

LES PASSAGERS DE L'ALSACE / 2002

A manifesto

Here is a film that is not easily approached, and whose viewing requires one not to turn away from it too quickly on the pretext of not feeling much concerned by these stories of Alsatians who seem to have nothing in common but the fact of living in Alsace. Made at the request of the regional channel France 3, this very smooth film, which might at first sight pass for a tourist film, does not take the viewer off to

some distant and mysterious elsewhere; it tells no dramatic stories; it does not meet the “amazing” people that television is so fond of. To the ordinary viewer, it shows ordinary people belonging to the middle class and living without any particular difficulties. Nothing, *a priori*, to make a film about.

And yet *Les Passagers de l'Alsace* is not what one too readily believes it to be. By agreeing to play the game to which it invites us, to take an interest in these ordinary people, to listen to their stories and above all to look at how they have been filmed, one gradually discovers that this film is saying something without appearing to say it. There then emerge the many clues to another film, played out beneath the surface of the first, which speaks of something quite other than Alsace.

The prologue delivers the first clues: a filmmaker (who is not the author) strolls through the Écomusée d'Alsace, where old half-timbered houses have been moved and rebuilt to recreate a “traditional Alsatian village” that never existed. For this filmmaker, the tourist attraction is a favoured location, an “Alsatian Hollywood” where he could shoot all his films. “Here, there is no artifice,” he adds, curiously, in this place that has lost all authenticity, leaving the viewer somewhat doubtful. From the very outset, Rob Rombout is speaking of cinema, of mise en scène, of film sets, and slips into the interstice that separates the true and the false, reality and fiction, word and image.

The film sets out to meet nine people carefully selected following a genuine casting process. One gradually discovers that they have things in common: there are those who look, or who work with vision: a filmmaker, an ophthalmologist who does research on the retina, a painter; there are those who listen, or who work with sounds: a psychoanalyst, a radio presenter, an athlete who is also a rap singer, a



composer and his band, whom Rob Rombout commissioned to create the music for his film; there are those who are on the move, who do sport (the singer is a runner) or travel by every possible means of transport: by train (the psychoanalyst), by tram (the ophthalmologist), by bicycle (the radio presenter) and by car (the winegrower, the painter); there are, lastly, those who devote their lives to creation: the filmmaker shooting a historical film, the winegrower who compares his wine to the poetry of Éluard, the rap singer, the musician and finally a model-maker who, with his friends, has built immense model layouts through which electric trains run. Looking, listening, moving, creating – every one of these people has something to do with cinema.

These people, who did not know one another, speak of their lives, their destinies, their pasts, but above all of what Rob Rombout wants them to speak about: the gaze and the image, listening and sounds, movement and creation. Whether they are speaking of psychoanalysis, ophthalmology, winegrowing, painting, music, sport or model-making, everything they say indirectly evokes the art of cinema and therefore the film that is being made with them.

“I see everything in images,” says the filmmaker. “I am the one who does the looking.” A banal idea, if it concerned only him and his costume drama. The composer Philippe Poirier goes one better, speaking of his discovery of Strasbourg, which he explored by filming it with his father’s Super 8 camera. The camera as a prosthesis of the gaze. But the painter, speaking of what led her to painting, calls into question this all too simple relationship between the gaze and things. She recounts that at school she drew an apple tree in blossom, with roots as large as its branches. Her teacher, displeased, cut her drawing in two, saying, “Christine, we don’t draw what we can’t see.” Today she knows she was right: “The tree as we see it doesn’t exist, it wouldn’t stand up. At the slightest gust of wind, it falls. Even if we see it whole, there’s a part missing. And it’s the same for people and for everything that’s alive, really. There’s always one side, even if you walk round it, there’s always a part that is often at the origin of things and that we often don’t want to see, that we don’t try to see.” A crucial remark for slipping beneath the surface of Rob Rombout’s film: beneath Alsace and the people who live there, the film reveals things that the viewer will not see unless he tries to see them, though they are there and, like the roots of the tree, are “at the origin of the things” that hold his film up [QR23].

