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## SLEEP, STATIC FILMS AND THE DISPLACEMENT OF ATTENTION AND DISTRACTION<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Categorized as both an instance of ‘durational cinema’ and ‘cinema of stasis’, this paper takes Andy Warhol’s 1963 film *Sleep* as case study to investigate how the seemingly opposed spectatorial modes of attention and distraction are installed in contemplative film works. This conceptual inquiry is initially enabled by aligning Jonathan Crary’s critical analysis of the contemporary homogenization of perceptual experience with Johanna Drucker’s investigation of conceptions of art. Yet, considering certain historical insights with regard to durational aesthetics and the spectatorial experiences that these elicit, it subsequently becomes necessary to also consider the ways in which a static film potentially stimulates or enables disruption and distraction. Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer form the theoretical counterparts to Crary and Drucker, through which the juxtaposition between attention and distraction can be explicated more fully. Ultimately, by means of additional contextual information on Warhol’s film, it is possible to characterize the apparent experiential paradox between attention and distraction that underlies *Sleep* as a conflicting, yet reciprocal bond.

**Keywords:** attention, distraction, stasis, sleep, Andy Warhol

### Biographical note

Vincent Baptist obtained a Research Master in Media Studies (University of Amsterdam), with special research interests into processes of film circulation and distribution, as well as theorizations of cinematic practices of slowness and stasis. As a Pre PhD fellow within the digital humanities research program CREATE (University of Amsterdam), he has developed a pilot project on historical cinema audiences in Amsterdam. He also works as editorial assistant for *NECSUS – European Journal of Media Studies*.

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## Drifting into sleep

As one of the foundational contributions made to the critical discourses on the contemporary trend of ‘slow cinema’, which has continuously and internationally been growing since the beginning of the twenty-first century, Song Hwee Lim has provided analyses of interrelated terms such as stillness, slowness and silence by focusing on the enigmatic oeuvre of one particular film author, namely Tsai Ming-liang.<sup>2</sup> More specifically, Lim highlights the frequent occurrence of ‘drift(ing)’, both by people and objects, in Tsai’s cinema. Consider the director’s film *I Don’t Want to Sleep Alone* (2006), for instance, in which the main characters end up sleeping on a mattress afloat in a pond inside a construction site. Lim evaluates this signature scene by Tsai, who frames his sleeping protagonists through a static camera, by claiming that it is a moment of utter inaction, “during which the audience is effectively abandoned by the characters, thrown into an empty time and space in which stillness and slowness prevail. In other words, the audience is left to drift in these empty moments of stillness”.<sup>3</sup>

The situation of drift, to which Lim calls attention in his analysis, is cut loose from the particular oeuvre of Tsai and clarified more explicitly when the author connects it to the universality of sleep: “Sleep [...] is the state closest to death in its stillness and to drift in hovering between consciousness and unconsciousness, stillness and movement”.<sup>4</sup> This conceptualization of sleep brings to mind another film that is connected to, yet historically predates, current tendencies of stillness and slowness. Andy Warhol’s *Sleep* (1963) displays the sleeping artist John Giorno for hours on end. Several scholars have pointed out, however, that *Sleep* is constructed much more intricately than its popular conception has acknowledged, with shots and sequences repeated for various times throughout the film and recorded material displayed at a higher frame rate than normal.<sup>5</sup> These technical factors account for a significant extension of *Sleep*’s duration, up to a final running time of almost five and a half hours.

Michael Walsh historicizes Warhol’s film as a prime example of the “subtractive or minimalist aesthetic” of the so-called “first durational cinema” from the 1960s.<sup>6</sup> He states that this particular grouping of cinema overlaps with the more widely recognized movement of structural film, even though the two terms should not be regarded as synonyms.<sup>7</sup> Walsh further clarifies that, contrary to various structural films

<sup>2</sup> S.H. Lim, *Tsai Ming-liang and a Cinema of Slowness*, Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2014, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> S.H. Lim, “Temporal Aesthetics of Drifting: Tsai Ming-liang and a Cinema of Slowness”, in: *Slow Cinema*, ed. by T. de Luca, N. Barradas Jorge, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016, p. 93.

