

# *The Awareness of Duration in Slow Cinema*

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**Abstract:** The concept of time has its particularity in the context of film studies. Film as a way of communication can span and reshape time. The “time” of a film is not the speed or the length of the shot, but the feeling it gives to the audience. Specifically, slowness as a temporal feature in films, it makes time noticeable in cinema. According to Bazin, the film aimed at an accurate picture of the world by recording the real life. Although many techniques, such as long takes, camera movements and editing pace, have been used to support and analyse the slowness in cinema. This essay will take the film *What Time Is It There?* (Tsai Ming-Liang, 2001) as a case study to find new perspectives to discuss how slow cinema makes the audience aware of the duration.

## 1. Introduction

As far as cinema is concerned, the ability to record time and impose duration is one of the most basic functions [1]. The concept of time has its particularity in cinema, especially in the perception of audience, and one person's feeling and experience of speed in cinematic time may be different than another. However, the concept of slowness in cinema can make time noticeable and consequently felt by the viewers. The expression “cinema of slowness” has been widely used since the twenty-first century to refer to films characterized by measured pace, minimalist mise-en-scène, long-take, and the stillness of camera movement, etc., which are routinised in a way. According to Bazin's theory in the realist application of the fullness of duration within the shot, slow cinema has possibilities for observational realism [2]. This essay will discuss new angles of cinematic slowness by drawing on examples from the film *What Time Is It There* (Tsai Ming-liang, 2001), which reveals distinctive structures of temporality and directs the viewers to an experience of authentic duration. Besides, as an art film in Taiwan, China, this film is the most representative of Tsai's works in shaping time, and it not only has the signatures of slow films, but also makes the viewers aware of the existence of time. Meanwhile, the viewers actively engage with images and sounds to comprehend a film, so this essay will explain how slow cinema makes the audience aware of the duration from visual and auditory, these two different perspectives, in terms of the monotony. To be precise, the movement of lonely characters in time and space and the silence in the film indicate a lack of interactivity and narrative. Moreover, these signatures in slow cinema are also in relation to traditional modes of film spectatorship [3], such as the observation and wait. Slow cinema enables time to be recognised and it encourages reflection and thinking of spectators. At the same time, it also enriches the film context at the level of realism.

## 2. Literature review

According to Andre Bazin's foundational realist theory of "The Ontology of the Photographic Image", he argues that cinema is different from other expressive arts due to its nature and photographic basis [3]. It is the basis of such photography that has emerged such as the shooting technique of long shots in films, which gives the possibility of recording and reshaping time in cinema. In addition, beyond Bazin's theory of realism, films should put emphasis on "an accurate picture of the world" [4]. Therefore, the expression of real time is inevitably integrated into the cinematic time, giving people a sense of slowness to pay attention to the duration in a film. Tiago De Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge believe that slowness in slow cinema is understood as a mode of time unfolding, as a kind of continuous consciousness and as a basic subjective experience [1]. In fact, slow cinema is often considered as art cinema, which is different from the mainstream cinema that use speed to entertain the audience but invite the audience to value or waste the use of time. As for the film *What Time Is It There*, Tsai infers the representational signatures animating Bazin's take on realist cinema [3], especially in the concept of duration. Different from the expression of temporality in cinema, duration is more concerned with the static existence of time. In Tsai's works, real time and cinematic time tend to coincide to a large extent, but at the same time it is also unfamiliar to the viewers. Therefore, the reason for the slowness and alienation of the viewers is monotony. In the category of slow cinema and realism, visual and auditory monotony can make the audience aware of the duration.

