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Slow Expansion. Neomodernism as a Postnational Tendency in Contemporary Cinema

Abstract

The article presents a theoretical overview of a distinctive strand of contemporary cinema identified in the text as neomodernism (as defined by Rafał Syska). It focuses on works of filmmakers such as Béla Tarr, Aleksander Sokurov or Tsai Ming-liang and their followers and tries to present them as a part of informal postnational artistic movement developing in cinema from mid-90s onward. The aim of the article is to examine critically the journalistic and reductive category of slow cinema usually applied to auteurs mentioned above and propose term more burdened with cultural connotations and thus open for nuanced historical and theoretical studies. The particular attention is given to the international character of neomodernism that negates the traditional boundaries of national schools as well as the division of centre-periphery in world cinema shaped by the first wave of postwar modernist cinema. Neomodernism rather moves the notion of centre to the institutional level with the growing importance of festivals, film agents and public fund that take the place of production companies as the main actors in the transnational net of art-house cinema circulation.

Key words: contemporary cinema, modernism, slow cinema, postnational cinema, neomodernism

Introduction

Over the course of the last two decades, the debate over cinema and modernism has taken the form of a dialectical struggle since two distinctive theoretical standpoints emerged, of which the more traditional and still dominant is rooted in art history and literary studies of the post-war years. It is focused on tracing the signs of high modernism in cinema, locating it mostly in the field of international art film practice of

both the pre-war (avant-garde and national film schools of 1920s) and post-war (New Wave and New Cinemas of the 1960s and 1970s) eras.¹ We can call this understanding of cinematic modernism “exclusive” as it refers to the language of formal innovation, auteurism, and a break with classical cinema. Lately, this perspective has been recapitulated and thoroughly explicated by András Bálint Kovács in his book-length study.² Kovács identifies subjectivity, reflexivity, and abstraction as basic characteristics of all modernist art³ and finds them in the post-war films of directors such as Ingmar Bergman, Michelangelo Antonioni, Robert Bresson, or auteurs associated with French New Wave, among others.

The oppositional, “inclusive” theory of modernism in cinema was conceived as a radical departure from this discourse. Since the 1990s, many scholars (often associated with the term New Modernist Studies) have contradicted the conservative Greenbergian account of modernism as a drive toward formalism, artistic sophistication, and medium specificity. Instead, they perceived it as a cinematic expression and representation of modernity in its various forms that is not restricted to the field of high artistic practice, but rather comprises mass cultural production. Miriam Bratu Hansen's 1999 essay, which is probably the most emblematic and influential work in this vein, calls Hollywood cinema “vernacular modernism”,⁴ and this term caught on.⁵ In her understanding, “modernism encompasses a whole range of cultural and artistic practices that register, respond to, and reflect upon processes of modernization and the experience of modernity, including a paradigmatic transformation of the conditions under which art is produced, transmitted, and consumed”.⁶ In this sense, early comic strips and Russian socialist realist musicals are just as (or even more) modernist as *Ulysses* or movies by Ingmar Bergman because of the way they transform and exploit new possibilities of perception born from the spirit of modernity. In its most radical form, this “modernity thesis” tries to prove that cinema as a whole is a modern art: the product and consequence of modernity defined by its technological and industrial character.⁷

Although the two described standpoints might appear to be distinct, competing approaches to the same problem, namely cinematic modernism, I would suggest that the situation is in fact the opposite: they examine two different phenomena claiming the same designation. The disparity between them is demonstrable not simply in the choice

¹ See John Orr, *Cinema and Modernity*, (London: Polity Press, 1993).

² András Bálint Kovács, *Screening modernism: European Art Cinema 1950-1980* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

³ Kovács, *Screening modernism*, p. 52.

⁴ Miriam Hansen, 'The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism', *Modernism/modernity*, vol. 6, no. 3 (1999), pp. 59-77.

⁵ It has been used to describe, among others, Soviet socialist realist cinema (Peter Kupfer, 'Volga-Volga: "The Story of a Song," Vernacular Modernism, and the Realization of Soviet Music', *The Journal of Musicology* Vol. 30, No. 4 (Fall 2013), pp. 530-576.) and silent Chinese films (Qijun Han, 'Melodrama as Vernacular Modernism in China: The Case of D. W. Griffith', *Scope: An Online Journal of Film and Television Studies*, no. 26 (2013), pp. 18.).

⁶ Hansen, 'The Mass Production of the Senses', p. 60.

⁷ Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), pp. 102-103.

of cultural texts they seem to be primarily interested in (“high” vs. “popular” art), but even more importantly in the way they try to position those texts. The proponents of cinema as vernacular modernism focus mostly on the social, industrial, and cultural context in which movies exist. These specific conditions make classical cinema a vital part of late 19th and early to mid-20th century modernity as it was experienced by moviegoers all over the world, since cinema according to Hansen became the world's first “global vernacular”.⁸ As a consequence, their aim is to describe a certain historical point of “paradigmatic transformation of the conditions under which art is produced, transmitted, and consumed”.