<sup>4</sup> S.H. Lim, “Temporal Aesthetics of Drifting...”, p. 93.

<sup>5</sup> B.W. Joseph, “The Play of Repetition: Andy Warhol’s *Sleep*”, *Grey Room* 2005, no. 19, pp. 28-29; M. Walsh, “The First Durational Cinema and the Real of Time”, in: *Slow Cinema*, pp. 64-65.

<sup>6</sup> M. Walsh, op. cit., p. 59.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

that are purely abstract, “the first durational cinema is necessarily representational; for a thoroughgoing subtraction of conventional dramatic interest to have its effect, the image presented must be one that could, in principle, begin a conventional dramatic sequence”.<sup>8</sup>

Employing a more formalist and less historical framework than Walsh, Justin Remes groups Warhol’s *Sleep* under the collective moniker of ‘cinema of stasis’.<sup>9</sup> This constellation of extremely contemplative films is characterized by Remes as featuring little or no movement, both in terms of the operation of the camera and changes in the mise-en-scène within the frame.<sup>10</sup> As these films “are ostensibly motion pictures without motion”, they challenge and problematize the conventional conceptions of cinema’s ontology as primarily being grounded in ‘movement’.<sup>11</sup> Static films instead turn to ‘time’ and acknowledge that ‘duration’, historically posited by Henri Bergson as a mobile perceptual experience, is the indispensable condition for cinema.<sup>12</sup> By emphasizing duration, a space for contemplation is created during the viewing of static films, which consequently strengthens the affinities between the cinema of stasis and traditional visual arts. It is also through the foregrounding of duration that static films call attention to the passage of time, as well as the movement of consciousness.<sup>13</sup>

The ‘dramatic subtraction’ in Warhol’s *Sleep* is enabled by the prolonged showcasing of human inaction.<sup>14</sup> Yet, in line with Lim’s aforementioned definition of sleep, can this static film then still establish a mode of drifting, of “hovering between consciousness and unconsciousness”?<sup>15</sup> To put it more generally, how can the seeming experiential paradox between stasis and “the movement of time and consciousness” be further explicated and better understood?<sup>16</sup> While Jonathan Crary observes that nowadays “[t]he idea of long blocks of time spent exclusively as a spectator is outmoded”, Warhol’s *Sleep* can nevertheless function as the prime case study that drives this inquiry.<sup>17</sup> As a singular work within the larger corpus of static cinema, it also proves fruitful to link this particular film example to the critical analysis carried out by Crary on the current socioeconomical status of sleep, and the broader associations with art, perception and attention connected to it.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> J. Remes, “Motion(less) Pictures: The Cinema of Stasis”, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 2012, vol. 52, iss. 3, p. 257. In his monograph on the subject, Remes includes *Sleep*, together with various other works of Warhol, in a list of film titles that to him define the ‘cinema of stasis’. See J. Remes, *Motion(less) Pictures: The Cinema of Stasis*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2015, p. 148.

<sup>10</sup> J. Remes, “Motion(less) Pictures...”, pp. 257-258.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pp. 258-259.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 263.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 265.

<sup>14</sup> M. Walsh, op. cit., p. 62.

<sup>15</sup> S.H. Lim, “Temporal Aesthetics of Drifting...”, p. 93.

<sup>16</sup> J. Remes, “Motion(less) Pictures...”, p. 265.

<sup>17</sup> J. Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, London & New York: Verso, 2013, p. 53.

