

Idle Cinema:  
A Crisis of Knowledge in Narrative Film  
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## **ABSTRACT**

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Malorie Urbanovitch

Amplified by their use of long takes, slow films dwell on the minutiae of everyday life; their time is drawn out and their story-telling inefficient. With roots in Italian neorealism, structural films of the 1960s, and what Paul Schrader identified in 1975 as “transcendental style,” slow cinema’s areas of influence are certainly diverse. But as the term “slow” suggests, it has come to represent a manner of storytelling predicated on a delayed, but eventual arrival of an event – an event that ultimately meets the seasoned viewer’s expectation of a “pay off” and in retrospect, justifies the film’s slow build. Even still, the category has become synonymous with the idea that in these films, “nothing happens.” Slow cinema has thus devolved into an often pejorative label that accounts for any and every film that makes use of the long take and tests our patience. As this contentious discourse surrounding slow cinema has clouded a sufficient inquiry into its breadth of aesthetic approaches, the purpose of this thesis lies in identifying what I am calling “idle cinema,” a style of filmmaking that has grown out of the tradition of slowness, but takes its resistance to the narrative efficiency of classical narrative storytelling in new aesthetic directions.

In idle cinema, ellipsis gains equal importance to the long take; like slow films, idle films make time visible, but they also make it disappear. As moving images are freed from the economy of “adding up to something,” idle cinema becomes less of a resistance to speed than an expression of a crisis of knowledge.

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## **Dedication**

For Ruby, who always loved hard work.

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## **Introduction: From Slow to Idle: A Move Away from Narrative**

In 1975, Chantal Akerman debuted her first feature, *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* at Cannes. Marguerite Duras – the famed French writer and director, whose film *India Song* was also premiering at the festival that year – was in attendance. Before the film’s nearly three-and-a-half hour run time had elapsed, Duras stood up from her seat and yelled “cette femme est complètement folle!” (“this woman is totally crazy!”) before storming out of the theatre (Liépa 1). It is no surprise that Akerman’s film would cause some frustration for audience members, particularly for those unaccustomed to slow films; this would have been the case for most film-goers in 1975, as it would be almost thirty years until slow cinema became a recognized category. Recently taking the number one spot in *Sight and Sound’s* 2023 decennial poll of the “Top 100 Greatest Films of All Time,” Akerman’s film has become a shining example of the aesthetics that inspired the movement of slowness in cinema. Its masterful play on duration, achieved not only by its unusually long run-time, but also its prolific use of long takes, static camera, sparse dialogue, un-emotive acting, and repetitive, banal subject matter have all become emblematic of slow cinema’s aesthetics. The film is made up of a series of extended takes observing Jeanne as she methodically performs her daily routine. She makes her morning coffee; bathes herself and dresses; waits in line at the post office; buys veal cutlets at the butcher; shops for a button to match the one missing on her son’s coat. The next day repeats with negligible variation: this night, meatloaf instead of schnitzel. The repetition of Jeanne’s daily life is given the duration to appear to be rendered completely, in what feels like real-time. In some behind-the-scenes footage captured in the short documentary *Autour de Jeanne Dielman* (Sami Frey, 1975), Akerman politely requests that Delphine Seyrig, the leading actress, brush her hair “slower.” In the end, it certainly becomes clear why this slow choreography matters; Seyrig’s

exaggerated movement – her *performance* of slowness – contributes to the film’s slowing down at every level (fig.1). While the camera observes her with unwavering attention, unsuspecting viewers might exhibit less patience. Duras was not the only audience member who walked out on the premiere early. Had they stayed, they might have realized that the repetitive slowness of Jeanne’s gestures eventually pays off with a shocking act of violence.



Fig. 1: A performance of slowness: Jeanne brushes her hair in Akerman’s *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975)

Slow cinema dwells on the minutiae of everyday life. But as the term “slow” suggests, it is a manner of storytelling predicated on a delayed, but eventual arrival of an event – an event that ultimately meets the seasoned viewer’s expectation of a payoff that in retrospect, justifies the film’s slow build. Even still, the category has become synonymous with the idea that in these films, nothing really happens. *Nothing Happens* is the title of Ivone Margulies’ book-length study on Akerman’s work, which is somewhat ironic in light of the fact that, in *Jeanne Dileman*,

something *does* eventually happen. As Margulies writes, “the extended duration of the shots no longer points to a nondramatic action but starts to function as the locus par excellence of the drama’s eruption” (77). Jeanne's opaqueness retroactively becomes deciphered as a symptom and a sign of the murder she will eventually commit. This single sensational moment finally reveals itself as the justification for all the waiting. This has become a common formula in slow cinema. In Tsai-Ming Liang’s *The River* (1997), a man’s life is taken over by a debilitating kink in his neck, the result of an unlucky swim in a murky waterway. Narrative-oriented events lose all currency as his state slowly worsens, and the film ends after a disturbing interaction between father and son. In Carlos Reygadas’ *Silent Light* (2007) – a striking reimagining of Carl Theodore Dreyer’s 1955 religious drama, *Ordet* – the slow and quiet farm life of a Mennonite family is upset by a miraculous resurrection near the end of the film. In Bruno Dumont’s *Life of Jesus* (1997, fig. 2), a violent xenophobic act puts an end to the incessant loitering of bored, small-town teenagers. The temporal slowness of each of these films ultimately contributes to a narrative charge that builds through extended duration and is expelled with a cathartic moment of action near the end of the film. While the relatively new category<sup>1</sup> has become associated with some of the world’s most diverse and revered filmmakers, watching these films seems to have become a matter of endurance. Slow cinema has thus quickly devolved into an often pejorative association that accounts for any and every film that tests its viewer’s patience. The slow cinema category is swallowed up by its association with the long take, and this has clouded a sufficient inquiry into its wide range of aesthetic approaches. The purpose of this thesis lies in identifying what I am calling “idle cinema,” a style of filmmaking that has grown out of the tradition of slowness, but takes its resistance to the efficiency of classical narrative storytelling in new aesthetic directions.

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase *cinema of slowness* was coined in 2003 by French film critic Michel Ciment.



Fig. 2: Incessant loitering culminates in violence in Bruno Dumont's *Life of Jesus* (1997)

As screenwriter and film scholar Paul Schrader writes, “even the seasoned viewer of slow cinema anticipates *something*. Some moment, some expectation” (20). What happens if that decisive something never seems to happen? Or if that something takes place outside of the film’s frame? Or happens too soon, before its *time*? Or too late to witness the after-effects?

### **Is it slow?**

As Johnathan Rosenbaum remarks in his essay, “Is Ozu Slow?,” there is a moment in Ozu’s *I Was Born, But...* (1932) that reframes the film from comedy to tragedy – two school-age boys, who are about to discover a devastating fact about their father, begin a debate about zebras: do they have black stripes on white, or white stripes on black? This scene pauses the narrative thrust of the film, creating a small disturbance that momentarily halts the discovery about their father, around which the film hinges. Interruptions like these are perhaps a contributing factor to Ozu’s frequent association with slow cinema. Yet, as Rosenbaum is contemplating, is this

slowness? The zebra has nothing to do with the story that will continue to unfold after this moment. There have been plenty of examples of narrative interruptions throughout film history that do not necessarily register as slow. However, when interruptions seem to eclipse the story itself, something else emerges.

Ozu made three silent films whose titles follow this same formula: *I Graduated, But...*(1929), and *I Flunked, But...*(1930), and *I Was Born, But...*(1932). The structure of these unusual titles signals a decisive moment – of being born, graduating, or having flunked – memorable events which can be plotted on a timeline of a human’s life.

The title of Angela Schanelec’s *I Was at Home, But...* (2019) directly references Ozu’s, whose unwavering subject was everyday family life. Schanelec’s title, however, marks an important difference, one that will help think through the concept of idleness. The phrase suggests a kind of excuse, or of something that got missed, or that went unnoticed. It suggests that although one may have been present, that something took place just out of view. Being “at home” is hardly an event at all, that is, unless something out of the ordinary took place. It is a “non-event,” a facet of everydayness that in classical editing would most likely constitute implied time in a storyline – time that is not usually considered worthy to occupy much screen time, as it is time that is obviously understood. Being at home where nothing much is taking place becomes homogenous time: repetitive, unremarkable, forgettable. A place that makes time invisible to us, wherein a cluster of “non-events” takes place. Thus the ellipsis dots that close *I Was at Home, But...*(while at the same time, leaving it open), express a never-ending deferral of decisive moments. Instead of suggesting that the film will “fill in the blanks,” or continue on from here, the ellipsis in *I Was at Home, But...* represents what will continue to remain unseen.



## **Duration and the Long Take**

Ellipses, which stand in for time that goes unaccounted for – time disappeared for greater narrative efficiency – stand in opposition to the long take, with its excessive attention to time unfolding. While the long take is a major aesthetic component of slow cinema, the concept of slowness has become conflated with long takes. The use of long takes does not necessarily mean that a film is slow; slowness in cinema equally has to do with the “action” or “event” taking place. In a scene in which nothing much is happening, time seems to slow down. Taiwanese director Tsai Ming-Liang, whose work is often associated with slow cinema, ruminates on his affinity for long takes in his films:

The long take is simply something I need in order to create. I want my films to appear more realistic, from a singular perspective. To preserve the natural passage and movement of time means using minimal cuts, which is one of the most effective strategies to me. Isn't porn mostly shot in long takes? Aren't they effective? Everyone wants to have a remote control in their hands at all times. What we should talk about is the audience's viewing habits, or people's endlessly impatient hearts (Lim 31).

Tsai relates the long take to “preserv[ing] the natural passage and movement of time,” helping his films to “appear more realistic.” The long take is arguably the defining feature of slow cinema, but as Tsai suggests, it is first and foremost a realist impulse. Bazin championed the long take as a move towards realism; Bazin thought cinema's strength was representing reality, and for him, realism in cinema emerged through the long take. There seems to be a tension arising when considering the long take as a move towards realism, and the long take as a modernist impulse that became a limit-test of the filmic medium in the structural films of the 1960s and 70s. P. Adams Sitney defined structural cinema as films that emphasize the “shape” of the film,

in other words, films in which form takes precedence over content (Sitney 1970). The need to define this cinema was initiated by experimental filmmakers like Michael Snow and Andy Warhol, whose underground films wrenched focus from narrative and towards the particular capabilities of the filmic medium. For example, Snow's <<--->> (*Back and Forth*) (1969), enlists the movement of the camera as its subject; resting on a tripod in an empty classroom, the camera pans all the way to the right until it hits a wooden stopper, which marks its cue to switch directions and pans until it hits the stopper on left, and so on, back and forth in an irregular rhythm, and at an increasing speed. Warhol's *Sleep* (1964) is an 8-hour long take featuring a closeup of a young man's face as he gets a full night's rest. Structural films were a huge influence on European art cinema as a whole<sup>2</sup>, and their emphasis on form and disinterest with narrative planted some of the heartiest seeds out of which slow cinema grew.

Long takes are often described as a durational aesthetic, yet there is more to this term than simply the length of a shot. The concept of duration was first theorized by French public intellectual, Henri Bergson. Around the turn of the 20th century, he began presenting his thinking on the spatialization of time. Bergson saw that the development and proliferation of modern technologies produced the false impression that the passage of time could be equated with the progress of space. Rapidly developing cultural phenomena like wristwatches suggest time has a spatial quality – as the clock hands move across the intervals, so “moves” time. These modern technologies have continually presented “a continuity which is really lived but artificially decomposed for the greater convenience of customary knowledge” (66). However, Bergson asserted that time should not be imagined as linear nor calculable. In *Creative Evolution*, he writes:

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<sup>2</sup> Chantal Akerman's early films for example, are clearly indebted to the work of structuralist films, particularly the work of Snow. In *La Chambre* (1971), Akerman lounges on the bed, doing nothing as the camera continually pans in a 360 degree circle around a lived-in room.

