INTRODUCTION

Going Slow

Why has the pleasure of slowness disappeared?

—Milan Kundera, *Slowness*

In a Calabrian village in southern Italy, an elderly goatherd tends to his flock by day and copes with his cough by night, workmen meticulously build a mound-like kiln to turn wood into charcoal, and an enormous tree is felled and trimmed before being erected in the center of the village for a celebratory ritual. Seasons come and go, the goatherd dies, and a lamb is born. Michelangelo Frammartino's *Le quattro volte* (2010), recipient of the Europa Cinemas Label award at the 2010 Cannes Film Festival, could easily have passed as a BBC natural history documentary except without the familiar voiceover narration of David Attenborough. Its title comes from Pythagoras, who lived in Calabria in the sixth century BCE and who apparently spoke of each of us having four lives within us—the mineral, the vegetable, the animal, and the human—"thus we must know ourselves four times" (French 2011).

The film bears the trademark of what has been called a cinema of slowness, described by Aaron Gerow as "tending towards a certain definite template: long takes (up to ten minutes), static camera, big distance between the camera [and] its human subjects, and a lot of the banality of daily life, such as walking, eating, or just plain mooching around" (cited in Martin 2010).[1] *Le quattro volte* pushes this kind of cinema to even greater extremes: while there are some verbal exchanges between people, the film contains not a single line of dialogue that requires

subtitling; there is no usage of non-diegetic music, and the soundtrack mainly consists of the sounds of animals, church bells, and wind in the trees; the camera remains static for most parts of the film, though there is a distinctive high-angle shot that pans along the turning of a road that features one of the best performances by a dog in a film.

Le quattro volte exemplifies a resurgence, within world cinema, of a commitment to the use of non-professional actors, location shooting, natural lighting, and the long take. Fittingly, the film comes from a nation that christened cinematic neo-realism over sixty years ago. Not coincidentally, this country also gave birth to the Slow Food movement in 1989, when McDonald's plan to open a branch at the foot of the Spanish Steps in Rome triggered demonstrations at the proposed site and a movement that was founded in Paris in December that year (Kummer 2002, 20–22).[2] With delegates from fifteen countries at the Parisian meeting, the Slow Food movement approved its symbol of a snail and endorsed a manifesto written by Folco Portinari that includes the following statements (emphasis in original):[3]

- We are enslaved by speed and have all succumbed to the same insidious virus: *Fast Life,* which disrupts our habits, pervades the privacy of our homes and forces us to eat Fast Foods.
- A firm defense of quiet material pleasure is the only way to oppose the universal folly of *Fast Life.*
- Our defense should begin at the table with *Slow Food.* Let us rediscover the flavors and savors of regional cooking and banish the degrading effects of *Fast Food.*
- In the name of productivity, *Fast Life* has changed our way of being and threatens our environment and our landscapes. So *Slow Food* is now the only truly progressive answer.

Taking a cue from the Slow Food movement, many organizations and enterprises promoting the concept of slow living have since flourished. This wider sociocultural phenomenon not only encompasses aspects of modern life from design and fashion to travel and architecture, but its philosophy could also potentially provoke a fundamental reorientation of our epistemological outlook so that what has been termed "slow knowledge" (Orr 2002, chapter 3) can be nurtured.[4] As Carl Honoré states in his best-selling book *In Praise of Slow: How a Worldwide Movement Is Challenging*

the Cult of Speed, this movement inevitably "overlaps with the anti-globalization crusade," and a "genuinely Slow world implies nothing less than a lifestyle revolution" (2004, 16, 17). By foregrounding "the importance of the individual subject and the contexts of their everyday life, including their interaction with the processes and networks of global culture" (Parkins and Craig 2006, 133), the Slow movement is deeply ideological and can be situated in what Arjun Appadurai calls an ideoscape that consists of "a chain of ideas, terms, and images" rooted in the Enlightenment, including "*freedom, welfare, rights, sovereignty, representation,* and the master term *democracy*" (1996, 36; emphasis in original).

