

stone or waterfall

Alicja Melzacka

FROM: Alicja

TO: Chloé

Hi Chloé,

Thanks for your last email and for sharing the film. I watched it with curiosity and thought it might be interesting to have our next meeting in person, in Antwerp. Perhaps we could take the same walk the protagonists take in the film?

Enjoy the last days of summer!

Alicja

It's September 22nd; the very last day of the season, when the weather is flaunting its full range in the final gig of its summer tour. I exit the station, and the low sun and the crowd disorient me for a moment until I spot Chloé's arm raised like a signpost. As soon as we exchange our hellos and how-are-yous, we start walking.

The walk takes us through the city, along the route traced out by the characters of 'stone or waterfall', Chloé's latest mid-length film. This sensitive, observant work captures the dialogue between the two saunterers and their surroundings, unfolding through movements, gestures, glances, and sparse conversations. There seems to be no particular aim, no itinerary to their walk; and likewise, the film has no conventional storyline – rather, it is composed of a collection of vignettes and anecdotes threaded together by the route they take.

That route is based on a spontaneous stroll Chloé once took with her friend Rien.

‘It was a *random* walk, and not a particularly *interesting* one,’ she tells me. ‘Actually, it was probably one of the most *boring* walks you could take...’

‘Boring walks are the best,’ I laugh. ‘That’s where the unspectacular comes to the foreground.’

As we navigate the streets and alleys, I have to think about the notion of randomness. Trinh T. Minh-ha once said that the throw of dice is both ‘*accidental*’ and ‘*very precise, very situated*,’^[1] and I find it fascinating how this description pairs two seemingly contradictory qualities. Picking a ‘*random*’ route through a city is like a throw of dice. As we retrace this route, whether in real life or through the lens of the film, it no longer feels improvised, yet its logic remains both *accidental* and *precise*. Each time I stroll through my neighbourhood, as I often do to unwind after a busy day, something new captures my attention. Similarly, each time I rewatch ‘*stone or waterfall*’, another minute detail reveals itself to me. The film invites multiple viewings by drawing the same attention to the non-spectacular and the nuisance as a stroll along the well-known route.

In my head, multiple timelines are playing out simultaneously, superimposed: one of our walk and another of the film. Where would the protagonists be now, some fifteen minutes in? While my legs are moving, I try to hold on to this particular experience, this semi *déjà vu*, as it evolves in real-time. But I keep getting distracted by how different the city appears to me today.

‘*History begins at ground level, with footsteps*,’ writes Michel de Certeau.^[2] Walking, especially off the beaten path established by tourism or commerce, has long been used as a research method at the intersection of art, activism, and urbanism. Dada walking practices grew directly out of critiques of consumption-driven perambulation, particularly in 20th-century Paris, the capital of the modern tourism industry. Dadaists organised absurd ‘*excursions*’ to places excluded from the sightseeing circuit, or as they defined them, ‘*places that have no reason to exist*.’^[3] With characteristic Dada antics, they appropriated and mocked the format of a ‘*guided tour*’.

The walking baton was then taken up by the Surrealists, whose nocturnal walks introduced the element of chance and exploration guided by subconscious desire. The Surrealists shifted their focus from pursuing audience attention, which often resulted in the spectacle of controversy that Dada relished (and which André Breton famously dubbed ‘*Artificial Hells*’),^[4] to seeking ‘*more refined and meaningful forms of participatory experience*.’ For Breton, ‘*taking to the streets*’ was a way to break free from ‘*cabaret and theatre conventions to create situations where the public would be confronted with a new type of artistic action and spectatorship*,’ thereby ‘*forg[ing] closer connections between art and life*.’^[5]

However, it was the Letterists and later the Situationists who pushed the walking practice further toward a cultural and political critique of urban environments. (The tension and the group's subsequent divide along the lines of art and activism illustrates the entanglement of their practice with the political dimensions of everyday life.) In the 1950s and 1960s, those artistic formations laid the groundwork for the discipline of psychogeography, which focused on understanding '*precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals.*'^[6] One of the research tools developed by the Situationists was *dérive*, or drifting, defined as a '*technique of locomotion without a goal.*'^[7] In de Certeau's terms, *dérive* is a '*tactic*', a subversive action challenging the '*strategies*' imposed by dominant institutions. *Dérive* was neither fully automatic, like surrealist strolls, nor entirely determined by choice, but it was a mode of *willful* 'behavioural disorientation', aimed at exploring how the urban tissue affects the state of mind. It wasn't an end goal in itself, but a form of '*gathering data*' for Situationist research into new ways of moving through the city – outside the framework of contemporary urbanism, with its alienating, consumption-driven routine. Despite the complex theoretical discourse that enveloped it, *dérive* '*avoided rational critique and emphasised the importance of playfulness and games.*'^[8]

