Auratic Presence through Slow Media

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Abstract

In this paper we explore the opportunities of slowness through moving images.
We take our proposition from Benjamin that "the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be"; that of a work of art is its "here and now . . . its unique existence in a particular place." We argue that it is possible to reclaim the aura in contemporary digital art practices through the adoption of slow media mindsets. We deconstruct the notion of "authenticity" and argue that digital reproduction does not diminish authenticity, uniqueness and the aura of images. Using case studies of video artists and as well as video works drawn from our own creative practice, we examine how slow media strategies may be used to alter modes of viewer interaction and promote a dialogic audience engagement. We reject the quick glance in favour of the lingering gaze, and champion the "slow reveal". Through slowness we invite temporal disruptions and a poetic engagement whereby the viewer is situated in the moment.

Introduction: What is Slow Media?

[1] Now that we live in a panopticon (Foucault, 1975) of networked and mobile media, people are increasingly beginning to question and resist the pressure to be in a state of "here" and "elsewhere" (Plant, 2002), constantly connected to social networks and checking work emails There are claims that the Internet is rewiring our brains and that "our life is fastfood, fast media, fast cars and a fast cycle to crash and burn" (Carr, np).

[2] A phenomenon called "Slow Media" has arisen as a response. It is part of a broader social zeitgeist including the slow food movement, slow art, slow writing, slow cinema, and slow reading. We would argue that these kindred phenomena are symptomatic of a longing for presence and mindfulness in a crowded networked world. Freeman (2009) encapsulates the conundrum of a networked mediated state of being a process of making decisions so that we have to decide "how we want to allocate our time to these things within the limits that do not and cannot change" (np).

[3] The rise of slow media may be interpreted as a response to the need to slow down. A Google search of "slow media" shows numerous blog posts discussing the effects of switching off or reducing one's consumption and use of media. Towards the top of the list is the Slow Media Manifesto penned in 2010 by Benedikt Köhler, Sabria David and Jörg Blumtritt. Benedict distils the premise underlying the philosophy of this manifesto by writing that "one might almost say that truth itself depends on the tempo, the patience and perseverance of lingering with the particular" (en.slow-media.net/).

[4] Rauch (2011) surveyed the blog posts about slow media to theorise the slow media phenomenon. She suggests, "we are observing a moment of transformation in the way many people around the world think about and engage with mediated communication" (n.p). She goes on to argue that slow media may be regarded a philosophy and a practice representing an appreciation or re-appraisal of heirloom

media, such as print or analog, as a counter to the immediacy and volume of information. At the same time, it places a value on "slowness in media production and consumption, which shifts usage toward slower mediated (or even unmediated) activities, often by temporarily or permanently reducing one's time spent with digital networks and devices" (n.p). She presents an analysis of several case studies of people who chose to disconnect for designated periods of time to undergo "digital detoxification" to trace the development of slow media as a sub-cultural movement.

[5] So is there a place for digital media? Do we have to unplug? As artists should we reject the digital, the networked? Perhaps a line of least resistance is another way of approaching the pressures to be constantly connected. For as Bashō (2011) wrote:

> Skylark
> sings all day,
> and day not long enough.

We would like to think not; rather we prefer Bashō's thought that even though the day may not be long enough, there is still a reason to engage with the digital and networked if we take our time.

A Slow Zeitgeist

[6] In this section we contextualize Slow Media within broader sociocultural phenomena operating within and informing creative practice. The Slow Media Manifesto presents a set of fourteen articles. In the introduction to the manifesto Köhler, David and Blumtritt (2010) propose that people are not so interested in new technologies that enable easier and faster content production; instead people are searching for media that is integrated and shared. The manifesto itself covers a huge range of social and cultural activities – from the value of mono-tasking and a progressive approach to social media through to concerns of quality and timelessness. In this paper we will narrow our focus on article 11, which states:

> **11. Slow Media are auratic**: Slow Media emanate a special aura. They generate a feeling that the particular medium belongs to just that moment of the user's life. Despite the fact that they are produced industrially or are partially based on industrial means of production, they are suggestive of being unique and point beyond themselves (Köhler et al., 2010, n.p).

