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Dreaming of Cinema / Slow Cinema

Adam Lowenstein's *Dreaming of Cinema: Spectatorship, Surrealism, and the Age of Digital Media* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015) and *Slow Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), a collection of essays edited by Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge, are attempts to come to grips with some of the different ways that digital technology has impacted on film culture. *Slow Cinema* investigates one of the ways technology has led filmmakers to react against what is deemed the excessive speed of modern life and begins to re-think cinema's relationship with screen realism and the representation of reality. *Dreaming of Cinema* is less about the production of a specific type of film and instead explores a particular way to understand digital technology and its impact on how films are viewed and shared. Lowenstein is concerned with providing an academic interpretation of film spectatorship in the digital age, whereas *Slow Cinema* investigates one of the ways digital technology has been utilised by filmmakers to experiment and expand cinematic techniques.

Lowenstein looks back to surrealism as a way of providing insight into cinema's relationship to the digital. This is built on his observation that, for the surrealist, the cinema was not an art form whose primary function was to merely record 'reality'. His initial link is in how cinema was an emergent technology for surrealists in the way 'digital technologies are a new media for us' (p. 2) in the modern age. While this claim holds a definite truth it is also a very loose connection that could be made between many different genres or movements. However, the tenuousness of the link does not limit the sharpness and appropriateness of some of the observations and analyses he makes throughout the book. Lowenstein's focus is on the impact digital media has had on spectatorship, and he connects this to how the surrealists were concerned with (among other things) how films were 'used' by viewers, often in ways the original filmmakers did not intend. This, he posits, creates

an opportunity to use surrealist-inspired theory to critique the assumed notion that the spread of digital technology has fundamentally changed how we consume media, and that it has transformed us from passive viewers to active participants in a two-way process.

Chapter one is titled 'Enlarged Spectatorship' and makes the claim that DVD special features (using *The Sweet Hereafter* [Atom Egoyan, 1997] as an example) create the possibility for viewing practices that would once have been thought of as part of a 'surrealist' method for using film. Here, Lowenstein asserts that the extras on a DVD allow a viewer to contradict the director's own statements about the film and permits them to make connections between and to juxtapose alternate versions of the same story (book, film, audio commentary, etc). In the chapter titled 'Interactive Spectatorship' Lowenstein re-examines *Un Chien Andalou* (Luis Bunuel, 1929) and uses it to question to what degree analysis of the interactivity present in surrealist cinema is a useful or relevant model in an age of digital spectatorship, where the distinction between games and movies, and users and viewers, is increasingly non-binary. He expands some of these ideas in 'Globalized Spectatorship'. This is a very strong chapter which investigates the intermediated text, with a focus on *The Ring* series and its associated sequels, remakes, and fan websites. The surrealist viewing practices Lowenstein discusses in chapter one are analysed in relation to the myriad versions of *The Ring* and its influence on global (digital) media. He again positions surrealism as a way of interpreting the interplay between these elements and of the relationship that exists between US and Japanese culture. The link is initially made through (the original Japanese) *Ringu*'s visual homages to the aforementioned *Un Chien Andalou*, where the cursed video tape at the heart of its narrative is constructed out of discontinuous shots and the prominence of close ups of eyeballs. From there Lowenstein brings in the history of surrealism in Japan and sketches the aesthetic and thematic influences between art, history, and the films themselves. He also suggests that digital media and the influence of surrealism on the Japanese and US *Ring* series enacts a version of Marshall McLuhan's 'global village', recounted in *Understanding Media* (1964), creating a cycle of 'complex media flows' (p. 7). These are enabled by the digital media that has helped to create the franchise's elements in all its forms (the films, the haunted video tapes within the films, DVD releases, and associated websites).

