

“CORN ISLAND” ON THE “SLOW LANDSCAPE” OF MODERN CINEMA

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While avant-garde meets the 20th century with accelerating paces of mechanical motion, with crushed, leaping rhythms and publishes various manifestos excited by “the blizzard of rhythms” (Blaise Cendrars), art-cinema of the early 21st century responds to this dynamism with the emphasized slowness. In the introduction of Carl Honoré’s book *In Praise of Slow*, published in 2004, the author states: “It is a cultural revolution against the notion that “faster” is always ‘better’ ... It’s about quality over quantity in everything from work to food and parenting.” This book has virtually turned into a real Bible for the so-called “slow movement,” or if we use a more secular term and borrow from the Financial Times, it had the same importance as Karl Marx’s *Das Kapital* had for communism.” “Slow Cinema” is part of this movement, actually, a part of a subculture opposing an accelerated speed of the modern automatized and mechanized world, reflected in lifestyle and any field of a human activity where quality is defined not by “how well” but by “how fast.”

At the end of the first decade of the 21st century, the festival arena witnessed a distinguished trend of non-narrative cinema which was initially called “cinophile” by critics and after publication of Jonathan Romney’s article *In Search of Lost Time* in *Sight & Sound*, it is named Slow Cinema. It is characterized by a minimalist narrative, dialogues and music, landscapes of rural environment and nature, which are quietly and unhurriedly invaded in long shots taken with a static and/or wide-angle camera, and does not always match/follow the gaze of the camera or a viewer and it allows us the spectators to wander freely. A stylistic description of Slow Cinema uses words like: poetic, contemplative, thoughtful, quiet,

spiritual, ascetic, austere, muted, boring and even comatose. The key concept is a peculiarity to capture time which means narration in present, real-time, in a certain online mode.

Researcher Nadin Mai believes that the time concept of Slow Cinema is close to Eastern thought and philosophy. In his view, the difference between the perception of time by the West and the East is clearly expressed by the principle of a sandglass¹ invented in ancient China, which refers to the passing of time independent of us, unlike the mechanical clock of Western origin which is a cyclic, circulating, measurable time mechanism and creates the feeling that we have control over time. Thus, according to Nadine May, the concept or aesthetics of “Slow” is not a discovery of our century. It always existed, just in the accelerated century it was given a name that is a purely Western discourse, created from our (Western) experience (Nadin Mai. 2012. *The Aesthetics of Slow Cinema*).

In his fundamental work, Gilles Deleuze’s actual division of cinema into two main directions—the movement-image and the time-image—is related to these two different principles of time perception. Deleuze’s judgment follows French philosopher Henri Bergson’s theory who distinguishes movement as displacement and movement as continuity. The first, which is intermittent, belongs to the past and the other, which is unified and unarticulated, develops in the present. Movement, on the one hand, is a relationship between two objects, two (or several) parts (something that occurs and develops between them) and, on the other hand, something that expresses continuity of an action (in time). While explaining the latter, Bergson brings an example of sugar

¹ However, clocks made according to this principle were also used in Babylon, Egypt, and ancient Greece, or we can say that its invention is generally related to the old “pre-logical” civilizations.

dropped in a glass of water, “which is expected to melt.” We can stir the glass with a spoon and, consequently, accelerate and, at the same time make a movement visible happening independently, secretly and for a long period of time. A continuous movement is a stretched process in this long, constant time that gives a qualitative change. In this case, a movement is transferred from a spatial to time category. It goes beyond the limits of its own motion and stays beyond it.

The concept of Slow Cinema is based on the creation of a cinema image of time. One of the main determinants of Slow Cinema is the so-called *temps mort*, somewhat suspended time, when nothing happens in the shot, at least nothing related to narration development but there is “presence” in itself, an action or a complete inertness that is recorded in the passing of time.

