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The Medium Is the Rhythm: Contemplative Narrative Structure as Sustainable Communication in Contemporary Cinema

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Abstract

Contemporary media are engineered for speed, and the industries that shape them treat audience attention as a resource to be captured, held, and resold. This article asks what a different tempo communicates. It argues that the rhythm of an audiovisual narrative is itself a communicative act and that the slow, contemplative structures of certain contemporary films can be read as a form of sustainable communication within an accelerated media ecology. The argument extends McLuhan's thesis that the medium is the message from the medium to the structure of the work, proposing, as an analogy that motivates a research programme, that pace, duration, and the release of narrative attention address the viewer's relation to time as directly as any content. The study applies a qualitative, interpretive structural analysis, using an operationalized grid of five dimensions (temporal duration and pacing, information release and plot propulsion, attention and engagement strategy, experience and memory quality, and temporal relation and subjectivity) to a purposive corpus of three films, read against the sociology of acceleration and the critique of the attention economy, the slow media and slow journalism movements, and slow cinema scholarship. Through a comparative reading of Wim Wenders's *Perfect Days* (2023) and Chloé Zhao's *Nomadland* (2020), set against the accelerated model of *Whiplash* (2014), the article specifies what makes a communicative rhythm sustainable rather than extractive. Sustainability is understood not ecologically but as an ecology of attention, an address that cultivates a shared resource rather than depleting it. The analysis is offered as an illustrative triangulation across three paradigmatic cases rather than as a generalisation about contemporary cinema; its contribution is to place narrative rhythm on the agenda of communication and media research as a variable with consequences for the attention it engages.

Keywords: slow media; attention economy; narrative rhythm; sustainable communication; contemplative cinema; media ecology; social acceleration; Byung-Chul Han

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1. Introduction

A feed refreshes. A video ends, and the next one begins before you have decided to watch it. The interval between one stimulus and another keeps shrinking, and the metrics that govern the attention economy reward whatever holds the eye for the following second. This is the media environment most audiences now inhabit, and it has a tempo. Its tempo is fast.

Within that environment, a certain kind of film behaves strangely. It slows down. It lets a man water his plants, drive to work with a cassette playing, and photograph the light coming through leaves, and it does not hurry him toward an event. It asks its audience

to stay rather than to move on. The question this article addresses is what such a film communicates by doing so, and the answer it defends is that its rhythm is not a stylistic preference. It is a message about how attention might be organised, addressed to a culture that has largely forgotten the possibility.

The claim reworks a familiar one. McLuhan argued that the medium is the message: that the form of a medium reorganises perception independently of the content it happens to carry, and that this reorganisation is where its real effects lie (McLuhan, 1964). This article moves the claim inward, from the medium to the narrative it carries, proposing that, within audiovisual storytelling, the rhythm is the message. The transposition is offered as an analogy that motivates a research programme rather than as a strengthened version of McLuhan's thesis: rhythm is not claimed to reorganise the sensorium in the full sense McLuhan gave the medium but, more modestly, to institute a determinate relation to time that functions communicatively. By rhythm is meant the temporal shape of a narrative: its pace, the duration it grants to events, the intervals it leaves between them, and the speed at which it releases what the viewer comes to know. These are not the packaging of a story. They constitute an address to the viewer's sense of time, and in an accelerated media culture that address carries a charge it would not have carried in another era (Ricoeur, 1984).

This is a question for communication and media studies, not only for film aesthetics, because attention has become a contested resource and rhythm is one of the instruments that act on it. The sociology of acceleration describes a culture in which the tempo of work, life, and mediated experience has intensified to the point of eroding sustained attention and the reciprocal relation to the world that Rosa calls resonance (Rosa, 2013, 2019). The critique of the attention economy describes an industry whose basic operation is the capture and resale of attention, and whose media forms are shaped accordingly (Wu, 2016). A narrative built for that economy will pace itself for capture. A narrative built against it will not.

The contemplative mode is described here as a form of sustainable communication, and the phrase needs defining before it can do any work. Sustainability is not meant in a directly ecological sense but in the sense of an ecology of attention: a way of naming forms that engage attention, time, and the bond between audience and world without exhausting them, in contrast to forms that seize attention, escalate to keep it, and break it into units that can be sold. The reframing grew out of a larger study of narrative structure and subjectivity in recent cinema, whose least expected finding was that some narrative structures do more than depict slower, more interdependent ways of living. They practise those ways in how they are built and in how they address the people watching.

