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“Staying on, or Getting off (the Bus): Approaching Speed in Cinema & Media Studies”

by Tina Kendall, editor

It seems only appropriate to introduce this In Focus by evoking the 1994 Jan de Bont movie, *Speed*—a film peculiarly fixated on the spectacle of human bodies moving at dangerous velocities: whether trapped in elevators, handcuffed to runaway subway trains or, (most memorably), hurtling down a half-constructed freeway on a Santa Monica bus rigged with a bomb to detonate if its speedometer drops below 50 mph. Much of the suspense of this high-concept movie hinges on the pressure that such fast-paced movement puts on both characters and spectators to react physically and affectively in time with the flow of action. Protagonist Annie Porter (Sandra Bullock) acts as both focal point of the drama and surrogate for the audience as she takes command of the bus, weaving it dexterously through rush hour traffic, deflecting danger and thwarting disaster at regular micro-intervals. At a moment of particular dramatic intensity, Annie approaches a freeway exit; the bus flanked on both sides by traffic, she looks anxiously at police officer Jack Traven (Keanu Reeves), shouting at him to make the call: “Stay on or get off? Stay on or get off?” As with other climactic moments in the film, *Speed* responds to this question not by slackening pace, but by ramping it up and pushing straight through—each of its suspenseful situations being “resolved by acceleration.”[[1]](#endnote-1) On the one hand, this film confirms the longstanding axiom that speed equals danger, but that danger is thrilling, suspenseful and that it makes for good cinema; on the other hand, it also admits to a less openly avowed—but perhaps increasingly nagging—cultural suspicion that “to slow down is to die.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

From our vantage point, *Speed*’s central conceit that we have no choice but to accelerate seems like a particularly prescient description of the condition of technological, economic, and cultural speedup that characterizes daily life in the 21st century. In recent years, questions about speed, tempo, and pace have become the focus of keen and often polarized debate across a range of aesthetic, political, and critical contexts. It has become something of a truism to say that we live in “a 24/7, always on, and on-the-go world,” defined by ever-accelerating rhythms of media, technology, and capital.[[3]](#endnote-3) As the dust jacket of James Gleick’s *Faster: The Acceleration of Just about Everything* apocalyptically warns:

We have reached the epoch of the nanosecond. This is the heyday of speed. […] Our computers, our movies, our sex lives, our prayers – they all run faster now than ever before. […] We have become a quick-reflexed, multitasking, channel-flipping, fast-forwarding species. We don’t completely understand it, and we’re not altogether happy about it.[[4]](#endnote-4)

In response to this context of technological and economic speedup, a set of ‘slow’ cultural practices have emerged—from slow food and tourism movements, to slow media manifestos, slow art and film festivals, and slow technology and computing movements.[[5]](#endnote-5) These cultural practices figure slowness as an emblematic mode of resistance for our time, offering the kind of hope denied by *Speed*: namely, that it may be possible, after all, to simply pull the handbrake and get off the proverbial bus.

Such anxieties about speed as a symptom of our cultural malaise have likewise transferred over onto debates about cinema aesthetics. On the ‘fast’ side of the spectrum, critics and film scholars have noted the emergence of “intensified continuity,”[[6]](#endnote-6) “post continuity,”[[7]](#endnote-7) or “acclerationist aesthetics”[[8]](#endnote-8) in contemporary cinema, terms which refer to the flamboyantly hyper-kinetic, adrenaline-charged style that has been embraced by recent blockbuster films, including franchises such as *Transformers* (Michael Bay, 2007-2014), *Bourne* (Doug Liman, Paul Greengrass, and Tony Gilroy, 2002-2012),and *Fast & Furious* (Rob Cohen, John Singleton, Justin Lin, and James Wan, 2001-2015). In both form and content, these ‘fast’ films reaffirm the visceral thrill of speed as part of what Siegfried Kracauer identified as the medium’s basic affinities, citing the chase scene in particular as a “cinematic subject…par excellence.”[[9]](#endnote-9) Similarly, it was cinema’s basic attraction for the speed of movement—and the mixture of delight and terror that it could conjure for spectators—that was registered in Maxim Gorky’s now infamous account of the first screening in Paris of the Cinématographe Lumière in 1896. He writes: “From far off an express train is rushing at you—look out! It speeds along just as if shot out of a giant gun. It speeds straight at you, threatening to run you over.”[[10]](#endnote-10) However, what sets these contemporary blockbusters apart from earlier forms of narrative cinema is the way that they intensify the affective and visceral impact of velocity through cinematographic techniques and editing practices that emphasize pace and energy in ways that are sometimes seen as antithetical to narrative coherence and spatio-temporal continuity. Lutz Koepnick summarizes:

