

**From Cinema to Superhighway: A filmic examination of slow**

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**Abstract**

This paper examines the development of modern media, from traditional filmmaking to the emerging practices of “Transmedia” and “Collaborative Content Production”, and the historical resistance to such modern practices, including the recent rise of the Slow Media Movement. The filmmaking world has increasingly embraced such emerging technologies and forms, with a utilisation of the most contemporary digital media equipment being a main characteristic of modern work in the field. This article demonstrates how technology has expanded and become democratised, allowing anyone to be a distributor and for audiences to engage with content across multiple platforms and in a collaborative manner. There are, however, some who question this growing trend of embracing technology. In January 2010, a group of German theorists published *The Slow Media Manifesto*, which launched the “Slow Media Movement”. The movement strives for the creation of art and media in what they describe as a ‘deliberate and thoughtful’ manner. Although mostly an academic movement that so far seems to have more impact on media consumption than media creation, Slow Media practitioners are beginning to emerge. Their work strives for discursive, dialogic, social and auratic perfection. Through contextual analysis of several modern and Slow Media works, by practitioners such as Martha Goddard, Maia Iotzova, Spike Jonze, and Chris Milk this paper examines the Slow Media debate and its implications in the world of filmmaking.

**Key words**

Transmedia, Slow Media, film

## Introduction

[1] There is a scene in *Boogie Nights* (1997), in which Jack Horner (played by Burt Reynolds) laments the arrival of VHS technology. He believes that the accessibility of such equipment will kill the pornography industry; that he will lose his ability to create work of high production value and be forced to produce films that place fast turnaround ahead of all else. Although fictional, Horner was not the first victim of the arrival of new technology and he is certainly not the last.

[2] Along with the rapid development, the new capabilities of the internet have paved the way for the growth of the online video industry. Media experts, such as Kelly Chapman, now proclaim that there has been more change within this industry in six months than in the previous six years (Chapman, 2010, np). Websites such as Hulu.com, for example, which have previously been a means of distribution only, have now begun producing their own content. We are now seeing a dramatic increase in the number of transmedia and online video productions that harness the potential of the internet. Experience Designers are the new film directors (Peters, 2011, n.p.). Fictional television characters now have their own Twitter account or Facebook page. Audiences can schedule online screenings, so as to experience a film simultaneously. A viewer's childhood home can be the setting of a brand new interactive music video.

[3] In January 2010, in response to the exponential creation of such modern media projects, a group of German media experts published online 'The Slow Media Manifesto'<sup>a</sup>. In it, they proposed that media makers around the world strive for the creation of media that is "perfect, discursive, dialogic and social" (David, Blumtritt & Köhler, 2010, np). They also call for this media to have a 'special aura' about it and for it to provide sustainability to workers in the industry.

[4] The movement is being widely associated with the 'Slow Movement', an idea started with the creation of 'Slow Food' in 1986 by Carlo Petrini, who lamented the opening of a McDonald's outlet near the Spanish Steps in Rome. Instead, he championed the idea that food should be "fresh, local, season produce; recipes handed down through the generations; sustainable farming; artisanal production; leisurely dining with family and friends" (Honoré, 2004, p. 59).

[5] This idea of 'Slow' spread to other parts of life, with people like Carl Honoré calling for the notion to be embraced in the areas of medicine, town planning,

working life, parenting, as well as sex and leisure. Honoré writes that “everything about urban life – the cacophony, the cars, the crowds, the consumerism – invites us to rush rather than relax, reflect or reach out to people” (Honoré 2004, p. 92). Instead, Slowness is calm, careful, receptive, still, intuitive, unhurried, patient, reflective and champions quality over quantity.

[6] What the Slow movement is rallying against is a modern way of thinking that has permeated such areas. In 1911, American mechanical engineer Frederick Winslow Taylor asserted that “in the past man has been first... in the future the system must be first” (Carr, 2008, np), a modern ideology that led to an overhaul of how factories operated. By delegating small repetitive tasks to each worker, a factory’s efficiency skyrocketed. The workers complained of the monotony of their work, but Taylor’s modern thinking prevailed and the system came first. Having sacrificed the interests of the workers, the world continued along the path towards the modern and has now, a century later, reached a digital age defined by the internet. Of techno-political modernity, Calinescu writes that it “has by and large continued the outstanding traditions of earlier periods in the history of the modern idea. The doctrine of progress, the confidence in the beneficial possibilities of science and technology... have been associated in various degrees with the battle for the modern” (Calinescu 1987, pp. 41-42).