This article develops the argument in four steps. It first assembles a theoretical frame from acceleration theory, the attention economy, the slow media movement, and slow cinema scholarship and connects them through a narratological account of rhythm. It then sets out a method and three comparative cases. The analysis reads *Perfect Days* and *Nomadland* as sustainable communicative forms and *Whiplash* as their extractive counterpart and specifies what separates them. A concluding discussion considers what the reframing offers to media and communication research, including media practice beyond the cinema.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. The Medium, the Message, and the Rhythm

McLuhan's proposition was a claim about form. Content, he argued, absorbs our attention and so conceals the deeper work a medium performs on perception and social life, which proceeds regardless of any particular message (McLuhan, 1964). Communication studies has pursued this insight through medium theory and, more recently, through the study of interfaces and platforms. The communicative work of narrative form has drawn less notice, and the communicative work of rhythm least of all.

Narratology already supplies the descriptive tools. Genette analysed narrative duration, the ratio between the time an event takes and the time the telling gives it, and with it the dilation and compression of narrative time (Genette, 1972/1980). Bordwell described narration as a process that meters the release of information and thereby positions the spectator (Bordwell, 1985). Ricoeur's account of the mutual belonging of time and narrative gives this formal vocabulary a philosophical depth, treating the configuration of time as the work narrative principally does (Ricoeur, 1984). That time is not a uniform container but a relational phenomenon, emerging through perspective, interaction, and the traces we call memory, is a conclusion contemporary physics has reached independently (Rovelli, 2017), and it converges with the narratological premise adopted here: a film does not represent a pre-given time so much as configure a particular relation to it. What these accounts describe as formal can therefore be read as communicative. When a film dilates ordinary time, it does not simply depict slowness. It offers the viewer a particular relation to time for as long as the film lasts, and that offer is a kind of address. Rhythm, in this sense, is legible as a position taken within a culture organised around speed.

2.2. Acceleration and the Attention Economy

The stakes of rhythm sharpen against the sociology of acceleration. Rosa describes modernity as driven by an escalating dynamic of technical, social, and experiential speed, in which the pace of life keeps rising while the sense of available time does not (Rosa, 2013). His later work names what this costs: resonance, the responsive relation in which self and world answer to one another, gives way to a merely processing relation in which the world is handled rather than met (Rosa, 2019). Wajcman shows that digital technologies sold as time-saving tend instead to deepen the feeling of temporal pressure (Wajcman, 2015). Crary pushes the analysis to its limit, describing a regime that encroaches even on sleep, demanding a wakefulness that is always available to produce and to consume (Crary, 2013).

Byung-Chul Han gives the condition its sharpest cultural reading, and his work supplies the connective thread between these accounts. Contemporary subjects, in his account, inhabit a burnout society of compulsive self-optimisation that has lost the capacity for contemplative lingering (Han, 2010/2015). The resulting time has been stripped of scent and duration, dispersed into a run of disconnected present moments (Han, 2009/2017). More recently, he has turned to storytelling itself, arguing that the compression and commodification of information have produced a crisis of narration, a loss of the slow, binding time that stories once needed to hold (Han, 2023/2024). This diagnosis has a direct precursor in Benjamin's distinction between *Erlebnis*, the isolated, shock-driven sensation characteristic of accelerated modernity, and *Erfahrung*, the deep, accumulated experience that requires duration, pause, and community (Benjamin, 1936–1940/2007). Read together, Benjamin's *Erfahrung*, Rosa's resonance, Crary's sleepless wakefulness, and Han's lost contemplation describe one condition from several angles: a temporal regime in which attention is continuously solicited and rarely allowed to settle.

These diagnoses meet the attention economy that communication scholars have described. Wu traces the long history of an industry whose defining move is to capture human attention and sell it on, and whose media forms bend to that end (Wu, 2016). On a stronger account, cinema and the moving image were the historical crucible in which capital first learned to convert human attention into value (Beller, 2006). Under such conditions, the prevailing way of addressing an audience is extractive. Media are tuned to grab attention fast, hold it through escalation and novelty, and cut it into saleable pieces. Rhythm, here, is engineered for capture. The consequence for narrative form is direct. A structure that runs on constant stimulation, quick causality, and the endless deferral of resolution suits this economy well, and a structure built on duration and stillness does not.