If regular feature films once consisted of a few hundred shots only, today they easily extend beyond the 1,000 mark, resulting in an acceleration of narrative speed amplified by the use of cuts in the middle of movement, of cutaway tracking shots, of hectic rack zooms and jerky reframings, and of unfocused whiplash pans. In much of mainstream filmmaking today, nervous editing and rickety camera moves impart a general sense of speed, energy, and arousal, but particularly in action cinema they often do so at the calculated cost of legibility.[[11]](#endnote-11)

Encapsulated in the notion of ‘legibility’ is a whole host of anxieties, including the fear that as average shot lengths shrink, cinema is beginning to move faster than the human eye can perceive it, or than the brain can process it, leading to what Tim Blackmore calls the “speed death of the eye.”[[12]](#endnote-12) Such perspectives foreground the stark differential that is imagined to exist between human and technological modes of perception. While an awareness of the difference between human and machinic vision forms part of a much longer history—which includes, for example, Dziga Vertov’s embrace of the “kino-eye” and its ability to convey an experience of speed beyond the limits of human embodiment[[13]](#endnote-13)—it has been put under considerably greater pressure in an age of digital media, where time is measured and managed in milliseconds. As Steven Shaviro notes, the kind of illegibility and incoherence that is generated through post-continuity cinema’s use of “rapid cuts,” “extreme or even impossible camera angles” and “violently accelerated motions” is a symptomatic part of the “structure of feeling” of global neoliberal capitalism that these films help to express.[[14]](#endnote-14)

Meanwhile, in the ‘slow’ corner, a growing corpus of scholarly work has consolidated “slow”[[15]](#endnote-15) or “contemplative cinema”[[16]](#endnote-16) as a significant global tendency, which offers a vital counter perspective to late capitalism’s celebration of instantaneity and speed.[[17]](#endnote-17) For example, in their polemic “In Defense of the Slow and the Boring,” Manohla Dargis and A.O. Scott defend the “deliberately paced” cinema of directors such as Kelly Reichardt, Andrei Tarkovsky, Hou Hsiou-hsien, and Béla Tarr, on the basis of the space for contemplation that it arguably opens up.[[18]](#endnote-18) As many critics have noted, slow pace takes on at least a symptomatic value in a context where culturally-endorsed spaces for pause and contemplation have been put increasingly at a premium. In *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, Jonathan Crary notes that today the nature of experience is being transformed, not so much by specific technologies and networks, but by the particular “rhythms, speeds, and forms of accelerated or intensified consumption” that they facilitate. He goes on to argue:

One of the forms of disempowerment within 24/7 environments is the incapacitation of daydream or any mode of absent-minded introspection that would otherwise occur in intervals of slow or vacant time. Now one of the attractions of current systems and products is their operating speed: it has become intolerable for there to be waiting time while something loads or connects. When there are delays or breaks of empty time, they are rarely openings for the drift of consciousness in which one becomes unmoored from the constraints and demands of the immediate present. There is a profound incompatibility of anything resembling reverie with the priorities of efficiency, functionality, and speed.[[19]](#endnote-19)

Seen from this point of view, slow cinema takes on value as a downright recalcitrant temporal engagement, refusing the frenzied pace of contemporary life, and allowing for the kind of absent-mindedness and reverie that are ever-diminishing forms of experience. As Dargis and Scott suggest, slow cinema offers spectators precisely such an opportunity to “meditate, trance out, bliss out, luxuriate in our own thoughts, think.”[[20]](#endnote-20) However, in characterizing slow cinema as a cozy retreat from the world, such claims also run the rusk of occluding the value of speed as a potential mode of critique, reducing it to an indulgently solipsistic pleasure—the cultural equivalent of incense or bubble bath. As Crary suggests, this danger is actively encouraged by the development of digital media and the marketing and consumer profiling strategies that track and target us according to our aesthetic proclivities and viewing habits. This leads to what Crary argues is a magnification of our sense of “privileged exemption” from a “world in common.”[[21]](#endnote-21) A vital task for cinema scholars from this point of view is to take stock of slowness as a variety of speed that might help to show us our desire for a “privileged exemption” from a 24/7 culture of intensified consumption, even if it can’t provide a definitive escape from it. As Lutz Koepnick argues, grasping the value of speed as “a medium to ponder the meaning of temporality and of being present today” does not mean finding “islands of respite, calm and stillness somewhere outside the cascades of contemporary speed culture.” Rather, it requires a “special receptivity to the copresence of various […] beats and rhythms in our temporally expanded moment.” [[22]](#endnote-22)

