

'I'm not driven by anger, but by desire'

Since 1976 I have discovered the works of Frans van de Staak, an important and authentic filmmaker. We met for the first time at Jean-Marie Straub and Daniëlle Huillet's apartment in Rome —whereas the two of us live at a distance of a 5 minutes walk from each other (!). Besides making films Frans van de Staak is also a graphic artist. In the latter profession (which was his first) the government supports him, like his peer artists such as painters, sculptors, with an annual income of 12.000 guilders, from which he saved fl 9.000 as a fund to finance his films.

The next conversation was held on Sunday, the 14th November, a beautiful autumn-afternoon. We have talked about his Spinoza-film in particular, but in addition to its specific content Van de Staak gives us some insight in his general workaroud and motivation. Let us hope that the rest of his work will be studied very soon, of which a very nice 4-minutes short *Sonate* deserves our attention.

Johan: Can you tell us more about Spinoza?

Frans: He was a cutter of lenses, in fact this was his livelihood. All day long he was busy with cutting lenses. Furthermore, as it is said, he was a pantheist. That is to say, he did not conceive of a god, who is detached from the world, but he identified god with the world. He was expelled from the Jewish community, because they considered him as an atheist. Being as it may, since my youth I was interested in this man. By the way he persisted in life. There is a kind of harshness in the manner of his thinking, working out his thoughts, patterned in a rhythm, which is unique. And in my view this rhythm is also present in the film. The principal question for him is then: how can one be happy? Formulated as a dummy, so to speak, this is for Spinoza what all is about. However, it is clear that Spinoza only could be happy by asking himself this question permanently, although he knew that he couldn't give a conclusive answer.

Johan: Doesn't he add to the fact of being happy also an ethical value? Nowadays we are asking ourselves urgently, how one can pursue his own happiness, *if* one has to pursue it.

Frans: Well, ok.... For Spinoza happiness, my happiness that is to say, is always related to others. It is selfish, but at the same time it is also social, because people are connected as a matter of fact. This he states explicitly, even more explicit than I'm trying to say now: one's own joy joins the other one's joy. The opposite is true as well: when hatred prevails, then one's joy *is* the other one's sorrow.

Johan: Yes, but greater social oppositions are at stake there, don't they? For example, last night we joined a meeting of the resistance-movement against Apartheid. Well, spokesmen from South Africa and Angola, who were present there, call for struggle. One could say, then, that for these people the only roadmap toward peace is the way of hatred. They can't do but fight, and in these circumstances large numbers of people from both sides would be killed. Under these conditions this way of reasoning will be embarrassing to oneself.

Frans: Yes, but you must not forget that those initiating the hatred in South Africa in the first place, are the ones that founded the system of Apartheid. And from Spinoza's perspective this is not human, because for him the human sphere coalesces with the urge of freedom to act. The blacks are restrained from acting freely, and when they try to remove the system of Apartheid, then in that case their struggle has a rational foundation. There is no need for them to act from hatred. The hatred is superfluous.

Johan: Don't you believe this is pretty naive?

Frans: Maybe so, but it does make sense after all. For, if one attacks this system, he is not backed up by hatred. For example, in case of Vietnam, I believe that the Americans fought far more out of hatred than the Vietcong... I'm trying to stay close to Spinoza's thinking as much as possible... I do still believe that the urge for self-preservation, the freedom to act, is the strongest motivation.

Johan: I'm trying to redirect this conversation on these topics intentionally, for I have the feeling that your films have a lot to say about the actual state of affairs, although the films are based on historical texts.

Frans: The Spinoza-film as well as *Ten poems of Hubert Cornelisz. Poot* are based on texts, written in the 17th century. A German writer of secondary rank, Friedrich Griese writes the text for *Meine Heimat mijn vaderland* in 1932. [The words 'Meine Heimat' and 'mijn vaderland' are the German and Dutch equivalents for 'My Home land, my country' respectively]. For *Meine Heimat* I was not interested in the author's personality as such, but just in this specific text. Well, granted these texts are in the past, they are moved into the present by recording them with modern equipment. As you know, the actual is already present in a film. Because of the technical means applied at the shootings, on behalf of the actors, the weather conditions... Due to numerous conditions whatsoever the actual is present already. The principal incentive for making the film would be, then: howfar is that, which lies hidden beneath the surface of historical dust, strong enough to resist the actual circumstances? In the Poot-film I have captured this aspect even more prominent by constantly manipulating the natural scenery. For example, a big sheet is stretched between poles, which is painted and waves in the wind. So, one can say, the sheet's waving is the actual: today the wind is blowing this way.

Well, to return to Spinoza's texts: I have designed their form like a musical score, which is performed before the camera. And when this happens, then you observe howfar these texts resist the present world of sounds. For every sound one can hear at the location of shooting, like cars, people, birds, planes, wind, acts as a disruption of the text.

Johan: Are you interested especially in sound?

Frans: Well, in fact no. Sound is but one of the aspects of presenting it.

Johan: You said: like a musical score, didn't you?

Frans: Like Spinoza did, modeling his philosophy in a mathematical way, with theorems and proofs, the film is constructed in a geometrical way too. I have reassembled Spinoza's propositions in a certain way. Specific texts are repeated a few times. There are roughly twenty actors, all amateurs, and I have figured out the rate of their appearance more precisely in advance. These matters I scrutinize in depth. Let us say actor number one appears ten times in the film and actor number 19 appears only once... The number of persons present within a frame varies also. Sometimes the text is said by one person, other times amidst of five or six persons. Because the text is always spoken in a social environment, it comes out as a kind of dialogue... that is to say, a quasi-dialogue.