2.3. Slow Media and Slow Cinema

A counter-current has formed in response, and it runs through both media and film studies. In media studies, the Slow Media Manifesto proposed that media might be made and used with an eye to duration, discernment, and sustainability rather than speed and volume, borrowing the vocabulary of slow food to picture another relation to media time (Köhler et al., 2010). Rauch has since built the idea into a sustained argument, showing that slow media is a mindful and selective relation to technology rather than a rejection of it, and framing slowness as a sustainable alternative to the logic of more and faster (Rauch, 2018). Journalism has felt the same pull. Slow journalism has emerged as a practice that resists the acceleration and commodification of the news cycle in favour of depth and care and that treats timeliness as a value to be questioned rather than obeyed (Le Masurier, 2015).

Film studies has examined the parallel tendency known as slow cinema, and its more systematic accounts help connect the aesthetic to the argument pursued here. Flanagan identified an aesthetic of slowness built on the long take, temporal dilation, and a minimum of dramatic incident (Flanagan, 2008), and de Luca and Barradas Jorge consolidated the field, reading slowness both as a contemporary trend and as a longer thread in film history (de Luca & Barradas Jorge, 2016). Çağlayan's poetics of slow cinema specifies the formal devices at work: the long take, the de-dramatised event, and the extended duration that reorients the viewer's temporal attention (Çağlayan, 2018). This tendency has its decisive philosophical formulation in Deleuze's account of the shift from the movement-image, subordinated to action, causality, and goal-orientation, to the time-image, in which time is presented directly through stillness and dead time rather than through action (Deleuze, 1985/1989); the distinction maps closely onto the contrast this article draws between extractive and contemplative rhythm. Koepnick treats slowness as a stance toward the present (Koepnick, 2014); Jaffe describes a cinema of stillness that sets itself against the cinema of action (Jaffe, 2014); Nagib argues that a cinema of realism carries its own ethics of attention to the world (Nagib, 2011); and Schrader's account of transcendental style names a related spiritual dimension (Schrader, 2018).

Most of this scholarship, in both branches, has approached slowness as an aesthetic, a craft practice, or a cultural stance. The question pressed here is different. It concerns the status of contemplative narrative as a communicative structure, a way of addressing an audience and shaping its attention that stands in a definite relation to the accelerated ecology around it. Read against acceleration theory, the attention economy, and the slow media movement, the slowness of these films looks like more than an aesthetic. It looks like a proposition about attention, made in the specific medium of narrative rhythm.

2.4. From Narratology to Communication: Structure as Address

To move from structure to communicative effect, the two need to be connected. The author's larger study distinguishes four narrative models, the classical teleological, the episodic or processual, the fragmentary or memory-based, and the contemplative or poetic, by how each organises time, causality, the release of information, character agency, and the viewer's experience. Its central claim is that narrative structure does not so much hold a story as produce a kind of subject and a kind of experience. For present purposes the relevant point is narrower. Each model also organises the audience's attention differently and so addresses it differently.

The classical teleological model, with its tight causality and its pull toward resolution, communicates urgency. It recruits attention through the promise of a goal and sustains it through the tension of that goal deferred. The contemplative model does close to the opposite. It dissolves urgency and spreads attention across the surface of the present, soliciting a viewer who remains where a goal-driven film would move on. The episodic

model addresses attention as accompaniment, a going-along rather than a pursuit. These differences are not reducible to telling the same story faster or slower. They are distinct offers made to an audience's attention, and in an accelerated culture each offer means something. Chatman's distinction between story and discourse is useful here, since in these films the communicative labour is done by the how of the telling and above all by its pace (Chatman, 1978).

2.5. Sustainability as a Communicative Category

Sustainability enters at this point, not as an ecological theme but as a way of describing how a form treats the attention it engages. The borrowing of an ecological vocabulary is deliberate and carries a positive warrant rather than doing merely analogical work. Citton's ecology of attention treats attention not as an individual resource to be captured but as a shared environment that can be depleted or sustained and that requires stewardship (Citton, 2017); it is in that specific sense, attention as a common ecosystem rather than a private commodity, that the language of cultivation, depletion, and renewal is used here. An extractive form seizes attention, escalates to retain it, and fragments it for sale. A sustainable, or non-extractive, form solicits attention, lets it settle, and returns it to a resonant relation with time and world. Where the ecological term risks confusion in a communication context, the analysis speaks equally of non-extractive or renewing communication.