While debates about ‘fast’ vs. ‘slow’ cinema have sometimes had a tendency to reinforce presumed dichotomies—between passive consumption and active viewing, Hollywood cinema and global *auteur* filmmaking, commercialization and art—they nevertheless help us to grasp the significance of speed as an increasingly significant facet of life in the 21st century, while reminding us that the affective and visceral attraction to speed was always one of cinema’s defining traits. A vital undertaking for ‘speed theorists’, then, consists in elucidating how notions of fastness or slowness emerge as complex forms of relationality, always in dialogue with a range of other speeds, temporal experiences, and forms of attention within a broader media ecology. This In Focus suggests entry points for analyzing speed as part of cinema’s long and varied history, and as an increasingly significant part of the social, political, and cultural landscape of the 21st century.

Contributors to this In Focus begin by asking precisely what we might *mean* by speed in the first place: how we define, gauge, and qualify speed as a meaningful aspect of cinema & media studies. The contributions included here approach speed from a range of different perspectives, defining and elaborating the role of speed as a property of the diegesis (a way of describing movement within the shot and a thematic element of the narrative); as an element of film style (a means of analyzing qualities of pace, rhythm, tempo); as an index of specific technologies and modes of production, and as a facet of exhibition, and consumption—including the interactive role of the spectator in fast-forwarding or slowing the flow of images. Indeed, Timothy Corrigan’s contribution to this In Focus reminds us that “speed describes not one dimension or relationship but potentially many” and that a vital task facing audiences today is the question of how they might “execute their insertion into this rapidly moving media culture.” Focusing on both the *Bourne* franchise and Trinh T. Minh-ha’s *The Fourth Dimension*, Corrigan’s contribution excavates both the dangers and possibilities presented by acceleration, and reflects on the productive potential of “still speed” as a mode of engaging with, and negotiating one’s place within, digital network culture.

Karen Beckman’s extraordinarily rich contribution to this dossier signposts the value of speed for a range of critical contexts, including feminist film theory and practice, Third Cinema, and queer theory. As she reminds us, recent discussions that characterize cinema as ‘fast’ or ‘slow’ often overlook the centrality of notions of pace, tempo and duration to these foundational theoretical legacies, and so run the risk of depoliticizing discussions of speed and “narrowing the field’s sense of what counts as cinema.” Turning her attention to the field of animation, she looks at the development of techniques for animating speed, and argues that such an appreciation for the creation of speed within cartoons can help to challenge and draw attention to “cinematic tempo norms in ways that prove useful to contemporary debates.”

Similarly, Neil Archer’s piece takes up an analysis of speed in relation to the often-overlooked aspect of sound in debates about slow cinema. Evoking a history of “fast talking” in cinema and television, from *Citizen Kane* to *The West Wing*, Archer looks at how a focus on aspects of dialogue and sound help to complicate some of our assumptions “around shot duration and its related ‘speed.’” Ultimately, he argues for an acknowledgement of the flexibility and variability of visual forms that are often assumed to produce a monolithic effect, arguing that a “‘slow’ aesthetic” can also critically explore “fast-ness.”

Dudley Andrew’s extended piece provides both a historical snapshot of the evolving techniques for producing and varying narrative tempo, and an account of the “epic” sensibilities of ‘slow cinema.’ Crucially, Andrew’s contribution provides a broader history within which to locate slow cinema’s affinities for duration. Through a patient analysis of Hou Hsiao-Hsien’s *A City of Sadness,* Andrew demonstrates how slow cinema requires us to “shift gears” and inhabit a mode of experience that is perhaps alien to our contemporary sensibilities, and which has roots in pre-cinematic traditions such as the medieval “Book of Hours” or the Homeric epic. As Andrew concludes, this ‘epic’ dimension of slow cinema has value as a mode of affective engagement, and as a form of memorialization.

Writing from a different perspective, Kim Knowles similarly foregrounds cinematic practices that engage temporalities outside of the modes of efficiency and speed of late capitalism. Her contribution focuses on the analogue film practices of contemporary artist filmmakers—including the work of Alia Syed, David Gatten, Jürgen Reble, Emmanuel Lefrant, Tomonari Nishikawa, and others—which explore “alternative forms of temporality,” that are embedded in the “deep geological or environmental time” of biochemical decay and the “rhythms of the natural world.” For Knowles, considerations of speed are crucial to understanding how this area of film practice is giving rise to new conceptions of embodiment, which speak both to posthuman and new materialist perspectives on “the interconnectedness of matter, both human and non-human.”