The sequence that follows confirms this. Christine is having an eye examination at the ophthalmologist’s. The camera takes the patient’s place and the image is blurred. The doctor brings a lens closer, saying: “And with this, is it any sharper?” [QR23] Through the device of the subjective camera, the question is addressed to the viewer. To learn to see what lies hidden beneath the appearance of things, one has to change lenses. At the very end of the film, we see the rushes of the fiction shot by the filmmaker. A woman runs after a man, saying to him: “But

just listen, try to understand. Can't you see? Look! Look, listen, understand what's going on, make a bit of an effort!" A final address to the viewer, who, for his part, must also look, listen and make an effort to understand.

There would seem, then, to be something else to see, to hear, to understand. When a viewer watches a documentary film, it is not the film he sees but what it represents. He sees Alsace before looking at the images and hearing the sounds created by Rob Rombout. But if he is at all receptive to the many warnings the film gives him, he will see the shots drawn as if with a ruler, so characteristic of the filmmaker's style: the parallel lines of the rows of vines, answering the rails of the railway or the lanes of the athletics track; the symmetry of the shots filmed along the axis of the depth of a railway carriage; the geometric forms of windows, screens, a watch in close-up, a snare drum, a mirror or the ophthalmologist's lens. Like Cézanne, who saw in nature nothing but cylinders, spheres and cones, Rob Rombout's camera transforms the reality that it films: these are no longer rails, windows, screens, a watch or a lens, they are lines, squares, rectangles, circles. Out of the chaos of the world, Rombout brings forth a harmony between things that are sometimes very far removed from one another, but which answer one another, in echo, creating visual rhymes. Throughout the film, these structuring lines and forms weave a web that is never given as such, but whose hold the viewer will end up feeling. Everything holds together, everything is linked, connected up by invisible threads of which the parallel lines of the rails are no more than the clues.





Visibility belongs not to things but to the gaze that one casts upon them. Rob Rombout's camera invites the viewer to look at the world in a different way, to see it through filters. Our vision is skewed by a lack of limpidity or by the play of the refraction of light. Faces glimpsed in the reflections on the windowpanes appear or disappear at the whim of shadow and light. Under cover of the night lit up by the headlights of passing cars, a garland of luminous dots passes across the face of the singer seated in the tram; the ophthalmologist's face is tinged green, yellow, blue; the halo of light that strikes the windscreen of his car makes the face of the composer disappear; the psychoanalyst's face fades away into the motion blur produced by the speed of the train. Reflections do more than simply blur reality: they transform it into an image.

Les Passagers de l'Alsace demands listening that is highly attentive to every detail of sound, even the most improbable ones. Over a shot of the façade of Strasbourg station, with the great clock in the corner of the frame, we hear the creak of the moving hand, then the ticking of the mechanism. These are sounds added in post-production, which it would be impossible to hear in reality. A long tracking shot follows the radio presenter as she rides her bicycle at the same speed as the tram in which the camera is travelling. We distinctly hear the clicking of the pedal crank, which the tram window and the noise of the traffic ought to make inaudible. Another tracking shot accompanies, at its own level, a little electric train crossing an urban landscape in miniature. Rob Rombout heightens the realism of the model by adding a multitude of sounds: the noise of a real train, its horn, the bell of the level crossing, the hooting of car horns, the line unreeling as an angler casts it into the river, the laughter of bathers and even a



man's wolf whistle at a woman undressing to sunbathe [QR25]. André, the model-maker, is very sensitive to sound. He has known the sound of trains ever since his childhood, when he lived close to a marshalling yard. "Now the rails are often welded, you don't hear the *clickety-clack, clickety-clack* any more, that's all over in trains. [...] The noises were completely different. It's a mixture, it stays in your ears, it's like a film."

