Slow Motion as a Condition of the Moving Image

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Abstract

The act of slowness is by its very nature an implied reduction of physical engagement that one might argue has as much to do with impairment as it does with temporal devaluation. Yet when placed in a twenty-first century context there are a growing number of arguments that position slowness as a mediator of resistance to fast-paced communication transactions thus impacting on the ways in which human interaction coexists between digital technology and cultural immediacy. While it may be suggestive to position this new emergence as a collective of techno-anthropological treaties as found, for example, in the *Slow Media Manifesto* (2010), there is an under-valued relation that I will discuss throughout this paper when considering the role that slow motion plays out as a condition rather than an effect of lens based practice. Discussion will integrate the ideas of Proust, Mearleu Ponty, and Murch with review of contributions from Wes Anderson, The Wachowski Siblings, Bill Viola, and Adam Magyar. These perspectives will align with discussion of my own lens-based practice with regards to a slow motion experimental called *The 51 Paintings Suite* (2013-).

Key words

Slow motion, cinema, slow media, slow cinema, digital philosophy, experimental film, video art, 51 Paintings

Introduction

[1] In Stockdorf, David, and Bonn's *Slow Media Manifesto* (2010), the authors propose that the next decade will surmount an understanding of digital media that gives rise to a condition of slowness whereby the fast paced and instantaneous are substituted for the need of thoughtfulness, deliberation, and quality. Where the manifesto attempts to provide an alternative model in opposition to fast media

practice through the framework of slowness, there opens up a potentiality for wider discussions as to the experience of the slow when considered as an implication for the moving image. As the treatise identifies how we might ought to consider the slow through a deeper and more enriching level, the implications of this intersect with the ways of how we might use and comprehend slowness beyond a cinematic effect.

[2] Within the boundaries of film practice, there exists a position for slowness termed 'slow motion' otherwise known as 'over cranking' or 'time stretching'. However, the failings of such, as I will argue, delineate slowness to a cinematic effect rather than as an overall condition. An example is found in the film *The Matrix* (1998) by a sequence where the main character Neo engages in a gunfight with security forces inside a building lobby. The quintessential shot design allows an audience to witness Neo dodging bullets through a supernatural time as if a kind of motioned ballet generated by stylised motion capture technologies later coined 'bullet time'. While this may be an important element in the film itself by way of demonstrating the differences of character abilities inside and outside of the Matrix, the effect itself is an archetypal example of how a cinematic technique can influence an audience experience of cinema from an optical set of illusions thus advancing a screenplay's plot and story. Yet in doing so, the illusion does not give evidence to extend beyond any substantial dialogue or contribution to the story nor does the technique itself transcend into a conceptual or philosophical medium. In the case of *The Matrix*, once an audience moves past the notion of visual design, I propose that there are very limited opportunities to delve deeper past the effect and into the wider effacements drawn from this slow-motioned sequence to further advance any benefits of the lobby scene beyond just an action-based motif.

[3] The same rudimentary portrayal of the slow might also be considered in the opening credits of *Zombieland* (2009) whereby the slowed rendition of the undead gorge and kill their way through the film's list of background extras. While it is nonetheless visually engaging to watch, there is, once again, little substance that this scene can give an audience beyond an entertainment experience and in turn, even less that an audience can engage with once the scene is interrupted from a succession of rather intrusive editing cuts. Slow motion in this regard merely

