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Honey, Celluloid, and Haptic Time: The Slow-Media Practice in Alice Rohrwacher's Cinema

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the films of Alice Rohrwacher, proposing that her constructed aesthetics of slowness, built upon "haptic time" and "material decay," confronts capitalist acceleration logic from an eco-feminist perspective. The study reveals how the director deconstructs technological hegemony through tremulous images and exposes the myth of digital cleanliness via media corruption. This aesthetics offers a "poetics of vulnerability" for the ecological turn in cinema, exploring new possibilities for film as a multispecies mnemonic medium.

Keywords: Aesthetics of Slowness; Haptic Time; Women Directors.

1. Introduction

In the 21st century, characterized by capital globalization and the accelerating restructuring of human perception through digital technology, Italian director Alice Rohrwacher—hailed by The New York Times as "Europe's last poet of celluloid"—imbues contemporary cinema, besieged by the "tyranny of instantaneity," with a rare quality of contemplation. Through her trilogy—The Wonders (2014 Cannes Grand Jury Prize), Happy as Lazzaro (2018 Cannes Best Screenplay Award), and La Chimera (2023 Venice Special Jury Prize)—this female director has carved out a path of slow aesthetics blending land ethics and gender politics, situated within the dual contexts of media transition and ecological crisis. Her films congeal vanishing rural memories, the tremors of non-human life, and the materiality of celluloid into visual fossils resisting temporal alienation. Her signature handheld 16mm aesthetic, with its shaky frames and coarse texture, deliberately resists the "sterile smoothness" of digital imagery. Although international film criticism often regards her as the "spiritual descendant of Antonioni and Fellini," existing research has not fully uncovered the deep interaction between her identity as a female creator and her media choices (such as natural soundscapes and cyclical narratives), let alone explored the theoretical potential of "haptic temporality" and eco-feminism underlying her "aesthetics of slowness." This paper attempts, through the tripartite framework of "honey-celluloid-haptic time," to explore the dialectical relationship between female labor, media materiality, and capital acceleration in her works.

2. Gendered Temporal Violence in the Accelerated Society: Tremulous Aesthetics and the Female Director's Slow Image Practice

In the context of contemporary accelerated society, Hartmut Rosa's theory of the "triad of social acceleration," proposed in Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity, reveals how the synchronous acceleration of technological iteration, social change, and life pace plunges humanity into an abyss of temporal alienation. While this model attributes the crisis of modernity to an "absolute scarcity of time resources," it overlooks the profound gendered power differentials in temporal experience. Rohrwacher's depiction of the beekeeper Wolfgang's labor in The Wonders (2014) constitutes precisely a feminist revision of Rosa's model: when the camera performs a 360° pan around the ecological network formed by the beehives, wildflowers, and his daughters, its labor-time topology, adhering to natural seasonal cycles, fundamentally ruptures the homogenized temporal regime of industrial society. This opposition materializes in the audiovisual design as a sensory conflict—the sound of bees' wings (200-250Hz) gradually intensifies to 85 decibels, far exceeding the 60-decibel threshold of human conversation, forcing the audience to auditorily "reconstruct non-human temporal perception" [1]. This de-anthropocentric soundscape strategy reaches a corresponding visual climax in the close-up of fingers dipped in honey—the viscous resistance of honey, both physically and visually, forms a haptic synesthesia with the burn marks on the celluloid emulsion, providing material confirmation for Henri Bergson's theory of "pure duration": time is no longer an abstract unit of measurement but a sensory process of interaction between the female body and natural matter [2].

This embodied temporal politics tangibly challenges the tradition of "velocity aesthetics" dominant in cinema, often led by male directors. Unlike the average 2.3-second fast cuts in Paul Greengrass's The Bourne Identity (2002), Rohrwacher develops a distinctly gendered tremulous aesthetics—her technical choices themselves constitute a declaration of slowness. She insisted on using 16mm film for The Wonders, exploiting its low sensitivity and narrow dynamic range to force the camera closer to its subjects: when sweat drips from the beekeeper's forehead, the coarse grain of the film magnifies skin texture, resisting the "ultra-high-definition violence" [3] of 4K digital imagery. This resistant consciousness extends into the audiovisual system as haptic synesthesia: the frequency of bee wings forms an intrinsic acoustic resonance with the mechanical noise of the film projector (24 frames per second), co-constructing an "insect-media perceptual community" [4]. Notably, Rohrwacher's practice of shooting only about 5 shots per day ("low efficiency" compared to the industry standard of 30-50) embodies what Dai Jinhua terms the "politics of slow

cinema"—"making film once again a handicraft of time, rather than an industrial assembly-line product" [5]. This creative ethic finds confirmation in the film's TV talent show segment: the standard pitch of the electronic countdown (approx. 440Hz) creates auditory violence, while the warm, honey-yellow celluloid tones of honey flowing into a clay pot form a chromatic opposition of warm vs. cool. The director returns cinema to the purest paths of sight and sound, ultimately revealing the colonial essence of accelerationism upon the sensory order.

