

THE DOCUMENTARY STYLE

OF ROB ROMBOUT

In the twilight of his life, in an interview given to the magazine *Art in America*, the American photographer Walker Evans explained his photographic approach in the following terms: “When you say ‘documentary’, you have to have a sophisticated ear to receive that word. It should be documentary style, because documentary is police photography of a scene and a murder. That’s a real document. You see art is really useless, and a document has use. And therefore art is never a document, but it can adopt that style. I do it¹.” To grasp this subtlety, one must remember that the word “documentary” has been the object of numerous semantic controversies, and that the meanings given to it over time still fuel many debates, to the point of sometimes provoking its outright rejection. Originally a simple adjective derived from the noun “document”, its meaning gradually emancipated itself from its forebear in order to designate a mode of representing reality, first through photography (from the end of the nineteenth century), then through cinema (from the 1920s onwards, although the word does occasionally appear before then)². A nuance nonetheless emerged according to the medium being referred to. In photography, “documentary” designated a non-artistic production, whereas in cinema it designated a non-fictional practice. A contemporary of the pictorialists, Eugène Atget never ceased to insist that his photographs were nothing but “documents” and that his work was driven by no artistic intention whatsoever. Owing to his discovery by Man Ray, who published one of his photographs on the cover of *La Révolution surréaliste* in 1926, his recognition as a master of photography came late. The German and Soviet photographers of the “new vision” immediately recognised him as a forerunner of their modernist conception of photography, that is to say one that was at once documentary and artistic. After his death in 1927, Berenice Abbott, Man Ray’s assistant, bought the whole of his negatives and took them to the United States, where she introduced them to Walker Evans. Evans had just spent a few months in Paris where, harbouring some vague ambitions of becoming a writer, he had developed a passion for French literature, Baudelaire and Flaubert

1. “When you say ‘documentary’, you have to have a sophisticated ear to receive that word. It should be documentary style, because documentary is police photography of a scene and a murder. That’s a real document. You see art is really useless, and a document has use. And therefore art is never a document, but it can adopt that style. I do it.” Leslie Katz, “Interview with Walker Evans”, *Art in America*, no. 59, March–April 1971. – 2. And today a good many other artistic practices besides, such as the theatre, comics, animated film, etc., which raise new problems that are more complex still.

in particular. From each of them he learned a great deal, but one thing became essential in his eyes: style. Once he had set aside his literary aspirations in favour of a photography that would be at once artistic and documentary, strongly inspired by Atget, his entire body of work would bear the mark of it. The idea of a “documentary style” must therefore be understood as the product of this journey: Evans fully intended to be recognised as an artist by creating a new photographic style, directly inspired by the document, by its coldness, its distance, its frontality, its sharpness, its clarity³.

In cinema, the notion of documentary style is more complex. Bill Nichols, in a now celebrated work to which I return further on⁴, prefers to speak of documentary “modes”, which implies the filmmaker’s overall approach both towards what he films and towards the viewer. In this approach, the question of style becomes secondary. One reason nevertheless justifies returning to the notion of style with regard to certain films described as documentaries: when form takes precedence over content. Such is the case of the cinema of Rob Rombout.

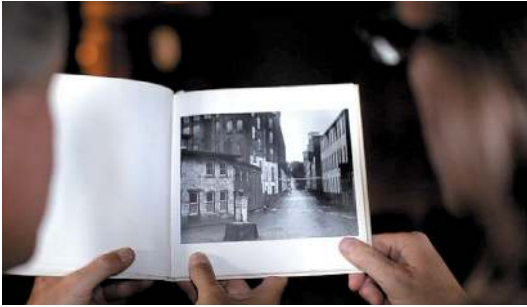
This Dutchman, born in Amsterdam in 1953 and settled in Brussels since 1975, has over the years elaborated a project that answers to one fundamental intention: to make a body of work in cinema. Little interested in pure fiction, and having begun his career by making reports for a trade-union television channel (Canal Emploi in Liège), he very quickly broke free of the routine procedures that furrow the television field in order to make films that answered less and less to the expectations of that professional milieu and more and more to his own artistic demands. Against the grain of the most common reports and documentaries, he sets aside burning issues, ignores current affairs, social problems and fashionable themes, and builds his films on unexpected objects, sometimes even on pure pretexts. Content is not secondary, but it is always subordinated to a series of fundamental formal choices (and as many rejections) which little by little calibrate his aesthetic until they constitute what may properly be called a style.

One of his films is specifically devoted to documentary cinema: *Perm-mission* (1999. [QR48]). The filmmaker has been invited to a festival that is held in Perm, a city in the Urals. In the train that is taking him there, Rombout, facing the camera, speaks of the self-questioning of the young Russian filmmakers in search of a new form of language, who want to make films without there having to be a message to get across or a commissioning sponsor to be felt behind them: “One of the questions they ask themselves is whether, in a documentary, you can edit at all, whether

3. In a remarkable work on the question, Olivier Lugon extended Evans’s expression to a vast photographic production stretching from 1920 to 1945 and encompassing a great many photographers, among them August Sander, Albert Renger-Patzsch, Paul Strand, Ralph Steiner, Berenice Abbott, the photographers of the FSA and of course Evans himself, but also anonymous uses such as illustration and the family photograph. The aesthetic criteria justifying these choices are drawn from the photographic literature of the period: respect for the specificity of the medium, clarity, luminosity, sharpness. Olivier Lugon, *Le Style documentaire d’August Sander à Walker Evans. 1920-1945*, Paris, Macula, “Le champ de l’image”, 2001. – 4. Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2001, chap. 6.

you can cut the images, whether you can regroup them in such a way that other people may find a meaning in them, whether you can intervene in reality, whether you are not always tampering with it.” The festival goes by the name of *Flahertiana*, in homage to Robert Flaherty, a filmmaker whom Rombout particularly admires. This is a deliberate choice on the part of the organisers, for whom the American documentarist’s “founding principle” and his “work on the character” are of great importance; the preference accorded to this filmmaker is clearly justified by the rejection of the cinema of Vertov. The director of the festival, Pavel Pechenkin, says of Vertov that he has “a video-clip relationship” with cinema. “He was hired by the communist regime because he created an artificial space-time on the screen.” Over these words, Rombout places the famous sequence from *Man with a Movie Camera* which shows the cameraman setting up his camera between the rails as the train approaches, a sequence whose spatio-temporal continuity is indeed thoroughly overturned by the editing. Pechenkin pursues his explanations with remarks that André Bazin would not have disowned: “At the previous festival, we talked about the fact that editing and the documentary film are two contradictory things. If we want the truth to appear on the screen, then we must not edit. Every cut that is made in the editing is, in reality, a lie. It is, it seems to me, a very characteristic mark of Flaherty. The less you cut, the less you edit, the better the film will be. That is the principle of our festival.” Rombout lets his interlocutors have their say and offers them no retort. And yet he himself does exactly the opposite of what they think. He concerns himself very little with the ethical questions that prescribe a code of conduct for documentarists and formalise their films in a dogmatic fashion. Never mind the supposed respect for the real and the quest for a truth that no film can ever attain, since it is always determined by the filmmaker’s point of view. Like Orson Welles saying “*Eye for I*”, Rombout proclaims the primacy of his own gaze and exploits every one of the possibilities of cinematic language, framing, the scale of shots, mise en scène, posing, arbitrary editing and even fiction, in order to make a film that is, above all else, not a pure creation (that would be a fiction), but a subjective gaze upon the world. Like Walker Evans in photography, Rombout does not make documentary cinema, but rather films in a documentary style. The nuance is an essential one.

In *Amsterdam Stories USA*, Rob Rombout and his co-director Rogier van Eck travel across the United States, stopping in every place named Amsterdam. Numerous shots of the façades of houses, bars or shops, filmed frontally and from a distance, seem inspired by the photographs of Walker Evans. The two directors discover that the photographer, early in his career, passed through Amsterdam, New York, where in 1930 he took a single photograph [QR27]. It shows a street lined with textile mills. The one on the left-hand side has since disappeared. A poet living in the town, Stephen Haven, talks to them about this one image taken by the photographer, whom he reproaches for having remained an outsider to the place, for having ignored the whole social context of these mills, for not having heard the hum of the looms or the ringing of the bell that signalled the breaks, and for not having



Amsterdam Stories USA / East.

cared about the fate of the workers. In other words, for not having “documented” a social problem. The reproach is unfounded: that was not the intention of Evans, whose sole concern was to make a photograph “in a documentary style” that would take its place in his own personal artistic project. Nor is it the concern of Rombout and Van Eck, who move between the disused mills without offering any explanation of the causes of the crisis that made them disappear in the 1950s. Such is not their project. Nor do they document. On the other hand, they film in a steep low-angle shot the façade of the mill with its broken windows, where, strangely, on the top floor, a young girl appears at a window. In the next shot, inside, she walks slowly across a vast empty floor, in front of windows blocked off with blue plastic sheeting. The superimposition renders her body as transparent as a ghost. A brief fiction has slipped in. [QR27]

DOCUMENTARY, FICTION

The matter is settled: anyone who reflects even a little on the nature of cinema could no longer dispute the idea, finally accepted, that there is in every documentary film a share of fiction and in every fiction film a share of documentary. The old distinction that the classical historians used to trace back to the difference between the films of the Lumière brothers and those of Méliès is obsolete today, at least in the terms they used, which set two ways

of making cinema in radical opposition to each other. If this distinction is more arduous to draw today, so many films having helped to cloud it, it remains no less true that the difference persists between “these two ways of questioning the world

and giving an account of it⁵”: on the one hand, the imaginary dominates the film by creating an invented world into which the viewer can immerse himself with more or less pleasure and, in certain cases, recognise his own preoccupations, his desires, his anxieties and even his aspirations to a world different from his own; on the other, the real imposes itself on the film and determines, with more or less force, the representation the filmmaker wishes to give of it, whether truthful or not. Indeed, although the question of truth remains fundamental where documentary cinema is concerned, it is nevertheless not the foundation of that practice: for a century now, from *Nanook of the North* (Robert Flaherty, 1922) to the recent *Hold-up* (Pierre Barnérias, 2020), a great many films that lay claim to the documentary are nonetheless riddled with lies. Conversely, a great many fictions, whether novelistic, theatrical or cinematic, have shown that they were perfectly capable of stating truths.

If the old divide between documentary and fiction hardly makes sense today, we do know, on the other hand, that every film, whatever kind of film it may be, by various filmic and perifilmic means⁶, proposes a pact to which the viewer adheres or not according to his expectations and his cinematic tastes. This fictional pact requires one to believe in the possibility of the imaginary universe represented (the diegesis), to accept the artificiality of the sets or of the acting (which varies according to genre), a certain proportion of implausibility (recurrent in Hitchcock in particular), but also more implicit things relating to the choices of mise en scène, to editing, rhythm, sound, special effects or music. The fictional pact of a neo-realist film is not that of a musical comedy; that proposed by David Lynch is not that of Ozu. A viewer may well agree to be swept along by the implausibilities of David Fincher but not by those of Wes Anderson, and the other way round. The same holds true in documentary cinema, where the diversity of the propositions on offer is doubtless less vast but every bit as decisive. The documentary pact there does not merely involve admitting the reality of the world represented; it demands just as much that one accept the way in which it is treated, the manner of filming (hand-held or not), the relationship to the men and women the filmmaker meets, his actual presence in his film, his inevitable interventions upon reality, the transparency or otherwise of the editing and a certain share of mise en scène. The documentary pact proposed by Flaherty is not that of direct cinema, nor the one to which Michael Moore invites us.

