

Designing Calm: Slow Cinema as an Act of Resistance

Temporal Experience and Spatial Design in an Accelerated Culture

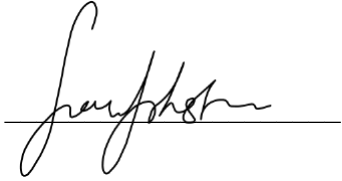
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Declaration of Originality

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Honours) Design for Film. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sara Johnston', is written over a horizontal line.

Sara Johnston

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Abstract

This thesis explores *Slow Cinema* as a form of quiet resistance to contemporary cultures of acceleration through carefully designed mise-en-scène and sustained duration. As life is increasingly shaped by speed and efficiency, cinema has mirrored these changes implementing rapid editing and spectacle. Drawing primarily on Byung-Chul Han's (2015) exploration of "burnout" provides a framework for understanding these changes. By situating this thesis within this cultural context, the research considers how slow cinema disrupts linear time and space and offers an alternative affective experience that encourages contemplation, relaxation and stillness as a response to the exhausting, pressurised current cultural condition.

Through a visual analysis of *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (2003) directed by Tsai Ming-liang, this thesis examines how production design creates interstitial spaces that function as temporal containers, allowing time to be layered, felt and experienced rather than simply passed through. It aims to approach slow cinema through three interrelated and combined analytical angles; time, space, and affect.

The question of *time* is informed by Gilles Deleuze's concept of the "time-image" (Deleuze, 1989b), complimented by the writings of filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky and his opinions on cinema's unique connection to time (Tarkovsky, 1986).

The analysis of *space* and mise-en-scène is drawn from Michel Foucault's theory of "heterotopias": where multiple temporalities coexist and time is stretched within them to position space as the primary driver of meaning (Foucault, 1984).

The exploration of *affect* is discussed through a broader cultural lens, using Han's (2015) critique of contemporary acceleration, with further discussions from Andrei Tarkovsky and Paul Schrader. Together, these perspectives provide an analytical foundation for how slow cinema uses duration and production design to communicate embodied emotion, and how this fills a gap and works as a quiet response to contemporary, fast-paced culture.

Ultimately, this thesis situates slow cinema within the broader cultural experience of acceleration, while acknowledging production designers' role in facilitating cinematic resistance through carefully curated design. It demonstrates how

slow cinema offers an alternative form of spectatorship that reshapes the present and gestures towards a future of cinematic slowness, emotional resonance and a resistance to burnout.

Table of Contents

Introduction	pg. 1
Chapter One: The Pressure of Time	pg. 6
1.1 External Conditions: Modernity, Acceleration & Globalisation....	p. 6
1.2 Internalisation: Burnout	p. 9
1.3 Cinema Under Acceleration	p. 10
1.4 Loss of Culture & Temporal Dislocation	p. 11
1.5 The Response: The Search for Alternative Temporalities	p. 12
1.6 Slow Cinema as Resistance.....	p. 13
Chapter Two: Theoretical Frameworks: Space, Time & Affect	pg. 20
2.1 Andrei Tarkovsky.....	p. 20
2.2 Paul Schrader	p. 21
2.3 Gilles Deleuze	p. 22
2.4 Michel Foucault	p. 23
Chapter Three: <i>Goodbye, Dragon Inn</i> (2003) Image Analysis	pg. 25
3.1. Interstitial Space & The Theatre as a Heterotopic Archive.....	p. 25
3.2. Stillness & Suspension as Design	p. 27
3.3. Temporal Accumulation & Architectural Porosity	p. 31
3.4. Embodied Duration & Lighting	p. 35
3.5. The Crystal-Image	p. 40
Chapter Four: Slowing Down - Slow Cinema Expansion & Contemporary Relevance	pg. 43
4.1 Slow Culture Movements	p. 43
4.2 Reversal of Cinematic Influence	p. 43
4.3 Tsai Ming-liang as a Precursor	p. 44
4.4 Contemporary Cinematic Slowness.....	p. 45
4.5 Limitations	p. 52
4.6 The Future of Spatial Design	p. 52
Conclusion	pg. 54

Bibliography pg. 56

List of Figures

- Fig. 1:** “Do you know this theatre is haunted?” *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (Ming-liang, 2003)..... p. 5
- Fig. 2:** Everyday life in Taiwan, 1971-72 (Meyskens, 2026) p. 7
- Fig. 3:** Taipei Taiwan, February 1990 (Flickr, 2007) p. 8
- Fig. 4:** Taipei Ximen Roundabout, 1978 (Reddit, 2026) p. 8
- Fig. 5:** Hong Kong in 1990 (Wordpress, 2026) p. 9
- Fig. 6:** Nine-minute continuous shot of Gorchakov carrying a lit candle across an empty pool in *Nostalghia* (Tarkovsky 1983) p. 14
- Fig. 7:** Jeanne meticulously preps and peels potatoes in real-time in *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai de Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*. (Ackerman, 1975)p. 14
- Fig. 8:** Black and white colour palette in *Andrei Rublëv* (Tarkovsky, 1966)p. 15
- Fig. 9:** Monochrome colour palette in *Nostalghia* (Tarkovsky, 1983)p. 15
- Fig. 10:** Water as a pervasive element in *Stalker* (Tarkovsky, 1979) p. 16
- Fig. 11:** Water leaks through ceiling emphasising decay of structure in *Stalker* (Tarkovsky, 1979)p. 16
- Fig. 12:** Observational wide-shot of patrons suspended within the time and space of the auditorium (Ming-liang, 2003)p. 28
- Fig. 13:** The Japanese tourist experiences isolation within the shared space of the auditorium (Ming-liang, 2003)p. 28
- Fig. 14:** 2 minute and 6 second static close-up of Chun Shih with flickers of projection light on his face (Ming-liang, 2003)p. 29
- Fig. 15:** Peeling paint and leaking ceiling in *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (Ming-liang, 2003) p. 31

Fig. 16: Stacked boxes and accumulated clutter in the back corridors of the Fu He Grand Theatre in <i>Goodbye, Dragon Inn</i> (Ming-liang, 2003)	p. 32
Fig. 17: The projectionist tends to the pervasive leaks above the theatre (Ming-liang, 2003)	p. 33
Fig. 18: Focus on everyday resilience of the employees (Ming-liang, 2003).....	p. 33
Fig. 19: Ticket checker limps through corridor in <i>Goodbye, Dragon Inn</i> (Ming-liang, 2003)	p. 35
Fig. 20: Static camera hold for 79 seconds (Ming-liang, 2003)	p. 35
Fig. 21: Camera holds for 18 seconds after ticket checker leaves frame (Ming-liang, 2003)	p. 36
Fig. 22: The ticket checker moves through the sparse, aged, cavernous architecture (Ming-liang, 2003).....	p. 37
Fig. 23: The ticket checker walks slowly through the back rooms of the Fu He Grand Theatre (Ming-liang, 2003).....	p. 38
Fig. 24: Dimly lit corridor and muted colour palette suspends time (Ming-liang, 2003).....	p. 38
Fig. 25: 5 minute and 20 second static observational shot of the ticket checker cleaning the auditorium (Ming-liang, 2003).....	p. 39
Fig. 26: Chun Shih watches himself projected on the screen in <i>Dragon Inn</i> , 1967 (Ming-liang, 2003).....	p. 40
Fig. 27: The two men sit in an empty auditorium to watch themselves in the 1967 wuxia film <i>Dragon Inn</i> (Ming-liang, 2003)	p. 41
Fig. 28: “And no one remembers us anymore.” The two men reminisce on times gone by (Ming-liang, 2003)	p. 42
Fig. 29: Domestic life in <i>An Cailín Ciúin</i> (Bairéad, 2023)	p. 48
Fig. 30: Everyday rituals in <i>Perfect Days</i> (Wenders, 2023)	p. 48

Fig. 31: Repeated water movement over floor tiles exposes spatial porosity in *Roma* (Cuarón, 2018)p. 48

Fig. 32: Water and decay emerges through repetition and accumulation in *Roma* (Cuarón, 2018)p. 49

Fig. 33: The cottage erupts into fire. Architecture fails to control exterior elements from interior space in *The Banshees of Inisherin* (MacDonagh, 2023)p. 49

Fig. 34: Rain blurs structures producing temporal suspension in *The Banshees of Inisherin* (MacDonagh, 2023)p. 49

Fig. 35: The garden space as a heterotopia of denial beside Auschwitz. Insulating domestic life from reality in *The Zone of Interest* (Glazer, 2023)p. 50

Fig. 36: The cinema as a space of temporary suspension from daily life in *Roma* (Cuarón, 2018) p. 50

Fig. 37 & 38: Diffused, naturalistic lighting in *Aftersun* (Wells, 2022).....p. 51

Fig. 39 & 40: Natural, soft, merging colour palette in *Nomadland* (Zhao, 2020)....p. 51

Fig. 41 & 42: Controlled, dream-like colour palette in *Moonlight* (Jenkins, 2016). p. 51

List of Tables

Table 1: Recent Award Recognised Films Incorporating Slow Cinema Techniques
Compiled by the author (Johnston, 2026) p. 46

Introduction

This thesis emerges from a growing curiosity about *Slow Cinema* and how it can act as a resistance to the pressures of contemporary society. The focus of this thesis is on exploring how film designers purposely extend duration and carefully compose a mise-en-scène to reshape viewers' emotional experiences. It investigates how slow cinema can make us *feel* time. By manipulating cinematic time and space, slow cinema's technical conventions allow viewers to be present, calm and contemplative within our accelerated society. Slow cinema has frequently been theorised philosophically, but in my opinion its spatial and material design that facilitates duration is underexplored. I intend to explore this gap through this research.

