In Real Time. Notes on New Expressions of Slowness

Rosanna Gangemi

Numéro 102, juin–octobre 2014

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/72272ac

Citer cet article
In Real Time
Notes on New Expressions of Slowness

“After the Old Testament, we have no new stories. Movie stories are not new and that’s the reason why we think, ‘Ok, the story’s only a part of the movie.’”

Slow people in our society, as noted by Pierre Sansot, do not have a good reputation. Condemned to rush frantically to nowhere, we are infected, ailing with hyperspeed, the dominant disorder of the 21st century, according to Thomas Hylland Eriksen, who devoted an influential essay to the frantic whirlwind sweeping away all aspects of our lives. For the Norwegian anthropologist, our age is characterized by fast activities that cannibalize slow ones (family, reading, private life). Yet, by making it possible to accomplish more tasks in less time, speed should, in principle, free up additional time for individuals. Every one knows that this is not the case. The social rhythms of contemporary life tend to establish urgency as a normal temporality, as well as a historical and social reality—in the Durkheimian sense that Christophe Bouton gives this term. It suffices to make speed the symbol of innovation, success—the race to productivity—and happiness. Contrary to a world of perpetual haste—as Paul Virilio warned us and, well before him, Eugène Minkowski with his reflections on the loss of vital contact with reality, today those trying to escape the secularized fear of death can look closely at the growing tendency towards a quest for slowness taking shape against all doom and pessimism. This ambitious recovery of the taste for slowness, the aesthetic reverse side of patience, the driving force freeing us from the mystique of speed—as put forward with customary thoughtfulness by Luis Sepúlveda in his recent story for “little men”—also traverses the recent practices of some artists and authors. More specifically, it informs certain aesthetic experiences and media phenomena that shift and reconfigure cultural signifiers in order to create what might be defined as a field of inaction, in which something, nonetheless, is happening, something which is profoundly real and authentic in form as well as substance. This has been recently exemplified by a renewed interest in the “real” in philosophical thought, contradicting two major dogmas of postmodern philosophical tradition. These transformations, which engender a slightly provocative radicalism in intellectual pleasure, reveal their coherence only slowly; this is why time-based art, such as video and performance, has a privileged relation to slowness. Defining the scope of what can be increasingly described as a phenomenon provides us with a limited selection of propositions in which time is perceived in its immanence, without speed changes, ruptures or loops: reality exposed as it is, or as it could plausibly be. Slowness aligns well with rest, abandon, sleep. The paradigmatic figure of the sleeper, safe from all, exposed to all, is in fact the subject of the work Sleep—Al Naïm by mounir fatmi, who has had his share of being censored. This work directly references the iconography of Sleep (1963)—in which the poet John Giorno sleeps for almost six hours, giving the illusion of a long sequence shot—by Andy Warhol, who mischievously laughed at his own films, which allowed the audience to leave and return, most often without worrying that they were missing something important. Begun in 2005, Sleep—Al Naïm is a black-and-white fictional work depicting a man peacefully asleep, his naked chest rising and falling to the rhythm of his breathing. After trying in vain to contact Salman Rushdie, fatmi chose to represent him via a virtual image. Considering the death threats hanging over Rushdie for many years, the writer’s rest appears as a necessary loss of control: sunken in sleep, a state of relaxation is still possible despite the vulnerability to which he is exposed. The Moroccan artist correlated his own breathing with Rushdie’s body—it is in fact fatmi’s actual breath which we hear for six hours—by synching a sound montage and the 3D animation of the writer’s body. Another famous sleeper of our era is Tilda Swinton, though in this case her sleeping was live and inside one of art’s temples. Her performance at MoMA, inside a glass case where she slept for more than six hours at a time, challenges the taboo of death. The anticipated duration of The Maybe was unknown even to museum employees. Other than providing the context, no program was published for her performances, nor a statement made by the artist or the museum. Confronted with visual experiences of this kind, viewers don’t know if anything will happen; they might hope something will happen, and likely nothing will, but even so they watch, observe, and are sometimes content with contemplating. Something wonderful might suddenly occur and put an end to their viewing, as compensation for this no longer habitual patience. Such is the case.
with Don't Touch (2012), a video less than two
minutes long by the young Finnish artist Maija
Saksman, in which one of the three inert female
