

ENTRE DEUX TOURS / 1987

An allegory

One of a kind in Rob Rombout's filmography, as different from the earlier reports made for Canal Emploi as from the documentaries that would follow, produced and broadcast within the small coterie of video art whose aesthetic and special effects it adopts, *Entre deux tours* is nonetheless, paradoxically, a founding work, one in which its author makes artistic gestures that break with the most common practice of documentary film, that of direct cinema as much as that of television reportage, and which would become fundamental in his later films. Before examining them, it is worth saying what we are talking about.



Two towers, then. The first stands in Belgium, near the small village of Eben, in the municipality of Eben-Emael. A local stonecutter, Robert Garcet, set about building a tower with his own hands, using as his material the flint concretions discarded by the quarries where he worked. Steeped in biblical mythology, palaeontology, geology and prehistory, but also in an esotericism that fed his fertile imagination, he took his inspiration from the mythical tower of Babel, which was to link the earthly world to the divine one. He named the spot where he raised his own Eben-Ezer, borrowing the name of another biblical place, in Israel, where the prophet Samuel is said to have erected a memorial stone on the site of a battle between Israelites and Philistines and to have called it Eben-Ezer, meaning “stone of help”. Garcet's biblical mysticism and his taste for anagogical symbols convinced him that an underground link existed between the two Eben-Ezers. He demonstrated it with a map on which he had drawn two equal quadrilaterals that touch precisely on the island of Patmos, where Saint John had his vision of the Apocalypse, and one of whose corners lies at an equal distance from each Eben-Ezer [\[QR1\]](#).

At the top of the tower Garcet sculpted in concrete four winged figures, a lion, a bull, an eagle and an angel, which he called “cherubim” and which derive from a vision of the prophet Ezekiel in which Christian exegetes would later recognise the symbols of the four evangelists. Like Babel, Eben-Ezer links the geological world (flint) and the world of the air (wings). The tower's various storeys are likewise



adorned with monumental sculptures in high relief, as well as with assorted documents, photographs, maps, texts and fossils found in the quarries where Garcet worked. His erudition, half scholarly, half fanciful, led him to remarkable archaeological and palaeontological discoveries, such as two mosasaurs, giant marine reptiles that appeared more than a hundred million years ago. But also flints supposedly carved at the end of the Mesozoic, Garcet not hesitating to date the appearance of man back to the age of the dinosaurs. Author of some twenty pseudo-scientific and fictional works published at his own expense, he was also a “literary madman” who could have figured in the anthology that André Blavier devoted to them (Blavier merely mentions him). Garcet was, finally, a committed pacifist, advocating conscientious objection at a time when it was still a criminal offence. He was convinced that the year 1964, the date by which he had decided the tower must

be completed, marked the beginning of a new millennium at the end of which war would no longer exist on Earth. Robert Garcet's extraordinary personality could have been the subject of a feature-length documentary. But that was not Rob Rombout's choice: he did not want to make a film about someone the viewer would quickly have labelled bizarre or strange. He wanted, on the contrary, to set him within a normality from which his difference and his richness would gradually emerge. He therefore needed a background, a ground against which the exceptional figure of Garcet could stand out.

With the tower of Eben-Ezer the filmmaker pairs a second tower, located some fifty kilometres from the first, at Brunssum, in Dutch Limburg. Built of concrete, it crowns a former mine shaft, whose lift cage it once housed. The coal mine was bought up by NATO in 1967. The organisation installed a military base there and mounted its aerals at the top of the tower. Twenty years later, at the time of the shoot, the Cold War has not yet come to an end and the Iron Curtain still divides Europe into two blocs, a fact that Rombout recalls with a map on which he has drawn two quadrilaterals similar to Garcet's. On the tower hangs a medieval-style coat of arms, adorned with a tower run through by a sword. The base's spokesman explains that the tower is the emblem of the city of Aachen, capital of Charlemagne's empire, and that the sword symbolises the Alliance's determination to defend itself. The Latin motto inscribed around the edge means: "I fight falsehood and purge every trace of evil." A martial discourse in every respect opposed to the pacifism of Robert Garcet [QR1].

First decisive artistic gesture: Rombout sets about constructing his object. Where renowned documentarists such as Leacock, Wiseman or Philibert seize upon a real object in order to describe, analyse and understand it, Rombout devotes his video to something that does not exist in reality: two towers that have nothing to do with one another, and whose founders were unaware even of each other's existence. The dual



structure of the tape, which produces this somewhat simplistic allegory of war and peace, above all creates an intermediate space, less geographical than plastic and poetic, in which Rombout will inscribe his own preoccupations by exploiting the visual possibilities of the language of video.

He films each tower from the same distance and frames them off-centre, one towards the left, the other towards the right, then unites them in a single image by means of a simple electronic wipe. The image thus recomposed creates an abstract space in which the two towers correspond to one another and take on meaning. In

the same way, he sets the NATO spokesman and Robert Garcet face to face, having asked them to climb onto crates so as to be at the same height, and lights them with lamps which, in the editing, will look like the headlights of a car, suggesting that they share the same space [QR2].