The term “cinema of slowness” was first coined by Michel Ciment (2003) speaking at the 46th San Francisco International Film Festival, while making clear his distaste for the “bombardment of sound and images” in contemporary films, he noted a return to films “of contemplation” (Ciment, 2003, cited in Tuttle, 2006).

My introduction to slow cinema was during a four-day masterclass with director Tsai Ming-liang on an Erasmus exchange programme in Prague. Many of his films were screened starting as early as 9am, continuing for long stretches of time. The first of these being his 2003 film *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*. As a socially exhausted student, my initial reaction to these films were that they were mentally and physically draining. I drifted in and out of sleep only to wake up on the exact same scene and realise that I had not missed anything crucial to the narrative. At first, I found this amusing, but in retrospect it was profoundly revealing.

In the following days, Ming-liang's films remained unusually present in my mind. However, unlike how I was used to, what lingered was the images and their affect, not the plot. I was forced to reflect deeper than I had with films before. Here I realised the true effect of cinema as a medium capable of shaping experience through duration and mise-en-scène.

On the final day, there was a question-and-answer session with Ming-liang. At the time, I felt I lacked the knowledge to ask a question. Ironically, now I find myself

filled with questions I wish I had asked. This brilliantly mirrors the temporal structure of slow cinema itself; meaning unfolding long after the initial viewing experience.

Watching these films was an emotionally profound experience for me. I was fascinated by their ability to allow me to *feel* time. The power of slow cinema is its deeply self-reflective nature and its ability to facilitate true present time. Rather than being force fed narratives or emotions like in mainstream films, slow cinema allowed me to embody the present moment and formulate my own deep thoughts. I was captivated by its capacity to slowly but surely seep into my thoughts over time. It is through these feelings that the relevance of slow cinema as an experiential alternative and resistance to contemporary life became clear to me.

The aims of this research is to demonstrate how designed cinematic space, particularly in isolated, urban environments facilitates extended duration and temporal suspension. Furthermore, I will discuss the ways in which slow cinema is currently being utilised in contemporary cinema and look to the future possibilities of slow filmmaking. As a production design student, slow cinema has profoundly shaped how I imagine my future practice. On a personal note, I strive to create environments that shape perception and create true meaning. I believe finding the balance between fast-paced media and slow cinema in future filmmaking will allow for the benefits to be widely experienced and preserved over time.

This thesis seems particularly relevant at present as we are fundamentally consumed by a contemporary acceleration culture and are lacking true moments of calm and presence. In a society driven by overstimulation and productivity I have found myself justifying spending time “indulging” in leisurely, “unproductive” media. I am part of the liminal generation which grew up in and were forced to adapt to the rapid acceleration of digital culture. This personal experience became my main motivation to research this topic. Thus, this research questions the role of slow cinema and its ability to directly confront these worries and discuss where it positions itself as a form of resistance within the first quarter of the 21st century.

This research aims to understand this resistance through existing scholarship and draws on critical theorists such as David Bordwell, Byung-Chul Han, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Paul Schrader and Andrei Tarkovsky.

David Bordwell is situated at the core of classic film studies. Drawing on his works regarding the hierarchy of the mise-en-scène and visual style in filmmaking will help to inform my analysis. His ideas have clearly influenced the contemporary theorists and filmmakers that I discuss, which shows how foundational film studies inevitably shape modern cinema. Acknowledging this influence recognises how the past influences the present and future concerns, which themselves are altered by changes in society. My own research is similarly informed by these societal changes and foundational concepts of the past.

Byung-Chul Han's *The Burnout Society* (2015) critiques the constant acceleration and the self-exploitation of modern life. His ideas provide a direct contrast to the deliberate slowness of slow cinema. His concepts like the "achievement-subject", the loss of "between-times" and the generative potential of "boredom" help frame why slow cinema techniques are increasingly meaningful. His work provides this framework to discuss how the design of slow cinema resists contemporary acceleration and offers space for deep cinematic emotional engagement.

Andrei Tarkovsky's insights into the true "power" of cinema lying in its ability to "sculpt time" are intrinsic to the thoughts outlined in this thesis. According to Tarkovsky (1985), this sculpting can deepen and strengthen a person's lived experience, and this is what makes cinema special. Tarkovsky's foundational cinematic ideas are valuable to discussions in framing slow cinema as a temporal art form.

Cinema 2: The Time-Image by Gilles Deleuze (1989b) is relevant because it shows how cinema alters perception and attention through the manipulation of time. The "crystal-image" showcases multiple temporalities coexisting to create reflective moments for the viewer. His concepts of "loosening" the "sensory-motor-schema" of mainstream films and "false movements" inform how slow cinema disrupts conventional habits of movement and ways of seeing. His thoughts inform my discussion on how the design of slow cinema can heighten awareness, evoke deep thought and focus on being present in time.

Michel Foucault's essay on *Heterotopias* (1984) frames space as relational, layered with multiple temporalities and governed by its own unique set of rules. When these rules are disrupted in film through unconventional movement or set design, the

perception of space and time shifts. This supports my thesis by showcasing how slow cinema filmmakers design complex spaces that shape emotional experience.

These frameworks help inform the design of cinematic space and its capacity to alter the viewer's experience of time. This thesis utilises the above theories to better understand how production design can facilitate slow cinema. This approach situates slow cinema within broader cultural issues and enables the exploration of film form in shaping emotional perception within the context of societal acceleration.

In this thesis, I argue the importance of the designers contributing to filmmaking by translating overarching theoretical frameworks into spatial design. My approach is to address this disconnect through a detailed visual case study of *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (2003) and its formal design choices.

Goodbye Dragon Inn was released at the turn of the century in 2003, and interestingly, emerged right at the precise moment when cinema was undergoing major transformation. This makes this film compelling for analysis not only for its slowness, but how it transforms space into a reflection of the fragility of cinema itself. It operates as a *film-within-a-film*, foregrounding present spectatorship while mourning the erosion of communal cinema culture in the digital age. Set in a dilapidated theatre in Taipei, *Goodbye Dragon Inn* (2003) follows a disabled ticket checker as she performs her duties on the last night of screening. The film is comprised of impossibly long static takes that observe her walking through the corridors of the empty theatre. Ming-liang cleverly designs a space which contains multiple temporalities at the same time. This temporal layering aligns with the theoretical frameworks explored in this thesis. The theatre functions as both setting *and* subject. Taiwanese director Tsai Ming-liang builds on Yasujiro Ozu and Andrei Tarkovsky's formal slow techniques in *Goodbye Dragon Inn* (2003). Its reflexive structure, long static takes, carefully designed space and slow-drifting characters make it an ideal case study for understanding how designing slowness can be a mode of resistance in an accelerated society.



Figure 1: “Do you know this theatre is haunted?” *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (Ming-liang, 2003).

Chapter One: The Pressure of Time

Rosa (2013) argues that acceleration is a driving force of modernity, and the very mechanisms designed to enhance human freedom have become the uncontrollable force that dictates the conditions of modernity. It didn't just change *what* we do, it changed *how fast* we live. This chapter addresses how this acceleration has fundamentally altered the perception of time, space and social structures. This chapter discusses the search for alternative forms of media and the rise of slow cinema as a response to this acceleration.

1.1 External Conditions: Modernity, Acceleration & Globalisation

Following the second world war, America emerged as a global superpower. Modernity intensified as industrialisation, mass production and technological advances reorganised social life around productivity and efficiency (Giddens, 1990). Although these changes initially promised greater freedom and stability, Han (2015) argues they also increased the desperate pressures of productivity and adaptability; conditions that slow cinema later react against. Rosa (2013) argues that this acceleration was propelled by Benjamin Franklin's infamous phrase, "Time is Money" (Franklin, 1748, cited in Rosa, 2013, pg. 162) where time becomes economised and measured. This reorganisation of time reorientated how people experience duration and shaped both urban space and media. As life became suffocated by efficiency and productivity, these urban spaces became shaped by these capitalist values and were designed to support this efficiency and speed.

Simultaneously, the rapid digital acceleration and technological advances changed how people consumed media. As media later shifted towards digital domestic environments there was a decline in traditional cinema viewing as the dominant entertainment experience (Sontag, 1996). Older cultural spaces of connection gradually became marginalised and obsolete, creating a cultural yearning for a time gone by. Rosa describes this curious paradox where "we don't have any time although we've gained far more than we've needed before" (2013, pg. 35).

Although modernity is often discussed through a Western lens, this logic

expanded globally, with a similar acceleration in East Asia. In the 1970s, Western capitalism expanded to East Asia, where mass production was outsourced to sustain the demand and pace, first to Hong Kong, and eventually to Taiwan, China (Gibson, 2014). Asian cities such as Taipei began to modernise quickly, leading to a similar adoption of accelerated urban architecture. Populations became denser, architecture grew vertical and visually saturated media became immersed in urban spaces through advertising and billboards, embedded on the architecture itself.

It is within these accelerated urban spaces that Tsai Ming-liang's slow cinema emerges. His films directly resist the temporal pressures of modernity. Slow cinema reclaims time from acceleration and offers respite, while being depicted within the very spaces shaped by modern acceleration.



