Slow Cinema Modality: Applying Bordwell to Tsai Ming-Liang

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Abstract
Slow Cinema has been gathering significant scholarly attention, but it remains largely unaddressed. Prior research has focused on the aesthetic properties of Slow Cinema, and its effects on spectators. This paper, on the other hand, explains the fundamentals of Slow Cinema via a critical analysis of Tsai Ming-Liang’s films *Goodbye Dragon Inn* and *Stray Dogs* while situating this movement within the contemporary art cinema scene through an engagement with David Bordwell’s claim of art cinema modality.

Keywords
Film Studies — Cultural Studies — Slow Cinema

Slow Cinema, a modern cinematic production trend that emphasizes slowness and duration of time, is an enigma. Current literature on the subject seeks to define the movement in terms of its aesthetic or its cultural value, which is essential to the understanding of Slow Cinema as a whole. This paper, like the literature before it, will explore the relationship between the aesthetic and cultural properties of Slow Cinema. It will also examine Slow Cinema’s place as a current production trend, and evaluate its effects on viewers both critically and physically. To assess this relationship, I will be conducting an analysis of two films by Taiwanese director Tsai Ming-Liang: *Goodbye Dragon Inn* (2003) with support from *Stray Dogs* (2013), which serves as an exemplar of modern Slow Cinema. Through this critical analysis, I argue that *Goodbye Dragon Inn* and *Stray Dogs* are prototypical works of Slow Cinema that carry significant cultural value that stands to exemplify the movement's relevance in contemporary art cinema. I will begin with a discussion of what Slow Cinema is, in terms of its production rather than its aesthetic, followed by an outline of the debate on the significance of Slow Cinema, and a brief history of the movement before assessing the aesthetic qualities of Slow Cinema as a whole, and how *Goodbye Dragon Inn* and *Stray Dogs* fit within this movement. This paper will then close with an engagement with David Bordwell’s claims about art cinema as a mode, and Slow Cinema’s significance as a trend in modern art cinema.

Slow Cinema is a contemporary movement within art cinema that began, scholars argue, at the turn of the 21st century. It is a form of cinema that focuses on temporality rather than narrative cohesion that is in direct opposition to modern mainstream cinema, which emphasizes strong narrative cohesion and fast paced action. Slow Cinema as a movement has roots in 1960s neorealist cinema, primarily Italian neorealist cinema, starting with Michelangelo Antonioni’s film *L’Avventura* (1960), which was known to espouse a number of aesthetic qualities (i.e. long takes and dead time) that became synonymous with Slow Cinema (Çağlayan 10). The debate that currently surrounds this cinematic movement surfaced around 2010 and is centred on whether Slow Cinema is relevant to contemporary art cinema. There are some detractors of this genre of art cinema that demean this form as derivative and “lacking the precision, daringness and provocation of the high modernist tradition,” (Flanagan 25). Others argue that this mode of cinematic production encourages critical thought about the use of time spent consuming Slow Cinema, that is, whether or not consumption of Slow Cinema constitutes time wasted, or time spent in labour (Schoonover 67).

This leads into the discussion on the aesthetics and methods of Slow Cinema which form the foundation of the Slow Cinema debate. Tiago De Luca summarizes the Slow Cinema production trend as “films characterized by measured pace, minimalist mise-en-scène, opaque and laconic narratives, and an adherence to the long take as a self-reflexive stylistic device” (24). This general understanding of the aesthetic and methods of Slow Cinema are corroborated and expanded upon by other scholars and critics as well: Flanagan writes that the stylistic features of ‘slow films’ are “the employment of (often extremely) long takes, de-centred and understated modes of storytelling, and a pronounced emphasis on quietude and the everyday,” (2008). Çağlayan, on the other hand, notes the rationale for the label: “Slow cinema is generally characterized by a persistent approach to the reductive manipulation of temporality and pacing, hence the label ‘slow’” (8). The aesthetics and methods of Slow Cinema involve the deliberate manipulation of time through the extended long take and sparse story. These are often paired with characters that lack motivation, and an emphasis on place rather than events. Flanagan notes this relationship with respect to Koehler’s statement that Slow Cinema is an intermediary, or a combination, of an ethnographic document and anthropological fiction,
that “all these ‘in-between’ films possess a quite singular discipline in their attention to place, movement and the activity of labour,” (30). Effectively, the summary of the aesthetic and methods of Slow Cinema become: a selection of long takes of minimalist mise-en-scène that incorporate a slowly, or sparsely, developed narrative engaged with location and routinized action.

According to my premises above, Tsai Ming-Liang’s two films, Goodbye Dragon Inn and Stray Dogs fall into this category of Slow Cinema. Both films feature excessively long scenes of little action that present the actors on screen as elements of the cinematic landscape, which is emblematic of Tsai’s films. An example of this is Goodbye Dragon Inn’s concluding scene: the empty theatre space. The scene lasts for a total of five consecutive minutes, the beginning of which opens with the ticket lady (Chen Shiang-Chyi) sweeping the floor between the aisles, then ends with nothing but silence as the theatre remains empty for the remainder of the film. This scene exemplifies the aesthetic of Slow Cinema: the extreme long take, centred on place rather than character or event, minimalist mise-en-scène, and attention to movement and the activity of labour.

