

Filter City – An Introduction to Everyday Living in the City.

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A keener awareness of everyday life will replace the myths of 'thought' and 'sincerity' – deliberate, proven 'lies' – with the richer, more complex idea of *thought-action*. Henri Lefebvre

Life in the modern city has formed the backdrop for most modern films. This is hardly surprising, considering that cinema historically was an urban phenomenon, made for consumption in the city by the subjects in the city. However, what would a film look like that had the city life itself as its subject? One such film is, arguably, Jean-Luc Godard's Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle (1966) where the 'she' of the title is actually not the woman that you follow in the film, but the city she lives in: modern Paris. Investigating the impact of an economically and architecturally changing Paris on its inhabitants, the film focused on the correlation between consumerism and prostitution within the 'new' city, the modern high-rises. The subjects in the film are contingent on the architecture and economy around them, caught between the high-rises and the cost of living

within them. The city is both frame and matrix, as it is in Knut Åsdam's Filter City.

Throughout Åsdam's work we find a continuous investigation into urbanity and subjectivity. What he has described as his interest in 'contemporary subjectivity' encompasses the structures of the contemporary urban environment and the modes of behavior they indicate, exploring how these in turn structure the formation of subjectivity including our use and understanding of language, sexuality and gender. Here, the production of space leads to the production of (certain) subjectivities, of possibilities and impossibilities. Indeed, the correlations between architecture and language seem to lie at the heart of Filter City, whose protagonists negotiate their surroundings, themselves and each other through language and buildings. Life between buildings, it would seem, is a constant negotiation of a double language, spoken through the buildings and through the body. Neither seems to run smoothly, however. There are impasses, intersections, redirections, residues, surpluses, misunderstandings as the protagonists constantly struggle to mediate and understand their (urban) condition. Alongside the territorialization of the streets and blocks, there is also always the deterritorialization of the subjects. Through and against. Back and forth. Fort da.

In Filter City, Åsdam's first foray into film, we principally follow two female characters who inhabit public places in a specific but unspecified city over a likewise unspecified period of time. Their relation to each other is unclear, as is their social status. We first meet them in a long establishing shot that places them on a street corner, but what this shot actually establishes in terms of story and subjectivities is unclear – Filter City quickly discards filmic conventions of narration and continuity. Where the establishing shot is typically used to establish the characters in a narrative structure and explain just enough to allow the viewer to grasp their situation, Åsdam's shot only establishes the ambiguous relations and positions themselves. We see that they are hanging out on a street corner in a modern cityscape, but as we get closer the characters seem more out of place than in their place. They are obviously not teenagers and neither do they affirm any other preconceived notion of street persons; they are young women and not easily categorized either as a gang or as vagrants: They are unexplainably there. But, at the same time, they seem to belong there – we trace no uneasiness on their part, but familiarity, a strange sense of belonging. Perhaps we can, then, categorize them as 'familiarily strange'.²

While the characters' appearance on screen is a fluctuating signifier, their speech also shifts from narrative, vernacular dialogue to an erosive language of theory-poetry. Through the course of dialogues and monologues, we understand that these characters have some sort of bond, the nature of which we never discover: Are they friends or lovers, or both? In the present tense or the past? We also learn, through their later conversation/territorialization of a playground – crucially, a (deserted) public space not designed for such intimate encounters – that the connection between them clearly is broken, not so much by any particular action taking place between them, but rather by the space between them. Rather than being protagonists in a story, with clear-cut agency – a part to play – they are situated, or established if you will, in a space.

Situating subjects in a space rather than in a story is a property of installation art rather than cinema. In installation work we find a spatial set-up that involves the physical movement and placement of the spectator. It is about *location*, and it employs reflection over representation, as we know from the tradition of minimalism and the architectural installations that have followed. However, with the advent of video installations we are witnessing a (re)introduction of the (moving) image into the reality of the space. Video installation

offers – phenomenologically speaking – the possibility of an expansion of the idea of spatiality as (self-) reflexivity and (auto-) critique. With video installation we are experiencing a space for filmic production that can literally surround the viewer, and, through the use of multiple projections, provide several points of view simultaneously. The French theorist Jean-Christophe Royoux has spoken of 'the spatialization of the story' in contemporary video work, that is, a spatialization of film that literally includes the space of the spectator.³ With Filter City Åsdam offers us this process in reverse: rather than inserting conventions and methods from film into art he inserts the knowledge from art production into an actual film, which, in turn, is a story of spatialization rather than the spatialization of the story!