Figure 2: Everyday life in Taiwan, 1971-72 (Meyskens, 2026)



Figure 3: Taipei Taiwan, February 1990 (Flickr, 2007)



Figure 4: Taipei Ximen Roundabout, 1978 (Reddit, 2026)



Figure 5: Hong Kong in 1990 (Wordpress, 2026)

1.2 Internalisation: Burnout

While Rosa (2013) defines acceleration as a temporal condition of modern life, Byung-Chul Han examines how this acceleration is individually internalised and *felt*. In *The Burnout Society* (2015) and *Psychopolitics* (2017b), Han argues that neoliberal power no longer operates solely through external repression, and instead through internal psychological regulation and self-optimisation. Han's "achievement-subject" is produced when their supposed freedom becomes an internal obligation for optimisation and performance instead of rest or play (Han, 2015, pg. 8). Truly, this "freedom" is self-exploitative and creates an intrinsic aggression that produces self-inflicted psychological abuse and "burnout" (Han, 2015, pg. 7).

According to Han, this condition erodes the possibility for moments of interruption or pause. Current globalised media culture normalises and pushes people to remain constantly productive, multitask and chase the next best distraction. It has rewired how we consume media; streaming a film while scrolling on TikTok, listening to a podcast while on a walk. Even acts of leisure are now mixed with and consumed by productivity and achievement. These common practices keep our attention fragmented, perhaps for fear of boredom as something that cannot be monetised. The constant strive

for multitasking fills every gap with activity. Han's explanation and diagnosis here identify the cultural issue at hand: "Today we live in a world that is very poor in interruption; 'betweens' and 'between-times' are lacking. Acceleration is abolishing all intervals" (Han, 2015, pg. 22). Han implies our contemporary society does not allow for temporal gaps that foster thought and rest. Crary (2013) further contextualises this phenomenon describing the collapse of the work/life/rest balance. According to Han (2015), this strive for multitasking is an epidemic in our society causing multiple negative effects such as stress, reduced depth of processing and a lack of focused attention. Seen through Han's lens, the contagion of constant activity and mixing work with leisure, leaves no space for the "between-times" that sustain contemplation and presence (Han, 2015, pg. 22). Han (2015) outlines the need for slowness and boredom, which he believes is necessary for creativity and true freedom.

Globalisation intensifies the pressure of the acceleration Rosa and Han talk about in their respective work. Production and consumption now operate on a global clock, collectively increasing pressures worldwide. These processes collapse spatial and temporal distance, creating a globally shared pace of life. This temporal burnout condition reshapes attention itself.

1.3 Cinema Under Acceleration

Cinema itself has not dodged the pressures of acceleration and globalisation. The demands of accelerated global audiences encourage the production of attention-grabbing films with fast editing, spectacle and plot driven narratives (Flaxman, 2000). Bordwell (2007) observes, Hollywood's classical and post-classical styles have successfully created a high functioning formula where the audiences' attention is sustained throughout. Bordwell (2007) notes how these films mirror our acceleration culture, dominate contemporary cinema and condition viewers to expect quick editing and constant, action-packed sequences. Blockbuster films in particular function to maintain audience perception and engagement through tight timelines and visual extravaganzas. Research carried out by Cutting (2016) found that the average shot length in

contemporary film is under 2.5 seconds.

Globalisation has also influenced style in non-Western film industries that increasingly adopt Western techniques associated with the success of Hollywood. The hugely successful Indian Bollywood films combine rapid editing, high intensity story lines and spectacle to capture audience engagement. Chinese wuxia films and Japanese anime incorporate high-intensity, dynamic fight choreography and camera work. These cross-cultural examples illustrate the global impact of acceleration and temporal pressures. Essentially, these conventional cinematic techniques reinforce acceleration by embedding the rapid globalised rhythm of society directly into visual and media culture.

1.4 Loss of Culture & Temporal Dislocation

It is important to acknowledge that historically, certain East Asian traditions have influenced attentiveness to duration and pause. For example, Lucken and Rosen (2021) write about the Japanese aesthetic technique of ‘ma’ (間) that highlights the importance of pausing and focusing on the quiet moments, moments between things happening, where nothing happens, where time can stand still. Similarly, the Chinese tradition of Daoism - living in harmony with the ‘Dao’ (道) emphasises aligning with the natural rhythms of life to find balance and develop inner peace (Hansen, 2025). These temporal methods have historically privileged stillness and repetition and offer an interesting contrast to the experience of acceleration and modernity. Ironically, cultures with long standing attentiveness to slowness and spatial awareness now participate in systems that actively erode them. Yet it is important to recognise that Asia is not simply passive in this process (Appadurai, 1996). Over time, contemporary urbanisation and globalisation have disrupted these practices. As accelerated media consumption has become normalised and expected, the conventional, idealised Hollywood cinematic techniques are adopted globally across East Asian cinema. The adoption of these techniques show East Asia’s ironic active participation in this breakdown of their own historical approaches to temporality.

As Appadurai (1996, pg. 33) argues, globalisation exists through overlapping

“scapes” of movement of people, media and economy rather than one stable process. These scapes move at different speeds causing a cultural dislocation. This displacement, he argues can lead to a loss of tradition. As a result, there is an emotional undercurrent of melancholy, loss and nostalgia for a previous, slower way of life. The juxtaposition between these historically embedded traditions and the new fast-paced bustling cities, underscore the cultural significance of the strive to create media as a resistance to this. One which reclaims duration and space as an emotional opposition to the overbearing acceleration of the 21st century.

1.5 The Response: The Search for Alternative Temporalities

In both Western and non-Western contexts, cinema has adapted to pressures to fit the temporal norms of the time, which has in turn caused decreased attention spans, burnout and a constant strive for rapid efficiency (Han, 2015). The resulting tension between historical approaches to time and contemporary urban life calls attention to the cultural and emotional consequences of modernity. It is therefore no wonder that there is a demand for alternative approaches to media.

This search highlights the emergence of slow cinema as a response to these conditions, resisting speed, efficiency and constant stimulation, as described by de Luca and Barradas Jorge (2015). Flaxman (2000) argues slow cinema filmmakers treat time itself as the central element of the film. It developed as a shared response to these temporal conditions and is enabled through festivals and art cinema spaces. By refusing speed and spectacle, it intentionally reintroduces the “between-times” that Han (2015) identifies are suppressed in contemporary life. It actively opposes globalised media culture and reclaims simple duration as a space to inhabit, reflect on and experience time itself.

1.6 Slow Cinema as Resistance

The relevance of slow cinema has sparked controversial discourse, with the term “slow cinema” becoming popular among film critics in 2010 after several critical articles and debates in *Sight & Sound*, with James (2010) accusing it of demanding too much of our “precious time” (de Luca & Barradas Jorge, 2016). Although slow cinema filmmakers hail from different countries, cultures and genders and can be seen as experimental and free form, there is a reason they are grouped together. Using Bordwell’s words, what “ensemble of concrete choices” consistently make these films slow? (Bordwell, 2007, cited in de Luca and Barradas Jorge, 2016, pg. 29)

Slow cinema is a cinema of carefully designed conditions that allow slowness to function affectively. In contrast to contemporary mainstream movies, de Luca and Barradas Jorge believe slow cinema “makes time noticeable in the image and is consistently felt by the viewer” (2016, pg. 30). Filmmakers such as Yasujiro Ozu and Andrei Tarkovsky can be seen as the important precursors to slow cinema, who laid the groundwork for this style that foregrounds duration and stillness (Schrader, 1972).

Arguably, the most recognised trait of slow cinema is the deliberate slow pacing. The *experience* of time is emphasised, rather than the rapid passage of time, allowing time to be *felt* not measured, focusing on unnoticed moments, forcing the viewer to slow down and sit with their emotions.

Extended takes and minimal editing are employed to embody contemplation. This is achieved by showcasing a disjunction between shot duration and visual content. The lingering shots are unusual and unexpected as viewers are conditioned to expect quick cuts (Bordwell, 2007). The viewers are invited to lean into the film, embody it, and be brought to another level of consciousness (Schrader, 1972).



Figure 6: Nine-minute continuous shot of Gorchakov carrying a lit candle across an empty pool in *Nostalghia* (Tarkovsky 1983)



Figure 7: Jeanne meticulously preps and peels potatoes in real-time in *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai de Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*, 1975 (Ackerman, 1975)

Slow cinema focuses on everyday laborious tasks, to reveal the truth of human existence beyond superficial action or spectacle. Viewers observe and understand what it really means to be human, through an adherence to realism. The camera often sits

statically locked off employing an observational composition, creating distance between the object and spectator. It is a cinema of *surveillance*.

Muted lighting and colour palettes are used to create a sustained visual and spatial suspension. Naturalistic, diffused lighting are often the dominating design choice. Black and white or monochrome colour palettes are a recurring visual style. These techniques soften contrasts and flatten the composition. By reducing the visual hierarchy in the frame, the *mise-en-scène* enhances sustained attention by reducing rapid eye movements across the screen (Bordwell, 2018).



