

Wang Bing's *15 Hours*
and the Chimera of Endlessness

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21'

(1)
Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960), 165.

“Does the spectator ever succeed in exhausting the objects he contemplates? There is no end to his wanderings.”
Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 1960 (1)

The complaint is by now old: major international exhibitions contain more hours of moving-image art than it will be possible for any visitor to watch. Such gripes speak to the temporal anxiety that haunts the display of moving images in a gallery. Unlike a painting, fully and immediately available to the gaze, the moving image is only ever partially there. It withholds. Its past and future states of appearance weigh heavily on the fragmentary glimpse it proffers at any given moment, tugging backward and forward in time, activating faculties of memory and anticipation. A moving-image artwork is always more than it yields in an instant, inhabiting a time of its own that flows with no regard for the viewer. The classical cinematic *dispositif* tamed this quality by imposing scheduled starting times and the hegemony of the feature film, indulging spectatorial fantasies of masterfully apprehending the whole. In the gallery, however, such assurances are not guaranteed.

When short films are installed on loop, one can choose to dwell long enough to see the work begin anew. But what of those installations of extreme length that deliberately deny such comforts? Faced with monumental running times, one option is to bemoan the surfeit of hours. Sometimes, there is good reason to do so: the immense quantity of video on display in an exhibition can be tied to a failure to secure for artworks the perceptual conditions they need to be properly appreciated. But there are also cases when artists mobilize long formats to their own ends, producing works that no viewer is expected to experience in their entirety. Instead of framing overwhelming duration as a problem or failure, what if thinking began from a recognition that the time of the image is intended to exceed the individual gaze? This is one of the things that Wang Bing’s *15 Hours* (2017), a fifteen-hour account of a day in a Chinese garment workshop, asks us to consider.

Shot in August 2016, *15 Hours* was filmed in Children’s Garment Workshop number 68 on Xisheng Road in Zhili Town, part of Huzhou City in Zhejiang Province (fig. 1). The titular duration is divided into two parts of the same length. *15 Hours* has frequently been described as a “single-shot documentary,” whether by documenta, its commissioner, or by the Film Society of Lincoln Center in New York and Eye Filmmuseum in Amsterdam, venerable institutions where it was subsequently exhibited. In fact, filming was interrupted four times, as Wang confronted the technological limitations of digital capture. (2) There is no effort to dissimulate these cuts as, for instance, Alfred Hitchcock did in *Rope* (1948), another “single-shot”

(2)
As Marie-Laure Gilles, a director at Galerie Chantal Crousel put it, “Indeed, the shooting has been interrupted 4 times, because of needed to change the battery of the camera (Sony F3). Each break takes less than a minute. Actually, Wang Bing wanted to shoot in a single sequence and thought that handling the battery change would not necessarily stop the camera. But, it was not the case... After the shooting, he bought a new battery that lasts more than 15 hours and the team made a second shoot 3 days later in a single sequence of 16 hours but the result was less better than the first shoot and Wang Bing decided to keep the first shoot as final one.” Marie-Laure Gilles, email to the author, June 28, 2019.

film that is nothing of the sort. Digital cameras easily overcome the roughly eleven-minute limit of shots registered on 35 mm, but even these takes cannot last forever; memory cards and batteries can only do so much. Nonetheless, *15 Hours* asserts the continuity of space and time with force, registering the rhythms and repetitions of work, all the microevents of an unexceptional day. Adopting a one to one shooting ratio, the installation effaces any difference between rushes and finished product.