Similar trends are found in Stray Dogs. Tsai’s later film. Both films have excessively extended scenes that conclude the work. The scene in Stray Dogs, shot in close up, finds Lee Kang-Sheng’s character standing behind Chen Shiang-Chyi portraying the woman who became the mother figure to his two children; the scene lasts a total of twelve minutes, over twice as long as the final scene in Goodbye Dragon Inn, with far less activity. The minimal movement performed by both man and woman in this scene turn them into elements of the environment, so it likewise conforms to the expectations and aesthetics of Slow Cinema. Aesthetically, both Goodbye Dragon Inn and Stray Dogs conform to my previous summary of Slow Cinema.

The perception of time while viewing both of these films drastically shifts between watching the film for the first, second, and even third time. While watching Goodbye Dragon Inn and Stray Dogs for the first time, significantly long shots drag on for, what feels like, longer than the actual duration of the scene, whereas the second and third viewing of the same scenes feel shorter. The anticipation of a scene’s length accounts for this shift in temporal experience; spectators are already aware of the contents and duration of a scene. The stairwell scene roughly halfway into Goodbye Dragon Inn exemplifies this shift: the loud clattering of the ticket lady’s gait marks time and drones on, which seems to take forever upon an initial viewing, but the spectator expects and anticipates this scene the second time, and is no longer entranced by its extended duration. In Stray Dogs, the sequence near the end of the film in which the character played by Lee mutilates and devours his daughter’s cabbage toy drags on, even though its disturbing contents might encourage otherwise; the prolonged, unmoving shot lends to the perceived extended duration. This is also consistent with what is generally assumed of Slow Cinema.

To return to the debate, Slow Cinema has its purpose in making audiences re-evaluate their sense of time in the moment. But the question arises as to whether audiences will critically reflect on how the time was spent watching the film. De Luca claims, in relation to the closing scene of Goodbye Dragon Inn, that because the viewer has too much time to view the screen, a “self-conscious mode of spectatorship” occurs, where the viewer becomes aware of the time spent viewing the scene (29). The same can be said of the final scene of Stray Dogs, in which the characters of Lee and Chen stare at a wall; the spectator begins to become acutely aware of how much time has been spent on this, collectively, twenty-minute ordeal. Schoonover argues that Slow Cinema would encourage the audience to engage in a form of labour, and he poses a question about whether it encourages a particular viewing practice “to soothe [sic] anxieties about the value of our own labour . . . or to exaggerate those anxieties” (68). So, spectators have to critically engage with the film’s temporality, its apparent abuse of their labour, and, thus, their time.

With these cohesive ties that have been explored through both of Tsai’s films, it is necessary to assess whether or not Slow Cinema, as a division of art cinema, is a mode of cinematic practice, rather than a genre. To understand this connection, I consult Bordwell’s article “The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice” in which he states that art cinema, as a mode, requires a high degree of authorial expressivity and realism that is dependent on depictions of real places and real problems (561). Surely Tsai Ming-Liang’s films fall into what Bordwell explains as the modality of art cinema. Both focus on real places -- the theatre of Goodbye Dragon Inn or the streets of Taipei in Stray Dogs -- and real problems, the anxiety associated with the closing night of a theatre or the struggle of daily life as a homeless alcoholic with children. Bordwell also identifies some of the underlying structures of character that carry through art cinema that also apply to these two films. He writes “the characters of the art cinema lack defined desires and goals. Characters may act for inconsistent reasons or may question themselves about their goals” (Bordwell 561). Tsai never provides any of his characters’ motivations, which defies the classical norm: reliance on characters with established goals. Another significant observation Bordwell identifies is that authorship exhibits itself as recurrent violations of the classical norm. Deviations from the classical canon - an unusual angle, a stressed bit of cutting, a prohibited camera movement, an unrealistic shift in lighting or setting” (563). Tsai’s authorship lies in his use of the negative space on screen; his use of what Tony Zhou identifies as the quadrant system is strained, which creates significant dramatic tension. Tsai places characters or objects in one part of the scene, then leaves the rest of the frame empty, which leads to unrealized anticipation: the viewer expects something to occur, but it never does. So, here it is seen that fundamental elements of art cinema as a mode, as identified by Bordwell, are present in Goodbye Dragon Inn, and in Stray Dogs.
Slow Cinema situates itself solidly within art cinema both in aesthetic and methodology: it is defined by authorship that hinges on the representation of reality. It carries with it a disposition towards the consumption of time that forces the audience to labour through and critically engage with the film itself. In this vein, Tsai Ming-Liang’s *Goodbye Dragon Inn* is a prototypical Slow Cinema film, as is its newer counterpart *Stray Dogs*, that encourages its viewers to assess the value of their time with their extreme long takes, between six and twelve minutes, and engage with the unrealized dramatic potential of each scene. However, as discussed, there is a point when Slow Cinema is no longer slow: repeated viewings of a single scene, or an entire film can change one’s perception of time. This contemporary movement has a purpose in modern art cinema as an extension of classic realism that exposes and exploits the anxieties that society has concerning the use and function of time. *Goodbye Dragon Inn* and *Stray Dogs* are exceptional examples of that exploitation.

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**Works Cited**