This playful hyperrealism, applying Hollywood techniques to a supposed documentary, is nonetheless justified if one is willing to hear what the characters are saying, for they invite us to *listen*. One must "know how to listen to people", says Henri, the ophthalmologist who became a councillor for the Bas-Rhin department. "Listening to people," says the radio presenter, "means, for example, listening to their silence." Sylvie, the psychoanalyst whose therapeutic practice is founded on listening, adds: "Silence is rich. Silence gives meaning. The unsaid takes meaning away." In conversation with Jean-Richard Freymann, a celebrated Strasbourg psychoanalyst and the author of numerous books, among which is an *Introduction à l'écoute*, she says: "To be listening is to enter into the discourse of the other," to which Freymann replies that "what is worrying is that all of that is repressed". These are words to be heard – once again – as a warning to the viewer. The film invites him to listen to what the characters say as much as to what goes unsaid. Not in order to play the psychoanalyst with the passengers of this film, of whom one cannot say what they might have repressed, but in order to listen to all

those small improbable sounds added to the images, to hear what cannot be heard in reality because our ears no longer pay attention to it, like the painter who, as a child, drew what cannot be seen, the roots of the tree. To see what one does not see, to hear what one does not hear, is to "enter into the discourse" not of the other but of the film; it is to listen to what it says without saying it: that cinema is always artificial, that a film is a construction that seeks to create an illusion and therefore to transform reality rather than to unveil it, and above all that this idea of cinema has always been repressed by those who make it, starting with the documentary filmmakers who claim to reveal a reality that the film has in fact constructed. *Les Passagers de l'Alsace* is a lesson in cinema.



With its passengers, the film takes us travelling through the little world it has specially imagined for us, as fictitious as the model-maker's layouts. The aerial views, which have the effect of miniaturising the world, contribute to this. From the helicopter, the camera follows a train entering a tunnel, but, thanks to a dissolve, it is the little electric train that comes out at the other end. Drawn by a blue locomotive, it stops at the station. After a cutaway to the model-maker, we see the blue locomotive again, but this time it is the real locomotive, in front of the real station at Bischheim, which the model-maker has perfectly reconstructed and which Rombout films from the same viewpoint as the one adopted to film the model.

In making this shot, Rombout does not merely film the station: he imitates the model, he copies the copy, he multiplies the simulacra, he underlines the gap that separates his film from the model and the model from reality, recalling in passing that cinema is the present-day form of Plato's famous allegory of the cave. This allegory, which led a large part of Western philosophy to distrust images, is here turned inside out like a glove. While filming reality, Rombout does not hesitate to stage it, to cut it up into fragments, to reassemble these fragments in his own way, adding improbable sounds, and hence to build a world from scratch, a world that does not exist. Beneath its playful appearance, which suggests that the filmmaker is amusing himself like a model-maker (like God?) by rebuilding the world while playing with all the subterfuges of cinematic illusion, the film reminds us that images (*a fortiori* copies of copies) are deceptive and that they produce a miniature universe as unreal as a scale model. The cinema viewer seated in a darkened auditorium is not a prisoner in a cave; he knows reality and is well aware that the fictional world constructed by a film deceives no one, because the white thread with which it is sewn is plain for all to see.

Rombout plays with images and sounds as a poet plays with words. He does not, however, seek, as did the filmmakers of Poetic Realism, to give "an interpretation of life that is truer than life itself". It is not life that he films, it is a certain idea of life. A strange sequence suggests as much. Christine, the painter, at the wheel of her car in the open countryside, consults her map and turns onto a side track that leads nowhere. In *voice-over*, she speaks of "the machinery of life" in which she found herself caught at the age of thirty, when she decided to change course and to devote herself to painting. Her car, driving across the fields, is filmed from a helicopter flying fairly low. Then the car reverses and, from the helicopter, which has meanwhile gained height, the camera films it at the crossroads where four dirt tracks meet. We then understand that these images of a car lost in the middle of the ploughed fields, this complex *mise en scène* involving a helicopter, have nothing of the documentary about them, and do not even show a typically Alsatian landscape. They were conceived in order to give visual form to the idea that Christine

1. Marcel Carné, on René Clair. *Cinémagazine*, November 1933.



expressed in words when, at a certain moment in her life, she found herself standing at a crossroads.