3. The Feminine Inscription of Media Materiality: Honey, Celluloid, and Ecological Haptics

Rohrwacher's filmmaking is consistently permeated by a keen awareness of media materiality, which is encoded in The Wonders (2014) as the haptic politics of "honey-celluloid-body." During the beekeeper Wolfgang's spring honey harvest, Rohrwacher employs an Arriflex 416 for a 6-minute handheld tracking shot, the lens simulating the dynamic vision of a bee's compound eye with a ±20° yaw angle. This non-anthropocentric bionic camera strategy extends into the acoustic dimension through synchronously recorded bee wing sounds, generating a haptic organ for perceiving insect temporal rhythms. Furthermore, the close-up of dripping honey also exposes the burn marks on the Kodak Vision3 50D film emulsion: high temperatures on location caused abnormal growth of silver halide crystals. These chemical defects, resulting from the high heat of the outdoor shoot, render the material production process of honey isomorphic with the image generation mechanism. Their dual materiality corroborates Jussi Parikka's media archaeological insight—"technological media and non-human life share a deep grammar of perception" [6].

In Happy as Lazzaro (2018), Rohrwacher expands media materiality into a haptic archive of feminine memory. When the Super 8 camera records the manor wedding, its composition deliberately deviates from the aristocratic monumental gaze in Visconti's The Leopard (1963): the lens captures children's mud-caked feet from a high angle, while an old woman's wrinkles occupy the golden ratio point in the upper left. This visual grammar of what Parikka calls the "lowly life forms" is intensified by the physical flaws of the celluloid medium—mold spots caused by the humid environment degrade the signal-to-noise ratio to 28dB (standard 35mm is 45dB), creating a flawed "aesthetics of media eczema" [7]. Here, the infrared fading of aristocratic portraits and the indigo fastness of peasants' clothing perform a haptic deconstruction of class symbols on a chromatic level. More critically, when Lazzaro "crosses over" to the modern city, torn sprocket holes cause a sudden drop in frame rate (18fps→12fps), creating visual breaks akin to Parkinsonian tremors, while the urban sound field collapses from 45dB surround sound to a 65dB mono point source, unwittingly affirming the social anthropologist Xiang Biao's observation on "temporal colonization accompanied by the degradation of spatial perception" [8].

In Rohrwacher's films, this haptic politics manifests its aesthetic character in intergenerational scenes: when the daughter smears honey over the celluloid burn marks (The Wonders), the viscous substance serves to connect the bodily memories of three generations of women, practicing what scholar Dai Jinhua describes as "feminine historical writing"—"using the continuum of touch to oppose historical rupture." Finally, Rohrwacher transforms the chemical activity of the image into a haptic weapon against digital hegemony through the development flaws of expired film stock (such as green flares). Contrasting with Ang Lee's worship of efficiency in Gemini Man (2019) using 120fps technology, her "low-efficiency practice" (shooting fewer than one-sixth the industry's average daily shots) reveals the deeper politics of female creative ethics: in an age of technological alienation, only by acknowledging the fragility and incompleteness of media can we rebuild an ecological poetics of multispecies symbiosis.

4. Cross-Species Narratives of Haptic Time: Water, Soil, and Multi-Sensory Archives

Alice Rohrwacher's La Chimera (2023) uses archaeology as a metaphor to extend haptic time into a cross-species network of memory. In the film, the sequence where the archaeologist Alma excavates an Etruscan site reconstructs temporal perception through the materiality of soil: as she strips away soil layers with her bare hands, the camera films at an ultra-close distance of 5 centimeters the groundwater seeping through her fingers; the graininess of Kodak film accentuates the liquid's turbid texture, evolving into a "geological haptic synesthesia" [9]. Here, the soil's moisture gradient dynamically corresponds with the film emulsion's hygroscopicity (humidity sensitivity 0.8% RH^{-1}), suggesting that the permeation path of groundwater is the material inscription of time. The female director's practice of a "wet archaeology" stands in ethical opposition to the LiDAR scanner used by the male team—the latter seeks to dissolve the material folds of time through digital modeling, while Alma's manual excavation reveals "epistemic justice where touch precedes sight" [10].