Finally, Lisa Purse’s contribution brings into focus the vital importance of affect for the consideration of speed in contemporary cinema. Noting the centrality of notions of optical-spatial intelligibility in debates about cinematic velocity, Purse argues that the spectator’s sensory and affective involvement in diegetic action is not always reducible to narrative or spatial coherence. Instead, she argues that the spectator “can be imaginatively oriented towards particular diegetic trajectories” without having a fully coherent visual rendering of them. Drawing from Sarah Ahmed and Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s notion of embodied orientation, Purse argues that speed is above all a means by which the film orients the spectator affectively and imaginatively to the shared world that it produces.

While the insights collected here show us how to think past the binaries of ‘fast’ and ‘slow,’ there is still much work to be done to explore the broader significance of speed, both historically and in relation to our contemporary context of acceleration. It is hoped that the range of reflections included here will continue to provoke questions and to yield new insights from future speed theorists working in the discipline of cinema & media studies.

1. Scott Higgins, “Suspenseful Situations: Melodramatic Narrative and the Contemporary Action Film,” *Cinema Journal* 47, no. 2 (Winter 2008), 84. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Tim Blackmore, “The Speed Death of the Eye,” *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society* 27, no. 5 (2007), 371. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Sarah Sharma, *In the Meantime: Temporality and Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 5. See also Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London: Verso, 2013); Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian, *#Accelerate#: The Accelerationist Reader* (Falmouth: Urbanomic Media, 2014) [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. James Gleick, *Faster: The Acceleration of Just about Everything* (London: Little, Brown, 1999), n.p. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See Nigel Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008); Wendy Parkins and Geoffrey Craig, *Slow Living* (Oxford: Berg, 2006); Sabria David, Jörg Blumtritt, and Benedikt Köhler, “The Slow Media Manifesto,” *en.Slow Media* 2010, http://en.slow-media.net/manifesto; “A/V Festival 12: As Slow as Possible” March 1-31, 2012, http://www.avfestival.co.uk/programme/2012?category=all; Sukhdev Sandhu, “‘Slow Cinema’ Fights Back Against Bourne’s Supremacy,” *The Guardian* March 9, 2012, http://www.theguardian.com/film/2012/mar/09/slow-cinema-fights-bournes-supremacy; Oliver Burkeman, “Conscious Computing: How to Take Control of your Life Online,” *The Guardian* May 10, 2013, http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2013/may/10/conscious-computing-twitter-facebook-google. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. David Bordwell, “Intensified Continuity in American Film,” *Film Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (Spring 2002), pp. 16-28. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Steven Shaviro, *Post-Cinematic Affect* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2010); See also “Post-Continuity,” *The Pinocchio Theory*, August 30 (2011), http://www.shaviro.com/Blog/?p=1003. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Steven Shaviro, “Accelerationist Aesthetics: Necessary Inefficiency in Times of Real Subsumption” *e-flux journal* 46 (June 2013), http://www.e-flux.com/journal/accelerationist-aesthetics-necessary-inefficiency-in-times-of-real-subsumption/. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), 42. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Maxim Gorky, quoted in Tim Harte, *Fast-Forward: The Aesthetics and Ideology of Speed in Russian Avant-Garde Culture, 1910-1930* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), 22. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Lutz Koepnick, *On Slowness: Toward an Aesthetic of the Contemporary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014, 153. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Blackmore, 370. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Annette Michelson, (ed) *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov* (Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Shaviro, (2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Jonathan Romney, “In Search of Lost Time,” *Sight & Sound* 20, no. 2 (February 2008), 43-44. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Matthew Flanagan, “Toward an Aesthetic of Slow in Contemporary Cinema,” *16:9* 29 (November 2008), http://www.16-9.dk/2008-11/side11\_inenglish.htm. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge, (eds) *Slow Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016) [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Manohla Dargis and A. O. Scott, “In Defense of the Slow and the Boring,” *New York Times*,June 3, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/05/movies/films-in-defense-of-slow-and-boring.html?\_r=0&module=ArrowsNav&contentCollection=Movies&action=keypress&region=FixedLeft&pgtype=article. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Crary, 88. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Dargis and Scott, (2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Crary, 53. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Koepnick, 3, 10, 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)