

Use of the Long Take as Film Language

Eduardo Mendoza, 2024

This project examined 23 films from directors known for their use of the long take, particularly directors associated with the “slow cinema” mode. The directors I selected were Theo Angelopoulos, Andrei Tarkovsky, Max Ophüls, Richard Linklater, Sergio Leone, Tsai Ming-liang, Kelly Reichardt, and Abbas Kiarostami. My intent with examining long takes was not with calculating average shot length or camera choreography, but in questioning how long unedited sequences relate to filmic representations of the passage of time within a time-based medium. By viewing the long take as film language, I uncovered how the long take interacts with other elements of film language, such as composition and editing.

I accompanied my film viewing by reading Lutz Koepnick’s *The Long Take: Art Cinema and the Wondrous*, which examines the role of long take within “slow cinema” in the 21st century. Koepnick argues that slow cinema and the use of long takes within that mode become “wondrous” and unusual events due to the high-paced consumer culture associated with the prevalence of screens in modern life.

The use of long takes can alternatively emphasize the static nature or constant motion of the camera. For example, in Tsai’s works, the still camera serves to emphasize voyeuristic elements in his films, as the audience witnesses his characters harbor their obsessions and explore their setting. In contrast, Angelopoulos’ camera rarely remains static. His use of the long take is closer to the term *plan-séquence*, in which a whole scene or sequence within a scene is captured in one uninterrupted shot.

My research culminated in the addition of 251 clips to Kinolab, an online repository of film and series clips for scholarly use. I also spent the last 3 weeks of the research period going through the LinkedIn Learning Course “Premiere Pro 2020 Essential Training.” I gained basic proficiency with editing in Premiere Pro to create a nine-minute-long video essay entitled, “How Theo Angelopoulos Destroys Time.” While Angelopoulos is often included as a director of the “slow cinema” mode, his use of the long take differs from the mode’s emphasis of the experience of real time, instead using the long take to travel through stretches of time and between memories. Time is treated as a fluid experience, rather than precise and static. I centered my video essay on a ten-minute-long *plan-séquence* from his 1995 film *Ulysses’ Gaze*, in which Angelopoulos portrays a family’s New Year’s celebration at a shared vacation home. Though only ten minutes of runtime, the celebration sequence jumps through five years within the timeline of the narrative. The long takes of *Ulysses’ Gaze* grant the camera the subjective view of the unnamed Harvey Keitel character, whose memories merge with those of the Manaki brothers whom he is investigating. Angelopoulos though his long takes uses time as a permeable element, which allows his history- and myth-centered narratives to provide a subjective human experience of time.

By spending a lot of time with these films, both in viewing and in cutting and curating clips from them for Kinolab, I was able to glean more about the relationship of the long take with other elements of film language. For instance, a *plan-séquence* complicates the question of whether a scene has an establishing shot if it is all one shot. Furthermore, the use of long takes often doesn’t include the use of common elements of editing language, such as shot/reverse shot and reaction shot, which become irrelevant in uninterrupted shots. However, I found strong correlation between long takes and stylistic decisions regarding framing and depth of field. To capture continuous action, a director would often block scenes across multiple planes and move the camera between subjects, for instance preferring pans and tracking shots over edits to close-ups.

I am thankful to the Roberts Research Award for allowing me to spend my summer in the company of so many great films. I come out of this research feeling a stronger grasp as to the possibilities of exploring time in film, and the many ways filmmakers use film language to achieve that. I greatly enjoyed learning how to edit on Premiere Pro and creating my video essay and plan to further expand my knowledge of the platform to create more video essays and other filmmaking projects.

Faculty Mentor: Allison Cooper

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