We are behind a barefoot man taking a step toward a doorway leading onto the street. The man has a shaved head and is dressed in bright red robes like a monk. The concrete stairwell is narrow and worn. Outside we hear a car scrape to life, horns honking, doors slamming, fragments of voices, rickety carts pushed along the sidewalk: all these intermittent sounds embedded into the tidal static of the city’s activities. Each step takes the man about a minute to complete. His body sways and trembles slightly as a foot hesitantly hovers just above the ground. He maintains this pace throughout the entire 25 minute film.

The film is comprised of 21 shots showing the Walker incrementally traversing various locations around Hong Kong over the course of a day. We find him approaching a colorful wall of wheat-pasted advertisements accompanied by the rattling of jackhammers, or crossing one of the many elevated walkways meant to alleviate congestion on the streets below, or walking in the busy and brightly-lit neon shopping districts of Mong Kok and Tsimshatsui, or surrounded by the crowds gathered under Goose Neck Bridge in Causeway Bay, where elderly women offer da siu yahn services, the ritual beating of bad influences from one’s life.

In the evening we follow the Walker through the now comparatively deserted streets, past tram stops and ice cream trucks, next to buses and taxis parked for the night, among bundles of compressed paper waste and pallets of newspapers. The film ends when the Walker stops in front of a gated stairway below a sign which reads “NO ENTRY” in order to take a long, slow bite from the bo lo bao, a type of Cantonese baked bun, that he has been carrying the entire time, as a ballad performed by Ricky Hui, Cold Wind of the Heartless Night, begins to play.

Throughout the film the camera always captures the Walker in the middle of traversing any given space: we never witness him departing or arriving at any specific place. He doesn’t enter or exit, only comes into view. The camera is primarily fixed; there are very few tracking shots. His body often disappears, eclipsed by passing citizens, cars, busses, trucks, taxis and trams.
The Walker is not hurrying and he is not standing still: he exists at a kind of threshold between action and inaction, between activity and passivity. Within this liminal space where he barely moves, he remains opaque, inaccessible. His subjectivity is closed to us, without speech and lacking in expressive gestures he only displays his bowed head, his clutching of a baked good in one hand and a plastic bag filled with indiscernible objects in the other, and, again and again, his gradual and interminable steps. The Walker takes his time and offers it to us, embodied.

Although always in transit, he remains the least transitory figure within each frame as he is repeatedly surpassed by vehicles and other pedestrians. An excessively slow passage of time is often described as “heavy,” as if time itself thickens and accrues a kind of viscous consistency, like in the idiom “slow as molasses,” as if time threatens to envelop us like quicksand if it isn’t “well spent.” We feel what Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky called “time-pressure.” As we witness the Walker’s presence from various perspectives and vantage points his body becomes an anchor around which each scene will coalesce. During the long distance shots we find ourselves searching for the body of the Walker, that one reliable constant, in order to organize the given tableau.

If the body of the Walker exerts a glacial influence, it is in the sense of Tarkovsky’s definition of cinema as sculpting in time. The Walker’s gradual progression carves through his surroundings, rendering palpable the contours of temporality. The Walker’s slowness is emphasized by the pace of the activity around him while, conversely, all of the other actions and elements taking place in the scene are in turn amplified by the torpor of the Walker’s body. The relations between these velocities, in addition to the formal structure of the film itself, produce a polyrhythmic configuration similar to what philosopher Gilles Deleuze refers to as cinema’s time-image. In his book Cinema 2, Deleuze wrote these paragraphs which seem to sum up the architecture and choreography of Tsai Ming-liang’s short film:

“The time-image does not imply the absence of movement (even though it often includes its increased scarcity) but it implies the reversal of the subordination; it is no longer time which is subordinate to movement; it is movement which subordinates itself to time. It is no longer time which derives from movement, from its norm and its corrected aberrations; it is movement as false movement, as aberrant movement which now depends on time. The time-image has become direct, just as time has discovered new aspects, as movement has become aberrant in essence and not by accident, as montage has taken on a new sense…”

As opposed to the movement-image of classical cinema, where time is often at the service of a script, where cuts and juxtapositions are made to carry the narrative, the time-image can manifest itself when the emphasis is placed on sustaining the cinematic image for its own sake. Or as Tarkovsky declares “The time in a shot must flow independently and, so to speak, as its own boss.” Deleuze continues:
“These are pure optical and sound situations, in which the character does not know how to respond, abandoned spaces in which he ceases to experience and to act so that he enters into flight, goes on a trip, comes and goes, vaguely indifferent to what happens to him, undecided as to what must be done. But he has gained in an ability to see what he has lost in action or reaction: he SEES so that the viewer’s problem becomes ‘What is there to see in the image?’ (and not now ‘What are we going to see in the next image?’).”

Tsai Ming-liang has become known for his slow-paced films with their static shots, fixed framing and notoriously endless long takes. There’s a blunt, minimalist documentary aesthetic to his style which eschews excessive editing or special effects. Two notable long takes from his films are the five and a half minute, medium range close up of a woman weeping in Vive L’amour and the shot of the empty theater which lasts for several minutes toward the end of Goodbye Dragon Inn. Tsai has repeatedly stressed that for him slowness is an act of rebellion, stating in an interview that “Slowness is the best way to express my revolt.”

