

Women Walking:
on Pia Frankenberg's
Never Sleep Again

WOMEN WALKING: ON PIA FRANKENBERG'S *NEVER SLEEP AGAIN*

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As we taxied across town, I thought: out there the city goes on being the city, more or less seductive, more or less comforting. In this city, I decided, I will continue to walk: walk beside the lake, walk along the old streets, walk into new neighbourhoods, noting the ways of people, keeping my step light.

—Helen Weinzwieg, *Basic Black with Pearls*

Pia Frankenberg moved to Hamburg when she was nineteen years old. It played host to nearly all of her films as a director; a port city of comers and goers proved the perfect backdrop to her effervescent portraits of mischievous women winging their way through life. But Germany's second largest city was more than just an energising location for Frankenberg. She paid close attention to Hamburg—its quirks and its crises—building it into the architecture of her filmmaking. Its chilly North German climate and fluvial topography come to the fore in *Ain't Nothin Without You* (1985); a memorable conversation about male contraception between Frankenberg's character, and her slippery, neurotic lover takes place along the equally slippery ice- and snow-encrusted banks of the river Elbe. Later, *Burning Beds* (1988) uses the city's housing shortage as the catalyst for an oddball comedy, where Frankenberg, acting again, plays house with a pyromaniac Ian Dury.

Her only film not set in Hamburg is *Never Sleep Again* (1992), though its presence is still felt through the three main characters, Hamburg natives who are visitors to a newly reunified Berlin. Fleeing a riverboat wedding (water is never far from Frankenberg), Rita, Roberta, and Lilian meander towards the city centre, past the ruin and reconstruction of the fractured landscape. On their walk, they encounter an overgrown war cemetery; over the wall, in the distance, looming factory towers make stark the distinction between imperial old and industrial new. Further along, in the middle of the pavement, Lilian sets her camcorder atop a gravestone that she has stolen from the cemetery. With it, she films an installation of Jenny Holzer's "Truisms". The first reads, "It's fun to walk carelessly in a death zone." The women take Holzer's words with them into the heart of Berlin, posing them as questions to citizens milling around the Brandenburg Gate. Then, a slice of pizza is split three ways, fleeting friendships are made with men in bars, trains shuttle by. History, art, architecture, community—the framework of the city is scattered across the film, like breadcrumbs to be discovered on their trail.

When women walk in the movies, they tend to do it alone. I think of Agnès Varda's Cléo, Barbara Loden's Wanda, and Eric Rohmer's Delphine; the European drifters of Claudia von Alemann or Angela Schanelec; the independent New Yorkers of Claudia Weill, Joan Micklin Silver, or Nicole Holofcener. They walk for many reasons: to get from A to B, to trace the steps of others, to escape what awaits them at home. Their walking is quotidian yet revelatory. Frankenberg's multigenerational trio of friends walk together, sharing uncertainties and anxieties about their futures, their relationships, their senses of self. The revelations provoked by their walking are collective, arising as much through collaboration and communication as introspection.

This "woman walking" microgenre is comforting to me because it feels familiar; the urban flâneuse waits within me, emerging at the firm feel of concrete underfoot. Cities both alienate and thrill, the vastness of space and density of population creating the exhilaration of being both someone and no one. Walking alone, especially, opens up a space for imagination, for examining and developing our ever-fluctuating ideas about ourselves.

The artist-filmmaker Michael Snow frequently depicted a "Walking Woman" figure: a stencil of a woman in profile as she walks, arms swinging. His Walking Woman both is and isn't present. Serialised throughout his work and often situated in public spaces, she is, in her bold but minimal outline, a figure to look at and to look through, another metropolitan woman in step with the city's liminality. On the New York streets of Snow's film *New York Eye and Ear Control* (1964), she is part of the city's furniture—a skyscraper, even. Later, she is washed out to sea.

For the three friends in *Never Sleep Again*, walking is a means for self-discovery. Both alone and together, they flit between states of being individual, distinguishable characters and disappearing into their collectivity. That closeness to one another, their ability to speak freely and critically, out of love, liberates the film from any potential navel-gazing. They call out each other's pretensions, their bad habits. When Rita returns from a short-sighted visit to a troublesome ex, she postures to the others: "The feeling I have for him is indescribable, it's..." "Emptiness?" offers Roberta—to Rita's shock, but she then concedes. This dynamic repeats and inverts throughout the film. Later, Rita near-shouts at the domestically depressed Roberta, "You're really unhappy." "Me?" Roberta replies. Even Lilian, the cool, stony one of the three, committed to documenting the world on camera, faces her friends' probing: "Are you afraid everything will slip away from you?"

It's the hyperspecific circumstances of the precise moment Lilian is capturing that make Frankenberg's film so distinct. Far from a romanticised, cinematic New York or Paris, Berlin in the late summer of 1991 is a ruptured space, ready for a new future. Its past, though, weighs heavily. When Lilian points out the former Nazi Ministry of Aviation, Roberta asks, "What should we do with it now? ... What attitude should I have towards it?" Berlin undergoes its own kind of self-scrutiny: trying to unify its component parts, or at least trying to make sense of them. A documentary artefact of this moment, *Never Sleep Again* is almost a city symphony, capturing a period of renewal in the German capital.

Helen Weinzwieg's 1980 novel *Basic Black with Pearls*—the New York Review of Books edition of which in fact features Snow's Walking Woman on the cover—recounts the misadventures of a housewife in Toronto. She, too, retraces a history there, rejecting her domestic discomfort and searching for more. She walks alone for the majority of the novel, and builds its world in her unreliable voice, from her wild imagination. Although she lacks friendship, she revels in the comfort of the city. Her life is as much in its buildings and streets as in her heart and mind. The few days and nights Rita, Roberta, and Lilian share in Berlin pass by in a state of imagination, too—as if their lives in Hamburg have been paused while they live out their fantasies elsewhere. When the time comes, the three of them can barely find the will to board the train home.