By contrast, the idea of modern cinema, as derived from Clement Greenberg's writings and represented today by András Bálint Kovács, concentrates more on the interrelations within cinema history itself rather than its social context. It is more interested in aesthetic autonomy and internal development of specific art forms and their inherent features. Cultural, political, and social contexts obviously play an important role in this argument; however, they are mostly used as possible hypotheses explaining certain formal and stylistic devices. This line of argumentation was employed also by many authors who did not use the term “Modernism” but were highly influential and contributed greatly to the debate on the term. Key examples might be David Bordwell, who identified “art cinema” as one of the four main historical modes of film practice,⁹ or Gilles Deleuze, for whom post-war international cinema of “Time-Image” was the fullest possible realization of medium specificity.¹⁰

Narrated in this manner, the story of modernism appears to be an evolutionary process of progressing sophistication of a given art in the search for its expressive potential. The crucial consequence of equating modernism with a set of formal qualities (instead of considering its relation to the broader cultural and social field) is the possibility of conceptualizing it as a trans-historical phenomenon. Although Kovács defined modernism as a completed historical period, his recounting of it allows for some trans-historical interpretation when he remarks, “narrative techniques, after they become accepted, remain in fact available for anyone, anywhere, anytime. Historical ‘modes of narration’, however, are conglomerates of certain techniques that are more fashionable in certain periods and in certain parts of the world than in others”.¹¹ This makes it possible to understand modernism as a set of artistic choices that became less frequently used in the course of 1970s and 1980s, but are still available and one day may come back into favour. This idea of recurring modernist tropes, reappearing in different periods and cultural contexts, is nothing new to modernism studies but has never been convincingly employed in film studies, where it is generally believed that high modernist cinema

⁸ Hansen, 'The Mass Production of the Senses', p. 68.

⁹ See David Bordwell, 'The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice', *Film Criticism*, vol. 4, no 1 (Fall 1979), pp. 56-64. The expanded version of this text formed a basis for one of the chapters in Bordwell's famous book-length study on narration. See David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

¹⁰ See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson, Barbara Habberjam (London: Continuum, 2007).

¹¹ Kovács, *Screening modernism*, p. 59.

ended sometime in the mid-70s.

While it might be true for some particular forms of modernist film, specific to the international art cinema of '60s, I would like to argue that its spirit survived and began reappearing in a new form around mid-90s, gaining full momentum about decade later. The whole wave of directors, led by figures like Béla Tarr, Aleksander Sokurov and Tsai Ming-liang and subsequently joined by younger filmmakers, established what I will call a neomodernist trend in contemporary cinema. This article is an attempt to sketch a historical and theoretical overview of this informal movement, taking specific note of its modernist character and transnational scope.

The eternal return

When John Orr attempted to explain the temporal gap between the two phases of modernism in cinema, he referred to the latter as a Nietzschean *return* to the modern. He described the modernist impulse as a cyclical movement, intersecting from time to time the main, linear path of cinema history: “a return to the modern in a more technically advanced form, (...) recurrence as the *completion* of form”.¹² Thus, the continuity of the modernist tendency might be disturbed by external (e.g. political) as well as internal (e.g. technological, such as the coming of sound) factors, but the idea and vision of the cinema behind it will be very much alive. However, his 1993 diagnosis concludes that “a second and momentous return of the modern seems unlikely”.¹³ He argues that the legacy of modernist cinema has been largely absorbed and adapted into mainstream post-classical cinema and selectively reworked, sometimes in a mannerist way, by postmodern cinema.

Interestingly enough, only a couple of years after Orr wrote these words, the aforementioned group of directors emerged, who tried to avoid both of those paths through creative adaptation of the post-war model of art cinema. They presented films that might enable us to reconsider Orr's statement about the unlikelihood of another return to the modernist impulse, such as Tsai Ming-Liang's *Vive L'Amour* (1994), Béla Tarr's *Satantango* (1994), Sokurov's *Mat i syn/Mother and Son* (1997), Abbas Kiarostami's *Ta'm e guilass/Taste of Cherry* (1997) or Bruno Dumont's *La Vie de Jesus* (1997). Their affinity with the older modernist generation was instantly noticed and is still underlined by many critics who frequently try to establish a connection between these modern movies and their historical ancestors. Alexander Sokurov is regularly described as Tarkovsky's apprentice, Tarr as heir to Jancsó's poetics, Dumont as a reinterpreter of Bresson's work, and Tsai as a contemporary Antonioni, to mention only the most important names of the movement. The beginning of the following decade showed another strong group of directors (Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Carlos Reygadas, Lav

¹² Orr, *Cinema and Modernity*, p. 3.

¹³ Orr, *Cinema and Modernity*, p. 12.

Diaz and others) following the same path.