The reframing rests on a hypothesis that a separate study argues at length and that is stated here in full so that the present article stands on its own: that narrative structures which loosen teleology and individual conflict tend to produce characters, and by extension modes of address, oriented toward interdependence, care, and a way of inhabiting time that answers to no particular destination, whereas structures organised around a single escalating goal tend to produce high-agency subjects whose identity is built through the progressive subordination of relation to purpose. The claim is not that one is better than the other, but that structure and the kind of subject it makes possible are two aspects of one mechanism. On this reading, directors such as Wenders, Zhao, and Reichardt do not only picture less extractive ways of living; they practise a less extractive way of communicating in the rhythm through which they address the people watching. The remainder of the article tests that claim on three films.

3. Materials and Methods

The study applies a qualitative, interpretive structural analysis to a purposive corpus of three films, using an analytical protocol developed in the author's doctoral research. Because the argument concerns how narrative rhythm addresses the viewer's relation to time, the method is textual: it examines formal features of the films themselves and the temporal relations those features make available. It does not measure, and does not claim to establish, the effects of the films on empirical audiences. Where the analysis states that a film "invites," "offers," or "affords" a relation to time, these are claims about the text and the address it makes available, not about documented reception; the scope and its limits are set out in Section 3.3.

3.1. Corpus and Selection Criteria

The three films were selected from a larger corpus of five contemporary films analysed in the author's doctoral study, which also includes *Aftersun* (Wells, 2022) and *Lost in Translation* (Coppola, 2003). The selection is purposive rather than representative, and the comparison is best understood as an illustrative triangulation designed to display and test the typology, not as a sample from which claims about contemporary cinema at large could be induced. Three criteria governed the choice. First, paradigmatic value: each film had to

be a clear, widely recognised instance of one of the three modes at issue so that the analysis engages exemplary rather than idiosyncratic cases. *Perfect Days* (Wenders, 2023) stands as a near-pure instance of the contemplative model; *Nomadland* (Zhao, 2020) of the episodic and processual model; and *Whiplash* (Chazelle, 2014) of the classical teleological model, included as the contrast case that makes the other two legible. Second, comparable circulation: all three achieved significant presence in the international festival and critical circuit (among them a Cannes recognition, an Academy Award for Best Picture, and Academy Awards for supporting performance), which makes them shared reference points with a documented critical reception rather than marginal choices, and which holds their distribution context roughly constant. Third, shared media moment: all three were released within roughly a decade and circulate within the same accelerated, platform-mediated ecology the argument addresses. The two corpus films set aside, *Aftersun* and *Lost in Translation*, belong to the fragmentary-memorial and hybrid models, whose defining operation is the reorganisation of memory rather than the regulation of tempo; they bear less directly on the question of rhythm and are therefore outside the scope of this article. The risk that cases selected to instantiate a typology will simply confirm it is real, and Section 3.3 states how the analysis is bounded in response.

3.2. Operationalization: An Analytical Matrix

Each film was analysed with a structural grid drawn from the doctoral protocol and expanded, in response to review, into the operationalization matrix set out below (Table 1). The matrix specifies five dimensions of narrative rhythm, the theoretical basis and analytical parameter for each, and the contrasting values that define an extractive and a sustainable configuration. It is offered as a repeatable analytical tool rather than as a quantitative instrument: the parameters are read qualitatively through close viewing, and the extractive and contemplative columns function as ideal-typical poles against which each film is placed.

Table 1. Operationalization matrix for the analysis of narrative rhythm.

