

L'ÎLE NOIRE / 1994

A microcosm

Like a motionless wading bird stalking its prey in a pond, an *offshore* drilling platform looms high over the sea from the top of its three legs. Lost somewhere in the North Sea, it bores into the seabed on which it stands, on behalf of an oil company. This vessel suspended between sky and sea, which neither floats nor flies, is a machine that never stops and yet produces nothing. It explores the subsoil beneath the sea in search of deposits of gas or oil that might be exploitable. Up through the pipe that sinks thousands of metres beneath the seabed comes mud, which is analysed by the geologists. If there is no oil, the information gathered will give a better understanding of the terrain and help to locate another spot in which to drill.



L'Île noire is nevertheless not a technical or scientific film. We learn nothing about the search for oil in the North Sea. What we discover instead is the day-to-day life of the eighty-five men – labourers, crane operators, drillers, electromechanical technicians, cooks, engineers and other technical supervisors – and the one woman who work there day and night. All in the same boat, they all work hard, twelve hours a day whatever the weather, fog, rain, snow or hail, with the sea as their one and only horizon, the salt air, the lashing wind, and at times the storm. Like sailors on a long voyage, they live aboard their motionless ship for three weeks at a stretch without returning home. Their place of work is also the place where they sleep, eat and rest, watching television or playing billiards. In this confined space, in cabins that are shared by two or by four, with hardly any privacy, they are obliged to get along with one another, since any conflict would be unbearable. “We’re like a family. We have to be, we’re living on top of each other in a small space. The workplace is limited. It ends up having an effect on your personality. If you have a fight with someone, you’re obliged to see him every day. And for a long time! So everybody seems to make the best of it.” In the absence of conviviality, the constant danger creates an unshakeable solidarity, like that of miners in the collieries. After twenty-one days of uninterrupted work, the personnel go home to rest for three weeks and a new team takes over from them.

The film does not confine itself to describing the living and working conditions on the platform and on the vessel that accompanies it. Listening to its witnesses, it points to their personal problems, which – on hearing them, but also on observing



them closely – turn out to be real social problems. One might think that, working only six months a year, these men benefit from a privileged social regime. But six months of work also mean six months away from home. In bad weather the helicopter brings no newspapers and the crew loses all contact with the rest of the world (this is 1994: no Internet and no smartphones on the platform). “What we wait for every day are the phone calls from the family.” The many testimonies that the film delivers all concur: despite their good wages, these men and this woman pay a heavy price: a fragmented family life, a high rate of divorce. “I’d say it’s 90%,” says one driller, still married; “for the time being,” he adds [QR13]. “This job cost me my marriage, after 18 years,” admits the head of the rescue teams. “What you miss most is seeing the children grow up,” says a *derrick man*. His colleague goes on: “You go off to work and they’re still crawling round your feet. When you come back, they’re galloping round the house on all fours. You leave again and, when you return, they’re walking.”

While one of them acknowledges that the hierarchical order is now less formalised than it used to be (no more uniforms, no longer compulsory to address the captain as “Sir”), the social inequalities are still present, in particular those suffered by Pat Thomson, the only woman present on board, on whom the film lingers. “On this type of platform, the work isn’t suited to women,” a man’s voice peremptorily asserts, a voice we immediately attribute to the crane operator whom we see at that very moment working in his cabin. The following shot shows Pat, from the platform, supervising the loading of the equipment onto the supply vessel. Large, heavy pipes attached to a cable are lowered onto the ship, which is pitching very heavily. The voice resumes: “The work we do here isn’t suited to women. A lot of people think it’s not their place, that they’re taking men’s jobs.” The editing alternates between shots of the crane operator in his cabin, of the men taking delivery of the load on the ship and of the woman looking now upwards, now downwards. In *voice-over*, she explains her job, which consists in keeping a running inventory of all the equipment that arrives at and leaves the platform.