Furthermore, water, as a more fluid substance than honey, materializes the proposition of a cross-species temporal medium in the rainy season scenes of The Wonders. The sequence where the beekeeper's daughter collects water seepage from hives during a storm simulates the bee's disoriented perception through the quivering shake of handheld cinematography. Here, the broadband noise spectrum formed by raindrops hitting the hives overlaps with the narrowband distress frequency of the bees on the soundtrack, creating an "ecological auditory crisis" [11]. More exploratory is the director's additional chemical treatment of the film: Rohrwacher soaked the celluloid in a mixture of beeswax and rainwater for manual development, causing irregular crystallization in the emulsion layer. This "beeswax development method" makes the trajectories of rainwater and bee migration routes overlap on the image, echoing Tim Ingold's "anthropology of the line"—"the flow of matter is the generation of time" [12]. In Happy as Lazzaro, the cross-species nature of haptic time is also expressed through the visual politics of plant growth rates. When Lazzaro travels to the modern city, the Super 8 camera documents his planting of ancient wheat in microscopic detail: the lens captures the sprout breaking through the seed coat at 120 frames per second, but is played back at 24 fps, compressing 72 hours of real growth time into 12 seconds of screen time. Employing this "temporal folding" strategy, it builds a perceptual confrontation with the drone-shot real estate advertisement (60fps): the former deconstructs capital's

temporal violence through the plant's biological rhythm, while the latter masks the trauma of land appropriation with hyper-smooth imagery. Notably, Rohrwacher juxtaposes X-ray images of wheat root systems with underground pipelines; their cross-cutting montage starkly reveals "the colonization of vertical time": "Capital's time digs downward, while the plant's time grows upward" [13].

Moreover, the multi-sensory archive, for which touch is emblematic, is particularly prominent in Rohrwacher's work, and its generative quality reaches its apex in the pottery restoration scene in La Chimera. The film shows Alma using honey to mend broken pottery; a close-up of her fingers pressing shards together is cross-cut with the laser sintering process of a 3D printer. Through this editing, the audience perceives the contrapuntal temporal politics formed by the viscoelasticity of honey—requiring bodily presence and patient waiting—and the instant curing of photosensitive resin—pursuing absence and efficiency. This opposition is again reinforced acoustically: the friction sounds of pottery shards and the noise of the printer constitute an "auditory class analysis" [14]. Ultimately, the restored clay pot (with honey amber preserved in the cracks) is reburied in the soil, signifying Anna Tsing's revelation: "The true archive is not preservation, but the transmission of cross-species memory through decay" [15]. These traces traversing time, as objective realities, together with the reality of the cinematic celluloid image, weave the collective network of the director's cross-species narrative within haptic time.

5. The Authorship Politics of Haptic Time: From Feminine Creative Ethics to Cross-Species Community

Alice Rohrwacher's cinematic practice not only reconstructs the creative ethics of the female director but also subverts the traditional film studies concept of the "auteur." In The Wonders (2014), she reconfigures the ecological politics of the female author by translating the haptic code of the bee dance, facilitating the formation of a "media-ecological assemblage"—beekeeper (human), bees (non-human), and the 16mm camera (technical object)—an interconnected cross-species community. When the beekeeper Wolfgang observes the bee's "waggle dance," the handheld camera, shooting at 48 fps slow motion, records the vibrations of the bee's abdomen; its movement trajectory is translated into visual signals through the Brownian motion of film grain. The dance language of the bees, conveying the direction and distance of nectar sources, and the mechanical vibration of the 16mm camera again form a cross-species rhythmic resonance, verifying that the trajectories of living beings and technology collectively weave the material network of time. This creative ethic reaches its critical climax in the narrative of colony collapse. When the bee colony disappears en masse due to pesticide pollution, Rohrwacher soaked expired film in a developer mixed with beeswax and plant sap, causing a photocatalytic reaction between residual silver salts and pesticide molecules. The developed film showed honeycomb-like corrosive holes, forming a morphological isomorphism with the hive structure on a microscopic scale. Here, the chemical degradation of celluloid is no longer a technical flaw but a "material testimony of ecological trauma"—as Anna Tsing suggests, the corruption process of marginalized media is precisely a haptic strategy against the myth of technological cleanliness.