Not the flow of life related to a particular story and its development but an interesting/spectacular, moreover the purest cinematic narrative by itself, is the cornerstone of André Bazin’s theoretical opinions, which are connected to the features of evolution of his film language. Bazin considers alternative forms of cinema such type of a film which relies on an outward appearance (Eisenstein and Soviet Montage) or on reality (Lumière Brothers’ tradition) and places them chronologically (1930–1940s), although he also indicates that during the period of silent cinema and the dominance of the so-called montage-roi some directors (e.g., Robert Flaherty and Erich Von Stroheim) already use a non-montage film language, which is developed by Jean Renoir, Orson Welles or William Wyler in 1930–1940s. Changes in film language, which were significantly determined by technical innovations, especially by sound establishment, are expressed in internal shot montage, deep *mise en scènes*, or long uncut shots. For Bazin, a continuous shot is synonymous with realistic aesthetics. Bazin attributes a special role to neorealism in formation of the new film language which brings changes not only to the form but to the content as well. If in the works of said filmmakers the story still directs form to a certain extent, neorealism reflects reality as a “stream of life,” a unity of different events, continuous and intersecting processes. Neorealism introduced chaotic and elusive life onscreen, where not only a person is in focus, but just a street, landscape,

wind, rain, any life event or detail, so the story and its dramaturgical development are no longer dominant in neorealism, which gives direction to the forms of post-World War II cinema because the daily flow takes a vast part of cinema narration. It is thus no coincidence that some authors, specifically some directors: Pedro Costa, Lisandro Alonso, Lav Diaz, Jia Zhangke, call neorealist Slow Cinema, in whose works we find marginal people living in the periphery (or simply wanderers), see authentic places, unembellished/“raw” environment and time.

Undoubtedly, Giorgi Ovashvili’s *Corn Island* (2014) fits into this cinematic trend. The film continues a fable tradition of Georgian cinema to some extent, and we may consider it a form of ascetic film-parable about Georgia in the Abkhazian post-war period. However, if we shift the local historical-political context, it also represents another interpretation of the theme of eternal conflict between man and nature/element of nature, which was as yet depicted in Robert Flaherty’s films at the early stages of cinema. I did not mention the latter accidentally. Flaherty is one of the first directors to capture reality as a result of long observations, in continuous episodes.

Giorgi Ovashvili’s film begins with the image of a boat entering the surface of the rippling water, which is slightly shrouded in fog. As a Russian film critic Elena Stishova notes, it seems that out of water and fog, life on the island begins “literally from nothing, like on the first day of creation.”² Unhurriedly, precisely in details the director depicts the routine of an elderly man and his granddaughter living on a small island produced of silt from the flooded Enguri river. Corn sowing, watering, weeding, fishing, eating, and so on. actually fit the cyclical motion of nature. Minimal dialogues (so that one can even count the words in the film), which in some episodes acquire a hue of artificiality (moreover, in the background of this sparse sound line, the music is heard and it can be said that takes the final place in the representational apparatus of Slow Cinema), enhance a sense of a sluggish, almost unchanging existence. Grandpa and his granddaughter seem to live not only beyond the civilized world, but beyond time too, where only sunrise and sunset heralds the flow of time.

Hungarian cameraman Elemér Ragályi depicts this unity of isolated people mostly from afar and portrays

2 Elizabeth Papazian. *Corn Island*. 2015

the universe mesmerizingly but in moderation, so as not to turn it into a delight with nature. However, you realize that neither humans nor nature will continue this idyllic picture long. Initially, this idyll is broken by armed people, which is accomplished by an apocalyptic disaster in the finale. Particularly, these film shots made some critics remember Andrei Tarkovsky and specifically the final episode of his *Solaris*, where from the top camera angle there is seen a house lost/fit in space as a sort of nostalgia for harmony, entirety that has been broken and no longer exists.

Remembrance of Tarkovsky, who is generally regarded as one of the first and most influential predecessors of Slow Cinema, is not surprising, but if we bring the quotes or allusions of the film, *Corn Island* is above all an evocation of *The Naked Island* (1960), a film by Japanese film classic Kaneto Shindo (the similarity of the names must not be accidental either)—it is also a completely word-

less, even more ascetic form of a drama about a family who make both ends meet by planting seedling on an island cut off from a settlement. However, if Shindo's exciting drama created with minimalism of images as well as with that of senses remains within the chamber (and philosophical) boundaries, we encounter the actualization of the problems of our recent history in Ovashvili's film. This may be the most unsuccessful side of *Corn Island* because the stylized form and political context could not be organically combined. With the appearance of a wounded soldier, the film's fine and transparent tissue becomes easily recognizable and not a bit banal and straightforward. However, one thing is certain: in sense of form, *Corn Island* is one of the most distinctive films in the modern Georgian cinema, and Giorgi Ovashvili is one of the most interesting authors, who always tries to create graphic cinema that provides material for analysis and discussion.

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