow films rather than embarking on a whistle-stop tour of the genre and contemporary chronopolitics. It seems fitting then, to return to the unheeded advice with which we began: *'you'll never get it if you don't slow down, my friend. You're going too fast. You're hardly even looking at the pictures'*.

⁶⁹ Neologisms coined by John Armitage and Joanne Roberts in *Living with Cyberspace: Technology and Society in the 21st Century* (Continuum; New York, 2002).

⁷⁰ Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings: 1938-40* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 31.

⁷¹ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Harvard University Press, 2002) 640.

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