Within this discourse on slowness, globalization is seen to be having a particularly homogenizing effect on culture, leading to "the McDonaldization of society" (Ritzer 1993), in which both food and people have become supersized. By contrast, the Slow movement advocates downsizing to the level of the local and places emphases on organic origins, artisanal processes, and ethical products. These values are anathema to speed, which, as the manifesto for the Slow Food movement and the subtitle of Honoré's book indicate, is the archenemy of slowness. Though there has not been a corresponding Speed movement over the same period, it can be argued that speed is so ubiquitous in modern life that it passes as natural; hence its ideological force, like the naturalizing ones in relation to gender and sexuality, for example, must be unveiled and challenged precisely because of its seeming transparency.

In *The Speed Handbook: Velocity, Pleasure, Modernism*, Enda Duffy pinpoints the emergence of the cult of speed to the turn of the twentieth century, more specifically from roughly 1900 to 1930, the era of modernism characterized by "a speed madness" (2009, 263). It was a time when the "increased regime of speed in modernity, which, with its time clocks, schedules, and Taylorist efficiencies, was becoming more and more onerous" (4–5). In particular, the invention of the motorcar was "repackaged as a sensation and a pleasure to be put at the disposal of the individual consumer," a "modernist mobile architecture" that offered "a new pleasure to the masses" (5, 6). In this context, Duffy reads the numerous high modernist literary treatments of anomie and boredom—"almost invariably, of pedestrian *flâneurs*"—partly as a lamentation about "the horrors of slowness and, by extension, as incitements to speed's prospect of vitality" (6–7).

A century later, the ideology of speed, like the inescapable car advertisements on our multimedia screens, has become the mainstay of modern consciousness to the extent that any celebration of slowness is immediately cast as either "reacting to" or "reactionary in relation to" speed, and "out-of-date" (Duffy 2009, 50). This ideology has become deeply ingrained in the minds of most denizens in late-capitalist societies because, like the motorcar, it is built into a consumer culture that not only defines but often dictates modern living and because it is inextricably bound to master concepts such as progress and development that are predicated upon a linear and teleological notion of time. The motorcar is, above all, a measure of success, to recall an infamous pronouncement, apocryphally attributed to the British ex-prime minister Margaret Thatcher, that "any man seen riding on a bus after the age of 30 should consider himself a failure" (McKie 2005). Duffy ends his book with the following statements, which can be seen as a manifesto for an unacknowledged Speed movement: "With so much of our lives controlled and so much of our experience mediated, speed is not only modernity's sole new pleasure but one of the few that remain available to us. In the dreamscape of the society of the spectacle, only the intervention of real experience can arouse us. We need speed" (2009, 273).

It is against this background that we can begin to address the question posed by Kundera (1995, 3) in the epigraph of this introduction, a question that, I would suggest, can only be approached through historicization, for there is no uniform appreciation for slowness (pleasure for some, pain for others), nor is there a singular explanation for its supposed disappearance. Indeed, the first question to ask is not so much why slowness has seemingly disappeared but rather where and when an ideology of slowness reigns supreme and where and when it has lost its currency. Only by identifying exact moments in which and precise locations wherein slowness manifests in specific configurations of knowledge and power can we begin to understand why it has been regarded as pain or pleasure and why it has appeared or disappeared. That the apocryphal quote once resoundingly endorsed private car ownership but now sounds out of sync in an age in which some of Thatcher's most prominent political children are known for their association with bicycles is testament to the changing currency of the respective ideologies of public and private, slowness and speed. The current British prime minister, David

Cameron, is famous equally for cycling to work and for having his bicycle stolen (BBC News 2008); London mayor Boris Johnson has introduced a popular cycle-hire scheme similar to those operating in cities as diverse as Melbourne and Montreal and Miami and Mexico City. At the start of the new millennium, the mantra seems to have become: private four wheels (particularly 4x4), bad; public two wheels, good.[5]