Nevertheless, it's very clear that this artistic indebtedness doesn't make them merely imitators or “retro” artists, but rather positions them as the newest incarnation of the “tradition of the new,” to quote Harold Rosenberg's aphoristic definition of artistic modernism. They reach for modernist formalism as well as certain narratives and stylistic and thematic patterns and use them in very idiosyncratic ways, exploring their possibilities and limitations. At the same time, it should be noted that none of the aforementioned directors constitute an organized or even informal “movement”, “school”, or “current”. They represent rather a tendency, a shared attitude toward the medium of cinema and a common sensibility. They come from different continents, generations, and cultural and historical backgrounds, yet their films, resisting both mainstream commercialism and postmodern stylistic games, bear an unmistakable resemblance to each other's.

Although the opposition between this wave of modernism and alternative modes of the mainstream or the postmodern might be seen as evaluative, its assumptions are (or at least should be) essentially descriptive. This is also the way Kovács understood the distinction between modernism and other modes of film practice: “When we speak of 'art films' as opposed to 'commercial entertainment films', we are referring not to aesthetic qualities but to certain genres, styles, narrative procedures, distribution networks, production companies, film festivals, film journals, critics, groups of audiences; in short, institutionalized film practice”.¹⁴ As early as 1981, Steve Neale tried to define “art cinema” not only in narrative or aesthetic terms, but also (and maybe even primarily) as an institution.¹⁵ This is also the way the newest development of modernist filmmaking should be considered: as a certain quality of films themselves and the discourse they inhabit.

Neomodern

The term “neomodern” in terms of the distinctive strain of contemporary art cinema was proposed by Polish film scholar Rafał Syska, who introduced it in a series of articles and eventually a book-length study.¹⁶ He calls neomodernism a “slow rebellion” and largely identifies it with the phenomenon of so-called *slow cinema*. This term—very much present in today's film journalism and promoted by people such as Sight & Sound's contributor Jonathan Romney,¹⁷—refers to a specific type of art cinema, forming a non-unified but very strong and visible trend on the contemporary festival circuit. As Thomas Elsaesser crisply explained, “*slow cinema* (also sometimes referred to as

¹⁴ Kovács, *Screening modernism*, p. 21.

¹⁵ Steve Neale, ‘Art Cinema as Institution’, *Screen* 1 (22) (1981), pp. 11-40.

¹⁶ Rafał Syska, *Filmowy neomodernizm* (Kraków: Avalon, 2014).

¹⁷ Jonathan Romney, ‘In Search of Lost Time’, *Sight & Sound*, vol. 20, no. 2 (2010), p. 43.

'contemplative cinema') counters the blockbuster's over-investment in physical action, spectacle and violence with long takes, quiet observation, an attention to detail, to inner stirrings rather than to outward restlessness, highlighting the deliberate or hesitant gesture, rather than the protagonist's drive or determination".¹⁸ Other key characteristic features of slow movies include behaviourist and anti-psychological depiction of characters (very often played by non-professional actors), abandoning strict narrative causality in favour of episodic or impressionistic storytelling while still maintaining intensified continuity. As a consequence, they tend to put a greater focus on showing instead of telling, or in other words, they encourage the dominance of monstrating over narrating, to use André Gaudreault's dichotomy.¹⁹ Directors working in this vein usually avoid non-diegetic music, explanatory dialogue, overt dramaturgical tensions, and clear resolutions.

Many *slow cinema* movies, although deprived of any commercial potential, have gained critical, academic, and festival acclaim, forming a small but distinctive canon. This canon consists of all the previously mentioned directors as well as the somewhat less recognized but influential Lisandro Alonso and Albert Serra, not to mention dozens of artists who have achieved smaller acknowledgment. These auteurs are also described by Syska in his study of neomodern cinema, in which he analyses recurring thematic and stylistic tropes of the movement as well as individual artistic strategies of its most important figures.

However, why do we need a new term if the discourse on *slow cinema* is already well established? The answer is twofold. Firstly, this appellation might serve well as a journalistic buzzword, but its explanatory power is very limited. It reduces the entire diverse group of films to only one, quantitative aspect: slowness (measured by the average shot length, lack of on-screen movement or focus on observation and contemplation instead of action). The sluggish pace of certain works draws disproportionate attention, provoking the praise of dedicated aficionados as well as the eloquent critiques of their adversaries. As a result, the ongoing debate on *slow cinema* and its predominance on the festival circuit was taken over by two opposing groups exchanging arguments for and against the artistic qualities of these films, to some extent restraining more nuanced historical and theoretical studies.

Attempts to define contemporary contemplative cinema in relation to cinematic modernism, as proposed by Syska, might help us replace the ahistorical category of *slow cinema* with one more burdened with cultural connotations, thus opening new avenues of studies. Besides, the majority of descriptions of the movement focus mostly on its antithetic position toward mainstream commercial films. While it is obviously true that these films stand in distinctive opposition to the post-classical cinema of attractions, they should be characterized not only as a negative movement but also as a part of a positive, modernist project of developing new reflexive structures of perception and the

¹⁸ Thomas Elsaesser, 'Stop/Motion', in Eivind Røssaak (ed.), *Between the Stillness and Motion: Film, Photography and Algorithms* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011), p. 117.