If I want to mix a glass of sugar and water, I must, willy nilly, wait until the sugar melts. This little fact is big with meaning. For there the time I have to wait is not that mathematical time which would apply equally well to the entire history of the material world, even if that history was spread out instantaneously in space. It coincides with my impatience, that is to say, with a certain portion of my own duration, which I cannot protract or contract as I like. It is no longer something thought, it is something lived (6-7).

As Bergson suggests here, duration is personal; it coincides with one's impatience. As film philosopher Elizabeth Grosz finds, "duration is experienced most incontrovertibly in the phenomenon of waiting; waiting for the narrative to 'add up' and for enigmas to be resolved" (17). What are we left with when a film's narrative does not seem to add up or lead to a resolution? Laura Mulvey suggests in *Death 24x Second* that the material nature of a celluloid strip pre-destines cinema for linear story-telling. She argues that "[c]inema's forward movement, the successive order of film, merges easily into the order of narrative. Linearity, causality and the linking figure of metonymy, all crucial elements in story-telling, find a correspondence in the unfolding, forward-moving direction of film" (69-70). In the digital era, this is no longer materially the case, that is, film's spatialization of time is no longer evidenced materially but manifests in editing. However, films have continued to operate under this regime. This has continued to solidify the dominant paradigms in film scholarship that have largely overlooked temporality in their discussions, instead leaning into a mode of analysis that relies on a systematization – semiotics and psychoanalysis – which have asserted that films are organized by a system of meaning that can be decoded by applying their insights. As Matilda Mroz observes in her book, *Temporality and Film Analysis*, "[w]ith the introduction of semiotics and

psychoanalysis in the 1960s, there seemed to be a conscious attempt to control and fix cinema's ungraspability by instituting a 'scientific' and rigorous mode of film analysis" (20). Thus studies of slow cinema have often fallen prey to an understanding of time that Bergson cautioned against; as Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge note in the introduction to their anthology *Slow Cinema*, "a popular method to evaluate and measure the slowness of a given film has been to examine its average shot length (ASL), a quantitative analysis achieved through dividing a given film's duration by its overall number of shots. This method would readily lead to the conclusion that slow style is firmly predicated upon the application of the long take" (5). Thus a calculation of shot lengths is evidence enough to "prove" that a film is a durational work indeed. Yet what is perhaps less considered in this quantitative analysis is the duration of the shot's complex relation to its rhythms and repetitions, and movements. These systems of thought have worked to guide writing on film away from phenomenological and ontological investigations (Mroz 1). This thesis aims to bring focus back to these.

### **Slow Cinema: "In a Mood of Expectation"**

Although the slow cinema label did not come into use until the early 2000s, in 1972 Paul Schrader identified an important precursor he called "transcendental style," which he describes as follows;

[b]y delaying edits, not moving the camera, forswearing music cues, not employing coverage, and heightening the mundane, transcendental style creates a sense of unease the viewer must resolve. The filmmaker assists the viewer's impulse for resolution by the use

of a Decisive Moment<sup>3</sup>, an unexpected image or act, which then results in a stasis, an acceptance of parallel reality – transcendence (3).

Here, Schrader lists many of the aesthetic elements that have become a mainstay of slow cinema, but also seems to be getting at a particular, mostly overlooked detail; slow aesthetics create unease in the viewer, which must be *resolved*. In *Narration in the Fiction Film*, David Bordwell states as much: that films are “problems to be solved” (Bordwell 7). In 2018, Schrader penned a new introduction to *Transcendental Style*. In it he writes that transcendental style can in retrospect, be understood as a larger movement away from narrative in cinema (3). He writes, “it is the hydra-headed creature we now call slow cinema” (3). Hydra-headed it may be, however, slow cinema has been reduced to its lowest common denominator – the long take. However, many films are regarded as slow but are doing something quite different.

Idle cinema shares many of the aesthetic tendencies associated with slow cinema. In idle cinema, ellipses gain equal importance to long takes; like slow films, idle films make time visible, but they also make it disappear. As moving images are freed from the economy of adding up to something, only hinting at resolutions or enigmas which in the course of the film are neither confirmed nor denied, idle cinema becomes less of a resistance to narrative efficiency than an expression of a crisis of knowledge. As it remains unclear who, or what, we are meant to relate to, a narrative is difficult to relay, and enigmas remain unformed or unresolved, an idle film may suggest that we search for meaning outside the frame. More specifically, idle cinema acknowledges the fact that we have been conditioned to find meaning through the images we see on-screen. As an abandonment of stable stories, and ultimately, stable subjects, idleness takes

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<sup>3</sup> Schrader uses “Decisive Moment” in a way that differs slightly from the more well-known version of the phrase, taken from the title of photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson’s book, *The Decisive Moment* (1952). While Cartier-Bresson’s version is not related to the spiritual, it does point our attention to something essential or profound within the frame.

shape in its expression of the limits of representation and communication, forging an inseparable link to images already seen, and stories already told.

### **The Everyday**

The end of narratives was considered by French thinker Jean-François Lyotard in 1979, when, in *The Postmodern Condition*, he argues that after the Shoah, there can no longer be a possibility in the belief of the progress of history. He describes the postmodern as a “crisis of narratives (xxiii),” in which “[t]he narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, great voyages, its great goal” (4). Thus a turning away from narrative becomes the starting point for a philosophy of idleness.

Gilles Deleuze finds that shift away from the dramatic scenarios of action towards ordinary, everyday situations, a shift that André Bazin initially identifies in Italian neorealist films. In *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, Deleuze writes:

In *Umberto D*, De Sica constructs the famous sequence quoted as an example by Bazin: the young maid going into the kitchen in the morning, making a series of mechanical, weary gestures, cleaning a bit, driving the ants away from a water fountain, picking up the coffee grinder, stretching out her foot to close the door with her toe. And her eyes meet her pregnant woman’s belly, and it is as though all the misery in the world were going to be born (1-2).

The young maid simply goes about her daily work, and thus the narrative unfolds not through the standard mechanics of exposition, but a focus on the banal action of the everyday. Simply through her glance – her eyes meeting her pregnant belly – we are told a story about “all the misery in the world.” Deleuze finds time-images present themselves as ordinary or everyday

situations, ones in which a narrative does not seem to be taking place, but is rather made up of a series of insignificant yet recognizable daily gestures; “It is because this world is intolerable that it can no longer think a world or think itself. The intolerable is no longer a serious injustice, but the permanent state of daily banality” (169-70). In lieu of movement and action, a film can show time “through its tiredness and waitings” (Deleuze xi). Deleuze recognizes this change in cinema as a shift from the action of the “movement-image” to the non-action of the “time-image” as a loss of faith in scenarios of causes and effects, effectively turning towards the only thing we can reliably count on: time itself, unfolding. This is typically imagined as long takes of everyday life, wherein, most of the time, nothing much happens. Yet, as Maurice Blanchot asks in his essay, “Everyday Speech” (1987), “for whom does “nothing happen” if, for me, something is necessarily always happening?” (15). This question is one of the main strains of thought that informs this thesis.

Blanchot’s statement begins an inquiry into storytelling that ultimately leads to an inquiry into subjectivity. Typically, films are centred around a human subject: a hero. Yet as Blanchot argues, the hero is anathema to the everyday;

The hero, while still a man of courage, is he who fears the everyday; fears it not because he is afraid of living in it with too much ease, but because he dreads meeting in it what is most fearful: a power of dissolution. The everyday challenges heroic values, but even more it impugns all values and the very idea of value, disproving always anew the unjustifiable difference between authenticity and inauthenticity (19).

Since Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899) exploded in popular culture and ignited the rise of psychoanalysis in film scholarship, the actions of characters in films are assumed to be a response to something else. Actions become symptomatic of a narrative cause that will

eventually be revealed. We cannot understand characters moving through daily life without the assumption there is something to be eventually revealed. As Blanchot observes, “[t]he everyday loses its power to reach us, it is no longer what is lived, but what can be seen or what shows itself, spectacle and description” (14). In other words, characters need to communicate efficiently their traumas (or triumphs) in a way that transcends the everyday so that we may be able to “understand” that they are subjects. As Margulies writes, “[h]aunting the interest in a repressed or unrepresented reality is the idea of a hidden totality” (22). When nothing is happening, there must be something *hidden*, which will be eventually disclosed. To become a discernible subject, everydayness must ultimately be overcome by a momentous event. Once everydayness gives way to an event, subjects become legible. In *Wretched of the Screen*, Hito Steyerl finds that even with the most “unknowable” of subjects,

[t]here might still be an internal and inaccessible trauma that constitutes subjectivity. But trauma is also the contemporary opium of the masses – an apparently private property that simultaneously invites and resists foreclosure. And the economy of this trauma constitutes the remnant of the independent subject (52).

Steyerl points out the economy of trauma, that is, what can be seen, described, understood, and assigned value. Like slow films, idle films often employ non-professional actors, and oftentimes, these performances are stoic but other times, impassioned. Regardless of delivery, performances in idle cinema are viewed through the lens of Stanley Cavell’s notion of “theatricality” (2003). While theatricality seems at times to be in opposition to the un-emotiveness slow cinema has become known for, the result remains the same – theatricality in idle cinema does not help produce subjects but signals an inscrutable divide between authenticity and inauthenticity.





Fig. 3: A young, non-professional actor looks into the camera in *Silent Light* (2007), a direct address to the camera that is typically avoided in narrative cinema to maintain a “natural” appearance.

Non-professional actors are often the preferred choice for slow cinema, and they are often associated with more authentic performances, particularly those by children and animals, since they are less rehearsed and their expressions are therefore considered more authentic and thus present something closer to realism. In the slow film *Silent Light* (Reygadas 2007) many of the actors are non-professional, giving the film an air of authenticity. Uncontrolled factors invite contingency – something unplanned taking place on-screen: details that contribute to realism. In one scene, as children are bathing and playing in a pond, one of the young actors looks directly into the camera. This moment is somewhat shocking, as it blurs the divide between realism and a modernist impulse, drawing attention to the fact that we are watching a film, and disrupting the illusion of reality. I will continue to contemplate how the line between realism and modernism becomes blurred in idle moments like these in Chapters 1 and 2.

Still, as slow films linger on everyday moments like these, withholding the action or drama that classical narrative films have conditioned viewers to follow, as film scholar Karl

Schoonover recognizes, slow cinema “seeing becomes a form of labour [...] time is the way that the art film makes the question of labour visible in the image” (155). Time unaccounted for, or underpaid or undervalued time, is a common theme in slow films; kitchens and cooking are a frequent motif, as is a fascination with “women’s work” such as housekeeping and caregiving. However, as with the example of *Jeanne Dielman* observing this undervalued everydayness is eventually understood as the “work” we have put in to get to the decisive moment of action. As Schrader writes, this formula “[c]asts suspicion on the nonemotional everyday; the viewer suspects that there might be more to life than day-to-day existence...[h]e (sic) is in a mood of expectation” (70). Everydayness will surely give way to action at some point; the story, eventually, has to progress. Or does it? When slow films fail to provide a narrative explanation after all the waiting, we are confronted with idle cinema.

