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BACK TO THE SPECTATORS THEMSELVES:
A METHODOLOGICAL PROPOSAL FOR ADOPTING EMPIRICAL PHENOMENOLOGY IN FILM AND MEDIA STUDIES

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Abstract

This article advances a methodological proposal for integrating empirical phenomenology into film and media studies, focusing on the reception of slow cinema. The study investigates spectators' lived experiences using micro-phenomenology (MP), a second-person interview method that elicits fine-grained descriptions of embodied, affective, and attentional dimensions of film viewing. Drawing on a selective sample of experienced viewers, the study identifies recurrent experiential patterns that extend beyond traditional accounts of cognitive effort or intellectual labor. Key findings highlight distinct forms of passivity—such as letting go, attuning, and surrendering—that enable sustained and pleasurable engagement with slow cinema. These experiential categories reveal the subtle interplay between activity and receptivity in spectatorship, challenging binary models of active versus passive viewing. By making implicit spectatorial skills explicit, Micro-phenomenology demonstrates its value in uncovering overlooked dimensions of aesthetic experience and refining phenomenological categories relevant for interdisciplinary research. The study concludes that micro-phenomenology provides a rigorous means of generating thick descriptions of cinematic experience, with implications for theory formation, audience research, and future collaborations with cognitive neuroscience. Ultimately, the paper argues that empirical phenomenology enriches film reception studies by deepening our understanding of how films affect embodied viewers in time.

Keywords: Slow Cinema, Micro-phenomenology, Spectatorship, Affect, Attention

Introduction

Whereas this special issue focuses on cinematic minds *behind* the screen (practices of film production including cinematography, editing, screenwriting), this paper concerns itself with cinematic minds *in front of* the screen (film reception). These two parts, of film production and reception, have previously been considered separately for the most part in the literature. What is more, traditionally, more emphasis in research has been put on the viewer at the expense of the proper consideration of the filmmaker (Tikka et al., 2023). However, recently, more attention has been given to the side of film production too (Tikka et al., 2023; Lotman, 2021; Pearlman, 2015; contributions to NeuroCine Conference[1]).

Even though I deal with film reception in isolation in this article, the reader might keep in mind that in reality the viewer's experience is indeed closely tied to that of the filmmaker. The reason for this is the very basic fact that films can be considered designed or 'tuned space[s]' (Spadoni, 2020, p. 56) or 'affective arrangements' (Hven, 2022, p. 117). In other words, they affect the spectator in relatively uniform ways because films are artworks made for the purpose of their cognitive, emotional, and embodied impact on the spectator. Film practitioners have developed a set of 'intuitions' (Pearlman, 2015) or 'experiential heuristics' (Lotman, 2021; Lotman et al., 2023; Yilmaz et al., 2023) that enables them to achieve their desired effect. If such theories of filmmakers' implicit knowledge of the perceptual, affective, and cognitive effects of their aesthetic choices on film viewers are correct, then studying cinematic minds (and bodies) of film viewers (in front of the screen) could prove insightful for film practitioners (behind the screen) too.

To enhance our knowledge of embodied filmic effects, this paper presents the results of a descriptive-experiential study of slow cinema spectatorship.[2] This research project uses the method of micro-phenomenology. The key findings of this study–pertaining to, inter alia, the experiential dimensions of embodiment, attention, and perception–can help filmmakers enhance and explicate their often-implicit knowledge of the effects that their tacit artistic decisions–e.g., cinematography, acting, directing, music–have on their intended audiences. The discussion of this project as a case study is intended to exemplify the value of and need for employing empirical, second-person experiential methodologies in film and media studies. In other words, the paper has the dual aim of (1) presenting new insights in the embodied, affective aspects of slow cinema spectatorship and thus contributing to the existing knowledge on that topic, and (2) with this discussion of the findings of this study, the paper additionally aims at demonstrating if and exemplifying how the proposed method of micro-phenomenology might benefit interdisciplinary film reception research more broadly.

With my interest in spectatorship, I follow suit with recent 'interdisciplinary efforts to understand the embodied cognitive processes' employed by both film viewers and makers, undertaken in fields such as neurocinematics, neurofilmology, and psychocinematics (Tikka et al., 2023, p. 3).[3] In this respect, Tikka et al. observe a disequilibrium in film studies, as 'neurocinematics generally tends to focus too narrowly on brain data while ignoring the experiential and introspective side' (ibid., p. 5). In this paper, I therefore focus specifically on the *experiential* dimension of film viewing.

1 https://konverentsikeskus.tlu.ee/en/neurocine-conference-2024/neurocine-conference.

2 Philosopher Robert Sinnerbrink distinguishes between the 'descriptive/experiential' epistemology of film phenomenology and the 'empirical/explanatory' framework of cognitive film studies, and proposes how they could engage in a productive dialogue (2019, p. 5).

3 On neurocinematics, see Hasson et al. 2008. An introduction to psychocinematics is provided by Shimamura 2013. Neurofilmology is outlined in D'Aloia and Eugeni 2014. Fingerhut and Heimann similarly call for a 'new cognitive media theory' and 'advocate for a multi-method study of film experience that brings cognitive science into dialogue with philosophical accounts and qualitative in-depth explorations of subjective experience' (2022, p. 105).

A range of empirical phenomenological methods to systematically explore lived experiences have started to prove their value and their results are getting increasingly validated in the academic community. Key to their success is the shift from first-person introspection (1P) to second-person, intersubjective generation of phenomenological material (2P).[4]

One such method for exploring lived experiences is *micro-phenomenology* (MP, hereafter). It is a second-person approach of working with experiences of others. Micro-phenomenology and other second-person methods have proven fruitful in various disciplines like contemplative studies, clinical and therapeutic research, educational sciences, and so on.[5] Recently, some scholars have proposed to also implement the method of micro-phenomenology in film and studies too.[6]

However, the actual *application* of the method in film and media studies remains relatively nascent and only a handful of publications have discussed findings of such studies on film production and reception.[7] This state of affairs necessitates systematic reflections on the implications of the implementation of such research methods in the field of film and media studies, which, I believe, are imperative to the success of such a cross-disciplinary endeavour. This paper therefore reflects on the advantages and limitations of employing micro-phenomenology for studying lived experiences of film viewers, and ultimately makes the case for the unique methodological contribution the method can make to the field of film studies. MP can in principle be used to study any kind of human experience, and hence it also holds potential for studying mediated experience. More specifically, it allows both film viewers and expert practitioners (directors, cinematographers, designers, editors) to become aware of and describe previously unrecognised (i.e., pre-reflective, tacit, implicit) procedural dimensions of experience (embodied cognitive processes) they employ in making sense of film – including, but not limited to, aspects of knowledge and skills involved in both film making and viewing.[8]

Method: Micro-phenomenology

Before I can start building my case for the value of and need for employing second-person methodologies in film and media studies, I will explain a bit more about them: how do they work, how can they best be applied, to which kinds of research questions are they best suited, what are their strengths and weaknesses? I suffice with only a brief discussion of the method of micro-phenomenology here, as it has been well-documented in the literature.[9] Moreover, I will tailor

4 For a discussion of second-person approaches, see Høffding et al., 2023. The interested reader might want to catch up on, for instance, the Phenomenological Interview (PI, Høffding and Martiny 2016; Høffding et al. 2021), the Descriptive Experience Sampling method (DES, Hurlburt and Heavy, 2006), Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA, Smith et al., 2009), and the Descriptive Phenomenological Method (DPM, Giorgi 2009).

5 See the micro-phenomenology website for an overview of projects and publications: https://www.microphenomenology.com/research-axes.

6 Fingerhut and Heimann 2022; Tikka et al., 2023.

7 Cavaletti 2020; Lotman 2021; Rosic 2023; Reinola 2023. At the time of writing, I am aware of only two projects that employ MP in the field of film studies: Katrin Heimann's "Experiencing the long take" and Pia Tikka's "Cinematic Minds Behind-the-Scenes". As these are ongoing and the results have not yet been published, I cannot discuss their results and their contribution to the discipline of film studies here in this paper.