¹⁹ See André Gaudreault, 'Narration and Monstration in the Cinema', *Journal of Film and Video*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (1987), pp. 29-36.

interrelated cinematic forms most appropriate to express them. As Maureen Turim put it in relation to cinema, “high modernism is seen as philosophical and formal, restructuring temporality, spatial relationships, and pictorial representation with a dedicated seriousness that consequently limits its commercial acceptance”.²⁰ Neomodernism can be seen as a continuation (or even an intensification) of this self-reflexive reconsidering of the medium's parameters such as time and space.

There is also another reason to consider the term neomodernism more carefully. Although Syska clearly puts all *slow cinema's* most important figures at the centre of his argument, in my opinion the two categories should not be seen as identical. They certainly largely overlap, but not every slow movie can be called neomodernist and not every neomodernist work has to be particularly slow. The latter point might be illustrated by some of the recent works of Michael Haneke, who went through his “modernist turn” in the 2000s (thereby following the example of most of the early neomodernist directors, who began their careers with movies that cannot be put in this category, the best example of which might be the unofficial leader of the movement, Béla Tarr, whose early features were socially committed, realist dramas). From *Code inconnu: Récit incomplet de divers voyages/Code Unknown* (2000) onward, Haneke abandoned his earlier poetics, which evinced some postmodern characteristics, and began to focus more on formal qualities of the image, questions of subjectivity, and references to high art. Films like *Caché* (2005), *Das weiße Band - Eine deutsche Kindergeschichte/The White Ribbon* (2009) or *L'amour* (2012) might be described as neomodernist, although they are usually not associated with the *slow cinema* movement. On the other hand, some slow movies might lack modernist conceptualism and self-reflexivity.

Furthermore, the term neomodernism might serve as a link to phenomena existing outside the field of cinema. It was already used in regard to other disciplines such as fine arts, architecture and philosophy, where neomodernist tendencies that reject the fashionable influence of postmodernism in favour of the revitalization of earlier modern forms were perceived.²¹ Victor Grauer proposed the name as early as 1982, when on the wider ground of art-historical periodization he advocated for a neomodern aesthetics which may be defined as a return to the most fundamental tenets of “formalist modernism”.²²

Although “nothing is more unfashionable than a fashion that's out of fashion”, the question of postmodernism has to be addressed briefly at this point. Regardless of whether one agrees with Umberto Eco and Jean-François Lyotard, for whom postmodernism was only a late, mannerist phase of modernism that exposed some of its

²⁰ Maureen Turim, 'Cinemas of Modernity and Postmodernity', in Ingeborg Hoesterey (ed.), *Zeitgeist in Babel: The Postmodernist Controversy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), p. 183.

²¹ For visual arts, see Armando Bayraktari, André Durand, Scott Norwood-Witts, *Neomodern Manifesto. Paintings, quadri, tabelaux*, accessed February 17, 2015, <https://www.durand-gallery.com/pages/manifesto>. For architecture, see Charles Jencks, *The new moderns: From late to neo-modernism* (New York: Rizzoli, 1990).

²² Victor Grauer, 'Modernism/Postmodernism/Neomodernism', *Downtown Review*, Vol. 3 Nos. 1&2, (1981-82), pp. 3-7.

features and pushed them to their limits (whilst simultaneously downplaying others),²³ or shares the view of Douwe Fokkema, who argued that postmodernist strategies express a radical break with modernist aesthetics,²⁴ we can roughly identify the leading formal and thematic characteristics of postmodernist cinema. These have already been described many times and in great detail and do not require another recapitulation here. However, whatever postmodernism is (or was), it is clearly contested by the neomodern directors, wishing to forgo its eccentricity, pastiche and playful intertextuality.

Reducing...

Although historical accounts of post-war cinematic modernism agree on the late 70s as the end date for the movement, sharp and precise periodization was never fully possible. As Turim noted, “there has never been much sense in insisting on the linearity of development of an art whose entire history coincides with modernism in the other arts”.²⁵ Different paradigms always co-existed (and sometimes competed) with each other; only the centre of gravity shifted over the years, when some techniques and devices become less fashionable and other means of expression replaced them. This is exactly what happened in the late 70s and early 80s and was the turning point for art-house cinema, when some key modernist auteurs passed away (Pasolini, Fassbinder) or stopped making movies (Antonioni, Bresson), while those still active moved either toward more avant-garde practice, becoming marginal figures in the industry (Godard) or, on the contrary, lost their modernist temperament and adapted to more mainstream stylistics (Wenders, Akerman).