## Perception and attention under late capitalism

In *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, Crary characterizes the contemporary mode of neoliberalism as giving way to an ever-increasing accumulation of activities that blur the lines between consumption and production, and that are structured according to an endlessly iterating ‘24/7’ temporal logic. However, he reserves the last few pages of his book to reflect on how sleep, as the last domain to be incompatible with and resistant to late capitalism’s harmful expansions, holds the imaginative capacity to instigate (thoughts of) viable alternatives and new beginnings. He writes: “[...] [the] temporary absence of the sleeper always contains a bond to a future, to a possibility of renewal and hence of freedom. It is an interval into which glimpses of an un-lived life, of a postponed life, can edge faintly into awareness”.<sup>18</sup> Sleep, conceived by Crary as a particular mode of perception opposed to the 24/7 logic, is here thus imbued with a certain potential for human reinvention.

This counter-hegemonic potential of sleep is crucial for Crary, as he is most concerned with the “homogenization of perceptual experience within contemporary culture”.<sup>19</sup> In this regard, Crary notes how Bernard Stiegler has also already addressed this sociocultural issue, yet from a slightly different angle.<sup>20</sup> Rather than Stiegler’s focus on homogeneous mass media products, what is most important for Crary is to analyze and criticize “the remaking of attention into repetitive operations and responses that always overlap with acts of looking or listening”.<sup>21</sup> Thus, at the heart of Crary’s concerns, there appears to be a link between the homogenization of perceptual experience, as in acts of looking or listening, and the instrumentalization of attention.

While clearly differing in scope and approach, Crary’s critical project can be connected to Johanna Drucker’s historical investigation of diverging conceptions of art. Drucker ultimately frames art as “a specialized form of experience within the larger realms of mediated perception”, and more succinctly as “a way of paying attention”.<sup>22</sup> If art is being defined as installing a particular attitude of attention, then the question arises how certain art forms and practices might construct some leeway to potentially defy the current homogenization of perception and concomitant instrumentalization of attention, as put forward by Crary. In evaluating this question by means of focusing on *Sleep*’s durational and static logics, this investigation can also be linked back to Stiegler’s call for “the creation of counter-products that might re-

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 127.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>22</sup> J. Drucker, “Art”, in: *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, ed. by W.J.T. Mitchell, M.B.N. Hansen, Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2010, pp. 16-18.

introduce singularity into cultural experience”.<sup>23</sup> Even though Crary is convinced, as mentioned earlier, that the object-oriented level put forward by Stiegler should not be the primary focus, the engagement of this paper with “the capture of attentiveness by a delimited object” like *Sleep*, as aligned with Drucker’s understanding of art through attention, can ultimately help tackle “the larger systemic colonization of individual experience” with which Crary is most concerned.<sup>24</sup>

## Spectatorial experiences

Evaluating the particular mode of attention that a durational work like *Sleep* investigates, entails a focus on the experience of cinema spectators. In line with Crary’s critique of contemporary capitalist modes of production and consumption, Karl Schoonover notes how debates on spectatorship have nowadays been restaged around “the opposition of time wasted versus time labored”.<sup>25</sup> Lim adds: “Under the logic of capitalism, there can be no greater luxury than the luxury of time or, rather, the crime of boredom. For to be bored is not to have made full use of time, to be inefficient, to waste time”.<sup>26</sup> If slow and static films employ aesthetic strategies that foreground experiences of boredom and duration, then one is reminded by Jacques Rancière that these aesthetics do not merely work on the levels of taste and class, but rather also encompass certain political potentials. After repeating Rancière’s definition of “aesthetic acts as configurations of experience that create new modes of sense perception and induce novel forms of political subjectivity”,<sup>27</sup> Lim concludes that “cinema [that is based on extended duration] comprises aesthetic acts that promote new modes of temporal experience, new ways of seeing, and new [politically committed] subjectivities”.<sup>28</sup>

Schoonover indicates how the political potential of the extended spectatorial temporalities of, for instance, Italian neorealist cinema and the films of Michelangelo Antonioni have previously already been pointed out by André Bazin and Roland Barthes respectively.<sup>29</sup> One can then wonder to what extent *Sleep*, or more recent slow cinema features such as Tsai’s work, contains potent political subversiveness. Bazin’s classic reading of the displayed quotidian routines in *Umberto D.* (1952, Vittorio De Sica) gives way for Schoonover to state that “the body functions onscreen to amplify and