8 Lotman (2021) refers to such largely tacit skills of filmmakers as 'experiential heuristics' used in their practice of film production. I suggest here that spectators likewise employ a set of more or less implicit skills in viewing film too, which can be studied with the help of appropriate research methods.

9 On the interview method, see Petitmengin 2006. On the analysis method, see Petitmengin et al. 2019; Valenzuela-Moguillansky and Vásquez-Rosati 2019. For a first-hand experience with the method, the interested and motivated reader can consider undertaking training. See: https://www.microphenomenology.com/trainings

the discussion as much as I can to the field of film and media studies.[10]

Micro-phenomenology is a two-tier research method of interview and analysis that enables the generation and analysis of reliable and 'thick' descriptions (reports) of participants about *their* experiences.[11] Such an approach of working with experiences of others, in contrast to mere first-person introspection, is an emergent tradition of applied phenomenology that has been dubbed the *second-person* approach.[12] MP's methodological rigour and formalisation of its interview and analysis procedures afford both the *generation* of fine-grained and accurate descriptions of experience through interviews and allows for *analytic detection* of patterns in the data (so, a comparison between interviews) that can be abstracted into generic structures.

1. The *interview* method entails a process of intersubjective or guided discovery of the implicit or tacit dimensions of experience. Olivares et al. succinctly define that the goal of the method is 'to make explicit what was hitherto implicit' (2015, p. 5). MP employs an interview design or protocol that is geared towards enabling interviewees to shift their attitude towards their own experience, in order to become aware of the *pre-reflective* aspects of their lived experience.[13] This pertains more specifically to the *procedural* dimensions of experience rather than its content: the focus is on the 'how' rather than the 'what' of experience (Petitmengin, 2006).

To help interviewees to make this shift, the interview relies on the *retrospective* re-enactment or *evocation* of a concrete, singular instance (token) of a type of experience the research focuses on.[14] The literature suggests that access to past experience is gained through recourse to autobiographical or *episodic memory*, defined by Tulving as 'memory for the events of the personal past' (Sant'Anna et al. 2023, p. 1).[15] It is characterised by a 'rich phenomenology, involving both quasi-sensory features, [...], and self-involving and temporal features, such as one's awareness of [a memory] as something that one *oneself* experienced in *the past*' (ibid., pp. 1-2). It is generally distinguished from semantic (or propositional) memory 'which refers to memory for facts' (ibid., p. 2).[16] This does not involve episodic memory's sensory and affective richness.

In practice, this can result in an interview of an hour exploring mere seconds of experience—hence the method indeed operates on a temporal *micro*-level of investigation.[17] Once sufficiently evoked and stabilised, the interviewer and interviewee together explore the experience into gradually increasing

10 In this respect, Rosic 2023 also provides a concise yet comprehensive overview of the method.

11 On 'thick' phenomenology, see Berkovich-Ohana et al. 2020, p. 3 ff.

12 See Varela and Shear 1999; Depraz et al. 2003; Froese et al. 2011; Høffding et al. 2023, Zahavi 2023, for a discussion of first- and second-person methodologies. See also my own defence of second-person phenomenology in Author 2023.

13 On the notion of the pre-reflective, see: Kozel 2007, p. 16 ff; Gallagher and Zahavi 2012, p. 46 ff. This shift in attitude is basically a refined version of the Husserlian notion of the *epoché* or the phenomenological attitude of bracketing. See Zahavi 2019, p. 32 ff. on the *epoché*.

14 The experience discussed in the interview can entail either a moment from longer ago (so working from memory), or it can be elicited during the interview (depending on whether or not the experience is easily replicated and instantly/volitionally elicited during the interview). Either way, the target experience is necessarily in the past and hence retrospectively reflected upon, as one cannot simultaneously have and reflect on one's own experience.

15 On the role of episodic memory in MP, see Petitmengin 2006.

16 See also Hutto and Myin 2017, for an insightful discussion of the various types of memory.

17 The idea here is that this focus on a concrete, actual (often short) instance of an experience allows participants to move away from a general level of description about what a given experience is generally like and to bypass beliefs and theories they might have about that experience, and shift their attention towards the lived, embodied, immediately lived (primordial) or felt experience and describe it from within.

depth until either the level of desired granularity is reached or the participant's capacity for giving finer descriptions is exhausted. This deepening exploration pertains to both temporal (diachronic) and non-temporal (synchronic) aspects of an experience. The former aims at probing the temporal structure or the unfolding of the experience in phases and subphases. The latter focuses on aspects like bodily dimensions, feeling states or emotions, and/or perceptual (sensory) features of the experience.

The interview process 'is a highly dynamic, shared investigation: the interviewer attempts to guide the interviewee to ever more precise descriptions of some past action or state of affairs' (Høffding et al. 2021, p. 39). Similarly, Valenzuela and Demšar refer to this as the 'relational and participatory nature' of the 'collaborative co-construction of knowledge' (Valenzuela and Demšar 2022, p. 9).[18] The role of the interviewer is to help or encourage subjects to find their own words and to make the interviewee aware that they are capable of finding new, unexpected words for his own experience. This has the effect of refining the perceptions of the interviewee.

MP has established a series of criteria to assess the *reliability* of the generated descriptions (data), most notably the speech position of the interviewee, e.g., using "I" and present tense, giving concrete and detailed descriptions, plus non-verbal indicators (i.e., gestures, eye movements etc.) (Petitmengin, 2006).[19] Together, these all allow the researcher to evaluate whether or not and to what extent the interviewee was able to enter and stabilise the evocation state–which is the pivotal feature of the interview. Besides these observable indicators, the most important criterion is the proper use of the prescribed interview techniques, e.g., using non-inducive or content-empty questions (i.e, not distorting the descriptions by introducing theories/interpretations etc.). For this the researcher can use audio-video recordings of the interview, as well as an assessment sheet to evaluate the performance of both interviewer and interviewee. If positively evaluated on both criteria, the resulting descriptions are considered reliable.[20]

2. Next, the process of *analysis* targets the detection of patterns in the data and uses them to generate abstract or generic structures of experience.[21] This entails both close reading of individual interviews as well as comparison between multiple interviews.[22] The analysis consists of first identifying 'descriptemes' or 'minimal units of meaning' and consequently abstracting from these minimal structural statements progressively more descriptive synchronic and diachronic categories through abstraction operations (Petitmengin et al., 2019, p. 704).[23] MP thus aims to systematically study recurrences, similarities, or shared aspects of experience. Instead of focusing on the 'what' or the thematic content of experience (as is usual in other qualitative research methods), it homes in on the 'how' or the structural (diachronic and synchronic) unfolding of experience. Hence, its diachronic or

18 Alternatively, it could be framed as a form of 'participatory sense-making' (De Jaegher and Di Paolo 2007).

19 Note, however, that some of these indicators have recently been contested.

20 See also Petitmengin and Bitbol 2009 on the validity of introspective reporting.

21 Hence, micro-phenomenology has a nomothetic aim of structural analysis, as opposed to an idiographic approach to phenomenology (Smith et al., 2009). 'Phenomenology has as its goal, not a description of idiosyncratic experience – 'here and now, this is just what I experience' – rather, it attempts to capture the invariant structures of experience' (Gallagher and Zahavi, 2008, p.26). 'Beyond the infinitely varying contents of singular experiences, this method makes it possible to identify experiential invariants which constitute the structure of the experience under study (Petitmengin et al. 2019, p. 692).

22 The MP analysis method is well-documented in Petitmengin et al. 2019 and Valenzuela-Moguillansky and Vásquez-Rosati 2019.

23 These operations are 'classification/instantiation, aggregation/fragmentation, and generalization/specialization' (Petitmengin et al., 2019, p. 704).

temporal focus sets it apart from other qualitative methods and is also what makes it so suitable for my purpose of studying film experiences (which unfold over time and relate to the temporal medium of film).