Throughout the film, the characters speak of the way in which they have conducted their lives, of how they chose to take them in hand. André, the winegrower, also turned back: “We’ve been winegrowers from father to son. I found that idea

very hard to accept. I didn’t want to be the heir to something, I wanted to decide to do what I do. My whole youth was marked by an absolute, wholesale refusal of my father’s profession. And I went off completely in another direction, I studied mathematics [...] It was very brutal. And it made me think a great deal about the rest of my life, and I came back for six months, I said to my father, ‘I’m going to try working with you for six months, and I’ll see what comes of it.’ And I understood that it was a path that interested me.” Taking one’s destiny in hand, assuming one’s freedom, even if it means returning of one’s own free will to a path already laid out by family tradition, or setting off in a completely different direction: such is the guiding idea, the white thread with which the film is stitched together and which most of the characters put into words. As a teenager, the radio presenter imagined herself becoming a lawyer, in a suit, with a little briefcase, a laptop, “an image dictated by my parents’ wishes”. In *voice-over*, over the image of the rails rushing past, Sylvie, the psychoanalyst, says nothing different: “It took me a very long time before I could ask myself questions and stop following the path that had been imposed on me.” Every individual is free to choose his own path rather than to run along rails. Whether or not they break with their past, the nine characters have in common that they have taken their destiny in hand, chosen their lives and recognised their deeper identity in this choice made in complete freedom, which, for several of them, has led them towards creation. To take one’s destiny into one’s own hands is to deny destiny. The supposed occult power of destiny holds sway only over those who agree to submit to it.

It is here that *Les Passagers de l’Alsace* confronts us with a paradox that gives food for thought. The nine characters of the film are carefully staged in situations chosen by the filmmaker: the psychoanalyst in a train, the painter in her car in the middle of the fields, the ophthalmologist in a tram, and so on. Little by little, the characters meet, as in an ensemble film: the painter undergoes an eye examination, the composer and the rapper make a recording at the radio station where the presenter works, the winegrower helps the painter load her canvases into her car and, in a perfectly orchestrated sequence, the ophthalmologist sitting in the tram follows with his eyes the radio presenter cycling along the cycle path that runs beside the track. The psychoanalyst puts into words what is being woven: “It’s funny how

everything overlaps. I believe nothing is there by chance and that life is made of paths that cross and criss-cross a great deal. Whether they lead to the same point, I have no idea.”

At the end of the film, Rombout brings the trajectories of all his characters to a single point – a virtual point: each participant, filmed at home, seems to be listening to the words of the next, who is nevertheless not in the same room, but whose voice we hear. The rails, the lanes of the athletics track, the trains and trams in which the characters travel, the radio studio and the virtual place are the threads that knot the meshes of the net in which they are caught like fish. This film, which speaks of the freedom to choose one’s way and to take one’s life in hand, arranges its characters like pawns on a draughtboard and imposes on them the rules of its game, to the point of gradually leading them to say what it wishes them to say. The paradox is embraced. Is it to be regretted? No. *Les Passagers de l’Alsace* is a film on two levels. Beneath the first level, which speaks of destiny and freedom, an underlying level invites the viewer to reflect on what the art of cinema fundamentally is: a mise en scène of the real. The last image is a piece of trickery: a film clapperboard seen through the front window of a locomotive. The signature of the filmmaker, sole master of his images and of the destiny of his characters.



COMMENTS

❑ *Les Passagers de l’Alsace* – the opposite of a documentary

❑ Strasbourg, Alsace. We were finishing the editing of *Canton, la Chinoise*, a very difficult edit that took us three months. The head of France 3 Régions, Jean-Marie Boehm, following a visit to my retrospective in Strasbourg, offered me the chance to make a documentary on Alsace, and he won me over by giving me carte blanche and by suggesting that I film the Alsatians the way I had filmed the penguins in *Le Piège de Kerguelen* in 1999. That’s not your run-of-the-mill thinking for a channel director.

❑ Alsace has one great advantage: it’s a region that will never make the front pages. Seemingly a bit sleepy, not very sexy, a bit like Switzerland or the Tyrol, which leaves me a great deal of freedom, because nobody (not even the producers) considers the subject to be urgent.

❑ I read books and watched films about Alsace that the head of the channel had given me, I looked at videos; I sensed that Alsace was a region with a certain malaise, where a great many votes went to the FN. A region with a problem digesting its past, a bit like Antwerp with its far-right party, the Vlaams Belang.

So I worked out a (very) basic theory:

people who don't move around, who only look at what suits them, who don't listen, those people have an identity problem, they're ill at ease with themselves. I had found my key words: sight, hearing and movement.