The protagonists of '*stone or waterfall*' also tread the line between art and life, the accidental and the situated. Away from the crowds, they lead us through narrow alleyways, a paved residential street that '*wants to be a square*', and into the '*backstage of the real city*,'^[9] which somehow feels more *real* than the city itself. The film doesn't layer that message too heavily, but the urban spectacle breaks through in the shot of a monument towering in the centre of a small square, its silhouette set against the vast digital sky of a video billboard. This unveiling of the city's simulacral side is also explored in the short sequence filmed in an old department store, where we see the protagonists interacting with storefront wraps, as if touching and probing the barrier between the two dimensions, while the camera keeps zooming in, eventually leaving the real-world frame behind, out of sight. Outside the areas designed to immediately grasp our attention, to communicate or sell us something, the city remains taciturn, reticent to reveal itself.

'Most of us have forgotten how to look – or never learnt it in the first place.' I remark, self-reflectively. 'I can feel it in my body, that restlessness pushing me to continually seek and consume information... Looking is a skill, much like reading or playing an instrument. It's a muscle we need to train.'

FROM: Chloé

TO: Alicja

Hi Alicja,

I've written down some thoughts. I find it easier to express myself this way because it gives me more time to think about the words, but I'd love to talk over the phone as well. Would Thursday morning suit you?

I was reflecting on what it means to walk. I had to think of that anecdote you shared about someone saying that walking is something poor people do because it's free, whereas, for me, it's always been associated with a certain luxury – the ability to spend time that way. This has been true, for instance, of the flâneur – a traditionally male figure of urban prosperity and modernity – who takes pleasure in detached observation of urban life. In contrast, psychogeographic practices – like the Situationists' drift – involve an emotional, physical, and even political engagement with the urban text. Where does the protagonists' walk fit within this history?

It might be interesting to talk about those different types of walking, and how they are expressed in language, through words like 'stroller,' 'lounger,' 'saunterer,' or 'loafer.'

These are just some quick thoughts, which we can discuss further on Thursday.

Warm regards,
Chloé

We are crossing the park; it is quieter this time. No music, only the sound of pedestrians, bikes, and gravel under our shoes. Several minutes in, we break the silence.

‘The first time we walked here,’ says Chloé, ‘I remember seeing two ducks sitting along the trail, perfectly still, side by side. Rien remarked that “*ducks are rabbits, too*”, and we laughed without going further into it. Later, I remembered that famous illustration of the rabbit-duck illusion.’

A bike bell blasts in uncomfortable proximity, and we jump aside as Chloé continues, ‘Then, a few metres further, we encountered a man with two identical poodles, poised by the bench. Their hair was trimmed in such an intricate way, making them look like...’ she pauses, searching for the right word.

‘Almost like an unnatural object?’ I suggest.

‘Indeed. Poodles are the epitome of stylised nature... They embody this tension between the artificial and the natural; something that has always fascinated me.’

Chloé emphasises her words with gestures – her hands softly tracing shapes in the air. ‘Everything looked so still, almost staged,’ she says, and I can almost see her picturing that evening and projecting it ahead of us. ‘The doubles in the dusk, and those curious slippages between the natural and the man-made created a unique atmosphere, “*like a film*.” And then we realised – why not make it a film?’

I am wondering, what quality makes a situation feel ‘*like a film*’? It’s a situation that elicits a particular kind of attention to the elementary cinematic language manifesting in the landscape: an emerging rhythm, a palpable duration, remarkable lighting, or aesthetic composition. It’s that ‘*sudden change of ambiance in the street within the space of a few meters*’ that Debord wrote about.^[10] A fortuitous coming together of particular elements within one *frame*. Framing has everything to do with how we *see* and interpret things, rather than what they *are*. The rabbit-duck illusion was employed by Ludwig Wittgenstein to illustrate the phenomenon of aspect perception; that is, the fact that objects do not merely appear to us, but are *seen as* something meaningful. You may only see either a rabbit or a duck, and in that sense, remain blind to certain aspects of the situation, but once you notice the duality, you cannot ‘*unsee*’ it. That curious feeling I am struggling to describe is somewhat like that: becoming aware of another aspect of a situation and your body as a viewing instrument. It entails a movement from immersion to detachment – a dissociation of sorts. In a way, it is only *a posteriori* that you can establish if something feels like a film; you can never notice this while immersed.

