

AMSTERDAM VIA AMSTERDAM / 2004

CO-DIRECTED WITH ROGIER VAN ECK

Stepping out of the frame to savour life

As its title suggests, *Amsterdam via Amsterdam* is a film that makes duality its structuring principle. Everything in it is multiplied by two: one city and two islands of the same name at opposite ends of the earth, one in the Arctic Ocean, near the North Pole, the other in the southern Indian Ocean; two Dutch navigators of the late sixteenth century, Willem Barentsz and Cornelis de Houtman¹; two filmmakers, likewise of Dutch origin but living in Brussels and expressing themselves in French, Rogier van Eck and Rob Rombout, who are working together for the first time and who stage their own “cinematographic expedition” (the film’s subtitle) in the wake of the two explorers; two voyages towards the two islands, edited in alternation with sequences devoted to the mother city of Amsterdam; two cameras filming each other and two media, Super 16 mm film and digital video². The video images, deliberately duller and shakier than the static shots filmed on celluloid, introduce an element of reflexivity by showing the 16 mm camera, the cameraman or the two filmmakers discussing their programme, as if the *making-of* had been incorporated into the film itself.

All these elements, constitutive of the content as well as of its making, produce a hybrid film stretched between two sharply distinct styles: the documentary style of rigorous beauty characteristic of Rob Rombout’s earlier films, and another, new and disconcerting at first sight, which takes everything lightly and pokes fun at this improbable expedition undertaken by two filmmakers who seem as resistant to any production brief as to the aesthetic norms imposed by the film institution. The result of all this is an unclassifiable film, lost like a desert island in the ocean of

1. Willem Barentsz (1550-1597) undertook three expeditions in search of a northern sea route to China. On his third voyage, in 1596-1597, he discovered the Spitsbergen archipelago, to which Amsterdam Island belongs; his ship was then trapped in the ice and the crew wintered on Novaya Zemlya. He died at sea on the way back to Holland and gave his name to the Barents Sea. Cornelis de Houtman (1565-1599) was the first Dutch navigator to reach the Sunda Islands (the future Indonesia), in 1596. The new sea route he charted passes close to a remote volcanic island in the southern Indian Ocean, which the Dutch navigators called “Amsterdam eiland” and marked on their charts as a maritime landmark. The explorations of the two navigators were financed by merchant companies through stock capitalisation, forerunners of the famous Dutch East India Company (VOC, founded in 1602), which made the fortune of the United Provinces. In the seventeenth century the young republic became the world’s leading maritime power. The Dutch named these two islands Amsterdam in homage to the city that had become the Queen of the Seas and whose name was a symbol of power. Nieuw Amsterdam – the future New York – was founded in the same period. –

2. The filmmakers used one of the first Sony mini HD-Cam cameras with digital cassettes. The high-quality images were deliberately darkened during colour grading so as to distinguish them from the shots filmed in 16 mm.

cinema, but one that must be understood as an attempt to explore new forms of filmmaking very far removed from the documentary *mainstream*. Without entering the orbit of experimental cinema in the strict sense, this cinematic essay should be approached as a “research film”, born as much of the chance circumstances that determined its production as of the two filmmakers’ wish to leave the beaten track and to engage in narrative and stylistic experiments that are at times disconcerting, but whose fruits, incomparably matured, they would reap in their next film, *Amsterdam Stories USA*, another cinematographic expedition towards another continent and the North American Amsterdams. *Amsterdam via Amsterdam* is a transitional film, an exploration of the margins of documentary cinema through which it was indeed necessary to pass in order to step out of the frame and to discover a new world.

The project, conceived in 1996, was not completed until eight years later. Numerous setbacks slowed down the production. The film attracted hardly any interest and found no funding. RTBF (French-language Belgian television), small Belgian production outfits (Nota Bene, Wajnbrose Productions, the Centre bruxellois de l’Audiovisuel, Wallonie Image Production) and institutions (the Norwegian Embassy, the TAAF – French Southern and Antarctic Lands) provided occasional but limited financial support. With Patrick Lefèvre, their Franco-Belgian producer, the two directors decided to embark on the film all the same, adopting a *low-budget* formula that ultimately proved advantageous, since it made it possible to persuade certain technicians to work for adjusted fees and to obtain various material resources through sponsorship (hotels, flights, tents, warm jack-

ets, free passage on ships heading north and south, etc.). Filming took place in 1998. But in 2000 Patrick Lefèvre went bankrupt and then, sadly, died. Rob Rombout bought back the rights to the film for a symbolic euro. The production was partly taken over by the two directors, now associated under the R & R emblem. New Brussels partners completed the post-production: Dada Studio for the mixing and the Studio L’Équipe for conforming, colour grading, subtitling and the authoring of the DVD.



