Notes on the Slow Thriller in Contemporary World Cinema

Rick Warner
Associate Professor and Director of Film Studies in the Department of English and Comparative Literature at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, USA
crwarner@email.unc.edu

Abstract

This essay considers the aesthetic and cultural importance of the slow, contemplative thriller in contemporary world cinema. While the thriller genre tends to be associated completely with the mainstream—and thus with action-oriented rhythms and Hitchcockian paradigms of suspense—there are alternative tendencies in global art cinema that relish more dilatory time schemes, more minimalist mise en scène, and more meditative atmospheres. Surveying multiple national and transnational contexts, this essay explores how the slow thriller functions as key manifestation of global art cinema’s evolving hybridity and impurity. Looking at films such as Bruno Dumont’s L’humanité (1999) and Lee Chang-dong’s Burning (2018), this essay shows how the slow arthouse thriller stages a dialogue with popular cinema while practicing suspense by other, more pensive means. The fate of the slow thriller in today’s shifting media landscape, in which digital streaming has become the primary locus of film viewing, is also considered. David Lynch’s television series Twin Peaks: The Return (2017) is discussed as a slow, contemplative thriller that renegotiates the place and function of the arthouse theater.

Keywords

slow thriller – the thriller genre – slow cinema – art cinema – world cinema – film atmosphere
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The thriller genre and its aesthetic calling card—suspense—tend to be associated entirely with the mainstream, but they have long inhabited and inflected global art cinema as well. From Michelangelo Antonioni and Jean-Pierre Melville to Kurosawa Kiyoshi and Nuri Bilge Ceylan, directors have taken part in a legacy of experimentation that crosses art cinema characteristics with the thriller in one or more of its subtypes. This history, however, is fraught with problems of definition and taxonomy, beginning with the thriller’s slipperiness as a genre. As Martin Rubin acknowledges, “There is possibly no such thing as a pure, freestanding ‘thriller thriller.’ The thriller can be conceptualized as a ‘metagenre’ that gathers several other genres under its umbrella, and as a band in the spectrum that colors each of those particular genres” (1999: 4). Thrillers therefore work as hybrids and require ancillary terms to indicate specific varieties: crime, action, espionage, erotic, political, psychological, etc. Rubin adds that thrillers must be described in quantitative ways. If most narrative films traffic in suspenseful intrigue to some degree, the thriller does so excessively, using its affective powers to induce extreme responses that may range from exhilaration to piercing anxiety (6–7). Rubin traces an etymological link between “thrill” and “thrall,” his point being that the thriller more forcefully holds its audience captive than most other genres (7–8).

Using “art” or “arthouse” as labels only exacerbates these categorical problems, as does the use of “slow” and “global,” but these terms are needed to identify a thriller incarnation that has strong roots and continues to evolve in concert with art cinema across multiple geocultural contexts of production and distribution. By “slow” thriller, then, I don’t have in mind popular films that progress more gradually than usual. My focus here will fall on slow arthouse films that partake of the thriller genre in at least one of its guises. Pacing is one of several attributes that traditionally distinguishes art cinema from the hurried velocities of mainstream cinema. What happens to the thriller genre when it is decelerated and refigured within a different expressive economy? How does it thrill and enthrall despite—or rather because of—its relative slowness? And how does the slowed thriller speak to world cinema as a critical concept? What functions does this variety of thriller perform in today’s transnational media landscape, where the arthouse theater sways on the brink of extinction?

The Art of Suspense Recalibrated

The term “slow cinema” has recently gained currency among critics, scholars, cinephiles, and programmers alike. It names a varied subgroup of global art
cinema, as Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover have defined it (2010: 3–20). For the most part, slow films are products of the festival circuit that exist between the mainstream and the avant-garde, finding niche audiences who value extended duration, dramatic sparseness, and atmospheric landscapes that keep at bay the speeds and protocols of more conventional plotting (De Luca and Barradas Jorge 2016: 1–16). Except for some overlaps with documentaries and essay films (e.g., certain experiments by Chantal Akerman and Aleksandr Sokurov), these are predominantly narrative films, although their narratives yield to lengthy, potentially wondrous moments of observation and thought for patient spectators. Also called “contemplative cinema,” this practice tends to be situated as the antithesis of popular cinema and its action-centered rhythms. Locating suspense and other thriller elements within, or closely alongside, slow cinema may aggravate critics who want to safeguard its integrity, but since the 1960s, slow cinema directors have given us thriller-inspired works that call for more porous boundaries.

