

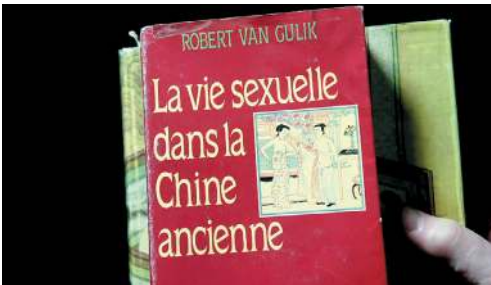
# ON THE TRACK OF ROBERT VAN GULIK

## A composite portrait

In cinema as in painting, literature or photography, the genre of the portrait raises a number of questions, not the least of which is the likeness to the model. What kind of likeness are we dealing with here? That of physical appearance, of the features of the face? That of the social status symbolised by posture, clothing, hairstyle and, where applicable, make-up? Or is it an “intimate” likeness, of the kind Nadar sought, one that



gives access to the inner life, the temperament, the psychology? Unlike the painted or photographic portrait – images without words – and unlike the literary portrait – words without images – the cinematic portrait of a real person (let us leave fictional characters aside) has at its disposal visual and narrative means that are far more effective but also more complex, and which serve to heighten its veracity. Recording images and sounds makes it possible to see, besides the physiognomy of the model, the changing expressions of the face, the postures, the gestures, the way the person behaves in society, and to hear the grain of the voice, the verbal fluency, any eloquence he or she may have or, on the contrary, any difficulties in speaking. An attentive viewer, ready to decipher the signs of a personality, will deduce from them certain traits of character: conceit or humility, vanity or contrition, insolence or propriety, and so on. A cinematic portrait can also recount a life, the ups and downs of a career, its successes and failures, its talents and disappointments, its joys and sorrows, its loves, happy or unrequited, its passions (perhaps never satisfied), its aversions, its existential anxieties. It can also lay bare the shadowy side of that person, the contradictions, the lies, the deeply buried secrets, and reveal the other who dwells within, the second personality, the Mr Hyde hidden behind the mask. The subject of a cinematic portrait becomes the character of his or her own story, and the film that tells that story can easily slip towards fiction and little by little lose the veracity of its narrative. The portrait of a celebrity readily lapses into hagiography or the documentary *biopic*. The person who is its subject may be metamorphosed into a hero just as easily as into a villain. The political documentary and the film about art often come up against this very pitfall: the politician becomes a star, the writer a demiurge and the artist a genius. Between the veracity of images and sounds and the



uncertainty of a narrative drifting towards fiction, it is the entire credibility of the cinematic portrait that is at stake.

In 2005 Rob Rombout set out to make a portrait of a man who had long fascinated him: Robert van Gulik (1910-1967), a prodigy endowed with multiple personalities. After completing studies in colonial law and sinology at Leiden (the Netherlands), this polyglot Dutch diplomat (besides his mother tongue and his knowledge of Latin, he spoke English, Javanese, Malay, Mandarin, Japanese, Sanskrit and Tibetan) occupied various posts, principally in China but also in Japan, Korea, India, Indonesia, Lebanon and, during the Second World War, in Mozambique and Egypt, where he seems to have worked for the British secret services. Hardly preoccupied with his diplomatic work, to which he devoted himself sparingly, Van Gulik was passionate about Chinese culture, of which he had a vast, deep and erudite knowledge that even today continues to impress the Chinese themselves. His insatiable curiosity led him to write scholarly works on sexual life in ancient China, on the art of engraving under the Ming dynasty, on the