This dwindling of 70s modernism does not mean that there is no bridge linking the two modernist formations. Just as Luis Buñuel and Carl Theodor Dreyer might be seen as a connection between pre- and post-war phases of modernism in cinema, Theodoros Angelopoulos would be the best example of a director who came from the late 1960s/early 1970s generation of art-house filmmakers and restlessly carried his modernist aesthetics into the 21st century. Rafał Syska calls him one of the few “depositaries of modernism”, consistently affirming values of high modernism in international art cinema. Unlike most of his peers, Angelopoulos continued making persistently elitist, uncompromisingly auteurist, and formally challenging works throughout his entire career. Symptomatically, a collection of essays on Angelopoulos

²³ Umberto Eco, *Reflections on The Name of the Rose*, trans. William Weaver (London: Minerva, 1994), especially pp. 67-68; Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), especially chapter *Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?*, pp. 71-82.

²⁴ Douwe Wessel Fokkema, *Literary history, modernism, and postmodernism* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: J. Benjamins Pub. Co., 1984).

²⁵ Turim, 'Cinemas of Modernity and Postmodernity', p. 182.

edited in 1997 was entitled *The Last Modernist*.²⁶

The movies of this Greek auteur already showed the direction that the next wave of modernist directors would take. If the late modernist works of Buñuel, Fellini, Godard or Fassbinder were getting gradually closer to postmodernist aesthetics and might have influenced and fertilized this current (when listing instances of postmodernism in different fields of cultural production, Frederic Jameson wrote: “in film, everything that comes out of Godard: contemporary vanguard film and video”²⁷), then neo-modernism clearly draws more from Bresson, Antonioni or Tarkovsky: the minimalist pole of modernism's wide stylistic spectrum. While Kovács identified minimalism as one of the four most general styles of modernism in cinema (along with the naturalist, theatrical and ornamental), he noted “from 1959, stylistic austerity and reductionism became fashionable, and minimalism became the strongest and most influential trend of modern cinema”.²⁸

Reducing the expressive qualities of film form and simplifying thematic or narrative layers without renouncing their sophistication and semantic potential was the main effort of many directors of the time, but if minimalism in the 1960s was the “strongest and most influential trend of modern cinema”, in the 1990s and 2000s it became an almost uncontested one. Whether it's Tarr's expressive aestheticism in *A torinói ló/The Turin Horse* (2010), Alonso's naturalistic austerity in *La libertad* (2001) or Sokurov's empathetic intimacy in *Mother and Son*, these and other neomodernist directors usually deny the intense emotional involvement encouraged and aroused by (neo)classical movies. In its most radical form, contemporary cinematic minimalism presents itself as a self-prescribed neoprimitivism (echoing the Bressonian call for „cinematograph” as opposed to „cinema”—a spectacle that spoiled the primal purity of the medium), as in the case of Paz Encina's *Hamaca Paraguaya* (2006), Albert Serra's *Honor de cavalleria/Honour of the Knights* (2006), and *El cant dels ocells /Birdsong* (2008).

Neomodern minimalism, however dominant, is not pure as it frequently incorporates other styles defined by Kovács, especially the naturalist. Formal asceticism in many cases goes hand in hand with behaviourism, since many *slow cinema* filmmakers focus on dispassionate observation of everyday routine and time's arduous passage. Influenced by such modernist ventures as Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23, Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), they avoid conventional ellipses by showing trivial actions in their full duration and replacing any possible plot progression with intentional and intense “non-happening”. The naturalistic bent of directors like Tsai Ming-liang, Bruno Dumont, or Lisandro Alonso can be seen in the way they portray characters' privacy and intimacy, very often exploring their physical (or even physiological) dimension.

²⁶ Andrew Horton (ed.), *The Last Modernist: The Films of Theo Angelopoulos* (Westport, Conn. : Greenwood Press, 1997).

²⁷ Frederic Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', in E. Ann Kaplan (ed.), *Postmodernism and Its Discontents* (London: Verso, 1988), pp. 13-29.

²⁸ Kovács, *Screening modernism*, p. 140.

This anti-psychological attitude, emphasizing materiality and physicality over the character's motivation or personality, must entail not only a different set of stylistic devices but also distinct types of characters. The model heroes of neomodern cinema are not the cultured, reflexive intellectuals portrayed in the 1960s by Fellini and Bergman or the careless *bon vivants* of some French New Wave films. Now it is the members of underprivileged classes who get the most screen time. They are more often rural than urban, usually in a difficult economic position, and on the margins of their own society. This tendency brings a completely different sensibility to the works of, for example, Béla Tarr or Alexander Sokurov, although it hardly makes films like *The Turin Horse* or *Mother and Son* politically or socially committed works: both directors (like most neomodern auteurs) are more interested in existential and contemplative aspects of their works—and in developing a unique cinematic form to express them—than in direct political message.

Characters like these appeared rarely in proper cinematic modernism, introduced and honoured sometimes by Pasolini (in *Accattone* [1961] and *Mamma Roma* [1962]) or Bresson (in *Au hasard Balthazar* [1966] and *Mouchette* [1967]). Contemporary modernist directors, although they show real social commitment only sporadically, direct their camera lenses away from the higher or middle classes, prosperous cities and industrial landscapes, focusing more on people and places that are usually considered peripheral or marginal. What's more—marking the difference between post-war modern cinema and its contemporary incarnation—this movement from the central to the peripheral takes place not only on the thematic level. One can even say that the shift described above is merely a reflection or consequence of the industry's dispersion.