These slow films might appear to invoke the thriller merely for the purpose of stripping away its typical affordances and gratifications. Let us begin with a fairly stark example, Bruno Dumont’s *L’humanité* (Humanity, 1999, France), which aligns itself with the police procedural—a young girl has been murdered—but then continually defers and estranges those generic traits by rendering the hunt for the killer a tedious, drolly comical process that fails to move forward. The film transfers suspense elsewhere. Superseding the plot is a mood of mystery that arises in slow-paced scenes of painterly beauty and in awkward human interactions that unfold around a compassionate, almost childlike investigator protagonist, played by first-time actor Emmanuel Schotté (Figure 1). We puzzle not over specifics of the case but instead over physical behavior (breathing, sweating, crying, copulating) of human beings who reside between traditions of the Bressonian model and the neorealist non-professional. Primed by the detective’s curious gaze at the world around him, we also reflect on the film’s mysterious relationship to painting, a motif expressed against a Flanders countryside that dwarfs its inhabitants. As with Dumont’s serial killer movie and miniseries *P’tit Quinquin* (L’il Quinquin, 2014, France), *L’humanité* offers not a negation of the thriller so much as a delicate recalibration. Dumont suspends the formulaic devices of the genre but employs an alternative style of suspense, one that permits ambiguity—and, thus, the viewer’s anxious unknowingness—to endure and resonate.

Most studies of cinematic suspense have been rather limited in their fixation on narrative and the audience’s psychological identification with characters in danger. The slow thriller more often delights in atmospheric forms of suspense that take hold where the plot wanes and opacity thickens. The suspenseful atmosphere isn’t just the setting but a stylized, qualitative
The conduction of mood that holistically pervades the world expressed onscreen, while also emanating outward to enfold and attune the spectator. As Robert Bird argues with the films of Andrei Tarkovsky and Krzysztof Kieślowski in mind, atmospheric suspense in art cinema results from the suspension of any appearance of conveying a world and its realities in all their plentitude (2004: 373–80). This kind of suspense involves an enduring residue of the unexplained and the incomplete, which we palpably feel in the film’s audio-visual texture, and which minimalist styles magnify in peculiar ways. This impulse to slow down and sparsen the thriller, only to practice suspense by different means, traces back to Antonioni’s Blow-Up (1966, UK/US/Italy) and Professione: reporter (The Passenger, 1975, Italy/Spain/France). It marks twenty-first century slow films such as Ceylan’s Üç Maymun (Three Monkeys, 2008, Turkey) and Bir Zamanlar Anadolu’da (Once Upon a Time in Anatolia, 2011, Turkey/Bosnia and Herzegovina); and to a lesser extent Abbas Kiarostami’s Raiku samuwan in rabu (Like Someone in Love, 2012, Japan/France). Certain slow films merely flirt with this tendency in select scenes, e.g., the reveal of a slain body in the opening long take of Lisandro Alonso’s Los muertos (2004, Argentina). We could also refer to a handful of films that edge slow cinema into closer contact with mainstream genre conventions: to list just a few, the Hitchcockian-Bressonian thrillers of Christian Petzold; Michael Haneke’s Caché (Hidden, 2005, France/Austria/Germany/Italy); much of Kurosawa Kiyoshi’s output; Kelly Reichardt’s Night Moves (2013, US); and Paul Schrader’s First Reformed (2018, US). One of the slow films that most masterfully recalibrates suspense is Chantal Akerman’s Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles (1975, Belgium/France), which empties out the psychological thriller and redraws it through a feminist lens. Taking

**Figure 1**  *Humanity* (Bruno Dumont, 1999): The curious gaze of Detective de Winter (Emmanuel Schotté, right) repeatedly draws other characters—and the spectator—from the murder investigation to slowly ponder marginal events.
cues from Michael Snow's avant-garde “thriller” *Wavelength* (1967, Canada), Akerman constructs a minimal yet riveting atmosphere of suspense at low thresholds of spectatorial attention.