[7] A century after Taylor first walked into that factory, this ‘battle for the modern’ saw the investment in Bill Clinton and Al Gore’s “Electronic Superhighway” – the internet. When Clinton and Gore unveiled their plan, they compared it to the creation of the interstate highway system in the 1950s (*Time Magazine*). While the actual creation of electronics may seem very different to the construction of highway infrastructure, the investment in such ideas is not. Like the bitumen highways before them, the creation of the Electronic Superhighway meant further progression towards a modern way of living.

[8] Having progressed through the Web 1.0 and 2.0 stages of growth, we now find ourselves on the verge of Web 3.0, a web dominated by co-operation (Fuchs 2008, p.126). With larger bandwidths made available by such development, there has been

an increase in the number of projects that embrace the ideas of transmedia and collaborative content production.

[9] The world now places the system that is the internet first. Ensmenger notes that “in most studios the production process, from start to finish, has become almost entirely digital and therefore computers are omnipresent and indispensable” (Ensmenger, 2012, p.770), with many filmmakers distributing their work online. YouTube, a site that is barely a decade old, now proclaims to scan more than 400 years worth of content on its servers everyday. Most of this content, however, is understandably deemed to be at odds with The Slow Media Manifesto’s call for “quality” media and what Slow Media expert Jennifer Rauch refers to as “thoughtful and reflective” media (Buddenberg, 2010, np). Despite this, YouTube continues to escalate in growth and popularity, providing us with more and more Rick Astley spin-offs and “Keyboard Cat” reappropriations.

[10] The Wachowskis famously brought us *The Matrix* (1999), a phenomenon that bundled a feature film, comic books, Manga spin-off films, computer games and merchandise into the one universe. Henry Jenkins points to such projects and notes their “rabbit hole” nature, creating a world “bigger than the film, bigger than even the franchise” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 114). Although Jenkins says that some people grow exhausted by this convergent nature and simply give up, opting instead for more self-contained narratives (Jenkins, 2006, p. 101), this is not to say that all contemporary media is categorically engaging or isolating; “all fast” or “all slow”. Indeed, Jenkins highlights that:

Successful creators understand the strategic and technical aspects they need to master in order to create content more likely to spread, and they think about what motivates participants to share information and to build relationships with the communities shaping its circulation (Jenkins, Green & Ford, 2013, p. 196).

[11] With many contemporary filmmakers now embracing this notion, modern content increasingly harnesses the capabilities of the internet, with creators constructing more innovative methods of storytelling. Whilst before modern media seemed slightly one-dimensional, online content providers began to embrace this new technology in more innovative ways. UK television drama *Misfits* (2009) has its characters tweeting live on Twitter during the show’s broadcast. The tweets, written in advance by the show’s lead writer, offer viewers the chance to watch the show with a new perspective in mind. Similarly, television shows like ‘True Blood’ are now

creating their own online web series spin-offs. By expanding the scope of their media's narrative and rewarding the user with this additional content, Augmented Reality Gaming (ARG) experts like Jeff Gomez say the creators of these media make "a whole that is more satisfying than the sum of its parts" (van Gool, 2010, np).

[12] At the 2010 SXSW Conference in Austin, Texas, Steve Peters and Maureen McHugh presented 'The 10-Minute Transmedia Experience', a short narrative that saw the audience led through a sequence of website visits, phone calls, videos, Google searches and emails after being presented with a blood-stained rag with a web address printed on it (Trumble, 2010, np). During the session, the audience was invited to use their laptops and phones to help "rescue" a "kidnapped mime". Peters and McHugh have also worked on a number of viral marketing projects, such as 42 Entertainment's "Why So Serious?" campaign for the release of the film, *The Dark Knight*. That campaign utilised the film's tagline to build an ARG site that aimed to gain fans' interest and have them earn content. The transmedia campaign was spread across web pages, interactive games, mobile phones, print, email, real world events, video and unique collectibles. Furthermore, Steve Peters compares his role as a modern Transmedia Experience Designer to that of a traditional film director, with both practitioners being involved with the writing of the story, developing scenes, and overseeing production (Peters, 2011, np).