Dimension	Theoretical Basis	Analytical Parameter	Extractive/Accelerated Mode (e.g., *Whiplash*)	Contemplative/Sustainable Mode (e.g., *Perfect Days*, *Nomadland*)
Temporal duration and pacing	Genette (1972/1980); Deleuze (1985/1989); Flanagan (2008)	Shot and scene duration; ratio of event time to screen time; movement-image vs. time-image	High shot density, rapid cutting, heavy temporal compression; dominance of the movement-image	Long takes, temporal dilation, dead time; emergence of the time-image
Information release and plot propulsion	Bordwell (1985); Chatman (1978); Rovelli (2017)	Metering of plot information; causal tightness vs. relational openness; time as linear container vs. relational flow	Fast disclosure, strong teleological drive; time as a scarce resource spent toward a goal	Minimal dramatic incident, open-ended progression; time as relational and open to lingering
Attention and engagement strategy	Wu (2016); Beller (2006); Citton (2017)	Mode of audience address; commodity value of attention; effect on the viewer's focus	Rapid stimulation, conflict escalation; attention harvested and fragmented for retention	Invitation to presence, low stimulus escalation; attention cultivated as a shared ecosystem
Experience and memory quality	Benjamin (1936–1940/2007); Han (2010/2015, 2009/2017, 2023/2024)	Mode of reception; sensory shock vs. narrative depth; temporal "scent"	*Erlebnis*: immediate stimulation, high sensory velocity; time stripped of duration	*Erfahrung*: contemplative lingering; deep, resonant temporal traces
Temporal relation and subjectivity	Rosa (2013, 2019); Rauch (2018)	Character agency; spectator positioning; type of world-relation	Instrumental: high-pressure individual achievement; time managed as an obstacle	Resonant: interdependence and care; time inhabited as an environment of mutual response

For each film, the matrix was completed through repeated close viewing, attending to the parameters listed above. The completed readings were then compared across the

three cases to establish how each configuration corresponds to a distinct mode of temporal address. The analysis in Section 4 is organised film by film and follows the order of the matrix, moving from duration and pacing through information release, attention strategy, and experiential quality to the temporal relation the form makes available; Section 5 draws the comparison together with the theoretical framework.

3.3. Scope and Limits

Four limits bound the claims, and stating them frankly is part of the method rather than a concession to it. First, the corpus is small and purposive (N = 3); the study makes no claim to statistical or inductive representativeness of contemporary cinema, and its findings do not generalise beyond the cases without further work. Second, the categories derive from a prior typology, so the analysis is interpretive rather than a blind coding exercise: it does not employ inter-coder reliability checks or quantitative measurement, and its validity is the internal coherence of the readings rather than a measured effect. The three films are therefore treated as an illustrative triangulation that displays the typology, not as independent evidence that confirms it; a fuller test would require cases not pre-selected to fit the framework, including deliberately mixed or ambiguous ones in which contemplative and extractive tendencies coexist. Third, the method is textual: it can establish how a film organises rhythm and what temporal relation its form makes available, but it cannot establish what actual viewers experience, which would require reception research of a different kind (Plantinga, 2009). The experiential counterpart to this textual question, namely how viewers actually undergo cinematic slowness, is beginning to be addressed through phenomenological reception research (Boer & de Roo, 2025), an approach this article does not pursue. Claims about attention in what follows are, accordingly, claims about the address the text offers and are marked as such. Fourth, reading each film as a communicative form is an interpretation open to contestation; the matrix is offered precisely to make that interpretation explicit and repeatable rather than impressionistic.

4. Analysis

4.1. The Contemplative Mode in Perfect Days

Perfect Days follows Hirayama, who cleans public toilets in Tokyo, through a routine that repeats with small variations. In terms of **duration and pacing**, the film does something exact and countercultural: it gives presence to precisely the actions a goal-driven structure would remove by ellipsis. Waking, folding the bedding, brushing his teeth, buying a canned drink from the vending machine, choosing a cassette for the drive to work, cleaning, photographing the play of light through the leaves at lunch, reading before sleep. Wenders declines the compression that classical narration imposes on whatever does not advance a plot, and the film closes on a sustained take of Hirayama driving, his face moving between tears and a smile, held long past the point at which a conventional film would cut. Regarding **information release and propulsion**, the film follows a non-canonical *kishōtenketsu* logic rather than a teleological chain: there is no governing objective and no detonating incident, only the establishment and deepening of a self-sufficient present, until the arrival of his niece Niko functions as the *ten*, a reconfiguring irruption rather than a plot turn, and the encounter with the terminally ill former husband of Hirayama's sister works as a *ketsu* that resolves nothing and yet reorients the whole; the past is released only through brief evocative images, never through exposition. In terms of **attention strategy**, the film invites presence rather than escalating stimulus. As regards **experiential quality**, it is *Erfahrung* rather than *Erlebnis*: an accumulation of resonant traces rather than shocks. And in terms of **temporal relation and subjectivity**, character agency is relational rather than goal-driven, a quality the film defines by contrast with Hirayama's colleague Takashi, who

needs money and external validation and performs the work carelessly, while Hirayama is constituted by the quality of attention he brings to what recurs.