‘Narrative transportation’ or ‘travel’ are concepts from the psychology of perception related to any medium of storytelling that produces immersion – and it is not without reason that their names connote movement. There exists an inherent relationship between viewing and moving. At the cinema, viewers are ‘moved’ and ‘transported’ by a narrative. Conversely, while on a train, in a car, or on foot, it is the movement of the body that sets images in motion. This principle was explored during the 1992 seminar ‘*Perception & Traffic*,’ organised by Lucius Burckhard – the founder of *Spaziergangswissenschaft* (strollology) at the University of Kassel – in which participants walked along a busy road holding windshields up to their faces.^[1]

I often do my writing while on the train, and even though I am used to watching images moving across the quadrilateral plane of various screens, there are moments when this view still catches me off guard. Like a child, I am mesmerised by the image moving across the panoramic frame. Countless times, I have recorded the image of myself projected into the passing landscape.

FROM: Alicja

TO: Chloé

Hi Chloé,

I came across this fascinating quote about the etymology of words associated with walking when reading Joseph Anthony Amato's book on the history of walking, and I thought I'd share it with you:

'Marching, which came to mean "to walk as soldiers do," derives not insignificantly from the deeper etymological sense "to trample down." Promenading has its origin in the French notion "to go for a walk" and the Latin "to drive forward." The curious word saunter in the seventeenth century referred to a self-reflective form of walking. It had its origin in the Middle English word santer, which meant "to muse." Amble, "to move slowly and even leisurely," has its source in the Latin verb Ambulare, "to go." Peripatetic, which meant "to walk around" and was aptly derived from a school of Greek philosophers who walked as they philosophized, came to refer to itinerant traders and travelers. (...) And then there is the nineteenth-century English verb to hike, of unknown origin, which first meant "a long and disciplined walk through the countryside" and now also can simply mean "to take a walk.'

Amato also writes about the relationship between walking and class, that is, the question of access to space and availability of time. Historically, not everyone has had the same right to walk, and walking still means different things to different people. It can be a matter of necessity or choice; liberating – like a protest – or vulnerable – like exile; solitary or communal; a means of complacency or subversion of the forces that shape the urban landscape.

Looking forward to discussing this more on Thursday. 9 am?

Best,

Alicja

Walking and filmmaking have a common history. In 'Notes on Gesture', Giorgio Agamben describes an experiment conducted by Gilles de la Tourette in 1883 for his clinical studies of walking in diseases of the nervous system. In this experiment, a long strip of white paper was fixed to the floor and marked down the centre. The soles of the subject's feet

were coated with powdered iron sesquioxide, giving them a rust-red hue. The resulting footprints along the marked line allowed for precise measurement of the subject's gait based on various parameters. Agamben sees in this experiment '*the gaze at work [that] is already prophetic of the cinema*' – sequential, rhythmic, mobile. He also draws a comparison between the reproductions of footprints by de la Tourette and Eadweard Muybridge's split-second photographic series, many of which featured their subjects walking (the '*man moving at a walking pace*,' the '*man running with a rifle*,' the '*woman walking and picking up a jug*,' the '*woman walking and blowing a kiss*.')^[12] '*Walking is a natural armature for thinking sequentially.*'^[13]

Walking, particularly through urban areas, has been picked up as a theme and device by diverse filmmakers, from avant-garde and structuralists to more mainstream narrative cinema. Hollis Frampton's '*Surface Tension*', contains a memorable stop-motion sequence capturing a walk from the Brooklyn Bridge to Central Park, condensed to 160 seconds – a technique he further developed in '*Ordinary Matter*' (1972). Chantal Akerman's '*News from Home*' (1977) juxtaposes a series of panning and static shots of New York with a voice-over reading letters from her mother. One of Jonas Mekas' earliest exercises in one-shot video form was his 1990 video '*A Walk*' – a 58-minute, unedited stroll through rainy Soho. In more traditional narrative cinema, there are also compelling examples that use walking as a narrative device, making the viewer palpably aware of the narrative tense – the relationship between story-time and discourse-time.^[14] Richard Linklater's and Joachim Trier's pop classics, for instance, condense one fateful day to the duration of a feature film; walking through a city becomes a device that underscores movement through time, towards the inevitable resolution – parting, death.^[15] Many more examples – past and more recent – could be listed, but I have selected a few personal favourites that show how walking is often used as a device in films that consciously engage with the viewer's perception of time passing.