concretises a supplementary level of emotive engagement through its cinematic qualities. The potentiality of such is not unlike Proust's position on metonym and metaphor where he surmounted 'the superiority of [the] metaphor' through the subject. In *Le Temps Ertrouve,* Proust's narrator discovers that the link between involuntary memory and art is found in the power of metaphor." (Heywood). What Proust establishes in this regard takes into account of his own articulation as to the perplexity of the subject's condition, which in this case is manufactured through memory then offers an expansive critical analysis by way of first, the journey through places found in *Le Temps Ertrouve* and second, the visual signs placed throughout the story to prompt memory. Yet if we consider the role of the metaphor in his position as akin to a modality for the subject and metonym as a secondary effacement brought about by the impact of the subject, then such a view offers the same kind of engagement that slow motion has on an audience when considered as first, a condition and then second, as an effect. The problem, however, in this interpretation is the conceptual limitations of narrative cinema, which are, in a contemporary sense, confined by the constructs of the need to explain to an audience every single detail of a film's narrative resolve at all times in order for the film to be 'successful'. In doing so, the expectation by modern audiences to be entertained does not necessarily give space for the subject's condition to develop or at the very least extend an invitation for the audience to forge a relationship with any given measure of emotive complexity towards the qualities of slowness.

[4] Indeed, through the movement of Slow Cinema, this allowance defines its broader qualities that offer an audience the invitation to witness slow films as a vehicle for contemplative experience rather than of a narrative base. Yet much of these types of films from notable Slow Cinema directors such as Tarkovsky, Tarr, and Antonioni, focus on an overall sense of contemplativeness through long takes, minimal dialogue, and intellectually engaging material not necessarily governed by slow motion as the main basis of their work. Moreover, much of the contributions of Slow Cinema focus on an editing and cinematic language that is, nonetheless, slow that one might argue is further exacerbated by conventional cinema's conditioning of limited duration shot lengths. It is precisely that which offers a point of difference between the effects of Slow Cinema and that of slow motion.

[5] With this in mind, my enquiry recognises Slow Cinema as one of the contributions that transcend slow motion into a 'condition' but will instead locate the core of such a state within the boundaries of video art. This of course is not to be confused with experimental cinema whereby I suggest that video art is best understood as 'the poetic' and experimental film best described as 'the abstract'. So to position video art as a type of centrifusion for this discussion brings with it a meeting point separated between the subject, the effect, and the condition. Under the guise of video art, slowness has instrumented a role through temporal engagement that invites the viewer past an entertainment level to instead provide a means for articulating the subject at much deeper levels than what exists through conventional cinema. This is not to say that narrative or commercial films are incapable of achieving an equal amount of contemplative density to that which video art harbours. Nevertheless, the mainstay of both populist cinema and television finds a growing disparity between slow as effect and slowed time as an act of meaningfulness. As Mearleu Ponty laments that "being is exclusively for someone who is able to step back from it and thus stand wholly outside being" (Ponty, p.246) it is necessary to consider such a position in terms of the ways in which we might articulate slow motion through the process of removing our experience and expectations of illusion, and in particularly, of showbiz entertainment, to instead place ourselves outside the effect thus gaining a broader understanding as to the wider implications that the technique of slow motion ultimately brings forth. Although Ponty's stance does take into account our perceptual ability to set a broader view from illusionism, which in itself expands the implications of optical cinematography, what interests me in this regard is how Ponty's idea can be used to identify a series of indicators which allow us to contest our own generalities of slow motion from 'entertainment' to a more phenomenological approach as a cinematic 'mediator'.

[6] In this paper I argue that, in fact, video art is utilised as such a mediator that thereby propels the condition of slowness through the moving image by way of situating my own creative practice into the given dialogue to illustrate connectivity between motion speed and the subject as a way to explore the deeper values of filmic duration as a whole. A test case will examine the motion picture *51 Paintings*

(2013) in relation to other video art and cinematic examples to interrogate these ideas and provide a response through critical means.

The Condition

[7] If one considers slowness through the moving image as a condition then I propose to establish a set of core values used to determine how the presentation of the motioned subject impacts on, and is experienced by the viewer. While it is critical that slowness is viewed as a content format in order to ascertain the wider implications beyond the effect, what is of interest to this paper is how such a continuation for the subject then becomes a 'condition' and also of the subsequent dialogue forged between the viewer and the subject.