The atmospheres of these slow thrillers aren't simply aesthetic but are often grounded in the particularities of their locations. Slow cinema thrives in the out of doors, figuring natural and built landscapes as registers of social and historical change, and this barometric quality extends to captured rhythms of everyday life and to nuances of local behaviors and institutions (think of the Thailand of Apichatpong Weerasethakul's work, where even the spoken Isan dialect has an atmospheric role by acoustically blending in with the play of wind). The slow thriller, in short, energizes site specificity, from the Flemish environments of Dumont's films to the German locales of Petzold's meditations on traumatic history.

**Watching the World Burn, Slowly**

To summarize, the slow thriller conducts a dialogue with popular cinema through which suspense takes on fresh forms, as slowness potentially serves as a medium for the atmospheric conversion of the spectator's boredom into vigilant attention and wondrous contemplation. Let me add that this recasting of suspense does not discard the thriller genre's proclivity for social commentary that is often saturated with negative feelings, from dread and anger to exhaustion and hopelessness. Thrillers usually hinge on crime and acts of violence. Like their mainstream counterparts, slow arthouse thrillers regard these features as opportunities to address systematic cruelty and various inhumane lapses in the ethical order.

This tendency is nowhere more striking than in East Asian examples, where atmospheric slowness and sparseness underpin cynical sketches of societies inhabited by desperate, forsaken characters. Consider Japan, where the moody, languorous, and ultimately tragic thriller dates back at least to midcentury noirs like Kurahara Koreyoshi's *Ore wa matteru ze* (*I am Waiting*, 1957, Japan). I have already invoked Kurosawa Kiyoshi's thrillers, which, since *Kyua* (*Cure*, 1997, Japan), have mixed mainstream and arthouse influences—both Eastern and Western—to generate environmental dread with apocalyptic implications. Stylistically evoking Ozu Yasujirō and Tarkovsky alongside thriller/horror specialists Jonathan Demme and Tobe Hooper, his work intimates political commentary through eerie confrontations with Japan's traumatic past and with ongoing tensions in the long fallout of the bubble economy. His contemporaries, Kitano Takeshi and Kore-eda Hirokazu, have also made slow crime...
thrillers that more readily align with mainstream cinema, while still embracing art cinema characteristics and contemplative tones. Kitano's *Sonachine* (*Sonatine*, 1993, Japan) and *Hana-Bi* (*Fireworks*, 1997, Japan) favor stillness and “vacant spaces” that are spasmodically interrupted by violence, including the violence of cuts that provoke disorientation and suspend knowledge (Gerow 2007: 50). If these films are abstractly conservative ruminations on modern Japan’s divergence from traditional, aristocratic hierarchies, Kore-eda Hirokazu's philosophical legal thriller *Sandome no Satsujin* (*The Third Murder*, 2017, Japan) is more in line with the liberal humanist attitudes of Kore-eda’s other films. Infused with pale winter light, the film questions the concept of justice within a slowly widening gap between ingrained legal procedures and infinitely more complex webs of experience surrounding a murder case that, upon historical scrutiny, alters the defense attorney’s ethos of dispassionate representation. The film’s suspense is mostly narrative-based, but its contemplative atmosphere attunes the viewer to the parallels and forces of inter-affection that grippingly arise between the attorney and his client.