Taken together, these features make available a distinct temporal relation. The form solicits a viewer organised around duration rather than advancement, attentive to the grain of the present, to the same everyday details that, in the film's own implicit diagnosis, an attention economy trained on rapid stimulation and productivity teaches one to overlook. Here the address of the form and the life it depicts coincide: an unhurried, non-extractive relation to time is not only shown on screen but enacted in the rhythm of the telling.

4.2. The Episodic Mode and Duration in Nomadland

Nomadland follows Fern, who, after her company town collapses and her husband dies, takes to the road, living out of a van and moving between seasonal jobs and the encampments of other older nomads. Regarding **duration and pacing**, the film is organised as duration and process, the rhythm of seasons and journeys rather than of acts and turning points; it accumulates rather than accelerates. Regarding **information release and propulsion**, it departs deliberately from the classical model: there is no central mission and no single conflict concentrating the dramatic tension. The latent question of whether Fern will return to a settled life or persist in her displacement runs through the film as an open undercurrent, but it never develops according to the logic of rising obstacles and climactic culmination, and it never crystallises into a decision that would retrospectively reorganise the whole; each episode adds a nuance rather than triggering the next. In terms of **attention strategy** and **experiential quality**, the film proceeds by sensory continuity and accumulation, an *Erfahrung* of small meetings, landscapes, and losses. In terms of **temporal relation and subjectivity**, character agency is relational and processual; Fern is constituted less by pursuit than by the way she inhabits spaces and sustains bonds, and the film's community of nomads, held together by mutual aid, has its formal echo in the narration's refusal to organise attention around a goal.

The temporal relation these features make available is one of accompaniment rather than pursuit. The form solicits a viewer who stays with Fern's passage without the propulsion of a question demanding its answer and offers a relation to time and to others built on endurance and interdependence rather than achievement. Once again the way of telling corresponds to what the story describes.

4.3. The Accelerated Counter-Model: Whiplash

Whiplash clarifies both cases by opposition. It follows Andrew, a young drummer whose pursuit of greatness under an abusive teacher organises the entire film. In terms of **duration and pacing**, the classical logic is exact: time is treated as a resource consumed on the way to a goal, whatever does not advance the conflict is eliminated by ellipsis, and the cutting quickens toward each climax. Where Hirayama inhabits time, Andrew spends it; where *Perfect Days* rests in the time-image, *Whiplash* belongs wholly to the movement-image (Deleuze, 1985/1989). Regarding **information release and propulsion**, the film exhibits the strongest causal chain in the corpus: a single escalating objective drives a tight sequence of the kind the classical model codifies (Bordwell et al., 1985), and its information regime is built for suspense. With regard to **attention strategy**, it is extractive in the precise sense developed here: its rhythm is engineered to seize attention and hold it through mounting tension and release. In terms of **experiential quality**, it is *Erlebnis*, a succession of shocks at high sensory velocity. And regarding **temporal relation and subjectivity**, character agency is the highest in the corpus and the most exclusively goal-driven: Andrew's identity is so completely a function of his objective that, as the analysis of the case shows, to remove the goal would be to remove the character, and his identity is built through the progressive destruction of every bond around him.

The point is not that *Whiplash* is a lesser film; its affective intensity is as great as that of the other two, and precisely of the opposite kind. It is that the way it organises attention runs parallel to the logic of the accelerated economy, where the contemplative and episodic modes cut across it. The film's subject reinforces the diagnosis: a protagonist who builds an identity by dismantling his attachments in the service of an individual goal enacts, in the story, the same extractive relation that the form enacts upon the viewer's attention.

4.4. What Makes a Rhythm Sustainable

Across the three films, the category of sustainable communication takes on a definite content, and it can be stated in terms of the five dimensions of the matrix. A sustainable rhythm dilates rather than compresses time; it loosens rather than tightens the causal chain and the metering of information; it invites presence rather than harvesting attention through escalation; it offers *Erfahrung* rather than *Erlebnis*; and it makes available a resonant rather than an instrumental relation to time. It is sustainable in the sense that its address does not exhaust the attention it engages: where the extractive form treats attention as something to be captured and spent, the sustainable form treats it as a shared ecology to be cultivated and models, in its own pace, the relation to time it commends.

