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Authors	Botz-Bornstein, Thorsten
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***Slow Movies: Countering the Cinema of Action*. Ira Jaffe. New York: Wallflower Press, 2014 (256 pages). ISBN: 9780231169790.**

A Review by Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, Gulf University for Science and Technology

Given the increasing spread of the recently emerged terms "contemplative cinema" and "slow cinema" in discussions about film, writing a book able to address these phenomena in detail has become an urgent matter. So far mainly employed by theoretically minded film enthusiasts writing in blogs, these terms have never been established as rigorous theoretical notions. It is certainly possible to say more about slowness and contemplation in cinema than simply characterise a film as atmospheric, foggy, dark, monotonous or nostalgic. In his monographic study *Slow Movies: Countering the Cinema of Action*, Ira Jaffe makes a serious attempt at establishing slow cinema as a coherent notion that concerns the aesthetics of specific films. The task is difficult because the field of research is vast. Is it really possible to find a common denominator in the styles of so many film directors? Jaffe succeeds in detailing some essential elements, which makes of this book an important contribution to the field.

Jaffe tackles the task by operating for the most part empirically. The book offers very detailed analyses of nineteen films from four continents that share, according to Jaffe, the quality of being "slow". The selection is eclectic and, as a result, the phenomenon of slowness is approached from various angles. The films examined are quite recent: twelve have been released between 2000 and 2011, five between 1995 and 1997, with only Jim Jarmusch's *Stranger than Paradise* (1984) featuring from the 1980s. Jaffe's historical and descriptive approach manages to grasp "slow cinema" as a new phenomenon that is coming in many shapes and forms. Jaffe's aim, however, is not to provide an overarching conceptual framework able to reconcile the different aspects of slowness that emerge from the analyses; rather, the book's main objective is to draw attention to the broadness of the concept of slowness and to show how widespread it actually is in contemporary cinema. Had the purpose been to establish "slowness" as a solid theoretical term, Jaffe might perhaps have theorised important representatives of slow cinema like Andrei Tarkovsky, Michelangelo Antonioni, Theo Angelopoulos and Tsai Ming-Liang. Sometimes it appears that the author widens the concept to the point of seeing slowness where others do not. The militant tone suggested by the book's subtitle ("Countering the Cinema of Action"), on the other hand, is absent from the text. The "cinema of action" is not especially critiqued; the designated opponent is, rather, the commonsensical idea that film is based on "the desire to capture the motion of life, to refuse immobility" (3), a conviction held by Dziga Vertov and Agnès Varda, among others.

What is slowness in film? Jaffe's slow cinema is neither a genre nor a well-defined style, but a "family resemblance". In the first place, slowness is a matter of time; however, as Jaffe's book very well shows, and as we will see, a variety of other devices can equally make films "slow". A problem is perhaps that Jaffe often forces different categories into one; for example, when writing that "retarded motion and prolonged moments of stillness and emptiness distinguish contemporary slow movies" (3), stillness and emptiness are equated without attempting to explain their relationship. Of course, the relationship can be grasped intuitively, as when Jaffe writes that in Pedro Costa's *Ossos* (1997) a "grave stillness and sense of emptiness outweigh the action" (129). Nevertheless, the phenomena could be disentangled for the purpose of theoretical precision: stillness concerns time, and emptiness concerns visual as well as narrative components. Statements like the following pass over these distinctions:

> [E]diting or cutting in slow movies tends to be infrequent, which inhibits spatiotemporal leaps and disruptions. Not only do long takes predominate, but long shots frequently prevail over close-ups. Consistent with these stylistic elements, which may distance and irritate the viewer, is the austere mise-en-scène: slow movies shun elaborate and dynamic decor, lighting and colour. Moreover, the main characters in these movies usually lack emotional, or at least expressive, range and mobility. … Further, a bit like slow-moving characters, the plot and dialogue in slow movies gravitate towards stillness and death, and tend, in any case, to be minimal, indeterminate and unresolved. (3)