figures, sitting with their backs to the still cam-
eras, is touched by a slowly approaching hand.
At the moment of contact, an alarming cry is heard.
The viewer is startled but the female characters
remain immobile.
In a different way, for the Dutch artist Maarten
Baas, something happens in a place where nor-
mally we don’t expect it to: inside a clock. Baas
joyfully pushes the limits of design to constantly
question our relationship with objects. Real Time
(2009) presents three videos that “mark time,”
employing technological advances that make it
possible to film for twelve or twenty-four
hours without interruption. The clock display of
Grandfather Clock is a twelve-hour video of an
actor indicating the time by erasing and redrawing
the clock’s hands every minute; Sweepers Clock
depicts two workers sweeping the trash, which
forms two giant clock hands, to the rhythm
of time passing; Analog Digital Clock shows a
person covering or wiping the transparent
geometric elements that shape the digital digits
giving the exact time. In 2013, clock-movies were
included in Grandmother Clock, offering the docu-
mented performance of a real grandmother in
action. Meanwhile, the series has been adapted
diffrent media (Comtoise clock, Blu-Ray,
iPhone, etc.).
More recently, the Bulgarian artist Ivan Moudov,
known for his occasionally illegal artistic actions
that defy social conventions and the power of
authority and its appropriation, often with great
mackery and the authority of artistic work, has
taken this concept even further. In 2012, he cre-
ated Performing Time, a video installation in which
he stands and pushes the hands of the clock,
according to his own sense of time passing, for
an uninterrupted twenty-three hours and fifteen
minutes.
These artistic propositions correspond with some
aesthetic forms that have marked the viewers of
certain European public television channels of a
more avant-garde nature. The first was the play-
ful world of sheep invented by Hélène Guetary
in 1993 for the Franco-German channel ARTE: at
the end of the programming, actors played sheep
indefinitely jumping over a fence to full noctam-
bulists to certain sleep. Gone in early 1995, they
came back on the air on January 1, 1998 with the
goal to count down the days until 2000.
More recently, Norway has tried to give time
to time, now through television. The NRK public
channel broadcasts ultra long programming of
ultra slow, trivial content, all in real time. These
are visual performances executed in tempo
adagio, sometimes elevated to a maestoso. The
 television medium, typically defined by its speed
and clamour, takes its time to find its most rad-
cial embodiment: as reality television in the lit-
eral sense of the term, since viewers can watch
a ferry journey through the fjords (134 hours) or
a fire burning in a fireplace (three hours). With
a precise beginning and end, but lacking narrative
substance, it is a vital letting go, the great return
of contemplation, and possibly a sinking into rev-
erie, making us want to reread Milan Kundera.14
These are modes of authenticity that search for
parts of the imagination which, because of their
evident banality, often escape us.
At once a producer of time passing and a frag-
ment of eternity, this “slow but noble television,”
as defined by the channel director Lise May
Spisskey, began in 2009. To mark the centenary
of the railway line traversing a stunning land-
scape from Bergen and Oslo, the journey was
retransmitted with the help of onboard cameras
and archival images, so as to remain on air while
passing through tunnels. The success surpassed all
hopes: approximately 12 million people, almost a
quarter of Norway’s population, watched at least
one part of the journey broadcast for seven hours
and sixteen minutes on NRK2. Original, easy and
inexpensive to implement, the proposal convinced
the CEOs of the public broadcaster who, freed
from the constraints restricting commercial chan-
nels, decided to allow this kind of experimenta-
tion on one of their two national channels. Besides
these long journeys at home, NRK produces ther-
matic slow television programming that explores
salmon fishing, the art of wood fire, or all aspects
of knitting. A long sequence of a discussion by ex-
erts is followed by an even longer sequence of the
practise in real time. Thus in early November,
NRK minutely analyzed the making of a sweater
in eight hours and thirty-five minutes, from sheep
shearing to knitting the last stitch. Beyond devel-
opping a taste for artisanal prowess, slow TV cre-
ates true “islands of deceleration.”15 However,
as proof that the urgent need for slowness is not
the same everywhere, in the United States, the
train’s coastal journey was reduced to a program of
one hour.
Yet in a country in which the rediscovery of slow-
ness takes the form of unique experiments that
intersect art with the hotel industry—The Thief-
hotel, in Oslo, replaced its offer of porn-on-demand
with video-art-on-demand—, NRK has plans for
other projects, such as a program on time minute-
ly analyzing the making of a clock (in 2006, the
Turkish artist Ali Kazma showed us how a clock
is repaired in Obstructions), then filming time pass-
ing. Baas and Moudov be advised...