An important aspect of the method is the integration of interview and analysis in an *iterative* or recursive structure. This means that after each interview, an analysis is performed on the data, and subsequently the resulting draft of a generic structure then informs the following interview. This structure enables the researcher to confirm or reject their own tentative categories by continually checking them against the new data produced in subsequent interviews. After the analysis of *specific* structures in individual interviews, the researcher then takes a next step to a higher level of analysis of *generic* structures. This involves comparing all the individual interviews and teasing out recurrences or similarities between them (Heimann et al. 2023). The resulting structural descriptions are thus features of experience generally shared between the cohort of viewers that participated in this study.

Pros

MP and other 2P approaches 'systematize the phenomenological research procedure, thus serving as valuable tools for performative coherence and scientific rigor' (Olivares et al., 2015, p. 5). Micro-phenomenology thus provides a form of 'non-naive' introspection (Rosic, 2023) that is 'essential for scientific progress' and that engenders results that 'cannot be already achieved by naive introspection' (Froese et al., 2011, p. 259).[24] Olivares et al. champion the 'highly refined, detailed and dynamic accounts of singular subjective experiences' that can be obtained with MP interviews (2015, p. 5).

In addition to the systematic and rigorous generation of data through interviews, MP's method of *analysis* is 'well-suited for discovering and analyzing patterns of experience across multiple individuals' (Heimann et al., 2024, p. 4). Thus, it successfully addresses what Olivares et al. have identified as the 'validation' problem, which entails 'challenges that second-person accounts face in establishing an objective methodology for comparing results across different participants and interviewers' (2015, p.5). As Petitmengin et al. explain, the analysis procedure is highly formalised and reflexive about the processes of abstraction and interpretation of the data (2019). This makes the research verifiable and replicable (ibid.). In sum, micro-phenomenology meets both of Varela and Shear's criteria for a scientific study of consciousness: a clearly described method that produces results that can be validated by the academic community (1999, p. 6).[25]

Cons

Besides these clear benefits, some downsides of MP and other 2P approaches should also be taken into honest consideration. Olivares et al. point out that their

> skillful execution, analysis and formalization are thus far more cumbersome and require meticulous effort. [Moreover,] they are, [...], less accessible for generalization and quantification (p. 5).

Indeed, the literature emphasises that (guided) introspection is a learned skill that needs expert training and practice. It is suggested that no elaborate training is necessary for the interviewee to be able to participate in a MP interview (Petitmengin 2006; Petitmengin et al. 2019). Instead, the researcher-interviewer is trained to guide or support participants to become aware of and describe their experience. The

24 Olivares et al. similarly stress that 'a disciplined observation of the experience is required' to improve the accuracy of 1P data (2015, p. 4).

25 Olivares et al. also contend that 'the status of 1P accounts is not determined by their facticity, but evaluated through procedural standardization, potential replication of its findings and intersubjective validation with other first, second and third-person methods' (2015, p. 5).

interviewer is aided by the formalised interview process that encompasses specific questioning techniques that enable the interviewee to reflect on their experience in a rigorous and reliable manner.

However, it is also noted that training of participants does improve the quality of the data. According to Heimann et al.,

> data quality can be significantly enhanced when it involves trained and experienced interviewees, as they will have developed their capacity to describe experiences. Also, training in meditation, mindfulness, and focusing, are thought to enable more detailed and articulate reports, possibly due to *enhanced skills in attending and articulating experience* (2023, p. 240, added emphasis).

Berkovich-Ohana et al. similarly note that the skills a meditator learns in practice—e.g., mindful non-judgemental awareness of one's experience and the ability to modulate their conscious states—can be employed in phenomenological introspection too (2015). So, the training of participants should address both their capacities of attending to, as well as describing their experience. These are two related but different skills.

As becoming a senior meditator arguably takes years of practice, training participants in a contemplative or introspective tradition is not a feasible strategy. A more viable solution would be to provide micro-phenomenological training to participants. Heiman et al. suggest doing this with a training interview with participants to acquaint them with the method (2023, p. 219).

Pros > cons

There is a methodological trade-off here between the method's advantages and limitations, which means that the use value of the adoption of MP depends on the research question, the type of experience one takes an interest in, and possibly the integration with other data types and approaches (in the case of a mixed-method approach).

The literature has documented the rigour and formalisation of the method quite extensively already and has argued how this adds to the method's validity (Petitmengin, 2006; Olivares et al., 2015; Kordeš et al., 2019; Petitmengin et al., 2019; Valenzuela-Moguillansky and Vásquez-Rosati, 2019). This suggests that the advantages of the method outweigh its limitations. To elucidate how MP can benefit research on film reception, I will turn my focus in this paper on the *thickness* of the phenomenological material one can obtain with micro-phenomenology interviews . Taking my own research as a case study, I make a case that the thickness of the descriptions I generated through conducting MP interviews with film viewers indeed yielded new insights (phenomenological categories) about slow cinema spectatorship that had not yet been adequately described in the existing literature on the topic.

Case study: A micro-phenomenology of cinematic slowness

The project aimed to explore *what it is like* to experience cinematic slowness. The study took a keen interest in experiences of viewers watching slow cinema in a cinematic viewing mode (which has its most paradigmatic instance in theatrical reception). Moreover, a leading research interest was a particular type of engagement: the sustained, attentive mode of spectatorship that would, it was assumed, result in pleasurable and meaningful experiences—for some viewers at least. The study hence did not focus on other modes of partial reception and their associated types of experience like disengagement, boredom, anxiety, or sleep.[26]

26 A case for sleep as a legitimate mode of reception is forwarded by Ma 2022.

Sample selection

The project worked with a *selective* (non-representative) sample of participants that included mostly seasoned viewers with a pre-existing affinity with slow cinema and considerable viewing experience. Participants were recruited from specialist film forums and blogs dedicated to slow cinema. This cohort of viewers was targeted for its acquired viewing competencies that would enable them to have the targeted viewing experience of cinematic slowness. In a pilot study (n=5) these expert viewers were interviewed. Additionally, in a second round (n=20) and third round (n=6), a broader audience segment was interviewed, which comprised mostly students from two universities in order to expand and diversify the sample size. This sample, again, was not randomised, as students with a particular profile would typically enrol for the project. They tended to have a pre-existing general interest in film and were inclined and open to discuss their experience, and/or interested in doing research. Participants hailed from various continents, the sample comprised both male and female participants, and the age variation was wide (even though demographic participant data were not collected systematically, as the sample size is too small for any statistically significant analyses anyway). Generally, participants had a Western cultural background and were relatively highly educated (but again, as the approach was not qualitative, the study had no aim of isolating and comparing such demographic variables).

In sum, the non-representative sample had a narrow socio-cultural profile, which precludes generalisation to a general audience. That is, the experiences of actual viewers will resemble the described ideal-typical model experience only to greater or lesser extent, depending on contextual factors like viewers' dispositions (character traits, preferences), screening conditions (theatrical versus home or mobile viewing), generic knowledge, and expectations. I will get back to this in the conclusion.

Selection of films and viewing context

The corpus of works used in this study was taken from the group of films often referred to as *slow cinema* (Çağlayan, 2018; De Luca and Jorge, 2016; Jaffe, 2014; Lim, 2014; Warner, 2024). It was assumed that the target experience of aesthetic slowness would be had by participants in its most paradigmatic form while watching this type of film. Slow cinema is formally defined as a group of films that share similar aesthetics or stylistics and often feature recurring narrative or thematic tropes. The entry 'Slow cinema (contemplative cinema)' in the *Oxford Dictionary of Film Studies* defines it as

> a type of cinema characterized by minimalism, austerity, and extended duration; downplaying drama, event, and action in favor of mood; and endowing the activity of viewing with a meditative or contemplative quality (Kuhn and Westwell, 2020, n.p.).