<sup>23</sup> J. Crary, op. cit., p. 51. While this article takes Warhol’s *Sleep* as its primary focus, Stiegler’s call is not necessarily limited to film works only. Yet, due to the particular scope of this article, connections with and implications for related non-cinematic works, on the basis of the theoretical argumentation presented here, will not explicitly be addressed in this text.

<sup>24</sup> J. Crary, op. cit., p. 52.

<sup>25</sup> K. Schoonover, “Wastrels of Time: Slow Cinema’s Laboring Body, the Political Spectator, and the Queer”, *Framework* 2012, vol. 53, no. 1, p. 67.

<sup>26</sup> S.H. Lim, “Temporal Aesthetics of Drifting...”, p. 91.

<sup>27</sup> Jacques Rancière quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> K. Schoonover, op. cit., pp. 70-73.

expand the aesthetic registers of a slower spectating, demanding a different kind of labor from the offscreen spectating body”.<sup>30</sup> Note that this remark’s mention of labor is congruent with the aforementioned discursive shift in current spectatorial debates. But how can this observation on the incitement of offscreen labor be interpreted in the case of *Sleep*? Does it mean that Warhol’s film urges its spectators to doze off themselves?<sup>31</sup>

That a film’s suspended progression and extended duration induces a certain spectatorial reaction has already been suggested by Maurice Merleau-Ponty who, in his text “The Film and the New Psychology”, connects cinema’s logics of rhythm and montage to his own phenomenological project of bodily perception by drawing on insights from French critic and filmmaker Roger Leenhardt: “When you see a movie, try to guess the moment when a shot has given its all and must move on, end, be replaced either by changing the angle, the distance, or the field. You will get to know that constriction of the chest produced by an overlong shot which brakes the [film’s] movement”.<sup>32</sup> Instead of continuously immersing the audience in a state of contemplation, or even putting them to sleep altogether, Leenhardt’s somatic description suggests that, in the case of *Sleep* for example, aesthetic strategies of stasis can lead to ruptures in a spectator’s film experience. Therefore, it seems necessary to not merely consider the ways in which a static film encourages attention, as initially put forward, but also how it potentially stimulates or enables an opposite stance characterized by disruption and distraction.

## Cinema of distractions

Previously, the interrelation between Drucker and Crary was enabled by their mutual alignment with the notion of ‘attention’. The theoretical counterpart to Drucker’s assertion that “[a]rt becomes a way of paying attention”,<sup>33</sup> however, might well be Walter Benjamin and his influential essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”. In it, Benjamin insists on “[d]istracted as provided by art”, which becomes especially prevalent through film according to him.<sup>34</sup> Benjamin argues that the medium of film causes a transformation of perception by installing a mode of dis-

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>31</sup> Remes has already investigated the idea of sleeping spectators quite directly, in relation to one of director Abbas Kiarostami’s experimental works, namely the static film *Five Dedicated to Ozu* (2003). See J. Remes, “The Sleeping Spectator: Non-Human Aesthetics in Abbas Kiarostami’s *Five: Dedicated to Ozu*”, in: *Slow Cinema*, pp. 231-242.

<sup>32</sup> Roger Leenhardt quoted in M. Merleau-Ponty, “The Film and the New Psychology”, transl. by H.L. Dreyfus, P. Allen Dreyfus, in: M. Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964, p. 54.

<sup>33</sup> J. Drucker, op. cit., p. 18.