[7] The word "aura" is what Bal (2009) would call a travelling concept in that it originated within the work of Walter Benjamin and has been picked up and travelled across numerous disciplines associated with the creative arts. It is also a concept noun. The concept aura is dynamic whereby its "meaning, reach and operational value" (Bal, 2009, pp. 20) differs according to the discipline and research context. The term "aura" itself is beautifully ambiguous and is a rich site for debate and analysis to explore how slow media strategies may be used to alter modes of viewer interaction and promote a dialogic audience engagement. Rather than disambiguating the term, in this paper we embrace the richness, inter-subjectivity and contradictions inherent in the concept of aura and the auratic.

[8] The notion of uniqueness resides in the same semantic field as "authentic": Benjamin links the concepts aura and authenticity together in his influential essay about art and the effects of mechanical reproduction on how we perceive authenticity. Benjamin evades a clear definition of the aura. Instead he employs a metaphor drawn from nature to explain the concept of aura with regard to the experience of viewing historical art objects:

> we define the aura of the later as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be. If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch (Benjamin, 1968, pp. 222-223).

[9] It would appear that aura is a concept that is difficult to speak about without the use of poetic imagery. He predicted that the age of mechanical reproduction and the advent of photography and film would result in a shift in the way representations

were viewed and would cause diminutions of auratic experiences. His way of describing the characteristics of aura is both ambivalent and ambiguous. In his essay "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire", where his central focus is on verbal expression and memory, Benjamin defines aura as the associations that a specific object will bring to mind. The essay reveals Benjamin's ambivalence towards modernity. Indeed he states:

> Thus technology has subjected the human sensorium to a complex kind of training. There came a day when a new and urgent need for stimuli was met by the film. In a film, perception in the form of shocks was established as a formal principle. That which determines the rhythm of production on a conveyor belt is the basis of the rhythm of reception in the film (Benjamin, 1968, p. 31).

[10] Benjamin explores the claims in Baudelaire's commentary in the Salon review of 1859 about the creative situation of an artist in the age of photography and mechanical reproduction and the need to keep photography separate from the domains of the imaginary. Bolter, MacIntyre, Gandy & Schweitzer (2006) suggest, "what Baudelaire regards as the realm of imagination is for Benjamin the aura" (Bolter et al., 2006, p. 25). Baudelaire (1988) himself warns that:

> If photography is allowed to supplement art in some of its functions,
> it will soon have supplanted or corrupted it altogether, thanks to the
> stupidity of the multitude which is its natural ally. (p. 125)

[11] Clearly the ambivalence with which emergent technologies were viewed during the mechanical reproduction age resonates deeply in the age of digital reproduction. Baudelaire's questions about the artist expressing what resides in the imaginary are just as pertinent today as they were in 1859 and similarly nostalgic. The aura then is impalpable yet capable of hooking the imagination into realms beyond the materiality of the present moment. The aura is at the same time, a state of mind or feeling that a viewer experiences when looking at work of art or nature; and it emanates from the object itself according to Benjamin. This interplay between the

viewer and the expression or object makes the aura a concept that is intersubjectively understood as intangible yet distinctive.

[12] Is the elusive notion of aura a common thread within the zeitgeist of the slow, particularly with regard to creative practice? Is the desire for unique moments that point beyond themselves a key feature of the allure of the slow? In order to unpack the inter-subjective semantic relationships between slow, aura and authentic further, we turn our attention to the notion of slowness. We propose too, that the word "slow" has effectively become a concept word, which has travelled from discourses of sustainability including the slow food movement towards media, cinema studies and creative arts practices. To unpack the word "slow" further we turned to dictionary definitions.

