

Insight and Wonder

The Netherlands, 2021-02-10 - Gerlinda Heywegen

“I am quite interested in the mechanisms behind film making and what they mean for a specific film and it's final result.” It's one of the first things DP Richard van Oosterhout says in a zoom interview from Berlin. He is there to shoot a Tatort film with his longtime companion / director Norbert ter Hall. Besides his own work and the process of creating, the Dutch film industry (and the way that it functions) is highly important to him. He talks about how he wishes that Dutch DPs would carry more of a torch for the beauty of cinema. They should almost have to feel obliged to also work on the expansion of film language, which is something he likes to talk about a lot. In his view, the research into what film language could be and a solution-oriented approach go hand in hand.



Richard van Oosterhout, NSC, SBC | Photo by Jo Voets

New Deal

But first: his New Deal. Van Oosterhout drew it up in 2018 after a survey amongst NSC members. In this manifesto one sentence stands out: Stop compromising; in other words, don't work the same way, everyone! Dump that 'self-same system'. He illustrates how DP's can and should play a large role in this, especially because they have more freedom than directors. After all, a DP doesn't have to deal with the pressure of actors, crew, producers and so on. It would redefine the job of the DP. And it improves films. Van Oosterhout thinks the work method he resists so fiercely is 'highly conservative'. It desperately holds on to methods of the ancient past as well as an outdated way of budgeting and setting up a production. Whilst the tools like lenses and lights change ever so fast. Each genre, each film deserves its own approach. Van Oosterhout: “But it's

always the same, no matter if it is for a romcom or an arthouse film. You collect the money you can get and divide it to the best of your abilities. That is why films become alike, both logistically and content-wise.”

So things should change. But Van Oosterhout does understand: “You cannot change the process by yourself, as a DP. At the same time, you can do something. But don’t think of me as some kind of Don Quixote, who will try to convince all Dutch filmmakers’ minds to have a good think about another way of working. The industry as a whole should take a bigger role in the process of alteration, by changing the ingrained habits in such a way that there is more room for the creativity that is definitely present. Filmmakers should do that themselves.” How should things be done? “The script and the way you picture it are the starting point. And not, as has been in practice for the longest time, that self-same system on which everything depends. Because you should be able to redistribute the budget together.” Working more flexibly is key: “What kind of people and material do I need on a specific shooting day? I do not want the entire team on set every day if it isn’t necessary. But in practice, that is the way things are now. It is bad for the energy and, additionally, it costs a lot of money, time and space. You lose focus because you get in each other’s way. People think up work and make themselves 'useful' to justify them being there. All of this is diffusive; it hinders the focus on the core business; the film itself. I like to address these kinds of highly practical and apparently inconsequential matters. It is not recognised enough how important they are for the greater whole and the final result: the film.” So, how do you form your crew, how do you decide on your equipment? “Those are essential matters that help you get a project in the right direction. Sometimes, your team had better be made up from two camera people, sometimes from a DP with 1AC, 2AC and a gaffer, sometimes from a DP with five grips and one lighting technician. Countless constructions are possible. Finetune, finetune!”

Tench

An example, *Tench* (after the novel *Muidhond*, 2019, by Inge Schilperoord), which Van Oosterhout made together with his partner Patrice Toye. “It turned out to be the most ideal situation for making a film, because we could take all the liberties we wanted.”

Tench is about Jonathan, a young paedophile, just out of prison because of lack of evidence. His frantic attempts to repress his inclinations are made more challenging by a ten-year-old girl next door. Delicate material. Filming *Tench* must have been a tour de force. Van Oosterhout explains that he worked with a changing perspective: at times objective, but also subjective. “This means that the viewer will sometimes identify with Jonathan and at the same time be confronted with the universal battle between good and evil. The idea behind this was to let you catch yourself feeling sympathy, or even compassion for a person you loathe in advance. For, who wants to see a paedophile and his point of view?”

“We took ample time. More shooting days than normally would have been planned. A lot of time for improvisation, new scenes and new points of view. Necessary to be able to do this right. The story is so fragile. Initially, this was hard to understand for the production team, but we managed to upscale from 22 to 35 shooting days. For the same budget, but with a total reset of the entire logistics.”

When asked, Van Oosterhout finds it hard to recall scenes that contributed to the research into film language that he values so greatly. It makes him resort to the word intuitive a lot. It is just like a painter who picks the next colour during painting – just like that. That is how he likes to reflect on his own work.



Tench, Patrice Toye, 2019

He added certain elements to Tench to frame the story and character of Jonathan. When the boy is still in prison, Van Oosterhout films him from behind bars. At home with his mother again, the windows have blinds; they are left wide open. And that is when Van Oosterhout starts playing around – increasingly shutting off Jonathan – in his room, in himself, by closing the blinds more and more while the story unfolds. At the end, when Jonathan's mother hugs him, they are firmly shut. The blinds have once again become bars and even worse than that.

Something else he did quite frequently, was to create light that caused Jonathan's shadow to appear directly next to him on the wall. That shadow functions as an alter ego: his battle between good and evil visualised.