[8] To understand both the implications and mechanics of this condition we must first consider the ways in which audiences engage the moving image through film editing. Contemporary cinema and television, for example, has a tendency to make use of an editing style focused on short, quick cuts in order to tell and resolve a story. Let us return to the idea of contemporary cinema's obsession with 'quick cuts' as American editor Walter Murch argues that "over the last fifty years, the editing pace of films has been increasing" (Murch, 119) "due to influence of television commercials" (ibid) which he describes as "visual shorthand" (ibid) coupled with the transition of cheap and widely available editing software. By the very nature of digital editing, there is an instantaneousness about these workflows which, as Murch argues, holds an influence on the pace and scope of a cinematic story telling process.

9. These two factors prove significant for modern audiences that, for many, have already been subjected to years of fast media content through communication technologies by way of emails, mobile devices, text messages, social media, and instant messaging to name a few. Such methods ultimately prescribe their own paced immediacy and instantaneousness through the readily available transaction of transmitted user information. If one was to consider Murch's position that the film *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), for instance, "has a rate of eighty-five cuts in the first twenty minutes" (Murch) and the film *Sucker Punch* (2010) has four hundred and

ninety seven cuts in the same amount of time, it then becomes a strong consideration that the methods and technologies of editing have impacted on the approach of how the moving image is assembled in post production just as communication technology has advanced and brought with it a mirrored culture of rapid and expected information access. Of course, gaming and television have a large influence on this shift away from the slow and the contemplative that Bolter and Grusin deliberate as being a type of 'hypermediacy'.

> For a variety of reasons, television readily acknowledges itself as a medium, and action-style games are like television in this willingness to acknowledges their own mediation. Like television, thee games function in real time: either the player tries explicitly to "beat the clock" or faces some other limitation, such as the amount of ammunition, which defines the rushed pace of the game. (Bolter, 93)

[10] What I find interesting in this regard is the consideration of 'beat the clock' ultimately maneuvering slowness as a type of redundancy within a contemporary context in that the desire of information transactions, imbedded in user expectations has lowered our rate of attention spans and devalued our tolerance for timed contemplation. Certainly, when Heidegger argued that philosophy ended by the mid twentieth century inasmuch as Derrida indicated a central collision point of the death and change of modernity through deconstructivism, what I argue as central to both of these proclamations is that the impact of these claims hold a significant effect on screen technologies. If one was to consider the Internet, for example, at the moment when widespread use of online resources separated content viewing from the traditional mechanisms of television, home theatre, and cinema, it is at this point coupled with the advancement of computer games that I propose the start of Murch's prescribed increase in editing cuts began an unprecedented shift for audiences attention spans which ultimately hold a significant implication for the condition of slow motion. Moreover, after this shift occurred, we have seen the separation of audiences between those who traditionally embraced cinema with those who now embrace the Internet. If we take these thoughts and deliberate Murch's perspective that quicker editing styles are giving us less time to contemplate the cinematic image then this sets up a dilemma for slow motion by which I suggest

that a contemporary audience has less of an interest in experiencing or coming to terms with the hence forth state as a condition simply because it not only challenges our accepted limits of duration but also one might argue that it does not allow us to take the time to appreciate what this condition brings forward to its audience.

[11] Thus, the exploration of this pending condition envelopes the suggested values of the subject, editing, and cinematography to determine how the presentation of the slowed subject impacts on an audience. If we reflect on the values of the condition as understood in an order of events then (1) cinematography, capturing the subject through the lens, opens up to (2) the effect governing the editing of the subject, which then allows for (3) the device of editing to prescribe the mediator for the condition. With this method let us return to video art.