### “Idle”

The Oxford English Dictionary rather strongly defines *idle* as “addicted to doing no work; lazy, indolent.” Idleness stands in opposition to productivity and hard work. Karl Marx detested idleness. However, in his book *Idleness*, philosophy scholar Brian O’Connor writes that “idleness is an experienced activity that operates according to no guiding purpose. The absence of purpose explains its restful and pleasurable qualities” (5). O’Connor argues that idleness is a kind of experience that rejects the norms and conventions that push productivity and progress as a means to happiness. Idleness is not only perceived as unproductive but “is perceived by its modern critics as an obstacle to some grand idea of self-realization” (6). Offering a similar opinion on the taboo subject in his essay, “An Apology for Idlers,” 19th Century Scottish novelist and essayist Robert Louis Stevenson writes that idleness actually involves “doing a great

deal not recognized in the dogmatic formularies of the ruling class” (2). For Stevenson, the idler is simply not driven by the goals of the official social order. Both Stevenson and O’Connor defend idleness as a move towards freedom; moments of idleness facilitate joy and wonder when they are not in service of progress, a preoccupation that takes us out of the moment and turns focus towards some future reward. Idle cinema begins here. The philosophy or way of thinking underlying idle films not only undermines the conventions of narrative structure that we have all grown accustomed to expect (and that even slow cinema has upheld) but communicates something larger about how we afford value to human lifetimes. The economic language I have used up until this point, of progress and payoffs, is intentional. Idleness stands in opposition to productiveness, progress, and even rewards. This lack of purpose is where idleness’ revolutionary potential lies. Idleness rejects the social norms that pressure us to be ever-efficient and productive.

In *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, Stanley Cavell puts forth the notion that watching films gives us a view of the world. As images that look just like the world we know are projected in front of our eyes, they present us with a model of how to live and understand a world that we are at once removed from, and yet, totally immersed in. For Cavell, movies reflect our relationship to the world. Understanding cinema as a collection of organized moments, each of which can be stalled, isolated, and examined produces an impression of a world that is made up of calculable and discrete blocks of time and that is a thing of comfort for contemporary viewers. Slow cinema is about patience and control, and even writing about it (“the shot lasts over 7 minutes”) seems to be under the tyranny of the clock. The move towards total digitalization in cinema has only amplified this manner of thinking; as it has become common to pause films in an attempt to analyze them closer, we begin to understand the images

that make up a film as separate entities, linked by their linear succession from beginning to end. It is not just that the succession of images is ordered in a particular way, but that they can be assembled into a sense; as Tom Gunning notes, “[t]ime in narrative, therefore, is never just linear progression (one damn thing after another), it is also the gathering of successive moments into a pattern, a trajectory, a sense” (44). More crucially, these patterns preserve the continuum of reality, that is, of our understanding of reality which is predicated on a linear notion of time. It gives the impression that time – human lifetimes – can be not only calculated and predicted, but controlled. Realism, then, appears to be predicated on control. Our enjoyment of films also relies on a base-level predictability of narrative outcomes. Though resistant to efficiency, slow cinema nonetheless maintains this expectation. Idle cinema thwarts it.

### **An Aesthetic of Astonishment**

The long take and turn towards the everyday, first identified in Italian neorealism by André Bazin are the main tropes of slow cinema. However, following De Luca and Jorge in the introduction of their anthology, *Slow Cinema*, I argue slowness can be traced back to much earlier waves in film history (10). Idle aesthetics are not only a return to a mode of address of early cinema, but also a continuation of the modernist fascination with a temporally unstable and fragile subjectivity in Global Art Cinema. In *Precarious Times: Temporality and History in Modern German Culture*, Anne Fuchs describes “aesthetic precariousness” in contemporary cinema and literature: works “having lost faith in the chronological imagination that presents history in terms of an overarching master narrative” (14). In idle cinema, ellipses suddenly change protagonists or make it impossible to discern a main character in the first place. Stories become not only drawn out but remain unfinished, details and characters become mirrored and repeated. Narratives are eclipsed, diverted, and or short. Time is tied in a loop. Beyond editing

techniques which allow idle cinema to exist as a collection of moments whose individual value cannot be calculated by its narrative currency, idleness takes shape through performances; the sparse and affectless dialogue slow cinema has become known for is replaced with constant chitter-chatter, or lengthy, impassioned monologues. Here, idle cinema takes a distinctive stylistic turn away from the practically non-existent dialogue that has become emblematic of slow cinema. While maintaining slow cinema's focus on the everyday, these scenes become charged with unexplained tension and emotion. Thus idle cinema produces subjects through an attachment to a melodramatic mode that has been severed in slow cinema, which has become known for its commitment to un-emptiveness. Characters in idle cinema may be talkative, but they remain opaque. Focus on characters begins to waver anyway; the camera becomes distracted or loses interest in protagonists, descending into the depths of the ocean or lingering on animal concerns instead. Thus, this thesis considers idle cinema's move away from classical narration not as a means of boredom or frustration, but rather, as astonishment.

As its focus turns away from narrative progression, idle cinema begins to resemble early, pre-narrative films, or what Tom Gunning and André Gaudreault call the "cinema of attractions," not only dispelling the notion that cinema, in its move towards becoming an increasingly efficient story-telling machine has only progressed, not only in terms of its developing technology, but also its form. (Gaudreault 11). Idle cinema resembles what Gunning describes in the cinema of attractions, where untethered images produce "a jolt of pure presence, soliciting surprise, astonishment, or pure curiosity instead of following the enigmas on which narrative depends" (48). Idleness constitutes a stalling of action that, unlike slow cinema, does not contribute to a build-up of tension or suspense that is given relief through a decisive moment of action or a reward, a moment that affirms the pervasiveness of a capitalist need for progress or

measurable inputs and outputs. “Rather than a development that links the past with the present in such a way as to define a specific anticipation of the future” (Gunning 45), idle cinema produces charged images that appear to us almost as if unearned. The work to get to a moment of violence or intimacy seems to vanish or to never have existed. Idle cinema forces its viewers to succumb to a strange rhythm and an indefinite suspension of knowledge that – when it is successful – is mesmerizing rather than frustrating. As I am arguing here, idleness becomes a loss of control of organized time, one that defies the conventions required for customary understanding. Narratives are how we structure our lives and sense of selves, our histories and our cultural understanding of time. Yet as narrative concerns have taken hold of the modern-day spectator, even art film festival-goers, idle cinema becomes a response to a crisis of knowledge in a world where belief in heroes and happy endings has long been abandoned.

## **Chapter Outline**

The first chapter of this thesis begins an inquiry into idleness as a family resemblance between films that might easily be categorized as slow but are breaking with the tropes that have established the category. Using a diverse selection of examples from work by Angela Schanelec, Maurice Pialat, Straub-Huillet, Lucrecia Martel, Tsai Ming-Liang, Lisandro Alonso, Albert Serra, and Helena Wittmann, my aim lies in locating a common thread between these idle films which are less defined by a set of specific aesthetic elements and more by a certain outlook – a philosophy of idleness – which at its heart critiques the virtues of narrative storytelling in the Western imagination.

As it remains one of the most striking examples of idle cinema I have come across and was the inspiration for this thesis, the focus of Chapter 2 is Angela Schanelec’s *I Was at Home*,

*But...* . Schanelec has produced ten feature films since the mid-nineties, yet her work is little known in North America, even in the film community. Her films have won prestigious awards,<sup>4</sup> yet reviews of her work have remained radically divisive; Schanelec's films are described as "sadistically withholding" by Michael Sicinski for a Mubi retrospective on her work, yet film critic Nick Pinkerton writes how a scene from her 2016 film *The Dreamed Path*, in which a woman simply boards a bus, is "one of the most moving scenes in recent memory and I can't even begin to tell you why" (3). It is this indescribable quality of Schanelec's work that either frustrates or enchants. This tension gets to the root of what idle cinema is doing. Chapter 2 is a detailed inquiry into idle cinema's affinities with the cinema of attractions. This chapter also explores intermediality (Gaudreault 1999) in idle cinema. Thus I will be placing Schanelec's film in conversation with Robert Bresson, dancer and experimental filmmaker Yvonne Rainer's *Hand Movie* (1966), and John Everett Millais's painting, "Ophelia" (1852), all intermedial connections that I argue are initiated by total stillness produced not only by a static camera, but most strikingly, by unmoving bodies.

Framed by Stanley Cavell's notion of theatricality, I read two particular moments of complete stillness in *I Was at Home, But...* as heightened moments of expression which ultimately signal a limit of representation. These moments of stillness are viewed through the lens of Brigitte Peucker's work on filmic *tableaux vivants* further situating idle cinema in the aesthetic regime of early non-narrative cinema. Here, the movement towards total stillness produces a sense of "becoming image," but at the same time, astonishment and wonder. In kinship with the idle work I will be discussing here, this thesis prioritizes a method of analysis that seeks less to "understand" the films in their entirety, contemplating instead some of the ways

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<sup>4</sup> *I Was At Home, But...* was awarded the Silver Bear for Best Director at the Berlin International Film Festival, and her most recent feature, *Music* (2023) took the prize for the best screenplay at the same festival.

that idle films speak to us as humans living in a world whose story we are both a part of and alien to.



## Chapter 1: Getting Nowhere

In Angela Schanelec's 2004 feature, *Marseille*, after over an hour of watching Sophie, the amateur photographer, wander around the streets of the coastal city alone, an ellipsis suddenly produces new protagonists. Without explanation or ceremony, the film completely shifts focus away from Sophie to some friends of hers: a couple and their son who were, until now, unknown to the viewer. The rest of the film plays out with the day-to-day happenings of this couple in Berlin, and we are never given a clear explanation as to why the film loses interest in Sophie and turns to them. A few minutes before the film ends, another ellipsis transports us back to Marseille, where Sophie has just returned by bus. Shortly afterwards, she is held at gunpoint and ordered to switch clothes with her aggressor. None of this violence is relayed visually, though. We learn of the encounter as, framed in closeup, Sophie struggles to articulate the events to a police officer. Just as it becomes clear why we have been following her aimless wanderings on the streets of Marseille, the film ends. We are left to wonder why the film spends so much time watching Sophie *doing nothing*, only to cut away when *something happens* to her?

This chapter is an inquiry into how idle cinema emerges as distinct from slow cinema. While a focus on everydayness remains a fascination, idle cinema's aesthetically unstable temporal modes undermine the "mood of expectation" that has become a mainstay of slow cinema. Ellipses not only disrupt linear timelines and create narrative impasses but produce scenarios where it is unclear who the protagonist is; idle cinema's play with temporality ultimately initiates an inquiry into subjectivity. Thus idle cinema becomes not so much a resistance to speed as a resistance to a kind of confirmation – a confirmation of narrative meaning and subjects. While slow cinema delays the process of classical narratives, which are

character-centred and based on “causality, consequence, psychological motivations, the drive toward overcoming obstacles and achieving goals” (Bordwell 13), in the absence of clear enigmas, drives, or motivation, it becomes difficult to make out clear subjects. Looking at a range of examples from filmmakers often associated with slow cinema including Angela Schanelec, Lucrecia Martel, Tsai Ming-Liang, Maurice Pialat, Straub-Huillet, Helena Wittmann, Albert Serra and Lisandro Alonso, this chapter opens an investigation into how idle cinema take shape as a multitude of aesthetic approaches, all linked by a similar, idle outlook, prioritizing moments of astonishment over narrative clarity.



Fig. 4: Sophie tapes her city portraits to the wall in *Marseille* (2004). The shots are reminiscent of the empty landscapes that are a common sight in slow cinema.

