

'The Stream Will Rise'

One Hundred Steps by Bárbara Wagner and Benjamin de Burcá

In their collaborative text *The Hundreds*, Lauren Berlant and Kathleen Stewart use a hundred-word constraint to write the titular number of pieces that compose the book. If word count is often used to normative ends, it's the potential to intensify resonances that attracted Berlant and Stewart. The formal constraint contains and amplifies its content at once, producing connections across the diversity of their affective engagement with the world. Bárbara Wagner and Benjamin de Burcá's *One Hundred Steps* uses formal settings and symmetrical structure to a similar end, heightening the performances of the musicians and dancers that chime throughout the film.

Split in two parts of equal length, *One Hundred Steps* is set first in Bantry House, County Cork and then in the Grobet-Labadié museum in Marseille. Both museums – one private and one public – display European art collections accumulated by members of the resident families during their continental travels in the 19th Century. If this formal arrangement creates a sense of symmetry, the sequence of shots continues it: both sections begin by following a vehicle through hills and end with views of the houses from the outside, suggesting a series of parallels between the two settings and the performances they house.

Long still shots, carefully framed by doors, partitions or columns and curtains, mirrors, paintings or a harp, further the film's formal structure. When the camera moves, it goes steadily through corridors or alongside suites of rooms. The film is shot in black and white academy ratio, enhancing the stately effect of this cinematography. In both instances, the voice of a tour guide introduces the houses, framing what we're seeing. They tell the visitors about the building and its development, the notable family members who once lived there, and their portraits hung on the walls, left unseen by the camera's gaze.

We see tapestries of edenic gardens and thick carpets, ornate chandeliers, convoluted ceramics, bronze figures, landscape paintings and classical musical instruments, all that we would expect in such residences. In Marseille, we are told the art collection was a typically bourgeois phenomenon that flourished in the 19th Century and functioned as a form of validation for those whose names were not that old. The collections were to demonstrate the singularity of the individuals by showcasing their good taste – and yet they are so alike, instances rather of an idea of what European culture was at the moment of its waning.

Throughout this stilted atmosphere, the visitors bring movement and presence: it is their faces the camera lingers on while the tour guides point to the family portraits. They respectfully listen for a while and then wander off to explore the rooms on their own. A little girl goes dreaming on a poster bed in Bantry, three men settle in a salon to play cards in the Grobet-Labadié house. As the two parts echo each other, we think of the mother and daughter singing *Róisín Dubh* in the sean-nós tradition sitting by the fire in the County Cork dwelling while listening to *Adieu Paure Carnavas* sung in Occitan in the one by the Mediterranean. The parquet floors seem to protest no less under the bare feet of Anass Zine's rhythmical dancing than the battering

footwork of Gerard and Patrick Devane. The songs in Arabic, Gaeilge and Provençal resound as incongruously within the walls of the great houses as the pulsing vibrations of the Krakebs, the fiddle, the Uilleann pipes, the mizwad and the drums. The elegant figure of a harp, the imposing bulk of a grand piano and a collection of violins and cellos on display behind glass stand in reproof.

The soundtrack of the film does not carry just the music; the wind blows throughout. It is the first sound we hear, as we move across the hills. It will flow along the corridors and agitate the curtains and it will carry us over from overlooking the bay of the west coast of Ireland to the calanques of Marseille. And the last sound is that of waves crashing on the shore. It is the wind that fill the sails of the trade boats on the Atlantic seaways from Scandinavia to North Africa, it is the waves that bring cultures together.

Borne by the wind and inspired by Sean-nós singing and dancing, the filmmaker Bob Quinn believed Atlantean influences on Irish culture more convincing than the Eurocentric Celts. He found resonances in the songs of the Berbers or the dancing of Egyptians. The instruments are light, the percussion easy to carry and when all else fails, there are always vocal cords to carry the tune. The music needs more space than the confines of the museums and in the film's last scene, the Algerian singer Hakim Hamadouche makes the reverbs of his electric mandoluth storm the steps of the Palais Longchamp.

In a recent article for Art Monthly, Morgan Quaintance questions the logic of access and support of art institutions which posit middle-class culture as the firmament to which the working classes are supposed to aspire. In the process they must “demonstrate the comprehensive nature of their own lack”. Foregrounding the actual cultural abundance of the working classes, Quaintance calls for a dismantlement rather than access to these institutions that perpetuate an exclusionary idea of culture, developed within colonial ideology. The tension between notions of lack and abundance plays out throughout the film leaving us in little doubt about their dispensation.

The titular one hundred steps are first mentioned by the Bantry House tour guide as having been built during the 1840s. The chronology of the house website tersely states: “1840 to 1860 The Famine. Major works on the demesne in progress.” At the close of the first part, the camera moves out through the bay windows to follow Naomi Smith ascending the steps. She is lilting, a form of singing developed to make up for musical instruments. As she reaches the top, she turns around to command a view of the house and gardens with the bay and mountains beyond.

Michaële Cutaya 2022

References

Lauren Berlant and Kathleen Stewart, *The Hundreds*, Duke University Press, 2019.
Morgan Quaintance, 'Closed Loop' in Art Monthly 456, December 2021-January 2022.