Ira Jaffe writes that films can be more or less slow on the counts of their 'visual style, narrative structure, and thematic content and the demeanour of their characters' (2014, p. 3). He argues that slowness results from 'constraints they [directors or their films] impose on emotion, physical action, camera movement, cutting and mise-en-scène' (Ibid.). This type of film shares formal features such as long take cinematography, minimal narrative development, emphasis on the everyday, moody atmosphere, and slow pacing.[27]

For the pilot study, participants were asked to select their own film examples and their interviews generally concerned

27 Asbjørn Grønstad points to the following 'distinctive features – the long or super-long take, action unfolding in real time, framed tableau shots, hyperrealism, and de-dramatisation', as well as narrative characteristics such as 'the use of ellipsis, minimal exposition, episodic progression, diluted causality, contingency, ambiguity, open endings, improvisation, location shooting and use of natural light' (2016, pp. 274, 276).

films they watched previously (so they did not always re-watch the film and worked from memory).[28] This approach was taken to make sure that participants selected examples of films in which they had actually had the targeted experience of cinematic slowness. Moreover, it would increase ecological validity, as viewers would have already watched the film prior to their enrolment in this study and would therefore have watched them under normal viewing conditions.

As this approach was potentially subject to distorting influences of long-term memory, in the two subsequent interview rounds the set-up was modified to diminish this potential distortion. For the second round, a collective screening of *Taste of Cherry* (Abbas Kiarostami, 1997) was organised. All participants in this round were then interviewed in two weeks after the screening, to make sure that the memory had not faded yet. For the third round, participants were invited to individually watch *Four Times* (Michelangelo Frammartino, 2010) This choice of shifting from a collective screening to individualised watching related mostly to methodological considerations: I wanted to interview participants as quickly as possible after a film, to eliminate possible distortions of memory and avoid bias from reflections and interpretations as much as possible. Moreover, this gave me the opportunity to perform a closer analysis of each of the interviews that I could then use to improve the following interviews, whereas in the second round (in which interviews followed each other more closely in time) I was less able to implement such an iterative approach.[29]

Participants watched the films either in the cinema or in comparable cinematic viewing conditions to enhance the ecological validity of the set-up. Some viewers watched films individually, but even in these cases the set-up was arguably cinematic, i.e., linear and uninterrupted viewing, appropriate screen and sound conditions, and other factors.[30]

The descriptions of the experience of cinematic slowness were generated in 31 interviews with spectators about their experience of slow cinema. The interviews were conducted in the period between February 2022 and October 2023 in Groningen (The Netherlands) and Sydney (Australia) at two partner universities. The interviews were conducted both offline (onsite) and online (remote). They generally lasted approximately one hour. The interviews were recorded and then integrally transcribed, either in Dutch or English. For onsite interviews, only audio recordings were made (as the audio recording equipment is less intrusive than video cameras) and for online interviews, the video recording functionality of conferencing software was used.

The interviews focused on *moments* or specific instances of cinematic slowness in the films participants had watched prior to the interviews. Participants were instructed to select a moment that stood out to them as significant or salient, in order to elicit moments that were particularly slow and, in that sense, clear and paradigmatic moments of cinematic slowness. After initiating the evocation state—in which the interviewee relived or re-enacted the target experience—the interviews then proceeded by exploring and deepening salient aspects of this experience in both synchronic (non-temporal) and diachronic (temporal) dimensions.

28 In the pilot study, participants were interviewed about their experience of the following films: *Beginning* (Dea Kulumbegashvili, 2020); *Gamling, Gods and LSD* (Peter Mettler, 2012); *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (Bi Gan, 2018); *Man with no Name* (Wang Bing, 2010); *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (Céline Sciamma, 2019); *Railway sleepers* (Sompot Chidgasornpongse, 2016).

29 This kind of iterative approach is recommended in the literature too (Petitmengin et al., 2019).

30 Hence, I do not include in my analysis experiences of slowness in other dispositifs like television, the mobile small screen, or multi-screen museal installations. It is suggested in the literature that the cinematic or theatrical exhibition provides the most favourable, conducive conditions to experience cinema slowness (De Luca, 2016; Doane and Galili, 2021; Johnson, 2020).

Such a concentration on singular, concrete moments of lived experience, clearly identifiable in time and space, is a necessary aspect of the micro-phenomenology interview method. It allows participants to report accurately on their actual experiences and bracket their preconceptions of the phenomenon. The online supplementary material contains the interview protocol used in this study. Readers can refer to this document to get a sense of the typical types of questions the interviewer can use to (re)direct the interviewee's attention to their immediate, sensory, embodied experience—as opposed to their general beliefs, theories, and judgements *about* that experience. Any parts of interviewees' reports not pertaining to the former are considered *non-descriptive*, and can hence not be included in the analysis. The online supplementary material also includes the transcripts of the interviews, which can be used to evaluate the material and validate the findings (and potentially also replicate the study, though replication by other researchers does not (yet) seem common practice in micro-phenomenology research—as far as I am aware). Also included is an assessment sheet that researchers can use to evaluate the performance of both interviewer and interviewee.

Analysis

For the subsequent analysis part, the goal was to detect singular and generic structures in the experiential reports, in the spirit of the nomothetic aims of the MP analysis method. This entailed following, as best as possible, the procedures of pre-processing and analysis that are described in the literature (Petitmengin et al., 2019; Valenzuela-Moguillansky and Vásquez-Rosati, 2019).[31] After transcription, the first step was the reorganisation into the so-called (but admittedly confusingly named) "verbatim", which entailed the elimination of non-descriptive elements to retain only descriptive elements, as well as the temporal sequencing into diachronic phases. This procedure prepared the material for the following steps of abstraction and formalisation into singular and generic structures.

I let my research question remain as open as possible to encourage an exploratory approach to the analysis, which entailed the bottom-up or *grounded* formation of categories emerging from the engagement with the descriptive data. I asked participants about their experiences of cinematic slowness without being prescriptive beforehand about what the most relevant aspects and dimensions of this experience would be. In the process of analysis, I thus tried to strike a balance between, on the one hand, using pre-existing or 'front-loaded' or 'sensitizing' categories derived from established theories of the phenomenology of the film experience, and, on the other hand, trying to let the descriptions be leading in generating new categories of experiential phenomena in a grounded approach. This is another way of saying that I combined both an inductive and deductive form of analysis; both working my way from the bottom up as well as top-down interpreting new data informed by tentative categories derived from previous analysis. Working this way is a process that I can best describe as a hermeneutic circle: a dialectical or abductive movement between these two ways of analysis. I tried as much as I could to be attentive to and open about the steps I took in the analysis process. From the beginning, I therefore also actively documented and kept track of these analytic steps of abstraction and categorisation.[32]

31 A complicating factor here was that the researcher at the time of conducting the study had only been trained in the micro-phenomenology interview training and not yet in the analysis process. Admittedly, the analysis therefore arguably consisted of a blend of micro-phenomenological analysis (rooted in the descriptions of this process in the literature) and more traditional qualitative procedures like thematic analysis through coding.

32 This took the form of adding memos to the transcripts and verbatims in which I documented the interpretive steps taken, the terminological choices for grouping and categorisation, and so on. This then resulted in a codebook in which I list and explain the introduced categories and their relations.

Results: The Pleasures of Passivity

The material generated in the interviews covers various aspects of the experience of cinematic slowness, including but not limited to dimensions of attention, the body, emotions, and cognition. In this paper, I highlight one relevant finding: the pleasure of passivity. I first discuss four synchronic dimensions of this passive spectatorial mode and then outline the diachronic unfolding of the experience.

1. Synchrony

A key finding of the study is the distinction between two modes of viewing. A structural synchronic characteristic of the experience of cinematic slowness that was detected in the analysis of the material is a distinction in viewers' sense of *agency*. Viewers typically reported that they either lacked a sense of agency, which I call *passivity*, or they described a different, agentic type of response that I call *activity*. In the former passive type, external stimuli from the environment *grab* one's attention, whereas in the latter active type individuals *select* and choose from their environment what they wish to focus on (Citton 2017, p. 125 ff). Put differently, the relationship between film and viewer entails a double movement: either the film seems to come to and take over the viewer, or the viewer attends to and approaches the film. I will focus here mostly on the former type of passivity. Four forms of spectatorial *passivity* were detected in the material gathered from the interviews: the attentional, somatic, temporal, and perceptual qualities of the experience of cinematic slowness. They are various synchronic dimensions of that experience that all share the identified feature of passivity.