The slow thriller has also been a key aesthetic and political vehicle for Chinese cinema, especially in Hong Kong and the People’s Republic, where such films have met with crossover success. Bi Gan’s recent arthouse blockbuster *Di qiu zui hou de ye wang* (*Long Day’s Journey Into Night*, 2018, China/France), although sold to Chinese audiences as a sentimental romance, more accurately works as a slow, noir-inflected thriller punctuated by Tarkovskian flourishes, nods to Wong Kar-wai’s films, and a celebrated long take that stretches through the entire last hour of the film, triggering a switch from 2D to 3D imagery. The dreamlike, labyrinthine film boldly represents slow cinema’s hybridization with lavish production values, yet still revels in suspense of the unresolved, atmospheric kind. Similar, albeit less esoteric, qualities mark slow thrillers by Diao Yinan. Winner of the Berlinale Golden Bear, *Báirì yàn huǒ* (*Black Coal, Thin Ice*, 2014, China) starts with a fast tempo but then slows and quietens the detective/serial killer subgenre with extended takes amid an icy factory-town setting in northern China. Neon, smoke, mist, snow, fogged windows, fireworks, and a soundscape of ambient beeps, hisses, and drones together transmit a noirish atmosphere that seems to weigh down the characters, reducing their agency. A feeling of menace escalates and informs the film’s suggestion that human lives, those of the rural working class especially, are disposable under China’s new capitalist mindset. Diao’s *Nan fāng che zhan de ju huí* (*Wild Goose Lake*, 2019, China/France) expands his atmospheric style into the gangland thriller, tinkering with its archetypes in a tactile urban milieu where all characters seem fated to bear the lethal brunt of crime, fraudulence, and exploitation. Diao’s grim portraits of modern China
are matched, yet surpassed in rage, by Jia Zhang-ke’s Tiān zhùdìng (A Touch of Sin, 2013, China/Japan/France). After having directed emblematic slow films such as Sānxìà hǎorén (Still Life, 2006, China), Jia here swerves toward violent popular genres (the crime thriller and, less conspicuously, the wuxia martial arts film), but rather than shed his earlier approach, he renders it more flexible. His long-held, painterly landscapes still carve out time and space for contemplation keyed to political dissent; however, the prevailing mood, which holds together A Touch of Sin’s four narrative strands, is decidedly bleaker and more furious. The film’s genre invocations have less to do with suspense than with portraying extreme violence, from suicide to revenge killings, as the only recourse available to individuals in abject desperation (Fan 2016: 337–38).

The necessity of revenge is a perennial trope in East Asian thrillers, implying as it does a severe mistrust of institutions in place to mete out justice. South Korean cinema has mined this premise at length. Park Chan-Wook’s Vengeance Trilogy—Boksuneun Nauï Geot (Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance, 2002, South Korea), Oldeuboi (Old Boy, 2003, South Korea), and Chinjeolhan Geumja-ssi (Lady Vengeance, 2005, South Korea)—uses arthouse aesthetics in grisly, virtuosic ways, and Bong Joon-ho’s tragicomical thrillers Sarinui Chueok (Memories of Murder, 2003, South Korea) and Madeo (Mother, 2009, South Korea) fit more neatly with the contemplative pacing discussed above. Lee Chang-dong’s Beoning (Burning, 2018, South Korea) is a more glacially paced version of the East Asian revenge thriller. Adapted and expanded from Murakami Haruki’s 1983 story “Barn Burning” (itself a loose take on William Faulkner’s 1939 story of the same title), Burning (Figure 2) conjures low-key, atmospheric suspense in the midst of quotidian events and objects. Quite strategically, the film is slow and long. The main character, Jong-su (Yoo Ah-in), is a shiftless, working-class

FIGURE 2 Burning (Lee Chang-dong, 2018): Jong-su (Yoo Ah-in) examines one of the derelict greenhouses in his vicinity that is possibly a target for arson.
fiction writer who becomes enchanted by a woman he reconnects with from his childhood. When she goes missing after her involvement with a suave boyfriend—a man of suspicious wealth who confides to Jong-su his hobby of burning down greenhouses—Jong-su investigates with only vague hints at his disposal. Was she killed? Is the boyfriend the culprit? Is the boyfriend really an arsonist, or does destroying greenhouses serve as a taunting metaphor for serial murder? Jong-su and the viewer grapple with a host of uncertainties around which the film’s suspense accrues via interplays of presence and absence. Defined by Lee as “a mystery film without thrills” (quoted in Martin, April 2019), Burning modulates its suspense in subtle atmospheric ways that shade into urgent political issues such as class-based economic disparity, a theme that ignites Jong-su’s quest for retribution. The film’s critical and commercial triumph owes to the timely finesse with which Lee taps into sentiments of outrage and powerlessness for both Korean and global audiences. Simultaneously, Lee upholds mystery as an insurmountable condition of modern life and of cinematic experience. The deserted greenhouses Jong-su patrols are reflexive mise en scène: their frames within frames evoke a ghostly metacinema before which his, and our, confusion resounds.