[12] If video art is proposed to be the necessity in bringing about an understanding of slow motion, then what has already been established throughout its fifty-year inception is that much of its content has been screened and publically exhibited within a gallery space. This opens up the need to identify the spaces we inhabit to view different kinds of content media. A gallery space is a zone of temporality where an audience can drift in, view the displayed artwork then move on while cinema and, to a lesser extent home screen viewing is more of a stationary experience. But is there a link between stationary places and transitory spaces when determining the articulation of slow motion? Notably, a cinema is a space where the viewer sits in a confined darkened room and experiences content in a single uninterrupted time frame. Home viewing allows the audience to sit inside a domestic space or be able to watch content on a device while in transit or in a mobile locations. However this usually implies that the audience is either siting or standing in space that is, of course, very different to that of a gallery environment. While video art has endured most of its public lifespan in the confinements of fine arts and to a lesser extent, public performances, in recent years the medium has occupied virtual spaces through online video servers including Vimeo and YouTube. Therefore I suggest it would be incorrect to assume that the physical space of a gallery alone is responsible for allowing an audience to come to terms with this condition. Moreover, it consequently is the spaces we go to within our own mind to experience video art that reflects the discussion of the condition insofar as identifying the implicated

territory allowing us to articulate and expand through a state of intellectual and cultural contemplation. This idea is not unlike Proust's metonym whereby his memory, acting similar to a camera, makes a recollected journey through places from the perspective of a condition of memory, not necessarily of a factual account or a first hand recording of the journey. However if this expedition was interpreted through film editing then one might argue that metonym is anchored to state acquired from infrequent editing cuts and metaphor be aligned through the state of frequented editing cuts.

[13] A comparison of such can be made through cinema and video art in order to determine the difference between these factors. Let us consider the slowed sequence in the opening of the motion picture *Garden State* (2004) and Bill Viola's *The Raft* (2004). In *Garden State*, the protagonist, Largeman, stares aimlessly at the camera while the commercial airliner he sits inside of dives amid distressed mayday calls from the panicked pilot. Yet as this sequence takes fold, the state of hypnotic beauty is somewhat interrupted by the presence of multiple cuts fluxing from establishing shot to close up to cut away to mid shot and so on, thus eliminating any meaningful engagement with the scene due to the imposing redirection of the audience's gaze. Nonetheless, within *The Raft*, we see the opposite occur with a single shot, depicting a group of people struggling to survive when hit by several large gusts of high-speed water gushes. The difference between these two examples is first determined by the time each sequence allows the audience to transcend into a state of contemplation and as a result, such allowances will either limit the audience into furthering their experience of the effect into a condition, as found in *Garden Sate*, or transcend the effect into a condition, from the state brought about by *The Raft*.

[14] Further, if we represent these two sequences and return to our added values, we can clearly see that *Garden State* represents slow motion as a singular effect, signified as an interaction between the subject, cinematography, and editing thus designating a resultant effect through the image. However *The Raft* can be understood in terms of advancement to contain the secondary relationship of the effect impacting on an audience through metonym used as a device to induce a condition. The defining difference between the two is that in this instance, metonym taken in the Proustian sense, changes the end result of the effect to produce a

condition, and subsequently opens up a deeper level from which to access and experience slow motion. It becomes clear from this method that the key for slow motion to develop from effect to condition is brought about by the act of the device, which of course is implemented by the process of editing and the reduction of editing cuts. Yet can we determine the act of joining two shots together as the fundamental difference between an effect and a condition?

The 51 Paintings Suite Experiment

[15] As an experiment, I decided in 2006 to undertake a significant long-term project titled *The 51 Paintings Suite,* which set out to establish five feature length films entirely comprised of slow motion sequences in an effort to understand the application of metonym and metaphor through lens based practice. The first artwork, *51 Paintings* (2013) contained a measured duration of seventy-one minutes, and featured fifty-one segments of continuous reversed slow motion represented in various speeds ranging from an expanded 50 frames per second to 400 frames per second. Since many of the shots scope between one and four minutes in continuous takes, the intent of the editing took the approach of Proust's representation of metonym in *Le Temps Ertrouve* to make the distinction between cinema and video art. In addition to this was the underlying idea that if metaphor related to the contents of the subject in what Proust implies as the imprint of memory then the subject must work in tandem with the device to differentiate between metonym and metaphor in order for the experiment to work. In doing so, the end result of *51 Paintings* brings together the said values of cinematography, editing, and effect to clearly manifest the secondary addition of the device to induce a condition. So if we were to articulate this ongoing experiment as a method to visually explain the progression from effect to condition, then what the artwork establishes is a vehicle by which an audience can ascertain the state of the condition thanks to the key value of metonym brought about by the need and value of durational allowances.