These chapters underline Lowenstein's insistence that surrealism is an appropriate filter by which to understand such disparate ways digital media

has impacted on film spectatorship. While Lowenstein does not claim it to be, surrealism is clearly not the only method through which to do this. By this measure the book perhaps is best thought of as a left field take on cinema and digital culture, rather than any historical study of a series of technological and aesthetic developments. I found chapter four, 'Posthuman Spectatorship', to be the weakest in the book. Lowenstein does not make a compelling enough case that surrealism is the most natural method by which to comprehend what the potential for post-human viewing could be. The connections made in this chapter feel like too much of a leap. This is even partially acknowledged by the author, who mostly looks to anthropomorphism and the pre-humanism of animals rather than building significantly on what scholars of post-humanism such as Katharine Hayles and Donna Haraway have written (though there are crossovers between the areas, as Haraway's *When Species Meet* [2007] indicates). Lowenstein's writing in this chapter is thorough, but the claims are too spurious to provide as much interesting and unique analysis as elsewhere in the book. Also, Lowenstein does not completely engage with the scholarship on digital media, despite claiming to mount a critique of its underlying theories. Lev Manovich, author of the seminal *The Language of New Media* (2001), only gets a single mention. This gap becomes particularly apparent when Lowenstein considers Christian Marclay's film installation *The Clock* (2010) as an example of a cinematic database, a notion that is explored in significant depth in Manovich's book. Lowenstein describes *The Clock* as a 'digital dream of cinema made real – as if the entire history of the medium were made into a single searchable database' (p. 185). A more rounded engagement with the question of digital media's relationship with cinema would have investigated Manovich's discussion of the database narrative and tested his assertions against recent examples (such as *The Clock*). The failure to do so is not necessarily a fatal shortcoming of the book, since Lowenstein clearly wishes to explore other lines of inquiry, but it again emphasises the fragile link between surrealism and digital media that underpins his analysis. While this does not completely invalidate the claims Lowenstein does make it hints at a gap in the book's scope.

Slow Cinema is more specific in its engagement with a form of cinema that is dependent on digital media rather than an examination of the questions it prompts of film scholarship. Slow cinema, whose key figures include Lav Diaz, Tsai Ming-liang, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, and Béla Tarr, was first considered an identifiable entity in 2003 by critic Michael Ciment

(p. 1). Song Hwee Lim is one of several authors in the book who links the modern slow cinema directors to a history of filmmaking involving earlier art house figures such as Antonioni, Akerman, and Tarkovsky (p. 89), and also to names from the experimental and avant garde traditions like Andy Warhol and Michael Snow. De Luca and Barradas Jorge's introduction does an admirable job of laying the parameters of the debates that circle slow cinema. They identify the formal details of the movement as involving long takes, particularly those which emphasise 'narratively insignificant' (p. 2) detail, and which are frequently in real time.

These scenes are often presented in single takes of extreme duration (in comparison to average Hollywood shot lengths). According to his chapter on Lav Diaz, William Brown notes that *Melancholia* (Lav Diaz, 2008) features 149 shots of an average of just over three minutes each in length (totalling a seven-and-a-half hour running time). The ability to make a film this way comes as a result of digital technology's capacity for increased storage space (to host the completed films) and recording lengths (to allow for longer takes).

The editors position slow cinema as part of a wider 'slow' cultural movement, along with media, travel, and food (p. 3), which seeks 'to rescue extended temporal structures from the accelerated temp of late capitalism' (ibid.). This connection between slow cinema and other decelerated cultural areas is made by the editors rather than positioned as an intentional act by the filmmakers themselves. The editors situate slow cinema as sharing a set of similar content and formal characteristics, which like other film movements is not always consistent and is instead 'made up of disparate films and practices that are conceptualised as a grouping thanks to their comparable style' (p. 4). This lack of consistency across the movement allows the collection of essays to be weighty, varied, and full of considerable breadth, which can be said to mirror slow cinema itself. That there are 22 chapters demonstrates the ambition of the book, and the spread of divergent topics and analyses of different filmmakers and their work reflects the full scope of slow cinema's themes and historicity.

As with Lowenstein's book, *Slow Cinema* seeks to assess (whether intentionally or not) a mode of filmmaking that cannot help but question and challenge the nature of cinema itself. The editors correctly identify cinema as being able to 'record time and impose duration' (p. 5), and so slow cinema is by definition pushing this feature to extremes. It is therefore an inherently experimental movement. As the editors point out, slow cinema stands in

opposition to Hollywood and its continual formal basis on 'rapid editing, close framings and free range camera work' (p. 10). As with *Dreaming of Cinema*, the question of film realism is intimately tied up with the opportunities for formal experimentation that digital technology affords. André Bazin is a key theorist for both books because his investigations of screen realism are challenged by slow cinema's emphasis on presenting action in real time, and by the surrealist approach to the medium that inspires Lowenstein's work.