An opening title card relates that Zhili Town “is home to around 18,000 small factories for children’s clothing, manned throughout the year by over 200,000 migrant workers. In the 1980s, Zhejiang saw the emergence of a private capital-based garment industry open to any and all operators prepared to invest in flexible business models based on mutual credit or leasing. Today, Zhili accounts for 80% of China’s output of children’s clothes.” Wang began filming at 8 a.m. as workers were arriving, accompanying them throughout the day, until they finished around 11 p.m. Sitting at benches equipped with sewing machines, men and women cut and stitch at a rapid pace, their income directly tied to the number of pieces they can complete in a given amount of time (figs . 2–7). The frame of the handheld camera wavers slightly as it observes them, indexing the director’s bodily presence behind it, periodically reframing to articulate spatial relationships and direct attention. (3) It pans and travels to follow the workers when they move or when Wang’s point of interest shifts. The camera’s movement betrays the presence of an embodied intelligence behind it, yet its unblinking look remains decidedly machinic; the approach is observational without ever claiming objectivity, indexing the cinematographer’s corporeal presence. In this regard, it is emphatically distant from the Warholian stare, a fixity that apocryphally allowed the artist to walk away after the camera began to roll. From time to time, a subtitle introduces an individual: “SHUAI Hongzia, 26, from Yatan, Anhui. In Zhili for 10 years.” The workers chat, but not that much, largely confining their remarks to issues pertaining to their tasks. The rhythmic buzz of the machines creates a hypnotic intermittence that provides a sonic counterpoint to the flow of the image. Throughout, Wang is unobtrusive. Very occasionally, workers remark upon his presence, as when one woman invites him to join her for lunch. He declines, remaining in the empty workshop with scraps of fabric strewn over the floor and fans whirring overhead.

15 Hours is far from Wang’s first long-format work. Over the last two decades, he has achieved international renown for adopting an epic scale to document the history of China and its rapidly changing present, often confronting political subjects that prevent his works from being shown in the country of his birth, instead enjoying a reception primarily in Europe and North America. (4) *Tie Xi Qu: West of the Tracks* (1999–2003), a depiction of the decline of industry in Shenyang, clocks in at 554 minutes; *Dead Souls* (2018), comprised of interviews with individuals who survived a forced labor camp in the Gobi Desert in the 1950s, is 495 minutes. These films are so long that one might deem them better suited to the gallery, but they are so dependent on the accumulating weight of time that they could seem more appropriate for the cinema. Wang has embraced both exhibition contexts, recognizing their differing affordances. Premiering

(3)
The cinematography of *15 Hours* is credited to Wang Bing and Liu Xianhui.

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In a 2018 interview, Wang said, “None of my films have shown in China except for this year, for the first time, my last film, *Mrs. Fang*, will play at the Shanghai International Film Festival. But otherwise none of my other films have been shown, so I’ve kind of grown used to it.” Wang Bing quoted in Annabel Brady-Brown, “This Grey Zone: Wang Bing Discusses *Dead Souls*,” MUBI, Notebook Interview, May 14, 2018, <https://mubi.com/de/notebook/posts/this-grey-zone-wang-bing-discusses-dead-souls>.

at documenta 14, *15 Hours* was shown four times at the Gloria cinema in Kassel throughout the one hundred days of the exhibition, beginning at 7:40 a.m., but was more widely seen in the portion of the quinquennial that exceptionally took place in Athens, where it was installed at the EMST National Museum of Contemporary Art in a large central room. Minimal seating was provided in the form of four benches, but many visitors viewed the work standing, as they passed through the space. Despite his openness to flexible display conditions, Wang has stated that he makes two kinds of films, those intended for the cinema (even if they sometimes show in galleries) and those made specifically for the gallery. (5) In the first category are works such as *Dead Souls* and *Bitter Money* (2016), a 152-minute feature that, like *15 Hours*, focuses on garment workers in Huzhou but, unlike it, observes their lives at work and during leisure time, within a loose narrative arc. In the second, one finds *Crude Oil* (2008), a fourteen-hour film that premiered as an installation at the International Film Festival Rotterdam, and, of course, *15 Hours*. These are works that imagine their viewers as mobile, not subject to a necessary commitment to teleological spectatorship, freed from the burden of attending to the whole.