Attention: letting go and attunement

Viewers described the pleasure of 'just watching' and letting the film unfold at its own pace and being in a pleasurable onlooking position comparable to being on the backseat of a car in the midst of a road trip, as one participant described it. They thus all pointed in various ways to the pleasures of passivity. Rather than desperately trying to attribute narrative or thematic meaning to the strategies of extended duration and slowness of a film, viewers describe how they 'let go' of such expectations and 'surrender' to the film and then, in a receptive, open attitude, 'just watch' the film and also attend to their own affective, emotional, and mental responses to it. One interlocutor describes how this works for her at length:

> [I] tried more to sit back and *enjoy* those moments as well. And, tried to see the value in the scenes and in the images *themselves*, and not constantly asking: 'what does it *mean*, what is the point for it in the story, is it necessary?' But not just asking too much and maybe ,.., also *accepting* what the filmmaker puts in front of me, and not trying to, [...], I guess also *control* it all. Not getting annoyed, but yeah, seeing it for what it is. […] And in that sense, making the experience also more pleasurable for me.

Another one describes: 'I can just enjoy this, just for the simple fact of seeing something very simple and basically going from the beginning to an end.' It gives viewers a pleasurable sensation of an unbound, not functionally-oriented mindset, a freedom to just observe and passively follow the unfolding of the film.

Participants described a process of positioning, attuning to the film, letting it come to them, adapting to the film, or coming into phase with it. Viewers thus perform distinct acts of *attunement*. So, some activity is involved in order to become passive. Viewers mention that they attune to or synchronise with the pace, rhythm, or movement of the film. This attunement is necessary because viewers report how much this type of film seems slower than usual, compared to the habitual pace of life, as well as the normalised pace of mainstream

entertainment in audiovisual media productions. In light of this initial temporal 'mismatch' between the film and the viewer, or 'between our time and an object's time,' a synchronisation or attunement is needed to attain a sustained and pleasurable aesthetic experience (Misek, 2010, p.781).[33]

To achieve this attunement or synchronicity, the inner gesture of *letting go* or surrendering is a paramount step or hinge point in the process of the viewer's sustained engagement with the film (see also the following section on the diachrony of the experience). The viewer needs to become receptive and adopt a charitable position of willingness. One interlocutor succinctly puts it like this: 'I was able to let go and allow it to happen, and to just feel it happening'. Another recounts that he wanted 'to attune to the pace. So, it's a kind of process of, not just being in that mindset, but letting the movie come into me, while I'm in that mindset, [...] me, trying to be positioned correctly'. It's a matter of 'just letting everything go for a while and really focus on one thing only,' as another interviewee describes. These and other descriptions point to an inner gesture of letting go. This encompasses adopting an attentional attitude of passivity, as well as a panoramic form of perception, bodily relaxation, and modulation of temporal awareness (these last three aspects will be taken up in the following sections below). Viewers were not necessarily—and often to varying degrees—consciously aware of making this attentional shift while watching a film, but the guided process of becoming aware of their experience during the micro-phenomenology interview enabled them to retrospectively bring this into reflective consciousness.

Embodiment and affect

The previously described attentional gesture of letting go is typically accompanied by *somatic* responses too: bodily feelings of relief, relaxation, or expansion. Descriptions of bodily relaxation that viewers associate with the experience of slowness abound, as evidenced in these three quotes from various interlocutors:

> 1. I don't know how to describe it but it feels ehm,..., yeah, like my body issss,....[makes body movement of release, relax and hand gesture of pushing or directed something away], at peace, or my body is just kind of, like, resting in a certain way.
> 2. I think that it is a bit of the feeling if yooouuu,..., if you flex your muscles and then relax all of them all of a sudden. That if you stretch very far, inhale and than everything..,eeh,..., suddenly totally relaxes. That whole feeling, as if the whole time, eh, you've been under tension,..., and then suddenly, you can fall, so to say [my translation from Dutch original].
> 3. Something that was visually appealing to watch, calm and relaxing.

Another sense of letting go entails an *affective* release. In other words, there is also a feeling quality or a what-it's-likeness to the lived experience of letting go. Some participants have highlighted that slow cinema relieves them of a necessity to feel with and for characters (empathy and sympathy) that classical narrative films would have. They have described how these films unburden them from what we could call an imperative of empathetic engagement. They refer to a felt sense of *freedom to feel* for themselves, rather than being guided or forced by the film into predictable emotional responses. 'You get the time to let it affect you' [my translation from Dutch original].

> I didn't feel like I needed to become the main character. I didn't feel like I had to understand the main character. [...] I didn't have to be the character and I

33 Note that for Misek, this mismatch results in boredom for the viewer. In my model, this is not necessarily so. It is only an initial mismatch that viewers respond to—again, more or less reflectively—by attuning to or matching the various rhythms of the film.

> was just watching, it kind of made it feel like I wasn't obligated to feel the same emotions he was feeling.

Interviewees often associate this with a felt sense of calmth and peacefulness. A commonly used way to describe this felt freedom was that there was no 'pressure' to feel, react, think, or pay attention. A compilation from various interviews paints the picture well.

> - 'It was just more *relaxing* than a regular film. It felt like I didn't need to give it as much of my attention all the time. [...] I felt relaxed in that,..., I didn't feel pressured to always be *on* and *focused*'.
> - 'I find it, ehm, *very* pleasurable that there is just, ehm, no *pressure* imposed on you [my translation from Dutch original].
> - That it's not dictated, so it's a passive journey to follow around, the.. trip of this man, and the trip of the film itself.

This dimension of somatic sensations associated with the experience of slowness is in line with the psychological literature on the topic of presence that defines it as 'temporally extended bodily awareness' (Wittmann 2016, p.104).[34] Marc Wittmann explains, 'concentrating on the moment, now, means feeling one's body as well as hearing, seeing, and smelling what is happening in the surrounding world' (ibid., p.42). So, awareness of the present moment can pertain to both perception of the world and heightened sensitivity to the bodily self.

Temporality

Besides the somatic and affective dimensions of cinematic slowness, we can also discern the *temporality* of the experience. It feels like the present moment has expanded. One interviewee concisely characterises the temporal quality of this expanded present moment as 'unbound and unpushed'.

One interlocutor describes his temporal experience as a form of atemporality. He specified he does not mean that he did not experience time at all, but rather that he experienced time *differently*, compared to both everyday life as well as conventional ways of viewing fiction films.

> The temporality is just about the fact that the time is unfolding, the time is going on, but it's not a matter of one second after the other. It's not a matter of linear progress. There is progress, in terms of time going on, but there is no strict attachment to this going on in terms of time segmentation, let's call it like that.

So, what stands out for him is his *different relation* to the film time: he is not attached to a linear or teleological progress of story, but points to a more detached observation of time unfolding.

Another interlocutor also describes his experience of presence as a sense of feeling 'no time'.

> It felt like no time. ... Ehm, it didn't feel like, eeh,..., Even though the train was moving forward, it didn't feel like time was moving forward. Right? It didn't, like, there was nooo, eh,... there was nooo, ... there was no pressure, there was no eh forward momentum that this, that time had to eh attend to or be responsive to, right? Like, it wasn't, it didn't feel like the next step in a sequence that had to happen. It didn't feel like, ..., yeah, it felt unbound and unpushed in that sense.

He similarly specifies that this temporal quality means it does not seem to move forward, it does not have a pressure or momentum, no forward push.

34 Fuchs 2021 similarly stresses 'the interconnections of temporality [and] embodiment' (p.12).

My findings thus point to what in the psychological literature on time perception is called *presence* or a mindful temporal awareness. 'The experience of presence occurs when body and mind, space and time, constitute a unity: here and now,' according to Marc Wittmann (2016, p. 56).[35] We could alternatively frame it as a temporal *centripetality*, or a sense of being drawn into the present moment—as opposed to temporal *centrifugality*, which would constitute a sense of being pulled outwards, towards past and future (e.g., suspense).

