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An interview with Boris Gerrets

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How did you get into filmmaking?

My way into cinema developed more within the discourse of the visual arts, than through the route of film studies. My first interests were in architecture and painting. I began my studies of architecture in Aachen, Germany when my professor encouraged me to pursue painting and sculpture. It was in the early 70s and these were transformative times in art practice. The aesthetics of conceptual art were moving the physical artwork into the realm of pure ideas. Video was also emerging as a new medium for artistic expression, creating and documenting events that evolved in real-time. After I completed my masters in fine arts at the Düsseldorf Art Academy, I moved to Paris where my interest in performance art spurred my curiosity in theatre. For a brief time, I attended acting school and I began training as a dancer. This led me to working in theatre and dance for a number of years, which helped me to understand how to approach dramatic structure, cadence, rhythm and musicality. My first film however was an animation called 'Pompei' (1987) that was made from a series of pastel drawings I drew. At the time, I was making performances that incorporated drawings and design sets that I would make. I began using video, at first to record the performances and then also as integral part of the events themselves. In the mid 90s, I began to use the camera in a more documentary way. I also became interested in the process of editing, which led me to work as a film-editor collaborating with other filmmakers, mainly on documentaries. All this prepared me for my entry into cinema.

Who are your influences?

There are so many filmmakers I admire, some of whom have become part of our collective consciousness. However those whom I would see as influences tend to be rather experimental not only visually, but also in the way their cinema inserts itself within the development of ideas such as Jean Vigo, Jean-Luc Godard, Abbas

Kiarostami, Peter Watkins, Chris Marker, David Cronenberg, Pedro Costa, Harun Farocki and Jose Luis Guerin. An important work of art does not necessarily appeal at first sight. This was true for me with the work of some of these filmmakers, but I quickly discovered their importance and complexity. These are filmmakers who include a reflection on – and a dialogue with the nature of the medium itself. More recently, I discovered the cinematic work of Guy Debord, which is absolutely fascinating.

What films inspired you to become a filmmaker?

My earliest memories are from Spain. I would skip school and go to the movies, where they would program two films in continuous projection, often-deplorable copies, but there was a great sense of excitement and a noisy audience. At that time, one would go to the movies to sit in the dark with one's boyfriend or girlfriend. There weren't really other places to have romantic encounters. But I was much too young for that. Seeing films like Hitchcock's 'Vertigo' or Jack Lemmon in 'The Days of Wine and Roses' left a lasting impact on me. I could have never believed then that one day I would ever be making films. Later it was Jean Luc Godard, 'A Bout du Souffle', Stanley Kubrick's 'Clockwork Orange', Wim Wenders 'Im Lauf der Zeit' and the early films of Werner Herzog like 'Fata Morgana' and of course all of Fassbinder's films, that drew my attention. But I could not say there is a defining film.

What was the difference between making "Garden Stories" and "Driving Dreams"?

'Garden Stories' is a topical documentary about how the city and its deteriorating communal fabric could be saved by a phenomenon called 'Urban Farming'. It seemed anathematic to me. So I started to investigate the characteristics that define a city and I came across Lewis Mumford's 'The City in History', which is a brilliant piece of cross-disciplinary scholarship. He sees two strands in the emergence of cities across history: the organic and the mechanic. One was the city emanating from a fortress to eventually become the centre of an empire, while the other was the village merging with neighbouring villages to extend into a large urban entity. In his view, the first aspect was represented in the vibrancy of cosmopolitan life, the second in the resilience of its communal relationships. According to Mumford a healthy city keeps a balance between these two aspects. 'Garden Stories' looked at manifestations of the organic in two cities – Detroit USA and St. Petersburg, Russia – that had suffered from the recent collapse of two opposing ideologies: industrial capitalism and communism. 'Driving Dreams' was an investigation into the world of the Dutch highway system. It was thematically connected to 'Garden Stories' in so far that I saw the highway system as the city's 'mechanical' extension into the countryside. But contrary to the former, 'Driving Dreams' became a very observational film. It had very little dialogue and instead of portraying people and their ideas it described the loneliness and anonymity that exists in our modern non-spaces. It was shot on Super-16 by Martijn van Broekhuizen on an Aaton Minima, which is an extra small film camera that has only 5 minutes of film on a roll. This posed quite a challenge in an often very fast moving situation on the highway. But the main difference between the two films was that the former for me was the discovery of a certain phenomenon through meeting people connected to it and the latter was more of a visual research into a particular aspect of our modern world.