All these types of film, documentary as much as fiction, to which must be added the innumerable intermediate variations, lead the viewer to adopt,

5. Geneviève Jacquinot, “Le documentaire, une fiction (pas) comme les autres”, *Cinémas. Revue d'études cinématographiques. Journal of Film Studies*, vol. 4, no. 2, winter 1994, p. 64. – 6. I call “perifilm” what literary theories call the peritext (or paratext): everything which, around the film proper, designates it as a film, characterises the category or genre to which it belongs, orients its reception and helps to clarify the pact that the viewer signs with it before watching it. This comprises at once the trailer, the reviews of the film circulated by the media, the posters, stills and comments displayed at the entrance to the cinema, the presentations given by a cultural host, the information printed on the sleeve of a DVD, and so on.

depending on the case, a fictionalising or a documentarising reading, to borrow the terminology of Roger Odin⁷. Which equally allows him, should he so wish, to apply a fictionalising reading to a documentary film or a documentarising reading to a fiction film. He can watch Oliver Stone's *JFK* as "a true story", whereas this film, well documented though it is, proposes a plausible, and therefore fictitious, explanation of the assassination of the President of the United States. And Jean Rouch's *Moi, un noir* as the fictional story of an African Edward G. Robinson living in Abidjan, whereas its subtle narrative device conceals nothing of the daily reality of the young Nigeriens who have come to look for work in Côte d'Ivoire. The interweavings of documentary and fiction, as tortuous as they are innumerable, call for analysis, not in order to draw up an inventory of them (a laborious and futile task) but in order to bring out the most original and innovative propositions, sometimes even experimental ones, which remind us that cinema is an art in constant evolution and that certain filmmakers, admittedly a minority compared with the mass of image producers, never cease to explore new territories, to invent new cinematic forms and to construct new relationships between the film and its viewers. Rob Rombout is one of them.

THE FILMIC PACT

At first sight, the films of Rob Rombout call for a documentarising reading. However, on looking at them closely (on looking at them twice rather than once) and on enquiring into the working methods of their author, it becomes apparent that, more often than not, the terms of the contract on offer unsettle the viewer's expectations. Very quickly he detects departures of every kind from what he believed to be the usual conduct of a documentary film (which does not exist, though many are convinced they know it). At the start of his career, Rombout made a decisive choice: to make documentary films with a "fictional splendour", as Jacqueline Aubenais so nicely puts it⁸, in other words with the methods (for want of the means) of fiction. In 1990, while struggling to introduce a fictional character into the documentary he was beginning to shoot (*Nord Express*), he understood that he had taken the wrong road, and that the "docu-fiction" he had envisaged, and which television still practises in abundance, was nothing more than a collage, within a single film, of two cinematic modes conceived and developed separately. He understood at the same moment what really interested him: to integrate these two modes completely into one another, to treat reality in the mode of fiction, to stage real people, to invite them to tell their own story, to integrate those stories within a narrative framework and, out of all this, to construct his

7. A distinction proposed by Roger Odin in various works, notably in *De la fiction*, Brussels, De Boeck Université, "Arts et cinéma", 2000. – 8. Jacqueline Aubenais, entry "Rob Rombout" in *Dic Doc. Le dictionnaire du documentaire. 191 réalisateurs*, Brussels, Communauté française de Belgique Wallonie-Bruxelles, 1999, p. 357.

own film. A decisive choice that would orient the whole of his work over the course of the following thirty years and bring with it a whole creative procedure: planning the film, elaborating a structure, gathering stories, pairing faces with landscapes, drawing perspectives, tracing lines, matching colours, combining sounds (noises, voices, music) to compose a soundtrack and, since 1999, playing his own role in it. Such a working method produces films whose contract proposed to the viewer, which for want of a better term we shall call the “filmic pact”, is more complex than it might appear.

Rob Rombout’s films may first of all be described as “creative documentaries” (*documentaires de création*). An expression that has become commonplace, but a simplistic and somewhat absurd one, since it implies that there could be documentaries that are not creations. This typically francophone label, which has no equivalent in other languages and no theoretical value whatsoever, was forged by independent producers and filmmakers (they are often one and the same) when, in the 1970s, television became the principal vector for the distribution of documentary cinema. The point at the time was to set their films apart from the ordinary run of television production, which had long since imposed the didactic model as the sole practice of documentary and perniciously instilled in viewers’ minds the idea, false of course, that a documentary should naturally be “objective” and, by way of a dominant *voice-over*, pronounce a “truth” about the reality filmed. In 1970, the French critic Louis Marcorelles wrote that if Leacock, Perrault and the other champions of direct cinema refused the label of documentarists, it was because the term had lost all its force: “In the hands of thousands of hacks, ‘documentary’ has become, as they say in France, synonymous with ‘docucu’, deadly routine, one more alienation of consumer society, the art of shooting and talking a great deal, by way of commentary, in order to say nothing and show nothing⁹.”

By adding the word “creative” to “documentary”, one was reasserting what television had caused to be forgotten: that a documentary film is always, as Jean Vigo put it, a “documented point of view”, that is to say a representation of the real treated and organised by an inevitably personal gaze. Whether that point of view is hidden or, on the contrary, placed in the foreground changes nothing about its structuring power, which makes every statement of a truth relative and every pretension to objectivity illusory. For these independent filmmakers, calling their films “creative documentaries” was also a way of claiming the freedom to instil into them a share of deliberate subjectivity, in whatever form it might take. Finally, this label highlighted an advantage that independent producers could offer filmmakers and which the television channels denied them: time. Time to film, but also, as Chris Marker used to say, time not to film, that is to say to observe a situation and steep

9. Louis Marcorelles (in collaboration with Nicole Rouzet-Albagli), *Éléments pour un nouveau cinéma*, Paris, Unesco, 1970, p. 42.

oneself in it in order then to be able to give a better account of it with the camera. Time, too, to develop a subject beyond the durations prescribed by the television channels (26 or 52 minutes), calculated according to the advertising breaks. However clumsy it may be, the distinction that the expression “creative documentary” inscribes in the discourse on documentary cinema is therefore justified. It would nevertheless be more felicitous to prefer the label “auteur documentary”, which would differentiate this type of production from institutional documentaries (television, educational, tourist, industrial, etc.)¹⁰.

Rombout’s filmic pact may next be characterised in relation to the six models identified by Bill Nichols¹¹ across the whole of documentary production: the observational mode; the expository mode; the poetic mode; the participatory mode; the reflexive mode; the performative mode. One quickly identifies those that do not concern him. Rombout makes neither didactic films (expository mode) nor direct cinema (observational mode). His cinema is utterly remote from those films or television programmes that explain the world by privileging a *voice-over* commentary illustrated by the image. It is the very opposite of the films made from the 1960s onwards by Perrault in Quebec, Drew, Leacock, Pennebaker, Wiseman and the Maysles brothers in the United States, Rouch, Marker, Ruspoli, Depardon and Philibert in France (to name but a few), who film “on the fly”, camera on the shoulder, so as to take possession of a place or a group without drawing too much attention to themselves, who record hundreds of hours of film and construct the film in the editing. Rombout does exactly the opposite: he does not operate the camera himself, he detests leaving things to chance, the camera is fixed on a tripod, the technicians are numerous, the shoot is meticulously prepared and pre-production can last several years (eight for *Amsterdam via Amsterdam*, eleven for *On the Track of Robert van Gulik*). The participatory mode, which presupposes an interaction between the filmmaker and those he films, as practised by Claude Lanzmann in *Shoah* for example, also seems very different from his documentary practice. Nevertheless, he talks at length with his characters before shooting, so as to attune their contributions to his own preoccupations. His questions are cut out in the editing, the interaction is no longer visible and the viewer hears a testimony that seems to him to be delivered freely and spontaneously – which is absolutely not the case. The last three of Nichols’s modes (and he insists on the possibility of the different modes being present within one and the same film) seem more

10. In Belgium, the country where Rombout has lived and worked since 1975, the expression “documentaire de création” established itself in the early 1980s when the government of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation (the French-speaking political authority which counts culture among its prerogatives) created the first “production workshops”, the Centre bruxellois de l’audiovisuel (CBA) and Wallonie Image Production (WIP). These “host structures”, accessible to young filmmakers and established directors alike, have the mission of financially supporting film projects (mainly documentaries, without however excluding fiction, animation or experimental films) that bear witness to an original writing and an auteur’s gaze. Originally brandished as a banner of identity by the government as much as by the workshops’ managements, the expression is still today firmly anchored in official discourse on documentary cinema in French-speaking Belgium, whereas, paradoxically, the progressive reduction of the budgets allocated to the workshops increasingly limits the funding of this type of project. – 11. Bill Nichols, *op. cit.*

present. There is unquestionably an exploration of plastic forms, of the frame, symmetry, lines and colours, which characterises the poetic mode (I return to this further on). The whole of the film *Perm-mission* belongs to the reflexive mode. Alongside their main theme, *Les Passagers de l'Alsace*, *Le Piège de Kerguelen*, *Amsterdam via Amsterdam* and *Amsterdam Stories USA* also contain sequences that question cinema, the relationship between fiction and reality, editing as connection. Finally, since 1997, Rombout has appeared in his films, where he can be seen walking beside his witnesses, visiting places, chatting with Rogier van Eck in the car taking them across the American continent, contemplating the landscape, sharing a meal in a bar and even clowning around with an elephant seal on Amsterdam Island. His slightly lumbering voice, with its characteristic Dutch accent, occupies more and more of the soundtrack in order to deliver a commentary that is at times highly ironic. His presence in a certain way attaches his films to the performative mode, but without the autobiographical dimension that characterises that mode, and without this involvement adding any share of knowledge to the subject treated.

“I do not portray being; I portray passing.” Montaigne’s famous sentence¹² stands as the epigraph to *Les Passagers de l'Alsace*, a film that may be regarded as a manifesto of his cinematic practice. The sentence holds for the whole of his output, whose protagonists are all passengers, some aboard trains or ships, others who merely pass before our eyes. Like a good many documentarists, Rombout films while travelling, sets off to discover distant horizons and gathers life stories. He is the twofold heir of the old Dutch explorers who set out to discover far-off lands and of the travelling documentarists who, from Robert Flaherty to Chris Marker, went to film at the other end of the world. With one great difference, however: for him, the destination is secondary, sometimes even a pure pretext, as when, with Rogier van Eck, he sets off across the world to film every place that bears the name of Amsterdam. The journey is a guiding thread that fundamentally structures his films. If Rombout asserts that *Amsterdam Stories USA* is a *road movie* across the United States, that *Nord Express* is a *railroad movie* from Paris to Moscow and *Transatlantique*, *Queen Elizabeth 2* a *sea movie* recounting the crossing of the Atlantic aboard the largest liner in the world, this does not for all that mean setting off on an adventure without knowing what he is going to film, nor composing the film in the editing room out of hundreds of hours of rushes. The meticulous preparation, the prior location scouting, the *a priori* aesthetic choices, sometimes extremely constraining, help to contain the shoot while still letting a share of the unforeseen occur and remaining open to chance encounters.

