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Slow movies, slow food, slow religion - these are a few of the Slow-life movements that are gathering serious attention in contemporary discourse, widely considered as the most immediate way to combat the fast-paced demands of everyday life, directly challenging the onslaught of high-speed progress, technological advancements, and a globalized economy. In a timely and thoughtful manner, Lutz Koepnick turns his analysis on the nature of slowness itself in his recent book, *On Slowness: Towards an Aesthetic of the Contemporary*.

Koepnick’s *On Slowness: Toward an Aesthetic of the Contemporary* is a critical examination of contemporary art that gazes straight into the velocity of the present. His work is far from self-help books that seek to focus the over stimulated mind. It does not promise to rescue speed addicts from the rushing stream of accelerated productivity, nor does it declare that decelerationism is our ultimate salvation. He seeks to define what it means to be contemporary, and presents “aesthetic slowness,” as a means of understanding that. Koepnick defines aesthetic slowness not simply as a reversal of the dominant trends of speed but as a way of transforming our current understanding of space and time and as a perspective that enables us to explore the multiple temporalities that exist within a complex, ever changing present. To be contemporary, Koepnick echoes Giorgio Agamben, is to be “once timely and untimely”.1 Contemporaneousness is defined as one’s ability to be both within the present, as well as being able to see one’s self within it. To go slow, in Koepnick’s view, is to allow one’s self to not only look forward, but to look sideways, backwards, upwards - to face the obscurity of the now head on. Koepnick’s analysis of aesthetic slowness explores photography, cinema, video installation, sculpture, sound, and the future of the humanities – and yes, he takes his time.

Koepnick begins his search in the depths of modernist acceleration. He examines the origins of present day velocity and interprets different notions of speed. He begins with the work of Italian Futurists Giacomo Balla, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, and Anton Giulio Bragaglia. Koepnick criticizes their eagerness to sacrifice the unpredictable in the name of progress. Progress here is being compared to Marinetti’s fascination with the racing automobile and serves as an invitation to “go with the flow, to serve as a mere index of the passing of time”.2 To unify all temporalities into one projectile, in this case the speeding car, is to reject all forms of difference and produce a no-alternative future. Modernism itself, Koepnick argues, cannot be thought of as one unified

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1 Agamben, 41
2 Koepnick, 17
movement, and thus the idea of progress is more complex. What Koepnick seeks to define is what he calls “slow modernism”\(^3\), a way of seeing modern velocity as “a force field defining the present as a site of uncontained potentiality and multiplicity.”\(^4\) Koepnick utilizes Umberto Boccioni’s sculpture, *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* as his prime example. According to Koepnick, Boccinoni’s figure strides into “a future full of options, choices, and possible interactions, a future in which both the durational and spatial exist in the plural.”\(^5\)

Koepnick’s choice in analyzing the root of speed, and thus the root of slowness, is striking, and unexpected. It is this contrariness, thoughtfully stitched into every chapter of the book, that allows the text to lift off the page into something the reader can handle and wrestle with as opposed to a static, 2-dimensional map that outlines the path of least resistance. It offers the reader something that *Slow-Life Movements* cannot- a complete picture of slowness. As Koepnick articulates several times, slowness cannot be defined without its speedy counterpart, modern velocity. Koepnick’s aim to complicate the discourse around slowness is relevant in the very fact that it counters the trends in polarization that are taking place around art and politics today.

Walter Benjamin’s image of the Angel of History supports Koepnick’s aim to complicate slowness, depicting history itself not as an image of linear, forward momentum, but as a suspended desire to “awaken the dead.” It is caught in the storm of rapid change that serves as the very force that keeps it aloft. This image of being held aloft by the storm of modern acceleration and being able to gaze straight into it seems to be a defining feature of Koepnick’s contemporary examples. The open shutter photography of Hiroshi Sugimoto and Michael Wesely is perhaps Koepnick’s strongest example of this. Sugimoto and Wesely take long exposure shots of modernity’s most iconic sites, the cinema and the train station, in order to capture their temporal and spacial multiplicity. The co-dependence and complex interrelation between time and space is one of Koepnick’s most compelling ideas. Through open shutter photography, Hiroshi Sugimoto’s photographs of cinemas seem to turn time into space, pulling the viewer out of the cause-and-effect chain of a linear film narrative. Michael Wesely’s portraits of European train stations complicate our understanding of place, of near and far, of departure and arrival. In contrast to the modernist preference of favouring the transformative potential of time over the static presence of space, Koepnick’s analysis of Sugimoto and Wesely depict space as heavily obscure, untidy, dynamic and infinitely intertwined with time.