While "conspicuous consumption" was the hallmark of the leisure class in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century (Veblen 2007), a hundred years later "sustainability" has become the buzzword for the intelligentsia, activists, and middle-class consumers, marking a paradigm shift from quantity to quality, from waste to taste, and from speed to slowness. It is no accident that both a cinema of slowness and a Slow movement appeared at the turn of the twenty-first century. While they may not feed off one another in a conscious manner, their coeval emergence bespeaks a desire, albeit expressed in distinct social spheres and in disparate ways, to formulate a different relationship to time and space. More specifically, the Slow movement can be seen as an attempt not only to counter the compression of time and space brought about by technological and other changes, but also to bridge the widening gap between the global and the local under the intense speed of globalization. A call for reducing the food miles of daily consumption in wealthier parts of the world, for example, is accompanied by an investment in fair trade products from the developing world as a way of reconfiguring socioeconomic relations within the global village, thereby halting the onslaught of speed through slow living and making connections across space via ethical consumption. In tandem with the rise of ecocriticism, the environmental movement, and the anti-globalization brigade, the Slow movement signals a political turn in public consciousness that now sees the local as imbricated within the global. This consciousness is reflected in slogans such as "Think Globally, Act Locally" and in the popularity of books like Naomi Klein's *No Logo* (2000) and Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* (2002).

At the same time, a cinema of slowness has appeared in many parts of the world to address both the speeding up of modern life in the social sphere and the treatment of time in narrative films. It is perhaps unsurprising that Duffy singles out film, one of the most popular time-based media in modern culture, as "the vision machine of the age of speed" and

the car chase as one of its "biggest thrills" (2009, 55). According to Duffy, driving offers "a new corporeal regime where eyes and bodies in tandem with machines are called to be fully alert," injects a "new energizing adrenaline," and enables a subject "for whom both fight and flight—the options of the ultrafast, struggling human—could, as she moved forward to progress while fleeing dull slowness, be one and the same, decision and desire" (197, 198). Pleasure, for Duffy, is clearly adrenaline driven and to be sought in thrill, and his account of speed is preoccupied with a morbid crash culture and with the death drive, an obsession that is only too obvious in popular films and computer games.[6]

In Hollywood, the world's largest factory of popular films with a globally dominant market, there has been a noticeable speeding up in editing over the past two decades. Calling this new editing style "intensified continuity," David Bordwell reckons the average shot length (ASL) of films has dropped from five to nine seconds in the 1970s to three to eight seconds in the 1980s and to two to eight seconds in the 1990s (2005, 26). In some instances, speed in film can accelerate to the extent that vision becomes a blur, "the effective erasure of the visible" (Duffy 2009, 175). One recent example is a car chase sequence set in Moscow in *The Bourne Supremacy* (dir. Paul Greengrass, 2004). With approximately 250 shots in about five minutes, this sequence averages barely one second per shot and crashes innumerable cars in the process.[7] Here visuality is displaced by kinesthesis and adrenaline as the speed of editing arguably exceeds what the human eye can register—the shots are clearly meant not to be seen but to be sensed.

The Moscow car-chase sequence is symptomatic of a kind of filmmaking (and, by extension, culture) that simultaneously idolizes the motorcar as a speed machine while treating it as a disposable consumer product. Duffy's account of film's relation to the motorcar, however, is a selective one. A different take on the car-chase trope can be seen in Ang Lee's *Chosen* (2001), one of eight short films collectively called *The Hire,* commissioned by the car manufacturer BMW between 2001 and 2002 as promotional material released on the World Wide Web.[8] Lee's film stages, in a long shot showing a number of cars deftly gliding while facing off each other, a car-chase scene as an elegant ballet. Yes, cars are crashed and gunshots fired, but nobody gets seriously hurt, and the driver of the getaway car saves the day for the next chosen Dalai Lama.

