

Suki Chan, *Sleep Walk, Sleep Talk*, 198 Gallery,

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by Paul O’Kane

... the present time which, by opening unknown spaces of freedom, makes us responsible for new relationships, always threatened, always hoped for, between what we call work, oeuvre, and what we call unworking, désœuvrement.

Maurice Blanchot *The Unavowable Community*

In Suki Chan’s *Sleep Walk Sleep Talk* at London’s 198 Gallery the visitor finds richly coloured digital images, carefully constructed soundtracks, beguiling edits and an artful installation which requires the viewer to visit two discreet spaces, encountering on a second screen much that is similar or familiar but occasionally alerted to subtly different shots and sequences. All this conspires to communicate a complex meditation on the city (London) and ideas of freedom. The film appears as part of a larger programme titled *Free To Air* by the organisation Film & Video Umbrella (in collaboration with A Foundation) who asked artists working with the moving image to explore the meaning of freedom today.

We are all too aware of why the modern principle of freedom is topical for artists,¹ the 21st century ushered in, as soon as its door was violently opened, a new atmosphere of oppression and restriction. Thankfully, the irrepressible and imaginative human spirit is

capable of endlessly re-inventing what Blanchot (above) calls 'spaces of freedom', even as many of the freedoms we cherish are wrested from us or under threat.

In Chan's film, the sensuous effects of time-lapse photography, artful pans and careful framing might invoke 1982's *Koyaanisqatsi* by Godfrey Reggio but Chan also seems to be in dialogue with current film-makers like Tacita Dean, so that, while night traffic's red and white lights smear into time-lapse trails we submit to images that patiently unfold as if the artist were reluctant to impose narrative. We see the city through nights and days always by means of an un-intrusive style, reminiscent of surveillance and of Andy Warhol's wide-eyed cinema - both of which have become significant influences on a generation of film-makers. ²

As we watch the city's flow we know we too are out there in that spectacular labyrinth, toiling under the gaze of numerous tracking devices. Welcome to the 21st Century where Sci-Fi comes all-too true, all-too soon. But despite the fear and cynicism with which we address surveillance and its compromise to freedom it also provides a model of an objective - albeit inhuman - gaze to which, it seems, we willingly aspire. A death of the *auteur* is apparent whenever filmmakers defer passively to the voice of the world and to the process by which it is captured. A neo-modernism appears whenever truth-to-materials overrides the artist's desire to impose form on their media.

As a parallel to Chan's evocative collage, the influential spirit of Benjamin, Hessel and Sebald-ian *flaneurie* seem to shape the film into a historical document as it's most idiosyncratic and emotive contributions lie, not in its stylish overview but in a handful of detailed human portraits woven into the rich contextual backdrop. To single-out a portrait, of an 'ordinary' man or woman as the appropriate hero of modernity, is a tradition stretching back to Baudelaire and the artists he rallied to his cause (Courbet, Degas, Manet). August Sander, 'Mass Observation' and many others helped develop this tradition as taxonomy for a rapidly passing, ever threatened modern world and it currently thrives in David Lynch's *Interview Project* where portable video allows everyone to grasp their 15 minutes of fame and a personal gigabyte of the collective memory. Chan's contribution is more oblique, avoiding the face-to-face style by which an otherwise anonymous figure confesses their secret value. Instead we get glimpses, backs of heads and disembodied voices describing day-to-day working lives while the camera -like time or the city itself - rolls on, listening but looking away, as if interested in human affairs only as much as every other aspect of modernity's distracting pageant.

The city is a testing ground, throwing us together in difference to struggle with new moral questions, demanding we negotiate and represent its bewildering rate of change.³ Consequently it requires us to concoct new, appropriate notions of art, of law, of community, morality and freedom.⁴ Depictions of L.A homelessness in Wim Wenders' *Land Of Plenty* (2004), or the popular currency of Michael Haneke's films, attest to cinema's ability and willingness to tackle these debates. But what is most striking about

Sleep Walk, Sleep Talk is the way in which the artist artfully side-steps the moral judgment of an anthropological gaze, so that despite the artist's will to impose and create, a handful of otherwise un-noted participants here speak through and above the city's relentless drone.