How about the difference between video and film?

Nam Jun Paik once pointed to the different epistemological character in terms of the continuous scanning of video-lines as opposed to the fragmented succession of film-frames. If I remember correctly, he insisted that video was more in line with nature and the stream of life, which is continuous. But in video you never have a full

frame, any split moment of video would give you a single scan-line whereas with film you are likely to still have a full picture. (I have researched the specific characteristics of the video image in my installation, *Time/Piece*.) Film is tactile and material; video is electronic and immaterial and marks the beginning of the disembodiment of the image that has been completed with digital. This is a huge psychological difference. There is a magic involved in film that someone like UK artist Ben Rivers for instance uses to its full extent in his work. Film still has a direct relationship to vision. You can look at a filmstrip, run it through your fingers and see the sequence of pictures with the naked eye. With everything electronic there is no picture without the device, without the hardware. It is conceivable that the hardware is fooling you, that what you put in is not what it puts out. The device demands a blind trust, which in a way means that everything potentially becomes a fiction we are ready to believe. The possibility of manipulation via CGI (*Computer-generated imagery*) is a case in point.



Today we can already see at the horizon the end of celluloid film. Nevertheless what has been gained by over a hundred years of film history will still determine the way we construct cinematic story for a very long time to come, especially when we think of it in terms of theatre screening. But with things like reality-TV, which is inconceivable on film, one already gets a sense of new narrative forms that are solely based on actuality, emotional exploitation and voyeurism. It threatens to supersede and overturn cinema's kinship with literature, painting, photography and storytelling. As cinema audiences and DVD-sales are declining, Hollywood is turning towards TV for income, so a lot of creative talent is migrating that way, among them Salman Rushdie, who recently claimed that the most interesting dramatic writing is done for television.

Do you have a method for writing? A preferred time of day or a place you like to be? Music or non-music while you write?

I love writing in cafés but increasingly they are contaminated with piped music and TV screens. More and more, I prefer to work in trains or in airplanes. Moving through space and the idea of being suspended somewhere between leaving and arriving, gives me a sense of urgency and also the possibility of reinventing myself.

How do you see your audience?

When I work on a film, I am not at all concerned with my audience. It is not that I don't want to communicate, but I only know my own fascinations, questions and interests. I do not want to have any preconceived ideas about whoever will be my audience. Film for me is a means to try to understand something, it's a tool to understand a specific reality within the confines of cinematic reality and I can only presume that other people, my audience, would be interested in these questions too. In some cases, I have a dialogue with my producer. My first audience are some artist friends and colleagues. I edit my own films; therefore their observations and questions give me new perspectives to reflect upon. Broadcasters employ a device with which you can follow the moment-to-moment zapping behaviour of the TV audience. You can actually see exactly which scene and which moment causes people to become disinterested. I really think this is a very oppressive and consumerist idea that creates shallowness. I don't believe in the power of anonymous numbers, but rather in engaging with my audience on an individual basis. Research has shown how different platforms influence the way we watch, that we actually see very different things and go through very different experiences if we watch the same film in a

cinema, on a TV-screen, a computer screen or on a Smartphone or tablet. These are the more fascinating questions for me as a filmmaker. I am very much focused on the experience of a movie theatre and the idea of duration, what it means to spend time together with other people in a room watching a film.



Why did you choose to shoot “People I could have been and maybe am” with a mobile phone? How long was the shoot?