[16] In creating this work, the resultant formula established a methodology to distinctly separate effect from condition while at the same time allowing the artwork itself to present metonym as the central philosophical approach throughout the series. Further, the disparity between effect and condition positions editing and

moreover, the absence of cutting as the central mode for a deeper investigation that would otherwise not necessarily be possible in this context if the device was absent from the artwork's durational qualities. In essence, this systematic approach allowed the artwork to develop its own experience with an audience without the need to explain a narrative inasmuch as the device itself could act with autonomy on the basis of permitting the condition with the help of limited edits and a noticeable reduction of timed motion. Such a cinemagraphic decision was made to reference how Proust constructs many of his own recollected accounts as being 'wide' - especially through *Le Temps Ertrouve* when the narrator walks the streets of Paris in 1916 during a blackout – that is, to describe what Deleuze himself argued as a series of mnemonic signs to be understood in this context as an expansive range of visual indicators not unlike the role of a wide angled establishing shot in narrative cinema.

[18] In the opening scene of *51 Paintings*, we are introduced to an epic coastal terrain occupied by Wilson's heavily pregnant wife dressed in a pink bikini top and tropical sarong reconfigured from the poses of characters located in a group of German medieval paintings situated in St Michaels Church in Schwabish Hall, Germany. The purpose of this was to situate a 'memory' of the source painting into the subject, as if a third handed reproduction of the original that Manovich, for instance, would consider to be a term he coins as a 'digital remix' (Manovich). The filming of this scene, executed during a severe Australian heat wave and local bushfire in Melbourne, Australia during late January 2007 was enhanced by the roaming drifters who appear to walk backwards in the image up and down near the pending beach perimeter. As the slowed duration of this scene measures over three minutes without any camera movement, the viewer is invited to engage through a meditate progression which intercuts to the proceeding segments. Given most of the scenes thereafter are purposely composed as extreme wide shots, the scenes allow for the maximum amount of selective randomised movement - a tree swaying, a character blinking, or a dog walking backwards – manipulated through reversed motion. This particular fascination with slowed nuances such as these were based on the last sentence of *Le Temps Ertrouve* in which Proust states "…separated by the slow accretion of many, many days – in the dimension of time." (Proust, 1107)

[19] The editing of this work was not compiled into its feature length format until March 2012 and it was at this point that another set of examples impacted on the ways in which the experiment was assembled into its current state. Through the considerations of Adam Magyar's 24 minute slowed sequence of *Stainless* (2011) and the Green Line bus sequence in Wes Anderson's *The Royale Tenenbaums* (2001) there were, of course, similar observations to the said contrasts of *The Raft* and *Garden State* but an additional characteristic to note was observing how the role of motion was addressed in terms of the perception of altered time. Magyar's sequence was filmed in 2011 inside a moving train shot passing through "Grand Central Station in New York, the Alexaderplatz station in Berlin, and the Shinjuku station in Tokyo" (Vesnin). Throughout its duration, the subject is transfixed in a constant state of slow-motioned rhythm juxtaposed through the speed and control of the moving train. In contrast, the Green Line bus scene from *The Royale Tenenbaums* presents the beginning of an equally mesmerising sequence as the character Margot Tenebaum, who walks effortlessly off a Green Line bus and towards the camera, is interrupted by narrative dialogue and editing cuts. But the contrast of this scene is attested to the idea of how both installments were shot; in Magyar's case from a moving train and from Anderson's case, a steady cam and static tripod.