Figure 8: Black and white colour palette in *Andrei Rublëv* (Tarkovsky, 1966)



Figure 9: Monochrome colour palette in *Nostalgia* (Tarkovsky, 1983)



Figure 10: Water as a pervasive element in *Stalker* (Tarkovsky, 1979)



Figure 11: Water leaks through ceiling emphasising decay of structure in *Stalker* (Tarkovsky, 1979)

Natural elements such as water, rain and weather have been used since the first slow cinema films as a recurring cinematic material reflecting interior states visually and spatially. The filmmaker forces attention on the mundane, stark reality through the symbolism of these natural overwhelming elements. As these elements gradually erode

these man-made structures, they produce a durational experience in which time seeps through space, memory pools and meaning emerges through sustained observation. These elements interrupt control and structure, and a calmness emerges from the gradual surrender to rhythms beyond human control. Similarly, these elements can symbolise a new beginning and create a feeling of hope as it *washes away* the past.

Finally, a lack of dialogue or narrative is a critical aesthetic of slow cinema. The viewer is left with no guide on what emotions they *should* be feeling. Instead, they are isolated in formulating their own reactions.

In contrast to mainstream cinema, the lingering and designed *mise-en-scène* forces the viewers to experience the passage of time instead of watching events unfold. According to Schrader (2018), the design approach of slow cinema filmmakers transforms the act of watching into a mechanism for contemplation and understanding, creating a reflective and transcendental experience from slowness.

It is a refusal of Franklin's (1748) capitalist idea that every second of time must be productive or useful. It does the opposite of self-optimize, in fact, it intentionally *wastes* time. Andrei Tarkovsky (1985) argues, that by eschewing the conventional plot narrative, the need for goal orientated viewing is removed. Slow cinema refuses to be viewed in fragments and thus forces undivided attention. The carefully composed *mise-en-scène* and extended long takes removes the habitual impulse to *consume* media quickly (Tarkovsky, 1985). It *pauses* instead of performs.

For an audience accustomed to constant stimulation, rapid editing and speed, slow cinema can be confronting or "boring". But as Odell notes "sometimes it's good to be stuck in the in-between, even if it's uncomfortable" (2019, pg. 10). At a time where media is instant and overwhelming, a cinema designed to champion stillness, pause and silence has gained a renewed appreciation and relevance. It is exactly this boredom that these directors strive for. It is in this discomfort that something begins to shift.

Han (2015) describes deep boredom as a deeply restful and productive mental state. "If sleep represents the high point of bodily relaxation, deep boredom is the peak of mental relaxation. A purely hectic rush produces nothing new." (Han, 2015, p. 13). Han draws on Walter Benjamin's metaphor of boredom as a "grey fabric... we wrap ourselves when we dream." (Benjamin, 2002, pg. 105-6, cited in, Han, 2015, pg. 13). By

associating boredom with fabric, it becomes warm, full and cosy, and when our mind enters this state, it creates new patterns of imagination. Essentially, something seen as empty or bleak can in fact contain a rich inner life if given the attention and duration to understand it. Han (2015) believes that sitting in this boredom can be a valuable resource to us in our fast-paced repetitive and unimaginative society. Slow cinema cultivates this boredom that Han and Benjamin defend in their respective work. Its focus on mundane, “boring” tasks turn these between tasks into ones that deserve and demand attention. It creates the perfect conditions for this boredom to be utilised to experience deep associative thought and reemerge refreshed. Therefore, the viewer who succumbs to Han’s “self-exploitation”, needs the cinematic pauses and temporal stillness prevalent in slow film (Han, 2015). In a world absorbed by overstimulation and productivity, the simple act of doing “nothing” becomes quite radical.

Parallel to this boredom, these techniques decelerate perception and relax the body and mind into a near-sleep state. Many slow cinema directors have previously noted this phenomenon. Slow cinema director Abbas Kiarostami remarked:

Some films have made me doze off in the theatre, but the same films have made me stay up at night, wake up thinking about them in the morning, and keep on thinking about them for weeks. (Kiarostami, 1997)

Similarly, slow cinema director Apichatpong Weerasethakul claims “sleeping and films are like twin realities” (Zhou, 2022). These directors' paradoxical thoughts reframe dozing and sleep during a film as a form of strategy rather than a failure. Phenomenologically, this near sleep state is not really disengagement, but a shift to a different consciousness altogether. The meaning is placed in delayed emotional and intellectual resonance rather than immediate stimulation. Images and their effects are embedded into the viewers memory. As Han (2015) notes, withdrawing into the depths of the mind can allow for complete rest and rejuvenation. In this way, slow cinema challenges assumptions that media must be energetic and fast to capture and sustain engagement, and instead presents it as a medium that lingers, haunts and reveals its significance over time.

The production designer is critical in constructing the visual density, atmosphere and spatial composition of a film. There is the capacity for them to operate at the direct intersection between research, theory and material practice. Through their practice they do not have to simply create aesthetic backdrops and environments, they can actively materialise critical thinking and philosophy. Arguably, designers are extremely intentional in manipulating cinematic space to reflect broader cultural concerns or characters emotions. If contemporary culture compresses time, the slow cinema production designer can position cinematic design as a counter practice to this acceleration. Space can therefore be designed to slow perception. Thus, production design carries an important weight. It can reinforce the broader cultural concerns of acceleration, or it can resist it.

Chapter Two: Theoretical Frameworks – Time, Space & Affect

Appreciating slow cinema requires an understanding of the ways in which time and space can contribute to experiencing *mise-en-scène* as an emotional experience. The following theoretical frameworks offer tools for analysing how production design and temporal rhythm work together to shape the viewers perception *and* experience.

2.1 Andrei Tarkovsky

Tarkovsky (1985) argues the power of cinema lies in its ability to “sculpt in time”. He proposes the lengthening of cinematic moments allows time to be experienced by viewers as something tangible and sensorial rather than an invisible vessel for the narrative and action to take place. As Tarkovsky (1985) noted over forty years ago, cinema holds a unique power in that it remains a medium that captures time in a shared space. Unlike the “bombardment” of short-form content that is common today, cinema has a unique capacity to offer sustained duration and immersion regardless of the style of filmmaking. By simply spending time sitting in a theatre or at home watching a film, cinema immerses viewers in a variety of worlds and emotions. As Tarkovsky wrote:

I think that what a person normally goes to the cinema for is time: for time lost or spent or not yet had. He goes there for living experience; for cinema, like no other art, widens, enhances and concentrates a person's experience—and not only enhances it but makes it longer, significantly longer. That is the power of cinema. (Tarkovsky, 1985, p. 63)

Through Tarkovsky’s perspective, in an age of acceleration, cinema's innate ability to encapsulate us and let us sit in the present moment has become its most vital contribution to society. Although slow cinema has not invented this capacity, it has revealed and intensified something that has always existed as a powerful medium capable of capturing this attention.

Time in Tarkovsky’s sense, becomes the primary material of the medium. Slow cinema deliberately extends this sculptural duration. Long takes focusing on mindless

gestures within static compositions and carefully designed spaces through lighting, colour and minimal decaying architecture allow duration to unfold without the need for narration. These formal techniques become the director's chisel in the sculpture of the film, capturing real, unhurried time. These strategies shift attention from anticipating *what* happens next, to *how* it happens. As a result, slow cinema forces the viewer to inhabit a moment rather than skip forward through it. Slow cinema recognises Tarkovsky's compelling claim that this kind of film's power lies in turning simple spectatorship into a reflective and mindful *experience* of time itself.

2.2 Paul Schrader

Paul Schrader provides an important framework to understand how duration and formal restraint produce affect without the need for narrative emphasis. Schrader (1972) examines how stylistic restraint, slowness, and spiritual austerity create a uniquely cinematic sense of *transcendence* by rejecting conventional cinematic techniques. Central to his thoughts is a move towards stasis and stillness to open space for reflection.

Schrader (2018) expands on his prior arguments, acknowledges its evolution, and revises his scope, recognising slow cinema as akin to his “transcendental style”, creating a contemplative experience through slowness. However, he distinguishes them as less spiritual or religious and as more concerned with affective temporal experience.

Although he writes mostly on form and duration, his arguments can be expanded to spatial design. Through Schrader's lens, production design becomes affective through what it *refuses* to show. These deliberate techniques alienate the viewer and force them into a contemplative state. Withholding ornamentation and narrative excess moves audiences toward a deeper engagement and awareness of time, positioning it as an aesthetic resistance of acceleration.

2.3 Gilles Deleuze

Deleuze's *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (1989b) provides a useful lens for understanding the effectiveness of duration and stillness in film and how slow cinema disrupts conventional narrative. Deleuze (1989a) draws on Bordwell and Thompson's argument that mainstream or "movement-time" films habitually operate on a conventional "cause-and-effect" logic, where perception leads directly to action (2013, pg.73). This is organised through "rational cuts" to keep the film fast and logical (Deleuze, 1989b, pg. 213). In contrast, "time-image" cinema emerges when these conventions have been "loosened", and perception is no longer immediately translated into action. Here, time becomes directly perceptible. This is what Deleuze refers to as spending "a little time in the pure state" (1989b, pg. 8) where "time is no longer subordinate to movement" (1989b, pg.143). In this loosening, Deleuze argues that movements that no longer rely on causal necessity produce what he calls "false movements": gestures or durations that seemingly go nowhere and actively oppose plot driven movement (1989b, pg. 8). The meaning and significance therefore come from the duration and time spent with them, rather than narrative progression. Time here becomes an element shown, inspected, and discovered by the viewer.

Slow cinema directly utilises and exploits this logic through long takes, static framing and repeated mundane gestures that convert chronological time into *lived*, experiential time. Slow cinema frees the spectator from anticipation and instead forces viewers into a contemplative state where time is *felt* not measured. Every gesture, no matter how small, and every long duration appears heightened and becomes charged with meaning (Deleuze, 1989b). This temporal suspension is a crucial element of slow cinema.

