


Being there: The long take and Alfonso Cuarón's Gravity

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<https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/TEKN.104334>

Received: August 1, 2025 • Accepted: November 16, 2025 • OPEN PEER REVIEW

Video URL: <https://vimeo.com/1132590277>

Abstract. This video essay juxtaposes two digitally created long takes from Alfonso Cuarón's 2103 film *Gravity* to argue that the function and mode of these sequences forces the viewer to contemplate and dwell in the present in an analogous fashion to how Paul Schrader interprets 'slow cinema'.

Keywords: aesthetics; cinema; film making; time.

ESP Quedarse allí: El plano secuencia y Gravity de Alfonso Cuarón

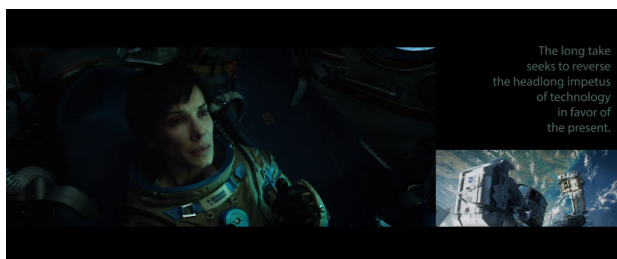
Resumen. Este videoensayo juxtapone dos secuencias de larga duración creadas digitalmente en la película *Gravity* (2013), de Alfonso Cuarón, para argumentar que la función y el modo de estas escenas llevan al espectador a contemplar y habitar el presente de forma análoga a como Paul Schrader interpreta el 'cine lento'.

Palabras clave: cine; estética; filmación; tiempo.

Summary. 1. Written statement. 2. Data availability. 3. LLM use statement. 4. Acknowledgments. 5. References.

How to cite: Middents, Jeffrey Romero (2026). Being there: The long take and Alfonso Cuarón's Gravity [Video Essay]. *Teknokultura, Revista de Cultura Digital y Movimientos Sociales*, 23(1), 67-68. <https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/tekn.104334>

1. Written statement



We are fascinated with the long take. The long take is a bravura performance in an audiovisual medium; it demands that the viewer take notice and feel something. In the revised introduction of *Transcendental Style: Ozu, Breson, Dreyer, Paul Schrader* (2018) writes about the meditative value of the long take —and, in the long excerpt quoted here, takes a swipe specifically at Alfonso Cuarón:

Here's what I think is the difference: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer, Mizoguchi, De Sica, and the rest used film time to create an emotional or intellectual or spiritual effect. Tarkovsky used film techniques to study time. For Tarkovsky time was not a means to a goal. It was the goal [...] The manifestation of time on film is the long take. Not the fancy out-the-door-down-the-street long takes of Orson Welles or Alfonso Cuarón—no, even though those takes run long in screen time, they are little different than conventional film coverage. They are driven by the logic of edits: wide shot, over-the-shoulder, close-up, point of view, two-shot (p. 8).

Cuarón made two films back-to-back that not only emphasized the use of the long take but were partially marketed based on the virtuosic deployment of the technique, especially in the assassination scene in *Children of Men* (2006) and the opening of *Gravity*

(2013). The camera's constant motion makes these scenes incredibly dynamic, akin to an action film or the franchise film made immediately beforehand, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (2004); these scenes draw attention to cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki's camerawork, especially as single shots. James Udden (2009) has written convincingly about how Cuarón's use of the long take in *Children of Men* is a sign of what we might call 'auteur posturing' reminiscent certainly more of Orson Welles than Yasujiro Ozu.