According to the free online dictionary (www.thefreedictionary.com/slow) the word "slow" refers to nine meanings, which we reproduce below:

> **slow**
> **adj. slow·er, slow·est**
> 1.
> a. Not moving or able to move quickly; proceeding at a low speed: a slow train; slow walkers.
> b. Marked by a retarded tempo: a slow waltz.
> 2.
> a. Taking or requiring a long time: the slow job of making bread.
> b. Taking more time than is usual: a slow worker; slow progress in the peace negotiations.
> 3. Allowing movement or action only at a low speed: a slow track; a slow infield.
> 4. Registering a time or rate behind or below the correct one: a slow clock.
> 5. Lacking in promptness or willingness; not precipitate: They were slow to accept our invitation.
> 6. Characterized by a low volume of sales or transactions: Business was slow today.

7. Lacking liveliness or interest; boring: a slow party.

8. Not having or exhibiting intellectual or mental quickness: a slow learner.

9. Only moderately warm; low: a slow oven.

Interestingly, none of these definitions have the gloss of something that is desirable. Rather they connote a description of actions and/or events associated with deficiency that are to be avoided if possible. Yet it is a word that has wandered across various disciplines including art, creative writing and film igniting imaginations and stirring practitioners to write manifestos.

[13] The Slow Media Manifesto was preceded by the Slow Art Manifesto signed in 2005 by Graydon Parrish, Jimmy Sanders, Christopher Pugliese, William Kennon, Christiana Inmann, Mikel Glass, Morley Safer, Jane Safer, Paul Brown, Brian le Boeuf, Patricia Watwood, Gregory Hedberg, Laura Grenning, Jacob Collins, Richard Piloco, John Morra, Christopher Forbes, Paul Sullivan, Melinda Sullivan. Their manifesto contains eight articles that encapsulate the overarching philosophy that beauty and skills combine to make great art. The Slow Art movement is an echo of Baudelaire's melancholy yearning for pure aesthetic experiences yet it does not reject the latest technologies outright. There is a palpable nostalgia in the manifesto for the restoration of the aura to art objects such as paintings.

[14] Slowness is a concept that is gaining increasing prominence within creative writing as well though movements such as mindful writing practices and the Slow Writing manifesto by Mark Sample. Julia Alvarez created a website to expose and meditate on the virtues of Slow Writing which include taking the time to craft the small details mindfully. The corollary of writing is reading so it is hardly surprising that there are slow reading and slow book movements as well. Miedema (2009) argues that the fact that print still lives is a manifestation of the need for slow reading whereby "digital technology is not the primary villain"; rather the problem resides in "our weakness for speed and our attempts to attend to too many things at once" and furthermore, the antidote to the pressures to speed up lies in slow reading because it "represents balance" (Miedema, 2009, n.p).

[15] Yet another manifestation of the slow zeitgeist is the Slow Book Movement. It was inspired by the Slow Food Movement and is encapsulated in Alexander Olchowski's interrogation of what it is that makes a slow book slow; he suggests that slow books are about the readers' responses so that they are "immediately transported to some other time and place" (Olchowski, 2010, np).

[16] Again there are strong connections in Olchowski's argument with the aura as conceptualised by Benjamin. A slow book, like an auratic image, exists at the intersection between the reader and the text. The concept of the aura as expounded by Benjamin and in the Slow Media Manifesto has also travelled to cinema production and cinema studies. Flanaghan's essay theorises an aesthetic of the slow resides within cinema studies discourses. He positions slow cinema in opposition to mainstream Hollywood cinema. He seeks to identify formal and characteristics as well as common tropes and memes such as extended shots of people walking. Flanaghan concludes that a slow aesthetic "uncompresses time, distends it, renewing the ability of the shot to represent a sense of the phenemological real" (n.p). On the other hand, Romney (as cited in Chesher, 2010) who also writes about slow cinema, attempts to place this trend within a broader socio-cultural frame that connects slow cinema to other slow movements such as slow food and slow media, whereby it is a "response to a bruisingly pragmatic decade" where "the oppressive everyday awareness of life as overwhelmingly political, economic, and ecological would seem to preclude (in the West, at least) any spiritual dimension in art" (p. 43). Romney suggests that slow cinema is a reaction to the tyranny of networked media and immediacy so that "we understandably thirst for abstraction … to seek ways of slowing" (p. 43-44). The spiritual, then, is a way of countering the demands of living in a world dominated by pragmatic agendas.