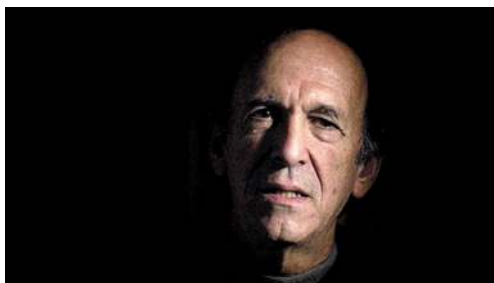
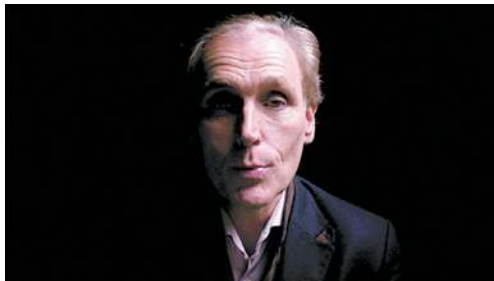
*guqin*, a very ancient stringed instrument that he called the “Chinese lute” (in reality an instrument more closely related to the zither), and on the gibbon, a small ape, a specimen of which he had taken in. His artistic practices were many: he drew, practised calligraphy, played the *guqin* while reading Chinese musical notation and, finally, he wrote. Van Gulik is best known for some thirty detective novels whose plots unfold in the China of the seventh century AD and whose main character is a magistrate who actually lived during the T’ang period: Judge Dee. These mystery novels, written in English, conform to the Western tradition of the *whodunit* (“who did it?”), but they have the twofold originality of being enriched by the historical and cultural knowledge of their author and of being abundantly illustrated with his own drawings, executed in the style of the ancient Chinese woodcuts [QR44].

It is less Van Gulik’s talents and erudition that attract Rombout than the multiple personalities of this bohemian diplomat, writer, sinologist, musicologist and

secret agent who seems to have lived several parallel lives. How does one go about making a portrait of such a man? Documentary resources are not lacking, first and foremost his memoirs, which recount his wanderings, the espionage missions he carried out for the British during the war, his mania for giving names to the rooms of the houses he occupied, and his marriage to a Chinese woman of high rank, Shui Shifang, the daughter of an imperial mandarin of the Qing dynasty, by whom he had four children. The accuracy of the facts reported is open to question – a remark that holds true for any document of this kind – so fond was he of comparing himself to his character (“I am Judge Dee,” he used to say), of cultivating enigmas and even a few secrets linked to his amorous escapades or his forgeries (he is suspected of being the author of a series of erotic prints sold as authentic engravings from the Ming period<sup>1</sup>). Also available are his manuscripts and the numerous drawings that illustrate them, photographs and family films shot on Super 8. Nevertheless, the undertaking remains a difficult one. How can one make credible the portrait of a writer whose life was itself the stuff of novels? How can one tell his far from ordinary story while avoiding panegyric? How can one convey the intellectual scope of so disparate a personality and of his activities in such different fields? How can one avoid a double trap: on the one hand, that of smoothing out the particularities of his multiple lives in an excessively general synthesis; on the other, that of overloading a detailed account that would reduce the portrait to an austere *curriculum vitae*? Finally, how can one recount the life of a man who has now been dead for nearly fifty years?

Rombout gets round all these difficulties by adopting his usual narrative strategy. He constructs his object on the basis of a question posed at the very opening of the film: “What remains of a writer?” Like a spider weaving its web, he stretches out improbable threads around Van Gulik, linking a multitude of witnesses in Tokyo, New York, Beijing, Paris, Chongqing, Nagasaki, Boston, The Hague... creating between all these points of the globe unexpected links that intersect with others woven in the past by Van Gulik himself. The portrait is a composite one, narrated by others, each of whom has a particular relationship with the writer, even if they did not know him personally. Apart from two of his children, who talk about their family life, all those who appear in the film have been marked in one way or another by his personality, his knowledge of Chinese culture or his novels. The list is too long for them all to be enumerated. There is, among others, Arthur Japin, a Dutch writer recounting how much he was impressed by Van Gulik, whom he had met at the age of six; Paul Lee, the “unofficial mayor of Chinatown” in New York, who no longer speaks Chinese but has relearned the Chinese culture he had lost by reading the adventures of Judge Dee; Henry Wessels, a New York bookseller, a great reader and a writer in his spare time, author

1. Nathalie Monnet, “L’ultime enquête du juge Ti”, catalogue of the exhibition *L’Enfer de la Bibliothèque. Éros au secret*, Bibliothèque nationale de France, 2007.