I believe that these most exciting one-takes are actually something of a bait-and-switch, where the excessive action masks Cuarón's interest in forcing the viewer to dwell in time, to—as Schrader articulates—«be there», present in the film (p. 8). For one thing, his use of the long take begins far earlier with 2000's *Y tu mamá también*. Keyshots in that film—a scene where the camera follows an older woman away from our protagonists into the back area of a restaurant, for example, or the 'truth telling' drinks and dance at the beachside bar leading up to the film's climax—experimented by refusing the editing rhythms of shot/reverse shot, instead remaining on the rhythms of life-in-motion. Throughout that film, the camera lingers on elements that enrich the central narrative; in fact, these choices are part of what elevates the film from a teen road movie into more profound commentary on contemporary Mexico.

Despite the attention to the opening twelve-minute shot that sets up the action of *Gravity*, the emotional crux comes in a different, quieter long take: when Dr. Stone (Sandra Bullock) frantically calls for help into the void, she is answered, to her disappointment, by a voice she cannot communicate with; she then contemplates giving up, only to be confronted with the specter of Kowalski (George Clooney), who jolts her back to wanting to live. All of this is conveyed within a single take, over ten minutes long. This scene could easily have been divided into three parts—the call and conversation with the man on Earth, Kowalski re-entering the capsule, and Stone's recommitment to live—with cuts between each element. The point of conveying the whole scene in an unbroken take is, in fact, the point: we need to stay with Dr. Stone to 'feel' her emotional turn, 'to be there' with her. The shot's long duration establishes this.

My goal, therefore, was to craft a video essay that did not distort the original shot through speeding up or cutting the original image, which is traditional video essay practice in working with long takes. Cuarón invites us to contemplate Stone's narrative trajectory by remaining with her through this transitional scene, and the relative quietness of this shot allows us to also contemplate the sense of immediacy and presence that Schrader invites us to consider as the function of the long take. Schrader (2018) might be arguing against how Cuarón has famously crafted these long takes, digitally eliding cuts in *Children of Men* and digitally crafting every element of *Gravity* before adding the actors into the scene. He states that by dwelling in time, cinema can work against its very technical nature to craft a sense of authenticity: «The long take seeks to reverse the headlong impetus of technology in favor of the present» (p. 8). Lisa Purse (2017) deftly rebuts this argument, highlighting that the work involved in Cuarón and Lubezki's digital crafting establish an appropriate reality for the story that articulates a new

form of authenticity: «long takes...invite the spectator to reconsider ways of being in and moving through the world, and, specifically, to reconsider the conception of knowledge and control that the opening credits initially prioritises: optical mastery and engine-powered spatial penetration» (p. 231). Here, the technological can shape a sense of being-in-the-present that traditional cinematic editing might otherwise come across for the viewer as inauthentic.

The rhythms reflected in this subdued, climactic long take, however, can also be seen elsewhere in *Gravity*, especially in the other major long takes used in the film. I have chosen to place a smaller image of the aforementioned opening shot, now stripped of the very loud soundtrack so that we may dwell in it as a visual element alone. I have compressed the duration of this shot so that it matches the larger image—but putting these images together can show some parallels we might not otherwise see. These shots have similar (if not exact) visual rhythms, with measured careful camera movements easing us through the scene; we may even note that Kowalski—that is to say, George Clooney's face—appears roughly around an analogous point in each shot, at both times to boost Stone's confidence so that she can keep going. (Highly edited sequences elsewhere in the film, such as the descent to Earth that follows the long take examined here, do not have the same rhythmic structure as the long takes do.) With this video essay, countering Schrader's statements, I argue that technology (though the long take) can *highlight* the present instead of needing to reverse it.

2. Data availability

The study data is available in the article or its supplementary material

3. LLM use statement

This article has not used any text or image generated by an LLM (ChatGPT or other) for its writing or editing.

4. Acknowledgments

This video essay was first conceived for In the Works: Makings and Unmaking of the Video Essay conference in Lucerne, Switzerland in November 2023. The author wishes to thank his co-presenter, Kerry Hergarty; the conference conveners, Johannes Binotto, Lého Galibert-Lainé, Jialu Zhu, and Oswald Iten; the conference participants; the Timeline Tuesday group for support and welcome feedback; and Allison Cooper for further feedback

5. References

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