[17] So, is it possible or even worthwhile to seek a set of formal aesthetic characteristics for slow cinema? We would argue that it is more worthwhile from our point of view as creative practitioners to think about slow with regard to the moving image in a similar way to how writers and readers think about writing and the book. For us, as creative practitioners, it's more about the effects poetic images have on the viewer's experience of time rather than the duration of a scene or slow motion.

Flanagan has indicated that slow cinema is a reaction against the constant flow of networked media that demands our attention and a manifestation of our desire for the return of abstract and spiritual dimensions in art. In the next sections we explore how the notion of slow plays out in the works of video artists, as well as in our own creative practice.

Slowness in Creative Practice

[18] The concept of slowness may seem somewhat "out of sync" in an age of networked digital media whereby identifying characteristics such as co-presence, multi-tasking, fast production and speedy consumption of media may be perceived as fundamental qualities that shape the production, presentation and viewer expectations of media content. As creative practitioners, we see synergies between the concepts of slow media and moving images produced using both analogue and digital media technologies. In this section we examine works by selected artists as a means of exploring the zeitgeist of "slow" in the production and viewing of video based artworks.

[19] As discussed previously in this article, and outlined in the Slow Media Manifesto, the travelling concept of aura may be understood as a key characteristic of slow media. In this section we argue, with particular reference to Benjamin's notion of "aura", that rather than being diminished through the process of mass reproducibility, digital video is capable of generating an auratic charge that invites both contemplation and arguably a unique viewer engagement. Furthermore, this auratic presence is not limited to its material structure or medium and may therefore be resurrected and/or reconstituted in the form of binary code and/or pixels.

[20] Steeped in nostalgia, Eno's "Mistaken Memories of Medieval Manhattan" (1981) remediates the aura of both an architectural icon and an iconic artist. Reminiscent of Andy Warhol's 1964 film *Empire*, Eno's 47 minute long unedited video, a result of his accidentally leaving a video camera in record mode on the window-sill of his apartment, shows slowly changing skies and rolling cloud formations floating above the rooftops of Manhattan. According to Eno (Ewart, 2005, n.p) his description of

the work as a "video painting" is "a way of saying, I make videos that don't move very fast", but this description may also be understood as challenging Benjamin's claim that authenticity and auratic presence are somehow diluted through the mechanical reproduction of imagery. Eno, through his use of the term video painting, establishes a mode of reception that invites contemplation and arguably acknowledges the importance of slowness, both in the the reading of his work and within the everyday.

[21] Eno's video paintings are perhaps better understood as mediated meditations; they are what the camera saw and what we now see, and as the name suggests, these works invite contemplation rather than fulfilling a need to pass time. When asked about his video practice, Eno (as cited in Scoates, 2013) notes:

> the films arise from a mixture of nostalgia and hope, from a desire
> to take a quiet place for myself. They evoke in me a sense of 'what
> could have been', and hence generate a nostalgia for a different
> future. (Scoates, 2013, p.198)

[22] A television screen/computer monitor may have replaced the canvas, and the image rendered in pixels rather than paint, but does this necessarily diminish an artwork's ability to transmit an aura, as Benjamin may have us believe? We suggest that Slow Media is not simply about the technology employed to create works of art, rather it is related to a considered use and/or engagement with technology. We suggest that Slowness may be understood as a stillness that isn't literal, rather it is a mindset, a way of seeing, feeling and being.

[23] In the case of video works produced by Bill Viola, we draw attention to his work titled *Memoria* (2000) which involves the projection of a low-grade video recording of a male face onto a suspended silk cloth. As the looped video illuminates the cloth, with a ghostly image, we stand transfixed as we watch a man's face slowly materialize and then recede back into a pixilated void, he is neither here nor there, yet his presence is arguably felt. Much of Viola's video work highlights the tensions that exist between the realms of life and death, presence and non-presence, and as

we stand on the precipice of these binary oppositions we are invited to transcend the role of spectator and become a participant in a mediated slow waltz. Viola asks that we situate ourselves within the moment, to quietly absorb information; to take the time to reflect upon an experience as it slowly unfolds. He has carefully crafted this work to manipulate our grasp on time, to create a temporal disruption so that "what is normally a fleeting condition in the course of a human life now flows within the largest stream of eternal time" (Viola, 2003, p. 96).