None of this makes slowness a virtue in itself, and none of it condemns fast media wholesale. The argument is about communicative regimes and their fit with a particular cultural moment. In an ecology organised by acceleration and by the harvesting of attention, contemplative and episodic narrative forms constitute a counter-proposal, and they make it less through what they say than through how they arrange time. That, in these three cases, is why the question belongs to communication and media studies and not to film aesthetics alone: these forms organise attention in a determinate way, and that organisation is legible as a communicative alternative to the dominant regime.

5. Discussion

Reframing contemplative narrative as sustainable communication carries consequences beyond the reading of individual films. It puts rhythm forward as an object for communication and media research, and it suggests that the temporal shape of a work is a communicative variable as consequential as its content or its platform. The field has studied the acceleration of media systems, the attention economy, and the platforms that organise contemporary attention with great care. It has studied the counter-forms less systematically, the ways a media work can be arranged to resist extraction and to cultivate attention rather than drain it. The three films examined here are such counter-forms, and the comparison across the five dimensions suggests, as a hypothesis to be tested on larger and less pre-selected corpora, that some of the resources for a less extractive media culture lie in questions of narrative rhythm that have usually been filed under aesthetics. The reading also connects to a longer argument about the spectator's share in constructing meaning and about the equality of attention such forms presuppose (Rancière, 2009).

The reframing also unsettles the reflex that reads slowness as retreat. It is easy to take slow cinema for a withdrawal from the present, a nostalgic refusal of speed. The communicative reading points the other way. These films are not outside the accelerated ecology. They address it, and they make a proposal within it. Their slowness is an intervention in a culture of acceleration, an argument carried in the medium of rhythm about how attention might be held. In this view, the contemplative mode is a response to the media condition rather than an escape from it, and it is a response that communication studies is equipped to analyse.

The consequences may reach beyond the cinema into media practice, though here the three cases can only motivate hypotheses rather than establish them. If narrative rhythm is a communicative variable that can be organised to extract or to sustain, then tempo becomes a

design question across media forms. Streaming platforms already tune pacing, autoplay, and episode structure for retention, engineering rhythm for capture in a way continuous with the extractive regime described here, and the poetics of contemporary serial storytelling have made such pacing an object of design in their own right (Mittell, 2015). The contemplative example suggests that pacing could instead be designed to cultivate attention rather than seize it. Journalism confronts a comparable choice between the acceleration of the perpetual news cycle and the slower, deeper address that slow journalism has begun to model (Le Masurier, 2015; Rauch, 2018). The lesson of these cases is not that media should simply run slower. It is that rhythm is a communicative and an ethical decision, with consequences for the attention it draws on, and that practitioners make this decision constantly, most often by default in favour of capture. Naming rhythm as a decision gives them, and those who study them, a language for a choice they are already making.

There is, finally, a bridge here between media studies and the wider discourse of sustainability, and it should be crossed carefully. Sustainability in this article is not a theme the films depict. It is a property of how they communicate, a way of engaging attention that does not use it up. Understood through the ecology of attention (Citton, 2017), the vocabulary of what drains and what renews a shared resource applies as literally to attention as to material systems. The rhythm of a narrative, on this account, is a small model of a relation to time. In a culture that has made time scarce, the models on offer are worth attending to.

6. Conclusions

This article has argued that the rhythm of a narrative is a communicative act and that the contemplative and episodic structures of the three films analysed here can be read as a form of sustainable communication inside an accelerated media ecology. Extending McLuhan's claim from the medium to the structure of the work and offering that extension as an analogy that motivates a research programme, it proposed that, in audiovisual narrative, the rhythm is the message and that the way a film arranges time addresses the viewer's relation to time as squarely as any content. A qualitative structural analysis across five dimensions, applied to three paradigmatic cases and set against acceleration theory and the slow media movement, specified the contrast: the contemplative rhythm of *Perfect Days* and the episodic rhythm of *Nomadland* make available a temporal relation of duration and presence, in contrast to the accelerated and extractive rhythm of *Whiplash*.

The wider implication, advanced as a direction for research rather than as a demonstrated generalisation, is that communication and media research has reason to treat narrative rhythm as a communicative variable and to study the counter-forms through which media works can resist the extraction of attention. In a culture shaped by acceleration, the forms that slow perception and cultivate duration need not be read as aesthetic curiosities or nostalgic retreats. They can be read as proposals about how attention, and with it a resonant relation to time and world, might be sustained rather than spent. In these films, the medium is the rhythm, and the rhythm proposes a way of being in time that acceleration has made hard to imagine and worth recovering.

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