The first section of the book looks at the forerunners of slow cinema, with analysis of some of those who pioneered what became its dominant style. Lúcia Nagib explores figures such as Mizoguchi and Ozu, whereas C. Claire Thomson considers Carl Theodore Dreyer as an important progenitor of the aesthetics and ideology underpinning slow cinema. Thomson sees this as going beyond the use of the long takes associated with Dreyer and instead locates the beginnings of slow cinema in his emphasis on 'everydayness' (p. 48) in films like *Ordet* (1955) or *Gertrud* (1964). This detail that Thomson indicates was dismissed by contemporary critics of Dreyer as being 'banal and tedious' (p. 50). Jacques Rancière's chapter shows how important the formal aspects associated with slow cinema are and how they are integral to the way it should be interpreted. In an analysis of the films of Béla Tarr he writes that in his early work Tarr's 'commitment to the materiality of time' recreates the 'official rhythm of the construction of socialism' (p. 245) in Communist-era Hungary. Within his long-take tableaux shots Tarr can depict quotidian lives and events. Thus, the formal strategy becomes a political comment, or can be read politically, as much as the actions of the characters.

Asbjørn Grønstad intimates that there is an 'inherently political' (p. 277) heart to slow cinema because 'every long take … also simultaneously articulates an impatience with, and perhaps distaste for, the regime of ocular speed' (ibid.). The (very) long take then becomes a form of resistance, disrupting the rapid flow of images one would see in a hyper-fast Hollywood thriller (such as the Paul Greengrass *Bourne* series referenced here). In relation to *Stray Dogs* (Tsai Ming-liang, 2013), Grønstad implies that the experience for an audience having to endure one of the film's many long takes is reflective of the 'monotony of labour' (p. 281) being forced upon the central character. Slow cinema becomes political not only in its commentary on the speed of modern life and culture and the monotony of most people's occupations but also as it forces the viewer to experience one of the challenges

of the life of the characters. The question of realism and what it means in regard to cinema is therefore ever-present in the movement and is a recurrent theme in the book.

De Luca and Barradas Jorge eulogise slow cinema as a phenomenon which has the potential for reassessing our interaction with the cinematic image, becoming a 'vehicle for introspection, reflection and thinking' (p. 16). This is a debatable point which depends on what the purpose of cinema is. Though the editors admirably make their case without suggesting a hierarchy of quality between an unthinking, brutalised, and degraded (Hollywood) commercial cinema at the bottom and a more introspective, purer, slow cinema at the top, it does raise an important issue regarding slow cinema's place in culture. While Lowenstein writes about the uses of media/film and what it means for engagement with the technology, the processes, and material (as a tool to create and the hardware itself), slow cinema as a movement ultimately struggles with the concept of engagement. The films are difficult to source (appearing at festivals, sometimes at galleries, not widely seen) and therefore appeal to niche audiences with exclusive tastes. The films are not made for mass audiences to enjoy and they do not reflect how digital technology has helped people engage with a particular medium. This issue is not dealt with in any depth in the book. Instead, the qualities of slow cinema are assumed rather than tested.

This is not to say that the throughout the book important questions are not asked. Both *Slow Cinema* and *Dreaming of Cinema* show the often chaotic impact that digital technology has had on the art form in terms of production, exhibition, and reception. In *Slow Cinema* the fact that several chapters cross over in terms of subject, in either an analysis of a particular filmmaker or an aspect of the movement, such as meditations on what slowness can mean, creates a valuable dialectic throughout. The book is an effective investigation of the different inflections of slow cinema and it is easy to see it becoming a core text for students of the subject in the coming years. Still, the timing of each book's release perhaps suggests that film scholarship is struggling to judge the impact of technological developments effectively. For case studies the books use material which is already resigned to the past. For example, 'The Enlarged Spectatorship' chapter in *Dreaming of Cinema* refers to the antiquated format of DVD extras. Lowenstein's declaration that the digital age 'continues to metamorphose at a pace that stuns the imagination' (p. 1) hints at his awareness that academic scholarship is persistently behind the curves of progress. New and original scholarship is fre-

quently commenting on the recent past, particularly work published in traditional academic outputs such as books and journals. However, as testaments to this recent past both books are indicative of the seismic impact that digital technology has had on cinema, and they do admirable work in handling some of the challenges and opportunities that it presents.

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