From left to right and top to bottom. Willem van Gulik, Pauline van Gulik, Arthur Japin, Paul Lee, Henry Wessels, Guido Tielman, Huang Jianhua, Li Ling, John Thompson, Frédéric Lenormand.

of an essay on Van Gulik; Wilt Idema, a former dean of Asian studies at Harvard, who decided to learn Chinese after reading, as a teenager, the novels of Van Gulik. And also Guido Tielman, a Dutch diplomat who, like Van Gulik, studied sinology at Leiden, currently posted in Chongqing, the city to which the man whose many books had nourished his studies was once sent; Professor Huang, who, like Van Gulik, practises calligraphy and plays the *gugin*; Frédéric Lenormand, the Parisian author of the “new investigations of Judge Dee”, whose adventures he has continued [QR42]; Professor Li Ling, whom Van Gulik’s work helped to gain a better understanding of sexuality in ancient China; John Thompson, a one-time American spy in Vietnam, who learnt to play the *gugin* after reading Van Gulik’s book [QR45]; and even a Shanghai taxi driver who talks about Judge Dee while taking Rombout to a symposium organised by the “Robert van Gulik now” committee. Each of the participants expresses himself in his own language, and the array of voices, to which are added that of Rombout himself speaking in French<sup>2</sup> and that of the actor reading the diplomat’s memoirs in English, contributes to a kind of great choral concert, a polyglot polyphony of which Van Gulik would be the composer and Rombout the conductor.

The filmmaker is not content with gathering testimonies to flesh out the portrait of his compatriot: each participant is himself the subject of a brief portrait illuminating his personal relationship with Van Gulik. Paul Lee talks about the social proprieties of his community while walking through the streets of Chinatown; Huang devotes himself to calligraphy and plays the *gugin*, explaining that the instrument brings serenity to the musician; Japin recounts that, as a child, he was forbidden to read Van Gulik’s novels, kept on the highest shelf of a bookcase because they were illustrated with erotic pictures; Guido Tielman strolls on an island in the middle of the river that runs through Chongqing and wonders about the destiny that led him to this city where Van Gulik preceded him. Henry Wessels has retained from the novelist that life is full of illusions and that one should not take oneself too seriously. “All that remains are dreams, my friend,” he says, as he finishes reading the essay he wrote on the author of the Judge Dee mysteries. The film thus moves from the centre towards the periphery, from the writer-diplomat to each participant talking about him, then returns to Van Gulik before setting off again into the world of another witness. It thus takes the form of a star whose many branches together draw a composite portrait, associating the writer with all those who were marked by his personality. To express this singular relationship, Rombout resorts to a form far removed from the usual devices of documentary: *morphing*. The participant is filmed from the front in a medium close-up; when he stops talking and looks at the camera, his face is rapidly transformed, becoming that of Van Gulik photographed in black and white. Each projects himself, as it were, onto Van Gulik,

2. There is also a version in Dutch.

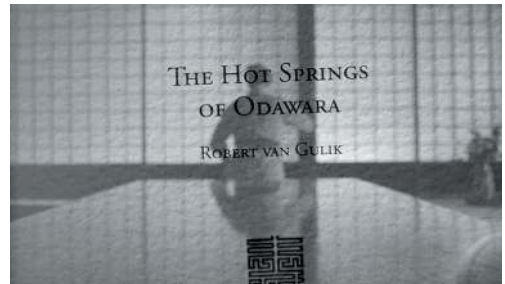


and vice versa. The metamorphosis teaches the viewer nothing, but it creates a relationship between the writer and those he inspired, while also establishing a connection between present and past. This *morphing* is the line linking the heart of the star to each of its branches. It is also a signature recalling that the film is the personal work of a filmmaker who stamps it with his mark and positions himself as the architect of this seemingly heterogeneous edifice.