At least since the birth of the Romantic the artist has embodied a courageous insistence upon liberty, and yet Chan, working within the context of *Free To Air*, reminds us that personal freedoms are creatively carved by *every* citizen, in every walk of life, necessarily scratching-out a constructive response to fate. We *should* be overwhelmed and defeated by the city as it compounds and condenses the difficult mystery of human existence, but allowing the city into us is what ultimately allows us to inhabit it. Thus Chan implies that we each redeem and orient ourselves by becoming one of its characters or operatives, jettisoning, in the process, shreds and legacies of our rural or suburban defensiveness to form a more stoic view.

In this ability to adapt we at least remain free, despite political and cultural forces seemingly intent upon mastering and determining our experience. Chan obliquely insists on the broadest interpretation of 'freedom' as something that -as Blanchot suggests (above)- will and must always be contested, enlarged, and interpreted in speculative, imaginative, even mysterious ways. Two images -sensitively collaged and repeated so as to gently burn into the audience's memory - are here worthy of note as they describe and compare some barely articulated 21st Century margins. First, the film illustrates the environment of Canary Wharf in London's Docklands, which exists as a quasi-private

space of an arch-postmodern kind. Like any gated community its defences ironically imprison those within by making them intolerably aware of every change and difference. The zone is perhaps still bruised by the impact of an I.R.A bomb exploding there in the 1980s while Canary Wharf was still symbolic of newly reactionary forces in Britain. Today its militaristic entrance makes clear that all are not welcome and Chan successfully portrays the twisted psycho-geography of such a trapped and cleansed space. In contrast to this culturally stagnant zone Chan has laced repeated episodes of deterritorialising roller-skaters negotiating an alternative liminal interface of 21st century space and legality. Displaying disdain for teeming traffic the skaters gaily rope along night roads in thick, languid processions, demonstrably insisting on subcultural rights by means of a surreal juxtaposition rather than any direct confrontation.

If freedom can be demonstrated in such a cheekily transgressive manner the interviewees in *Sleep Walk, Sleep Talk* show us that it can also, paradoxically, take the form of self-imposed discipline that masters rather than rails against our conditions. And here we glimpse subjective, nuanced alternatives to Marx's own homogenising appraisal of modern freedom, with all its stark images of chains and fraternity. Walter Benjamin – imaginative historian, city visionary and champion of technology- flirted with Marx's materialist resentment only to promote the *avant-garde* in its stead. He preferred the efficacy of a revolution-in-consciousness as the best means by which to survive, transcend and rescue modernity, and in his 1920s essay *Surrealism* suggested that Russia

was still waiting for its revolution as it hadn't yet succumbed to the seduction of Bretonian influence.⁵

Benjamin also made the typically inspired and convoluted observation that, despite their 'lowly' status in the modern hierarchy, workers building the first towering industrial constructions were among the first to enjoy the consciousness-changing effect of seeing the new city evolve from high above, and thereby appropriated towering buildings as new 'optical devices'.⁶ One of the voices in Chan's film belongs to a security guard who explains his duties as the camera follows his routine around the tower of offices that he protects.⁷ After conscientiously checking numerous doors and enormous windows from a vantage point high above the sparkling city he settles down to time-passing banalities of instant coffee, micro-waved food and 24-hour TV news. Meanwhile, his voice-over proudly lists his responsibilities, just as he might have parroted them on his induction day. This initially seems a sadly repressive and necessary response to a 21st Century world where Marx's vision of liberated workers has palpably failed or been relentlessly crushed. A similar response might be made by a medieval serf dutifully enduring unhelpful containment within an unjust system. But a certain wisdom with which Chan seems to artfully grace the contents of her film encourages us to move, with this man, beyond resentment to a level of acceptance, where we can, and must find dignity (another crucial locus of freedom) by mentally transcending our restricted material conditions.

Freedom might take the form of romancing (by means of personal narrative and private mythology) significant moments of our life or occupation, thus giving colour, drama and meaning to what would otherwise be mere drudgery. Chan shows us the city through the eyes of a tube-train driver as the cab-mounted camera pushes along shimmering lines of electrified steel through London's underworld, breaking occasionally into a glimpse of dawn or the sodium-lit oasis of a tube station. This man's voice-over almost relays the tale of an unspeakable and indelible incident that has scarred the history of his employment, but the details are carefully assigned to the digital equivalent of the 'cutting-room floor', maybe because, inspired by the city itself as great equaliser, Chan senses that highlighting one dramatic and grotesque element would introduce an unwelcome imbalance into her crafted composition.