15 Hours might seem like a simple gesture. One might dismiss it for its lack of analysis or criticize it for being a “mere” recording, a document that has failed to become a documentary. (6) But this would be too easy. Instead, it is worth considering how the installation’s presentation of a protracted duration in all likelihood to be witnessed by no spectator in its totality may be understood in relation to longstanding film theoretical debates concerning realism and the long take, debates which have in recent years been reignited by the unprecedented durational possibilities of digital capture and the emergence of a strong documentary impulse in contemporary art. Situated at the intersection of these discourses, *15 Hours* complicates key assumptions of both, exiting the cinema so as to reaffirm what for Siegfried Kracauer was a crucial capacity of film: “the power of deepening and rendering more intimate ‘our relation to this Earth which is our habitat.’” (7)

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Prominent theorizations of the digital cinema have focused on qualities such as hybridity, imagination, and painterliness. Thomas Elsaesser, for instance, has described digital cinema as a “graphic mode” akin to painting in its requirement of “craft and skill,” deeming it “expressive” rather than “reproductive,” as its photochemical antecedent before it had been. (8) For D. N. Rodowick, following the adoption of digital tools, “The image becomes not only more painterly but also more imaginative. Its powers of documentation are diminished or decentered in relation to the presentation of counterfactually conditional worlds.” (9) In place of the miracle of the *acheiropoieton*—the image produced without the intervention of the human hand—the digital image heralds the return of an image all too human, tailored through the intermediary of algorithmic tools.

These assessments are not wrong. Such qualities are widespread, particularly in popular cinema, where workflows have shifted drastically to privilege postproduction as a site of creation. Yet it must

(5)
Wang Bing in conversation with the author, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, April 14, 2019, recording available on YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kBRHZXAU_pY.

(6)
In Philip Rosen’s words, “If shots as indexical traces of past reality may be treated as documents in the broad sense, documentary can be treated as a conversion from the document. This conversion involves a synthesizing knowledge claim, by virtue of a sequence that sublates an undoubtable referential field of pastness into meaning.” See Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 240.

(7)
The quotation in this passage is from Gabriel Marcel. See Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 304.

(8)
Thomas Elsaesser, “The New New Hollywood: Cinema Beyond Distance and Proximity,” in *Moving Images, Culture, and the Mind*, ed. Ib Bondebjerg (Luton: University of Luton Press, 2000), 187–204, here 192–93.

(9)
D. N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 105.



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figs. 1-7 Wang Bing, *15 Hours*, 2017, 16:9 film, color, sound – in two parts (7 h 55 min each), 15 h 50 min, edition of 6 + 2 AP. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris. © Wang Bing.



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also be recalled that digital technologies also offer new possibilities of durational recording. As Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge have noted, digital cameras have been a key condition of possibility for the cinemas of slowness that have claimed prominence in recent decades, with the long take as a favored device—something that must be kept in mind when considering how often digital cinema is yoked to notions of acceleration and a fading of reality, and how common it is to see so-called “slow cinema” as nostalgic or technophobic. (10) In the case of *15 Hours*, the affordances of digital technologies are integral to the installation and are deployed to affirm the apparatus’s powers of documentation, rather than diminish or decenter them. Wang marshals the capacities of digital capture to preserve a stream of time.

In a very different way, notions of hybridity and imagination have also been central to discussions of the documentary turn in contemporary art. Since at least documenta 11, documentary practices have been a central feature of major international exhibitions and biennials. As Evgenia Giannouri has written, many artists’ documentary practices engage in “an aesthetic as well as methodological deconstruction of the genre,” often tempering a mimetic relation to reality in favor of formal reflexivity, fictionalization, and artifice. (11)

In the critical and curatorial discourse that has taken shape around these practices, the ability to access reality is forever in question. The following statement from Hito Steyerl and Maria Lind is exemplary:

Documentary modes [in contemporary art] still appeal to institutional modes of power/knowledge and cite their authority, but the effect is rather a perpetual doubt; a blurred and agitated documentary uncertainty, which paradoxically is extremely pertinent as an image of our times. It is precisely the failure of documentary to fulfil its pretense to certainty, which ultimately does justice to an intransparent and dubious contemporary reality. [...] Instead of denying this uncertainty, one should instead acknowledge its productive effects. (12)

Steyerl and Lind accurately assess the strategies put into play by many artists. Mannered stylization, fictionalization, and the foregrounding of subjectivity have become common ways of instilling an awareness of the inevitable gap that separates reality from representation, of grounding documentary practice in a recognition of epistemological crisis.