On several occasions, Rombout lingers over subjects whose link with the writer seems at first sight anecdotal. In The Hague, the camera wanders beneath the stained-glass windows and the allegorical ceiling scenes of the De Witte club, frequented by diplomats, where Van Gulik used to go when he was back in his own country. In China, in Taiyuan, where the real Judge Dee is said to have been born, the filmmaker slips into a group of women practising tai chi near a remarkable tree said to have been planted by the judge's mother. In Beijing, he listens to Professor Li Ling setting out his archaeological research into the use of dildos in ancient China. He also films the ramparts and temples of the old town of Pingyao (Shanxi province), while a centenarian lady recounts her brief meeting with Van Gulik. That this lady does not live in Pingyao is of secondary importance. The images serve not to locate her but to set her testimony in the past while showing the present: at the foot of the ancient walls, men with weather-beaten faces, languid

with boredom, stare at the camera while children drive round in circles in curious little electric cars in which large rag dolls sway. In this medieval setting, the old rub shoulders with the younger ones, and the wave of the past resonates in the present, in a surprising diversity. The film is not a travelogue, as too hasty a viewing might lead one to believe. The journey it offers the viewer is in reality a journey through time [QR41, QR44].

These digressions do not prevent the film from regularly returning to its object, like a bloodstream feeding the extremities of the body and then flowing back to the heart, from which it will be pumped out again. In Japan, Rombout travels to places that Van Gulik had visited when he was ambassador and which have not changed. On the island of Hirado, the curator of the Matsura museum, who had received Van Gulik in 1966, is kneeling at the entrance to a *chashitsu*, a small house opening onto a garden, reserved for the tea ceremony. The woman in a kimono who prepares the tea and offers him a bowl performs the precise gestures required by tradition. We understand that this scene reproduces the one Van Gulik had witnessed during his visit. Before the war, the diplomat had gone to Nagasaki to study the Dutch occupation of the port island of Dejima. Rombout takes this episode as a pretext for filming the Huis Ten Bosch theme park in Nagasaki, where an ideal Dutch town has been built from scratch, a simulacrum in which the Japanese stroll as if they were on a film set. In this way the film perpetuates, in cinematic terms, the historical ties between the Netherlands and Japan that Van Gulik embodied. This relationship between past and present finds a very cinematic expression in a fine sequence filmed in Odawara, where the hot springs and the associated rituals described by Van Gulik still survive, unchanged [QR43]. By playing with soft focus, off-screen space and close-up, and by adding to his images the voice of the actor reading a text written by the diplomat in 1936, Rombout succeeds in giving this scene an aura of timelessness. Hearing Van Gulik's description over images filmed eighty years later is, for the viewer, a troubling experience of the superimposition of times, in which the past seems to merge with the present. The same impression comes over him when he watches Professor Huang



paint a calligraphy and play the *gugin*, an instrument that has remained unchanged for 2,000 years.

If Van Gulik always remains the centre of gravity, the engine that gives the film its impetus is Rombout himself, who speaks in *voice-over* and expresses himself as “I” in his film. Always on the move, the filmmaker travels at length through the cities where his witnesses live, walking with Paul Lee through the streets of Chinatown, taking the metro in Paris, the cable car in Chongqing and taxis in Beijing, in Shanghai and in Boston. He films the city from his vehicle, taking care to keep the window frame in the image, a way of asserting his point of view, of associating the filmmaker’s “here” with the “elsewhere” he is filming. Travelling from one continent to another in the diplomat’s footsteps, seeking out witnesses, archives, sometimes minimal traces, returning to places the novelist merely passed through, Rombout seems to be conducting a criminal investigation in the manner of Judge Dee. Begun in 2005, his insatiable investigation lasted eleven years, as if the inquiry had become an existential quest, as if he shared the obsessions of the man he is pursuing. For it is the man who interests him more than the work. Rombout is fascinated by Van Gulik’s capacity to live several lives at once, an official life as a diplomat, another, unofficial one as a writer, a life guided by his passions more than by his obligations, a life in which the imaginary takes precedence over reality. The quotation in the film’s epigraph says exactly that: “Does not every man lead a double life? On the one hand the real life, the everyday one, on the other the life we imagine, the one we ought to live if only we had a little more courage<sup>3</sup>.” Courage was something Van Gulik did not lack in leading his parallel