<sup>34</sup> W. Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, transl. by H. Zohn, in: W. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. H. Arendt, New York: Schocken Books, 1968, p. 240.

traction rather than of contemplation. To further illustrate this, he makes a comparison between a film screen and a painting's canvas: "The painting invites the spectator to contemplation; before it the spectator can abandon himself to his associations. Before the movie frame he cannot do so. [...] The spectator's process of association in view of these [film] images is indeed interrupted by their constant, sudden change".<sup>35</sup>

It has already briefly been pointed out that the cinema of stasis shares strong affinities with more traditional visual arts. The potential for contemplation enabled by a film like *Sleep* thus lines it up more with the painting canvas in Benjamin's juxtaposition. From here, it seems easy to further criticize the durational logic and aims of the cinema of stasis by means of the following quote from Benjamin's essay: "In the decline of middleclass society, contemplation became a school for asocial behavior; it was countered by distraction as a variant of social conduct".<sup>36</sup> A contemplative and distanced perceptual stance is thus viewed in a negative way by Benjamin, although a substantial part of his reasoning is also grounded in the historical context of the pre-war years: if the experience of modernity during the 1930s could be characterized less as contemplative than distractive, then the former aesthetic experience potentially turns into an ideological anachronism that evades reality. Nevertheless, it remains necessary to formulate the following remark with regard to Benjamin's text: it does not seem entirely clear what the actual status of 'distraction' is for Benjamin. Does he view cinema's predominant mode of distraction as an incorporation into modernity, or rather as a form of critique on the social experience of that same modernity?

It is Benjamin's Frankfurt School associate Siegfried Kracauer who, in his writings on the historical picture palaces of Berlin, seems to provide a more clarifying account of 'distraction'. Kracauer does not directly provide an investigation of the film medium as such, but instead focuses on the former grandiose sites of movie-going that operated according to a "display of pure externality".<sup>37</sup> With regard to the perceptual experience elicited by a visit to the picture palaces, Kracauer writes: "The stimulations of the senses succeed each other with such rapidity that there is no room left for even the slightest contemplation to squeeze in between them".<sup>38</sup> While this statement aligns with Benjamin's aforementioned conception of cinema's mode of distraction, Kracauer goes on to say that distraction should not merely be "an end in itself".<sup>39</sup> Rather, the mimicking of one's disoriented experience of social reality through the film experience should create a necessary "tension which must precede the inevitable and radical change".<sup>40</sup> Thus, distraction then becomes a genuine form of critique, potentially leading to the disintegration of one's social reality.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 238.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> S. Kracauer, "Cult of Distraction: On Berlin's Picture Palaces", transl. T.Y. Levin, *New German Critique* 1987, no. 40, p. 94.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

## Distraction through attention

Now that the juxtaposition between attention and distraction has been characterized more fully, Warhol's *Sleep* can be brought back to the fore. The question remains whether this instance of static cinema merely installs a spectatorial mode of contemplation, and in doing so shies away from a certain potential for disruptive renewal, or not. Turning more closely to information on Warhol's film provides the necessary insights into the ways in which both attention and distraction are constructed in static films.

In examining how Warhol's films were greatly influenced by the work and views of composers Erik Satie and John Cage, Branden Joseph cites a passage from Henry Geldzahler's program notes for *Sleep*'s original premiere in 1964 that highlights the film's 'strategy of attention': "[...] the more that is eliminated the greater concentration is possible on the spare remaining essentials. The slightest variation becomes an event, something on which we can focus our attention".<sup>41</sup> In other words, drastically reducing potential distractions, which simultaneously means moving towards a state of stasis, heightens concentration and strengthens an effectively attentive attitude. More specifically, attention in this case becomes focused on details and nuances, such as "changes in brightness", "small movements of the [sleeper's] lips and throat", or "the eyeball flutters beneath closed lids that are associated with REM sleep".<sup>42</sup>