[24] Whilst perhaps alluding to the story of Veronica's Veil, Viola's use of the cloth as a projection screen for this auratic imagery helps to mesh this powerful religious narrative with the human experience. The continual fading in and out of the video image echoes the rhythm of slow breathing and thus further enables an audience to connect with the work as both physical artifact and visual metaphor. The aura of *Memoria* is perhaps best understood as a springboard to facilitate the act of audience as participant, and in doing so arguably creates a unique and personal experience as we reflect upon our own mortality. It is an invitation to slow down.

Our creative practice

[25] As creative practitioners, we believe that slow media strategies present opportunities for artists to engage in creative processes in a manner that acknowledges "the virtues of practice with its repetitions and slow revisions" (p.291). Rather than a barrier to productivity, we believe, as suggested by Sennett, that slowness promotes a deeper level of engagement with our craft, and with this in mind, we reject haste for a more considered approach to the development and production of our video works. In this section we discuss the use of slow media strategies in our video practice, with particular reference to Berry's work from 2011, *Slivers of Necessity* (2011) and Keep's work from 2010, *All That Remains*.

[26] In *All That Remains*, Keep's rediscovery of a 2-minute instructional video, originally created by Keep in 1989 as a university assignment, is re-worked and re-contextualised as a video memorial for his sister who had passed away suddenly in 2005. Inspired by Eadweard Muybridge's motion studies of the late 1800's, Keep

attempts to split time into fractions by reducing the frame-rate and therefore extending the video's duration so that he can prolong the time spent with his sister.

[27] Operating as a series of both still and moving images, this silent work reveals expressions and nuances that went unnoticed at the time of shooting the video. The reframing of the composition to only include close-ups of his sister arguably sets up an intimate relationship with the viewer, and in doing so invites a personal engagement as Keep tries to slow time itself so that he may hold onto to the memory of his sister. And though, as suggested by Benjamin, the eye of the camera can perform tasks beyond natural optics, we argue here that rather than distance the viewer from the original moment, the moving image can be used as a vehicle to resurrect the aura.

Production still from *All that Remains* (2011)

[28] In *Slivers of Necessity* Berry explores chance, necessity and being exiled, out of place. She shot the vision and wrote the poem. Joe Hesch, whom she met on Twitter, read the poem for her. The work experiments with slow media aesthetics to create an auratic presence and relationship to place. The video was shot on an iPhone using applications that evoke 8mm cameras through the use of filters. The soundtrack is Hesch's voice against the background noise of a projector.

[29] The intention was to create a sense of haunted ambiguity so that video of contemporary mundane scene would be infused with a sense of otherness – the aura of time and the dislocated histories of those who reside in suburban Australia. *Slivers of Necessity* is an invitation to slow down to look at commonplace sights with new eyes, to engage with places to imagine the vast treasure-trove of narratives that lie beneath a seemingly mundane surface. Berry uses double exposures as a visual poetic device to encourage the viewer to contemplate the words of her poem. '

Production still from *Slivers of Necessity* (2011)

Conclusion

[30] We have established that there is a slow zeitgeist in the early part of the 21st century as a reaction to the pressure of networked media. It reveals a romantic yearning for a time when there was time enough and world enough to be swept away into other places. In some ways it poses dangers of descent into sentimentality and valourisation of hierarchical societies. Nevertheless, the rehabilitation of the word "slow" does represent a shift in the ways in which creative artists are thinking about digital media. As artists working with digital media, we believe that the employment of slow media strategies has proven to be advantageous in the development and production of our own video works. Slowness is not dependent on frame rate or duration; rather it is an approach or ideology that promotes a thoughtful interaction and engagement with media. Slowness rejects the false need for speed and instead suggests that haste makes waste. As creative practitioners, we have found that the

notion of slowness coupled with the search for the indefinable aura has provided us with a way of privileging a viewer engagement that invites viewers to dwell for a while in our moments in the here and now.

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