Deleuze (1989b) draws on Bergson's (1896) concept where time "splits" into two states yet remain connected. This is what he calls the "crystal-image" (1989b, pg. 82). This is the cinematic manifestation of where the *actual* (present time) and the *virtual* (past time) become so intertwined that they become indistinguishable to each other. His theory clarifies how extended, built-up duration allows multiple temporalities to exist within a single shot: what has happened in the past, what is unfolding in the

present and what is simultaneously preserved from the past (Deleuze, 1989b, pg. 82).

Ultimately, when the conventional pace of film slows down, viewers focus on their perception and become aware of the past that lingers and haunts the present. In extended takes, space becomes layered with *virtual* time in the form of accumulated echoes, memories, dreams, gestures, etc. allowing the *mise-en-scène* to communicate emotional states. The production design only reflects these psychological states because of this facilitated extended duration and its accumulated emotions. Deleuze's perspective here is acknowledged in relation to the design of temporal suspension, and *mise-en-scène*. In this way, time seems like a physical presence or materialistic thing rather than something invisible.

2.4 Michel Foucault

Foucault's' concept of "heterotopias" is particularly useful to understand the use of space within slow film. He argues each space has its own function, logic and history and the meaning comes from relations of various things in the space and what happens inside it.

He reframes classic *mise-en-scène*, shifting the focus from a simple visual arrangement of the set, props and actors to a place where the same physical room functions differently depending on choreography of movement, social rules, duration and proxemics. This understanding can effectively transform filmic spaces into a unique "heterotopic" space. In the case of slow cinema, this relational logic has the capacity to activate physical spaces and to stretch time in space. By breaking the norms of conventional spaces through idiosyncratic movements and relations, expectations are subverted, and the perception of time is altered. Liminal, empty, oversized environments, exaggerated distances between characters and minimal repetitive gestures reorganise spatial relations and evoke a feeling of *otherness* (Foucault, 1984). These spaces feel "other" because they disrupt expected rhythms of movement and use. The viewer therefore experiences space relationally and not just as a visual backdrop. This manipulation of time and space forces the viewer to pause, notice and feel things normally missed in faster media. Designing these heterotopic, liminal spaces can control

pace of perception and encourages reflection and emotional engagement.

Foucault's observation that heterotopias are "capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (1984, pg. 6) is particularly resonant in a cinema space, where a spectator occupies a fixed position in the auditorium where "on a two-dimensional screen, one sees the projection of a three-dimensional space" (1984, pg. 6). The space is designed to make emotions more perceptible by reorganising these spatial relations. This spatial layering in slow cinema is exposed through its sustained duration. Production design therefore shapes emotional perception by constructing these relational spaces that stretch time, heighten awareness of isolation and distance and encourage calmness and contemplation.

Chapter Three: *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (2003) Image Analysis

This chapter acknowledges the role of production design in combining theoretical frameworks with spatial design to construct slowness, creating a space in which contemplation and reflection can rise to the surface. This analysis explores how the design choices force the viewer to deeply engage with the textures, slowness and duration, and how this slowness is not simply created by extended duration alone.

Ming-liang came across the languishing Fu He Grand Theatre in 2003 in the suburbs of Taipei, just before its closing. He was becoming increasingly aware of the death of cinema culture and the crumbling nature and vulnerability of once thriving built environments. In his sadness and fondness for times gone by, he responded by renting out the cinema space for a year and creating a film inspired by this very idea, of layered memories and a decaying cinema-going culture as a result of acceleration (Ming-liang, 2019).

3.1. Interstitial Space & The Theatre as a Heterotopic Archive

Goodbye, Dragon Inn (2003) is not just set in a Foucauldian heterotopic space, as mentioned previously, the film itself functions as a heterotopia. Ming-liang carefully constructs the experience of cinematic space and transforms it into a site of emotional and spatial duration and resistance rather than consumption.

The auditorium holds Foucault's "accumulated time" (1984, pg. 7) where multiple temporalities are built up and coexist together. In this case, the success of the cinematic past, the projection of the present images and the anticipation of its disappearance in the future exist simultaneously. Ming-liang's choice to show an old wuxia film inside the rundown theatre functions as a crucial element of the production design, embedding the history directly into the present space. This is a cleverly designed "heterochrony", where a heterotopic space disrupts the traditional, linear progression of time (Foucault, 1984, pg. 6). The same auditorium holds decades of accumulated life through the worn-out seats, dispersed ghost-like figures and at the same moment, tiny "slices of time" in the present (Foucault, 1984, pg. 6). More specifically, *Goodbye,*

Dragon Inn embodies time and showcases a type of heterochrony that Foucault refers to as “heterotopias of indefinitely accumulating time” where time is constantly stored and piled up on itself. (Foucault, 1984, pg.7). Although an auditorium is constructed to function as an isolated, collective space of immersion, its organisation in these scenes erodes any notion of a shared attention. It becomes a place of disconnection with parallel individuals existing within a collective unified place. Here the auditorium acts as the “single real place” that juxtaposes multiple incompatible experiences and temporalities within it (Foucault, 1984, pg. 6).

In a time where images and films circulate endlessly through digital access, the persistence of this old wuxia film existing without an audience reflects the current state of our society, where images outlive the moment and audience for which they were made. The shared experience that once gave them meaning is no longer fully present. The film plays in full, even when no one is watching. Ming-liang is clever in that he does not treat this as a tragedy or something to mourn, he simply shows it how it is. In this context, *Dragon Inn* becomes a tool to show the past and presents coexistence that no longer fully aligns. Its relevance does not depend on consumption and engagement. The world around it has changed, but the old film persists at its own pace, and with it some lingering spectators. In this way, Ming-liang's film exemplifies slow cinema as a form of temporal resistance where meaning is produced through endurance, and the continued presence of images passed their moment.

3.2. Stillness & Suspension as Design

While the carefully selected images of the theatre and its few inhabitants are lacking almost any action, they are conceptually dense and hold visually striking emotions. Viewers become increasingly aware of the act of lingering. Ming-liang cleverly employs a restrained mixture of static wide shots in alteration with closer framing. Both of which are characterised by an absence of any significant character movement. At times, the only movement seen is the flickers of light from the projection screen bouncing on the patrons' faces and architecture. This intermittent illumination creates a feeling that the spectators are tethered to the film onscreen, and that the theatre is a space designed for cinematic time to be experienced rather than purely recalled.

Ming-liang shifts the viewers' attention between distances to deepen the viewers immersion in duration. The camera adopts an observational angle to emphasise the sheer size of the theatre and its lack of patrons. The characters are dispersed across the frame separated by empty rows of red theatre seats. In these wide shots, no particular character is given visual priority over the other. This is a technique described by Bordwell (2018), that decreases eye movements across the screen giving the effect of a suspended *mise-en-scène*. The empty space itself becomes the subject of the image. The composition and blocking of this scene reinforces the sense of spatial inactivity as if the theatre itself and

its patrons are suspended in time. This design draws attention to the space itself, slows the viewers gaze and reinforces contemplative looking.

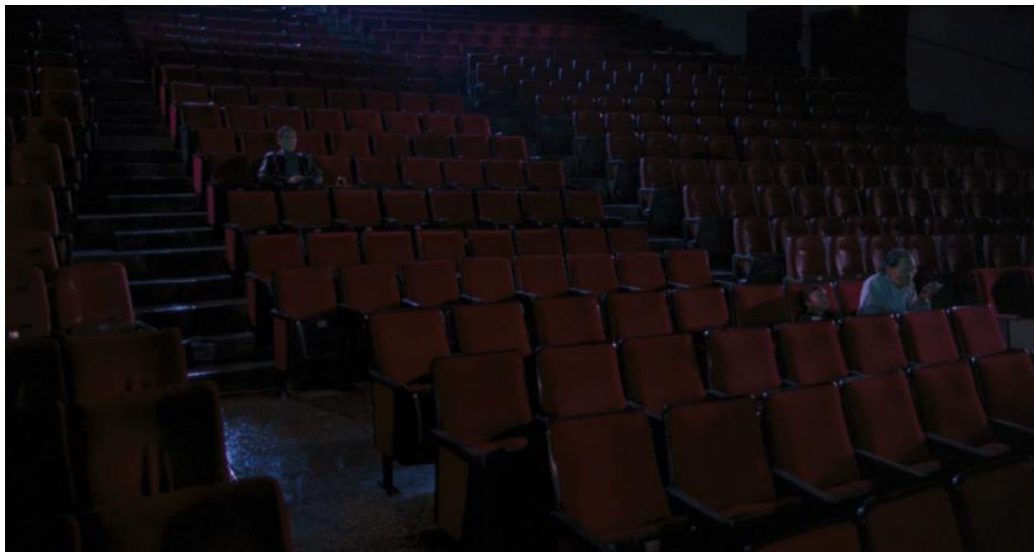


Figure 12: Observational wide-shot of patrons suspended within the time and space of the auditorium (Ming-liang, 2003)



Figure 13: The Japanese tourist experiences isolation within the shared space of the auditorium (Ming-liang, 2003)

When Ming-liang cuts to the closer shots, the faces are shown in stillness. This further emphasises the feelings of isolation felt by the characters, although they are not fully alone. These shots allow time to be felt passing by on their faces. Paradoxically, instead of drawing the viewer in, it emphasises the isolation and individualism of each

character in this shared space. In Deleuzian terms, these moments are “false movements”, where action is suspended to foreground duration itself (1989b).