In *Precarious Times: Temporality and History in Modern German Culture*, Anne Fuchs interrogates contemporary cinema, art and literature that intervene in the current discourse on time by bringing into view work that “articulates a radical uncertainty about time as a mode of

order” (14-15). Fuchs argues that the modern discourse on time has centred the “speed-as-progress” narrative, “it also abounds in images of cyclicity, lateness, distraction and punctures the very idea of humankind’s linear progression through history” (16). Thus, as I am arguing here, the disjointed time of idle cinema, though less easily understood, should not be read as more or less “real” than the stretched-out temporality of slow cinema. In *What is Cinema?* André Bazin puts forth the notion that certain cinematic techniques, particularly long takes and scenarios without “action,” or that focus on everydayness are more expressive of realism. Real life becomes associated with banality, and thus, realism with slow cinema. However, slow cinema’s affiliation with realism is not lost to idle cinema’s unorganized sense of time. I argue here that while a customary understanding of real-time unfolding is often associated with the long take, ellipses are an equally experiential rendering of time, if not closer to the human experience, where, in the everyday, time often seems to disappear as much as it drags on. As Henri Bergson argues, duration represents our perception of time passing which arises through an experience – not something calculated, but something lived. However, as philosopher and theorist Elizabeth Grosz recognizes, “we prefer that [time] evaporates into what we can comprehend or more directly control” (9).

Controlled and measured time becomes the subject in a manner that completely overtakes character-driven outlooks in Cyril Schäublin’s *Unrest* (2022). Set in 1877, the daily life of watchmakers of Saint-Imier in the Swiss canton of Jura is complicated by four competing time zones in the area: factory time, municipal time, telegraph time, and railway time. The film begins with the arrival of real-life Russian cartographer and exile Pyotr, who visits the town in hopes of creating a more accurate map of the region. This proves complex, as the spatial divisions of the area, like the time zones, are contested, with the anarchist

comrades of the area envisioning their territory as less easily divided. In true anarchist fashion, the film also makes it clear that it has no protagonist – rather than focusing on a particular worker for long, the camera oscillates its focus between them, never maintaining enough interest to remain with one for long. In *Unrest*, nothing much seems to happen (even though a title like *Unrest* seems to suggest that something like an uprising might occur). The film instead presents a series of views of this group of workers at this particular historical moment, their intricate watch work, and the equally intricate and often brutal time-keeping that is required to resolve each worker’s compensation. Throughout the film, time is carefully, almost comically calculated, as managers time their workers’ tasks (12 seconds) for efficiency (and thus, increased compensation) and determine travel setbacks (4 minutes). If one arrives at the post office at exactly noon, by factory standards, it’s 8 minutes past the hour. When the film ends we are back with Pyotr, mostly absent in the film after his arrival, and the film’s other most probable protagonist, the young, pretty unrest wheel<sup>5</sup> fitter Josephine who, in an early scene, when the workers are trying to cast her in their play, quietly declares that she is “not a protagonist.” Focus wanders between workers. The film ends with Josephine and Pyotr walking through the forest together – a vague suggestion of romance. The pair seems to have wandered off course, evidently having lost track of the time or maybe even abandoned their posts for good. The final shot lingers on Josephine’s once carefully observed timepiece, abandoned hanging from a branch, its ticking having ceased (now that it no longer has a subject to keep time for, it no longer matters). While critiquing capitalism’s obsession with efficiency and the division of labour and land, *Unrest*’s exaggerated focus on time-keeping overrides any interest in storytelling and protagonists. While the film maintains a linear

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<sup>5</sup> The unrest wheel is the part of the clock that regulates its rhythm and after which the film is named, though the title also alludes to the political unrest of the anarchists.

temporal mode, its exaggerated focus on time-keeping points to the arbitrary nature of such concerns, and the capitalist desire to control it, down to the second.

### Seeing Double

*The everyday is what we never see for a first time, but only see again.*

-Maurice Blanchot, “Everyday Speech”



Fig. 5: A gesture of extreme duration: an identical shot of a fountain closes one Straub-Huillet film and opens another.

Idle cinema can also present situations where mastery of temporal organization begins to slip, or in other cases, when the forward progression of time remains stuck in an impasse. While ellipses and non-linear temporality are typically not associated with duration (which is usually reserved for the long take), idle cinema re-imagines what can be considered durational; a showing of time can occur in its gaps and omissions, or even across works. For example, the

shot that closes Straub-Huillet's 1972 film *History Lessons* is the identical shot that opens their next film, *Introduction to Arnold Schoenberg's Accompaniment to a Cinematic Scene* (1972)<sup>6</sup> (fig. 1). Though these films are otherwise unrelated, film scholar Martin Brady finds this to be a gesture that implies "a cinema of extreme duration" (78). Extreme duration is suggested when films reject conclusions by bleeding into one another, as though their diegeses are permeable, or suggest that films can be picked up from where they left off.

Extreme duration is suggested differently in Lisandro Alonso's *La Libertad* (2001); the film ends with the exact images it opens with. Composed in medium close-up, a man, shirtless and sweating, seated facing the camera, eats his dinner – barbequed armadillo – and swats away flies from his arm as lighting intermittently illuminates the treed landscape behind him. The erratic movements of his right hand, which grips a serrated carving knife, moving between vigorously sawing meat from the armoured carcass to his mouth, to brusquely scratching his bicep – indicate that, at the end of the film, this is a repetition of the opening scene. The odd movements of his body indicate that this scene is not *repetitive*, it literally *repeats*. The rest of the film could easily be described as slow cinema; a portrait of daily life for a tree farmer. But there is something else going on here: the film could play seamlessly in a never-ending loop.

A never-ending cycle is also the theme of French director Maurice Pialat's 1972 film, *We Won't Grow Old Together*. The film centres around the seemingly endless cycle of a couple's breakups and subsequent make-ups in a manner that makes time feel like it's repeating itself. Eventually, by the end of the film, it seems the lovers have parted ways for good. Yet the majority of the film is made up of vaguely variable scenes of conflict, a series of

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<sup>6</sup> The film is based on Bertolt Brecht's fragmentary novel, *The Business Affairs of Mr Julius Caesar* written between 1937 and 1940, in which, like in idle films, "[t]he narrator is not afforded insight and does not undergo any discernible transformation" (Brady 76).

seemingly interchangeable scenes in which a couple argue, end their relationship, and then reconcile. The order that these moments and conversations have been strung together matters little, and in fact, they often feel disordered. Throughout the film, it remains unclear how much or how little time has passed between scenes. An ellipsis in classical narrative cinema connects two scenes or indicates that time, unseen, has elapsed, compelling the viewer to bridge the gap and complete the fragmented timeline in their mind. They are a rather basic example of cinema's language of false continuity. Thus ellipses stand in opposition to the excess of time created through long takes; while long takes give us too much information, ellipses remove it. They can also facilitate a picture of the repetitive nature of life. This treatment is a realistic depiction of a real-life breakup – love stories, in real life, are full of repetition. Yet, the temporality of the film is certainly disorienting; a simple cut from a heated quarrel to a scene of tenderness renders linear timelines obsolete. Not only does the couple “get nowhere” in their relationship, but the order of events is treated as having little importance, rejecting the classical narrative structure of cause and effect, suspense, or resolution. Instead, Piat's film enacts idleness as its repetitive structure creates a narrative impasse.

### **Bodies Performing Time**

In other idle films, movements, gestures, and expressions of bodies create a sense of duration independent of conventionally constructed narrative time. In Tsai Ming-Liang's most recent feature, *Days* (2022), the neck pain of his recurring star (Lee Kang-shen) seems to have been acquired from an unlucky swim in a murky river in a film made more than two decades earlier, *The River* (1998). Duration takes the form of a real-time erotic massage, the pleasure

of which is starkly contrasted to the other painful medical procedures in the film. In both films, narrative concerns are overshadowed by the kink in this character's neck that he hasn't been able to fix for all this time. A gesture of idleness emerges as a thread of never-ending pain which his favourite actor carries with him into this new film (see fig. 6 & 7). This chronic pain eclipses narrative concerns in both films. In *Nothing Happens*, Margulies suggests that this "overwhelming physicality," begins to call into question the conventions which have sustained the relation between reality and representation. She writes:

Contemporary realist cinema exercises pressure over this constitutive duality – the representational and literal aspects of cinema. Tsai Ming-liang's *The River* (1998) is an example. Caused perhaps by a brief stunt dip into a polluted river, or else by a dysfunctional family, the protagonist's sudden excruciating pain in the neck takes over every scene, contaminating more "dramatic" moments with an overwhelming physicality. This excessively charged sign, a symptom whose cause moves and evades the entire narrative, radically checks the film's fictive ground. The pain is a constant reminder of the actor's body, of its literalness (1996, 32).

The body is central to Claire Denis's *L'Intrus* (2004), where disorienting narrative events read like a fleeting, incomplete collection of memories, stitched together by the main character's deep sternal scar, the result of a heart transplant. Time can rarely, if ever, be assembled in chronology. Instead, timelines are most implied visually, by the state of Louis' wound healing. In *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, Deleuze argues that time becomes visible through bodies – bodies can depict the passage of time through their ageing, deformation, or illness. Both Margulies and Deleuze touch on broader philosophical interests here; examining how cinema represents and evokes bodily experiences offers insights into the ways in which the medium shapes our understanding



of corporeality and subjectivity. When bodily concerns completely eclipse narrative ones, when the regular and controlled passage of time becomes distorted by bodies: this is idle cinema.



Fig. 6: Debilitating neck pain takes over narrative concerns in Tsai Ming-Liang's *The River* (1998)



Fig. 7: Pain continues to plague Tsai Ming-Liang's recurring character (Lee Keng-sheng) almost twenty-five years later in *Days* (2022)

## Idle Talk

In Argentinian director Lucretia Martel's *La Ciénaga* (2001), children playing in the forest come across a cow stuck chest-deep in mud, a tragically overwhelming metaphor for "getting nowhere." When the film returns to the scene after the cow has succumbed to its cruel fate, we know that enough time has passed for its immobility to create an utterly irreversible change: death. Time is made visible through the cow's body, not by its movement, but by its stuckness. Beyond these harrowing scenes, the feeling of stagnation that the film evokes is both narratively and corporeally astounding. Much of the story's progression becomes stunted by Marta's chest wounds which she incurred while drunk in the afternoon, falling over onto her wine glass by the pool. The film unfolds nearly as distracted by Marta's wounds as she is. The camera lingers on her as she lies in bed, drinking more wine, and obsessing over how this will affect her plans to take a road trip, all the while lamenting how she will never be able to wear a low-cut shirt again. The film is not only enamoured with stagnant bodies but also constant chitter chatter. While the children pass the day sitting on their beds, their mothers talk on the phone – making plans, cancelling plans, discussing their children, commenting on the weather, gossiping; they engage in near-constant chitter-chatter. In *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger describes "idle talk" as everyday communication that tends to conceal rather than reveal the authentic (211-14). Idle talk for Heidegger has become the predominant way of interacting that involves speaking superficially and conventionally, the repetition of clichés that not only prevents genuine engagement and communication but contributes to our self-deception. Blanchot makes a similar critique of language in the everyday, where he finds that "means of communication...wear out and lose their mediating force (14). While Bresson paved the way for the sparse dialogue and un-emotive delivery that has become a common trope of slow cinema, *La Ciénaga* puts words

back into the picture, so to speak. Yet these words do little for narrative progression. All the talk accomplishes little else than filling up time in between moments of silent lethargy: too many adults in lounge chairs around a half-emptied, festering pool; too many children lazing about in damp bathing suits (see fig. 8). Standing in contrast to slow cinema's stringent approach to language, idle cinema's excess of words produces promises, platitudes, and plans that lead nowhere.