12. Quoting Montaigne as the epigraph to his manifesto film is a curious idea on the part of a filmmaker who does not practise self-portraiture in the manner of Montaigne writing “I am myself the matter of my book.” The passing of which the philosopher speaks is that of the time of his own existence, which he intends to describe “not from age to age [...] but from minute to minute”. If Rombout appears in several of his films, if his voice with its distinctive accent delivers certain commentaries, he is not for all that “the matter” of his cinema. On the other hand, each of his films speaks of his conception of cinema, the art of passage par excellence.



1. A road movie: *Amsterdam Stories USA* (2012). – 2. A railroad movie: *Nord Express* (1990). – 3. A sea movie: *Transatlantique, Queen Elizabeth 2* (1992).

Such a balance between the predictable and the unpredictable, between control and letting go, between formal mastery and openness to the vagaries of reality is not merely a rigorous methodological choice; it is also a way of attuning his cinematic writing to the important theme that runs through all his films and which most of the witnesses he meets express in different ways: destiny (indiscernible but not necessarily inexorable) and freedom. From which it follows that his films associate destiny with fiction, documentary with freedom (unless it is the other way round). Which considerably renews the outmoded antagonism between Lumière and Méliès.

DESTINY AND FREEDOM

At first glance, the cinematic work of Rob Rombout may seem heterogeneous, so many different subjects has he covered: a train journey from Paris to Moscow (*Nord Express*, 1990); the crossing of the Atlantic from Southampton to New York (*Transatlantique, Queen Elizabeth 2*, 1992); a drilling platform in the North Sea (*L'Île noire*, 1994); the Portuguese

group Madredeus (*Les Açores de Madredeus*, 1995); a documentary film festival in Russia (*Perm-mission*, 1999); a scientific expedition to the Kerguelen Islands (*Le Piège de Kerguelen*, 2000); the city of Canton (*Canton, la Chinoise*, with Robert Cahen, 2001); the portrait of a few Alsations (*Les Passagers de l'Alsace*, 2002), a prison in the Netherlands (*Overloon Penitentiary Center*, 2003); the construction of the largest liner in the world (*Queen Mary 2, la reine des mers*); a set of places bearing the name of Amsterdam, the subject of three films made with Rogier van Eck: *Amsterdam via Amsterdam*, 2004/ *Amsterdam Stories USA*, 2012/ *Amsterdam Black and White* (in production); a portrait of the Dutch writer, diplomat and sinologist Robert van Gulik (*On the Track of Robert van Gulik*, 2016). Other projects under way paint the portrait of a city (Porto) or of a middle-class family in São Paulo.

Although Rombout never tires of repeating that the form of his films takes priority over their content, it is worth looking beyond the apparent heterogeneity of his subjects and examining the underlying existential questions that circulate from film to film. In each one of them, the filmmaker meets people who tell their story, who speak of the place where they live or the place they come from, of their working conditions, their convictions, their aspirations or simply of what is essential in their eyes. Some express with pride the happiness of having lived the life they wanted; others testify to the difficulties they encountered in trying to escape the constraints of existence. Some speak of their dreams of living differently or elsewhere; others have resigned themselves and have accepted their lot. All these micro-narratives of life bear on the theme of destiny and freedom, recurrent ever since the first reports Rombout made for the trade-union channel Canal Emploi in the 1980s.

L'Homme qui en disait trop (1985) paints the portrait of a shop steward dismissed by the management of his company, a powerful petrochemical multinational (Monsanto) with a branch in the port of Antwerp. To defend a worker who had photocopied documents, the steward publicly declared that he had done so too, although this was not the case. The worker and the steward were both sacked, triggering a seven-week strike at the end of which the worker would be reinstated, but not the steward, whose strong personality disturbed the management. Enjoying the solidarity of the workers, the man had then organised barbecues in front of the factory and carried on, in his caravan, his union surgery. At the appeal hearing, the labour court would find in Monsanto's favour. Rombout began shooting several months later, in winter, when the whole town was under snow. He makes use of video footage shot by the workers during the strike. The film alternates the images filmed in summer, where the steward is surrounded by his comrades, with those of winter, where he is alone in his caravan in the snow. The novelistic substratum of this story lends the film a genuine dramatic intensity: the little man against the giant, the hero alone against all, victim of a class justice in the pay of the powerful. Through the alternation of past and present, summer and winter, solidarity and solitude, we understand that the trade unionist's fate was sealed, and we admire his stubbornness in resisting [QR46].



L'Homme qui en disait trop.

Rob Rombout says he left Amsterdam, the city of his birth, “in order to breathe”, so increasingly hard did he find it to bear the mental straitjacket that Dutch society imposed on his need for freedom. In *Amsterdam via Amsterdam*, he says in *voice-over*: “In Amsterdam, everything is free and controlled. Everything is framed, even the pleasure of living.” Holland, in the sixteenth century, embraced the Calvinist theology according to which each believer is elected by the grace of God, to whom alone he owes his salvation. Elect or damned, his destiny is already written. Rombout received no religious upbringing, does not know the Bible and has rarely set foot in a church, but his childhood was marked by that austere Protestant ethic which has for centuries permeated the mentality and culture of the Dutch. The conflict between individual freedom and a constraining social, economic, religious, cultural or racial framework has become the central theme of his cinema – as I have already said – just as it is the source of its aesthetic. The fundamental question is that of choice and responsibility: does man have the choice of living as he sees fit, or is he subject to a destiny (whether one calls it God or Master, whether it be an abstract power, ill fortune or a social condition, it matters little) that directs his existence from outside himself? To what extent is he responsible for the conduct of his life, for his acts, for his possible failures or simply for his happiness? Where does freedom begin, where does determinism come to an end, and how does each individual manage to push back the frontier that separates them? These are questions posed in every one of Rob Rombout’s films. In telling his or her story, each of the participants gives his or her own answer, necessarily personal, but the sum total of the testimonies gathered over the course of the films inevitably takes on a political dimension. On the one hand, there are those who have taken their destiny into their own hands and who lay claim to their absolute freedom. Andrew Graham, the *social director* of the *Queen Elizabeth 2*, comes from a poor family of nine children. He cannot remember having owned a pair of shoes before the age of 10, he left school at 14 and, on the death of his parents, had to take care of his brothers and sisters. Then he became a dancer, and Australian dance champion in 1981. Now the owner of eight houses, he does not envy the rich because, as he says, “everything I own, I owe to myself. [...] I don’t believe in luck. I think you make it yourself. You are the master of your own destiny and you can become whatever you want.” In *Amsterdam via Amsterdam*, Mariël, a professional flautist, keeps her emotional life firmly under control: “I quickly feel cramped in a relationship, I need space. And I find my work very important. I know I can take it on alone. In it I feel free, independent. I know perfectly well what I want to achieve and I can always hold on to that. I know what I have, I know what I can do.” At the end of the fourth episode (*West*) of *Amsterdam Stories USA*, Veronica, who arrived illegally from Mexico, tells how, with other refugees, she fled her country by way of a long tunnel running under the American border. Today she works for Peter Calf, who for his part has come from Vancouver and is the owner of an immense almond plantation in Amsterdam, California. Both of them have left their country of origin, she in order to escape poverty, he to fulfil his dream of founding

an agricultural business. “I don’t believe in destiny,” says Veronica. “I believe in choice, in decisions. I made that decision, I accepted this job, and if I am here it is because I made that choice.” Her boss, who is a touch pretentious, talks in the same vein: “I have total control over my life, I believe I control my destiny. [...] I think the Book was written by man. Man didn’t create the plants, or life, or the earth; man made a Book, and the people who need it most can’t read it. When I was younger, I often asked God to come and tell me whether he was there; he never came.” [QR40] In the third episode (*Midwest*), Rombout, in *voice-over*, defines the Americans’ “pioneer spirit” thus: “The individual alone is responsible for his choices, before God.”

On the other side are those who had no choice. One of the most beautiful sequences in *Nord Express* shows Galina, a Russian carriage attendant, seated in a compartment next to the window, behind which rolls past a landscape barely glimpsed between the half-drawn curtains. On the folding table, three tulips stand stuck in a bottle. Galina explains that she has no future in the Polish railway company, that she is not free to travel abroad and that her dream would be to grow flowers. The medium close-up and the double frame within the frame of window and curtains that hem in the three fragile tulips speak of the weight of a destiny that places the dream beyond reach [QR5].

Aboard the *Marion Dufresne*, the ship taking Rombout and Van Eck to Amsterdam Island, in the southern Indian Ocean, the steward Gonery Le Gall began going to sea at the age of 14. After thirty-one years at sea, his face marked by premature ageing, he would like “it to stop at the end”. On the *Queen Elizabeth 2*, Ana Moretic, a Yugoslav chambermaid, cannot return to her country because of the war (the film was shot in 1992) [QR10]. She dreams of her native town, sees herself back in her house or in the old town, on the very spot where the fighting is going on. It is no doubt her experience as a refugee that leads her to state, quite



1. Galina, in *Nord Express*. – 2. Gonery Le Gall, in *Amsterdam via Amsterdam*. – 3. Ana Moretic in *Transatlantique, Queen Elizabeth 2*.

simply, this paradox: “I believe deeply in predestination. If we had to stay at home for fear that something might happen to us, we would never do anything any more.” In other words, predestination has made her free. The question is again at the heart of the fourth episode (*West*) of *Amsterdam Stories USA*. The Calvinist pastor who officiates in Amsterdam, Montana says: “For me, predestination simply means that the final destination is already determined, but that we have complete freedom to write the chapters of our lives, the ones that will lead us to that final destination. God puts things in my path that push me in a very specific direction, but he never forces me to take that road. He gives me the freedom to take it of my own accord.” To which Carly, whom fate has led to take over the garage her grandfather founded, replies: “Yes, but in a certain way I have the freedom to screw it all up.” [QR38]

The nine characters of *Les Passagers de l'Alsace* speak of the way they have taken their destiny into their own hands. André, born into a family in which winegrowing has passed from father to son, studied mathematics out of a refusal to be the heir to his lineage. Then he turned back, returned to work with his father and discovered the appeal of a trade which has since become his passion. Fleeing family determinism only to return to it freely is possible only on condition that one knows how to stop, to reflect for a moment on the meaning of one's life and to take one's decision in complete freedom. Christine, a painter, went through a similar moment in her life.

While she speaks of the “cogs of life” in which she was caught before changing course and devoting herself to painting, Rombout films her in her car, lost in open country, driving across the fields, consulting a map and then reversing as far as a crossroads. Filmed from a helicopter, the *mise en scène* he devised visualises the words of the young woman who was, at that moment of her life, at a crossroads.



Les Passagers de l'Alsace.

