

“The problem is not how to stop the flow of items and surfaces in order to stabilize space, but how to articulate the politics of their passage. Every culture is the terrible gush of its splendid outward forms.”

- Lisa Roberston

Desire Lines

‘Desire lines’ is a term from landscape architecture used to describe the off-beaten paths humans inscribe on their environments, favouring shortcuts and alternative routes than what has been instructed by design. We hear this phrase in Chloe Brenan’s *Verdigris*, where the narrator describes the design principles of the Paris Metro, specifically an original, canopied entrance by Hector Guimard, where ornate and foliate lines in glass and iron curl and repeat above the descent to the underground. The narrator then brings our attention to another line, leading from a trampled fence at a station entrance and cutting a diagonal path straight through a patch of green. ‘Desire lines’, as a term in itself, strikes a generous, fanciful tone. It is a flexible phrase used as an analogy across disciplines but in practice are the paths of a collective intent on a shortcut journey. Whilst they tend not to appear as wanton lines that frolic and play like the curlicues of Guimard’s art nouveau, it is in the impulse to walk on the grass rather than the pavement that we trace instances of human intuition, trails of interiority that spiral in the mind and must be taken to softer ground.

In Brenan’s film, this antagonism of navigation, whether it be straight and narrow—or free-wheeling and expressive—is drawn out across images of Paris’ rich architectural aesthetic. We are informed of the ambiguous shade of verdigris that slips between blue and green, chosen to brand the Metro in homage to the city’s oxidised copper statues, and also, of the dramatic reinvention of Paris through the construction of its boulevards. These boulevards displaced the slum communities, resettling them to the city’s periphery and made Paris a city for promenading, flaneuring, and shopping. The city could now accommodate exchanges that benefited commerce and also, as our narrator informs us, the circulation of troops. *Verdigris* delivers a foreboding reminder that the word ‘direction’ holds two meanings: orientation and control. Brenan’s film reveals a modern Paris emerging as much from a new aesthetic sensibility as from an impetus to survey and control its growing population.

It was in Paris, too, that another movement was formalised to counter the increasingly insidious ways in which late capitalism was shaping society. As Brennan's narrator states, in the 1950s and 60s the Situationists (who inspired the anarchist movements of the 1970s) developed their key concepts of *dérive* (meaning to drift, to move through the city in a manner that encourages misbehaviour and self-discovery), and *détournement* (a rerouting of a concept against its original purpose, squatting in a banking institution, for example). These were strategies to encourage independence of thought, to consider how one feels walking through a city. Instead of taking a certain route, where would you go if you were to drift and tune in to the energy of the streets? What attracts you to go one way? And what repels you from going in another? It is in such practice, the Situationists argued, that a kind of self-making comes about, a newfound disposition to resist sinking into passivity. Desire lines resurface and proliferate here in Situationist logic; in another route opened up, so is a sense of potential in theory and the imagination.

In *Morning Circle* by Basma al-Sharif, we are faced with a more strangulated environment for any drifting or self-making. Opening to a dramatic soundscape, a tracking camera captures the scaling heights of Berlin apartment blocks and glass corporate buildings. As though hunting a target, the camera slinks into a complex, leading us up a gloomy stairwell and into the private space of a father and young son. The soundtrack abruptly ends before we hear some questioning; '*why did you come to Germany? Can you go back? Would you like to go back?*' A strange relationship ensues between the father and his inquisitor, where implicit discrimination and wilful misunderstanding characterises the tone of the questions. The father is mostly wearisome with his interrogator and shrugs off such displays of ignorance, but he also chooses small acts of resistance. In response to the question, '*what does family mean to you in relation to this country?*', he answers, '*do you have any idea what family means to us?*' Neither party satisfyingly addresses the questions asked, leaving the interrogator both out of sight and omnipresent, suggestive of the kind of ongoing scrutiny and prejudice experienced by migrants forced to flee their home countries and cultures.