The principle of duality structures the film into two narrative lines that will never cease to be interwoven. The first is history writ large, that of the navigators Willem Barentsz and Cornelis de Houtman, whose

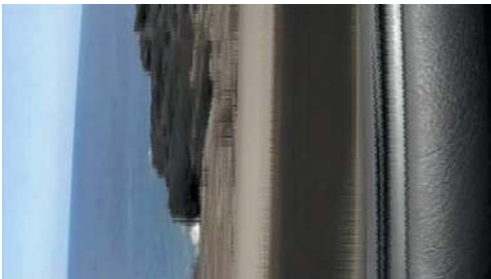
logbooks are read in *voice-over* by actors. The filmmakers also make use of old images relating to the explorations, in particular a painting by Cornelis de Man, held in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, which gives an unrealistic vision of the northern island, on which the painter never set foot. Other period drawings show the southern island as it was seen with his own eyes by a member of the expedition that gave it its name. The second narrative line is the small story of the filmmakers themselves, who have embarked on this curious adventure and who become the main characters of their own film. “The heroes have disappeared. We have taken their place,” says Rogier, while the camera shows the two men behind the window of an Amsterdam bar: “It was roughly here that the merchants used to discuss their plans.” In this district of Amsterdam, where every street bears the name of a great navigator, Rob and Rogier, who are the same age as Barentsz and Houtman were at the time of their final voyage, identify with their models. The film constantly shuttles back and forth between the old navigators and their budding epigones, who have themselves photographed taking the portraits of their illustrious predecessors as their models. History writ large and the small story become entangled with each other when, on the northern island, the two filmmaker-explorers discover the graves of the Dutch whale hunters who died in 1636, or when, as their guide surrounds the camp with a wire that will sound the alarm if a bear breaks it, we hear the voice of one of Barentsz’s companions recounting how a bear killed one of the sailors.

The small story is not only that of the two filmmakers. It is also that of all the characters they meet along the way and of whom they make a cinematic portrait: Ron Meijer, a lock-keeper in Amsterdam, who regulates boat traffic on the canals, goes scuba diving in the Red Sea and takes an interest in Egyptology; Rik Vlaanderen, an Amsterdam photographer, who says he makes reality more beautiful than it is and who tours the city on his motorbike; Bas Kist, a curator at the Rijksmuseum, who has studied Cornelis de Man’s painting and has made the voyage to the island himself; Mariël Van den Bos, a flautist who loves her work, which makes her free and independent, who knows what she wants to achieve but who “quickly feels cramped in a love relationship”; Gonery Le Gall, thirty-one years at sea, a steward on the *Marion-Dufresne*, the French scientific vessel of the TAAF (French Southern and Antarctic Lands) that links Réunion Island with Amsterdam Island in the south; Yan Tremblay, a scientist who studies fur seals and penguins and has “a sort of romantic rendezvous” with Amsterdam Island, where he lived for several months, during which he wrote constantly to his sweetheart, who has since left him; Cornelia, a young German ornithologist fascinated by the beauty of nature; and finally the old Norwegian coastguard, his skin weathered by the sea air, who loves the limpid light of the boreal night, when the sun no longer sets, and admires the “divine” architecture of the Arctic islands. Each character explains what determined their life choices. Here we find the major but underlying theme of Rob Rombout’s cinema: destiny and freedom.

Whether one believes in it or not, the Calvinist idea of predestination – that our existence is determined by God – comes to mind when the past returns into the present, which illuminates it in retrospect. The film instils this idea by recounting the expeditions of Barentsz and Houtman, whose tragic fate it relates, but also by evoking the past of the two directors, Rob, who left Amsterdam when he was young – “to breathe”, he says – and Rogier, born in Paris to Dutch parents, who come back to make a film about their city of origin. The idea comes back with each contribution from those they meet on the road, who retrace some of the stages of their lives in front of the camera. The chance of an encounter, or the power of a destiny that made the trajectories of Barentsz and Van Eck, Houtman and Rombout and all their witnesses cross? Neither, of course. The filmmakers carefully constructed their film and selected their participants. They might never have met them, but the “destiny” that brought them all together, between past and present, between Amsterdam and Amsterdam, is the film. And the filmmakers are the masters of that film.