Johan: It seems to be a distribution, doesn't it? By distributing the text over a strict number of people you make it a common property.

Frans: Exactly. In virtue of the quasi-dialogue a kind of meaning is added. The same text is uttered by different persons, and the one expresses it with more insight, has more trouble or feels more about it than another person. And that is why the meaning is changing constantly. Well, you see...this has to do also with my treatment of the text like a musical score. The distribution of the texts, the actors and the locations are fixed in it. Fortunately, there are enough possibilities to structure the material at the stage of editing.

Johan: Sure, you can determine the final combination of frames by editing. All this boils down to work it out at different levels. For everything you have figured out and put together

is handed out to the actors in the final stadium of shooting and so exposed to their unpredictable reactions and changing circumstances beyond your control (which you don't want to control neither: say, this is your rationale for working with amateurs, people who act in a natural way).

Frans: What is getting important in the film is something quite different from what Spinoza intended. The film is about showing a manner of thinking, a sense of working out things or let us say: being absorbed in an activity of a kind.

Johan: It has struck me that you appear yourself in some scene of the Spinoza-film. You express a short text, which apparently takes you a lot of trouble. Although it is the biggest close-up in the film it is nevertheless modest, due to its shortness and its vulnerability, which it exemplifies. The mistakes the other actors cannot avoid, you also make yourself. In that sense I consider your film is in fact very savage: you deal rash with mistakes. In the film about Poot you have formalized this to a certain extent. Sometimes the actor, Donald de Marcos, says: "No, I'm not doing this correct.", and immediately he starts all over again in the same shot. These moments you don't cut off, on the contrary: they get a prominent place within the film. From this point of view *Meine Heimat* is even more extreme. When, as it happens sometimes, one of the actors forgets his text, he thinks a while and then goes off-screen (presumably he reads the text again, written on a piece of paper) and re-enters after a while the frame of shooting, where he left before, and continues his performance of the text. All this without the least stress of failure: all the time the shot is maintained and not interrupted.

Frans: Well, ...let us say, calling this a 'fault' is even itself a fault. Initially, one has a historical product like a poem or what one would call a philosophical text, but at the moment of shooting the performer is not able to express it, because his own actuality is stronger. So, the capturing of the actor's mistakes is not at stake here, but forces come into play within the actor or in his surroundings, which interfere with the moment of shooting. However, at other moments, the historical and the actual coalesce completely, and these are outstanding moments.

Johan: At these moments the text is alive totally. In my view your films lead us to conceive of time-space in a certain direction. This is the perception of the flow of time, but now understood as extended in space. This conception becomes visible in the way you edit the shots: very tough, exact jumpcuts between shots of a very long duration; next, the vulnerability of the texts with respect to time and place of the action; the sound present on the location; the individuals, small groups, collections of people and the way they are standing up, sitting or lying down in their décors; the light of the scenery at this moment; the composition of images, that often refer to the art of painting; the being there of sheets, painted or not, waving or not. These are all characteristics of time and space and taken together they transform your film into a poetic whole. On the other hand, your style of working is so little adapted to the usual ideas of making film that I wonder if your work exemplifies also an element of resistance, does it?

Frans: Well, in my view a filmmaker should not try to make a revolutionary film, even if you are revolutionary. One should keep this revolutionary point of view at a certain distance from oneself, and yet make one's own film. When I say: one should make one's film as well as possible, granting this is a cliché. But still... If you want to evoke a revolution, it has to benefit lots of people, you see...as many as possible.

Johan: But what prompts you to manage the peculiar way you are working? What is your drive behind it? Speaking for myself, often when I'm about to shoot, I am driven by anger.

Frans: Well, let me say it this way: I am not driven by anger. Why did I choose Spinoza and why did I choose Poot? In fact, because they forced themselves to pay full attention to their environments, although they were lonely. And perhaps, I guess, this is my own theme. For Poot as well as for Spinoza it is desire of some kind ... and the same holds for myself; although it is a little bit embarrassing for me to say this. Alright, fairly this is the proper word. Desire, I am driven by desire, not by anger, yet a very strong emotion indeed. This desire arises from the tension between being alone and being together, due to a failure to communicate or problems one is confronted with personally. The same holds for Spinoza and for Poot, and perhaps for me too. So, likely this would do.

Johan: Just, why do you choose texts to express this desire?

Frans: I am just working with a piece of literature, because literature connects people in an indirect way. Then you make a film of it and that is why it becomes direct. For, at the moment of recording it is a reality, even for the actors who perform the text. And this directness you fix and put on screen, and by so doing it becomes indirect again. Precisely by fixing it, you complete the circle in one leap, so to speak, rendering its indirectness.

Johan: I see, but what has all this to do with this desire?

Frans: Well, you can locate this desire within the process of connecting the indirect with the direct. For desiring implies an indirect way of communicating, a substantial distance. For example, one sends someone a bouquet or something, which is a very indirect way of expressing one's... you know. In that way the desire is at its utmost. The most difficult and most intense part of desire is that part, which is the most indirect. And perhaps that is why I have chosen those historical texts, for it gives me the occasion to work it out.

Translated from Dutch by Wim Schlebaum

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