As I have argued elsewhere, the discourse that took shape around the documentary turn in contemporary art can be understood as a radicalization of the postmodern critique of documentary and its debunking of notions of immediacy, objectivity, and the testimonial power of lens-based capture (even as it continues to depend upon the latter). (13) Moreover, by championing artifice, understood as a locus of human creativity in opposition of the automatism of machinic recording, this discourse assimilates documentary to a traditional model of artistic subjectivity, one bound to individual expressivity. Together, these positions offer a powerful disqualification of the observational mode, a form of filmmaking grounded in the non-interventionist registration of events occurring in front of the lens. (14)

Such positions are widespread in accounts of the documentary turn in contemporary art and provide fair contextualization for

(10)
Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge, “Introduction: From Slow Cinema to Slow Cinemas,” in *Slow Cinema*, ed. Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 1–21, here 10–11. For an exemplary instance of the alignment of digital cinema with acceleration and a diagnosis of slow cinema as nostalgic and technophobic, see Steven Shaviro, “Slow Cinema vs. Fast Films,” *Pinocchio Theory* (blog), May 12, 2010, <http://www.shaviro.com/Blog/?p=891>, and *Post-Cinematic Affect* (Winchester: O-Books, 2010).

(11)
Evgenia Giannouri, “No Man’s Land, Every Man’s Home: Clemens von Wedemeyer’s Documentary Aporia,” trans. Maria Vlotides, in *Documentary Across Disciplines*, ed. Erika Balsom and Hila Peleg (Cambridge, MA and Berlin: MIT Press and Haus der Kulturen der Welt, 2016), 216–35, here 218.

(12)
Maria Lind and Hito Steyerl, “Introduction: Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art,” in *The Greenroom: Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art*, ed. Maria Lind and Hito Steyerl (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2008), 10–25, here 16.

(13)
See Erika Balsom, “To Narrate or Describe?: Experimental Documentary Beyond Docufiction,” in *Deep Mediations: Thinking Space in Cinema and Digital Cultures*, ed. Karen Redrobe and Jeff Scheible (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021), 180–96.

(14)
Bill Nichols aligns the observational mode with direct cinema and *cinéma vérité*, characterizing it as stressing the non-intervention of the filmmaker, relying on an impression of real time, the “exhaustive depiction of the everyday,” lacking retrospective commentary, and providing the “expectation of transparent access.” See Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 38–44.

many of the heterogeneous practices that fall under that umbrella—but not the work of Wang Bing. Wang is a leading figure in this tendency; although his films often premiere at prestigious festivals such as Cannes, Toronto, and Venice, since 2009 he has been represented by the Paris-based Galerie Chantal Crousel and exhibits widely in gallery and museum contexts, with funding for his projects increasingly stemming from this sphere. His commitment to durational recording and observational blankness, however, puts him at odds with the orthodoxy of documentary uncertainty. His practice is unmarked by doubt; his films demand faith in the reality of what is being shown and do not question the camera’s ability to present it to view.

In his lack of fit with the paradigm of documentary uncertainty, Wang is far from alone: against its positioning as a bad object, and departing from the ubiquity of docufiction, renowned artists including Éric Baudelaire, Kevin Jerome Everson, Antje Ehmann / Harun Farocki, and many filmmakers associated with Harvard University’s Sensory Ethnography Lab have embraced observational strategies. While these practices encompass an array of concerns and methods, they tend to share an interest in the long take as a compositional unit, emphasizing the qualitative integrity of the profilmic event and according primacy to the set of relations that exist within it over and above whatever capacity the filmmaker might possess to intervene, whether during shooting or at the postproduction stage. In 1993, David MacDougall wrote that “The long take has become the *terra incognita* of the modern documentary film, a blank space in a practice which devotes itself almost entirely to other properties of the shot,” noting that this is “contrary to its heritage, for documentary was born in the pleasures of watching such ordinary events as leaves shimmering on a tree or a train arriving at a station.” (15) These recent practices are evidence of the significant shift that has taken place since MacDougall’s article was published, a shift that might be conceptualized as a dialectical response to, on the one hand, the ubiquity of CGI and intensified continuity and, on the other, the “blurred boundaries” of postmodern documentary. These practices carry forward the extensive history of the long take into a changed historical, technological, and institutional context, summoning its associations not only with realist commitments but also its ties to the formal reflexivity of the 1960s and 1970s avant-garde.