Fig 8: Stagnant bodies in *La Ciénaga* (2001).

### Non-Human Views

In *La Libertad*, leading nowhere becomes a momentary loss of a human point of view; in one particularly noteworthy moment of idleness, the camera suddenly loses interest in the daily work of the farmer and appears to take on the perspective of a fly or a moth, flying erratically away through the bush for a moment before returning to camp. As the camera loses interest in its

protagonist it is indicative of idleness, but also is a rather illustrative example of a turn towards non-human perspectives. The realism that has become equated with slow cinema is predicated on an understanding of the hierarchy of events but also perspectives. In idle cinema, the mastery of a singular, human perspective is discarded.

A striking recent example is Helena Wittman's 2022 feature, *Human Flowers of Flesh*.<sup>7</sup> The film follows Ida, the captain of a sailboat, en route with her crew from Marseille to Algeria. The film has been described by the director as a continuation of Claire Denis's *Beau Travail* (1999). Wittmann's film presents an alternative ending of sorts in which Galoup, the legionnaire who commits suicide at the end of Denis's film (after one of the most awe-inspiring solo dance scenes in cinema, performed by the magnetic Denis Lavant), lives on. Yet our meeting with Galoup does not produce any new story. In a comical refusal of such desires, after spotting Galoup at a café and following him back to his apartment (as if Ida has somehow recognized him from Denis's film), he invites her in and offers to make her some scrambled eggs. Instead of cooking an omelette, this Galoup juggles the eggs instead. The film ends shortly after one drops to the floor. Galoup's appearance itself suggests it will be explained, or that his appearance will help explain the rest of the film. It does not. Of course, this only works if the viewer has already seen Denis's 1999 film and made the connection. *Human Flowers of Flesh* is a series of narratively indifferent moments of Ida, her crew, and the non-human creatures on their journey by boat from Marseille to Algeria.

In one scene, perspective shifts completely away from a human one as the camera is lowered deep into the sea. Its descent is discernible only by the light playing off small floating particles as they enter and exit the frame vertically; but, as the camera is submerged deeper, all

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<sup>7</sup> A recent review of the film in the *New York Times* (April 13, 2023) calls it a "contribution to slow cinema."

light becomes extinguished and with it, the feeling of movement. We are presented with what reads as stillness as the screen is saturated with blueness.<sup>8</sup> Idle cinema can be expressed as a move away from human concerns, and with them, the human desire for meaning and allegory. In *Human Flowers of Flesh*, a narrative thread is impossible to grasp. The camera moves between observing the crew at a distance and lingering on the non-human subjects around them. One scene sees a snail slowly glide towards a bowl of glittering watermelon, unnoticed, until it is suddenly plucked away by human fingers. In another underwater scene, the screen teems with a view of microscopic sea creatures, offering a look at their unusual, frenzied action, a tiny circus usually imperceptible to the human eye (see fig. 9). These non-human views are beautiful and arresting to watch; their time is well-earned, regardless of their narrative irrelevance.

In Bazin's short essay, "The Science Film: Chance Beauty," in the science film, he writes, "cinematic beauty unfolds like a supernatural grace" (50). This is also realism: displaying real organisms that cannot be controlled or choreographed, simply living in their natural habitat. But Bazin also describes it as "supernatural," more than natural or beyond nature, a spectacle to behold and produce wonder. Yet, this is not supernatural, it is only no longer a human perspective. These creatures are usually too small to see and thus the view presented of them takes on a *superhuman* perspective. The mode of production of documentary films has fairly explicit ethical standards, but fiction films are meant to stage particular scenarios, none of which

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<sup>8</sup> The stillness produced by this frame – an unmoving wash of colour – strongly recalls experimental filmmaker Derek Jarman's *Blue*. In another of Wittmann's films, there is a direct reference to Michael Snow's *Wavelength*; with these references, Wittmann is situating herself within the tradition of experimental cinema with its acute focus on form. Like Tsai, whose own films bleed into one another, Wittmann's work constantly engages with other films; in another scene that strongly recalls *Beau Travail*, movements of legionnaires in training are captured as casted shadows on the sand, a direct reference to an almost identically composed shot in *Beau Travail*. However, unlike the balletic, controlled movements of Denis's legionnaires, in Wittmann's version, the movements have noticeably sped up and become more frantic, as if the bodies of the men themselves have absorbed – and thus need to dispel – the constant acceleration and ever-increasing need for efficiency that has transpired in the fifteen-odd years between the films. Intermediality will be discussed in more detail in relation to Schanelec's *I Was at Home, But...* in the next chapter.



occur “naturally” but are carefully planned. Inviting certain uncontrollable or contingent factors into the frame is more easily facilitated by depth of field and long takes – a bird is more likely to wander into a wide frame that observes a landscape in patient, long takes. Duration also becomes a factor with contingency, since unplanned events or appearances are most likely to feel like a significant event in a shot in which not much else is happening. A bird walking into the frame might also go unnoticed in a scene in which urgent action is unfolding but becomes the main event in a shot which lingers on an empty field. Thus contingency is linked to “nothing happening.” As Margulies observes in the introduction to her anthology, *Rites of Realism*; “Bazin’s images for the incidental and contingent have usually served to exemplify the achievement of a surface realism through the putative inclusion of the marginal, nondramatic element...[i]rrelevant details for realistic notation” (3). However, details can only be “irrelevant” if others are “relevant,” that is, about a greater narrative, a structural divide between “event” and “non-event” that dissolves in idle cinema.



Fig. 9: Underwater, non-human views in *Human Flowers of Flesh* (2022)

## Idle Attractions

As linear narrative progression is continually eschewed, idle cinema's mode of address begins to strongly resemble early, non-narrative films, or what Gunning and André Gaudreault call the "cinema of attractions." Consisting of some of the earliest projections, cinema of attractions films largely disappeared after classical narration took its hold on the cinematic form. However as Gunning finds, until about 1906,<sup>9</sup> filmmakers used cinema less as a means for storytelling; rather than making narrative sense the priority, these films often presented a series of "views." The cinema of attractions films are made up of a series of tricks or, just as often, simply displays of daily life. Not unlike slow cinema, they often present scenes of everydayness – people in the streets, going to and from work, children playing – their emphasis "displaying" rather than storytelling (Gunning 42-3). These films were designed to astonish and entertain viewers through means such as trick photography, stunts, exotic locations, and the display of the capabilities of this new film technology. Thus as Gunning finds, the cinema of attractions exhibits a "strongly discontinuous experience of time" (49).

One example is *Miss Dundee and Her Performing Dogs*, a silent film produced in 1896 by the Lumière brothers. The film captures a performance by British animal trainer and vaudeville performer, Miss Lizzie Dundee, commanding a group of dogs to perform various tricks and stunts for the camera. The film does not follow a narrative but instead presents the audience with a direct and engaging display of dazzling skill and entertainment. While the cinema of attractions often prioritizes spectacle and novelty, it equally displays scenes of everydayness. The quintessential example is "Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory" (1895), an

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<sup>9</sup> Charles Musser disagrees with Gunning's timeline for non-narratively concerned cinema; Musser argues the only truly non-narrative films disappeared before 1900. However, Gunning asserts that "the period from 1907 to about 1913 represents the true narrativization of cinema" (68).

actuality film by the Lumière brothers which simply shows workers exiting a factory in Lyon, France, at the end of their work day. Despite its simplicity, the film captivated audiences by offering a realistic portrayal of ordinary life. As films developed conventions that have rendered them efficient story-telling machines, moments of ordinary life like this became relegated to ellipses where audiences can simply infer, for example, that a character has left his factory job and must take the train home – a scene that is usually inconsequential to a narrative and thus, unworthy of screen time. While today scenes like these may read as mundane, the cinema of attractions offered glimpses into everyday life that fascinated early audiences, without the need to integrate these scenes into a narrative sense. An allusion to a well-known fairy tale or folktale might provide a logical connection or theme for a film that does not in itself provide a narrative sense, particularly prevalent in the films of Georges Méliès. However, Gunning points out that these were merely an afterthought and do not render these films as narratively oriented. He quotes Méliès: “As for the scenario, the ‘fable’ or ‘tale,’ I only consider it at the end. I can state that the scenario constructed in this manner has no importance since I use it merely as a pretext for the ‘stage effects,’ the ‘tricks,’ or for a nicely arranged tableau” (57).

The pretext seems equally inconsequential in a contemporary film like Catalanian director Albert Serra’s *Liberté* (2019). Often discussed under slow cinema, I argue that the non-narrative structure of the film makes it a strong example of idle cinema. While the film maintains a stable temporal perspective, it draws a strong influence from the cinema of attractions as it exhibits a blatant disinterest in storytelling, turning its interest to displaying a series of spectacles. Spanning the duration of a single debaucherous night in the forest somewhere between the French and German border, a group of exiled libertines engage in sadistic group sex in a moonlit forest; the film is made up of scene after scene of unsimulated



fucking, pissing, prodding, and whipping. No story unfolds here, and the film certainly has no interest in protagonists. While the mise-en-scene might suggest otherwise as it is set in a specific moment in history and focuses on a particular group of people, Serra's film exhibits a lack of interest in its sociohistorical context. The period is important only in that it provides Serra with a canvas upon which to unload his roulette of sadistic spectacles. Although the relentless repetition of these sex acts over its close to two-and-a-half-hour runtime oscillates between monotonously mundane and increasingly violent, it remains idle in its steadfast resistance to storytelling. Not unlike *Miss Dundee and Her Performing Dogs*, the film subjects its viewers to a series of spectacular acts, one after another, without any regard for narrative progression. Although the sex acts themselves may be difficult to watch, *Liberté* is beautiful to look at. It is lit and composed like a Renaissance painting. Many of the earliest projections were also advertised as having artistic and beautiful painterly effects (Wiegand 10). In the chapter that follows, I examine further the aesthetic influence of the cinema of attractions in idle cinema.

Chapter 2: Performing Stillness: *Tableau (Non)Vivant* in *I Was at Home, But...*



Fig. 10: From stillness to movement: The spring goddess stirs awake Feuillade's *Le Printemps* (1909)

Louis Feuillade's 1909 film, *Le Printemps*, opens with a view of nature: down the centre of the frame flows a lively stream surrounded by grass and blooming buds. The shot lingers here in this empty landscape until the body of a sleeping woman magically appears, nestled amongst the new growth (see fig. 4). At first, she is still. Slowly, she begins to awaken in movement, just like the springtime all around her. Then, two children frolic into the frame, joining her in this joyous celebration of new life. In early non-narrative films like Feuillade's, the interplay between still and moving images was often used to demonstrate the abilities of this new medium. They showed how still images, once immutable and static, could come alive, and suddenly move on-screen. The earliest film exhibitions were projections of photographs presented at first as still images which were later abruptly animated. As Tom Gunning observes of the cinema of

attractions; “the sudden transformation from still image to moving illusion startled audiences” (822). Today, the movement of bodies alone on-screen can no longer produce the same element of astonishment it once did. As Vivian Sobchack writes;

[...] if, as Gunning suggests, the movement from still to moving images set the primal scene of “attraction” for cinema’s early spectators...the primal scene for today’s spectacularly kinetic and high-tech cinema is dramatically reversed: what is particularly astonishing and metaphysically perturbing now is the *movement* from moving to still images (340).