[20] While both examples use movement to gain their desired shots, Anderson employed the perspective of guiding the camera through human movement whereas Magyar employed a mechanised solution that was, in effect, completely arbitrary. With this in mind, the experiment of *51 Paintings* considered both long durational footage shot from a moving car traveling at night from Stuttgart to Schwabisch Hall and stationary shots of the same region capture on a locked down tripod. Yet on review the tripod shots were used in place of the subjective moving scenes because what was found in the stationary views added to the condition in ways that the car shots did not; filming inside a moving vehicle akin to Magyar's strategy introduced a random element to the effect and thus impacted on the condition in different ways that were distracting, if not confusing for the subject. The viewer had another element to consider when manifesting the condition that ultimately changed the way the condition itself was articulated in context to slow motion. It was not a slow motion sequence that traversed the effect to the condition but instead a methodology introducing an alternative result of the condition that was obviously

lacking in its ability to become immersive in altered time. In this case, the audience would be continuously reminded of the method of capture instead of a unified process where the audience was oblivious to the methods by which the camera employed.

[21] So what, therefore, does the condition carry forth through the moving image to make it any different than, say, watching a recent British Airways inflight Slow TV film called *The Seven Hour Train Journey to Oslo*? Described by BA inflight entertainment manager Richard D'Cruze as "wallpaper style footage people find mesmerizing in-flight" (Daily Mail) and "a hypnotic, calming and entertaining quality to Slow TV..." (Daily Mail) the video captures a real time front-end view of a train journey through various stops "between Bergen and Oslo". (Daily Mail) While the film itself was aired in Norway where "more than a million Norwegians tuned in to watch at least part of it" (Daily Mail), it remains part of a new programing interest by companies such as British Airways in response to the growing interest towards Slow Cinema. Yet the nature of the condition brought about by real time durational works is different than that of reduced motion works such as *Stainless* simply because what slow motion brings to its subject is an altered time that obviously real time cannot induce. That's not to say that films like *The Seven Hour Train Journey to Oslo* are incapable of inviting an audience into a state of heighten contemplation especially given its extreme duration as a single take. However what it cannot achieve for the subject is the poeticness of an altered time that is, of course, in opposition to the properties of real time's depiction of nature, and of natural perceptions through time to what Kant, for example, discussed as unity in his notes of *Motion of the Subject.*

[22] This distinction was evident in the production of *51 Paintings* where, to reflect back on Mearleu Ponty's idea of "stand[ing] wholly outside being "(Mearleu-Ponty, 243) it remains to be said that focusing on the aspect of the film's condition brings together the portrayal of the subject through a manifested assemblage of non-natural time. It is this perception, I argue, that causes both metonym and the condition to act in unison so as to forge the poeticness of the subject in ways that are difficult to contest if they were to adopt the Kantian approach towards nature and time. In doing so, the experiment concluded that both the effect and the condition are distinctively diverse in their own approaches toward the subject. Yet

what effectively defined the nature of slow motion in this regard was the differentiation of the condition brought about by first, the device of editing when auspiced under the poeticness of video art and second, the momentary attention of the effect auspiced under the limitedness of the subject throughout cinema and television.

[23] Thus, slow motion as considered through the impact of the subject has the ability to be framed as an effect and, separately, a condition. As we have discussed throughout this paper the circumstances of film editing, the state of the device, and the whereabouts of the mediator all contribute to our experience of the subject, whether this be through cinema, home theatre, mobile device, gaming, or through video art. However, it is through the later, prescribed with an attention to the condition brought to the subject from the device, which determines how an audience experiences the condition and sanctioned through the subject. By considering these ideas to the values of effect, metonym, and the condition, we can attest to the concept that slow motion gives an audience a level of engagement that is limited when presenting the same subject matter through real time depictions of the subject. Conversely, by capturing the subject through a reduced motion speed and framing such through the language of video art, as seen through the experiment *51 Paintings,* the viewer is presented with a series of values that can determine a richer, more in-depth experience of slow motion understood beyond the cinematic and into the realm of altered time.

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