

**CfP: Symposium: Overwhelm and Overload in Cinema:
Modernisation – Individualisation – Disorientation (Bremen, 06.05-09.05.2026,
Deadline: 26.10.2025)**

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CITY 46 / Kommunalkino Bremen e.V.
University of Bremen (IKFK/ZeMKI)

Throughout its history, cinema has been associated with experiences of being overwhelmed, overtaxed or overloaded. It used to be claimed that in 1896, spectators fled the auditorium at the sight of the train coming towards them in the Lumière brothers' L'ARRIVÉE D'UN TRAIN AU GARE DE LA CIOTAT – and although that myth has since been debunked, it is not without reason that it stubbornly persisted. Nowadays, the disorienting flurry of rapid cuts in popular cinema is juxtaposed to the more contemplative pace of 'slow cinema'. Both kinds of cinema have been accused of placing excessive demands on filmgoers, and it might seem this is primarily in virtue of films' aesthetic qualities rather than their content.

But films address experiences of being overwhelmed and overburdened at the thematic level, too, opening up historical and contemporary perspectives on states of stress, exhaustion and disorientation. For example, THE CROWD (King Vidor, USA 1928) and MODERN TIMES (Charlie Chaplin, USA 1936) deal with the trials and tribulations of industrialised modernity, while JEANNE DIELMAN (Chantal Akerman, B 1977) casts a feminist gaze on the gruelling daily routine of care work in the transition period between Fordism and Post-Fordism. More recent works, such as À PLEIN TEMPS (Eric Gravel, F 2021), depict the overwhelming toll of a hectic daily race against time. On the production side, there are legendary reports of filmmakers pushing their crew (and themselves) beyond their limits: for instance, the multi-year shoot of PLAYTIME (Jacques Tati, F 1967), in which Tati exhausted his own productive and financial capacities, as well as those of his friends or family and colleagues (see Bellos 2010 [1999]).

In contexts of film education and concern for young people's welfare, films that 'overtax' or 'overwhelm' can either be welcomed as a positive liminal experience (one that stretches and challenges film audiences), or else seen as something to be prevented. For instance, many reports by the FSK, the German film ratings body, make reference to whether a film is likely to overtax and disorient viewers.

Overwhelm

However, what it is to be overwhelmed or overtaxed is often not defined. In health sciences, overwhelm (or mental overload) is understood as a form of stress that arises from feelings of being unable to meet demands and expectations or to complete tasks (Antonovsky 1997). Moreover, when people are overwhelmed, they experience a loss of agency and feel alienated from the demands placed on them (Fuchs et al. 2018: 9). As early as 1917, Siegfried Kracauer had already anticipated the later phenomenon of overwhelm, postulating a 'self-consciousness of powerlessness' that results 'when the soul cannot satisfy its own demands or is unable to overcome external constraints of some kind' (Kracauer 1971 [1917]: 44). This is, of course, a subjective experience, yet it is nonetheless interfused with – and co-produced and hence historically shaped by – social conditions, power relations and practices of subjectivation. By considering selected films through the threefold lens of **modernisation**, **individualisation** and **disorientation**, the film symposium will seek to formulate an aesthetics of overwhelm.

Modernisation

While the 'city symphonies' of the 1920s and 30s (BERLIN: SYMPHONY OF A METROPOLIS, MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA) celebrated modernity and its aesthetics, Vidor and Chaplin (THE CROWD, MODERN TIMES) focused on its more negative effects on society. In Neorealism and the auteur films of the 1960s and 70s, the fragility and ambivalence of experiences of modernity became a characteristic aesthetic hallmark.

More recent works like Radu Jude's DO NOT EXPECT TOO MUCH FROM THE END OF THE WORLD and Philip Barantini's BOILING POINT continue this trend. The former dynamically combines a dizzying wealth of intermedial references and different image formats, while the latter is a single-shot film that escalates towards the titular boiling point. Using different stylistic devices, they allow audiences to experience how their protagonists are impacted by their gruelling daily routine, societal expectations and the rhythms of their work.

Individualisation

Although (or precisely because) cinema is regarded as a 'mass medium', it is notable how prominent depictions of isolation and the harm it causes have been throughout film history. In the part-talkie LONESOME (Pál Fejős, USA 1928), a montage depicting the hectic New York traffic, replete with double exposures and cross-fades, is followed by an intertitle proclaiming: 'In the whirlpool of modern life – the most difficult thing is to live alone.' This existential difficulty is later embodied in the lonely detectives of 1940s Film Noir and in the empty architectural worlds through which the protagonists of Michelangelo Antonioni's L'AVVENTURA and RED DESERT drift. In the 1970s, Wanda (the eponymous protagonist of WANDA, Barbara Loden, USA 1970) wanders aimlessly through Pennsylvania's coalfields until she falls in with a small-time crook, while in JEANNE DIELMAN (Chantal Akerman, B/F 1977) the housewife and mother Jeanne remains isolated within her own four walls. In world cinema, there is perhaps nobody who has dealt so intensively with this theme over the past 30 years as Tsai Ming-Liang, described in a review by Jonathan Rosenbaum as the 'poet laureate of loneliness' (Rosenbaum 2023 [2002]). Through long shots and painterly compositions, the hyper-individualisation of late modernity is framed as a product of globalisation and urbanisation (VIVE L'AMOUR, 1994; WHAT TIME IS IT THERE? 2001; STRAY DOGS, 2013; DAYS, 2020).

Disorientation

Filmmakers have long worked on formal devices to express disorientation. Just think of Méliès's stop tricks, Soviet montage theory, the techniques of assorted avant-garde movements, the porous barrier between dream and reality in horror films, the ellipses of the Berlin School. These devices have become staples of different aesthetic programmes, and can be embedded in various cultural and historical frameworks (Lash 2020). For example, PLAYTIME makes use of its 70 mm widescreen format to fill the frame with sometimes hundreds of extras, creating bewilderingly complex *Wimmelbilder* (images densely packed with figures, objects and other details). These almost identically dressed extras move through homogeneous spaces, whose colour design at first glance makes them appear impenetrably opaque. In Jia Zangke's STILL LIFE (2006), meanwhile, disorientation is linked to the geological and social changes of hypermodernity: the two protagonists wander through the town of Fengjie, which is soon to be evacuated due to the construction of the Three Gorges Dam and whose buildings are already being demolished, in search of their spouses.

Concepts of 'overwhelming' or 'overtaxing' experiences raise a host of new questions: where and to what extent can we speak of such experiences in film? How should we assess them? Must they necessarily be associated with feelings or vocabularies of *failure*? How are broader social trends reflected in the constantly changing forms that overwhelming experiences assume? How can these

experiences be described in terms of cultural and political phenomena? What are their implications? What historical forms and developments can be traced in the depictions of such experiences in films past and present?

Since scholarly discussions about the history of concepts such as overwhelm and overload tend to be highly Eurocentric, the symposium also invites submissions that focus on other geographic regions and cultural/social spaces.

Please submit proposals (Abstract of max. 5.000 characters and a short biography of max. 500 characters) until 26th Oct. 2025 to

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