In the previous chapter, idle cinema began to take shape as an aesthetic expression of a crisis of knowledge. This chapter examines how, as narratives remain difficult to relay, and enigmas remain unformed or unresolved, stilled compositions nudge us to look for solutions outside the frame. By reading performances of stillness in Schanelec’s film as *tableaux vivants* – a popular trope in the cinema of attractions where performers pose, unmoving, to create compositions that refer to other cultural works like famous paintings – I examine how an invocation of complete stillness initiates an aesthetic of intermediality (Gaudreault 2008). This is a mode of address that resembles some of the earliest projections but acknowledges the fact that in narrative cinema, we are conditioned to find meaning, no matter where. Drawing from Stanley Cavell’s notion of “theatricality,” I argue that we can only understand the world through the familiarity of the images we already know. In idle cinema, this becomes a gesture of turning “*established* images into *performed* images” (Robert 282).

In the penultimate scene of Angela Schanelec’s *I Was at Home, But...* (2019), the body of a woman is surrounded by nature. She lays across the centre of the frame atop a large boulder in a stream. Instead of awakening with movement, she remains completely still (see fig. 14). This

chapter contemplates how the invocation of complete stillness in *I Was at Home, But...* recalls, and then inverts the primal scene of attraction that Gunning finds in early non-narrative films.



Fig. 11: Turning established images into performed images: Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (1486) performed in the early Pathé film, *La Naissance de Venus* (1899).

In *What is Cinema?* Bazin argued that photography freed painting from the imperative of realism; slow cinema in particular seems to have taken up the task; as I discussed in the introduction, the idea that “nothing happens” has become equated with realism in film.<sup>10</sup> This becomes quite literally the case with cinematic *tableaux vivants* since putting a stop to movement also puts a stop to the action. Long before the technology had developed to allow for the pausing, stalling, and slowing of movement of films for both dramatic effect and closer analysis,<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> This is epitomized in slow cinema's long takes of empty, pastoral scenes taking the place of landscape painting.

<sup>11</sup> Laura Mulvey writes in *Death 24x a Second* that the main aim of textual analysis is to find the “film behind the film;” she writes that “there is a temptation to isolate the stilled frame from its setting in continuity, to detach a privileged sequence from its narrative armature. This is a gesture that dismisses

performers posed to create the illusion of a still frame. As Gunning argues, this was a bid to produce a sense of wonder in audiences; “withholding briefly the illusion of motion... [was] the apparatus’ *raison d’être*” (832). As early film-going audiences were still unaccustomed to the flurry of movement flashing before their eyes, beauty and artistic value in critical discourse were often associated with a “taming of filmic motion” (Wiegand 16). Particularly prevalent in Georges Méliès’s early non-narrative films, a reprieve from the newness of cinematic motion was achieved not only by a static camera but by performances of actors who literally slowed their bodily movements, allowing them to be photographed as well as filmed (Robert 289). Thus I focus my analysis in this chapter on stilled compositions produced not only by a static camera but most unusually through performances, where actors pose to appear as if frozen in time.

As we have seen from Henri Bergson, since the Industrial Revolution, movement has become the main marker of temporality. Thus, stalling the movement of bodies in space also disrupts a linear notion of time. However, the conventions that produced this kind of understanding were not yet cemented in place in the earliest film projections; Gunning notes how the cinema of attractions completely escaped a linear or hierarchical sense of time (49). Although these dramatic scenes of stillness are out of time with the rest of the film, the very concept of narrative time was yet to be developed in early films, and thus, could hardly be interrupted. Therefore the pausing of movement, and thus the fragmentation of time, would not have been seen as an interruption to the story, but read as a moment of astonishment. However, the cessation of bodily movements also echoes what is only alluded to in Sobchack’s formula quoted at the start of this chapter: in the move towards stillness, the evocation of death.

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narrative and context” (145). The idle methodology I am employing here treats still frames not only as presented within the film (isolated analysis), but in the context of the entire film, as the film as whole must be taken into account to recognize its idleness.

Bazin's uneasiness with the ontological implications of cinema's ability to reanimate the dead (as discussed in his essay, "Death Every Afternoon") becomes reversed in a *tableau vivant*, where the stillness of living bodies becomes a performance of lifelessness. This is a process that, as Sobchack describes at the start of this chapter, is metaphysically perturbing but also, astonishing. Particularly prevalent in Georges Méliès's early non-narrative films,<sup>12</sup> with origins in vaudeville and pantomime, *tableau vivant* is taken from the French phrase which translates as "living picture." However, as Daniel Wiegand notes, life is tantamount to movement and therefore, a *tableau vivant* which captures bodies frozen into a standstill, is in fact, actually the opposite of what the words denote (273). In her study, film scholar Hijnal Király finds that in the contemporary context, seemingly still, moving images interrupting narration are "[a]n example of the last stage of slow cinema, where the moving image 'regresses' into the earlier state of the still image and painterly composition" (70). Similarly, in "Figures of Sensation: Between Still and Moving Images," Eivind Røssaak suggests that the complete cessation of movement in contemporary film "disrupt[s] the eye and seem to pull the spectator into a zone of confusion of appearances, between media, between art forms, between forms of mobility and immobility" (321), and that this confusion actually "lures to temporarily put cinema under erasure" (334). Rather I suggest that idle cinema promotes a return to the aesthetics of the cinema of attractions. It is not a regression. By tracing this mode of address back to the earliest projections, I argue that performances of stillness in *I Was at Home, But...* produce an aesthetic of astonishment that articulates a tension between realism and modernism; between films, mediums; and between life and death on-screen.

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<sup>12</sup> In *Living Statues*, Steven Jacobs finds that the living statue, another name for *tableau vivants*, "appear in no fewer than seventeen of his (extant) films between 1898 and 1911. Twelve of these are mostly non-narrative acts" (34).

## A Philosophy of Idleness

*I Was at Home, But...* (2019) opens with a dog chasing a rabbit through a field. The camera keeps pace with the speeding animals, cutting back and forth between them, and rests only when the rabbit stops to camouflage itself behind a rock. The moment of the kill is omitted. Instead, a cut takes us to the interior of an old farmhouse where the dog tears at the rabbit's carcass on the hollow wooden floor. The meal is abandoned when the dog decides to turn in for the night, joining an unlikely companion at the other end of the room: a donkey, who stares out towards a darkening sky. An ellipsis abruptly removes us from this animal world – a world to which we do not return until the last scene of the film – and into the space and time where it appears the *real* action is unfolding: a woman, seen from a second-floor window, runs across an empty schoolyard, and then breathlessly up a set of stairs. A cut produces the sudden stillness of her body collapsed at a school-age boy's feet, who sits silently in a chair. The woman's reaction, alongside the boy's blackened clothes and hands indicate that he has been lost for some time. No words are exchanged between them. Yet the urgency with which the woman scales the stairs – her heaving sigh of relief when she reaches him – is enough to understand that she is his mother. The dramatic economy of these early images suggests that the rest of the film's narrative will centre around the event of her son Phillip's return. However, we are never given any clear clues on what prompted his departure, and no illuminating insight into his or his mother's psychology, before or after this moment. Throughout the film, whole sections of the narrative appear to be missing, leaving us with stacking fragments that don't seem to add up or progress. *I Was at Home, But...* continues to unfold as a collection of everyday events for Astrid and her children. These scenes of daily life are often charged with the tension of the unexplained; we seem to be missing the parts of the film that might give some insight into the postures of these melodramatic

performances. Astrid's daily, emotional outbursts are intercut with scenes of Phillip rehearsing the title role of *Hamlet* with his schoolmates. The children stiffly and unemotionally recite their lines, sometimes in their sunlit classroom, other times, in picturesque treed outdoor spaces. In one scene, Astrid takes Phillip's blackened yellow puffer jacket – the one he was wearing while he was missing – to the dry cleaners. They tell her it likely won't come clean. We never find out if it does.

At a Q&A for a screening event in Toronto<sup>13</sup> for *I Was at Home, But...*, Schanelec shed some light on her fragmentary approach:

If I am in a building and I look out the window and see a woman running, I am interested. I feel privileged to see this. I don't look away because I don't know the reason she is running. My wish for each scene we shot is that they are each interesting by themselves, without knowing, or understanding, or being a part of a story, that leads the story from A to B.

We don't need to find out *why* the woman is running. The scene is compelling regardless of its explanation concerning any story. This reveals something vital about indie cinema's philosophy: to consider how each moment can be compelling without considering its utility in playing out a cohesive narrative.

### **Life is a Dumb-Show**

In *Disowning Knowledge: Seven Plays of Shakespeare*, Stanley Cavell defines “theatricality” as a kind of performance of self that emerges at the site of a crisis of subjectivity. Astrid's crisis of subjectivity is a result of her inability to process her husband's death two years

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<sup>13</sup> “*I Was at Home But...* Director Q&A TIFF 2019.” *YouTube*. Uploaded by TIFF Originals, 13 Sep. 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yiUsbxxz1xA>



prior, as well as the viewer's inability to draw out the enigmas of her mourning as such. She acts out to be seen and to feel she exists as an independent subject. Throughout the film, a lack of narrative understanding produces an environment where the scenes of the children rehearsing Hamlet begin to mirror Astrid's everyday encounters; it is as though the unemotive children's play-acting is being performed again, only this time, re-imagined through her melodramatic everyday encounters. In Shakespeare's play, Hamlet stages the events playing out in his own life with actors for King Claudius as a dumb-show<sup>14</sup> to gauge his uncle's reaction to the sinister plan he has devised. The dumb show also foreshadows the events that will unfold for Hamlet in the play, enacting a kind of repetition, a mirrored reflection of events, or *mise-en-abyme*.<sup>15</sup> In *I Was at Home, But...* one set of mirrored instances shows a classmate of Phillip's, rehearsing the Ophelia opposite his Hamlet, recites a line from Act III Scene I: "I was the one more deceived." A cut then leads us directly to a daily scene of "deception;" Astrid purchases a used bicycle and after it breaks during her first ride, she returns it to its original owner in a huff. The man, speaking through an electrolarynx, assures her he will fix it. His calm, pre-programmed responses are a stark contrast to Astrid's overly exasperated tone. The scene ends after she exclaims, "You deceived me, Mr. Meisner!", directly referencing the scene Phillip was rehearsing in the previous scene. It is as if Astrid herself is looking for a narrative that can help her understand how to act; "the emotion conveyed is of theatricality, and the cause of the

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<sup>14</sup> A dumb-show is a pantomime performance, one in which the actors don't speak, but act out scenes in silence, with only their body movements and gestures.

<sup>15</sup> Schanelec frequently references theatre in her films. In *Marseille*, Sophie's friend rehearses a Chekov play in which she is the lead; Schanelec's 2007 film *Afternoon* is a loose adaptation of a different work by Chekov, *The Seagull*; her forthcoming film, entitled *Music*, is an adaptation of *Oedipus Rex*. In *Marseille* Hanna rehearses "The Dance of Death." Schanelec also began her career as a theatre actress in Berlin, and with her late husband, she translated works by Shakespeare into German. Their translation of *Hamlet* is the one from which the school children recite lines in *I Was at Home But....*

emotion lies not in the drama of the characters' words and gestures but in our sense that they are characters before themselves, that our views of them are their views of themselves" (Cavell 204).

The dialogue in *I Was At Home, But...* is largely one-sided, and the topic of Astrid's ramblings have little to do with the narrative, but turn their focus to meandering thoughts but also larger philosophical questions, which the film in no way attempts to answer but only complicates further. She screams at her children and sends them out to the street in their pyjamas for seemingly no reason; her opaque, philosophical speech to Phillip's teachers is impossible to decipher; "it has to do with the fact that he is a man, or he is becoming one. There's no word for that state between being and becoming..." (she then asks, "how does one speak to a radiator? Oh nevermind, a radiator is something else...") For Cavell, "theatricality is the sign of an inability to mean, to get our meaning across, then [...] by understanding this desperation, figuring our hidden screams, and then understanding us despite ourselves, despite our inexpressiveness, the poverty and pathos of all expression" (40).