15 Hours illuminates what is at stake in this tendency by pushing the penchant for the long take to an unprecedented extreme. Although there is no precise agreement as to precisely how long a long take must be in order to be worthy of the name, its shots are surely amongst the lengthiest in the history of cinema, more akin in their duration to the relentless stare of the CCTV camera and yet sharply differentiated from this mode of visuality through the inscription of Wang’s somatic presence as he winds his way through the space of the workshop. Much recent scholarship concerning the adoption of protracted temporalities emphasizes the dilation of narrative and the spectator’s endurance of the glacial crawl of time, but neither applies here; there is no narrative to slow down and no assumption that the viewer will stay for a defined period, let alone for the entirety of the work.

(15)
David MacDougall, “When Less is Less,” in *Transcultural Cinema*, ed. Lucien Castaing-Taylor (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 209–23, here 209.

How, then, can the temporal strategy of *15 Hours*—an installation that affirms duration to such a point that its viewer is released from the experience of it—be described? In his 1960 book *Theory of Film*, Siegfried Kracauer names endlessness as one of the medium's inherent affinities, alongside the unstaged, the fortuitous, the indeterminate, and the flow of life. All of these are at play in *15 Hours*, but endlessness deserves special attention as a concept that might help to unravel the installation's particular deployment of time and its relation to the viewer.

For Kracauer, endlessness names those instances when it is as if the medium "were animated by the chimerical desire to establish the continuum of existence." (16) Why is this desire "chimerical"? Most obviously, the "desire to establish the continuum of existence" is chimerical in the sense that it names an impossibility: perfect isomorphism between profilmic reality and filmic representation cannot exist. The filmic record will always be partial. Even in *15 Hours*, the continuous registration of the workday is rent by ellipses of roughly one minute of profilmic time each, a span Wang needed to change the battery of his Sony F3 camera. There is, however, also a second, less foreseeable and more literal meaning attached to this word in Kracauer's usage, bound to the mythological fire-breathing creature of the chimera. In his first example of filmic endlessness, one which underlines its bond with the long take, he sketches an experience of horrific monstrosity.

In a subsection entitled "24 consecutive hours," Kracauer discusses Fernand Léger's 1931 text "À propos du cinéma," a four-page essay that concludes with a paragraph in which the author imagines a day-long film. (17) Léger proposes an experiment in mediated observation, dreaming of "new and mysterious apparatuses" that would enable an average couple to be filmed for twenty-four hours without their knowledge, "without letting anything escape: their work, their silence, their private life, their love life." (18) This parable of surveillance might sound like a vision of reality television *avant la lettre* but should not be construed as such: lacking the imposition of a narrative arc, absolutely central to so-called "structured reality" programs made for broadcast, Léger imagines that this film will be presented *tout cru*, without intervention.

Léger's dream of a day-long film predates Cesare Zavattini's better-known 1952 article "Some Ideas on the Cinema," in which the screenwriter holds that cinema has an "original and innate capacity for showing things that we believe are worth showing, as they happen day by day—in what we might call their 'dailiness,' their longest and truest duration." (19) For Zavattini, a film should not show a plane pass overhead once, but twenty times. Notably, even if elsewhere he refers to Italian neorealist films, here Zavattini resorts to a fabricated example, like Léger. It is a gesture found, too, in Bazin's "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema," in which he conjures "a film by Stroheim composed of a single shot as long-lasting and as close-up as you like." (20) Prior to the experiments in duration undertaken by Andy Warhol in the 1960s, it seems that film theorists more readily located extended duration in the realm of conceptual possibility than in practical actuality. They strain beyond the limits of what was viable, what was watchable, what existed, in order to ponder the possibilities of realism. Their fabulations hint at forms of duration more radical than anything in existence at the time, forms that

(16)
Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 63.