Figure 14: 2 minute and 6 second static close-up of Chun Shih with flickers of projection light on his face (Ming-liang, 2003)

Ming-liang intentionally denies contrast, keeping both types of shots with minimal motion as to not disrupt the spatial logic and passage of time. Time here feels empty and suspended. The viewers sustained observation between these durational close-ups and wide shots allow emotion to emerge naturally without needing guidance. Emotion arises purely from the prolonged exposure to stillness through this oscillation. Unlike other sequences where time is built through bodily movement, here time accumulates through stillness. The characters’ miniscule gestures like a shift in weight or tears dropping down a face carry significance because the viewers are made perceptible to them through these restrained techniques. Here Ming-liang reinforces how heterotopic spaces can operate on both small and big scales where each isolated face holds its own experience. The patrons’ experience of time is fractured despite them occupying the same physical space. They remain affectively isolated and absorbed in private durations. Ming-liang repeatedly returns to similar framing throughout the film, yet the space never feels the same. Each time there are subtle changes which signal temporal progression. Setting the film in the same physical space reinforces persistence, where time becomes suspended and heavy with the past, present and imminent absence of the ghost-like patrons within it. Emotion emerges from these locations because they

are left open and incomplete. The viewer fills these sparse interiors with emotions of memory, longing and contemplation because the past and present linger without closure. Ming-liang's design of these spaces quietly refuses the capitalist idea that unused space is "wasted" space and instead extends Foucault's thinking and frames his film within it.

For a contemporary viewer, these images represent a shared yet fragmented experience which is an increasingly common condition of life in the 21st century. It mirrors the broader contemporary state in which people coexist in shared systems but remain temporally suspended through disconnection. In a time of fragmented attention, this film reflects how collective time is difficult to sustain. We experience time unevenly much like the patrons of the Taipei theatre.

3.3. Temporal Accumulation & Architectural Porosity

The recurring images of rain leaking into the cinema function as *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*'s most quietly charged moments. The inside of the theatre is characterised by weak structures, decaying surfaces and is almost entirely absent of decorative details. By choosing to set his film in a decaying urban interior, Ming-liang makes Foucault's "accumulated time" visible (Foucault, 1984, pg. 7). Leaking ceilings, cracked peeling paint and stacked boxes are visible records of passing time, showing evidence of repeated use, neglect and endurance. While our contemporary society attempts to cover up decay and focus on upgrading and replacement, these decaying urban ruins refuse that logic and instead function as a Deleuzian "in-between". The cinema becomes a living ruin susceptible to exterior change.



Figure 15: Peeling paint and leaking ceiling in *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (Ming-liang, 2003)



Figure 16: Stacked boxes and accumulated clutter in the back corridors of the Fu He Grand Theatre in *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (Ming-liang, 2003)

The leaks visually pack the film's themes of time, decay and fragility into a simple gesture. Rather than representing decay through narrative progression, Ming-liang instead allows the material failure to speak for itself visually. The leaking into the hidden corridors behind the cinema screen exists alongside the showing of the film in the theatre, but does not disrupt it. This registers the slow drips of water as commonplace and an everyday occurrence. The leaking is not treated as a problem that needs to be solved. It is simply a condition to be endured. This highlights the temporal theme of maintenance and endurance rather than crisis or frustration.



Figure 17: The projectionist tends to the pervasive leaks above the theatre (Ming-liang, 2003)



Figure 18: Focus on everyday resilience of the employees (Ming-liang, 2003)

The static, distant camera frames the scene and offers no refuge from the constant drips of leaking rain. This stubborn framing draws the viewers' attention towards the rhythmic sound and visual of each drip as it hits the ground. Each drop marks time as incremental and produces a sense of persistent eternity. Unlike classic cinematic time, this film constructs a cyclical and accumulative temporal experience rather than simple rising action, climax and resolution (Freytag, 1900). The viewer is

forced to be aware of time passing through persistence. Thus, the leak externalises itself, manifesting as audible and tactile.

Traditionally, a theatre is as a built environment that isolates the viewers from the outside world, encapsulating them for certain a duration of time. The intrusion of rain demonstrates Benjamin and Lacis' (1978) concept of architectural "porosity", undermining the traditional perception of a theatre as a protected and enclosed environment. Here, the cinema functions as a metaphor for the film world. The leaks compromise this barrier between interior and exterior isolation. This dissolution reconfigures the theatre as a permeable structure subject to decay and inevitable transformation. In doing so, this film shows the vulnerability of urban man-made environments within an accelerated society. This vulnerability mirrors the experience of watching slow cinema, in contrast to the perceived stability of mainstream cinema as an untouchable pillar. Slow cinema's breakdown of conventional techniques allows the real time, textured, undramatic exterior world to leak into the film viewing space. It values the temporal flow of real life over creating a perfect cinematic illusion.

These images produce a melancholic emotion. The leaks normalise loss and decay instead of dramatising it. The cinema continues functioning despite the deterioration. For a contemporary viewer accustomed to optimised environments, this image carries political weight. It triumphs endurance and honesty over spectacle and perfection. The leaking rain becomes a metaphor for time's slow, inevitable erosion through which historical change infiltrates the cinematic space. Ming-liang successfully designs and transforms accumulated, architectural decay into a deeply emotional cinematic experience, as opposed to inefficient and unproductive. Ming-liang's slow cinema does not simply exist to aestheticise slowness, it responds to the history of modernisation and cultural erasure in Taiwanese urban life.

3.4. Embodied Duration & Lighting

Goodbye, Dragon Inn (2003) has many examples of the use of impossibly extreme long takes and static framing that allows time to become visual and felt by the viewer through Deleuzian “false-movements” (1989b). These images observe a disabled ticket checker performing her duties on the last night of screening. Ming-liang builds time in these scenes through her repetitive movement navigating the never-ending corridors.



Figure 19: Ticket checker limps through corridor in *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (Ming-liang, 2003)



Figure 20: Static camera hold for 79 seconds (Ming-liang, 2003)

Her slow, laborious walk has no narrative drive whatsoever and thus becomes a

“false-movement” (Deleuze, 1989b). Her limp is never explained or dramatised, it just is how it is. It becomes mechanical and repetitive. The sound of her shoes hitting the floor unevenly act as a hypnotising metronome. The lack of direction and narrative progression in these corridor scenes transforms the moment into pure temporality and duration. The walking goes nowhere, and the story does not change. It is a scene where her movement exists for its own duration. At times she leaves the frame of the camera and viewers are left digesting a space void of human presence.



Figure 21: Camera holds for 18 seconds after ticket checker leaves frame (Ming-liang, 2003)

The simple passage of time becomes the point of the moment. Because this walk through the corridor does not seem to have a narrative purpose, the viewer notices things that are often missed in contemporary, fast paced films; the echoes of each step, the never-ending length of the corridor, her limp shifting her weight repeatedly and the seemingly stagnant air of the abandoned theatre. These “false movements” ensure the viewer becomes conscious of time moving in the image.

The cavernous corridors function as transitional spaces; they are not fully public but not entirely private either. Ming-liang positions her inside the elongated, narrow and sparsely lit passageways that emphasise linear depth, to sustain prolonged attention. This

interstitial space reflects the characters psychological condition, of emotional suspension, existentialism and disconnection.



Figure 22: The ticket checker moves through the sparse, aged, cavernous architecture (Ming-liang, 2003)

Furthermore, the dim, unchanging lighting suppresses major contrast and distraction, creating a sense of temporal suspension. The production design is deliberately sparse with aged, textured surfaces to be looked at and felt gradually as the scene unfolds. As she travels through these corridors, she is the only moving element and the neutral architecture helps facilitate the prolonged movement by stretching time visually and experientially. This monotonous design turns the film back and inwards on the viewer, making them feel the pressure of duration. They begin to understand the exhaustion of the lonely ticket checker and the weight of neglect and time in a dying

space. The visual monotony of these combined elements slows down perception, encouraging the viewer to dwell, reflect and not anticipate action.