lives, including in secret. As for the filmmaker, documentarist or not, is it not his function to bring to life images through which he can live the life of another, including – why not – his hidden fantasies? To illustrate a passage of Van Gulik’s memoirs in which he speaks of his arrival in Mozambique during the war, Rombout inserts into his film a few old postcards supposed to match the writer’s African imaginary. Across the screen pass chromolithographs published by the *Compagnie belge maritime du Congo*, which operated the regular sailings from Belgium to its colony. Notwithstanding the fact that these images have nothing to do with



3. Quotation taken from one of Robert van Gulik’s novels, *The Given Day*, 1964.

Mozambique, their sanitised representations of African life bear witness to the colonial imaginary of the time. One of these postcards, which shows a woman, bears the caption “young civilised negress”. In the background, one can hear the sound of the tom-tom. When Van Gulik speaks of his stay in Cairo, a woman’s voice sings in Arabic. Between two views of the pyramids of Giza, other cards show young Egyptian women with bare breasts, cruel images of the double domination, colonial and sexual, of which they were the victims [QR41].

At this moment the viewer finds himself in two minds, not knowing to whom he should attribute this stereotyped vision of Africa: to Van Gulik or to Rob Rombout? To both, of course, the latter seeking to express through his montage of images and sounds the fantasies he imagines to be those of the diplomat. With Rombout, in this film as in the others, fiction is never far away, and with it the author’s signature on his work. Fiction is the barely veiled sign of the freedom the filmmaker takes with his object and of his own desire for the imaginary, a constant throughout his work. One can better understand why he became so passionate about a man who led several lives at once, some real, others fantasised through writing. Rombout is not Van Gulik; nevertheless, he travels the world to meet real people whom he transforms into characters in documentary films staged like fictions. Between the travelling filmmaker and the writer-diplomat circulates one and the same desire (one and the same fantasy?): to add a share of the imaginary to the real. Far more than literature, which does not enjoy the privilege of the photographic image, cinema holds this power, which Rombout plays upon with a master’s hand.

## COMMENTS

❑ I’d been given a book in French, *Les Trois Vies de Robert van Gulik. Une biographie*, by Carl Barkman and Helena de Vries (Bourgois, 1997). In it he’s presented as being very well known for his Judge Dee stories... but I’d never heard of him. In the United States he was so well known that American diplomats posted to China had to read his novels to prepare themselves. I read a few of the stories, but his life, made up of many layers, with different points of view, interested me more.

❑ These days, you’re only taken seriously if you stay in your own field, on your own turf. A biologist who writes a book about Venice or about aeroplanes – that’s not “serious”. With Van Gulik, it’s the complete opposite. He loves

horses, he writes about horses in Inner Mongolia and the book becomes a reference work. He dreams of being a member of a very elitist Chinese music club; he writes a book on the *guqin*, which becomes THE book on the *guqin*, and he’s accepted into the club.

He has a gibbon at home (in one sequence his daughter says that the ape, when it was cold, could sleep in their bed, and Van Gulik thought that was fine) and he writes a book on gibbons that becomes authoritative.

That’s the side of him that interests me... he won’t let himself be put in a box.