“In Amsterdam,” says Rob in *voice-over*, “everything is free and controlled. Everything is framed, even the pleasure of living.” For Rogier, “Amsterdam is first and foremost an image. It is the image of freedom.” Rik, the motorcycling photographer, confirms: “You’re always looking for something. A certain kind of freedom. Although you’re very free here.” The camera mounted on the back of the motorbike films the landscape of the IJsselmeer. Suddenly it tilts over, turning the horizon vertical, expressing a free vision of the landscape, outside the norms and with

no other justification than the pleasure of seeing the world differently. While Ron, the lock-keeper, talks about how he organises his holidays in Egypt, we hear an ambulance siren. The cameraman immediately deframes towards the quays, where there is no ambulance, then calmly returns to Ron, who has not stopped talking. A whim that someone forgot to cut in the edit? No. The same unmotivated deframings disrupt the sequences devoted to Mariël, the flautist, and to Cornelia, the German researcher. On Réunion Island, the cameraman had already turned the horizon vertical. In reality, these visual digressions lie at the very heart of the film’s project: they express cinematically the dialectic of destiny and freedom, of constraint (framing) and the pleasure of living (deframing).





To frame, in cinema, is both to cut out a fragment of the space in front of the camera and to compose an image with the elements caught within it. Framing is not only choosing; it is constructing, ordering, controlling, *a fortiori* when mise en scène becomes involved. Rombout and Van Eck compose their images meticulously, in particular the often grandiose landscapes that they discover at the ends of the earth and film in static shots, like paintings. The order that the framing establishes between the elements answers to very clear motivations, such as emphasising a symmetry – that of a ship's bow, for instance, whose geometric shape will stand out against the seascape – or when the two filmmakers place themselves on either side of the image.

Framing also means lowering the horizon line as far as possible to bring a great cloudy sky into the image, in the manner of the Dutch landscape painters of the seventeenth century, Salomon van Ruysdael in particular. The filmmakers model their images on the great painters who were contemporaries of the explorers whose route they follow. Such a composition amounts to inscribing the shot in a history of painting that, through the film, seems to extend to the present day. Past and present line up along the thread of time that the film rewinds, placing ancients and moderns on one and the same trajectory. The destiny of images.



Above. Salomon van Ruysdael, *A View of Deventer seen from the North-West*, 1657, London, National Gallery.

Opposite. Salomon van Ruysdael, *An Estuary with a Ferry, Other Vessels, a Church and a Windmill*, c. 1650, private coll.



Editing is another way of controlling the elements captured by the camera, of extending the operation of framing, of bringing order to the apparent disorder of the world. In the manner of Hitchcock, the film creates visual rhymes, as when the two filmmakers, each in his own cabin, sit in front of the window in a similar but inverted pose. Editing can also create a relationship between two very distant realities that are nonetheless framed in the same way, and thus bring out an analogy between them. For example, the crossed beaks of two penguins slowly tilt downwards the way a drawbridge is lowered over an Amsterdam canal. The link thus woven by this analogical editing reminds us that there is, beyond the singularity of things, a higher order – a poetic one, of course – which connects them and which only the artist can make us see.

All this work of composition, of pictorial quotation and of poetic construction would be ordinary if, in other segments of the same film, the filmmakers had not made the radically opposite choice to deframe, to disorder, to deconstruct their shots and to give up the peaceful, reassuring stability of the static shot in favour of camerawork that is agitated, abrupt, unpredictable and poorly lit. Exploiting the lightness of the small video camera, they no longer care about composing a beautiful image but seek to capture things on the spur of the moment, at



the very moment they happen, as when they look for Barentsz Street in Amsterdam, or when a member of the Malagasy crew, during the impromptu dance party in a cabin of the *Marion-Dufresne*, seizes the microphone, boom and headphones of the sound recordist and communicates with the film crew in another way.

At such moments, of which there are many in the film, one feels a wind of freedom blowing that touches the filmmakers as much as their images. An unbridled fantasy, a gentle madness (disconcerting for the viewer) takes hold of them. Forgetting all the reserve that would be fitting in a “serious” documentary, the two filmmakers film each other, get caught up in their own game and make fun of themselves. With their little video camera, they film the popular festivities organised in Amsterdam for “Orange Day”, the Queen’s Day celebrations. The camera whirls through a crowd in which the colour of the dynasty dominates, capturing a brass band here, a dog decked out with a crown there. Then, granting by a logic all their own that “to make a portrait of Amsterdam is to make a portrait of ourselves”, they put their heads through the holes of a “face-in-the-hole” board depicting the royal couple. On the Polaroid that comes out, Rogier is the Queen, Rob the Prince Consort. Later in the film, we see them playing like kids with the elephant seals, strolling among penguins and fur seals filmed at the height of their “sponsored” boots, or clink-

ing glasses when their ship comes within sight of the northern island. So keen are they to make us forget that they are also the film’s directors that they behave, in short, like schoolboy pranksters.