...and expanding

The silent modernist cinema, identified by most scholars with the European avant-garde movements of the 1920s, was almost exclusively restricted to just a couple of artistic „hubs”. It was mostly Germany, France and Russia (or, to be more exact, Berlin, Paris and Moscow) with their highly developed industrial base and thriving film culture, that served as capitals of high art in cinema. This situation was not unusual in the history of modern art, which was always highly concentrated in certain privileged places; at some point Greenberg even suggested that modernism is a particularly French phenomenon.²⁹

In the 1960s and 1970s, at the height of the second wave of modernist cinema, France was still leading with the tremendously influential New Wave: the narrative experiments of the so-called Left Bank group and progressive *cinéma-vérité* documentarists. Other traditional „superpowers” of cinema also made their important contributions, putting Italian auteurs and German New Cinema filmmakers on the forefront of new aesthetics and politics in film. However, this was also the moment

²⁹ Clement Greenberg, 'Beginnings of Modernism' in *Late Writings*, ed. Robert C. (Morgan Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 35.

when the range of modernism in cinema expanded vastly. It encompassed many areas that were formerly regarded as marginal in terms of highly artistic film production. Most notable examples are some Eastern European countries (Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia all had an impact on the international art film scene) and two vital non-European movements that reached out to the Western festival circuit and art-house audience with their very original propositions: Japanese New Wave and Brazilian Cinema Novo. Kovács describes this process briefly:

The first phase of modernism was mainly an isolated national phenomenon in German, French, and Soviet cinema, whereas the second phase of modernism was a general phenomenon of global dimensions: apart from most of the European filmmaking countries, Japanese, Indian, and Brazilian new cinemas as well as the North American underground were all contributing to the second modernist movement. It was important as a global film art movement as much as a local national cultural phenomenon.³⁰

It is worth noting that although he acknowledges this meaningful expansion, Kovács limits his own interests to European modernism. The subtitle of his seminal book “European Art Cinema 1950-1980” justifies this exclusion and allows him to dismiss smoothly the valid question of defining the relationship between modernism and non-Western art. Nevertheless, it has to be questioned openly: is speaking about the Japanese New Wave as a modernist movement (as in David Desser's classical study *Eros Plus Massacre*³¹) evidence of global circulation of aesthetics and politics in international cinema, or is it just an expression of cultural and academic imperialism, imposing familiar categories of description on unfamiliar phenomena? Does it oversimplify our object of studies, reducing it to the role of derivative of European art cinema? Alternatively, maybe it actually enriches our understanding of it, showing relations, tropes, or possible interpretations we could otherwise miss?

This complex problem seems even more pressing in relation to the contemporary cinema of global (co)production, distribution, and reception. However, my argument is that a more synthetic approach that encompasses diverse phenomena might be helpful in some cases, if applied carefully and purposefully. Applying the wide and open term of neomodernism to the films of, for example, Apichatpong Weerasethakul is not a way of denying their intriguing cultural specificity, rooted deeply in Buddhist spirituality and philosophy, but rather an attempt to identify some typically modernist narrative strategies he uses to implement this local tradition into his filmmaking practice. This combination is not unusual for neomodernist directors, who often translate very specific cultural experiences into the more universal language of international art cinema. Because of their cultural specificity, the works of Weerasethakul are frequently described

³⁰ Kovács, *Screening modernism*, p. 217.

³¹ Dyan Desser in his seminar work used the category “modernism” (as opposed to classicism) to describe New Wave movies of Nagisa Oshima, Shohei Imamura and others. Dyan Desser, *Eros Plus Massacre: An Introduction to the Japanese New Wave Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

as highly “exotic” for Western audiences. However, at the same time we must remember that they are co-produced by as many as 5 European countries (*Loong Boonmee raleuk chat/Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* [2010]), shown and celebrated at the most prestigious European film festivals (and honoured with the Palme d'or at Cannes 2010), and distributed all around the world through the art house circuit, while being almost ignored (and sometimes even banned, as in the case of *Sang sattawat/Syndromes and a Century* [2006]) in his native Thailand. Due to exhibition restrictions imposed on his films, he announced recently that *Cemetery of Splendour* (2015) would be the last film he shot in his homeland. This example shows that no matter how “Thai” Weerasethakul films seem, they are actually produced mostly for a European audience by European producers.

This international (or rather postnational) character of neomodern cinema can be observed also on the part of the artist him/herself. Although filmmakers from different parts of the world draw richly from local artistic traditions, they are at the same time deeply entangled in a complex global network of artistic and economic connections. Weerasethakul was educated at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where he studied the films of important figures of early *slow cinema* in the 1990s: Tarr, Tsai, and Kiarostami.³² Weerasethakul openly speaks about his involvement in international art film culture that overrides national or cultural divisions³³, and of his inspirations from European modernist cinema of the 1960s.³⁴ Now he is one of the lecturers at Sarajevo's Film.factory: a film school founded and managed by Béla Tarr, who invited many important figures of *slow cinema* to form the faculty.