For an example that is antithetical to Duffy's account, I turn to Abbas Kiarostami's 1997 film, *A Taste of Cherry,* in which driving does not equate car crashes and the death drive can be averted, appropriately for this context, by the taste of food. In a sense the diegesis of *A Taste of Cherry* is literally a death drive, as it centers on a middle-aged man, Mr. Badii, driving around in his 4x4 car in Tehran, looking for someone to bury him in a grave amid the mountains after he has committed suicide. However, his intention is initially withheld from the audience so that for the first twenty minutes of the film, Mr. Badii (Homayon Ershadi) could easily have been mistaken for a gay cruiser, sizing up men as he drives slowly by, chatting up potential candidates ("If you have money problems, I can help you"), complimenting a man on his red UCLA top ("Nice color, it suits you!"), arousing suspicion (one man says, "Clear off or I'll smash your face in!"), and refusing to tell the young Kurdish soldier he has picked up what the well-paid job he is offering entails ("You know, son, if I were in your shoes, I wouldn't ask what the job is, but rather how good the pay is"). The young soldier becomes increasingly uneasy as he is taken further and further away from his barracks and flees after Mr. Badii reveals his intention at the site of the grave.

The rest of the film repeats the pattern as Mr. Badii continues to search for a suitable candidate and drives each one to the same site. About halfway into the film Mr. Badii picks up an Afghan seminarian who tries to convince him that "suicide is wrong" and invites him to share an omelet his friend has made ("it smells good") in an attempt to change Mr. Badii's mind. Later, a jump cut leads to a conversation between Mr. Badii and a taxidermist who has agreed to do the job. The taxidermist tells Mr. Badii his own experience of a suicide attempt shortly after his marriage and how his attempt was aborted when he tasted the mulberries on the tree from which he was going to hang himself ("A mulberry saved my life," he repeats).

A Taste of Cherry can be described as a road movie with a difference: the protagonist arrives at the destination several times because the journeys have to be repeated until a candidate is finally persuaded to perform the unusual task. More important, in contradistinction to Duffy's account, the car journeys in this film are slow and do not involve crashes despite the protagonist's obsession with death. Rather, the motorcar in Kiarostami's film is both a means of physical transport

and an embodiment of the existential journeys Mr. Badii has to make before he can begin to appreciate that life is, after all, worth living for the taste of succulent mulberries.

Kiarostami's film can undoubtedly be classified under the rubric of a cinema of slowness, and its sense of slowness is achieved by employing two strategies. First, it withholds diegetic information so that the audience, instead of seeing nothing happening, is kept in the dark as to what is happening, and the film thus causes narratorial delay and demands patience toward the revelation of vital plot elements. Laura Mulvey has described what she calls a "delayed cinema" as working on two levels, first by the "actual act of slowing down the flow of film" and second by delaying in time "during which some detail has lain dormant, as it were, waiting to be noticed" (2006, 8). In *A Taste of Cherry,* even visuality serves as an obscuring device—for example, in the conversation between Mr. Badii and the taxidermist. Reversing the order in the first two pick-ups in which Mr. Badii is shown talking to potential candidates before driving them to the gravesite, here the conversation begins at the site, with the taxidermist having already agreed to do the job. However, the taxidermist remains unseen for almost three minutes while the camera shows either a medium close-up of Mr. Badii (the use of shot/reverse shot is denied during this part of the conversation) or a high-angle long shot of the car meandering along the snake-like mountain paths. The film holds the audience in suspense with regard to the identity of the willing candidate by delaying his image, inducing a sense of slowness as we eagerly await to see who he is.

The second strategy employed to construct slowness in *A Taste of Cherry* is repetition and circularity, with conversations returning to the topic of suicide and characters brought to the same gravesite. Mr. Badii's car journeys often take a circular route, whether it is in the opening scene in the city (in which an elderly man wearing a checked sleeveless sweater is seen twice) or when Mr. Badii drives to what looks like a construction site where he passes two children playing in a discarded car, stopping to chat talk with them the first but not the second time. This sense of repetition and circularity is reinforced visually throughout the film, from Mr. Badii's point-of-view shots out of the windscreen to the road ahead and the reverse shots through the windscreen of him driving, to his point-of-view shots from the side window onto the passing scenery

and long shots of the car going round and round on the mountain paths. These shots become increasingly familiar as they appear repeatedly, generating a sense of déjà vu that leads nowhere.