Rombout is fascinated by the novelistic destiny of Robert van Gulik, a polyglot Dutch diplomat, musicologist, author of various scholarly works on Chinese culture and above all of some thirty detective novels whose central character, Judge Dee, was a man who really existed in the China of the seventh century. To pin down the multiple personalities of this far from ordinary man, who died in 1967, he sets out to meet those who knew him, but also various other people whose lives were marked in a decisive way by that of the diplomat: Paul Lee, a Chinese-American, the son of one of the oldest Chinese families in New York's Chinatown, who no longer speaks Cantonese but who owes his knowledge of Chinese culture to Judge Dee; Frédéric Lenormand, a French writer of detective novels who has undertaken to write a sequel to the Judge Dee

stories and who, to do so, studied in depth the narrative techniques of their creator [QR42]; Wilt Idema, a Dutch sinologist who decided to learn Mandarin after reading all of Van Gulik's novels in his adolescence; Guido Tielman, who became consul of the Netherlands in Chongqing seventy years after Van Gulik and who, like his predecessor, studied sinology at Leiden: "It is as if fate had wanted me to end up here after having been inspired by him during my studies," he says.

All these personal stories told from film to film, each more astonishing than the last, lead to no conclusion as to the nature of the destiny that is supposed to have guided them. Nonetheless, taken as a whole they are surprising, such is Rombout's delight in collecting life stories that seem determined by a higher power and in classifying them, in his films, as an entomologist pins beetles.

OPEN AND CLOSED

The dialectic of destiny and freedom is not only at the heart of the stories told by the protagonists encountered. It is also the concern of the filmmaker himself, of his conception of cinema and of his cinematic writing. It is the shot that plays a fundamental role here. Two types of shot recur: on the one hand, wide shots of grandiose landscapes, often empty of any human presence, filmed from above, sometimes from a helicopter: a divine point of view; on the other, close-ups of the faces of the participants met along the way, travellers, engine drivers, ship's crew, workers, inhabitants of the places passed through or people encountered by chance: a human point of view. When it is wide, the shot opens onto the immensity of the



Amsterdam Stories USA / West.

world, onto the ocean, onto vast expanses of wild or cultivated land, onto a great city seen from a bird's-eye view; when it is tight, sometimes even redoubled by a window or a door that frames the image once more, it shuts the characters in. The dialectic of destiny and freedom is thus expressed through a formal relationship between the open and the closed.

When Veronica recounts, in *voice-over*, in *Amsterdam Stories USA / West*, how she left Mexico by way of a long, dark and dusty tunnel, a slow panning shot unfolds before our eyes the grandiose landscape of an arid mountain range, bare of all vegetation, beneath a twilight sky. It matters little whether or not this landscape is that of the southern border of the United States. What counts is that the breadth of the panoramic shot over untamed nature expresses the idea of liberation contained in her testimony. A close-up of Veronica's face, her eyes closed, seemingly overwhelmed by the memory, forms a counterpoint to the previous shot and reactivates the tension.

When her boss, Peter Calf, finishes telling his story and says that God never came, that it is man who writes the Book, a high-angle close-up shows his straw hat, a shot so tight that it is impossible to tell where the man is. Suddenly the camera rises, the hat moves, the planter walks among his almond trees in blossom as the camera, carried by a crane, takes in the immensity of the plantation, progressively reducing Calf to Lilliputian size. A vertical tracking shot that opens onto the world by adopting a divine point of view. This masterly, blossoming shot, one of the most beautiful in the film, achieves the dialectical synthesis of the open and the closed, of destiny and freedom.



There is one place that Rombout favours: the island. He films in the Kerguelen Islands, on the two islands bearing the name of Amsterdam and in the Azores. The island is a paradoxical place: at once open onto the sea horizon and closed like a prison¹³. It provides him with everything he needs: splendid landscapes, wild lands, richly coloured skies and distant horizons, together with the closed world in which his characters are confined. In 1995, he takes the Portuguese musical group

13. Some islands are famous prisons: the Château d'If or the island of Alcatraz. Rombout did not film there, but he did make a television programme on the prison at Overloon in the Netherlands. A prison is like an island on dry land.

Madredeus to an island in the Azores where all the musicians will be at his disposal for the duration of the shoot, and unable to escape his demands. He has, in a way, locked them up in a grandiose landscape. When he films Pedro and Teresa rehearsing, he multiplies the frames within the frame that narrow the space around them. Conversely, his frame widens to paint the volcanic landscapes of the archipelago (*Les Açores de Madredeus*, 1995).

Despite its title and its knowing nod to Tintin, *L'Île noire* is not an island, but almost: it is a drilling platform in the North Sea. Those who work there, by day and by night, are obliged to live there for periods of three weeks without going home and to work twelve hours a day. They are well paid, but the consequences of such a working regime on their private lives are enormous. Many of them have divorced. The film alternates between close-ups of the faces of the workers whose testimony it gathers and wide shots of the oil platform. At the beginning, the camera is inside the taxi taking a worker to the helicopter that will fly him out to the platform. The man's face is framed within the frame of the vehicle's windows, which cut across the horizon. Other shots, taken aboard the rescue vessel that keeps a permanent watch over the platform, are filmed through a porthole that shuts in the ship's captain. Alternating with these eye-level shots, others are filmed from the top of the oil structure, in a vertical high angle. From this divine point of view, perfectly ordered by the symmetry and orthogonality of the composition, the men at work, minuscule seen from that height, seem to be scurrying about like rats in a cage. Wide shots opening onto the immensity of the seascape and



L'île noire.

close-ups enclosing faces have no symbolic value that would be systematically attached to them. It would be too simple to think that the one expresses destiny and the other freedom. In *L'Île noire*, freedom is to be found elsewhere. The black island is a prison.

Other places are at once open and closed: ships and trains. The liner *Queen Elizabeth 2* and the *Marion Dufresne* can also be seen as islands lost in the middle of the ocean, from which neither passengers nor crew can escape. The same can be said of the train crossing a foreign country, which is as isolated as an island in the middle of the ocean. Such is the case of the *Nord Express*, which crosses Germany before its reunification. The wall running along the railway line in the former GDR visually reinforces the separation between train and landscape and heightens the impression that the travellers are shut in the closed world of their compartment. Through the way the train is filmed, from inside and outside alike, this documentary clearly follows in the wake of a number of fiction films founded precisely on the impossibility for the characters of escaping from a moving train¹⁴. The attraction of the train persists throughout Rob Rombout's filmography, and he never hesitates to film trains wherever he goes. Besides *Nord Express*, they turn up in *Perm-mission*, in *Les Passagers de l'Alsace* (where he adds a little electric train running on a model layout) and in a good many shots of *Amsterdam Stories USA*. "I really like trains. It's an enclosed place, where you only stay for a clearly defined time. Encounters are short and perhaps more personal, since you know you're going to leave the place. People there are a bit like leaves in the wind. And they open up because you only see them for a limited time." In the train, the filmmaker seems to be saying, the spatial confinement corresponds to a span of time. The shorter the time, the more open people are and the more willing they are to tell their story.

In *Amsterdam via Amsterdam* a surprising shot appears a few times, unexpectedly: the camera filming a seascape suddenly tilts over, setting the horizon vertical. The same 90° rotation appears in *Amsterdam Stories USA*, where a shot taken along the axis of the road unrolls the ribbon of tarmac horizontally. These tiltings,

which nothing justifies and which may look like pure whimsy, speak of the determination of Rombout and Van Eck to escape the norm of the horizontal horizon, to which we adhere without thinking because we accept the order of



Amsterdam Stories USA / East.

14. A few famous examples: *The Lady Vanishes* by Alfred Hitchcock (1938), *Emperor of the North* by Robert Aldrich (1973), *Murder on the Orient Express* by Sidney Lumet (1974) and then by Kenneth Branagh (2017); *Runaway Train* by Andrei Konchalovsky (1985).

the world. Disconcerting for the viewer, who wonders what it means, this radical cinematic gesture bespeaks a free vision of the landscape, just for the pleasure of showing the world differently and of prompting reflection on the norm of the frame. Destiny is a frame which, like that of the camera, structures and composes a life but also shuts it in. Freedom, in so far as it is possible to enjoy it, means stepping out of the frame, opening it up, emancipating oneself from it and setting – why not? – the horizon vertical. An isolated gesture, of course, but one that says how far the central question of destiny and freedom – and the ethics it engenders – has become an aesthetic question.

BUILDING THE OBJECT

Unlike a great many documentary filmmakers, Rombout does not seize upon a social problem but constructs his object from scratch, outside the preoccupations of the moment. One of his first films, *Entre deux tours*, made on video in 1987, is highly characteristic of this way of going about things. Near Liège, in Belgium, Rombout discovered an astonishing tower of flint stones, topped by four monumental sculptures. It was built with his own hands by a stonemason, Robert Garcet, a pacifist activist and visionary mystic steeped in the reading of the Bible and of a few apocryphal writings. A few dozen kilometres away, in the Netherlands, NATO had taken over a former colliery whose winding tower now supports surveillance antennae pointed towards the Soviet Union. Its spokesman delivers a bellicose discourse in total contrast with that of Garcet. Rombout moreover engaged a Vietnamese actress whom he asked to drive by car from one tower to the other by country roads. In *voice-over*, she speaks a poetic text that evokes Babel and, with the words “I remember”, introduces archive images of the war. The actual object of this video is not one tower rather than the other, but what lies “between” them, their relationship, which does not exist in reality (each of the protagonists was unaware of the other tower’s existence). A relationship constructed entirely from scratch by Rombout and expressed by means of fiction. What is really at stake here is also at stake in most of the films that would follow: Rombout does not make a film about something, but about the connection he establishes between things [QR1].

Connecting things is, for him, a structuring principle, an *a priori* principle. The first idea of a film is its structure, which is sometimes found in the very title, as in *Amsterdam via Amsterdam*, for example, which associates the great Dutch city with two islands situated at the antipodes that bear the same name. Sometimes Rombout takes up the same idea of structure again for another film and to connect other things.

At least four structural models can be recognised in Rombout’s filmography. The first is like a washing line: on a cord stretched between two points, the filmmaker hangs all sorts of sequences as varied as clothes put out to dry. This structure

is comparable to that of episodic novels, which are often travel novels in the course of which the heroes (Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, for example, or Jacques the Fatalist and his master) meet a variety of people and suspend the course of the narrative to indulge in various digressions. *Nord Express*, a film devoted to the transcontinental train created in 1896 by the Compagnie internationale des wagons-lits, works on this model: departure from Paris at the start of the film, arrival in Moscow at the end and, on the line stretched between the two cities, all sorts of images: the landscapes seen from the train, the stations passed through by day and by night, the attendants at work, encounters with travellers and engine drivers, a few forays into the cities along the route, the hitches of the journey, the changes of locomotive and even the changing of the axles at the Soviet border because of the different track gauge in Russia. All these sequences are interwoven with archive footage retracing the long history of this mythical train. The whole, rather heterogeneous, draws the viewer into considerations that are now historical, now sociological, without however preventing the film from moving forward or holding the course of its narrative. The train journey draws the structure of the film, but its real object is all the connections the director forges between the characters met along the route, who testify at once to the grip of destiny and to the historical contingencies that have led them to where they are and from which they cannot escape. All of them, even when they sing, express a deep melancholy symbolised by this once mythical train that is now no more than the shadow of what it was. The same structure is adopted for the following film, devoted to the crossing of the Atlantic aboard the *Queen Elizabeth 2* (1992), as well as for *Le Piège de Kerguelen* (2000).