In chapter 4, “Dream Time Cinema”, and chapter 5, “Free Fall”, Koepnick turns to how aesthetic slowness is depicted in film. He explores the idea of “dreamtime” in cinema, or the “art of embodied looking.”\(^6\) In the films of Peter Weir’s *The Last Wave* (1977) and Werner Herzog’s *The Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010). For Koepnick, these films introduce a physical element in the viewing experience, “redfin(ing) the screen as a threshold or door rather than an ocular viewing device.”\(^7\) Koepnick introduces the idea of dreamtime, describing it as a sacred, and

\(^{3}\) Koepnick, 15.
\(^{4}\) Koepnick, 30.
\(^{5}\) Ibid.
\(^{6}\) Koepnick, 120
\(^{7}\) Koepnick, 121
timeless domain that pushes against the frame of reality. In film, it seems to serve as a reconfiguration of the screen, navigating an alternative representation and to allow us to “touch upon topographies, objects, and histories not of our making.” For this, Koepnick leans heavily on abbreviated notions of aboriginal spirituality in order to support his arguments. Here, there appears to be an assumption on the universalism of sense seeing, an assumption that risks overlooking the complexity of indigenous knowledge and seems to claim that anyone can enter a sacred dream time space simply through watching a film. It is a tactic that forces the reader to question the author’s ethics, let alone his arguments around sense seeing. Here, much like the character David (played by Richard Chamberlain) in The Last Wave, Koepnick seems to be pulling away from his original analysis and driving towards a desire to acquire the world-views “not of our making” or rather, that of the other. This tactic seems misplaced and insensitive in an otherwise very thoughtful text.

In perhaps one of the book’s strongest chapters, Video and the Slow Art of Interlacing Time, Koepnick uses the instability of video, both in its institutional existence and its ontological definition, to define the now as a site interlaced with fragmented pasts, presents and futures. Willie Doherty’s video installation, Ghost Story, is the catalyst of this revelation. Doherty’s video addresses the trauma of Ireland’s Troubles through Steadi-cam technology and spoken text, neither of which offers a connected narrative. Instead, the viewer is confronted with a dehumanized, almost ghost-like perspective, one that captures the unrepresentable or invisible. This fragmentation illustrates the present as a place that can never fully be inhabited. To embrace slowness is in fact a rupture, a multiplicitous disruption, one that allows the self to un-master, to walk beside one’s self, to surrender to the uncontrollable, to recognize the inevitable failure of existing in the here and now. This thought works against conventional notions of therapy that encourage the patient to work through the pain of the past. It also contrasts self-help discourse that perceives slowness as a tactic of reducing complexity in order to simplify decision-making. Instead, Koepnick’s depiction of slowness embraces the complexity of the here and now and navigates how to move with that into an unstable future.

Koepnick continues his attack on today’s slow life movements by comparing their desires for instant spiritual salvation to that of the modernist speed addicts. This act of turning one’s back on the complexity of the moment could be interpreted as simply taking a repreive to plug in one’s mobile spirituality device in hopes of recreating faith and religious possibilities amid a confusing and tormented time, riddled with abstraction. In contrast, Koepnick adopts Siegfried Kracauer’s notion of “hesitant openness” which is simply nothing more than an open attitude toward many times: what is, what was and what is coming.

In his last chapter, Those Who Read, Koepnick turns his analysis on himself and considers the future of the humanities. He is quick to point out that the slow nature of critical writing can be perceived as out-of-date in contrast to the technological advances in other sciences. It could even be seen as echoing early bourgeois intellectual thought, conjuring up images of old white men sitting in a smoking room, taking their time with long sentences and irrelevant words. Koepnick

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8 Ibid, 119.
9 Koepnick, 139
10 Koepnick, 197
11 Koepnick, 252
challenges this by recognizing the need for different notions of progress. Slowness remains of critical importance in the simple fact that it can detect the co-presence of different durations and allow us to think of the future as not one single, unified trajectory, but as an uncertain and complex yet-to-be.

Koepnick’s multidisciplinary approach in *On Slowness: Toward an Aesthetic of the Contemporary* makes his ideas accessible to a wide audience. Anyone with an interest in contemporary art or of slowness in general would find his concepts relevant. Although at times the thesis of the book seems to be echoed within the same chambers of thought, being rephrased in the same way one too many times, Koepnick’s mantra holds weight and gravitas. This thoroughly critical, engaging and patient insight has much to contribute to what it means to be contemporary.

**Works Cited**


**Bio**

Ian is an MFA candidate in Contemporary Art at Simon Fraser University. He is a multifaceted theatre maker whose unique practice of landscape poetics, junkyard theatrics and performative alchemy explores the unexpected correspondence between the performing body and the performing-of the world. Using the disciplines of puppetry, eco-scenography and sensory ethnography as foundations for creative inquiry, Ian creates works for the theatre, outdoor spectacles and community-led projects across Canada and New England, having worked with Bread and Puppet Theater, the Old Trout Puppet Workshop and Swallow-a-Bicycle Theatre. Ian is also a founding Co-Artistic Director of Mudfoot Theatre in Calgary, AB.