'*stone or waterfall*' also takes the walk as a premise defining its form; the walk's rhythm and pace substitute for the narrative arc, and the route establishes the setting. Due to its sequential and durational character, walking often lends itself to a structural principle of filmmaking – while in some structural films, this relationship is one-to-one, the temporal construction of '*stone or waterfall*' is more complex. The film's duration, running close to 30 minutes, differs from the timeframe of the story, which remains rather unclear. While the sense of time passing is communicated by the change in lighting – the walk begins when it's bright and ends in darkness – the walk's duration remains a mystery; there is a feeling of roaming around, off the grid and out of time. Employing devices such as slow pacing, silence, and a lack of a clear storyline imbues the work with a sense of self-reflexivity.

Chloé's previous films are also characterised by an atemporal aura, often employing stillness as a strategy to emphasise duration and draw attention to mundane or undervalued details, as well as the interplay of chance and situatedness, the scripted and the unscripted. It is the kind of cinema that embraces slowness, and that Erika Balsom argues can '*challenge the frenetic pace of editing present in contemporary media*' and the idea of cinema as '*a territory of shock and distraction.*'^[16] The aesthetics of slowness also carries a political dimension, resisting the drive toward rapid production and consumption. '*With the expansion of a market-intensive economy of movement, there is a tendency in the mainstream media to emphasize speed as a goal...*' writes Trinh T. Minh-ha. '*Anyone who makes a detour, opts for indirectness, and takes time to move on his or her own can neither gratify the reader or viewer right away, nor expect any immediate gratification in return. But for me, to be able to maintain a certain independence and to pace one's movement accordingly is always a necessity, if one is to... embark on any artistic or creative venture*'^[17]

Many avant-garde films that utilise the walk as a form employ a first-person perspective, foregrounding the embodied experience of viewing and exploring the city. In contrast, in '*stone or waterfall*' we experience the city through a double removal. Most shots include both protagonists in the frame – a strategy reminiscent of the Rückenfigur (back figure) in Romantic painting, which served as the intermediary between the beholder and the landscape. The film focuses on their gestures and the choreography of their bodies, that is, on the interface between the city and the body, rather than on the image of the city alone. On several occasions throughout the film, we cannot see what the characters are looking at; instead, we are presented with observant, sensitive shots of them watching or sensing their environment, underscoring their dialogue with gestures as if trying to outline the shapes of the enunciated words. A slight sense of derealisation permeates the film (the atmosphere echoing my earlier description of '*feeling like a film*'), as we are continually reminded that we are viewing the act of viewing.

'When casting the actors, I was most interested in how they moved through the space. I was looking for someone with a sense of natural curiosity towards their environment,' Chloé reveals as we exit the park.

'You mentioned that the repertoire of gestures came from actual observations, multiple conversations, walks, and rehearsals.' I ponder. 'Could we say then that all these gestures are, in fact, quotes?'

In '*On Foot*', Joseph A. Amato states that '*walking is talking.*' He suggests that '*it can be understood as a language, having its own vernacular, dialects, and idioms.*'^[18] This echoes de Certeau's seminal '*The Practice of Everyday Life*,' which likens the city to the text and pedestrians

(*Wandersmannen*) to writers who ‘follow the cursives and strokes of an urban text they write without reading.’ While ‘stone or waterfall’ punctuates dialogues with long silences, the ‘conversation’ never truly stops. It just shifts between various forms of verbal and non-verbal communication – peripatetic, gestural, oral, or textual.

We are circumventing the monument, which was the subject of haptic inquiry by the characters in the film. It’s much larger than I imagined.

‘Do you remember that plot line from “*One Hundred Years of Solitude*”?’ I ask, ‘where the villagers are struck by a particular case of dementia? They have to annotate all surrounding objects with their names because forgetting the name leads also to forgetting the object’s function...’