The second structural model, again established *a priori*, is a more complex development of the previous one. The structure no longer rests on a single thread but on several, stretched no longer between places but between men and women who have been carefully selected. The whole forms a kind of web, or rather a piece of lace, given the delicacy of the links that are woven. Only a single film works on this model, and it is a major one: *Les Passagers de l'Alsace*. As is his habit, Rombout organised a casting session to select his participants. The project was to establish connections between characters who did not know one another, relationships that were sometimes quite trivial (the rap singer is played on the presenter's radio show, the winegrower helps the painter to transport her canvases), sometimes more fundamental: the words of some echo those of others. Each of them speaks of what it means for him or her to look, to listen, to create, to move (four concepts, let us note in passing, that define cinema); then of more personal things, of the way they have assumed their life choices, avoided being set on rails and how they have constructed their identity. "My identity," says the radio presenter, "I find it in all the people I invite onto my programme. It is they who build my identity." A little further on, she adds: "But the essential thing is the connection, that is what counts." These associations of ideas are underlined either visually (the parallel lines of the

athletics track match the railway lines), aurally (the cadence of the music, underlined by the brush rubbing on the snare drum, recalls the sound of the train) or both at once (the clicking of the presenter's bicycle heard from the tram in which the ophthalmologist is sitting). At the end of the film, a skilful montage of exchanged glances, suspended words and attentive listening leads the viewer to imagine that all the participants are conversing with one another, when in fact they are not gathered in the same place [QR24]. This sophisticated Kuleshov effect reminds us that these characters have nothing in common other than the connections created by Rombout himself, the lace he has crocheted, stitch by stitch, between them. In short, the object of the film is the film itself, its own game, its system, its structure.

The third structural model is a more classical one. The film is built around a central point, a place (the oil platform of *L'Île noire*, for example), a character (*On the Track of Robert van Gulik*) or both together (*Les Açores de Madredeus*). The film sets out from this central point, finds a witness with whom it develops a theme, returns to the centre, sets off again with another who extends the previous theme or develops a new one, returns to the centre, and so on. The structure thus draws a star, each of whose branches corresponds to a different participant¹⁵. In *L'Île noire*, the witnesses recount the difficulties of their working conditions and their effects on their personal lives. Social inequalities come to light: the company representative earns a good living, his wife has no need to work; Pat Thomson, on the other hand, the only woman working on the platform, spends her three weeks' leave doing the housework at home. Between the different characters, the film returns to the central point that links them to one another: the drilling work. Through this star structure, which constantly connects the testimony of the staff with the work on the platform, the film never ceases to say to what extent these men and this woman are prisoners of the industrial machine and of the capitalist society that manages, controls and imposes its hold on every aspect of their lives, including the private sphere. *On the Track of Robert van Gulik* works on the same model, but it is the Dutch writer, diplomat, musicologist and sinologist who is at the heart of the star, a structure entirely suited to the fragmented personality of this character.

The fourth structural model extends the previous one by multiplying the stars, so that the film draws a constellation. It is the model of the three films made together with Rogier van Eck whose central point is the name Amsterdam. Besides the city in the Netherlands, this name is also that of several other places in the world. *Amsterdam via Amsterdam* (2004) associates the Dutch city with two islands bearing its name, situated at the antipodes; *Amsterdam Stories USA* (2012)

15. *Les Açores de Madredeus* would rather take the form of a helix, since only two members of the group (Teresa and Pedro) speak, each in turn.

describes the two directors' long journey across the United States, passing through the sixteen cities, small towns and other places named Amsterdam; *Amsterdam Black and White* (currently in progress) brings together two localities of the same name, one in South Africa, in the province of Mpumalanga, the other in the province of Drenthe in the north-east of the Netherlands. In every Amsterdam, the two filmmakers meet people who tell them their story. Each encounter is an autonomous fragment, a miniature narrative that could be isolated without losing its internal coherence. Each Amsterdam becomes the heart of a star-shaped development, as in the previous model. By connecting these different places, by establishing between them a relationship that does not exist in reality, the film draws a constellation. Apart from their name and their origin (discovery or foundation by the Dutch), these places today have no connection whatsoever with one another, neither political, nor economic, nor sociological, just as there is no actual relationship between the stars that make up the constellations of Centaurus or Orion, apart from their proximity as seen from the Earth. The filmmakers are like the astronomers of antiquity who drew an abstract figure between the stars. In the first two films, the constellation is drawn by the journeys by ship or by car, the conversations of the two filmmakers and their reflections in *voice-over* about their film. In *Amsterdam Black and White*, the journey is no longer filmed. The editing alone takes charge of tracing out the outlines of the constellation. The connections thus created from scratch between places with no link other than their name gradually draw an abstract figure that constitutes the deep meaning of their film, what is at stake in it and its purpose.

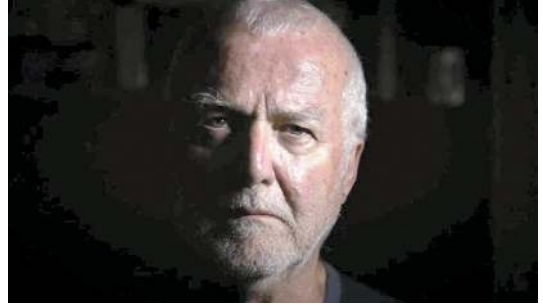
WORKING METHODS

A great admirer of Alfred Hitchcock, Rob Rombout, documentary maker though he is, works like a maker of fiction films: he conceives his film in his head, wants to control everything from start to finish, is apprehensive of a shoot that would oblige him to alter his plans and delegates the editing to his regular editor, Adriana Moreira (who is also his wife). A film that has been well written beforehand shortens the work of editing and avoids hesitations and procrastination, even if the various preparatory stages do not take place in the same order as those of a fiction film. In the first place, as we have seen, Rombout conceives the structure of the film. Then, if his financial means allow it, he carries out location scouting in the course of which he takes a great many photographs and gathers all the documentation he needs. For *On the Track of Robert van Gulik*, a writing grant enabled him to meet all the witnesses he wished to interview and to visit all the places he wanted to film (Paris, the Netherlands, China, Japan, the United States). Next, he writes up his project using a technique inspired by the working methods of fiction screenwriters. He prepares a certain number of pages, as many as there are segments envisaged for his film; on each page he writes down a title, describes places or shots, develops his point of view, specifies his visual and aural choices and

finally, step by step, writes out the synopsis; lastly, he inserts each segment into the structure of the whole. He draws up, *a priori*, a set of aesthetic guidelines that his cameraman will have to respect. For *Amsterdam Stories USA*, he stipulates that all the interviews will be shot indoors, in darkness, with side lighting that leaves one half of the participant's face in shadow¹⁶. He likewise plans to film two witnesses at the same time, positioned one behind the other, and to pull focus on whichever one is speaking.

With all the material gathered, photographs and texts, the filmmaker puts together a voluminous production dossier, indispensable nowadays for obtaining funding¹⁷. Sometimes, for the benefit of the producers, he makes a pilot film that explains the project, shows a few scenes and gives an idea of the general atmosphere of the film. The pilot for *Nord Express* convinced Marilyn Watelet¹⁸ to produce the film, and that of *Amsterdam via Amsterdam* made it possible to find numerous sponsors. The pilot film also allows him to test his ideas on what he has chosen to film, to look for solutions to any technical problems encountered and finally, at the start of the shoot, to show the crew exactly what his intentions are.

Rombout admits to being “of the old school”: he likes heavy equipment, big cameras mounted on tripods, lighting, rails, the dolly. On the shoot of *Amsterdam Stories USA*, where equipment was kept to a minimum, he managed to dig up a crane or a fireman's ladder on the spot every time he wanted a shot from a height. Tracking shots are executed on rails or from a car, with the camera fixed to the bonnet. Occasionally, very mobile sequences are shot with a hand-held camera (the black-and-white sequences in *L'Île noire*, for example, or the folk scenes in *Les Açores de Madredeus*), the better to bring out the fixity of the other shots and



1. Russell Banks in *Amsterdam Stories USA / East*. – 2. Helen Brooks and Kevin Hollis in *Amsterdam Stories USA / South*.

16. During the shooting of the first interview, his cameraman told him that this instruction could not be carried out and that they would have to film in full light. The director had to lose his temper for the shot to be taken as he had planned it. – 17. By way of example, the production file for *On the Track of Robert van Gulik* runs to more than a hundred pages. Besides the statement of intent and the budget estimated by the producers, it contains a detailed description of the locations, a presentation of the seventeen planned participants, fifty-two location-scouting photographs, thirty-one archive documents and finally a thirteen-page “script” (a description of each sequence in the order planned for the edit). – 18. Belgian producer, founder of the production company Paradise Films, which notably produced most of Chantal Akerman's films.

to heighten the contrast. Rombout also likes to film aerial views even when they are not indispensable, for the beauty of the shot. His budget provides for a line headed “helicopter hire”, to film the *Queen Elizabeth 2* lost in the immensity of the ocean, a train running through Alsace or Amsterdam Island. To satisfy his demands, the crew of technicians can be a large one. Eight people boarded the *Queen Elizabeth 2* for the shoot: besides the director, the producer and co-writer Jean-Philippe Laroche, the director of photography Louis-Philippe Capelle, a script supervisor-assistant director, two camera assistants, a sound recordist and a grip-electrician.

Rombout leaves nothing to chance. Even so, an element of the unforeseen remains, when he cannot scout the locations or when too much time elapses between the scouting and the shoot – an improvised shot can always be kept if it conforms to the spirit of the film. As a rule, the witnesses are chosen on the spot by a kind of “casting”. He talks at length with those he wishes to bring into his film, in private, without camera or technicians, in order to get to know them better, to identify what preoccupies them and to see how their words might find a place in his film. Proceeding in this way with each participant, he comes to understand what, in their life, in their experience of life, in their relations with others, in their vision of the world, in the meaning they give to the things, facts and events that have shaped the course of their existence, is at once essential to them and in keeping with the general ideas the film is going to uphold. Once a relationship of trust has been established between them, the filmmaker agrees with the witness on the themes that will be at the heart of the interview and on which he will be able to take a position. Interviews are always filmed indoors in order to obtain the best sound quality and, since the 2010s, in half-darkness: this isolation has the effect of creating a calm, peaceful and warm atmosphere, which cuts the participant off from everyday worries and favours meditation, introspection and the expression of a more intimate thought. On the shoot of *Transatlantique*, *Queen Elizabeth 2*, some interviews were conducted without a camera, in a cabin, to obtain good-quality sound and because the absence of the crew and the shooting equipment encourages more personal, sometimes even confidential, speech. Rombout asks questions (cut in the edit) that steer the participant gradually towards the theme determined beforehand and lead him little by little down the path of a more abstract, deeper and also more universal reflection. A fine psychologist but also something of a manipulator, the filmmaker brings his witness to say what he wants him to say while letting him believe that he is the one saying it. The witness is treated like an actor playing his own part under the rigorous direction of the filmmaker who stages him.