Walker was produced by the Hong Kong International Film Festival Society to be part of four short films under the heading of Beautiful 2012 and was hosted by Youku, China’s Youtube equivalent. The video received over 10,000 comments within two days of being posted. As Tsai Ming-liang describes in another interview:

“There have been more than four million clicks to see the video, but an even greater number of people wrote in to complain about it. They said they found it unbearable, that Lee Kang-sheng was walking too slowly, that someone should push him, or hit him on the head to make him react.”

What is it about this slow-moving figure that frustrates and enrages, that makes the presence of his body’s incremental movement so “unbearable?”

Perhaps we could compare the Walker with another ambiguous and unbearable figure whose radical passivity was similarly provocative: Melville’s Bartleby the Scrivener. Akin to the Youku commentators the two copyists who work with Bartleby on Wall Street quickly lose their patience with him. When asked what they think of Bartleby’s behavior, Nippers replies “I think I should kick him out of the office” while Turkey roars “I think I’ll just step behind his screen and black his eyes for him!” As the narrator of the story reminds us: “Nothing so aggravates an earnest person as a passive resistance.”

But why this urge to violence against a figure who himself appears to enact the exact opposite of aggression? Why would one feel threatened by a blatant refusal to assume a normative tempo, what we assuredly consider to be “real time.” One describes something as being “painfully or excruciatingly slow,” as if there is something inherently violent in excessive slowness.
In his reading of Bartleby published in *The Parallax View*, Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek discusses the passive-aggressive “mode of our participation in socio-ideological life in which we are active all the time in order to make sure that nothing will happen, that nothing will really change. In such a constellation, the first truly critical (‘aggressive,’ violent) step is to withdraw into passivity, to refuse to participate—Bartleby’s ‘I would prefer not to’ is the necessary first step which, as it were, clears the ground, opens up the place, for true activity, for an act that will actually change the coordinates of the constellation.”

As opposed to the spontaneous acts of violence which ultimately display their impotence in the face of power or the tyrannical spectacle of violence which enforces the status quo, Žižek posits what he refers to as “Bartleby politics:” “In order for the last kind of violence to take place, this very place should be opened up through a gesture which is thoroughly violent in its impassive refusal, through a gesture of pure withdrawal in which—to quote Mallarmé—*rien n’aura eu lieu que le lieu*, nothing will have taken place but the place itself.”

There is another figure upon which the figure of the Walker is based: the 7th century scholar, translator and monk Xuanzang, who spent years travelling along the Silk Road to India in order to bring Buddhist scriptures back to China. Tsai has made three other versions of Walker: “No Form” and “Diamond Sutra,” both filmed in Taiwan, and the latest installment “Journey To The West,” which lasts 56 minutes and borrows its title from the classic Ming Dynasty text by Wu Cheng-en that mythologizes Xuanzang’s adventures. He also has plans to transform the premise into a live performance piece for the stage entitled “The Monk From The Tang Dynasty,” upon which he commented that the ‘slowness’ of Xuanzang is what is lacking in today’s world. . . . I think Xuanzang is a rebel,” further urging people “to use ‘slowness’ to rebel against the fast-paced world.” Tsai views an obsession with speed as a constraint and wants his goal as a filmmaker to be free from all constraints. “With slowness,” he says, “we return to the essence of cinema.”

It’s curious to note that in the “real world” in which the Walker was filmed his presence was largely ignored or unacknowledged, while his cinematic depiction provoked angry and hateful reprisals. This may be symptomatic about certain expectations of cinema as a commodity designed to provide a kind of explicit entertainment value for a consumer audience. Indeed one of the most common complaints toward a movie that one was bored by or simply didn’t like is: “It was a waste of my time.”

In an era increasingly concerned with speed and immediacy, excessive slowness disrupts the punctual and programmatic automation of our lives, all of the demands that we hurry up and arrive on time. At one point the narrator in Bartleby asks: “What shall I do? What ought I do? What does conscience say I should do with this man, or, rather, ghost.” One could say that the Walker haunts the spaces he traverses, both physically as well as the “dead time” of a film that would usually be edited out as unnecessary to the narrative or plot. He persists as an uncanny apparition which seems to exist within another temporal dimension than the one occupied by passerby and audience alike. His presence, like the ghost of Hamlet’s father, puts “time out of
Amid the rushing cacophony of the city the Walker’s barefoot steps fall careful and silent. Tsai has said that he is interested in developing an “ethics of slowness.” This ethical gesture of slowness is perhaps a kind of atonement for what Kafka considered to be a primary sin: impatience. He writes:

“There are two main human sins from which all the others derive: impatience and indolence. It was because of impatience that they were expelled from Paradise; it is because of indolence that they do not return. Yet perhaps there is only one major sin: impatience. Because of impatience they were expelled, because of impatience they do not return.”