[13] In 2004, Joseph Gordon-Levitt started hitRecord.org. A decade later, the site now claims to "create and develop art and media collaboratively here on our site; we use my position in the traditional entertainment industry to turn that creativity into money-making productions; and then we share any profits with the contributing artists" (hitRECORD.org 2010, np). The site utilises the social power of Web 2.0 and 3.0 to collaboratively create video projects in a crowdsourcing style reminiscent of what Atte Joutsen and his team call "collaborative content production" (Joutsen et al., 2008, p. 141).

[14] Similarly, director Chris Milk now uses HTML5 video (a technology synonymous with Web 3.0) to create online music videos. In early 2010, Milk directed *The Johnny Cash Project* (2010), a crowdsourced music video for Johnny Cash's *Ain't No Grave* in which participants each re-draw a frame of the video. The result is an original frame-

by-frame animated collaborative content production. Milk also directed The Arcade Fire's *The Wilderness Downtown/We Used To Wait* (2010) HTML5 multimedia video, which creates a unique video for each viewer that constructs video of their street from Google Maps and Street View.

[15] Spike Jonze's short film *I'm Here: A Love Story* (2010) was first exhibited at the Sundance Film Festival and Berlinale, before it was released online in a very unique way. The web design provides the viewer with an almost "cinematic" interface in which to watch the film, provoking their full concentration. It also limits the number of viewers to 12,000 per day, thereby creating a tenor of exclusivity, which encourages the viewer to savour the film with thought and attentiveness. Furthermore, the viewer is able to schedule a simultaneous online screening with their Facebook friends, allowing the experience to be a social one. Having a long background in filmmaking and an experienced crew at his disposal, Jonze created a film that creatively evokes the theories of sociality, perfection and reflection inherent in 'The Slow Media Manifesto'.

[16] On a more local level, Sydney-based filmmaker Martha Goddard's *Art of Observing* (2009) is a series of short films uploaded online. Each film's narrative is unrelated to the others in the series, thereby rejecting the trend rabbit hole nature of transmedia storytelling. Instead, the common theme of these films is centered around the idea that a character can literally step outside their lives for a moment and observe the scene they are in, reflecting on the characters' emotions at the time. By having her characters reflect upon their situations, Goddard implores the viewers to be reflective themselves. Furthermore, the *Art of Observing* website also attempts a dialogue with the viewer, creating a "What's your story?" page wherein viewers can, for instance, discuss the themes of the films and their own reactions to them.

[17] These examples illustrate where many theorists and practitioners see the future of the media industry heading. Especially now that larger bandwidths allow for increased utilisation of online video, these transmedia projects that encompass some degree of cross-platform production are becoming exponentially prevalent. Rather than simply limiting a story to the one type of media, creators are seeking to expand their narratives across multiple mediums and rewarding consumers when they participate in all of them. Jenkins notes, however, that producers "cannot fully predict whether audiences will embrace what they have designed" (Jenkins, Green & Ford, 2013, p. 196). For some, the nature of the way certain content is designed will cause them to opt for something else. This is the point at which the Slow Media movement found its place.

[18] It would be foolish to think, though, that the thoughts embraced by the Slow movement began with Carlo Petrini in 1986. The investment in modern ideas has always caused a backlash. In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century the Luddites attempted to sabotage machinery to stave off the Industrial Revolution and, although the thinkers behind the Slow Media Movement are not as radical, there are similarities in the ideas of resistance between the two movements.

[19] Matei Calinescu (1987) writes about the history of such friction:

During the last one hundred and fifty years or so, such terms as ‘modern’, ‘modernity,’ and more recently ‘modernism,’ as well as a number of related notions, have been used in artistic or literary contexts to convey an increasingly sharp sense of historical relativism... What we have to deal with here is a major cultural shift from a time-honored aesthetics of permanence, based on a belief in an unchanging and transcendent ideal of beauty, to an aesthetics of transitoriness and immanence, whose central values are change and novelty (p. 1).

This friction, then, has been present for much longer than Slow Media has.

In his article in 2008 for *The Atlantic*, Nicholas Carr cites Plato’s *Phaedrus*, in which Socrates laments the development of writing and its overshadowing of human thought. Of Socrates, Carr writes:

He feared that, as people came to rely on the written word as a substitute for the knowledge they used to carry inside their heads, they would, in the words of one of the dialogue’s characters, ‘cease to exercise their memory and become forgetful.’ And because they would be able to ‘receive a quantity of information without proper instruction,’ they would ‘be thought very knowledgeable when they are for the most part quite ignorant.’ They would be ‘filled with the conceit of wisdom instead of real wisdom’ (Carr, 2008, np).