(17)
Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 63.

(18)
Fernand Léger, "À propos du cinéma," in *L'Intelligence du cinématographe*, ed. Marcel L'Herbier (Paris: Éditions d'aujourd'hui, 1977), 340 (translation mine).

(19)
Cesare Zavattini, "Some Ideas on the Cinema," in *Vittorio De Sica: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Howard Curle and Stephen Snyder (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 50–61, here 53.

(20)
André Bazin, "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema," in *What Is Cinema?*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. Hugh Grey (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1967), 23–40, here 27.

would materialize in practice some decades later. When speculating on the effect of his imaginary twenty-four-hour film on audiences, Léger paints a picture distant from the feelings of humanist solidarity that emanate from Zavattini, writing, "I think that this would be so terrible that the audience would flee horrified, calling for help, as if before a world catastrophe." (21) In line with his earlier mention of "chimerical desire," Kracauer calls Léger's invention a "monster film," swiftly summoning its enormity and enormousness, that is to say, its heinousness and immensity. He concurs with Léger and elaborates: "Such a film would not just portray a sample of everyday life but, in portraying it, dissolve the familiar contours of that life and expose what our conventional notions of it conceal from view—its widely ramified roots in crude existence. We might well shrink, panic-stricken, from these alien patterns which would denote our ties with nature and claim recognition as part of the world we live in and are." (22)

This association of observational realism and panic might strike readers as a surprise, particularly coming from a theorist who wrote passionately of cinema's ability to redeem physical reality in the aftermath of the devastation of World War Two. Negative responses to long duration in cinema tend to involve soporific boredom. Indeed, Zavattini opens by acknowledging that, "No doubt one's first and most superficial reaction to everyday reality is that it is tedious." (23) Notably, the reaction Léger and Kracauer imagine is not a dull lack of interest. Their hypothetical spectators do not leave the cinema out of impatience; they flee in horror. The recent proliferation of extremely slow films provides ample empirical evidence that this frenzied exodus from the cinema does not in fact occur. Nevertheless, recognizing that "À propos du cinéma" is a thought experiment that makes use of hyperbole, Léger's account of the twenty-four-hour film remains a valuable provocation, particularly as elements of its rhetoric recur in other important discussions linking realism and duration. When Bazin imagines Stroheim's interminable film, he writes of the world "lay[ing] bare for you all its cruelty and ugliness"; Gilles Deleuze posits that the eruption of quotidian banality in neorealist cinema yields a "nakedness, crudeness and brutality which make it unbearable." (24) In short, the evocation of cruelty and horror is not Léger's alone, but a recurring trope in the theorization of a commitment to physical reality articulated through durational recording. (25)

Kracauer imagines spectators fleeing, but he does not scorn the twenty-four-hour film. In the crudeness of its continuous flow of time, the viewer confronts an undoing of one of the great myths that much of cinema conveys: that of an ordered universe of causes and effects, where individual agency reigns sovereign and threat of contingency is safely managed. Jeffrey Skoller has proposed that continuous recordings "can be seen as a counter form of documentary narration that disrupts and undermines the mass-media temporalities of journalistic and documentary film exposition, which is always already shaping outcomes while creating the impression of a process that has not yet been determined." (26) The endless "monster film" recalls not only the avant-garde's predilection for difficulty, but also its interest in the reflexive interrogation of perceptual processes and its insistence on reformulating the relationship to meaning and

(21)
Léger, "À propos du cinéma," 340.

(22)
Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 64.

(23)
Zavattini, "Some Ideas," 50.