Morning Circle progresses further into bewilderment, tipping between moments of poignant intimacy between the father and son and the painful process of separation, where at the door of the son's crèche the boy refuses to enter. Al-Sharif employs dizzying techniques of reversing the filmplay, polarising and overlaying imagery, and a trancy, pulsing soundtrack to culminate in a

kind of sensorial overload. The result evokes something of the experience of starting over in a new culture where your identity must undergo a form of subversive redeployment. We see this when the father shares an in-joke with his son, when asked to explain it he smugly replies '*unfortunately it doesn't translate*'. *Morning Circle* complicates the notion of just where desire lines can run free in what feels like a trap, instead subverting them in an inward spiral.

Al-Sharif's film closes on an image of the boy falling to the ground dizzy from twirling. This theme of movement and directionality that runs through this programme are perhaps most directly echoed in Olivia Normile's two short videos that segment this programme. In her first, *as above, so below (Limits and Demonstrations)*, dots, lines, and animal footprints trace a spatial energy mediated by a hand-made process, and in her second, *Body Diagrams (Limits and Demonstrations)* descriptions of human experiences such as '*walking through a storm*' or '*waiting for a scan*' are represented in hand-drawn diagrams that playfully schematise an interpretation of such experiences. The indexical quality—that of Normile's hand registered in the flickering hand-drawn lines—captures something of the conditions of movement. In the abstract space of the blank background gesture is foregrounded as both abstract and relational.

In the final two films of the programme, *Speech for a Melting Statue* and *Parish*, the theme of community shifts from the isolated and antagonised setting of *Morning Circle* to a speculative register that considers the role of hope and camaraderie in shaping identity. In *Speech for a Melting Statue* by the Belgian-Congolese filmmakers of Collectif Faire-Part, poet Marie Paule Mugeni practices a speech in hope of the day when a statue of King Leopold II might be taken down in Brussels. As though imagining this day, we watch archival footage of a different Leopold II statue being dismantled and delivered to a Kinshasa museum in the Democratic Republic of Congo—where the former King unleashed his devastating regime of killing and resource extraction over the course of decades until 1908. Despite the horrors of this historical violence, the tone of the narrator is one of hope, projecting the lines of revolution that have seen the statue fall in Kinshasa and wishing them upon her own city of Brussels. *Speech for a Melting Statue*, therefore, is like a premonition. The film draws together the link between theory and practice in the satisfying result of a statue being dismantled, and while the Belgian statue remains standing, the channels of energy are felt like etchings lining up the next fall. The film is a document for changing beliefs, and in the key of its hopeful message for making space for new stories, the narrator asks: '*but which ones do we want to tell?*'

In *Parish* we see a nuanced take on a community's relationship to their locality. We follow an ensemble cast as they trace what was once the parish boundary around Sandyford, Co. Dublin. Heart-felt qualities of warmth and connection associated with the term 'community' are clearly evident with the group. As they ramble along the parish line they display the true practice of it, where disparate lives are marked and brought together in their relation to each other and the land. They take turns narrating stories of folklore, personal tragedy, political histories and official advice from the local council. We hear description of local flora and rock, personal tales of assault on the streets, stories of anglo-Irish conflict, a tree that was the site of a suicide, and the impositions of local financial institutions. In a hybrid-documentary style, we learn of the factual but absorb it along with the mythic, how myth spools from the elapse of oral histories. One member of the group plays the role of a kind of diviner, possibly holding a bodily memory of the parish bounds where the group come to gently support him in his fits of overwhelm. As they perambulate the land, *Parish* enacts the coming together of desire lines and dérive in their emotive response to the historical character of the locality. Along with an eclectic soundtrack and the textural variance of the groups' individual voices, the aesthetic is also trippy, intoxicated—attesting to how the sum of all these experiences that mark the land lives on in a manner that escapes totalisation.

Epigraph from Lisa Robertson's essay 'Spatial Synthetics: A Theory', published in her collection *Occasional Walks and Seven Walks from the Office of Soft Architecture*, Coach House Books, third edition, 2011.

Leah Reynolds, May 2026