For Rombout, speech takes precedence over the image¹⁹, the speech of the

19. Rombout is contemplating making a “minimalist documentary” that would turn its back on the visual possibilities of cinema in favour of speech. “Just a face talking,” he says. “It is up to the viewer to imagine what it is talking about.” Susana de Sousa Dias made her film *48*, devoted to the Salazar dictatorship in Portugal, on a similar device, except that here the faces are anthropometric photographs taken by the regime’s police, over which we hear the voice of the person remembering the abuse they suffered.

participants as much as that of the commentary which, since 1999, he has delivered himself in a French pleasantly modulated by his accent. In the directing workshops he runs all over the world, he asks his students to write a commentary before shooting, to speak it in their own voice, with their accent and their faults of pronunciation, to record it and then to listen to it in the dark. He finds that, under these conditions, the intonation is finer and the modulation better.

In the editing, Rombout places the voice first, then the images showing the participant busy at various tasks. Sometimes the voice is heard before the person speaking appears. In certain sequences, the character poses facing the camera, silent. We hear his voice in *voice-over*, but his lips do not move. Then the voice becomes synchronous. At the beginning of *On the Track of Robert van Gulik*, the priority given to speech is unmistakable: the voice of the writer Arthur Japin is heard over a black screen and his face appears only afterwards.

Rombout also attaches great importance to sound effects. Sounds recorded separately, outdoors or in the studio, are post-synchronised. Most of them accentuate the realism of the scene (ambient sounds, a character's footsteps even when he is far away, birdsong, barking, etc.) or announce the sequence that follows (the whistle of a train that will not be seen until the next shot). But Rombout, who does not lack humour, also likes to inject unexpected sounds. In *Les Passagers de l'Alsace*, the camera films with a macro lens [QR25] a few minute details of the great model railway layout on which a little electric train runs, for instance a fisherman on a riverbank. Rombout adds the sound of the water flowing by. We hear a man whistle at the moment women in swimming costumes appear. A distant voice shouts "action!" before a shot showing a filmmaker with his camera on his shoulder.

In *Amsterdam via Amsterdam*, the directors film a seventeenth-century painting depicting, in highly fanciful fashion, Amsterdam Island at the time



1 and 2. *Les Passagers de l'Alsace*. – 3. *Amsterdam via Amsterdam*.

when the Dutch had set up a trading post there, with ovens for rendering whale blubber. Over the details of the painting we hear the sound of the waves, the wind, burning wood and even the song of whales. Towards the end of *Le Piège de Kerguelen*, when Rombout gently mocks the young ethologist desperately searching for wild cats to observe, we hear from time to time the hoarse grunts of elephant seals. These noises are not incongruous – it is quite possible that one of these animals, which abound on the island, is close by – but, added in post-synchronisation, they also serve as a diversion and as irony towards a scientific mission that strikes the filmmaker as thoroughly futile.

MISE EN SCÈNE OF THE REAL

Contrary to what most viewers believe, mise en scène is a common practice in documentary cinema, although a good many filmmakers dare not admit as much and prefer to speak of “mise en situation” (Laurent Chevalier), “mise en place” (Raymond Depardon) or “mise en condition” (Marcel Ophuls)²⁰. Rombout has no such problem of vocabulary. He takes responsibility for his choices and even makes them visible. He asks real people to take up their places in real locations, carefully chosen by him, and to speak, act or move in a certain way in front of the camera. He has them climb onto crates to film them from a low angle (*Entre deux tours*), has them walk in front of the camera, which films them from behind, or chooses a suitable background to play on depth of field. In *L'Île noire*, he places Pat Thomson at the entrance to the billiard room where two men are playing. Pat talks about the difficulties of living and working in a male-dominated world, where the rare leisure activities are reserved for the men and where she has no say. She does not play billiards herself; she thinks it is a man's game. The mise en scène does not contradict her.

The editing of the shots brings out a mise en scène of the elements composing them, one that would not be perceptible without it. In *Nord Express*, in Berlin, Rombout meets Ben Wargin, a painter-philosopher with a passion for trains and nature. The man lives in a large block of flats built right up against the railway line that runs straight through Berlin. Rombout films Ben crossing the street in front of the building at the precise moment a train passes over the bridge, then Ben sitting by the window through which the train can be seen passing, then the building beside the track seen from the train. Three shots, three points of view, three different trains passing at three different moments and which were probably not all going to Moscow. The viewer attentive to the editing knows that the film is not cheating and becomes aware of the effects of mise en scène that transform reality into film.

20. Expressions quoted by Guy Gauthier, *Le Documentaire, un autre cinéma*, Paris, Armand Colin, 4th edition, 2011, p. 184-185.

The mise en scène of the witness is not only the sign (or the signature) of the filmmaker's intervention in reality. It has a distinct symbolic function that contributes to the overall meaning of the film. In *Amsterdam Stories USA*, Rombout and Van Eck ask young Chesney to walk across a snow-covered field, where no path can possibly lead her anywhere – she who dreams of going to Dubai to see the tallest tower in the world and who feels trapped within her small town [QR37]. In Amsterdam, Montana, after hearing Pastor Jack speak of predestination, the directors ask Carly, sitting at the wheel of her old 1930s car, to drive round and round a wooden windmill that vaguely recalls the Dutch origin of the place. A symbolic image of a reclusive and monotonous life in an uneventful little town that no event ever comes to disturb and whose horizon is desperately flat. The visual discourse of these mises en scène differs from that of the participants, the filmmakers' point of view not always agreeing with what their witnesses say. These mises en scène create a semantic tension within the general theme of destiny and freedom. On leaving their witness, the filmmakers make what they call a *good-bye shot*, always staged in the same way: the participant, filmed in close-up, looks straight into the lens of the camera, which is fixed to the back of the car. As the car draws away, the very shallow depth of field drowns the image in an optical blur, a way of bidding farewell to the witness, who slowly fades from view [QR30].

Some highly sophisticated mises en scène require lengthy preparation. In *Les Passagers de l'Alsace*, Rombout exploits the discursive possibilities of the sequence



1, 2, 3. Nord Express. – 4 and 5. Amsterdam Stories USA / East.

shot and of depth of field. The ophthalmologist is seated in the tram, close to a window. In the background, through the glass, we see another character in the film, a radio presenter, ride past on the cycle path that runs alongside the tram line, draw away from it for a brief moment and then come back level with the man who, without the viewer having noticed, has changed seats. Such a visual and auditory bringing together (we hear the clicking of the bicycle although the camera is inside the tram) of two protagonists who do not know each other and have never met is once again symbolic of one of the central themes of the film: connection.



Connecting people through mise en scène or editing is one of the fundamental concerns of Rob Rombout's cinema, whose films give rise, between the participants, to relationships that do not exist in reality but that set the viewer thinking. In *Amsterdam Black and White*, the directors play with match cuts, true or false. They film a tennis player hitting the ball in South Africa and another returning it in the Netherlands. A black waiter brings a pizza, but in the following shot the viewer understands that the restaurant is in Holland.

Not all of Rombout's mises en scène have a symbolic function. Some of them answer to strictly formal objectives. For his film on the Portuguese group Madredeus, Rombout takes all the musicians to the Azores, has them walk in single file along the ridge, against the light (like Orson Welles at the beginning of *Othello*), has them play seated uncomfortably on chairs planted in the dust of a bare slope of the volcanic island [QR16] or has some of them pose standing on a low wall

1 and 2. *Les Passagers de l'Alsace*. – 3 and 4. *Les Açores de Madredeus*.

[QR17], looking out at the ocean, while Teresa, between the two guitarists, sings facing the camera. Such a theatricality of bodies within the space of the frame composes visual forms, combines lines and colours. *Mise en scène* becomes image-making. The filmmaker turns painter.

A PAINTERLY CINEMA

When he left the Netherlands in 1975, Rombout took with him the one thing no one can rid themselves of: a culture, always shaped by the place where one lives and by the mentality of those one has rubbed shoulders with. From his native country he retains the pull of the sea, of islands, inlets and canals, of sails beaten by the winds, of damp skies where the sun and the clouds engage in flamboyant jousts. In a word: the landscape. Fixed in his memory are the works of the great Dutch painters of the seventeenth century, the Van Goyens, Ruysdaels, Hobbemas, Van Diests, whose landscapes, with their lowered horizons, cede the whole space of the canvas to great cloud-filled skies.

It is in their manner that Rombout works when he finds himself before a grandiose natural landscape: he does not capture it, he composes it like a painting, widens the horizon with a wide-angle lens, gives the clouds the greater part of the frame, modulates the shadows and the light.

In several films he incorporates photographic images, often old ones, which his hands slide beneath the lens. As a general rule these are the participant's family photographs, but he also makes use of photographs of past events (Selma's Bloody Sunday in *Amsterdam Stories USA / South*), postcards, illustrated magazines (*On the Track of Robert van Gulik*). He also makes portraits staged like photographs, facing the camera. Group portraits (the team of workers charged with changing the axles of the *Nord Express* at Brest; the crew of the *Marion Dufresne*; all the scientists on mission on Amsterdam Island); family portraits (the Harvey family in *Queen Mary 2, la reine des mers*); portraits of the participants filmed in half-darkness (*Amsterdam Stories USA*). Certain shots break with the classical rules of the photographic portrait: the models are filmed from a low angle



1. Meindert Hobbema, *The Avenue at Middelharnis*, 1689, London, National Gallery. 2. *Amsterdam via Amsterdam*.



From left to right and top to bottom. 1 and 2. *Amsterdam Stories USA / South*. – 3. *Amsterdam Stories USA / Midwest*. – 4. *Amsterdam Stories USA / West*. 5. *Queen Mary 2*. – 6 and 7. *Amsterdam via Amsterdam*. – 8. *Amsterdam Stories USA / East*.

and off-centre, so that their face is pushed into a corner, leaving a building or something else visible in the background. The artifice of the pose, contrary to the norm that recommends leaving space in the direction of the gaze, underlines and signs the *mise en scène*.

The filmmaker Rob Rombout is also a talented photographer. As with Kubrick before him, photography has taught him to frame, to structure, to cut an image out of reality while composing it. In painting, the frame materially

determines the space of the composition. The painter fills it with lines and colours until he has obtained an image, figurative or not. In photography and in cinema, the frame is a constitutive given of the camera, that is, of an optical instrument that cuts out a portion of reality²¹. Framing cuts out a part of the real and casts out of frame whatever does not suit it. An infinitely complex and paradoxical gesture, since in cutting out it composes. To frame is to perform a double, simultaneous operation of extraction and construction; it is to extract an image from the continuum of reality while at the same time structuring it. Besides the frame, the camera produces perspective. The cameraman can deny it (by filming a wall, for example) or, on the contrary, exploit its effects. On the relationship between frame and perspective everything else depends: centrality, symmetry, orthogonality, balance, geometry. Everything that Rombout is looking for. With him, every shot is meticulously framed, at once cut out and constructed by the point of view of the filmmaker, who directs his camera so that it produces an image answering to his fundamental aesthetic choices: aligning a perspective, constructing a symmetry between elements, balancing the composition, measuring proportions, bringing out the structuring lines (straight ones for preference), seeing to their orthogonality, for example by arranging them parallel or perpendicular to the edges of the frame, centring a character or an object (if need be by setting it in a frame within the frame, a window or a door), drawing geometric figures (circles, triangles, squares, rectangles). The whole of Rombout's cinematic art is inscribed in these choices, which converge on a single goal: to create harmony. Rombout is a classical artist, in the sense that art history has given to that word.