In a book as rigorous as it is enjoyable, Denis Saint-Amand develops a fertile reflection on what he calls “the schoolboy style³”. Style is not merely a matter of a literary or visual form. It is first and foremost a posture, a way of being and of behaving towards society, of identifying and distinguishing oneself, a “stylistics of existence” (Foucault) embodied in exemplary fashion by the dandy on the one hand and by the schoolboy prankster on the other. The prankster’s posture, always on the margins of the collective (at the back of the class, near the radiator), his deliberate oafishness, his sometimes questionable humour, his pointless provocations, his sense of derision and of the absurd are an anarchistic way of criticising the established order in the name of the only value that is his own: the pleasure of living. Born in the school setting, pranksters have spread into the press (*Charlie Hebdo*), literature (from Flaubert’s *Dictionary of Received Ideas* to Alfred Jarry and Alphonse Allais), comics (Gaston Lagaffe), television (Les Snuls) and the stage (the Chat Noir cabaret, Desproges), turning everything to derision, mocking, laughing, provoking, messing about for the sheer happiness of not being taken seriously. Cheeky and rebellious not for the sake of ideas but for the pleasure of rebelling, pranksters step out of the overly narrow frame in which the collective confines individuals, escape social, artistic or political formatting, free themselves from every straitjacket, draw moustaches on the Mona Lisa and thumb their noses at every established order.

Right from the opening of *Amsterdam via Amsterdam*, a very carefully constructed shot, playing on duality and symmetry, shows a shoreline, the sea, two islets (in fact, mirages formed by the relief of the land) and, in the centre, an indeterminate shape. Two silhouettes enter, each from one of the side edges of the frame, and advance towards the centre while we hear Rogier say in *voice-over*: “On the left is Rob, he’s maladroït,” then Rob: “On the right is Rogier, he’s a bit gauche.” A hoarse grunt closes this “dialogue” at the moment when the two of them meet up beside what we then understand to be an elephant seal. The centripetal movement of this burlesque couple à la Laurel and Hardy, the flatness of the puns, the post-synchronised sigh of the beast: everything in this theatrical mise en scène tends to present the two filmmakers as maladroït and gauche schoolboys who are not to be taken too seriously. A sequence at the end, on the northern island, confirms that clumsiness is indeed a factor to be reckoned with: no doubt

3. Denis Saint-Amand, *Le Style potache*, Geneva, La Baconnière, “Langages”, 2019.





inspired by Monsieur Hulot at the end of his holiday, Rob breaks the wire that protected the camp from a possible attack by a polar bear, setting off the smoke flares that were supposed to make the animal flee. On this desert island, where no bear shows itself, the two sidekicks, no longer knowing what to film, decide to stage a cinematic gag: there are three of them setting off in single file, rifles on their shoulders, and walking out of shot; a gunshot rings out; there are only two of them coming back.

Pleasure before duty: such is the form of schoolboy provocation. The prankster-filmmakers defy the order of the documentary film by bathing in an open-air pool on Réunion Island, at the very spot where, they say, Houtman is supposed to

have landed. And they amuse themselves by swimming underwater only to pop up suddenly under the nose of the camera and of the astonished viewer. Besides oafishness, the gag and gratuitous provocation, the film exploits all the usual comic devices of the schoolboy prankster: the pun (“Ron is a functionary. Without Ron, the city could not function”); the double meaning (when Cornelia praises “the beauties of nature”, Rob introduces a series of close shots of the pretty researcher, saying “We follow our nature”); parody (the portrait of Gonery on the ship, his gaze fixed on infinity, is “the archetypal sailor”, says Rob); derision (during a visit to the building of the once fabulously rich East India Company, we learn that the paintings are fakes and that the historians who run the place “have a difficult choice to make: the colour of the carpet”); and finally the absurd: over one of the last shots, three minutes from the end, showing the two filmmakers seated in front of the city of Amsterdam, we hear them say: “In front of us, an island, Amsterdam; behind us, a camera. The film can begin.” There follows a close-up of the head of a fur seal looking us straight in the eye.