> - As it all moves so slowly, you don't have an image of an ending or something. It is more the, ehm, the *now* [my translation from Dutch original].
> - I am enjoying, as well, the moment.
> - I remember myself just being there the whole time, in the moment.
> - That it kind of *pulls you into the moment* [my translation from Dutch original, added emphasis].

Some theorists of slowness have picked up on this temporality of presence. For Asbjørn Grønstad, slow cinema 'is a form of film whose final destination is always presence' (2016, p. 277). Likewise, Marco Caracciolo characterises slowness as 'a mode of contemplation that deepens the perception of the temporal plurality of the present' (2022, p. 19).

Perception

Finally, in addition to the previously described dimensions of attention, embodiment, and temporality, experiencing cinematic slowness also has *perceptual* features. My findings point to an absorbing, engrossing, or *immersive* viewing mode. Characteristic of this state is a lack of self-awareness: a sense of forgetting or losing one's self, as well as the phenomenological retreat of the viewing context (social, architectural) toward the periphery of the attentional field, up to the point where everything else but the film seems to have disappeared. Cinematic slowness entails a *heightened* perception. It encompasses a sense of an enhanced or what Caracciolo calls 'thickened' perception of the (film-)world: 'a mode of contemplation that deepens the perception of the temporal plurality of the present' (2022, p. 12).[36] It involves a slowly evolving, ruminative mode of looking and listening—or better: a multimodal form of embodied perception—that viewers described as a sharpened awareness or an enhanced sensitivity. One interlocutor recounts his experience of *Taste of Cherry*:

> Small things start to stand out, other things. And I find that pleasurable somehow. Little happens. But maybe that nothing happens, that reality intensifies, you,...,... more intensely, as it is a film, to which you are conditioned to expect certain things.

35 See also Arstila and Lloyd 2014; Flaherty 2000; Fuchs 2021; Wittmann 2018. Note that the present moment is always temporally extended and not a 'knife-edge' moment (Gallagher and Zahavi, 2014, 72). See also Dorato and Wittmann (2019) for a recent survey of insights in time-consciousness from the fields of psychology and neuroscience. In their paper they assess competing models of temporal consciousness in the light of empirical findings from these fields. While they ultimately argue that the applicability of either of these models depends on the scale to which one applies them, they do 'argue in favor of an extensional model of time consciousness' (2019, 747). This extensional model of the present moment was already phenomenologically described in Husserl's 'retentional-primal impressional-protentional structure' (Gallagher and Zahavi, 2012, 85).

36 Note that Caracciolo discusses slowness in literature, comics, and video games. His descriptions, I demonstrate here, hold for film too. Tybjerg similarly suggests that slowness does not necessarily lead to self-reflexivity, but instead that shifting of attention from film world to artefact level (induced by formal slowness) can instead enhance involvement with the film. Viewers 'just allow themselves to experience the rhythm on a more immediate level, giving in to the incantatory, almost hypnotic, effect [...], and so, [...], becoming more involved in the film' (2007, p. 174, added emphasis).

Relating to *Le Quattro Volte*, another interlocutor describes:

> The image of,…, this kind of mound with all these holes in it at the bottom and then all the smoke pouring out of it in less intense and more intense moments of… This nice, kind of, again, blow that was happening with the smoke, I suppose. You know which I really, I enjoyed that.

Perception seems to acquire a heightened *intensity*, a vividness, or something akin to an increase in the sensory resolution of one's perceptual field. But note that the intensity of perception also pertains to other sensory modalities than merely the visual. It is this sensitivity and intensity of perception that is consistently described as a source of pleasure of cinematic slowness.

Participants commonly described their state of immersion in spatial terms of transportation or submersions: I was with the film, I went into the film, I was immersed into the film, I was submerged in the film, at the end I had to get out of the film again, etc. One participant extensively used the metaphor of a tunnel to describe her perceptual attunement to the film.

> If I just focused on that, everything else was removed and like, [makes gesture to of tunnel with two hands moving parallel]. […] I don't know anything else was happening. I was just very hyperfocused on that. And so I couldn't tell you what my body was doing, because I had just allowed it to eh.., So, tunneled in, yeah, quiet, tunneled in and all I was focused on was that.

Another interviewee describes that his immersion in the film is not an either-or phenomenon of focusing on film or self, but characterises it rather as a blurring of boundaries. 'This transition is about, I think it's a moment in which the movie merges with you more. […] This type of immersivity, which is like, totally blurring […] of the boundaries'. Another interlocutor also described his immersion similarly as a form of blending in or 'merging' with the film. This entails a phenomenal *proximity*, an act of closing in on the image, or, vice versa, the image closing in on the viewer.[37] This close contact then seems to dissolve boundaries between self and film. At the point of touch it becomes difficult to distinguish between touching and being touched, as Merleau-Ponty's account of perception shows (2013).

Descriptions of participants point to various forms of embodied engagement with for instance onscreen visual movement, camera movement, as well as engagement through a range of other sensory modalities including but not limited to the senses of touch, smell, taste. One interlocutor described his attunement repeatedly during the interview:

> There was something pleasing about that, something peaceful, I guess, about that. […] It was very,…, I don't know, easy to be just following that and I don't know if enthralled but just hooked a bit by that. And even though not much was happening there, it was just satisfying you know, because of how, I guess, simple. […]if I think of the film, I think a lot about very simple .., movement, let's say, taking place, but they were pleasant enough to follow. And that was like being repeated, like this car driving in that way it kept happening and so, I don't know, there was something pleasant about that. […]Something that was visually appealing to watch, calm and relaxing. […]I can just enjoy this, just for the simple fact of seeing something very simple and basically going from the beginning to an end.

37 This distinction of who approaches whom (or what) is made by Hanich 2010 and Rushton 2009, who call these phenomena immersion and absorption.

In this synthesis of various fragments from the same interview, he describes his visual experience of a couple of scenes from Abbas Kiarostami's *Taste of Cherry*. He singled out a number of similar scenes in which, in his words, not much happens in the film. Despite this lack of eventfulness these scenes do manage to spark his interest and offer him a peaceful and pleasant experience. During the interview, I followed up on his initial observation and specifically asked what is pleasurable for him about these scenes. He recurrently mentioned the simplicity of these scenes. For him, this meant that he was foremost engaged with onscreen visual movement. For example, the recurrent overview shots of the protagonist's car that drives the hilly terrain of a stone quarry at the outskirts of the city of Tehran were scenes that provided such a satisfying experience of just following onscreen movement. Another participant also made reference to a sensed rhythm, in this case of Bing Wang's *Man With No Name* (2010).

> It's like a rhythm and we can, it's almost close to the rhythm of the heart. We can experience it vividly. [...]I mentioned the heart beat, that it's close to the steps, the rhythm of the steps.

These descriptions complement previous literature that has predominantly framed slow cinema as anti-illusionist or anti-immersive and hence missed out on its immersive quality.[38] Even though not much happens on screen, viewers nevertheless engage with slow films in a pleasurable, heightened perceptual mode that participants described as immersive, intense, enthralling, and (hyper)focused. Rather than becoming bored and consequently disengaging from the film, these viewers find ways to enjoy and take pleasure in the slow pace, delicate movements, and gentle rhythms in and of the film. Viewers reported dual processes of attuning perceptually to both the level of representation (form/discourse) and the level of story world (represented content).[39] Awareness of the present moment entails heightened sensory awareness; an enhanced perception of the individual's immediate surroundings. It is a *mindful* form of perception. Ellen Langer writes: 'Mindfulness, for me, is the very simple process of actively noticing new things. When you actively notice new things, that puts you in the present, makes you *sensitive to context*'.[40]

These descriptions accord with recent theories of filmic engagement from the fields of cognitive film studies and film phenomenology that all stress the embodied and affective dimension of spectatorship. At an elementary level, viewers synchronise with a sensed rhythm or movement in and of the film; with filmic patterns of camera movement, onscreen movement of objects and actors, editing, and music. Moreover, viewers can relate to or feel close to characters in narrative fiction. Sarah Keller argues that affective attunement is a form of spectatorial *empathy*; a 'being-with' the film, in Meunier's terms (2022, p. 585). Keller's idea is that viewers empathise with cinema in various ways, not necessarily limited to character identification or narrative engagement. 'Affect as a structuring principle is not limited to narrative contexts, or even on some level to the intentions of the filmmaker' (ibid., p. 580). This idea chimes with a broader 'embodied turn' in

38 See Lim 2014, 2016; Mroz 2016, Remes 2015; Stańczyk 2021, for instances of such framing of slow cinema in terms of anti-immersive aesthetics.