Well, originally I merely started using it as a sketchbook in the early phase of the project. A bit like photographers used Polaroid to check the possibilities of light and composition. But I quickly grew very fond of quality of the image and the phone became a crucial part of the content of the film. I tried to integrate it into all the aspects of the storyline. Besides, when I had my first encounters captured on the mobile phone, the narration of film had already begun, so there was no going back to

another camera without serious consequences for the continuity and authenticity of the story. People often ask me if I could have made this film with a conventional camera. As far as I am concerned the answer is no, because of the degree of intimacy it allowed in this particular situation and for the spontaneity that enabled me to seamlessly switch between filming the situation and being part of it. The mobile phone involved a different mindset because it is so much more integrated in real-life. The time I shot covered a period of about 4 weeks with Sandrine and a little more than 2 years for Steve. Many times I kept losing trace of him for he was homeless and I never knew if I could ever find him again. The fact that at the time I wasn't living in London didn't make things easier.

What did this whole thing cost?

Blood, sweat, tears, the dedication and trust of my protagonists and about 35 000 Euros, which was spent to a great extent on the expenses and travelling.

So you did the writing, directing, editing and cinematography?

Yes, in the beginning, the writing was about formulating a concept. It was a conceptual film that on the outset involved a performative decision on my part: to go out and meet people I would never have met, were it not for the fact that I had decided to make this film. It was obviously crucial to do the filming myself. The directing consisted in steering the film through unknown territory, which challenged me to understand at any given point what the essential themes were that emerged during my interaction with the protagonists. Then writing in the more traditional sense continued during the editing, when I had to give a structure to the story and a reflection on – and if you will a dramatisation of – the events that had occurred. But on the other hand for me, editing is writing and writing is editing. It's about the creation of meaning out of disparate events by putting them together according to a grammatical logic. And my own writing in this, the actual text in the captions of the film, provides the contextual framework and the point of view of the first person singular.

How many hours of film did you shoot for this movie?

Quiet a lot. They are all digital files of various lengths so I would have to mathematically add them all up.

Have you used tripod or steadycam?

No, that would not have made any sense.

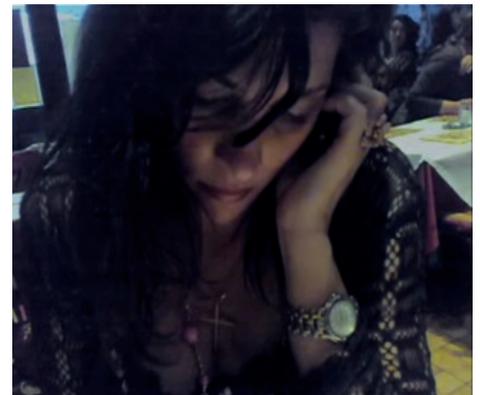
What practical problems did you encounter when filming?

The sound was a problem, because the mike of the telephone is omni-directional and it captured and boosted all the ambient noise, increasingly when I moved away from the subject. It is generally easier to accept a grainy image than bad sound. I had to turn around the limitation of the audio by using the element of noise in a musical way, incorporating it as an essential element in the sound design of the film. I have always been fascinated by the atmospheric quality of the soundtrack of David Lynch' film 'Eraserhead' and I wanted to achieve something similar. As far as the video is concerned, I liked the darkness of the night much more than the daylight. Another thing was that I did not know if and how the image would hold its ground on a cinema projection, right up until the end when the film was finished. It was a huge relief to see how the quality of the image reinforced the narrative.

The point of view of this film is Steve or Sandrine?

How did you find them?

Sandrine and Steve were both chance encounters in the streets of London. The film's perspective, the point of view, is essentially mine. It is I who was wandering through the urban space, trying to read the city like a poem and take my cues from the people I come across. It is through that experience that I see things unfolding. The encounters are recorded in the film. I first met Sandrine in the tube and there was a short conversation. I saw Steve in the street and him having an amputated leg made me feel empathy. I had once almost lost my legs in an accident, so I could very well imagine how he felt. I sat down next to him and asked if I could film him for a one minute without speaking. That was my way of inviting both my protagonists into the film.