In architecture as in painting, classical art is an art of the straight line, of balance, of right proportion, of geometry and of symmetry. Before being an artistic form, symmetry is a constant of the natural world, an organic principle proper to living beings. It orders the human face and governs the arrangement of the limbs, of the fingers, of the toes. It structures the leaf of the tree and the wings of the butterfly alike. It is the formal principle of matter and of particle physics. One still has to be able to recognise it. A question of point of view: the cow's head is symmetrical only when you look it in the eyes. Inspired by natural symmetry, artists, architects, interior decorators and designers have had recourse to it in drawing not only the façade of the Parthenon or of the Palace of Versailles, but also ocean liners, trains and motor cars. Rombout loves symmetry, whether he discovers it in reality or constructs it entirely from scratch. On the one hand, his framing reveals the symmetry of existing things (the architecture of the *Queen Elizabeth 2* [QR9], the driver's cab of a tram, the two halves of a drawbridge rising above an Amsterdam canal). In *Entre deux tours*, thanks to video special effects, he superimposes a

21. Whether this reality has been staged or not is secondary here. Reality, in its very principle, is never framed, not even the carefully prepared reality filmed on a studio set, which the frame serves to separate from everything that will not enter the image (equipment, technicians, lighting, in short everything that is precisely called the off-frame).



1. *Transatlantique*, Queen Elizabeth 2. – 2. *L'île noire*. – 3. *Amsterdam Stories USA / East*. – 4. *Amsterdam Stories USA / Midwest*. – 5. *Les Açores de Madreus*.

woman's eyes and the beak of an eagle, thereby bringing out the natural symmetry of living beings. He also discovers it in places where the aesthete's eye might perhaps not think of looking for it, in the structure of an oil platform, for example. It is enough to look carefully and to adopt the appropriate point of view. Rombout also creates symmetries that do not exist in reality, when he places bodies or objects within the space of the frame, on either side of a central axis. The video effects of *Entre deux tours* allow him to bring into the same frame the two towers, even though they stand some tens of kilometres apart from each other [QR2]. In the films made with Rogier van Eck, the two filmmakers stage themselves in their own film in order to inscribe in it the duality of their function by taking their places symmetrically at the edges of the frame. Constructing a symmetry can also be achieved by filming from a distance a tower, a lighthouse, a grain silo or the funnel of a liner and centring the structure in the image. Capturing the sky on either side of the structure produces a kind of hollow symmetry that exists only in the image [QR15].

A classical artist, Rombout loves the straight line, beginning with the most commonplace of all: the horizon, on the ocean in particular, which cuts across the frame and can be doubled by parallel lines, such as those of a ship's rail. In *Canton, la Chinoise*, a lateral tracking shot filmed from a car on a viaduct shows for a full minute the continuous yellow line of the guard rail. Everything is a pretext for tracing lines: the cables of a cable car, the overhead wires of the tram, cranes, rails, road markings, window blinds, etc. All these motifs intersect and draw geometric



Left. 1. *Transatlantique, Queen Elizabeth 2.* – 2. *On the Track of Robert van Gulik.* – 3. *Amsterdam Stories USA / Midwest.*
Right. 1. *Amsterdam Stories USA / South.* – 2. *L'île noire.* – 3. *Transatlantique, Queen Elizabeth 2.*

shapes. The windows of houses, trains, trams and ships, the control panels with their instruments, the dials and push-buttons filmed in extreme close-up become so many quadrilaterals whose orthogonality accords with the frame. And the portholes through which he films the sea, the oculi of the doors opening onto the decks of ships, whose shape – and whose name – recall the eye of the camera, the wheel of a navigation instrument, a medal, a glass ball, a drum, a helipad, the inside of a tube about to sink into the seabed or a semicircular bridge reflected in the water of the river – everything becomes a circle under the filmmaker's attentive gaze.

Rombout's aesthetic is no less modern for all that, and it is no paradox to assert that it is possible to be classical and modern at one and the same time. His modernity brings him close to certain avant-garde artists and groups who, in the 1920s, returned to the straight line and to geometry. The most important of them, his compatriot Piet Mondrian, who, together with the members of the De Stijl group, theorised the geometric abstraction he named Neo-Plasticism,



1. Theo van Doesburg, *Counter-Composition V*, 1924, Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum. – 2. *Les Passagers de l'Alsace*.

reduced painting to a very small number of elements: the horizontal or vertical straight line, pure primary colours and the balance of proportions, which makes him the heir of classicism. Theo van Doesburg, a member of De Stijl, invented counter-composition by drawing oblique figures that enter into conflict with the frame. The Calvinist austerity of this school left its mark on Rombout, who proceeds by subtracting the superfluous and reducing reality to its structuring elements (lines, forms and colours), without going so far as abstraction. His ascetic shots always represent concrete objects. The white lines separating the lanes of an athletics track cannot make us forget their primary function, and the next shot shows, precisely, a young athlete running.

Though reality always prevails, Rombout remains concerned to produce a work of art. Through various strategies, he gives an artistic added value to every shot he films. The simplest: capturing the image reality gives of itself, when it is reflected in a pane of glass that

makes it indistinct (numerous examples in *Les Passagers de l'Alsace*, *Canton, la Chinoise* or *On the Track of Robert van Gulik*), when two mirrors set face to face prevent the viewer from telling the real from its reflection (*Amsterdam Stories USA / South*), or again when, in Chicago, in front of Anish Kapoor's giant bean, Rombout and Van Eck look at their own reflection. "We are inside an image," says Rogier, "America as it likes to picture itself" (*Amsterdam Stories USA / Midwest*). The cast shadow is another image that need only be seized, one that the filmmaker isolates by separating it from its referent, a strictly pictorial choice devoid of any expressionist concern, Rombout perhaps remembering that the cast shadow, according to Pliny the Elder, lies at the (mythical) origin of painting²² [QR19]. Another elementary way of reinforcing the pictorial quality of his images: reducing the palette to a handful of colours and saturating them, either with filters during the shoot or at the grading stage. The bright red of a lorry or of a liner's funnel stands

22. The literature on the shadow is abundant, including as a favoured motif of cinema (expressionist or otherwise). See in particular Dominique Païni, *L'Attrait de l'ombre*, Crisnée, Yellow Now, "Côté cinéma/essais", 2007.



From left to right and top to bottom. 1. *Amsterdam Stories USA / South*. – 2. *Amsterdam Stories USA / Midwest*. – 3. *Transatlantique, Queen Elizabeth 2*. – 4. *Amsterdam Stories USA / West*. – 5. *Amsterdam Stories USA / East*. – 6. *Queen Mary 2, la reine des mers*. – 7. *Le Piège de Kerguelen*. – 8. *Les Açores de Madredeus*. – 9. *Le Piège de Kerguelen*. – 10. *On the Track of Robert van Gulik*.



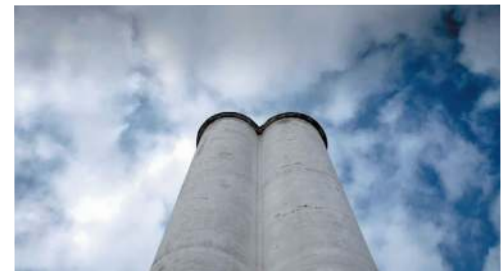
On the Track of Robert van Gulik.

out against the azure of the sky or the ocean, the yellow of an anorak against the blue wall of a container; green invades a crater in the Azores, orange a twilight sky over the Indian Ocean, violet a Japanese site. In *On the Track of Robert van Gulik* an original digital technique makes its first appearance: morphing. The face of a character speaking of his relationship to the writer is gradually transformed and becomes that of Van Gulik, photographed in black and white. Another face metamorphoses into that of Judge Dee, as the writer himself had drawn him to illustrate his novels.

Rombout frequently adopts unusual points of view, breaking with that of the so-called “anthropomorphic” camera filming on the horizontal axis at eye level. He likes steep high-angle shots taken from an elevated point (from the top of a crane, for instance) or low-angle shots of buildings, stairwells, metal bridges, tram wires or the derricks of the oil platform. He is particularly fond of the vertical angle, upwards when he films the skyscrapers of New York (*Amsterdam Stories USA / East*) or downwards when he films the great hall of the *Queen Mary 2* (*Queen Mary 2, la reine des mers*, 2004), literally vertiginous shots that disturb traditional vision.

His framings recall those of the photographers of the New Vision who, in the 1920s, in Germany and in the USSR, cast a new eye on the realities of industry. One thinks of the metal structures of Germaine Krull, the symmetrical compositions of Albert Renger-Patzsch, the high- and low-angle views of Alexander Rodchenko, the counter-compositions of László Moholy-Nagy, all of them photographers with a passion for the new forms that modernity made it possible to capture. Rombout’s cinema also recalls that of the filmmakers who, again

in the 1920s, filmed the world differently by singing the praises of the machine and of speed, the two pillars of technical modernity. In *Jeux des reflets et de la vitesse* (1925), Henri Chomette places his camera at the front of a train on the Paris metro (as Rombout does in *On the Track of Robert van Gulik*). In *De Brug* (1928), Joris Ivens climbs the immense metal structure of a railway bridge that lifts to a great height to let a ship into the port of Rotterdam. His film composes a visual symphony of geometric forms, of rails, cables and riveted girders, of shadow and light, of water and steam, of high-angle shots from the top of the bridge, of close-ups of the wheels, connecting rods, slides, cams, cleats and control panels of the gigantic lift, whose movements have the precision of clockwork. All things that recur in Rombout's early films, *L'Île noire* and *Nord Express* in particular, where he amuses himself by quoting Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), filming from beneath the train as it comes towards him [QR4]. The nod to the theorist of the kino-eye may seem paradoxical in a filmmaker who shares nothing whatsoever of his radical communist ideology and who claims Flaherty as his model instead. Nevertheless, many of the shots characteristic of his aesthetic have their equivalent in *Man with a Movie Camera*, if only by the number of trains, trams, cars and other vehicles, but also because the Soviet filmmaker multiplies symmetrical shots, close-ups of faces, objects and machines, high and low angles on the city, factory chimneys and metal structures. As the manifesto of its author's constructivist film practice, *Man with a Movie Camera* is a lesson in cinema that opens up an immense field of work to all documentary



1. *Amsterdam Stories USA / East*. – 2. *Queen Mary 2, la reine des mers*. – 3. *On the Track of Robert van Gulik*. – 4. *Amsterdam Stories USA / West*. – 5. *L'Île noire*.



Left. Dziga Vertov, *Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929. – Right. 1. *Nord Express*. – 2 and 3. *L'île noire*. – 4. *Transatlantique, Queen Elizabeth 2*. – 5. *Queen Mary 2, la reine des mers*.

filmmakers, inviting them to film what the human eye does not see, by adopting unprecedented points of view on the real, on the daily life of the great cities, on the world of work and that of leisure. Other filmmakers have since pursued the enterprise, such as Jean Mitry in *Pacific 231* (1949), an experimental short in which the camera films, notably, at the height of the wheels of the powerful steam locomotive itself.