Unobvious connections like the ones described above lead to the vital question of neomodernism's geography. Generally, when examining the problem of modernism, one has to ask not only when it happened, but also where it happened. In relation to modernist literature, Susan Stanford Friedman recalled Frederic Jameson's call to “always historicize” and complemented it with her own plea: “always spatialize”.³⁵ The same is also valid for cinema, and the contemporary global artistic market requires new kinds of analysis. This is also why new terms are coined readily; Nicolas Bourriaud proposed the name altermodernism, defined “by rapidly increasing lines of communication and travel in a globalized world. If early twentieth-century Modernism is characterized as a broadly Western cultural phenomenon, and Postmodernism was shaped by ideas of multi-culturalism, origins and identity, Altermodern is expressed in

³² Marc Menichini, *Interview: Apichatpong Weerasethakul Recalls His Past Films and Future Plans*, Criticwire, accessed February 17, 2015, <http://blogs.indiewire.com/criticwire/interview-apichatpong-weerasethakul-recalls-his-past-films-and-future-plans>

³³ Mark Peranson and Kong Rithdee, *Ghost in the Machine: Apichatpong Weerasethakul's Letter to Cinema*, Cinema Scope, accessed February 17, 2015, <http://cinema-scope.com/spotlight/spotlight-ghost-in-the-machine-apichatpong-weerasethakul's-letter-to-cinema/>

³⁴ Karin Badt, *Interview With Winner of Cannes Festival: Thai Director Weerasethakul Speaks About Reincarnation*, Huffington Post, accessed February 17, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/karin-badt/interview-with-winner-of_b_587179.html

³⁵ Susan Stanford Friedman, 'Periodizing Modernism: Postcolonial Modernities and the Space/Time Borders of Modernist Studies', *Modernism/modernity*, vol. 13, no 3 (2006), p. 426.

the language of a global culture. Altermodern artists channel the many different forms of social and technological networks offered”.³⁶

Contemporary neomodernist cinema completes this slow process of decentralization, progressing gradually from highly condensed pre-war European movements through the first truly global artistic trends in the age of New Waves and arriving at XXI century radical dispersion. Today, the well-established and long-celebrated national cinemas of France, Italy, or Germany seem to be somewhat exhausted when it comes to high modernist filmmaking, and the refreshing impulses most often come from countries that until recently didn't have much art-house exposure. This brings to attention a familiar argument that will not be further developed in this article but has to be mentioned: modernist aesthetics emerge in countries where the processes of modernization are the most persistent at a given moment. Whatever the reason was, neomodernism was born at the same time in Tsai Ming-liang's Taiwan, Abbas Kiarostami's Iran, Alexander Sokurov's Russia, and Béla Tarr's Hungary; later on, directors from Latin America, Western and Eastern Europe, and the Middle and Far East all contributed to the shaping of this new tendency.

Nevertheless, it must be stressed firmly that this change is not a matter of plain relocation. The informal capital of modernist cinema did not simply move from the Paris of the 1960s New Wave to, for example, the Bangkok of Apichatpong Weerasethakul in the 2000s. There is something more to it: the capital ceased to exist and the periphery became a centre. This shift can be observed on the smaller, national level as well: for example, in the career of Bruno Dumont, who can be considered a main figure of French neomodernist cinema. Contrary to all his predecessors from the long tradition of French film modernism, Dumont lives, shoots and sets his movies mostly in rural areas of the Nord region, symbolically abandoning Paris, the city towering over all French cinema to this day.

At the same time, the disappearance of clearly defined centres of modernist cinema production does not mean that there are no “hubs”. As always, this function is fulfilled partially by film festivals, cinema journals, and public institutions supporting and promoting film culture. However, the real revolution that made this global neomodernist movement possible was the development of an international coproduction model. Due to the large number of film funds and production or distribution companies, Western Europe remains the centre of gravity for international art cinema. European Union countries (especially France and Germany) dominated this market of cultural production, coproducing films of almost every celebrated neomodernist director from all over the world. Most of these directors began their career making locally produced films, but all the mature works of Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Tsai Ming-liang, Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Abbas Kiarostami, Carlos Reygadas, Eastern European directors like Béla Tarr and Alexander Sokurov, and others were made thanks to Western European funds.