Another man's voice takes over: "It's necessary paperwork." He adds: "But it must be hard for her, because you get used to living among blokes. At first you think, hey, there's a woman on board, and afterwards you treat her like the other men. It all depends whether she takes offence and gets upset at what we say and at our swearing. But she understands, she's worked *offshore* long enough." And indeed, Pat Thomson understands very well. There is only one television set on board, on which the men watch football matches, porn films or westerns. She understands very well that she has no choice.

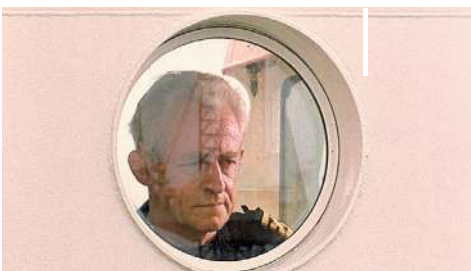
"I don't play billiards. I think it's a man's sport," says Pat. Filmed in a medium close-up while, in the background, two men are in the middle of a game of billiards, Pat Thomson tells the story of her own life: her husband also works *offshore*, in two-week stints, whereas she works three weeks at a time. "So we only rarely see each other. Sometimes we have a week together, sometimes two, and sometimes we don't see each other for five weeks. When I'm at home I have a great deal of work to catch up on, the washing, the cooking and the housework. It's hard." The film does not labour the point; this is enough: the men enjoy three weeks of rest, but she does not.

In the next shot, composed in the same way, the company supervisor also talks about his marriage: "My wife is happy, she has time for herself, and when I'm here I have time for myself." He has chosen quality over quantity. "Now, when I go home, we spend the three weeks together. And when I leave again, she picks up her own life: her sport, her meetings, her clubs... And I have my work. She has her life, I have mine. We have ours. And that's fine." One understands that his social status allows his wife not to work.

The editing has thus linked three voices in succession: that of the macho workers, for whom a woman has no place on the platform; that of Pat, who has to do the housework during her leave and is not entitled to the same rest as the men; and that of the oil company executive whose wife does not work. The black island is not the island of Utopia. The micro-society living on it has reproduced the prevailing social order.

The film is constructed upon an explicit opposition: on the one side, a technical,





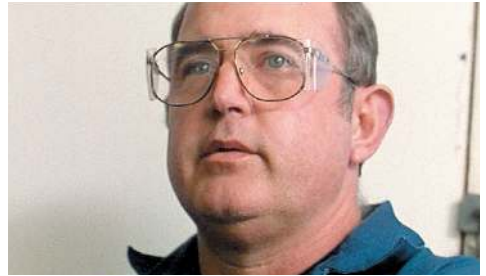
economic and social system governed by the laws of capitalism: a powerful oil company, having invested a great deal of money in prospecting for new deposits, has built a drilling platform and taken on personnel to keep it operating day and night. The investment is profitable only if the system runs to perfection, until such time as new deposits are discovered; on the other side, the workers who are caught up inside this system, bound to conform to its mode of operation, who accept its constraints and who try, to a greater or lesser degree, to protect themselves from it, for want of being able to escape it [QR12].

This opposition between the system and the individuals is expressed cinematographically by two clearly demarcated visual regimes. The first conveys the power of the system by means of wide, static shots, carefully framed and composed, and taken from a distanced point of view, from afar or from above – haughty, one might say, if not divine. These shots, many of them filmed in vertical high-angle or low-angle views, favour horizontal, vertical or oblique lines, regular geometric forms and, above all, as a constant, symmetry. These are perfectly structured images, in keeping with the industrial imperatives of the system and the social order it imposes. Man is not absent from this universe, but in it he is very small, a frail silhouette working at the heart of the metallic monster. Certain images in a vertical high angle show him moving about between the containers, like a rat in a cage [QR13].