However, even though *Sleep* is unmistakably static, Remes notes how Warhol as a director seemed to value audience dynamics more than a film's actual displayed content.<sup>43</sup> With regard to his first films, Warhol commented that: "I made my earliest films using, for several hours, just one actor on the screen doing the same thing: [...] people usually just go to the movies to see only the star, to eat him up, so here at last is a chance to look only at the star for as long as you like, no matter what he does and to eat him up all you want to".<sup>44</sup> Initially, it could be said that *Sleep* asks for a spectatorial stance characterized by concentration and contemplation. This is what Benjamin denotes as 'being absorbed by an artwork'.<sup>45</sup> Yet, with the above quote, Warhol seems to point to the opposite position in stating that the display of a sleeping artist for an extended period of time gives the audience the opportunity to 'absorb the artwork', corresponding to Benjamin's propagated perceptual mode of distraction.<sup>46</sup> Apparently, it was indeed a distractive form of collective reception that Warhol pursued with his films.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Henry Geldzahler quoted in B.W. Joseph, op. cit., p. 26.

<sup>42</sup> M. Walsh, op. cit., p. 65.

<sup>43</sup> J. Remes, "Serious Immobilities: Andy Warhol, Erik Satie and the Furniture Film", *Screen* 2014, vol. 55, iss. 4, p. 449.

<sup>44</sup> Andy Warhol quoted in B.W. Joseph, op. cit., p. 27.

<sup>45</sup> W. Benjamin, op. cit., p. 239.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> J. Remes, "Serious Immobilities...", p. 458.

How can these two seemingly opposed logics of attention and distraction that underlie *Sleep* be reconciled with one another? An additional remark made by Remes, but left unexplored in his text, seems to point to a paradoxical spectatorial operation of static films, namely that when “[a] cinematic shot is repeated ad infinitum, the artwork fades into the background and our attention becomes focused elsewhere”.<sup>48</sup> While *Sleep*’s on-screen micro-events can construct a spectator’s attentive and invested stance towards the film, the work’s extended duration subsequently seduces the audience to turn away from the screen and become distracted. Underneath the general moniker of ‘cinema of stasis’, Remes further categorizes *Sleep* as a so-called ‘furniture film’ that “invite[s] a partial, momentary and distracted glance”.<sup>49</sup> Yet, a connection is not made here to the final insight, namely that Warhol’s film provokes a paradoxical distraction through attention. Even though the static film might recede into the background during its full running time, it still functions as a common, durational backdrop. This shared temporality furthermore also allows for the emergence of a fragmentary and distracted perceptual experience.

It is this conflicting, yet reciprocal bond between attention and distraction in Warhol’s *Sleep*, and perhaps in the cinema of stasis in general, that ultimately also functions as an elucidation of the intuitive idea of ‘drifting’ between consciousness and unconsciousness that initiated this paper’s theoretical and conceptual inquiries.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, coming to a more intricate understanding of two opposing perceptual poles avoids lapsing into “the same ancient lament that the masses seek distraction whereas art demands concentration from the spectator”.<sup>51</sup> As for the political capabilities of filmic stasis that this paper hinted at, it can be said that the specific case of *Sleep* works on two interconnected levels, starting with the on-screen depiction of the titular act to which Crary attributes a potential for human reinvention, as stated earlier. This coincides with Drucker’s characterization of art as “a continuing space for renewing human imagination and giving expression [...] to that imaginative capability”.<sup>52</sup> Subsequently, as the reinvigorating extended duration of Warhol’s film leads to a perceptual experience of ‘distracted attention’, so to speak, it also installs an intricate shared temporality. According to Crary, this can form “the basis for provisional publics or communities”.<sup>53</sup> In an age driven by increasingly fragmented tendencies and logics, then, it might well be up to uncompromising works of art to ensure the invigorating (re)alignment of individuals through experiences of extended duration.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 454.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 452.

<sup>50</sup> S.H. Lim, “Temporal Aesthetics of Drifting...”, p. 93.

<sup>51</sup> W. Benjamin, op. cit., p. 239.

<sup>52</sup> J. Drucker, op. cit., pp. 17-18.

<sup>53</sup> J. Crary, op. cit., p. 51.

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