Approximately halfway through *I Was At Home, But...*, Astrid runs into an acquaintance, real-life director Dane Komljen, whose documentary inspires her 13-minute impassioned monologue about the ethics of acting. Komljen is patient and reacts kindly to Astrid as she berates him for his "unbearably bad cinema." She is offended by the fact that the film casts terminally ill people, whose bodies she says have been reduced to absolute necessity – in her mind, absolute truth – alongside dancers, whose acting and movements are rehearsed manipulations – in Astrid's mind, lies. This scene asks the viewer to look backward; it directly recalls the preceding scene, a flashback of Astrid and her children performing a choreographed dance in a hospital, presumably for their dying father (though he never appears on-screen, another exercise of visual economy). This monologue highlights some of the general

philosophical themes that Schanelec seems to be grappling with in her work regarding authenticity and ethics in filmmaking. Astrid thinks dancers are rehearsed, calculated, but then we flashback to the scene where she and her children perform their rehearsed dance at the hospital, complicating Astrid's speech here. As we have already seen, much of the narrative is left out in Schanelec's films, and in terms of dialogue, she plays with excess: for Astrid language becomes over-expressed. While filmmakers like Robert Bresson paved the way for the untalkative approach of slow cinema, *I Was at Home, But...* reveals how idle films might begin to put words back into the picture. The words they speak do not "tell" nor "explain," instead, language is in excess. As we saw in the last chapter, in *La Ciénaga* (2001), this is achieved by the constant chitter-chatter that does not add to the development of any narrative; *I Was at Home, But...* takes a different, but equally idle approach; the film over-indulges in lengthy monologues. Astrid easily gives in to her impulses to rant, even to scream – bursts of emotion that would be reserved for only the most decisive of moments in slow cinema. Yet the result is not melodramatic because we are not provided with a cause.

As characters seem unable to express themselves, *I Was at Home, But...* constructs configurations of incomplete, but mirrored subjects. Repetition takes the shape of doubling here; instead of information being repeated, which is redundant storytelling but provides a *clearer* or more stabilized account of events, idle cinema augments mirrored reflections. In one scene of *I Was at Home, But...*, a boy who appears to be the same age as Phillip, wearing a tinfoil crown, attempts to employ himself at a grocery warehouse and when he is told to leave, puts his hand out for payment. As he walks off, we can see that he is dirty, and wearing clothes he has outgrown. This child is not one of Phillip's classmates who are rehearsing *Hamlet*, so why is he wearing a crown? He lies on the ground like the children do when they act, yet this isn't a play. It

is as if Schanelec is presenting an alternate existence for Phillip, where he had never found his way home after getting lost in the forest. This is what Deleuze would call “forking time: recapturing the moment when time could have taken a different course...” (xii). As such, film constructs configurations of incomplete, doubled subjects: parallel temporalities which exist all at once, yet due to their everydayness and distance between cause and effect, “[n]othing is ever completely realized and nothing proceeds to its ultimate possibilities” (Blanchot 16). When language wears out, theatricality gives way to gestures, where the body expresses what words cannot.

### **Idle Hands**

*The things one can express with the hand, with the head, with the shoulders! ... How many useless and encumbering words then disappear! What economy!*

- Robert Bresson, *Notes on Cinematography*

The first moment of complete stillness in *I Was at Home, But...* occurs when Phillip, rehearsing his role as Hamlet, drops his wooden sword. The camera rests in close-up on his empty hand, now motionless after relinquishing the prop to gravity, frozen in an unusual, almost dance-like pose<sup>16</sup> (see fig. 12). Though brief, this shot jolts the viewer with its total suspension of movement.

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<sup>16</sup> Schanelec incorporates moments of dance in almost all of her films; the dance scene in *Marseille* evokes a certain discomfort as Sophie tries to connect with new friends in a foreign city at a bar; in *Passing Summer* it is a moment of intimacy and catharsis between siblings whose father is terminally ill. Schanelec affords ample duration to these dance scenes, and they function as an expression of characters reaching an absolute limit with linguistic communication.



Fig. 12: Phillip drops his wooden sword in *I Was at Home, But...* (2019)

While film technology has evolved to enable pausing and slow motion for dramatic effect, Phillip's theatrical gesture harkens back to the exaggerated movements typical of early silent films. In the absence of sound, actors relied on exaggerated gestures to convey emotion and drive the narrative forward. In silent films, such as those belonging to the cinema of attractions, gestures often play a vital role, directing the audience's attention; one common example is the magician's hands directing the audience towards a magical transformation taking place (Gunning 45). The crucial difference in idle cinema is that there is no transformation or trick to behold, only the gesture alone. While this image of Phillip's hand, suspended in motion, seems to take us out of any narrative – like the displays of the cinema of attractions, it “presents itself as a *temporal irruption* rather than a temporal development” (Gunning 46) – it also “says” *more* than action or dialogue could. Phillip's unmoving hand seems to directly express the idea that gestures emerge at the limit of language, producing a sense of mystery and wonder rather than

knowledge. Phillip rarely speaks or emotes in the film; we hear his voice only when he awkwardly recites his lines, and in one scene when he sweetly sings "Moon River" to coax his sister to sleep. Still, it is as if he does not have any words of his own to express, only those already written for him. His disappearance is never explained, and the film gives us little to grasp in terms of his interiority. His lack of linguistic expression throughout the film stands in stark contrast to Astrid's often overly exasperated tone, which also goes unexplained. Both cases communicate a limit of expression.

In his essay, "On Gesture," Giorgio Agamben writes that "[g]esture is always the gesture of being at a loss in language; it is always a 'gag' in the literal sense of the word...[b]ut there is a gesture that felicitously establishes itself in the emptiness of language, without filing it, makes it into humankind's most proper dwelling. Confusion turns to dance, and 'gag' to mystery" (9). French director Robert Bresson also maintained a fascination with close-ups of hands, and both of these aesthetic tendencies of his have been well-documented<sup>17</sup>, so much so that Bresson's hands have become a symbol of his entire oeuvre. Bresson's close-ups "allow the hand to communicate what the face conceals" (Price 127), but they also serve to describe linear movement; in *L'Argent*, the movement of counterfeit cash; in *Pickpocket*, of stolen valuables. Hands for Bresson express an economy of cause and effects. *L'Argent* follows the movements of a forged bank note as it changes hands, first introduced into this chain by Norbert, a greedy bourgeois student, and landing at its final destination in the hands of Yvon, who is arrested for the forgery and ultimately turns to a life of crime. The film ends with a harrowing event and Yvon's transformation into a cold-blooded murderer. After the bank note comes into Yvon's hands and he tries to use it to pay for his sandwich at a cafe, the waiter accuses Yvon of forgery.

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<sup>17</sup> For a comprehensive look at Bresson's aesthetic and formal affinities, see the anthology entitled *Robert Bresson*, edited by James Quant (1998).

This chain of events culminates with a close-up that shares an uncanny resemblance to the image from Schanelec's film; a lingering close-up of Yvon's hand spread open, a gesture resulting from the violent action of having shoved the waiter across the room (see fig. 13).



Fig. 13: Lingering on the expressive aftermath of dramatic action in Bresson's *L'Argent* (1983)

This string of images produces a linear narrative, fragment by fragment, but one which can nonetheless be easily followed. Bresson's hands are in service of narrative economy, they also communicate something beyond language. Price also argues that Bresson's closeups of hands often allude to other works; while he notes that Bresson's intermediality<sup>18</sup> most often comes up in his films as references to his own earlier work, he cites a literary example as a reference for

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<sup>18</sup> In "Robert Bresson's Modernist Canvas: The Gesture Towards Painting in *Au Hasard Balthazar*," Raymond Watkins argues that the last image of Marie – her nude body in a barn viewed through a window frame, is composed in a way that evokes Ingres's *The Valpinçon Bather* (1808). He writes; "without any resolution to her ongoing saga, as if the tension between forward progression and the model's entrenched stasis has devolved into Marie's complete ossification into a work of art" (10).

the close-up of hands sneaking a pornographic image into a religious text in *La Diable Probablement* (Bresson, 1977). According to Price, this recalls an identical sequence in Dostoyevsky's *Dreams*. Thus, as he goes on to argue, we can read Bresson's hand imagery "vertically"; "to see images as participating in a series that extends beyond the horizontal axis of a single film" (127). The French director's use of hand imagery extends beyond mere narrative economy, often alluding to other works. Price suggests that Bresson's intermediality invites viewers to consider his films as part of a larger cinematic continuum, where images can transcend individual narratives. This interconnectedness of imagery recalls discussions of open-ended diegeses in idle cinema, where one film bleeds into another, fostering a sense of continuity and interconnectedness across works.<sup>19</sup>

I consider how the hand image in *I Was at Home, But...* is more resonant with Yvonne Rainer's *Hand Movie* (1966), a 7-minute closeup of the self-choreographed movements of Rainer's right hand. Rainer, a dancer, filmed this short while confined to a hospital bed, her expressive movements limited during recovery from surgery. There are no props that the hand interacts with, the film simply displays its ordinary movements in space (see fig. 14). In *Hand Movie*, Rainer draws focus to the "everyday body" as an alternative to the "performing body" which is meant to display skills and virtuosity (Bukhari 6).

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<sup>19</sup> This recalls the discussion in Chapter 1 surrounding open-ended diegeses in idle cinema, with the example of Tsai-Ming Liang and Straub-Huillet.





Fig. 14: Ordinary movements in Yvonne Rainer's *Hand Movie* (1966)

Instead, Rainer's choreography highlights movements of the hand that completely reject the functional or purposeful. Rainer's fragmented body but also her non-purposeful movements create an environment in which we cannot extract meaning to understand the subject of the film; which simply displays the strange beauty of the ordinary movements of a hand, devoid of purpose or function. This emphasis on the mundane challenges viewers to rethink traditional notions of narrative and subjectivity in cinema, foregrounding the inherent ambiguity of gestures instead. However, unlike Rainer's moving choreography, Phillip's gesture becomes completely unmoving: a pose rather than a dance.

## Tableau (Non)Vivant

Tableaux vivants are described by Brigette Peucker in her essay, “Filmic Tableau Vivant: Vermeer, Intermediality, and the Real” as

a meeting point of several modes of representation, constituting a palimpsest or textual overlay simultaneously evocative of painting, drama, and sculpture. As the staging of well-known paintings by human performers who hold a pose, it involves the “embodiment” of the inanimate image. In other words, tableau vivant translates the painting’s flatness, its two-dimensionality, into the three-dimensional. By this means, it figures the introduction of the real into the image – the living body into painting (295).

The cinematic tableau vivant that materializes in *I Was at Home, But...* produces the opposite effect as the one Peucker describes, moving away from realism; rather than translating a two-dimensional image into a three-dimensional one, three-dimensional space is flattened. In the last images we have of her, before we are brought back to the world of the donkey and the dog, the camera rests on Astrid’s unmoving body. Her children have wandered off alone and left her lying motionless on a large boulder in the middle of the water, surrounded by foliage softly highlighted by filtered sunlight (see fig 14). The painterly composition also bears a striking resemblance to arguably the most famous depiction of Ophelia’s death: John Everett Millais’s *Ophelia* (1852, see fig. 15).