This type of skepticism arose again later, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries during the “Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes”. While “the general feeling was that the moderns were still dwarfs in comparison with the ancient giants”, the Moderni blamed the Ancients “for the prevailing sterility of thought and the general lack of adequate methods in the sciences” (Calinescu, 1987, p. 23).

[20] The prevailing of a modernist ideal triggered the Industrial Revolution and the further investment in new technologies. Karl Marx bemoaned this, just as ‘The Slow Media Manifesto’ bemoans the lack of sustainability that technology brings in the media industries today. Marx exclaimed “capitalist production, therefore, develops technology, and the combining together of various processes into a social whole, only by sapping the original sources of all wealth – the soil and the laborer” (Marx, [1867] 1976, p. 556).

[21] *The Slow Media Manifesto* calls for media that “emanate a special aura. They generate a feeling that the particular medium belongs to just that moment of the user’s life” (David, Blumtritt & Köhler, 2010, np).

[22] The notion of an object having an aura is inherent in the Slow Food movement. A significant example of a Slow Food item is lardo di Colonnata, a cured pork product traditionally made in Italy and famous for its white marble. Petrini compared lardo to “other objects of significant national heritage, including major works of art or buildings of national architectural note” (Leitch in Halpern 2010, p. 40). Similarly, the Slow Media movement want producers to strive to create auratic work and for consumers to ingest such work.

[23] The notion of aura is an important one and calls to mind the work of Walter Benjamin. Benjamin (1931) wrote:

‘What is aura? A peculiar web of space and time: the unique manifestation of a distance, however near it may be. To follow, while reclining on a summer’s noon, the outline of a mountain range on the horizon or a branch, which casts its shadow on the observer until the moment or the hour partakes of their presence - this is to breathe in the aura of these mountains, of this branch. Today, people have as passionate an inclination to bring things close to themselves or even more to the masses, as to overcome uniqueness in every situation by reproducing it’ (p. 20).

Benjamin's definition, in all its slipperiness, has been challenged a number of times (Bolter et al, 2006; Kelly, 2014), yet it raises questions regarding the degree to which various technologies can be utilised, while retaining levels of engagement, concentration, and absorption. In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", he also wrote:

One might subsume the eliminated element in the term "aura" and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. This is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art. One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of the tradition (Benjamin 1930, p. 3).

It seems, then, that if the Slow Media manifesto strives for the creation of auratic work, then this discounts the use of modern technology. In "A Short History of Photography", Benjamin claims that some earlier photographs produced with "primitive" cameras had an aura to them, but that this aura dissipated upon the introduction of "instruments capable of overcoming darkness completely and of registering objects with the clarity of a mirror" (Benjamin, 1931, p. 19) - instruments widely used in art in the 1930s.

[24] Just as Benjamin unveiled a lack of aura in the art of the 1930s, the Slow Media manifesto discusses the same lack of aura in media today. The Slow Media Movement, then, seems deeply grounded in traditional skepticism of the modern.

[25] As well as further progression of online media, skepticism of such media will also continue. Nicholas Carr (2008) quotes playwright Richard Foreman, when he writes that 'as we are drained of our "inner repertory of dense cultural inheritance... we risk turning into 'pancake people' - spread wide and thin as we connect with that vast network of information accessed by the mere touch of a button'" (np).

[26] In his article "Everyone I Know is Stayin' Home: The New Cinephila", James Quandt writes of the emergence of the many new technologies used for the exhibition of video. A programmer at the Cinematheque Ontario, he examines the

recent explosion in use of DVDs, the internet and mobile phones for the viewing of films and believes these practices to be 'alien' (Quandt, 2009, np).

[27] Similarly, David Lynch has used much harsher language when addressing the issue of viewing films on a mobile phone. He purports that the idea that someone might believe they have properly experienced a film when viewed on a mobile phone is preposterous (Sciretta, 2008, np). As a filmmaker, he is also known for insisting that the DVD versions of his films do not contain chapter marks, making the act of skipping through a movie much more difficult and, thus, encouraging the viewer to watch the film in a single sitting.

[28] Just as Socrates believed the written word filled people with the 'conceit of wisdom', Nicholas Carr, Richard Foreman, James Quandt and David Lynch, amongst others, believe modern technologies are "making us stupid". The pursuit of the modern saw the creation of these technologies. It must be noted, however, that just because resistance to the modern is not a new idea, this does not make it an invalid one. It is plain to see that the Slow Media Movement's concerns have very strong historical foundations.