## 3. Visual monotony: movement of characters

Time and space in films are reflected by the way the characters move, sometimes there is nothing in the frame but a person and nothing happened. Such solitary characters often appear in Tsai's works, and lead the audience to follow them to feel the existence of time and space. In *What Time Is It There*, it spans two different cities in terms of space (Taipei and Paris), and temporally it spans the gap between real time and cinematic time. However, the two main characters, Hsiao-kang and Shiang-chyi, wander alone in different places and the time seems to be slowing down. For example, Hsiao-kang sits alone in front of the television, watching the rented movie *The 400 Blows*, the space was small and dark with only the light from the TV screen. At this moment, he is solitary and inside the frame is monotonous. This monotony is not only reflected in the character alone without any action, but also in the still image. Besides, the only moving thing is the images inside the TV screen, which reinforces this sense of monotony and stillness by contrast. This makes the spectators start to observe, and such observations can draw their unique attention to minor or material details in a film image [2]. Therefore, they start to be aware of the setting in the room and empathize with the characters, and finally start to realize the duration. Another representative scene worth to be mentioned is that Shiang-chyi waits for a train on the platform in Paris. She stands alone on the right side of the frame to give the audience time to observe the space she is in, and then, we see the opposite platform is also a man waits for the train, and after a while he gets on the train and disappear, only Shiang-chyi is still there. This scene gives the audience just a single message, but it allows us to wait with her for something to happen. "The phenomenon of waiting is the subjective experience that perhaps best exemplifies the coexistence of a multiplicity of durations [1]." This quote indicates that the audience and the character are experiencing synchronous time both in film and outside of film. In other words, the audience is not only aware of the duration, but they are in it. Consequently, the solitary of character conveys the signal of observation and waiting to the audience while making the images become monotonous, thus making the audience realise the duration of the film, that is, the slowness.

In addition to the visual monotony caused by a solitary character, the aimless movement of the

characters can also achieve a sense of slowness. Song Hwee Lim argues that a slow film should not full of characters who do nothing but wait or waste time, it must be filled with a sense of purpose in characters [5]. However, such characters with aimless actions occasional appear in Tsai's works, and the structures both as epistemology and ontology, form and content. Based on this structure, the aimlessness can also be considered as drifting between different contexts, which strengthens the reflection of spectators on the duration of slow cinema unconsciously. For instance, in the end of *What Time Is It There*, Shiang-chyi comes to Le Jardin des Tuileries in Paris and falls asleep in the chair while a suitcase is floating in the pool. There is no reason or purpose for her behaviour at this moment, and the audience is left to drift just like the suitcase. In fact, an unstable state of mind may be best suited to experiencing inexplicable mysteries and ambiguities at these moments, rather than consciously understanding them. "Drifting, here, becomes a way of knowing [5]." In this way, the actions of characters become a kind of lost, and the audience understands the film by move aimlessly with them to feel the continuity of time. In another sequence, Hsiao-kang uses a long pole to adjust the clock on top of a building in Taipei, an action that lacks purpose but one that he puts a lot of effort into. In the frame is reflected as he constantly adjusts the needle for a while, and after that he sits on the roof to pour himself a glass of red wine. During this time, the audience is always waiting for something to happen and trying to understand his behaviour. At the same time, the character's lack of purpose also adds to the visual monotony, there is nothing except for his "strange" behaviour. Therefore, leaving the viewers waiting, they only witness the passing time as duration.