Rosanna Gangemi

1 Bela Tarr, quoted on April 19, 2003 in an article by Rich-
.theguardian.com/film/2003/apr/19/artsfeatures.The
journalist writes: “For the director of Werckmeister Har-
monies, the biggest part of the movie is time. […] as
the camera watches Valuska and Eszter for minutes on
end as they walk silently down a street before heading
off in different directions, Tarr is turning cinema’s most
abusive dimension into its most effective tool.”
2 Sansot, Pierre. Du bon usage de la lenteur. Paris: Payot,
1998.
3 Eriksen, Thomas Hylland. Tyranny of the Moment. Fast
and Slow Time in the Information Age. London: Pluto
4 Bouthon, Christophe. Le Temps de l'urgence. Lomont:
5 Among others, Vittio, Paul. Speed and Politics. Trans.
6 Minkowski, Eugène. Lived Time. Phenomenological and
Evanton: Northwestern University Press, 1970:
“Technology, through its discoveries, tries to conquer
time and space. All too happy to benefit from its un-
relenting progress in this respect, we can’t but be
grateful to it. However, this feeling of gratitude remains
incomplete. Often we are seized with a profound weak-
erness, as though the pace of life, thus created, did us
violence. This progress takes place to the detriment of
other essential values. Going fast is not enough for us.
[…] inside, we feel the rumbles of revolt.”
7 Sepúlveda, Luis. Storia di una lumaca che scopri l’impor-
Praising slowness while also putting it into practice
can be a form of civil disobedience, as demonstrated in
the food industry by the Slow Food movement, whose
founder Carlo Petrini published with Giunti-Slow Food,
in 2013, Cibo e libertà—Slow Food: storie di gastrono-
mia per la liberazione.
8 One text in particular: Ferraris, Maurizio. Manifesto del
reaction, according to the Turin philosopher, has re-
gained ground in this century.
9 Ferraris, Maurizio. ibid.: “[...] that all reality is socially
constructed and infinitely manipulable, and that truth is a
useless notion since solidarity is more important than
objectivity [...]” (My translation.)
10 One of Warhol’s first experiments with cinematog-
raphy, Sleep was conceived as an “anti-film.” Warhol
would develop this technique in his next eight-hour
film, Empire.
11 Ironically, once the film was completed in 2012, the two
men met in Brussels. After this meeting, fatmi conduct-
ed a long interview with the writer to be published in a
book called Sleep.
12 The performance was conceived as a memento mori in
1995, for the Serpentine Galleries in London, following
the death of the actress’s friend Derek Jarman, and
was restaged at MoMA in 2013, following the death of
her mother.
13 A scene in Spike Jonze’s most recent film Her elucidates
this idea. In this scene, Amy Adams shows a video de-
picting her mother sleeping, and the husband, disap-
pointed, asks her if anything is about to happen...
York: Harper Perennial, 1997: “There is a secret bond
between slowness and memory, between speed and
forgetting. […] In existential mathematics, that experi-
ence takes the form of two basic equations: the degree
of slowness is directly proportional to the intensity of
memory; the degree of speed is directly proportional
to the intensity of forgetting.”
15 Rosa, Hartmut. Social Acceleration: A New Theory of