❑ In diplomatic circles, he ruffled feathers. Early on, in Japan, at the embassy, people lived as they did in the Netherlands; nobody ate Japanese food, lunch was a cheese sandwich with a glass of milk. Except for him.

□ The embassy was run like a company, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. One day, when he was still a mere embassy attaché, he arrives at 11 o'clock. In he comes – tall, imposing – smoking. The ambassador is furious... the whole place is shaking. People ask him: "What's going on?" "Nothing, we had a discussion." The next day he turns up, not at 9 o'clock, not at 11 o'clock... but at 10 o'clock. That's Van Gulik. Totally non-conformist.

□ The obvious danger was making a biopic – a kind of illustrated Wikipedia. A biopic is a film that already exists before it's made...

□ Thanks to a writing grant, I travelled around the world and met people who had something to do with him – not always experts – and I observed certain affinities; the film became a kind of personal portrait through personal contacts... and therefore very subjective. When we screened it, a few experts came along who didn't find in it what they had been looking for.

□ When you're totally free, your film also becomes a portrait of you – although you're always the worst analyst of yourself. And there are similarities between Van Gulik and me. Being cosmopolitan. Also having a profession that lets you do what you really love. He was a master of diplomacy, but it was partly so that he could write. Me, I love making films, but I don't want to depend on them for a living. So I teach. I've never had to negotiate financially for anything other than my films. The most important thing has always been what I want to do, and I've been able to do it because I was a teacher.

□ When you travel all over the world for a film, the more you focus on something precise – Van Gulik – the more space disappears, as if the world were becoming a "Van Gulik country". I show the cities, the places, from a car, as if, when you film, whether it's in New York, in Tokyo or in China, you were rather on the inside, behind a pane of glass, barely hearing the sounds from outside and more in a reflective frame of mind. When I was little, in the car, I used to look out of the window and I'd

make up my own sounds and my own ideas. In that sense, I let myself go... the film became what is perhaps my most personal film. I'm quite happy with the form and the content, in a good balance.

## CREDITS

*Written and directed by:* Rob Rombout.

*Camera:* Stef Tjink, Benjamin Wolff, Stefano Bertacchini, Tarek Raffoul.

*Sound engineers:* Yves Goossens Bara, Mike Hough, Paul Schoenberger, Shi Luo, Rin Takada.

*Picture editing:* Adriana Moreira de Oliveira

*Assistant editor:* Melissa Moens.

*Voice of Robert van Gulik:* Richard Wells.

*Commentary:* Rob Rombout.

*Translations:* Zimu Zhang, Mao Xi

*Sound editing and mix:* Rainier Buidin, Guillaume Berg.

*Subtitling:* The Subtitling Company

*Colour grading:* Nick Fortemps.

*Post-production:* Off World – Walking the Dog – The Fridge.

*Post-production supervisor:* Frédéric Dirickx.

*Production:* Off World.

*Production managers:* Maarten D'Hollander and Celine Strypsteen, together with Judith Vreriks.

*Co-producer:* Frank van den Engel.

*Producers:* Eric Goossens, Frederik Nicolai.

*Co-production:* Zeppers Film.

*Production assistant in Japan:* Aomi Shin.

*Production assistants in China:* Frank Yuan, Yang Yang, Chinamis Cherelle and Zheng Qion.

*With the support of* the Flanders Audiovisual Fund, the Netherlands Film Fund and the Centre du cinéma et de l'audiovisuel de la Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles.

*Festivals:* selected for the 36<sup>th</sup> International Festival of Films on Art in Montreal.

*Format:* HD digital video.

*Running time:* 87 minutes.



Prof. Huang Jianhua.



Shooting the sequence devoted to Zhu Xiao Di in Boston.





Shooting  
*On the Track of*  
Robert van Gulik.

**Top to bottom.**  
In Chongqing,  
in Tokyo,  
in Taiyuan.

**Right-hand page.**  
In Pingyao.