A classical artist revisiting the historical avant-gardes, Rombout inscribes his film practice in the history of visual forms. Should we conclude from this that he does not innovate? That his cinema remains attached to a mode of writing dating back almost a full century? Obviously not, for in spite of this formal proximity, his project remains radically different from that of the filmmakers and photographers I have cited. They were passionate about a technical and industrial modernity that allowed them to break away from bourgeois academicism, whether pictorialism in photography or the film d'art in cinema. Their images were an ode to progress, to technical performance, to the power of the machine and to speed, which could only, in their view, improve society as a whole. The historical avant-gardes were, moreover, highly politicised (Moholy-Nagy, Rodchenko, Ivens and Vertov were communists). Their formal innovations and their radical break with the art of the past (going all the way to the tabula rasa) had a revolutionary value: photographing or filming new visual structures made it possible to bring about an awareness that new social and political structures were possible. Which is why their works never dealt with the person but always with the collectivity and the individuals who make it up. Rombout's cinema is in no way driven by the same ideas. From the first reports for Canal Emploi to the projects still under way, each film approaches individual men and women, each of absolute singularity, whose narratives recount a few fragments of their own lives (their destiny), happy or unhappy. The only political dimension of this cinema is left to the interpretation of the viewer, who measures the share of freedom each character has been able to enjoy and the share of economic, social or racial determinism that has made them suffer. The masses addressed by the ideologues of the 1920s are absent from Rombout's cinema.

This does not mean, however, that the writing of his films is a mere artist's whim devoid of all meaning. On the contrary, his art of framing, the long axial perspectives, the symmetries measured to the millimetre, the vertiginous high angles, the repetitions of circular or quadrangular forms, this whole panoply of forms can be understood as everything that "frames" a life, constrains it, boxes it in, shuts it away (*Queen Mary 2, la reine des mers* as the quintessence of this language). Conversely, the hand-held shots, the disorderly camera movements, the off-centre framings, the vertical horizons, the offhand mise en scène, the incongruous sounds, the ironic tone of certain commentaries and Rombout's humour shake up the frame, throw open the windows, breathe the sea air and sing of the freedom of the artist who cares nothing for constraints and conventions.

COMMISSIONS

There is, however, one category of documentary that shuts the filmmaker in: the commissioned film. Over the course of his career, Rob Rombout has been led to make a certain number of them, like so many of his peers who have worked in Belgium. In this country without a film industry and lacking any infrastructure whatsoever for more than half a century, the commission was for a long time the only possibility of making films for a great many talented filmmakers, and not the least among them: Henri Storck (nicknamed the “father of Belgian cinema”), Charles Dekeukeleire, Edmond Bernhard, André Cauvin and Paul Meyer all had to submit to it. For the first two, who worked on their own account, making films was not only an artistic choice, it was a matter of survival. They had to film to feed their families. Others took the risk of diverting the initial commission in order to make a film that answered their personal concerns. Edmond Bernhard played the game cleverly, but made very few films. Paul Meyer paid all his life for having turned a short documentary into a semi-fictional feature. The majority of the commissioning bodies were companies asking for a film about their products, or ministries, in particular the ministry of public education, which had educational films made for schools. Then came television, which took on a great many documentary filmmakers and allowed them to work with relative freedom, but within an institutional framework that, today as yesterday, subjects the filmmaker to a programme, content and a running time determined by the channel. In such a system, the filmmaker does not have the *final cut*. He must accept that the commissioning body removes certain sequences, shortens his film, intervenes in the editing or the music, and so on. All of which explains why many commissioned films have been consigned to the dustbins of the history of cinema. Forgetting that all the art of the past, from Giotto to Rubens by way of the great masters of the Renaissance, was produced thanks to the commissions of the Church and of princes, film critics blinded by a certain “politique des auteurs” despised this abundant production, unworthy in their eyes of the art of cinema. They were not entirely wrong about this: commissioned films are not unknown masterpieces that should be rehabilitated and admitted to the pantheon of the seventh art. But the history of cinema cannot be reduced to that of masterpieces. It must also take into account the reasons that lead companies to commission a film and those for which certain filmmakers agree to submit to their demands. This balance of power, with all its ins and outs, is also part of that history.

If Storck and Dekeukeleire made films to earn a living, Rombout accepts commissions for other reasons: “Commissioned films have two advantages. The first is that they take away all my guilt: I know what they are going to be used for. The second is that they allow me to experiment, they are a kind of playground, because those who commission them know nothing about it and don’t realise what I am doing.” Rombout has made commercial films, educational films and television programmes. He stands by some of them and has excluded others from his filmography.

In 1982, fresh out of film school²³, he was hired by Canal Emploi, a trade-union television station coupled with a training centre, located in Liège. This community television had been created in 1978 in a precise economic and social context: the gradual decline of the old steel industry, whose successive restructurings were sending thousands of workers into unemployment. The factory was the ideal place of communication between the unions and their members; once their jobs were lost, the workers lost contact with the organisation, no longer took part in its actions, became isolated and ended up giving up the struggle. At the time, Belgium was the first country in Europe to have installed a very dense cable television network. The young Liège station had access to it, allowing it to broadcast its programmes directly into the homes of the unemployed. Alongside the audiovisual technicians, the first organisers at Canal Emploi were mostly sociologists with no particular training in cinema. One of them, Jean-Claude Riga, took the ini-



Pas de cadeau pour Noël.

tiative of organising training sessions with filmmakers and educationalists. Jean-Louis Comolli, Geneviève Jacquinot, Jean Frappat and Johan van der Keuken came to Liège to run workshops. Rombout, one of the last directors to be hired, learned from contact with them how to free himself from television routine and make the films that interested him. The management allowed him to choose his subjects and to treat them as he wished, as long as they remained within the trade-union spirit of Canal Emploi²⁴. *Pas de cadeau pour Noël* (1986) is the portrait of a Rwandan, Noël N'Tunda, who has lived in Belgium for nearly thirty years. The man, idle and insomniac, wanders at night from café to café. Since losing his job, he has survived meagrely on social assistance. Probably a mythomaniac, he claims to have fled the massacres of Tutsis perpetrated before Rwanda's independence and to belong to the

23. The RITCS – Royal Institute for Theatre, Cinema & Sound, the Dutch-language equivalent of INSAS – Institut national supérieur des arts du spectacle, Brussels. – 24. For more information on Canal Emploi, I take the liberty of referring the reader to my contribution to the volume edited by Nancy Delhalle, Jacques Dubois and Jean-Marie Klinkenberg, *Le Tournant des années 1970. Liège en effervescence*, Brussels, Les Impressions nouvelles, 2010, chapter 5: “Télévisions locales et communautaires”, pp. 105–111.

family of the former Mwami. Rombout accompanies his nocturnal wanderings without directing him, shares his solitude, meets his African friends, sits in on the interview with the social worker who looks after him, lets him tell his story and his misfortunes without seeking to know the truth. This infinitely touching film, which walks alongside Noël like a friend on a night out, which pays attention to him, hears his disenchantment and listens to him without judging, found no favour with the management of Canal Emploi: content too far removed from trade-union problems, no explanation of the causes of unemployment, no investigation to establish the truth. The filmmaker had abused the freedom he had been given and had stepped outside the frame [QR47].

Queen Mary 2, la reine des mers (2004) is a textbook case for understanding the problems a filmmaker can encounter with a commissioned film. When the decision was taken to build a new transatlantic liner, which was to be the largest in the world, Rob Rombout envisaged a film about its construction. He had to abandon his project, because the shipowner had already sold the rights to the subject to a French producer, who had concluded agreements with Arte, France 3 and the American channel Discovery and hired a crew of technicians. After four months and six hundred hours of rushes, the producer realised that it might be interesting to have a director. She then looked for someone who had already shot a film about ocean liners and contacted Rombout. As it happened, another director was also working on the subject for France 3. The producer wanted them to work as a team. Rombout then proposed making two films: one on the shipyard seen from below, on the work and the social aspects, and a second on the shipyard seen from above, on the design of the ship, the work of the architect and the interior designer, as well as on the maiden voyage. The idea was accepted and Rombout took charge of the second film, intended for Arte's Thema strand. But the person in charge at Arte did not like the film and said so clearly. Finally, after many compromises, Arte accepted it on condition that Rombout respect "the six-minute rule", a rule he had never heard of. This typically televisual prescription consists in bombarding the viewer, during the first six minutes of the film, with so many elements that he takes the bait and no longer thinks of zapping. "If they had explained that to me at film school, I would have changed careers," says Rombout, who nevertheless respects the rule by opening the film with the christening of the liner by Queen Elizabeth II and the fireworks that follow, then by listing all the figures attesting to the gigantic scale of the enterprise: "figures, the heavy artillery of promotion," the commentary notes ironically. Despite everything, the film's aesthetic bears the Rombout stamp: alternation between two time frames (the construction of the ship and its maiden voyage), interviews with the crew and the passengers, symmetrical shots of the liner's architecture and vertical high-angle shots. The sequences devoted to the crossing recall the film *Transatlantique*, *Queen Elizabeth 2*, but are distinctly less elaborate. A few months after the film was broadcast by Arte, Rombout would run into the producer of the programme,

who congratulated him because, despite all the compromises that had disfigured it, the film had drawn an excellent audience.

Rob Rombout's cinema gives food for thought. Less about what it shows or what it tells than about the way of showing and telling. Each film (some more than others) offers a reflection on cinema, on documentary, on the place of the filmmaker, on his gaze, on his intrusion into reality. His presence on screen, his voice with its pronounced accent, the mise en scène of his own body, sometimes elaborate, sometimes offhand, the irony of his commentaries and even his self-mockery are so many signatures.

One particular motif returns from time to time in his cinema: model-making. In *Queen Mary 2, la reine des mers*, he attaches a great deal of importance to the work of the Dutch model-maker from whom the interior designer had commissioned a reproduction of the liner at a scale of 1:100, intended to be placed behind the bar. The man took as long to build the model as the shipyard did to build the original (but ten thousand workers were employed on the shipyard, whereas the model-maker worked alone). In the editing, Rombout alternates extreme close-ups of the scale model with views of the ship [QR26]. In *Les Passagers de l'Alsace*, he films a large, highly realistic model layout on which electric trains run. In the editing, he connects these shots with others: a train, filmed from a helicopter, enters a tunnel; at the other end the scale model emerges and comes to a halt in a miniature station. In the next shot, we find the real train again, with the same locomotive, stopped in the same station, which the model-maker has perfectly reconstructed. This is not merely a game. The filmmaker offers the viewer the pleasure of comparing a reality with its own reproduction in miniature. Filming a scale model amounts to making a copy of a copy (as Plato would have said), to multiplying simulacra, to comparing the art of model-making with that of cinema (as an extreme close-up of a figurine holding a camera underlines), to reminding the viewer that images are deceptive and that the world they show is as artificial as the model-maker's model [QR25].

Several times in *Amsterdam Stories USA*, Rombout and Van Eck place plastic figurines behind the windscreen of their vehicle and film them in extreme close-up (an Indian, a cowboy and even a Napoleon on horseback, found as they passed through a small Midwestern town by the name of



1. *Queen Mary 2, la reine des mers*. – 2. *Les Passagers de l'Alsace*.

Waterloo [QR34]). A touch of humour, a moment of relaxation in the conduct of the film, like a chocolate served with the coffee after a meal. But these innocent trinkets that make the viewer smile also have an essential function: to remind him that (almost) everything in this film has been chosen, staged and filmed by its authors. In short, that cinema is a great game.



Amsterdam Stories USA / Midwest.