I suggest systematising the different points presented in the above passage. First there is the lack of cutting, which produces long scenes. This lack obviously concerns time. Next comes "the austere mise-en-scène", which has nothing to do with time but with visual design. In Cristi Puiu's *Death of Mr. Lazarescu* (*Moartea domnului Lazarescu*, 2005), for example, "the film's uniformly drab environment and dull available light undoubtedly reinforce the no-exit atmosphere. Even when a cut to a new shot occurs, the dreary, cramped atmosphere persists" (90). The last point, which concerns the actors' blankness and lack of expressiveness, is a matter of acting style, which is central to Jaffe's analysis of *Stranger than Paradise* in the form of a pervasive "deadpan manner" (15). One might wonder whether "slow cinema" really is the right term to hold all these elements together because, obviously, only the first point (lack of cuts) has to do with time. "Cinema Povero", derived from the Arte Povera movement of the 1960s, could perhaps be a more suitable term, for Arte Povera attacked the corporate mentality prevalent in culture by returning to simple objects and messages—something that the films analysed by Jaffe also arguably do. Of course, it is also possible to link, in a transversal fashion, the stylistic device of minimalism to the concept of time by saying that long takes are minimalist because they tend to provide less information per second. In that case, "minimalist cinema" might be a more suitable term. Matters become more complex, however, if one considers that being minimalist is not the only function of long takes—indeed, their minimalism might even merely be a side effect. True, when takes are long there often is less to be filmed, but this is not necessarily their main purpose. Jaffe mentions critical reflections on recent Romanian cinema and, in particular, on Cristian Mungiu's *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (*4 luni, 3 saptamâni si 2 zile*, 2007), in which the long-take camera "maintains a distance" and "an impassivity" resembling "the stare of a peculiarly empathetic surveillance camera" (99). It is thus not only the take itself but also the intention behind it that matter for the aesthetics of the long take.

Another concept that comes to mind is that of "cool cinema", derived from Marshall McLuhan's principle of "cool media", which the Canadian philosopher understands as a model of communication leaving information partly unexplained and open to interpretation. McLuhan juxtaposes "hot media" with the "cool media", which provide highly defined information (37). Hot media favour analytical precision while cool media's impassiveness is likely to challenge the viewer's own emotional and intellectual response. According to McLuhan, hot media "leave not much to be filled in" (36) and thus allow for less participation, while in incomplete cool media emotions need to be reenacted by the consumer. Also Jaffe uses the metaphor of coolness when writing about a "horrific long take" in *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*, in which the camera "continues calmly and coolly" (101). Similarly, in Gus van Sant's *Elephant* (2003), which is one of the main subjects of Chapter Two, long takes "keep the audience distant and the film's emotional temperature low" (57).

The above minimalism can be effective in the décor, choice of place, and action, but also in the narrative when information that could provide coherence and narrative soundness is suppressed. Jaffe explains this last point in his chapter on Béla Tarr. The characters in *The Turin Horse* (*A torinói ló*, 2011) are "unable to abandon their home as they attempt to do after their well dries up" and there are no indications as to "what causes the expanding darkness that signals their deepening paralysis and the end of the world" (14). Also in *Elephant* "the absence of explanation is matched by the lack of emotional expression [when] the suddenly slow, soft, gliding motion seems to occur without cause or explanation" (50). Again these intellectual patterns are in agreement with McLuhan, who attends to the narrative aspect by declaring nonlinearity an attribute of coolness and by dismissing melody as a continuous, connected, repetitive structure (vii–viii). Linear and sequential ordering is hot, while fractured and discontinuous structures are cool.