One shot in particular seems to be filmed from an impossible point of view: in a vertical high angle, through the circle of the pipe that is about to cap the well casing, whose gaping mouth opens exactly in the centre of the

image, while faceless workers busy themselves all around it, as if they were being observed by the cyclopean eye of the machine itself.

The circular frame within the frame is a recurring figure that Rombout exploits with relish. He is particularly fond of filming through ships' portholes. Now, two hundred metres from the platform, a rescue vessel stands guard. Its sole mission is to be there, ready to come to the rescue in the event of an accident, a fire, a shipwreck or a man falling overboard [QR10]. While describing its function, the film exploits the vessel's position away from the platform to film the latter from a distance, notably through a porthole. It also does the reverse: filming, from the outside, the ship's captain looking out through the porthole. Though separated in the film, these two shots, which work together, restate in another way how much man is part of the system.



The film's second visual regime is the very opposite of the first. It gives preference to medium close-ups or close-ups on the faces of the witnesses whose voices we hear (on-screen or in *voice-over*), or else highly mobile shots that follow them from behind in the course of their movements about the platform. Faces that speak of what we cannot see: their personal history, their family life, their states of mind, their aspirations and their regrets.

The witnesses' speech is the thread the film weaves between these two visual regimes. Begun facing the camera, the testimony continues in *voice-over* on images of the platform at work. In this way the viewer sees the system operating while at the same time hearing about its perverse effects on people's lives.

To avoid too marked a dichotomy, Rob Rombout devised a third visual regime, very different from the first two. Three sequences filmed in highly contrasted black and white show the drilling work being done on a narrow gangway, where only two or three men can stand. They have to recover the mud rising from the well and couple together, one to the next, the pipes that sink little by little into the seabed. This hand-to-hand work with the machine, slimy with oily mud that spurts everywhere, is also filmed hand to hand, with a hand-held camera, in highly mobile close-ups that follow the workers' gestures, the spattered faces, the sliding pipes and the vigorously grasped pieces of machinery.

The black and white blackens the mud-smeared bodies still further and helps to glue them into their industrial surroundings. The very tight framing, the rapid camera movements and the fragmented editing accentuate the general indeterminacy of bodies and objects, which can no longer be told apart in the image. These sequences, in which the visual and sound aesthetic prevails over what they show, create a wild, dark universe where man and machine merge into one [QR11].



COMMENTS

□ I experimented with several methods, several styles, in a place that does not normally allow for experimentation.

□ It is once again a closed world, on an island, but an artificial island, a workplace that cannot be visited.

With Jean-Philippe Laroche, the producer, we had written a script around the search for black gold, which imagined life and the search for oil – in a somewhat romantic way – on a drilling platform. When at last, after months of waiting, we were given permission to go there, we experienced what I call the zero moment: when nothing looks like what you had

imagined. Everything was very ugly, and the people working there were concerned above all with their own problems, not at all with the oil to be found (they had, as it happens, just gone on strike because the cook was not up to scratch).

□ The platform is one of the ugliest places in the world. Everything about it is strictly utilitarian, the space is restricted. The rooms are shared. Two crews take turns: twelve hours of work, then twelve hours of rest. For three weeks.

The shock was great: when I stood facing them to talk to them, they were ill at ease, they wanted to carry on working.

❑ Three styles / Three film stocks.

The place and the activity alike were diametrically opposed to those of the ship (*Queen Elizabeth 2*), less harmonious. I thought that for this film we had to resort to three different shooting styles.

Moreover, I wanted to work on film, using prime lenses. The director of photography, Louis-Philippe Capelle, would have preferred to work in video, with a zoom lens, because with mud everywhere, changing a lens seemed unthinkable to him. What is more, the Super 16 camera gives off a spark when you start the motor... and since there is gas everywhere on the platform, there is a risk of explosion. We had to use *blimped* equipment, extremely well protected.

The three shooting styles each correspond to a different film stock; they also each correspond to a point of view (we called them the A, B and C shots).