(24)
Bazin, "Evolution," 27; Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 4.

(25)
This bracing, alienating confrontation is a far cry from the more recent assessment of slowness found in the work of Lutz Koepnick, who sees the temporal expansiveness of the long take as an attempt "to make our hearts leap again" with wonder, inciting the positive affects of curiosity and surprise. See Lutz Koepnick, *The Long Take: Art Cinema and the Wondrous* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 18.

(26)
Jeffrey Skoller, "iDocument Police: Contingency, Resistance, and the Precarious Present," *World Records* 1 (2018), <https://world-recordsjournal.org/IDocument-police-contingency-resistance-and-the-precarious-present/>.

experience proper to the spectatorship of dominant cinema—something experimental filmmakers in the 1960s and 1970s would take up specifically in relation to duration. For structural filmmaker Malcolm Le Grice, for instance, the experience of duration creates a needed awareness of the materiality of time. (27) When the long take is pushed to new lengths and narrative development is minimized, what had seemed to be a realist device meets modernist ideals of anti-illusionism and estrangement.

The deployment of the long take found in recent experimental documentary practices straddles two traditions, taking up the avant-garde's materialist interest in temporal protraction without relinquishing a realist commitment to referentiality and social content. These practices, to borrow Kracauer's words, "pierce the fabric of conventions," thereby helping us to find "something we did not look for, something tremendously important in its own right—the world that is ours." (28) There is no claim here that cinema delivers over reality itself, fully and transparently; the desire to establish the continuum of existence remains chimerical. The paucity of editing in *15 Hours* must not be understood as an absence of form but as a radical assertion of form. Continuous recording is duplicative yet transformative, something that can crack the carapace of habit—including those habits formed through exposure to the dominant grammars of audiovisual media—such that it "dissolve[s] the familiar contours of [...] life." By pursuing the impossible isomorphism between profilmic and filmic temporalities, film can denature existence and filmic convention alike, effecting an estrangement that paradoxically occurs through mimesis. The desublimated "crudeness" and "ugliness" ascribed to the long take speak to an abandonment of classical ideals of composition and beauty, as the image is pulled down into swampy particularity, such that the spectator can become attuned to what Kracauer deemed the "murmur of existence" and to the dynamics of their own encounter with the image. (29)

The subject matter of *15 Hours* differs significantly from that of Léger's monster film. Trading the home for the workplace, Wang foregoes the intrusive exposure of intimacy. Like Kevin Jerome Everson's eight-hour *Park Lanes* (2015), which follows workers at a US factory producing bowling equipment, Wang leaves the hours of leisure and rest afforded to these workers off-screen, capturing life as it is lived in public, at a place of employment, focusing on manual labor in an age when so many speak of knowledge work and cognitive capitalism. But like the twenty-four-hour film, the day of *15 Hours* could be any other. The minutes and hours accumulate with nearly no interruption during this long day, and so it will the next and the next. It is here that Wang's decision to offer subtitles with information concerning how long each worker has been in Zhili takes on special resonance: the film proclaims how much time like this the individual has experienced. The installation's title, too, speaks to the void homogeneity of quantity without quality. Yet simultaneously, the day of *15 Hours* is resolutely one particular day. Preconceptions crumble in the face of concreteness. Whatever minimal structure exists—the start of work, the lunch break, the end of the day—is inundated by an undifferentiated time slight on meaning yet full of detail, presented to the spectator within a nearly uninterrupted block that insists on its presence. The stubbornly persistent images of *15 Hours* keep time in an

(27)
Malcolm Le Grice, *Abstract Film and Beyond* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977), 121.

(28)
Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 296.

(29)
Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 166.

unfolding now, claiming recognition of the world that is ours, a world of globalized flows of goods and people, outsourced production daily drudgery, and precarious migrant labor—a cruel world that is witnessed in its complexity rather than packaged and explained.