A problem with Jaffe's empirical approach is that the same elements pop up in different contexts but are never sufficiently summarised. The idea of "holding back", for instance, is recurring in *Slow Cinema* though it is never highlighted as a particular part of a theoretical system. What is held back? First, in slow cinema the director tends to "hold back" the protagonist's point of view. In Lisandro Alonso's *Liverpool* (2008) and in Costa's *Ossos*, for example, this "'withholding' pattern entails a refusal to track either promptly or closely the actions of characters as well as their shifts of attention or points of view" (114). More generally, in slow movies "strong political and social views are withheld. Rebellion is limited in slow movies because of "the extreme indeterminacy of these films" (151). Often, long takes have been seen as participatory because they create in the spectator the feeling of being present to the scene and of moving around in the space. However, it is also important to note that the aesthetics of the long take as a "cool device" works only in combination with the above strategy of withholding. In strictly temporal terms the long take is continuous, as Tarr confirms when saying that he prefers the long take because he likes its "continuity" (161). Furthermore, this continuity "matches that of real life—and 'it's very important to make the film a real psychological process'" (164). Tarr's desire for continuity, should any "withholding" effect be absent, would clash with McLuhan's "discontinuity" as a main feature of cool media. Vice versa, the "spatiotemporal leaps" that slow cinema avoids can also work in the service of discontinuity while continuous and connected long takes leave not much to be filled in. First, this means that cool or minimalist cinema does not depend on long takes; second, it means that long takes are

minimalist only in so far as certain elements within the shot are withheld. Jaffe presents many cases but does not establish these distinctions very clearly; instead, he extends the scope of the long take towards the metaphysical, saying that there is not just a lack of expression but also the attempt to express something inexpressible. He finds this in Jia Zhangke's *Still Life* (*Sanxia haoren*, 2005), where both Sanming (Sanming Han) and Shen Hong (Tao Zhao) seem locked "in inexpressible sadness" (143); also, Tarr's slow pace points to "the existence of human beings deprived of action and events in their allotted time" (151). The above examples show that the minimalism of the narrative structure needs to be distinguished from a minimalism of content. Jaffe refers to this when quoting Jonas Mekas's attempt to distinguish "silence" from "emptiness" in the films of Antonioni: "They say Antonioni rediscovered silent cinema, he is going back to the true principles of cinema. They look at it formalistically. But … Antonioni's silence comes from his content" (69). However, Jaffe does not establish this distinction very clearly.

There is yet one more important aspect of slow movies that could have been considered. In general, slow movies have nothing to do with slow motion, as it is used in scenes of combat in martial arts films, where the slowness does not create the detached mood for which slow cinema is famous, but rather adds information because details (often of horror) are blown up in time. This is not a "slowness of emptiness" but a "slowness of fullness", creating anxiety. However, what about the stroboscopic step-printing method used by Wong Kar-wai and others? This stylistic device clearly slows down the film's pace and creates a contemplative mood in the spirit of slow cinema. Finally, one more idea clinging to slowness, that of a meditative mood able to link past and present, could have been explored, as it could have provided interesting insights especially if pursued against the background of Laura Mulvey's thoughts on the continuous "now" juxtaposed to the "then" of stillness.

The general idea of slow cinema is that less is more. But what is this "more" supposed to be? Is it aesthetic beauty, reality, unreality (dream), a meditative mood, or "the metaphysical"? Do long takes capture the reality of everyday life in a more efficient manner? Twice, Jaffe mentions André Bazin's conviction that long takes "preserve the natural continuity of the time and space of everyday life" (57), while Béla Tarr suggests something else: since nothing happens in his movies, "all that remains is time. This is probably the only thing that's still genuine" (161). This is Tarr's radical view (reminiscent of Tarkovsky) quoted by Jaffe. Not all "slow" directors would agree. In summary, we can say that not only there are different devices that can be used in order to slow cinema down, but also that the purposes for which they are chosen differ from director to director. In Jaffe's book all these elements are mentioned but, obviously, the purpose of the book was not to elaborate all this into a systematic theory. Nevertheless, Jaffe's book is a valuable attempt contributing to the exploration of an important tendency in contemporary cinema. Most valuably, the book begins to delineate what is a vast field of studies, and points at many of the aspects that need to be identified and distinguished, thus giving impulse to further research work. Jaffe's study should be seen as a first step towards the development of a particular branch of film studies attempting to explore the phenomenon of contemplation as a theoretical notion.

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Thorsten Botz-Bornstein was born in Germany, studied philosophy in Paris, and received his PhD from Oxford University. As a postdoctoral researcher based in Finland he undertook extensive research on Russian formalism and semiotics in Russia and the Baltic countries. He is now Associate Professor of Philosophy at the Gulf University for Science and Technology in Kuwait.