Faced with this film that disconcerts him, the viewer wonders: why all these schoolboy antics in a documentary about Amsterdam and its two namesake islands? If there is an order that the film challenges, it is not only that of traditional documentary cinema; it is first of all the order the film has itself established: the order of the frame, of beautiful images, of the historical narrative that builds bridges between the three Amsterdams, of the editing that, by interweaving past and present, suggests that an inescapable destiny is leading the filmmakers along a path traced in advance by the seventeenth-century explorers. This all-too-straight

trajectory – too Calvinist, perhaps – they wanted to break, in order to say something else, to dissociate themselves from this all-too-expected way of making a film and to express their fundamental subjectivity. One sequence says so clearly. On the ship taking them towards the southern island, seated face to face in front of a window, they wonder what they are doing: “What is the connection between our expedition and Amsterdam?” Rogier tries to explain: the detour would be the only way to experience Amsterdam, to enrich the city with landscapes. But the film gradually fades out his voice. Rob says he is rambling. “My metaphysical system is no doubt more Calvinist,” he says, by antiphrasis, before launching into a precise description of Amsterdam *carrot cake*. A way of saying that Amsterdam is a city to be *savoured*. The word had already been spoken by Ron, the lock-keeper, when he talked about his taste for Egyptology as a way to “savour life”. Rob had added, in *voice-over*: “Ron reveals a key word in Holland: *lekker*. It means good, tasty. It’s hard to translate.” Savour, with all the subjectivity attached to that sensation, is a fundamental element of this film made for pleasure, to “savour life”. Undertaking a “cinematographic expedition” of which they know “neither the end nor the results”, the film became “a search for ourselves”, says Rogier, who asks: “Did we have to go so far for that?” “Yes,” says Rob.

COMMENTS

❑ It’s my first film with Rogier. I had discovered an island near the North Pole called Amsterdam. Uninhabited. Nothing but polar bears. Rogier, for his part, had discovered a tiny island in the Indian Ocean, also called Amsterdam. Miles from anywhere.

With no money, we set off for the north. The paradox is that when you have no budget, everyone helps you. No film budget at all is sometimes more comfortable than a measly little film budget. You say: “We want to go to the North Pole, we want to do this and that, but we’ve got nothing.” So a travel agency organises it for us, Fuji gives us film stock... and we find a director of photography, Willy Stassen, who hesitates because he’s never done a documentary before, but for whom money isn’t a problem. He came, he shot superb images...

❑ From there, we wrote a big screenplay and landed a budget to shoot: we set off on a second voyage, towards the south.

❑ The plan was to work with both film stock and a video camera. These are two very different kinds of material, and we created two very different styles. With video, the camera is easier to handle, it’s more raw, it’s for short shots.

We tried all sorts of things, and we appeared in the film ourselves.

But we didn’t know what we were going to do with it. Seeing it now, I don’t think this alternation between video and film really works.

❑ The editing process was very complex. It isn’t easy to act and to talk in a film and then to edit it yourself. After that, we started working with Rudi Maerten, the editor who came to our rescue.

CREDITS

Written and directed by: Rob Rombout and Rogier van Eck.

Camera: Samuel Dravet, Willy Stassen SBC, Louis-Philippe Capelle SBC.

Sound: Griet van Reeth.

Video camera: Samuel Dravet, Rogier van Eck, Pascal Perez, Willy Stassen SBC, Louis-Philippe Capelle SBC.

Picture editing: Rogier van Eck and Rudi Maerten.

Sound editing: Anne-Laure Guégan (Tintamarre).

Music: Hughes Maréchal, recorded by Pascale Snoeck.

Commentary by Rob Rombout and Rogier van Eck, in collaboration with Philippe Blasband.

Voice of Willem Barentsz: Erwin Grunspan.

Voice of Cornelis de Houtman: Pierre Laroche.

Mix: Peter Soldan (Dada studios).

Post-production: Studio L'Équipe.

Conforming: Dominique Marcel.

Colour grading: Mike Joris.

Production managers: Olivier Caste, Patrick Lefèvre.

Associate producers: RTBF – Image création – Triangle 7 – Nota Bene – Wajnbrosse Productions – Wallonie Image Production – Centre bruxellois de l'Audiovisuel, with the support of the Communauté française de Belgique and the Loterie nationale. With the kind participation of Philippe Crespel, Griet Van Reeth, Samuel Dravet, Willy Stassen, Adriana Moreira, Rob Rombout and Rogier van Eck.

Broadcast: RTBF – TV5 Monde – Télé Bruxelles – AT-5 Holland.

Festivals: Best Foreign Film, Route 66 Film Festival Springfield, USA 2005 – Silver Remi Award, 39th WorldFest Independent Film Festival, Houston, USA 2006. – Best European Doc, International Film & Video Festival, Syracuse, USA 2006. – Tiburon International Film Festival, San Francisco, USA 2007.

Format: Fuji 16 mm colour film and Mini-HD video.

Running time: 80 minutes.



Amsterdam South.





Amsterdam City.





Above and following page. Amsterdam North.





Amsterdam South.





Welcome To The
AMSTERDAM
STORE