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The workers endure these fifteen hours, and so does Wang, who makes his workday commensurate with theirs. As for the visitor to the installation, they are free to come and go. The claim for duration in *15 Hours* resides firmly on the side of the image and the events registered within it; it does not extend to the viewer, as it would in a cinema. How can the long take instill a sense of endlessness when the viewer is able to roam? Questioning the relevance of Kracauer's analysis of film experience to a media ecology in which the space of the cinema is no longer primary, Miriam Hansen has noted that "the dynamics of self-alienation and self-absorption, the viewer's simultaneous abandonment to the world on screen and to its centrifugal impulses, would seem to belong to a cinema *dispositif* centering on projection in a darkened theater space." (30) In the case of *15 Hours*, the release of the viewer from a durational commitment might be enough to vitiate any encounter with the brutality of a mediated reality or with the materiality of time. In dispensing with the perceptual intensity of the cinema space, one might argue that *15 Hours* lets the viewer off the hook, allowing them to appreciate the idea of the installation without actually experiencing it phenomenologically. In his text "A New Kind of Epic Film," Lars Henrik Gass takes such a view of moving-image installations, sharply criticizing what he describes as "the merely conceptual freedom of all filmic installations which, due to their duration, either turn the audience into desperate consumers or hopeless participatory diletantes." (31)

There is certainly some validity to this position, in relation to moving-image installations in general and *15 Hours* in particular. At the same time, it is worth questioning why a use of the moving image that makes recourse to conceptualism—an undeniably central orientation within contemporary art—should be deemed an inherent problem. Instead of seeing *15 Hours* as perhaps trying and certainly failing to replicate the temporal experience of the cinema space, it is worth probing the conceptual dimension of the installation to explore how a sense of endlessness might in fact be enhanced by leaving the protocols of the movie theater behind.

Continuous recording is not the only route to endlessness, according to Kracauer. Another is found in those instances when films "caress one single object long enough to make us imagine its unlimited aspects." (32) At stake here is a sense of expansiveness, a conveyance of an inexhaustible complexity, that is suggestive of boundlessness even when real limits are present. If dwelling in the workshop for fifteen hours were not enough, the intimation of such "unlimited aspects" in *15 Hours* is abetted by the fact that the image was already there before the viewer's encounter with it and will remain there after they leave. It partakes in an obstinate *always-there-ness*, an ongoingness that endows the image with the kind of material presence dear to avant-gardists like Le Grice. The installation's title may give a precise running time, but it is one long enough so as to bleed into a

(30)
Miriam Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2012), 279.

(31)
Lars Henrik Gass, *Film and Art After Cinema*, trans. Laura Walde (Zagreb: Multimedijski Institut, 2019), 118.

(32)
Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 66.

feeling of perpetuity—particularly given the strong likelihood that the work’s duration will exceed the opening hours of most institutions that play host to it. By purposefully eclipsing any single viewer’s time and attention, by being always the same and always different, *15 Hours* creates a spectatorial experience that rhymes with the structure of Kracauer’s caress: the encounter with a block of extended duration spurs an imagination of an absent whole that remains unverified, elusive, and thus without defined limit. It is longer—more monotonous, more arduous, yet also more replete with life and particularity—than the viewer will know.

15 Hours imagines its spectator as dwarfed by the immensity of the Zhili workday. This viewer is intermittent, partial. They will never exhaust what the image offers. The installation frustrates any pretense to mastery, any possibility of partaking in the arrogant pleasure of grasping hold of the world with certainty through the agency of the gaze—thereby preempting a perennial criticism of the observational mode. Here, the long take becomes so long that filmic time extends beyond the viewer’s reasonable capacity for apprehension, dislodging them from any position of sovereignty over the represented scene, presenting the world in a manner that makes one cognizant of its infinite becoming. Attending to the endless murmur of existence, both through uninterrupted durational recording and through its proposal of an ambulatory encounter with an unverified totality, *15 Hours* pushes the long-take tradition beyond its classical iterations so as to reaffirm one of its central tenets: that a devotion to recording can give rise to forms of contact and implication that are able to unsettle and trouble the spectator in meaningful ways. (33)

(33)

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