The protagonists in Filter City are, then, not so much part of a story as they are part of a spatial setting or stage. They are immersed in the space, and their agencies and subjectivities cannot be separated clearly from this space. The relationship to the city space may be antagonistic at points, but nevertheless always contingent. The two main characters, S and O, both personify this relationship: S constantly trying to find new ways to interact and engage with the city and its subjects, and O falling seamlessly into a depressed speech and alienated state that merges with the grayness

of the city space around her. S, the most active character, follows a more vitalist line of engagement with the city, walking around it and narrativizing it like private eye or a everyday resistance fighter, figures akin to Michel de Certeau's famous notion of the walker. -Engaged in an urban practice of everyday life, the walker not only experiences control and inaccessibility, but also the joys and freedoms in resisting the technologies of discipline structuralization and control by refusing to be reduced to them.⁴ S follows an unknown woman through some familiar streets, and then through the aisles of a supermarket, musing on her own interest in this person whose identity ultimately remains a mystery.. Except, that is, in one crucial respect. S recognizes this woman, not from somewhere, but from everywhere: she is similar to herself through location. That they inhabit and territorialize the same space, and that they - though spatial practices - are, if not the same, then similar.

In this regard the properties of Filter City are similar to Gordon Matta-Clark's strategy of 'anarchitecture' - an amalgam of anarchy and architecture - as seen in the site-specific work Conical Intersect, made in Paris in 1975, at the end of the same period of urban renewal that was the subject of Godard's film. Conical Intersect consisted of making a hole through an

entire block of houses that were about to be demolished. What Matta-Clark's traversal of these private spaces made public was not difference or individuality, but structural similarity, sameness: That all the apartments were similar, not only in their lay-out, but also in their furnishings and arrangements. Matta-Clark crucially showed how privacy didn't produce individuality, only isolation: everyone lived similar lives in similar apartments that nonetheless remained invisible to each other. The implications of visualizing similarity and isolation are profoundly political, and a movement from practice to critique to revolution in everyday life becomes apparent.⁴ Åsdam's work places itself in this trajectory, being both engaged with the cinema of Godard and the 1960s as well as with Matta-Clark and the installation work of the 1970s. Åsdam is also concerned with urban transformations and structuralizations, but, crucially, also with the everyday usages and resistances of the city's inhabitants. He is engaged with potentialities.

Even though the desires of S presumably are not met – neither in her meeting with O in the playground or in her following/stalking of the woman – she is at least trying to (inter)act, to make sense, to formulate: a line of least resistance. O, on the other hand, fails to connect and speaks of a feeling of separation or

division, not just between her and her surroundings, but also inside herself, as if the compartmentalization of the modern cityscape had been internalized. She is lost in language and lost in space, which, in Åsdam's work often amounts to the very same thing. Thus, when he injects the language of art into cinema and of theory into poetry he is suggesting counter-narratives – counter-memory if you will – and the beginning of thought-as-action.

1. Henri Lefebvre, Critique of Everyday Life, Volume 1: Introduction (London: Verso, 1991), 135. (Originally published in Paris, 1947/58 as Critique de la vie quotidienne I: Introduction).

2. The Freudian notion of the uncanny, the German Unheimliche, is sometimes translated into French as l'étrange familier, an altogether more evocative and precise phrasing than the English version. Something that is familiarly strange is a reversal of the interpretation of Unheimlichkeit as the familiar, the everyday suddenly seeming strange, unfamiliar, and moves towards a notion of the strange as familiar. It is exactly this reversal that brings about anxiety: That the trauma, albeit hidden or forgotten, is always already familiar, and thus integrated. The figures in Åsdam's apparently realistic

film also have this function; their being (there) is familiar yet strange.

3. Jean-Christophe Royoux, "The Conflict of Communications," Stan Douglas, (Centre Georges Pompidou: Paris, 1993), 56-71.

4. In his seminal essay "Walking in The City", Michel de Certeau pointed to the importance of the act of walking in city life, and how this implies a perception of the city very different from that of the perspective of power – the bird's-eye view and the map, panoramic totalizing views that, ever since the Middle Ages, have been used to transform the city into a clear and readable text. To this he opposes the "blind knowledge" that urban subjects have when walking through the city, creating a kind of narrative as it were, with favorite sites and routes, making shortcuts and stops. This is the everyday practice of living in the city, without an overview of it being possible. See Michel De Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life, (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984). (French original published in 1974)

5. The notion of the revolution of the everyday stems from the situationists' take on Lefebvre, most notably Raoul Vaneigem in his book The Revolution of Everyday Life, that can be read as a radicalization of Lefebvre's work, not to mention de Certeau's, in its focus on 'spurious opposition', youth, street life, spontaneity,

performativity, madness, riots and so on. Raoul Vaneigem, The Revolution of Everyday Life (London: Left Bank Books/Rebel Press, 1983). (French original published in 1967).