Do different relationships to cinematic time constitute distinct categories of film, functioning, as it were, like other classificatory systems such as genre and national cinema? By literally slowing down the speed of driving in the diegesis, Kiarostami's film epitomizes a cinema of slowness that advocates a renewed attention to the image and to the experience of time in cinema. This book aims to account for a propensity for slowness shared by a body of contemporary films, but through a very specific prism that is the cinematic oeuvre of Tsai Ming-liang. While there have been, throughout the history of cinema, films that can be regarded as slow (however problematic or subjective the qualifications may be), the *discourse* on slowness in cinema is fairly new. Within this discourse, the names of some usual suspects make regular appearances (see chapter 1 for a list), while others from an earlier era are routinely cited as precursors of this tendency (Yasujirō Ozu, Michelangelo Antonioni, Andrei Tarkovsky, Chantal Akerman), with artists and movements associated with avant-garde filmmaking and video art also invoked as kindred spirits (Andy Warhol, Michael Snow, structural film).[9] Together these films and filmmakers raise questions about temporality, materiality, and aesthetics, which will form the focus of the first chapter of this book.

Tsai Ming-liang, the Malaysian-born, Taiwan-based film director, occupies a central position within this discourse and this cinema, a position achieved through a conjuncture of ideas surrounding authorship, cinephilia, and nostalgia, which I will discuss in chapter 2. Suffice it to say here that Tsai has, over the course of his career, developed a challenging signature style, with increasingly improbable narratives and unexplained ellipses, and an austere aesthetic described in a film review as akin to watching paint dry (Lundegaard 2004).[10] Tsai's notion of cinematic authorship is of a decidedly old-fashioned kind, devoted as it is to the materiality of the celluloid film, the physicality of the theatrical space, and the sociality of going to the movies, all eloquently captured in his film *Goodbye, Dragon Inn.* By consciously drawing on the legacy of the French New Wave—in particular an affinity to François Truffaut, whose films are incorporated into Tsai's diegesis—Tsai mobilizes the discourse and culture of cinephilia to good effect for the international

reception of his films. Tsai is, in the true sense of the term, an international auteur and arguably the brightest beacon for a cinema of slowness.

To unpack the workings of cinematic slowness I will examine elements of sight and sound within Tsai's films, positing stillness (chapter 3) and silence (chapter 4) as the two defining features of slowness. By "stillness" I refer to the use of a static rather than mobile camera and of long takes for shots that typically comprise stillness of diegetic action (i.e., very little happening). By "silence" I mean a concomitant privileging of silence and abstenance of sonic elements usually heard on film, such as diegetic and non-diegetic music, dialogue, and voiceover. These are, of course, only general rules, and Tsai is adept at constructing a cinema of slowness precisely by breaking these rules. The ending of *Vive l'amour* includes a tracking shot of the female protagonist walking in a park that lasts two minutes and eight seconds. The sense of slowness is accentuated by sounds of her high-heeled footsteps, functioning like clockwork on the hard surface of the pavement, yet the mobility of the tracking shot does not seem to hasten our perception of speed. Later, she sits on a bench and cries for almost six minutes. This time, the static long take holds the audience hostage in a diegetic world of inconsolable sobbing, listening to these uncomfortable sounds among strangers in the darkness of a cinematic auditorium. It is during moments like these that one feels Tsai's films are very slow indeed.

This book seeks, therefore, to address the question of cinematic slowness via a very specific path that is Tsai Ming-liang and to analyze Tsai's films through a very particular lens of cinematic slowness. It is not a comprehensive account of the films and directors who are generally identified with a cinema of slowness, though this body of work will be drawn into the discussion where appropriate. It is also not a conventional book of auteur studies and makes no attempt at covering all of Tsai's films in a chronological or thematic fashion. What it examines is the overlapping area between Tsai Ming-liang *and* a cinema of slowness. I can only hope that readers who are more interested in either of the two components that make up this book will, instead of wanting more of each, find the relationship that ties the two—represented by the conjunction "and"—a productive one in illuminating both the fascinating films of Tsai Ming-liang and the perplexing notion that is a cinema of slowness.