A. The point of view of the architect, of God: shots from a distance, shots from above – which show the environment.

B. The point of view of the sociologist: three-quarter-face shots, at a human distance (1.5 metres): the camera is placed at an angle that allows the subject to talk to the camera without taking his eyes off his work.

C. The point of view of the observer, on the drill floor, who becomes an active participant. The camera as an actor, following the gestures of the work.

The C shots were shot in black and white, with a 20 mm lens. In colour, the orange (almost fluorescent) clothing would have attracted the viewer's attention too much, whereas in black and white it would be drawn to the gestures of the work. I wanted something very physical. I had to shake up the director of photography a little, as he was making images that were too beautiful – the eternal conflict between beautiful images and images that match the style of the sequence. With the editor, Adriana Moreira, we managed, in this social film, to create an almost experimental montage, very fragmented, which retains a raw quality; you might think of Russian cinema of the 1920s.

❑ The disharmony is plain to see on the platform. It is also conveyed in the soundtrack, with maximum dynamic range. There are shots with a lot of noise, others with none. I asked Jean-Louis Daulne to come up with two styles of music, one linked to the tools, very mechanical (reference: Prokofiev), the other associated with the workers, a more emotional kind of music, closer to country. The workers on the platform are condemned to live together day and night, always at the workplace, with no private life; country suits them better than Nietzsche when it comes to escaping...

❑ Near the platform, a rescue vessel keeps a permanent watch. By law, it must always be afloat within two hundred metres of the platform, ready to intervene in the event of any problem, an explosion for instance. It is a world entirely distinct from that of the platform: Scots, unemployed, badly paid, who stay for six weeks. They would like to be able to work on the platform themselves one day, but they do not have the required certificates. From the platform, you hardly see them, nobody looks at the boat; it is a form of contempt.

But people envy them for having nothing to do.

These two worlds each have a captain. They do not mix. With them, we constructed a scene that links them. There was only one way of bringing these two worlds together: a survival drill.

❑ To be allowed to film on the platform, we had to undergo five days of training, military-style training. The last exercise consisted of a simulation of a helicopter accident: you are shut inside a capsule that is dropped into the water. Under water, you have to count to seven and then get out through the windows.

❑ It is the only shoot on which we were not merely spectators or observers, on which we had to live like the workers, wear the same clothes, be as dirty as they were... In the end, that is what documentary is.

CREDITS

Screenplay: Rob Rombout and Jean-Philippe Laroche.

Director of photography: Louis-Philippe Capelle.

Camera assistant and grip: Jean Vangutte.

Assistant director: Jean-Philippe Laroche.

Sound recording and sound design: Philippe Sellier.

Editing: Adriana Moreira de Oliveira.

Negative cutting and colour grading: Dirk Vandewalle.

Original music: composed by Jean-Louis Daulne, recorded and mixed by Michaël Nijs, and performed by Bernard Wrincq (guitars), Christophe Vervoort (piano and keyboard instruments), Véronique Lierneux (violin), Pascal Schmidt (viola), Catherine Lebrun (cello), Philippe Corman (double bass), Mich Van Hautem (vocals), Jean-Louis Daulne (harmonica, guitar, drums, percussion and vocals).

Digitisation: Cyril Nakache.

Synchronisation: Dominique Brune.

Mix: Jean-François Gosselin.

Production managers: Olivier Rausin, Serge Kestemont.

Producer: Jean-Philippe Laroche.

Production assistants: Géraldine Grouillart, Karine de Villers.

Associate producers: Christiane Philippe, Christine Pireaux, Éric Pertz, Jacques Perrin, Viviane Vanfleeteren.

Production: Nota Bene.

Co-production: RTBF-Liège – Wallonie Image Production – BRTN – Galatée Films – Pandora Prod.

RTBF coordination: Marie-France Collard.

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Format: 16 mm film.

Running time: 52 minutes