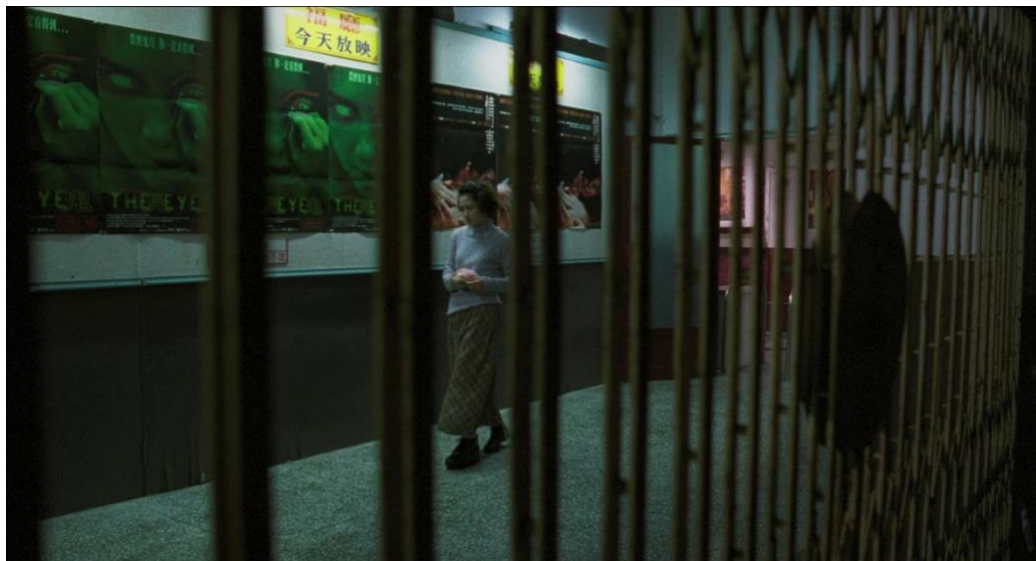


Figure 23: The ticket checker walks slowly through the back rooms of the Fu He Grand Theatre (Ming-liang, 2003)



Figure 24: Dimly lit corridor and muted colour palette suspends time (Ming-liang, 2003)

In a contemporary context, these images insist on slowness, resisting the efficiency and acceleration that is all too familiar in our society. Bodily movement in the 21st century is expected to be seamless, fast and optimised (Han, 2015). The ticket checkers movement is neither seamless nor optimised. The slowness directly challenges

contemporary expectations of productive and optimised movement. This film highlights forms of movement that is often hidden or erased in mainstream content. It denies the viewer any distractions and makes labour, fatigue and persistence visible by refusing to hide it through editing. Slowness here is presented as a necessary response to accelerated living, to value presence over progression and productivity.



Figure 25: 5 minute and 20 second static observational shot of the ticket checker cleaning the auditorium (Ming-liang, 2003)

3.5. The Crystal-Image

Ming-liang's *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*'s strength lies in its reflexivity. Formally, Ming-liang produces one of the clearest film examples of a Deleuzian "crystal-image". It is centred around multiple temporalities coexisting at the same time. The extended long takes allow these temporal layers to fold into one another until they become "indiscernible" (Deleuze, 1989b, pg. 82). It drifts between the *actual* present setting of the empty theatre, combined with the *virtual* past made up of drifting memories, ghost-like figures and the screening of the very successful 1967 wuxia film *Dragon Inn* by King Hu.



Figure 26: Chun Shih watches himself projected on the screen in *Dragon Inn*, 1967 (Ming-liang, 2003)



Figure 27: The two men sit in an empty auditorium to watch themselves in the 1967 wuxia film *Dragon Inn* (Ming-liang, 2003)

The camera lingers on two elderly men sitting quietly apart from each other in the nearly empty cinema. It is not revealed who these men are inside the film, but outside the diegesis, they are two actors who star in the original *Dragon Inn* that is being screened here. The men occupy a present time that splits them into spectators in the present, while simultaneously watching their own youthful selves preserved in the past (Bergson, 1896). We see them (actual), watch their younger selves (virtual) in the old movie that at one time would have packed the auditorium with excited spectators. This actual/virtual tension strengthens and embodies Deleuze's "crystal-image". In this he allows both present and past to coexist in the same moment so viewers can experience "time in the pure state" (Deleuze, 1989b, pg. 8). The projected images of the past are not simply a memory; they continue to persist in the present moment. By presenting both layers simultaneously, time becomes visible, denser and full of history. This indiscernibility and thickness of time produce a melancholic and nostalgic emotional effect for the viewer separate from the plot of the film.



Figure 28: "And no one remembers us anymore." The two men reminisce on times gone by (Ming-liang, 2003)

Chapter Four: Slowing Down - Slow Cinema Expansion & Contemporary Relevance

This chapter explores my opinion that there is a growing desire and need for slowness in contemporary society. It situates slow cinema parallel to other slow movements of the 21st century. It assesses the benefits of the co-existence of slow cinema with classical mainstream film forms, yet recognises its limitations. I then focus on the role of the production designer in facilitating this resistance through intentional spatial design.

4.1 Slow Culture Movements

It is important to note, slowness is not unique to cinema. It appears across multiple areas of contemporary life as a response to the same conditions. Practices such as slow food, slow tourism and mindfulness have emerged in direct response to the experiences of modern life (Clancy, 2017). These movements share the goal to return to slowness and reclaim attention and presence. They reflect the growing shared recognition that the constant speed, productivity and endurance is unsustainable.

Slow cinema directly offers an experience to slow down and remain emotionally present. Its relevance becomes clear when positioning slow cinema beside these wider slow movements. It shows how slowness is not just an isolated form of aesthetic choice, but a global response to the acceleration and burnout of 21st century life.

4.2 Reversal of Cinematic Influence

Film history has a long pattern of uneven cultural exchange. Yoshimoto (1991) argues that there is a “cultural domination of the non-West by the West”. As discussed previously, East Asian cinema once absorbed Western Hollywood’s forms and aesthetics, while now there is an ironic reversal of influence. Asian filmmakers like Ming-liang become relevant here as a reference point to creating this “cinema of

slowness” (Ciment, 2003). His position in Taiwanese and international art cinema initially allowed him to develop a temporal cinematic language that is less constrained by Hollywood norms. His work, originally seen as marginal, is newly relevant now.

Western critics and filmmakers increasingly look towards slow cinema as a method of resistance, because it offers a visual language capable of articulating the psychological and temporal pressures of contemporary life, highlighting the shared global conditions of burnout. Once perceived as incompatible with Western audiences, Ming-liang’s temporal strategies that align with East Asian temporal traditions are now increasingly valued and sought after. This could be due to their emphasis on temporal gaps and “between-times” (Han, 2015). The renewed interest in a return to slowness is not simply theoretical. It mirrors the global longing for experiences that unfold naturally instead of experiences that overwhelm.

4.3 Tsai Ming-liang as a Precursor

Although Ming-liang’s films are often positioned on the outskirts of film culture, by situating his work within the contemporary cultural context of acceleration, it suggests that he is a precursor of growing global concerns. Long before widespread discourse around overstimulation and fatigue, his films offered an experience of stillness and presence that anticipated a need for alternate forms of spectatorship.

From a production design perspective, Ming-liang’s curation of space establishes a language that design and duration can work in tandem to shape viewers emotions. They demonstrate the emotional potential of cinematic space itself. *In-between*, *heterotopic* spaces such as corridors and cinemas characterised with decay and emptiness can create alternate environments that resist visual spectacle. It is these interstitial spaces that hold weight and facilitate reflection over time. This supports the argument that spatial design is an active agent in spectators emotional experience.

Considering the recent shift towards slowness, Ming-liang’s films can be understood as precursors to the global revaluation of temporality. His work anticipates a shift in how cinema functions in the 21st century. Therefore, although some of his films

are over 20 years old, they remain relevant rather than outdated, offering an early cinematic response to issues that have only intensified since their creation.

4.4 Contemporary Cinematic Slowness

Slow cinema's gradual recognition at recent film festivals, award ceremonies and critical discourse suggests a shift from the margins of society to a wider relevance. There has been increasing attention and success coming from recent films which borrow slow cinema's formal techniques. This positive critical acclaim, prestigious nominations and awards frame slow cinema as a legitimate and widely desirable style of filmmaking.

Table 1. outlines a selection curated by the author of this thesis, of recent, widely distributed films that received major recognition and awards for utilising elements of slow cinema. All information was accessed from the official websites of the award organisations - (AMPAS, 2026), (BAFTA, 2026), (Festival de Cannes, 2026), (Golden Globes, 2026), (IFTA, 2026).

Table 1. Recent Award Recognised Films Incorporating Slow Cinema Techniques

Year	Film Title	Director	Slow Cinema Techniques	Major Awards / Nominations
2016	<i>Moonlight</i>	Barry Jenkins	Slow pacing, long takes, emphasis on atmosphere and interiority, restrained dreamlike colours and lighting – flattens and suspends visuals, natural elements – water/wind	Academy Award for Best Picture.
2018	<i>Roma</i>	Alfonso Cuarón	Spatial repetition – cyclical time, water elements as memory and reflection, accumulated objects through daily use, black and white colour palette – flattens hierarchy, temporal stretches, Foucauldian spaces	Academy Award nomination for Best Production Design, Academy Awards: Best Cinematography, Directing. BAFTA for Best Film, Best International Film.
2020	<i>Nomadland</i>	Chloé Zhao	Observational rhythm, duration, non-spectacular landscapes, minimal dialogue, design mirrors <i>between</i> moments of human existence	Academy Awards: Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actress. BAFTA for Best Cinematography.
2022	<i>An Cailín Ciúin (The Quiet Girl)</i>	Colm Bairéad	Silence, emotional minimalism through domestic and rural design, slow observational pacing, rural natural elements	IFTA for Best Production Design. BAFTA for Outstanding Debut. Academy Award nomination for Best International Feature Film.
2022	<i>Aftersun</i>	Charlotte Wells	Temporal gaps, stillness, muted colour palette, generic spaces – disconnection, outdated design- time suspended in limbo.	BAFTA nomination for Best Production Design.

2022	<i>The Banshees of Inisherin</i>	Martin McDonagh	Deliberate pacing, contemplative rhythm, atmospheric restraint, repetitive locations- suspension, nature overwhelms architecture – fire	Golden Globe Awards: Best Motion Picture & Best Original Screenplay. Academy Award nominations.
2023	<i>The Zone of Interest</i>	Jonathan Glazer	Muted colour palette, Foucauldian Garden space - spatial denial, visual restraint, decaying locations, normalised repetition.	Cannes Film Festival: Grand Prix. Academy Award for Best International Feature Film. BAFTA nomination for Best Production Design.
2023	<i>Perfect Days</i>	Wim Wenders	Location repetition – time in suspension/routine, accumulated time and objects, minimal narrative, isolation/meditation of city life, Foucauldian spaces.	Cannes Film Festival: Best Actor & Prize of the Ecumenical Jury.