Furthermore, the director actively explores the generative practice of haptic montage. In the bee pollination sequence, the camera lens, adopting an insect's compound-eye perspective, closes in on the flower stamens; the physical impact of pollen grains against the film emulsion layer is recorded synchronously as soundtrack material. During editing, Rohrwacher deliberately cross-dissolves the pulse of pollen vibrations with the haptic sound waves of the beekeeper's fingers rubbing honey, forming a feedback loop between organic and inorganic systems. This "haptic synesthesia" strategy stands in stark contrast to the technical orientation of Nolan's digitally designed sound field (full-frequency coverage) in Interstellar (2014)—the latter obliterates material difference through technological omnipotence, while Rohrwacher preserves the fragility of the ecosystem through the "imperfect resonance" of touch.

In the global dialogue of Rohrwacher's slow aesthetics, from the Italian countryside to the forefront of ecological cinema, this innovation in creative ethics not only reshapes authorship but also resonates trans-locally with global ecological film practices. Rohrwacher's haptic time aesthetics engages in profound dialogue with Kelly Reichardt's "handmade cinema": in First Cow (2019), Reichardt used 16mm film, shooting an average of 9 hours daily to document the cheese fermentation process; their shared use of long average shot lengths constitutes a dual paradigm of "slow cinema politics." However, Rohrwacher places greater emphasis on the agency of non-human actors—the microbial action in cheese (Reichardt) versus the ecological network of bee pollination marks a divergence; the latter, through the cross-material dialogue between honey's viscosity and celluloid's resilience, practices the "located multispecies politics" advocated by Haraway (2016). Simultaneously, the global nature of this resistant aesthetics finds cross-cultural echoes in Mati Diop's Atlantics (2019): Diop uses the haptic frequency of ocean waves to deconstruct colonial history, its sound pressure fluctuations complementing the persistent hum of The Wonders as oceanic/terrestrial temporal-geographical texts. In a telling cinematic comparison: Rohrwacher's reconstruction of Southern Italian rural life—the slow production of daily crystallizing honey—forms a material alliance with the Southern poetics of Brazilian director Kleber Mendonça Filho's Bacurau (2019), where handmade lead bullets are cast at a rate of 3 per day, jointly resisting the efficiency violence of global capitalism.

If Rohrwacher's work foreshadows potential paths for post-human imagery, then her theory of haptic time further points toward future possibilities for the film medium. Through her "wet media" practice using honey as an image, she challenges the "dry ontology" of digital imagery: the non-Newtonian fluid properties of honey and the growth of silver halide crystals in film jointly point toward an image materiality that is organic-inorganic hybrid. In Happy as Lazzaro, the mold spots on the Super 8 tape (biodegradation by mycelium) form an ethical opposition to the "sterile preservation" of digital restoration. This strategy of "decay as resistance" aligns with the generative revelation of the director's gently moist haptic archive: only by acknowledging the ecological and material nature of time can film become a storage medium for cross-species memory. This perhaps indicates a future turn for the image—under the hegemony of AI-generated content, the slow crystallization of honey and the chemical respiration of celluloid may provide the last ecological sanctuary for rebuilding the sensory resilience of the audience.

6. Conclusion

Alice Rohrwacher's filmmaking, with its fidelity to the celluloid medium and sensitivity to natural materials, has carved out a unique path of slow aesthetics in the era of digital image hegemony. By analyzing the viscosity of honey, the chemical activity of celluloid, and the cross-species nature of haptic time in her works, this paper reveals how the image, through material folds and bodily experience, resists the homogenizing violence of capital acceleration. Rohrwacher reconstructs the "author" identity through female labor, transforming practices like beekeeping, archaeology, and manual development into vehicles of haptic politics, inscribing ecological trauma and gendered memory within tremulous frames and traces of decay. Her work not only expands the resistant paradigms of art cinema but also, through the organic-inorganic hybridity of "wet media," challenges the "sterile ontology" of digital imagery, offering new possibilities for interdisciplinary dialogue between ecological criticism and film materiality studies. In an image future dominated by streaming platforms and technological spectacle, Rohrwacher's aesthetics of slowness suggests another potential path—by returning to the fragility of matter and the ecology of time, it seeks to rebuild the multidimensional sensory connections between the audience and the land, memory, and non-human life.

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