Another type of character's movement that can be used to analysis the slowness in cinema is repetitive actions. To be specific, when the character is always repeating a certain action, the visual experience is monotonous, even boring for the viewers. As the image does not express new information, this creates a blank in time. "Conceivably the empty time and space of slow movies open the way to a cinema of contemplation [6]" Therefore, the audience falls into a time gap when watching the repetitive actions of the characters and starts to pull away from the film for thinking, and they are aware of the duration of slow cinema in this process. In a typical scene in the film *What Time Is It There*, Hsiao-kang's mother covers all the windows with cloth on the balcony at home because she believed her dead husband would come back in the dark. This action is repeated over for several minutes and seems to be endless. From the perspective of spectators, the repetition to some extent causes visual tiredness and weariness, which is considered as an aesthetic force and structural principle, that is, the relationship between the body and the diversity and variability of its duration [7]. The physical tiredness makes the audience begin to realise the duration of time, that is, to realise the slowness in the film. In addition, the most frequent action in the film is that Hsiao-kang adjusts every clock and watch on various occasions and places to match Shiang-chyi's French time. This movement is very monotonous in the frame performance, and his repeated actions easily make the audience feel the time is extremely slow. Furthermore, what he is doing is changing the time, and it is a clever coincidence in terms of content. Beyond the actions of the characters, the same scenes and settings are also repeated in the film, such as the dinner scenes in Hsiao-kang's home. Although each time the plot is different, the image and angle of camera is almost the same. Besides, there is almost only the act of eating among the characters, which will make the viewers feel the reality of daily life and connect with the time of slowness in it. There are many ideas that illustrate visual monotony in terms of the movement of the characters in the film and demonstrated that slow cinema encourages the audience to observe, drift and wait outside the frames. Also, it causes the reflection and thinking of the audience and make them be aware of the duration.

#### 4. Auditory monotony: wordless, silence and odd sound

Sound is also a crucial element in the slow cinema of bodies. At the auditory level of a film, the monotony of the sound can also make the audience to feel that time is flowing slow, one of the respects in which is reflected in the wordless of the film. Slow cinema often lacks dialogue and language between characters, in other words, it lacks interactivity and narrative momentum. This kind of silence is not just the absence of words, but the fact that characters fill our imaginations with words they are not saying [8]. Specifically, in beginning of the film *What Time Is It There*, Hsiao-kang's father sits alone at the dining table smoking a cigarette, then he gets up and calls his wife to dinner. But he gets no response, and no one come, so he returns and sits down. After a while he gets up and goes to the balcony to light another cigarette, this scene ends with him standing at the end of the frame for a long time. It is obvious that there is almost no dialogue in this scene, and the only word the father says is not answered, which is a lack of interactivity. Such one-way communication gives the audience space to complete their imaginations and makes them try to understand the plots inside the frame. In terms of cinematic language, this scene also lacks narrative by setting the camera still, which is more like a waiting process. Song Hwee Lim suggests that from the aspect of narrative, the waiting metaphor can be a source of boredom for some spectators, but at the same time, the use of long take and the lack of language can be considered as hallmarks of slow cinema [5]. On the other hand, the wordless is not only reflected in the absence of dialogue in the images, but also in the communication barrier between people. As for another part of the film, Tsai is using the language barrier in terms of content to reduce the dialogue of Shiang-chyi, who lives alone in Paris. As a girl who cannot speak French, she has trouble ordering food in restaurants. Even though the sounds are noisy in that scene, the audience can still feel the lack of the words from the perspective of the character. Also, the film uses a lot of sequences to show her inability to communicate, such as shopping at the supermarket without saying a word, and the never-ending phone call. This interactive barrier is also a form of silence in the film, which isolates the characters and creates a silent atmosphere, thus achieving an auditory monotonous effect. Besides, it also slows down the narration because of the lack of dialogue, which makes the cinematic time slow for the audience. As a result, they begin to become aware of the duration in their imaginations and immerse themselves in it. As Tiago De Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge put it, "[...] the durational aesthetic more commonly associated with slow cinema [1]." Therefore, the wordless in a film extends the duration of time in physical terms, while increasing the aesthetic properties of slow cinema.

In addition to the wordless, the lack of sound of the film is also reflected in the silence, which is the absence of background sound and music. In this concept, there is a blank in time. However, sometimes it is not absolute silence, but with only one or two detailed sounds can make the whole environment seems to be completely quiet. To take an example from the film *What Time Is It There*, Hsiao-kang's mother squats in front of the fish tank to look at the big fish, imagining that it is her dead husband. This scene is very quiet, with only a few small sounds, such as the sound of water in the tank. Meanwhile, the stillness image is also breaking the flow of time, which is like to pause the film and "saving the image" [9]. During this empty time, the audience can feel the silence and begin to speculate on the motives for her thoughts and actions. In slow cinema, the silence and emptiness may lead to meditation on life, or to the emptiness of the human soul, which is the root of human consciousness [6]. Another scene as an example need to be mentioned is the female character Shiang-chyi sits eating on the bed in her hotel room. There was nothing but the sound of her eating, no music nor other objective sound. In terms of the long, repetitive and monotonous sound may make the audience feel boring. This simple boredom of spectators is a temporary, time-limited condition caused by lack of stimulation, lack of concentration, impatience, or other external