Second artistic gesture: the mise en scène of the real. To balance the two towers visually, the military base at Brunssum had to be made stranger than it was. Rombout uses smoke machines that envelop the base in a disquieting cloud. Through the rural landscape that separates Belgium from the Netherlands, he sends a white car along a dusty track. On board, a woman. At the roadside, an eagle. “Word of the winds, speech of the sands. I am a sentinel of stone,” says a female voice whose poetic tone contrasts with the discourse of the two men. She adds: “I remember.” Her sentence introduces archive footage of the Second World War and then of the Vietnam War. As the car crosses the Belgian-Dutch border, she speaks of Babel, “gate of the god El, passage from earth to heaven, passage of the limit, of the frontier”, echoing Garcet’s discourse. The journey through space is also a journey through time, from the past (war) towards the future that Eben-Ezer represents according to Garcet. Having reached her destination, the woman metamorphoses into a stone statue, on which the eagle comes to perch like the cherubim on the tower in the background.

Third artistic gesture: the choice of beauty. Natural beauty of landscapes with a low horizon beneath a vast, hazy sky, or of an eagle's head in close-up. Beauty created by a plastic language that combines the classical figures of cinematic writing (low angles, depth of field, slow motion, close-up) with the new possibilities of the electronic image. A video effect superimposes the eagle's head in close-up on the woman's face, eye to eye, creating a hybrid being, beautiful and monstrous as a chimera [QR2].

Fourth artistic gesture: symbolism. The eagle that a simple panning shot brings into the frame of the car driving towards the border does not merely make for a beautiful image, as bold in its composition as it is strange. Associated with the woman travelling from one tower to the other, it is the bearer of a meaning, admittedly a hermetic one, directly inspired by the fabulous visions of Garcet and the cherubim that crown his tower. In the civilisations of antiquity, the eagle is the emblem of the Sun, towards which it takes flight, linking the Earth to the world of the divine. It is also the symbol of Saint John, to whom the Book of Revelation is erroneously attributed. When, at nightfall, the eagle comes to rest, in slow motion, on the shoulder of the woman turned into a statue of stone, it resonates with the winged cherubim on the tower of Eben-Ezer that can be seen in the background. All these videographic effects create new images that extend the symbolism of Garcet's mystical and esoteric discourse.

A pivotal work in Rob Rombout's career, *Entre deux tours* leaves the territory of social reportage to explore the more formal paths of video art. From this short-lived experiment would be born a reflection on the style he would go on to forge and refine, little by little, for each of his films. Abandoning video's special effects, he would nonetheless retain certain decisive choices: to build his object, to stage the real, to film the natural beauty of things and to create plastic forms that carry meaning.





COMMENTS

□ The idea was to make a double film, with, on one side, the tower at Eben-Emael (Belgium) with Robert Garcet, the man who conceived it, and on the other a NATO tower, a military base, in Holland, with its spokesman, Ed Frieser. The two towers are fifty kilometres apart. Two towers, two representatives, two languages and, between them, a woman, Vietnamese.

□ I filmed each of the characters separately, one after the other. I staged them; I made the military base a little mysterious, with smoke machines. Everything was very constructed, very artificial, with nothing spontaneous about it. A mixture of elements out of which an intriguing, irritating atmosphere arises. I then edited the two men, the two worlds, together in a single shot. That was possible, since video lets you split a shot in two. So that Robert Garcet could “face” the base’s

spokesman, with the proportions duly respected, we had to make him clamber up onto crates, despite his fear of heights. I invited both these men, who had never met one another, to the premiere in Liège: Garcet, for whom NATO is a war machine, and the spokesman Ed Frieser, who regarded Garcet as a pacifist. They were rather ill at ease. Two opposing worlds. Two somewhat odd characters.

□ The video was produced for the RTBF programme “Vidéographie”.

CREDITS

Written and directed by: Rob Rombout.
Cast: Jessie Elmido, Robert Garcet, E.C.W. Frieser and Sirca the eagle.
Director of photography: Kommer Kleijn.
Camera assistant: Chris Renson.
Sound recording and mix: Fabio Lani.
Electrician: Wolfgang Paquay.
Grip: Albert Roemers.
Script supervisor and assistant: Nadia Curto.
Editing: Adriana Moreira de Oliveira.
Conforming: Christian Maton.
Make-up: Theresa Vanderbenden.
Archive research: Bénédicte Schmitt.
Unit manager: Francis Luchen.
Monologue text: Christian Janssens.
Voice: Trinh Le Thu.
Music: Excuse My French.
Titles: P. Dans.
Executive producer: Dany Trossat.
Co-production: RTBF / “Lumière bleue” programme – Wallonie Image Production – Gsara – Image vidéo – Rob Rombout.
Format: ¾-inch BVU video. Colour and black and white.
Running time: 16 minutes.