Fig. 15: Astrid's final performance as a *tableau (non)vivant* in Schanelec's *I Was at Home But...*(2019)



Fig. 16: John Everett Millais, *Ophelia*, oil painting (1852)

Typically, when *Hamlet* is staged, Ophelia's death in Act IV occurs out of view. Rendering this unseen moment became the fascination of quite a few visual artists,<sup>20</sup> particularly the Romantics, placating the public's desire to witness the scene of her demise (the need for narrative completeness – of getting the “whole picture” – is pervasive). Millais began painting the work in July 1851. He started with the landscape; the figure of Ophelia was added afterwards. Working outdoors, he closely observed the vegetation in its natural state and rendered each plant with painstaking detail. The painting is highly accurate and depicts significantly more botanical detail than modern photography was able to capture at the time.<sup>21</sup> However, Millais unwittingly betrays his commitment to realism as a result of taking too much time to finish the work. Because he did not complete the landscape portion for many months, the painting simultaneously depicts plants that bloom at different times of the year, and which do not co-exist together in nature: forget-me-nots bloom in early spring and poppies in the late summer. Unwittingly, he painted a time-lapse. The point is that Millais' devotion to realism took time, and that extended time ultimately betrayed his aim of utmost realism. This leads to a basic questioning of the conventions sustaining the difference between reality and representation. According to Margulies, slow cinema in its excessive attention to banal details moves away from realism and towards the hyperreal. She finds that hyperreality is achieved through a “fake impression of depth” (46), however, the tableau vivant in *I Was at Home, But...* creates a fake impression of *flatness*, highlighting the intermedial quality of the image. One of the paradoxes of

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<sup>20</sup> Eugene Delacroix, *La mort d'Ophelia* (1838 & 1853); Arthur Hughes *Ophelia* (1865); John William Waterhouse *Ophelia* (1910); Paul Albert Steck *Ophelia Drowning* (1895); *La Jeune Martyr* Paul Delaroche (1855), to name a few.

<sup>21</sup> The artist's commitment to realism stemmed from his membership to the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood, a group of painters who aspired to photographic realism as the moral standard. The fact that this standard lives on today in film as the *de facto* desired result for visual effects and computer generated imagery is relevant as we consider the mainstream attachment to “realism” as a style of supposedly the most efficient or accurate communication.

representation begins to show its face here; even the most valiant devotion to realism – to accurately render the real – instead reveals the limits of representation. Furthermore, the ontology of cinema as a medium of movement, placed in opposition to the stillness and immutability of a photograph or painting, becomes troubled in this image.

### **Becoming Image**

Somewhat paradoxically, in *I Was at Home, But...*, the tableau is an expression of Astrid's theatricality, one that emerges as a total void of expression rendered through the total cessation of movement. As Ágnes Pethó writes in her essay on *tableaux* in contemporary East European cinema; “the *tableau vivant*...is not conceived primarily as an embodiment of a painting, the introduction of ‘the real into the image’ (as Brigitte Peucker described), instead it appears more like the objectification of bodies as images” (Pethó 51). Bodies are essential for tableaux vivants. It is Astrid's body which makes this scene a tableau vivant; a scene like this without her would be reminiscent of the durational nature shots that have become a cliché of slow cinema. As empty landscapes have become emblematic of slow cinema, idle cinema re-inserts the human body into the picture, only to immediately negate its subjectivity. As Király finds in her study of tableaux that “[a] painterly reference disrupting narration in these films is meant to render visible death...or the impossibility of signification” (72).

In his 1936 “The Storyteller,” Walter Benjamin writes, “not only a man's knowledge or wisdom, but above all his real life – and this is the stuff that stories are made of – first assumes transmissible format the moment of his death” (83). The key to this statement is that a life must be “transmissible,” or rather narrativized plainly in order to count; for us to make sense of life. Our conception of time is undergirded by a directionality that progresses unstoppably, towards death. If Astrid is seeking self-knowledge, and with death comes knowledge, “then modes of

death may be said to absorb the plot” (Cavell 2008, 16). And while Cavell finds that “in the Shakespearean mode...the closing image takes on a central character’s imagination of a scene central to his or her self-understanding” (346), Astrid’s death performance does not make her life transmissible. Her symbolic death allows her to both perform as Ophelia and at the same time reject this as a plausible narrative to account for her life. The tableau in *I Was at Home, But...* is not only a performative death in the narrative sense. Rather, the aesthetic form is, as Mulvey writes, “as though the still frame’s association with death fuses into the death of the story” (69-70).

While we can assume that the film is not suggesting narratively that Astrid dies in the stream like Ophelia, Astrid performs Ophelia’s fateful act as an intermedial expression, what Margulies would call a hyperreality “pervaded with clichés, platitudes, much-too-well-known stories” (159). The painterly composition of the penultimate scene calls back to the limits of any representation, but in this case, specifically to the culturally over-determined representations of women. In a kind of performative stillness, this scene communicates the bind of being made image in order to be made subject. As Cavell writes in *The World Viewed*, “ours is an age in which our philosophical grasp of the world fails to reach beyond our taking and holding views of it” (xxiii). As Pethó has argued, the intermedial nature of tableaux vivants is somewhat paradoxical to Lyotard’s postmodern principle of the death of narratives; the tableau in *I Was at Home, But...* is “constructing not so much a linear narrative as offering a blueprint for a ‘big picture’...and while the narratives present the failure of their characters to become heroes of mythical proportion, the films themselves...present us over and over again with rituals of ‘becoming image’ (68-9). Yet, the composition is hauntingly beautiful. As Peucker argues, the “erotic lure” is not overshadowed by the intermedial nature of tableaux vivants (294). Thus, this

scene is an aesthetic solution to the trap of over-determined images required to produce narrative subjectivity. The film suggests that when the narrative is unclear, we will inevitably draw from the images and stories we already know. In this way, idle cinema is complicit with the idea that like language, images are implicated in a system of pre-determined meaning. The incoherence of Astrid as a recognizable subject throughout the film, her unexplained actions, confusing monologues and general opacity culminate in this image – this performance of stillness – that suddenly feels familiar. This scene is theatricality, but also a repose: Astrid's final act. Analogous to Schrader's concept of the "decisive moment," instead of providing a moment of clarity, it expresses both a limit of representation and a complicity to the power of stories. Astrid's body, which has carried an incredible tension throughout the film, finally refuses to perform, and finally gives in to rest in this performance of stillness. Her symbolic death does not produce any new knowledge. In a world saturated with images, idle cinema offers respite from the relentless pursuit of meaning, inviting viewers to embrace ambiguity's beauty. Opposed to the final surge of violence in *Jeanne Dielman*, for example, the "decisive moment" in *I Was at Home But...* takes shape not as a jolt of action, but as an incredible stillness.

In the last moment of the film, it is dawn. We have returned to the world of the donkey and the dog. The companions appear to have remained in their humble abode for a single night's rest, but a clear indication of time is not given: perhaps time is not accounted for here. Before the film cuts to black, the donkey turns and looks directly into the camera (fig. 17). The result is startling; it is as if we are suddenly being acknowledged by the animal. Then, the film ends. It leaves the impression of being looked at; of the animal knowing something we do not. This kind of address to the spectator is an example of an aesthetic of astonishment found in the cinema of attractions; "a direct, often marked, address to the spectator at the expense of the creation of a



diegetic coherence...along with its power of ‘attraction,’ its ability to be attention-grabbing” (Gunning 36). This chapter has considered how idle cinema’s return to some of the non-narratively oriented aesthetics of the cinema of attractions initiates an inquiry into how we relate to films. As Rossaak writes, “[t]he deepest pleasure and *jouissance* of cinema may reside in such attractions, rather than the way the film is narrated” (322).



Fig. 16: A final address from the donkey in *I Was at Home But....* (2019)



### **Conclusion: Time Flies, Like a Moth**

We relate to stories. Stories show us how to live, and how to cope with the terrifying uncertainties of our precarious existence. We take comfort in protagonists that we can recognize ourselves in. Lives are given value when they are transmissible. We base our knowledge of human lives on their ability to be recounted, their lived events narrativized, and we take comfort in these narratives, which encourage us to predict an outcome, or perhaps a number of finite outcomes, or, at best, have our expectations thwarted with an unexpected outcome. Outcomes they all are nonetheless. We cannot help but tell ourselves stories that structure our sense of self. We project images we already know onto images we encounter, super-imposing their already-established meanings creating excess but also a void: a repetition of pre-established meaning.

As I have argued here, watching slow cinema has often become a matter of endurance, or patience, or in Paul Schrader's case, perhaps faith. He argues that "[t]ranscendental style seeks to maximize the mystery of existence" (42). However, the expectation of a decisive moment dispels that mystery, even subtracts from it. The essence of idle cinema lies in its inherent unknowability, challenging viewers to relinquish the desire for clear narrative understanding. There is something spiritual in idle cinema too, like what Schrader identified in transcendental style, but a kind of secular spirituality predicated on an essential mystery or unknowability. It is this loss of control of knowledge that makes idle films so mesmerizing. It subjects its viewers to a rhythm that emphasizes the moment rather than the economy of a scene in relation to its narrative structure.

As Blanchot writes, the "[e]veryday man is the most atheist of men. He is such that no God whatsoever could stand in relation to him" (20). Blanchot identifies something here,

something that Schrader recognized as well: that there is an undercurrent of spirituality in all of this. The ritual of the everyday; the virtue of waiting; of expecting something to *happen*; of good behaviour “paying off”; the idea of truth; of grand narratives. The grand narrative of Christ, or the Oedipal, of grand histories and heroes, and the pervasiveness of such stories, makes every story ever told a potential parable, a cliché. Even in stories in which “nothing happens,” we are always tempted to solve their meaning. As Cavell writes,

Put it this way: to know the world as a whole, or the world as it is in itself, would require us to have God’s knowledge, to know the world the way we more or less picture God to know the world, with every event and all its possibilities directly present. And this simultaneous, immediate intuition of the world is not merely beyond us in fact or in extent; it is not a matter of having more of something we now have a little of. It is beyond us in principle; human knowledge is not like that. First, because our knowledge, being a function of experience, is *sequential*; it takes place in time (in history, Hegel will say). Second, because the sequences of experience are categorized in definite ways – in terms of a definite notion of what an object is, of what a cause is – and there is no way to know whether these categories of understanding are ultimately true of things. All we can say is, they are ours, it is our world (1979, 76).

Idle cinema shows us another way to know the world. Cinema can show many angles, multiple perspectives, even non-human ones, but I would argue that idleness, which does not give us “the whole picture,” is more utterly real, closer to the human experience, than most which claim to. While idle cinema is complicit to the fact that the real is always mediated by images we have already seen, and stories we already seem to know, idleness is not a skeptical position – on the contrary. It does not predicate itself upon a suspicion that nothing is “real” because we cannot

possibly prove, with sound evidence, that such is the case. Rather, idleness teaches us to stop needing proof and find beauty and wonder in the fragment rather than gaining knowledge of the whole. Idleness offers another way to see the world, by showing us that knowledge is always a dance. Like Millias's painting, which aimed so valiantly at producing a work as realistic as humanly possible – the key word being *human* – shows that a commitment to realism ends up being a projection of our human understanding of nature. Idle cinema's time is perhaps more real, or, at least no less real, than a rendering of time that is felt. Idle cinema renders those experiences that cannot be organized in our minds; time, lived, that disappears ("where did the time go?"), or becomes unorganized, just as much as it slows. Life is repetitive and redundant, but also too short. In idle cinema, time flies, like a moth.

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