The complex topography of the city in *Sleep Walk, Sleep Talk* becomes symbolic of our individual and social uncertainty as today we forego any 'ground level' from which to confidently build identity or maintain aims. Passing from high above to deep below the urban fabric, moving in loops, repetitions and the wholesale doubling of the film installed in the gallery space, the viewer is made aware that *memory* is perhaps the only means by which we might compensate for our lost horizons. Contemporary with the birth of cinema, memory was championed by Proust and Bergson as the form and medium with which to describe and transcend modern disorientation. Today that memory is aided by an arsenal of recording and communicating devices that we can now carry like combat gear through the city. We hold the future in our hands as a tiresome banality, using it to explore an increasingly exotic past while memory is both the material and the conceptual

paradigm of new technologies, iTunes and YouTube being more consciously archival than cinema and the novel ever were. And so the cutting edge guides us around and beyond the Hegelian delusion that modernity is primarily futural or teleological as we relinquish any belief that we might soon realise the longed-for clarification and liberation promised by Enlightenment.

But while Enlightenment may have given birth to abstract promises of freedom, Walter Benjamin might argue (and Gilles Deleuze concur) that modernity's constructions and technologies, while symbolic of incarceration, nevertheless make possible new forms of consciousness by means of which to negotiate corresponding freedoms. Thus, artists should never be afraid to acknowledge and reflect upon the state of the world and the status of the image using the latest tools and materials. *Sleep Walk Sleep Talk* explores our current freedom to compose the moving image liberated from canons of genres, forms and *auteurs*, yet forced, as ever, to reconcile innovation with the particular technology, audience and object which together allow the artist to speak.

Among the many notions of freedom with which Chan's film is concerned it also shows, (like Shakespeare's Prospero who ultimately needs the audience to free him of his own powers) how filmmakers might today be paradoxically constrained by the apparently infinite, yet pre-programmed possibilities made available by digital wizardry⁸. And so, while hypnotised by *Sleep Walk, Sleep Talk's* sensuous complexity the viewer might sometimes be reminded of the antithesis, found in the stark simplicities of early cinema, which bequeaths us images evoking overwhelming empathy for the human condition,

made in a moment bereft of both sophistication and tradition. We only need bring to mind what is often claimed to be the first film ever made, a scene of mostly female workers leaving the opening gates of the *Lumière* factory in 1895 to see that Film and Video Umbrella's *Free To Air* project is perhaps as old as the medium itself.

1 The *Free To Air* programme coincides with the 150th anniversary of John Stuart Mill's seminal and highly influential text *On Liberty* of 1859

2 For example, Michael Haneke's *Hidden (Caché)* 2005, not only used surveillance as an oppressive idea but as a new means of human reflection whereby we might explore our conscience with a new clarity. The notorious final scene of that film provokes the audience precisely because, like CCTV footage it demands much of our own judgment and invention to ascertain its meaning and truth.

3 Chan's own roots lie in Hong Kong, and it is perhaps significant that Wong Kar Wai and Christopher Doyle have spoken of the need to make film's extremely quickly in that city to reflect the fact that it changes and lives even faster than most.

4 Here we might also consider Kafka's story *Before The Law*, which highlights the city as the seat of law in relation to the country. A pivotal moment in New Labour's policies symbolically confronted the country as a site of reaction and illuminated the city as progressive, provoking a 'Countryside Alliance' to march on the city in September 2002. The BNP currently claim that cosmopolitan London is unrepresentative of Britain.

5 Walter Benjamin, *Surrealism* 1929

6 Detlef Mertins, *Walter Benjamin and the Tectonic Unconscious: Using Architecture as an Optical Instrument*, University of Pennsylvania 1999

7 Here one might also recall a significant character, similarly occupied, in Mike Leigh's anarchic *Naked* 1993

8 A scenario drawing on the language of film deployed by Bourriaud as *Postproduction* a book in which he extends the metaphor of the title into the late 20th Century cultural producer's general position.