Positively Impure

My brief account of the slow thriller has moved away from the tendency to regard “world cinema” as a miscellaneous group of non-Hollywood, or non-Western, productions. The films I have dealt with demand a positive definition of world cinema—that is, a definition that doesn’t chiefly cling to what world cinema is not, thus still privileging a more commercially dominant cinema according to a lopsided binary opposition (Nagib 2006). It doesn’t follow, however, that positivity means categorical purity. Art cinema (which, thanks to recent critical efforts, ought to be treated as a subset of world cinema and not as its Eurocentric other) has always consisted of hybrids that challenge standards of classification. Impurities of style, genre, production mode, distribution system, and viewer engagement abound (Galt and Schoonover 2010: 3–9), and the slow thriller is no exception. Studies of slow cinema have tended to insist on its separateness from popular filmmaking on the basis of speed, temporality, and realism, the argument often being that slow cinema’s vocation is to provide a corrective to mainstream entertainment and, more broadly, to counteract the hasty, exploitative rhythms of life that are dictated by global capitalism. By illustrating how some slow cinema has strategically partnered with a popular genre, I have argued for a critical stance that acknowledges,
and even relishes, slow cinema’s mutability as a tradition of world cinema that explores impure connections with more popular cinematic vocabularies. Though I have dwelled on slow thrillers, there is no denying that slow cinema has also productively intertwined with comedy (the Keatonesque/Tatiesque films of Elia Suleiman and the Bressonian comedies of Eugène Green), film noir (Béla Tarr’s A londoni férfi [The Man from London, 2007, Hungary/ France/Germany] and other Tarr films that display the imprint of noir), martial arts wuxia epic (Hou Hsiao-hsien’s Cíkè Niè Yǐnniáng [The Assassin, 2015, China/ Taiwan/Hong Kong]), and the musical (Tsai Ming-liang’s Dong [The Hole, 1998, Taiwan] and Lav Diaz’s Ang Panahon ng Halimaw [Season of the Devil, 2018, Philippines]). In short, several key practitioners of slow cinema have urged audiences to contemplate networks of influence that run between the arthouse and the multiplex.

The terms “arthouse” and “multiplex” have become old-fashioned in a media landscape that has repositioned the viewing experience across an array of platforms, ceding priority away from public theaters and giving digital streaming a foothold. A fuller account of slow cinematic suspense would have to reckon with the algorithms that impinge on this shift where the delivery of content is concerned. The final point I want to make is that the slow, contemplative thriller, as part of its impurity, has been at the forefront of redefining the place, function, and experiential dynamics of the arthouse. David Lynch’s seminal Showtime TV series Twin Peaks: The Return (2017, US) and Nicolas Winding Refn’s roughly similar Amazon series Too Old to Die Young (2019, US) both unfold as extravagantly slow, durational exercises in atmosphere that relocate the arthouse on a digital frontier situated ambiguously between film and television—a frontier most daringly essayed by the surreal voyage into an atomic cloud in Part Eight of Twin Peaks: The Return, which implicitly figures streaming itself as a kind of atmospheric energy current that absorbs us into the portal that is the screen.

The slow thriller’s place in this redefinition of the arthouse is perhaps not something to admire on all fronts. Arguably, its crossover potential has forged industrial alliances that have had a hand in abolishing arthouse theaters around the globe and restricting the distribution of peripheral, idiosyncratic films that lack such generic hybridity. That said, the slow thriller, as I have argued, valuably transforms suspense along atmospheric lines. Adrian Martin notes how drawn-out, mood-driven, and mysterious forms of episodic construction have come into their own within today’s complex interrelations between cinematic and televisual narrative, to the point of pushing narrative closure into check for the sake of seemingly endless expansion and deferral (Summer 2019: 23–27). Largely diverging, however, from the binge-ready modes of suspense that gratify audiences precisely where mystery is resolved and reset through sudden
twists of plot, *Twin Peaks: The Return* manifests stranger pauses, detours, doublings, replays, and internal bifurcations of fictional worlds. Stretched and amplified, its atmospheric suspense works its forces in excess of the narrative, where distinctions between cinema and television no longer obtain. Lynch and, in a less astonishing light, Refn experiment with the slow thriller’s resources on an added plane of impurity: that of medium. The same could be said of Dumont’s *L’il Quinquin* and Jane Campion’s series *Top of the Lake* (2013-, UK, Australia, New Zealand, US). If other artists follow suit (and one suspects they will, through a panoply of mixed styles), then the slow thriller may have an increasingly prominent role in the intermedial furtherance of global art cinema’s interchanges with the popular.

**References**