³⁶ Nicolas Bourriaud, *The Death of Postmodernism and Emergence of Altermodernism*, accessed February 17, 2015, <http://www.psfk.com/2009/02/the-death-of-postmodernism-and-emergence-of-altermodernism.html>

Production and distribution companies like Germany's The Match Factory or France's Wild Bunch, big TV companies (ZDF, Arte, Canal +) and public film funds (the Hubert Bals Fund or the Council of Europe-funded Euroimages) are responsible for producing most of the films that can be considered as neomodernist. These movies are made under the supervision of European producers, largely with the international festivals and art-house audiences in mind. The influence of this economic conditioning on the aesthetic, political, and artistic qualities of works is yet to be examined, but it resolutely precludes the notion that directors from different cultural backgrounds are completely separated from the international film circuit. This complicated situation will most probably soon force us to rethink thoroughly our idea of centre/periphery relations in the field of artistic production and the institutional basis of contemporary art cinema.

Sense of an ending

Academic reflection comes too late, as always. The last couple of years finally brought the first scholarly monographs analysing *slow cinema* more closely. They include expanded overviews of the entire movement³⁷ as well as book-length studies of its most prominent figures: Béla Tarr, Tsai Ming-liang, and Aleksander Sokurov.³⁸ They were published at an interesting point of solstice, when the movement seems to have been at its most influential but at the same time probably close to its end. Neomodernism, as expected, is a slow movement. It rose to prominence slowly in the 1990s without any manifestos or glamorous successes and now we can presumably observe its equally slow decline. Symptoms are numerous.

Some of the earliest directors creating the canon of neomodernism in 1990s have now reached the culmination of their long-developed poetics. Their radical artistic pursuit led them to the point of no return. Béla Tarr quit filmmaking after the apocalyptically minimalist *The Turin Horse* and became engaged in other activities supporting the film industry as president of the Hungarian Filmmakers' Association and the head of the film school in Sarajevo. Tsai Ming-liang announced that he was abandoning feature filmmaking and focusing on short forms like his series of filmed performances of "slow walking". Each of those films pictures Lee Kang-sheng (Tsai's long-standing collaborator) dressed as a Buddhist monk and performing an extremely slow walk in a public place. Filmed with a distanced, immobile camera and without any

³⁷ Ira Jaffe, *Slow movies: Countering the cinema of action* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2014).

³⁸ András Bálint Kovács, *The Cinema of Béla Tarr: The Circle Closes* (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2013); Song Hwee Lim, *Tsai Ming-liang and a Cinema of Slowness* (Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2014); Birgit Beumers and Nancy Condee (eds.), *The Cinema of Alexander Sokurov* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011); Jeremi Szaniawski, *The Cinema of Alexander Sokurov: Figures of Paradox* (New York: Wallflower Press/Columbia University Press, 2014); Only Abbas Kiarostami enjoyed greater attention from film scholars with first monographs being published already in the early 2000s.

trace of plot, this series marks a final stage of slow cinema's pursuit of contemplation and the void. Before Tarr and Tsai, Abbas Kiarostami made a similar shift away from feature filmmaking, realizing a series of highly experimental films in the mid-2000s but then moving back to more conventional filmmaking with his final projects completed before his death in 2016: *Copie conforme* (2010) and *Like Someone in Love* (2012) (both made notably outside Iran).

This sliding toward a more conventional mode of cinema becomes another sign of neomodernism's demise. Some directors abandon their line of radical experimentation, trying to make their aesthetics more accessible for wider audiences by using more traditional narration (like Kiarostami, mentioned above) or TV-series formula (Bruno Dumont in the clearly self-parodistic *Li'l Quinquin* [2014]), or casting well-known actors (like Viggo Mortensen in Alonso's *Jauja* [2014] or Juliette Binoche in Dumont's *Camille Claudel 1915* [2013] and *Slack Bay* [2016]).

Finally, an unexpected and paradoxical threat to neomodernism's identity and stability might derive from its own success. Growing festival acclaim (sealed by such achievements as the Palme d'or for *Uncle Boonmee...* in 2010, the Venice Golden Lion for Sokurov's *Faust* in 2011 and the Silver Bear in Berlin for Tarr's *The Turin Horse* earlier the same year) triggered an increased popularity of neomodern aesthetics among viewers, festival programmers, and directors. Consequently, more and more weight accrues to opinions such as that of Steven Shaviro, who criticized *slow cinema* on his blog as “a sort of default international style that signifies 'serious art cinema' without having to display any sort of originality or insight. ‘Contemplative cinema’ has become a cliché: it has outlived the time in which it was refreshing or inventive”.³⁹

Will this emergence of “slow-kitsch” become the end of neomodern cinema? It is possible: every film movement of great importance (and in my opinion neomodernism is such a movement) finally reaches the point of mannerist self-pastiche (some examples of *slow cinema* parody can be observed already, as in the case of Sergio Caballero's *La distancia/The Distance* [2014]). Nevertheless, a turning point like the one we are witnessing right now is perhaps the best moment to capture the movement's specificity and examine it more carefully. This article is a modest attempt to identify the neomodernist movement in contemporary cinema, and its aim is only to inspire more detailed studies.

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³⁹ Steven Shaviro, *Slow Cinema Vs Fast Films*, accessed February 17, 2015, <http://www.shaviro.com/Blog/?p=891>

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