(Johnston, 2026)

While these directors do not use the strict radical conventions of slow cinema like Tarkovsky or Ming-liang, they do adopt elements of its temporal language and design, integrating slowness in strategic ways through a more typical narrative structure to appeal to a more receptive audience. This hybrid approach offers mainstream audiences an easier way to interact, integrate and acclimatise to slow cinema forms. This incorporation and positive reception reflect the broader cultural desire for slower modes of media and signals a reassessment of what cinema can and should offer to contemporary audiences. In this context, the work of slow cinema filmmakers such as Ming-liang, now appear as an articulation of resistance to current cultural concerns. Techniques that were previously misunderstood as austere, self-indulgent and boring, by film critics such as Romney (2010) and James (2010) are now more accessible and accepted by mainstream audiences. From this information, it is clear slow cinema is

currently most widely effective when used in tandem with conventional cinematic techniques, when viewers are given a familiar framework to approach it.

The following film stills are from award-recognised contemporary films that demonstrate slow cinema techniques.

Mundane, everyday labour and accumulated time:



Figure 29: Domestic life in *An Cailín Ciúin* (Bairéad, 2023)



Figure 30: Everyday rituals in *Perfect Days* (Wenders, 2023)

Nature as an inescapable, relentless force of decay:

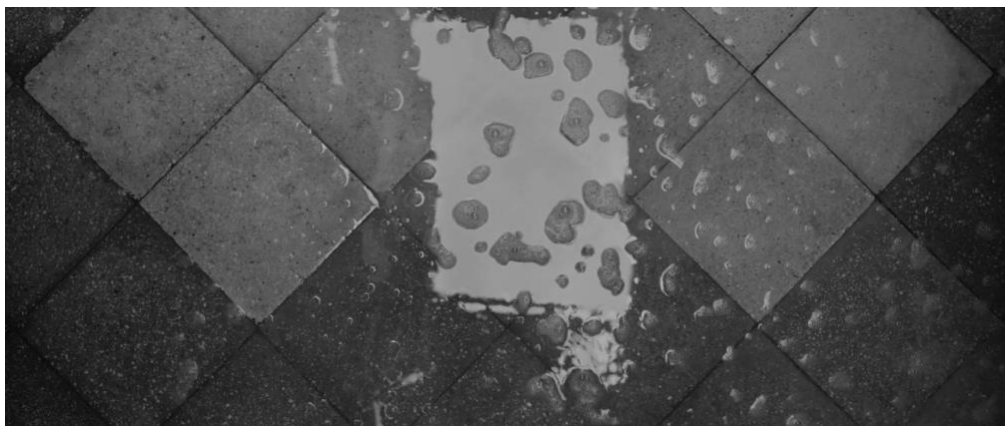


Figure 31: Repeated water movement over floor tiles exposes spatial porosity in *Roma* (Cuarón, 2018)



Figure 32: Water and decay emerges through repetition and accumulation in *Roma* (Cuarón, 2018)



Figure 33: The cottage erupts into fire. Architecture fails to control exterior elements from interior space in *The Banshees of Inisherin* (MacDonagh, 2023)



Figure 34: Rain blurs structures producing temporal suspension in *The Banshees of Inisherin* (MacDonagh, 2023)

Spatial manipulation:



Figure 35: The garden space as a heterotopia of denial beside Auschwitz. Insulating domestic life from reality in *The Zone of Interest* (Glazer, 2023)



Figure 36: The cinema as a space of temporary suspension from daily life in *Roma* (Cuarón, 2018)

Visual suspension through colour palettes and lighting:



Figure 37: Diffused, naturalistic lighting in *Aftersun* (Wells, 2022)



Figure 38:



Figure 39: Natural, soft, merging colour palette in *Nomadland* (Zhao, 2020)



Figure 40:



Figure 41: Controlled, dream-like colour palette in *Moonlight* (Jenkins, 2016)

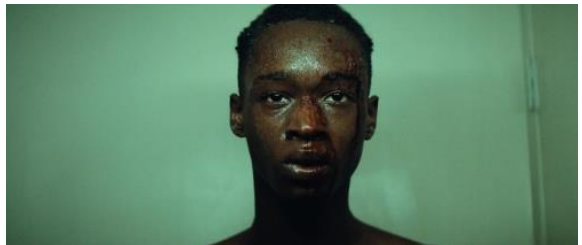


Figure 42:

4.5 Limitations

Although slow cinema can offer great benefits to our fast-paced achievement society, it is important to distinguish that its strict conventional filmic form is not a simple universal solution to contemporary burnout. Believing that everyone places value on these experiences and can embody these “between-times” and extended pauses is presumptuous and overlooks cultural imbalances. For some it can be restorative, but for many it can cause further isolation. Therefore, is it only beneficial for those who can afford the time, have the film literacy and the cultural capital to understand it?

It could be argued that slow cinema is simply filling a cultural gap and that it does not dismantle the deep-rooted conditions that produce burnout. Acknowledging these limitations is essential to avoid a romanticised understanding of slowness. Because of this, slow cinema benefits from contextualisation to reduce and recalibrate pre-made judgements.

For production designers, this acknowledgment is crucial, as assuming slow cinema design is universally healing could be damaging. The designer cannot force or control how slowness is perceived, they simply create the spatial conditions for slowness to exist. Recognising these limitations does not decrease the value of slow cinema. It clarifies what it *can* and *cannot* do and reinforces the importance of experiential spatial design.

4.6 The Future of Spatial Design

The selective adoption of slowness by contemporary and upcoming directors and designers suggests a growing opposition to speed driven media. This shift highlights the transformation of slow cinema and how it can continue to create spatial and temporal forms of emotional engagement that arguably resonate with an increasingly wider audience.

For production designers concerned with the emotional capacity of space, this shift is particularly important. If slow cinema’s true power lies not only in the sustained

duration but the careful design of how time *feels* in cinematic spaces, then the design of these environments and locations become critical to the cinematic experience. This move towards slowness suggests exciting new possibilities for spatial design. Clearly, designers are increasingly being asked to create spaces that allow an accumulation of time in contemporary film, rather than constructing a passive backdrop to serve the plot or narrative. With the desire for slow living becoming even more common, the potential for designing temporal spaces through a medium that is already capable of capturing attention is thrilling. This reframes cinematic spatial design as an act of resistance. While slow cinema does not ask viewers to reject contemporary mainstream media entirely; it creates the space for alternative forms of cinematic experience to exist beside and within dominant media. It is a complementary mode of engagement that broadens the future capabilities of cinema. It reaffirms ways in which cinema can be designed, watched, experienced and felt, as we move forward in the accelerating 21st century.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to explore slow cinema as a resistance to the growing pressures of an accelerated culture. Emerging from a personal engagement with film form and taking a production designers perspective, this research has examined how the combination of intentionally designed mise-en-scène and extended duration can create contemplative and calming affective experiences as an opposition to the dominant temporal conditions of contemporary society. Through the analysis of film imagery, this thesis demonstrates how slow cinema design extends beyond a simple slow pace and actively reshapes cinematic space into something that is felt, inhabited and emotionally evocative.

Chapter One situated slow cinema historically and within the broader concerns of modernity, acceleration and burnout and stated that this form acts as an alternative media offering refuge from the current fast-paced society. This was closely informed by Byung-Chul Han's (2015) exploration of "burnout".

Chapter Two established the theoretical frameworks to inform the discussions on the manipulation of time and space within slow cinema. Concepts from thinkers such as Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Paul Schrader and Andrei Tarkovsky were explored and discussed. These ideas provided the tools to understand how the carefully designed mise-en-scène and durational stillness generate affective resonance.

Chapter Three outlined production design as more than a simple backdrop through a close visual case study of *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (2003). Using the theoretical frameworks previously discussed, it emphasised design as a central mechanism that produces emotional and temporal resistance in combination with duration.

Chapter Four explored the surrounding slow culture movements existing alongside slow cinema, and the shared cultural desire for slowness going forward. It acknowledges that in the 21st century, the need for slowness is global and that slow cinema facilitates this through a shared visual language. This desire was made evident through an exploration of recent award-winning films and their use of slow cinema techniques. Further analysis situated slow cinema as a potential cinematic form of opposition existing parallel to mainstream media.

From a personal perspective, engaging with slow cinema has solidified my

interest in how restrained time and spatial intention can produce affective meaning without spectacle. As a production design student, this research has reinforced the idea of cinematic spaces as environments that facilitate presence, self-reflection and inner calmness as explained in discussions of the *mise-en-scène*. These films reveal how sparse, quiet and seemingly uneventful environments can hold profound emotional weight when viewers are given the time to experience them. This is increasingly important in an era defined by speed and overstimulation. As discussed, slow cinema does not promise an escape from modernity, but it can offer a place of rest and momentary pause within it. Its capacity for slowing perception through careful temporal and spatial design positions it as a meaningful and enduring form of resistance amongst contemporary culture and as a medium that continues to shape the future possibilities of film design. Slow cinema simply invites viewers to reconsider what it truly means to watch, wait and experience presence in an accelerated society.

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