So...where is Sandrine, now? Have you heard any more from her?

Sandrine still lives in Vancouver. We have become very good friends. She saw the film when it was shown at the Toronto Hotdocs International Film Festival. Steve saw the finished film on DVD but never as a projection. Precious saw a version of the editing a few months before she passed away. For the London premiere at the Open City Festival in June 2011, I was looking forward to having Steve as a special guest so he would see the film projected and experience the sympathy he would get from the public. But sadly, he too passed away weeks before the event. He had fought a heroic struggle against addiction, but finally the alcohol won the battle.

What do you think about Pippo Delbono ("The Fear"), Cyrus Frish ("Why didn't anybody tell me it would become this bad in Afghanistan"), Sepideh Farsi ("Tehran without permission"/"Herat") and Jean- Charles Fitoussi ("Nocturnes pour le roi de Rome"/ Temps Japonais")?

I saw Cyrus' film in a cinema in Amsterdam. I was the only spectator, which was a shame, because it is visually a very poetic film. As far as I know, it might be the first film ever done on a mobile. I heard about Pippo Delbono, but I haven't seen his film, neither have I seen the other films you mention.



Can you explain Gerrets's method?

Every film is different and one has to develop a specific approach for each film. So I don't have a method, but I do have a way of thinking about film. I am very aware of the performative side of filmmaking, that the presence of the camera creates a reality of its own. That allows me to invite people into the space it establishes at least for my main protagonists. It involves a different psychology. It's not 'I am being filmed' but it is more about

giving my protagonists a sense that they are a crucial part of creating that cinematic moment through their own reality. They become accomplices in the endeavour of creating the film and I do see – and credit them as actors playing the role of their own life. If my films have a documentary quality, I think it's by way of a detour through fiction. What counts for me is not so much the factual accuracy of the event, but how I can touch the essence and 'feel' of it, strengthening the authenticity with respect to the reality before me. After all, these are real life events that are reinterpreted through cinema. It's important for me not to hide the meta-aspect of filmmaking – the fact that a film is being made – and integrate it into the narrative structure of the film.

What do you think about independent cinema?

With the pretext of the economic and financial crisis and the loss of political credibility of the left, the extreme right, composed of neo-liberals, fascists, populist nationalists and reactionary conservatives is pushing the agenda for governments around Europe to cut funding for the arts and academia. Those who scream loudest about freedom of speech are the ones who are scared stiff of creative minds and independent thinking. We live in proto-fascist times where the individual is losing all control of his human dignity and sovereignty to a corporate machine that wants to collectively lull us into sleep and feed us with preconceived thought and behavioural patterns. Anything that is disconcerting, different, disruptive, mysterious or open-ended, anything that goes against the grain is under threat. Under the populist guise of 'that's what people want' the powers that be are orchestrating the tyranny of the masses where the deep long-term impact of art is replaced with the short-term appeasement of entertainment. Independent cinema is one of the artistic territories that need to be vigorously defended against this onslaught. We have to develop models of artistic survival. The Internet, though so much praised for its accessibility and potential of global distribution will never replace the reward of 'duration' of actually sitting in a cinema among a group of people who collectively undergo the unfolding of a story that makes us understand who we are.

What are some of your non-film interests?

All my interests are somehow related to my profession: art, music, dance, literature. Otherwise, it is definitely food and travelling.

What are you working on now?

I am shooting a film in Freetown, Sierra Leone where I used to live when I was young. The film is a journey through the night around the few blocks with the 'Street-boys'. They are a small community of young men and women who are disabled and homeless, living in the margins of an impoverished society that has only recently emerged from civil war. This journey is mirrored by another journey. It is the one these people undertook when they fled from their remote villages to seek refuge in the capital during the war. They have never shared with

each other the extraordinary stories they lived through. The film will create a space for them to do that. We will be making this film together, which means that except for the camera everyone will be involved in the various aspects of the film like lighting and sound.

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