“Maybe the audience is not too much aware of this, but they certainly feel it.” Van Oosterhout emphasises that these kind of choices have nothing to do with symbolism. It is working on a visual language: “It creates a richer world, it adds depth. I would like to believe that Antonioni has researched the language of film in the same way; his compositions are mindblowing”

Beast in the Jungle and Dreamland

“As DP you are, in a way, a problem-solver. That is the way it is often approached anyway. There is a certain problem and if you fix it, you are happy at the end of the day, because you have succeeded at 'it'. Sometimes it even looks good. But let's be honest here, making a 'beautiful' shot is very easy. The next shooting day is the same. But you can solve and research at the same time. I don't think I see that very often, that way of filming. It's mainly practical problem solving – stuff to do with equipment or enabling everyone on set to do their best job. I regret that.”



Beast in the Jungle, Clara van Gool, 2019

Therefore yet another film where Van Oosterhout succeeded in working the way he likes to, *Beast in the Jungle* by Clara van Gool, 2019 (an interpretation of Henry James' famous novella). He cannot emphasise enough that the current (conservative) system in itself could work for quite a lot of productions, but 'we' should start making distinctions. Like with *Beast in the Jungle*. Van Gool transformed James' work into a dance film in different time periods. A completely unique film. Van Oosterhout: “It has taken Clara at least 15 years. From the beginning to the release. Her tenaciousness may have influenced the Filmfund. Because it is indeed an a-typical film. One of the most inspiring films I have ever done. I really like dance films and movement. The abstraction of it, the human body and how you can tell an entire story with it, without words. Just like how you can love a painting without understanding it, in fact: I prefer not to understand, I prefer to feeling it. *Beast in the Jungle* is the first motion picture made up entirely from dance. Every move or step being made gets a 'dansante' meaning.” And therefore, the camera dances along as well confirms the DP.

How about *Dreamland* by Bruce McDonald (2019) with Stephen McHattie, Juliette Lewis and Henry Rollins? How did this bat crazy jazz, vampire, film noir thriller which is at times a comedy as well (as Van Oosterhout describes it himself) come about?

“I really wanted to do that film because it is so totally bonkers. The shoot was quite 'traditional'. I was the only foreigner amongst the crew, together with Bruce. The rest was from Luxemburg or

Wallonia. I don't think that it needed a different system per se. It was a complicated shoot for the money that was available.



Dreamland, Bruce McDonald, 2019

I like the way Bruce works. He lets everybody do their thing and just lets it happen. But he is physically present everywhere. Fascinating. He understands very well that he gets more from people this way." Van Oosterhout talks about the dream sequence in the film in which Stephen McHattie goes to an exotic island in a boat, to Dreamland. "That scene was quite literally in the script. But it was the middle of winter in Luxemburg; no exotic island. That's when I thought of background projection, plus the technique should also be visible for the viewer. I was allowed to produce it on my own; Bruce went along all the way. A friend of the producer lived on the Faroe Islands and had some film skills. He found us the right kind of island and filmed it for us, aided by my instructions. The whole had to be enchanting, but at the same time totally fake.

Magic

Back to his New Deal. Does Van Oosterhout like to battle bureaucracy? Against 'that's just the way we do things'? "You could very well put it like that," he says. Gazillion set visits or dozens of meetings, for instance. "No, I don't believe in that. It's chasing ratio and compromises. You set out to film knowing exactly what you are supposed to do. And that will be exactly what you will get... if you're lucky. But all creativity will have evaporated. Nothing new is going to happen. You try and hold up with the 'plan' and forget to take in the here and now comprehensibly. It's all about solutions!! It becomes a machine, a train that can no longer change its course. And exactly that is what should be possible, because a script is just letters on paper. On a filmset you transform it into a new organic reality; an entirely different dimension. It comes to life and wants to go its own way. You have to let that happen while adhering to an underlying vision and then you have a chance of hitting upon magic."

That reminds Van Oosterhout of Rosie, Toye's debut film which they made together. Dutch film magazine Filmkrant described it as a film that: "without being sentimental manages to enter the universe of a thirteen-year-old girl that grows up too fast amongst adults who don't know all the answers either".



Rosie, Patrice Toye, 1998

“I can still remember so vividly that we had to choose a coat for the girl, Rosie [they decided on a short fake fur coat with large black stains, gh]. We felt it was over the top, but went for it anyway. You should always choose for extreme or distinct. Because if you make an image, it will be the reality, even truth, of the moment. So, too well-behaved, too neat, too middle of the road just dissipates.

This is how I see it: work is freedom. Anything is possible and everything is allowed. Follow your intuition. Failure is never ever an option, only for those who work from bias.

Our tendency to copy or repeat what we know, is gigantic, while what you should do, is trying to find new angles. We must go forward, we must improve. You have to force yourself to do so. I like to manoeuvre myself into a position where I have lost all footing. Sometimes by not reading the script, sometimes by intentionally not having the equipment, sometimes by putting the camera in an impossible position. And every single time something good comes of it. At the least: insight and wonder. It is not always a handy thing to do, because it's bad for your nerves. But in hindsight, I'm always happy to have done it anyway.”

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