circumstances. However, in the respect of slowness in cinema, this feeling of boredom can make the audience aware of the duration. Under this concept, the spectators will subconsciously prolong the duration of the film when watching the stillness or movement of the characters with monotonous sound or completely silence, which can also make the film become slower. At the same time, it is undeniable that the reflection and boredom that slow cinema creates for the viewers also has the aesthetic value in terms of the cinematic level. As the music that can give the film its rhythm, it hardly appears in the film *What Time Is It There*. Tsai avoids using music in order to create the silent atmosphere, which is also his adherence to realism. However, the rhythm is determined not by the music nor the length of the segment, but by the consistency of time in the scene, what Tarkovsky calls “time pressure” [5]. To be precise, this pressure builds up the duration of the film and gives the audience a sense of perception. As a result, it is this relative silence in sound that makes the audience be aware of duration in slow cinema.

At the same time, some odd sounds which may make the audience uncomfortable that can also create the sense of slowness in cinema. As I mentioned before, the presence of a small sound can enhance the sense of silence in the image, while the odd sound can interrupt the endurance, force them to pull away and realise the duration in the film. In Tsai’s works, especially in *What Time Is It There*, by emphasizing the details of the sound, he makes the audience feel the source of the sound and its material features, and points out the specific process of sound production [3]. For example, the film shows several times that Hsiao-kang pees in his room into various containers, as he is afraid to go to the toilet at night after his father died. Such images show the details of the sound vividly, which is so private and strange that, in fact, it makes the audience feel uncomfortable. Tsai uses such scene to show the reality of everyday life, and the odd sounds in it gives the viewers an unbearable feeling, thus beginning to realise the slowness in the film and paying attention to the duration. In addition, the odd sound also refers to the monotonous sound, which emphasis the duration in the film. For instance, Hsiao-kang sells watches on the overpass bridge, and in order to prove the quality of his watches, he taps them against the bridge railing over and over, makes the rhythmic, single sound. When the audience hear the repeated sound for a while, it is inevitable to think other things beyond the film. This phenomenon is known as “mind wandering”, characterised by a shift in attention from primary tasks to internal information, which is the main reason for this mental activity. In the process of the wandering, spectators will notice the other details inside the frame and start to feel the long duration in this period.

## 5. Conclusion

To sum up, slow cinema has its unique signatures of slowness in terms of cinematic methods. This essay used a Chinese film, which is considered as one of the most representative works in slow cinema, is taken as a case study by Tsai Ming-liang’s *What Time Is It There* to analyse the reason of the slowness signatures make the spectators notice the duration from two new aspects of visual and auditory. Moreover, the slowness of a film is closely related to the feelings of viewers. In fact, the way of recognising films, including aspects of narrative structure and visual style are similar to the psychological characteristics of boredom as defined by idleness, monotony and emptiness. So, the viewers gain the experiences of duration from the feeling of boredom. At the same time, instead of trying to annoy the audience by causing boredom and idleness, slow cinema aims to reposition their experiences of time and duration for positive and creative reflection. This process of pushing and pulling stress on the audience’s understanding and experience of slow cinema, while emphasising that the concept of time, which can be produce and record, is based on duration and observation. From the perspective of realism, the characteristics of slowness in slow cinema and its relationship with spectators fully reflect the essence of recording and reshaping time in real life. In

addition, it also enriches the spectatorship in terms of the context of film studies.

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