39 The literature has variously described engagement with these two levels of audiovisual media as: immediacy/hypermediacy (Bolter and Grusin 2007); immersion/enthrallment (Hanich 2011); configurational/recognitional (Fingerhut and Heimann 2022); Artefact (A)-/Fiction (F)-emotion (Tan 1996); twofoldness (Fingerhut 2020).

40 Langer 2014, quoted in Findlay 2017, p. 138, added emphasis. Farb et al. similarly define mindfulness as 'nonjudgmental attention to present-moment experience' (quoted in Caracciolo, 2022, p. 45). Some theorists have argued that individual time perception relates to social, historical, and cultural ways of structuring time. They propose that contemporary culture lost its appreciation of and capacity for presence (Gumbrecht 2014; Wittman 2016).

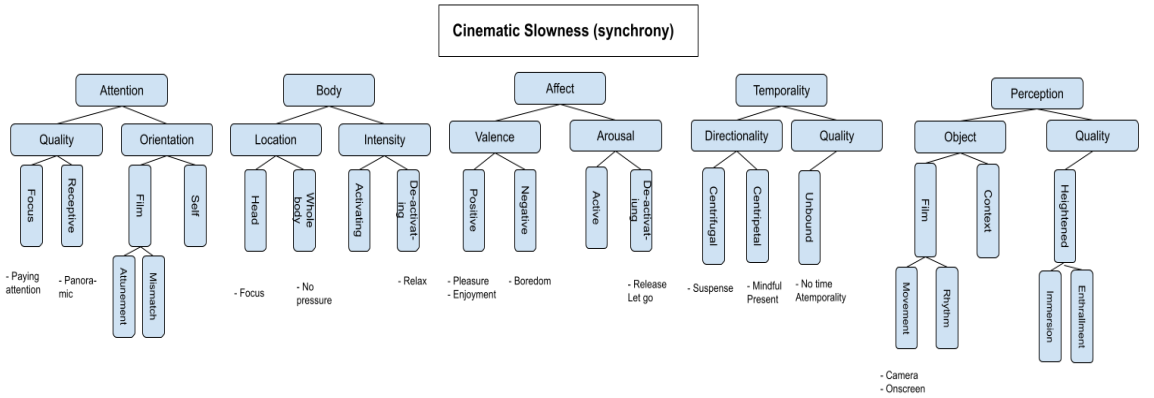

Fig. 1 Diagram - synchronic dimensions of cinematic slowness.

the humanities (and film studies in particular) (Hven, 2022, p. 5).[41] Central to this turn is the idea of mimesis, embodied simulation, or somatic empathetic identification as the foundation of film viewing.[42]

The below diagram visualises the synchronic dimensions of cinematic slowness:

2. Diachrony

The temporal unfolding of the process of engaging with cinematic slowness entails that viewers go through a recursive or feedback loop; an oscillatory movement between attention and drift, between activity and passivity. This diachronic structure can be chunked into a couple of phases. First, viewers are engaged with the film (1). In this scenario, viewers sustain interest in a visual on-screen movement or action, which, as I proposed before, is enabled by the viewer's inner gesture of letting go in order to become passive or receptive. This first phase of engagement entails several subphases of perceptual engagement (tracking a process or movement) (1a), then a growing awareness of an anticipated outcome (1b), followed by an effort of maintaining interest when the outcome is delayed (1c). Next, viewers might phase out or disconnect from the film, if they do not manage to sustain their attention (2). As this typically happens involuntarily and usually below the threshold of consciousness, the next hinge point in the temporal unfolding of the experience is a sudden realisation that the viewer's attention had drifted off (3). Next, the viewer might aim to redirect their attention to the film (4). This awareness typically results, first, in a response of self-criticism or annoyance and subsequently an intention to redirect their attention and/or modulate their initial negative

41 Hven succinctly historicizes this: 'it is possible to subdivide the "embodied turn" of film studies into three broad and, at times, overlapping theoretical perspectives: Deleuzian inspired affect theory [...], Film phenomenology [...], and cognitive psychological and neuroscientific film theory [...]' (p. 148n9).

42 Cf. Beugnet 2007; Coëgnarts and Karvanja (eds.) 2015; Curtis 2007; D'Aloia 2021; Gallese and Guerra 2019; Pearlman 2015; Tybjerg 2007. In a review article, Forceville summarises: 'film viewers make sense of films first of all at a precognitive level, triggered by their bodily responses' (2020). This idea also has precursors in film theory. For instance, Kracauer already developed the notion of 'mimetic identification' in his book *Theory of Film* (1997), to denote a kind of engagement more primary than character identification or story comprehension: 'film images affect primarily the spectator's senses, engaging him physiologically before he is in a position to respond intellectually' (p. 158).

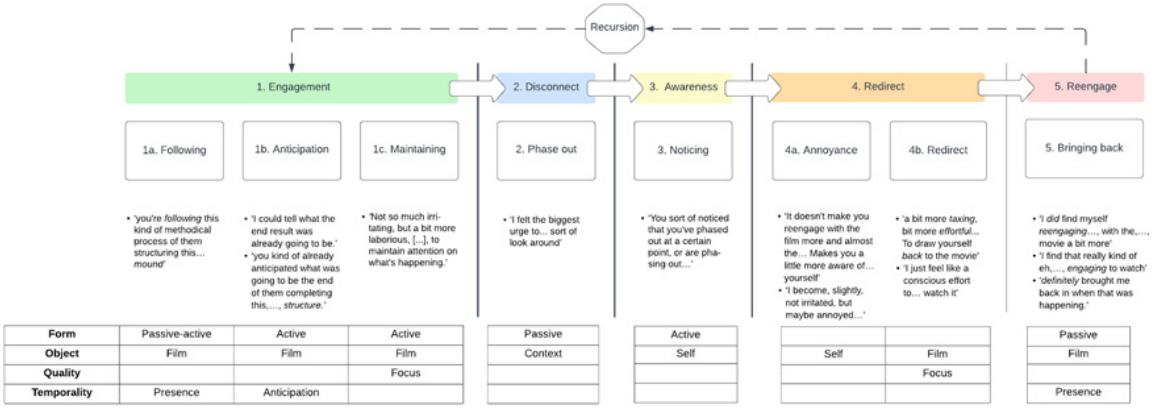

Fig. 2 Diagram - diachronic structure.

emotional response. Finally, the viewer might then reconnect with the film if they manage to bring their attention back to the film (5). The diachronic structure is summarised in the following figure:

Discussion: Active and Passive Spectatorship

The terms activity and passivity are contested and subject to a heated debate about spectatorship in twentieth century film theory.[43] The influential screen or apparatus theories of spectatorship from the 1970s and 1980s criticise the ideological effects of the cinematic apparatus for its manipulation of passive viewers who are susceptible to hegemonic discourses. This is most seminally formulated by Baudry who likens cinema spectators to the prisoners in Plato's cave.[44] Rushton then suggests that in response to these critical (post-) structuralist and psychoanalytic theories of the passivity of the spectator, cognitive film studies as well as film phenomenology from the 1980s onward have stressed the affective, bodily, and mental *activity* of the viewer (2009). Both types of film theories with their respective emphases on either activity or passivity of spectators engage in normative projects of value attribution, as Rushton points out (ibid., p. 46).