Chloé’s work often grapples with the question of the relationship between image, language, and object. One particular moment in the film brings these considerations to the forefront: about eighteen minutes in, the screen abruptly goes black, and white captions appear. We read an account of a visit to an exhibition and the author’s attempt to articulate the appearance of the works – eventually conceding that they ‘*don’t have enough words*’ to describe the shades of grey present. We can never be sure when two people see or speak of the same colour; I have always found this a beautiful mystery.

‘*stone or waterfall*’ conveys how meaning always arises in the gaps: between language and language, but also between language and its object – between *burek* and *durum*, *kastanje* and *chestnut*, *mouse grey* and *sky grey*. The film’s title engenders this dynamics; the two words, juxtaposed by the conjunction ‘or’, construct a certain anticipation and engage in the game of *différance*^[19] – continuously reshaping their meaning in relation to one another and the images in the film. The stone is something static; it sits amidst the stream, allowing the water gushing from the waterfall to flow around and over it, softening its edges. What is the stone and what is the waterfall? As the film progresses, I keep coming up with still new interpretations of the relationship between the two: the highway and the flowing traffic, the city and thoughts, the architecture and pedestrians, words and images.

Before I realise it, we arrive at the last filming location. It looks different from how I remembered it. This is where the film and the walk end. From here on, we need to improvise. I part ways with Chloé, who points me in the direction of the station, and I try to make my way there, resisting the annoying habit of using GPS. On the train, I put my device on mute, wanting to linger a bit longer in the out-of-time atmosphere of this afternoon – no music, no book, no chatting, just watching the film running behind the window.

FROM: Chloé

TO: Alicja

Hi Alicja,

Two weeks ago, Rien and I visited Marc De Blicck's ongoing exhibition, which featured large-scale photographs, the majority of which depicted waterfalls—one of nature's ultimate spectacles. Hypnotic, just like a campfire. Worth seeing (in Dutch we say 'bezienswaardigheid,' which translates to 'sight' but emphasizes more the fact that something is truly worth [waard] seeing [bezien]).

The photographs weren't framed, and the folds within the images turned them into objects. De Blicck's works are of an apparent simplicity, but they are always about looking itself. In that sense, there are connections between his and my work, which is also about looking, representation, and language.

During our first walk that prompted the making of the film, I shared with Rien details about De Blicck's previous exhibition, which the film references. That was three years ago, and it feels like we've come full circle. An epilogue. One of many epilogues. After dozens of walks, rehearsals, filming, and finally completing a film, we found ourselves together in a gallery full of waterfalls.

Best,
Chloé

- [1] TRINH T. MINH-HA, ANNAMARIA MORELLI, *The Undone Interval* (1996) in TRINH T. MINH-HA, *Cinema Interval*, 1999.
- [2] MICHEL DE CERTEAU, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 1984.
- [3] CLAIRE BISHOP, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, 2012.
- [4] ANDRÉ BRETON, *Artificial Hells. Inauguration of the "1921 Dada Season"* (1921) in *October*, vol. 105, 2003.
- [5-6] CLAIRE BISHOP, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, 2012.
- [7] SADIE PLANT, *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age*, 1992.
- [8] CLAIRE BISHOP, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, 2012.
- [9] CHLOÉ OP DE BEECK, *stone or waterfall*, 2024.
- [10] GUY DEBORD, *Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography*, 1955.
- [11] LUCIUS BURCKHARDT, *Why is Landscape Beautiful? The Science of Strollology*, 2015.
- [12] GIORGIO AGAMBEN, *Notes on Gesture* (2019) encountered in MELISSA GORDON, *Vital Signs*, 2023.
- [13] MICHAEL SORKIN, *Twenty Minutes in Manhattan* (2013) in MICHAEL PATTISON, *Walking Pictures*, 2022.
- [14] GÉRARD GENETTE, *Narrative Discourse, an Essay in Method*, 1980.
- [15] RICHARD LINKLATER, *Before Sunrise*, 1995 and JOACHIM TRIER, *Oslo, August 31st*, 2011.
- [16] ERIKA BALSOM, *Saving the Image: Scale and Duration in Contemporary Art Cinema* in *Cineaction* 72, 2007.
- [17] TRINH T. MINH-HA, *The Undone Interval*, 1996.
- [18] JOSEPH A. AMATO, *On Foot: A History of Walking*, 2004.
- [19] As developed by JACQUES DERRIDA.

*Written for the occasion of the premiere
of 'stone or waterfall', a film by Chloé Op de Beeck, 2024*

TEXT: Alicja Melzacka

DESIGN: Judith Herman