□ Starting from these key words, I organised with the producer Ariel Waksman something fairly unusual for a documentary: a casting. There was no event, no issue, no characters. In short, I was going to make a documentary back to front. I wouldn't film a reality that was already there; I would look for the elements of the film in it, but the reality would be something I created myself, out of three words.

□ For sight, I needed a painter, an ophthalmologist, a filmmaker. For hearing, a radio presenter, a musician and a psychoanalyst (Strasbourg has the highest density of psychoanalysts per square kilometre); for movement, a sportsman and someone who moves very little: a winegrower.

I wanted the characters not to belong to the generation that had known the war, and I wanted them to be ordinary people. In the end I kept nine of them (out of fifteen!), each of whom had a very curious relationship with his or her speciality.

□ I wanted to call the film *Les Passagers de l'Alsace*, because the characters are, as in a railway carriage, condemned to make a journey (a film) together, but also because I love trains. I was hoping for a railway setting, and I found the ideal setting at the home of a model-maker who plays around with miniature trains.

They all played along, and all came to the premiere, where they finally met one another.

□ The narrative is based on the editing together of the testimonies, as if all of them, each in his or her own individuality, were telling one and the same story (even though they don't know one another).

I interviewed them separately, with questions that would allow me an edit that would bring them together; then, as a step towards fictionalisation, I created encounters, in a kind of game. It's totally constructed. Each of them devoted two mornings to me. They are

framed in their own surroundings, because an interior says something about the person who lives in it (determines them, in a way). With the editor Adriana Moreira, I began by editing only the interviews. That made fifty minutes of material, which could already be watched as a film.

To make it all more fluid, there had to be some intermediate sequences:

for every character, there is a journey. By bus, by car, by train...

And then I created encounters between the characters.

□ As in *Entre deux tours* (1987), in one sequence we experimented with an edit that gives the (brief) illusion that the participants are in the same room. They seem to be listening to each other (while looking at each other), and the single, balanced soundtrack reinforces the effect. That's where the point of view (the philosophy) and the form of the film meet: the characters, all very individual, little concerned with their Alsatian identity, nonetheless live in one and the same region, Alsace.

□ The film obviously raises a lot of ethical questions. How far can you go with the *mise en scène* of the characters? It's particularly problematic to choose people who are in a difficult situation or ill-equipped. That's why I prefer to work with people from the middle class, who are often unfairly regarded as banal, as uninteresting. The relationship between the director and his characters is more equal; they know what game they are playing.

□ For me, it's an experimental film, a non-documentary.

You can only do something like that in non-places, with characters who are apparently ordinary.

□ The film was broadcast in Alsace, and on FR3. It was even translated into Alsatian. But it wasn't selected for any festivals... not even in Alsace.



From left to right
and top to bottom.
Christine Collin, painter.
Henri Dreyfus, ophthalmologist.
Daniel Ziegler, filmmaker.
Aurore Humbert, radio presenter.
Philippe Poirier, musician.
Sylvie Levy, psychoanalyst.
Ibtissam Mellouki, athlete, singer.
André Osterdag, winegrower.
André Ohrel, model-maker.

CREDITS

Written and directed by: Rob Rombout.
Director of photography: Samuel Dravet.
Camera assistant: Thierry Sitter.
Sound: Grégoire Delandes, Suzanne Erkalp.
Editing: Adriana Moreira de Oliveira.
Sound editing: Omar Perez, Paul Delvoie (Gsara).
Mix: Benoît Biral.
Sound studio: Dada Studios.
Original music: Philippe Poirier, performed by Philippe Poirier on guitar,

Pascal Benoît on drums and Marco de Oliveira on bass guitar.

With Christine Collin, Henri Dreyfus, Jean-Richard Freymann, Aurore Humbert, Sylvie Levy, Ibtissam Mellouki, André Ohrel, André Osterdag, Philippe Poirier, Daniel Ziegler.

Executive producer: Carine Zelig, Ariel Waksman.

Producers: Le Meilleur des mondes – Good & Bad News.

Co-producers: France 3 Alsace – RTBF.

Format: Digital Betacam.

Running time: 53 minutes.