Despite this fraught history of the terms, I have continued to use them. This choice might have inadvertently suggested an implicit normativity: a reversal of the values attributed to active and passive spectatorship that nonetheless reinstates the same value hierarchy. I therefore briefly caution here that my understanding of passivity entails that it is 'not just the absence of activity but a capacity in itself' (Han, 2024, p.1). Passivity here denotes a viewing mode that, paradoxically, involves agency (which itself implies activity): viewers actively become passive. Passivity refers to the adoption of an aesthetic mode of receptivity that enables viewers to engage in a sustained, pleasurable, and meaningful relationship with slow cinema. When viewers become passive, they are not at all inactive. My use of the term should thus be considered descriptive rather than prescriptive.

43 See Rushton 2009 for an overview of the debate.

44 Baudry 1974.

In the literature on the topic of slow cinema, an emphasis had been put on spectatorial activity: the labour and effort of spectatorship. Karl Schoonover conceives of a labouring offscreen body (of the spectator) that supposedly mimetically mirrors or doubles that of the onscreen character (Schoonover 2016).[45] Likewise, Elena Gorfinkel conjures up a state of 'extrafilmic fatigue' from which the spectator suffers as a consequence of their engagement with the 'profilmic weariness in performing bodies' they witness onscreen (2016, p. 126).[46] Similarly, in critical and popular discourse of slow cinema this trope of labour is also recurrent. Spectatorship is often associated with the effort and the endurance slow cinema demands, the challenge it poses to viewers. For example, in the now infamous New York Times article, critic Dan Kois likens the boredom of watching Kelly Reichardt's film Meek's Cutoff (2010) to 'eating your cultural vegetables' (2011). In sum, slow cinema's spectatorial effects have often been construed in terms of the mental and perceptual effort of enduring aesthetic slowness and reaping intellectual reward from that spectatorial labour.

The findings of the various forms of passivity thus complement and nuance the received wisdom about slow cinema. The question then is how to interpret the discrepancy between the received knowledge of cinematic slowness (with its focus on active spectatorial labour) and the findings of passivity presented in this paper. A couple of possible explanations may present themselves.

Firstly, it arguably relates to the sample of participants. The research has not exhausted all possible types of experiences that each individual viewer might have, but has instead provided a 'concrete plausible example of a possible human experience' (Van Manen, 2014, p. 227). The project has mostly left out considerations of, for instance, negative experiences of boredom and disengagement. The resulting experiential model or generic structure I have set forth here could be understood as an ideal-typical or paradigmatic model to which actual viewers' experiences will relate to or resonate with to greater or lesser extent. While many aspects of the descriptions provided were shared between participants, the results are not necessarily generalisable beyond the sample. Indeed, it is to be expected that a different type of viewer—with his or her own set of expectations, generic knowledge, and personal preferences, and motivations for watching—will have different experiences compared to some of the slow cinema aficionados that I interviewed for this research.

Another plausible explanation would be that it relates to the particular set of skills of the cohort of viewers that participated in the study. As mentioned before, these were seasoned viewers. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume they have acquired a set of skills that other viewers arguably lack. The acquisition of such viewing competencies might very well, at least partly, account for variations between viewers. The aforementioned skills of for instance letting go and attuning can be thought to be conducive to an appropriate, that is: sustained, meaningful form of engagement. In other words, such spectatorial responses—again, not necessarily performed reflectively—make for the difference between an immersive, prolonged, mindful attention to the film and an experience of effort, boredom and disengagement.

45 For similar formulations of spectatorial labour, see Lim 2014; Padmanabhan 2024; Tronconi 2023. The most seminal formulation of spectatorship (more broadly) as labour can be found in Beller 2012. On the ideological work done with such discursive positioning of spectatorship as labour, see Duncan 2024.

46 Fusco and Seymour are quite critical of such an equation of the types of labour that the spectator and the onscreen characters respectively do. They argue that spectators (obviously) do not really labour in the exact same way as the protagonists onscreen; their forms of boredom, endurance, and patience are of a different kind altogether. 'Characters do a very different kind of labor, suffer a very different kind of boredom, and thus occupy a very different structural position from viewers' (2017, p. 52). They seem to leave unquestioned, though, that the spectator must perform some kind of labour nonetheless, even if it is of a different quality than that of the onscreen characters—as they emphasise.

This idea of viewing competency goes against a common conception in neuroscience that assumes that film is a stimulus that best approximates everyday human perception (ecological validity). These approaches 'operate under the assumption that filmic stimuli do not require a specific kind of competence and can function as a stand-in for reality impinging on a biological brain' (Fingerhut and Heimann 2022, p. 110). By contrast, Fingerhut and Heimann argue that viewers' engagement with moving image media 'differs from the everyday instantiations of perceptual, cognitive, and affective processes' (ibid., p. 109). Hence, viewing moving images (since it is not the same as natural perception) inevitably involves, at whatever minimal level, some element of skill.

I introduced MP as a method that enables viewers to make implicit skill explicit, to shift from pre-reflective to reflective awareness. Hence, it is a valuable method to study film viewing too, as this also includes an element of viewing competency or skill. There is tacit know-how involved such as empathising with characters, following a story, and interpreting or giving meaning to a film, but also more fundamental capacities like various forms of attending, or tracking visual motion.

Conclusion

The discussion of some of the preliminary results of the case study of slow cinema spectatorship has enabled me to substantiate the claim that the adoption of the method of micro-phenomenology can be beneficial for film reception studies. I have shown that the method has enabled the discovery of new experiential categories that would arguably not have been detected otherwise. Specifically, I identified various forms of passivity and their attentional, perceptual, somatic, and temporal dimensions. The inner (micro-dynamic) gestures of, for instance, letting go and attuning were developed to describe implicit spectatorial responses to cinematic slowness.

The MP method proved essential in enabling participants to become aware of and describe (i.e., make explicit) these previously implicit or unrecognised aspects of their lived experience of watching films. In sum, this testifies to the efficacy of the MP method: its capacity for generating reliable and fine-grained or 'thick' phenomenological descriptions of lived, embodied experience. This can be highly valuable for film and media studies in light of the recent embodied turn to the actual, embodied, situated spectator.

To use the empirical findings presented in this paper for the purpose of *theory formation*, the descriptive-experiential data would need to be complemented with explanatory frameworks. As I already hinted at, a number of (con)textual factors might be relevant to consider then. Firstly, the *spectators* and their individual predispositions, personal preferences, habits of viewing, generic knowledge, and other possible influencing factors might result in variations of viewing experiences. E.g., does the personality type influence the response to and the appreciation of cinematic slowness? Future research could adopt a quantitative, comparative approach to detect variations between audience segments. For instance, variations in experience could be correlated with demographic factors like age, gender, education, or social-cultural background.

Secondly, the *dispositif* or the screening context, e.g., the architectural features, viewing position, mode of address, and social conventions of the cinema are also relevant to consider (Hanich 2010; 2018). What screening context is most conducive to foster the associated spectatorial mode? Which elements of technology, screen size, viewer mobility, or sociality of the audience come into play?

Film form is the third, textual pole in the 'triangulating epistemology' that is also constitutive of films' effects on viewers

(Tikka et al., 2023). The broad header of 'slow' cinema does not fully capture the gradations of slowness and the various aesthetic strategies with their manifold bodily, cognitive and affective effects. Slow films come in various formal varieties that engender more or less immersive and passive spectatorship. What makes a slow film slow? Future research could work towards establishing a typology of formal features that could then be correlated with a range of experiences.

To properly take all these (con)textual factors into consideration, a qualitative, phenomenological approach could be combined with quantitative methods in a mixed-method research design. In this research project, I was not able to integrate these phenomenological reports with other data types, like neurophysiological measurements. I leave this open as an exciting area of exploration for future research. I see the exploratory work of establishing phenomenological (experiential) categories as a necessary and preliminary first step that needs to be taken before one can begin obtaining neuro-physiological measurements, because such refined categories can support more informed interpretations of naturalistic data. Put differently, phenomenology can help neuroscientists understand better what they are measuring. Future research could establish neurophysiological correlates to the effects that participants have verbally reported. This form of triangulation could enhance the validity of the findings.

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