[29] An important principle in the Slow Media manifesto states that "Slow Media advance Prosumers" (David, Blumtritt & Köhler 2010, np), encouraging people to consume media in a thoughtful and reflective manner. New York academic Jennifer Rauch underwent a Slow Media "diet", in which she forewent the use of the internet, mobile phones, DVDs, MP3s players, cable television and so on (Rauch 2009, np). In 2010 New York comedian Mark Malkoff spent five days living in his bathroom, in an effort to overcome his 'addiction' to the internet. Whilst his project was not embarked upon under the Slow Media banner, it was an act of resistance to modern technology. Pointing to how much time he "wastes" online, he decided instead to devote his time in the bathroom to learning a new set of skills. Rather than dedicating his time to social networking and blog-surfing, Malkoff memorised the names of all the United States Presidents in order and learnt to play "Every Rose Has Its Thorn" on guitar (Osterhout, 2010, np). Rauch and Malkoff's experiments epitomise the growing number of people resisting society's heavy investment in modern media - media and technologies that value quantity and fast turnaround over the ideals outlined in the Slow Media manifesto.

[30] While the movement's principles of consumption have been validated through such experiments and its theories validated through such references as Benjamin's notions surrounding aura in art, the challenge the movement seems to face is that

there are very few media practitioners who claim to be a part of the movement at the production level.

[31] Currently, it seems that Maia Iotzova, a Canadian-based Bulgarian filmmaker, is the only self-proclaimed Slow Media producer (Iotzova, 2010, np). She laments the nature of media production today, instead saying, "I wanted to create media like the food I enjoyed to eat, nutritious, fresh, local, prepared with love and care and shared with my friends and family. At the time I was thinking of creating a media company called Slow Food Media, as I delved deeper into this more organic media production I changed my mind about the name" (Iotzova, 2010, np). When emailed, Iotzova said that while she is glad that there is a manifesto, she is personally not following it for fear of her work becoming formulaic rather than intuitive (M Iotzova, 2012, pers. comm., 5 March).

[32] Time will tell whether the Slow Media movement is embraced by more film and media practitioners. The trends leaning towards modern media production and distribution methods, combined with the arguably problematic nature of creating auratic work in the age of the internet, do not work in the movement's favour.

[33] If we are to treat Walter Benjamin's claim about the lack of aura in the age of mechanical reproduction as gospel, then it seems that the use of modern technology within the Slow Media movement is doomed. If we are to listen to thinkers like James Quandt, however, then it is possible that media can have an aura about it. A programmer at the Cinematheque Ontario, Quandt uses the example of how the colour grade in a 35mm reel of Jacques Demy's "Model Shop" was much more vibrant than a DVD version of the same film (Quandt, 2009, np). He claims that the DVD is an inferior copy that lacks the 'aura' of the celluloid version.

[34] Perhaps we should consider the Slow Food movement's description of the aura of lardo di Colonnata. Emily Halpern asserts that "because globalized marketing of these products has made them widely available, they inform the consumer about the existence of an 'even more authentic item' and serve to increase the item's aura in its place of origin" (Halpern, 2010, pp.42-43). Of course, word of mouth isn't everything. Jenkins, Green and Ford (2013) write:

None of this allows us to be complacent about the current conditions of networked communications, even if the expanded opportunities for participation give us reasons for hope and optimism (p. 194).

[35] The creation of transmedia, online video and other innovative film and media projects will increase, progress and continue to innovate. If more Slow Media producers do emerge, they will likely also lament the popular move towards modern media production, but it is also likely that they will strive to make the most of what modern technology has to offer, in much the same way that many filmmakers turned from cinephiles to online video creators.

[36] Film is not marbled pork, but if Slow Media production adheres to auratic creation, whilst using social methods to inform, the practice of Slow Media production may become more of a trend. Whatever the case, it is becoming clear that there will always be some incarnation of a Slow Media Movement. From Socrates' lamentation of the effects of the written word, to Jenkins' observation of people disengaging from *The Matrix*, people will always resist the utilisation of modern technology. It could even be argued that the "Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes" continues today, with the Slow Media Movement on one side and the creators of modern projects on the other.

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<sup>a</sup> <http://en.slow-media.net/manifesto>

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