

This was once a mountain that stood nearly 12,000 feet tall and then had its heart removed. This was once a wasteland of lava and pumice and ash. This was once an empty bowl that took hundreds of years to fill. But, hard as I tried, I couldn't see them in my mind's eye. Not the mountain or the wasteland or the empty bowl. They simply were not there anymore. There was only the stillness and the silence of that water: what a mountain and a wasteland and an empty bowl turned into after the healing began. (p. 273)

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Joy of being

A philosophy of walking, by Frederic Gros, London, Verso, 2015, 288 pp., £12.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1781682708

Reviewed by Nigel Armistead, writer on walking

Frederic Gros has done a typical Gallic job on walking, combining his own ideas about walking with accounts of what walking meant to various philosophers. His own ideas hardly amount to a philosophy of walking – perhaps ‘notes towards a philosophy of walking’; but they are worthwhile, nevertheless. These ideas are couched in the usual continental language that we Brits (this one, anyway) find hard to swallow. For instance, if you like this quotation, I think you’ll like this book:

Walking reminds us constantly of our finiteness: bodies heavy with unmannerly needs, nailed to the definitive ground. Walking doesn't mean raising yourself, it doesn't mean getting the better of gravity, or letting speed and height delude you on your mortal condition; it means reconciling yourself to it through that exposure to the mass of the ground, the fragility of the body, the slow, remorseless sinking movement. Walking means precisely resigning yourself to being an ambulant, forward-leaning body. But the really astonishing thing is how that slow resignation, that immense lassitude give us the joy of being. Of being no more than that, of course, but in utter bliss. Our leaden bodies fall back to earth at every step, as if to take root there again. Walking is an invitation to die standing up. (p. 187)

Who would have thought it? Certainly not me.

By and large, the chapters that feature Gros's own musings on walking are the best: chapters with titles such as ‘Walking is Not a Sport’, ‘Freedoms’, ‘Slowness’, ‘Solitudes’, ‘Silences’, ‘Eternities’, ‘Energy’, ‘Regeneration and Presence’, ‘Strolls’, ‘Gravity’ and ‘Repetition’. You can see where he's going with titles such as these.

For me, the chapters on individual philosophers and their relation to walking are not so good, rather pedantic (pun intended) in many cases. For instance, the chapter on Rimbaud entitled ‘The Passion for Escape’ is little more than a potted biography, detailing how, whenever possible, he escaped from the boredom of provincial life by walking somewhere else. Similarly, the chapter on Nietzsche is mainly biographical,

with a short excursion into how walking helps a writer such as Nietzsche to compose his writings. However, there are also good chapters on philosophers – I particularly liked the one on Thoreau in which Gros shows how walking was central to Thoreau's writings:

[For Thoreau] Walking is setting oneself apart: at the edge of those who work, at the edge of high-speed roads, at the edge of the producers of profit and poverty, exploiters, labourers, and at the edge of those serious people who always have something better to do than receive the pale gentleness of a winter sun or the freshness of a spring breeze. (p. 94)

I also liked his chapter on Rousseau in which Gros charts the changing significance of walking in Rousseau's life, from the early walks of youthful expectation through his mature years discovering the natural man, and to his later years where 'walking is no longer undertaken to fuel invention, but exactly for nothing: just to connect with the movement of the sinking sun, to echo with slow tread the cadence of the minutes, hours, days' (p. 78).

In my experience, there is a sequential contradiction at the heart of walking. At first, walking amplifies thought and feeling (rather like meditation, of which for me walking is an example) so that whatever is uppermost comes vividly to the surface; then, what lies deeper begins to appear, until finally all such thoughts and feelings reduce in intensity and disappear into nothingness. Gros clearly favours the nothingness of walking – nothing except the sensations of one's body and one's surroundings. Yet in order to have a book, he needs to explore the somethingness of his philosophers.

Unfortunately, this does not make a philosophy of walking, but rather a pot-pourri of thought hurdles to be jumped on the way to the essential nothingness of walking where all the convolutions of philosophy disappear – at least for this walker!

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DVD REVIEW

Excuses to kill

The look of silence, by Joshua Oppenheimer, 2015, 1 hr 43 mins, London, Dogwoof, DVD, £12.99

Reviewed by Toby Bull

Joshua Oppenheimer has made two films about Indonesia, a society in which the memory of unresolved collective trauma continues to be lived and suffered as injustice.