

REGEN PROJECTS

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off the silver screen

BY LARS BANG LARSEN

In their films, Willem de Rooij and Jeroen de Rijke mix the formal rules of painting, time-based arts and epic film, thereby infusing iconicity with a narrative tension. Crucial to the presentation is the relationship to the codes of film screening, where the unique characteristic of the film – its duration – is emphasised.

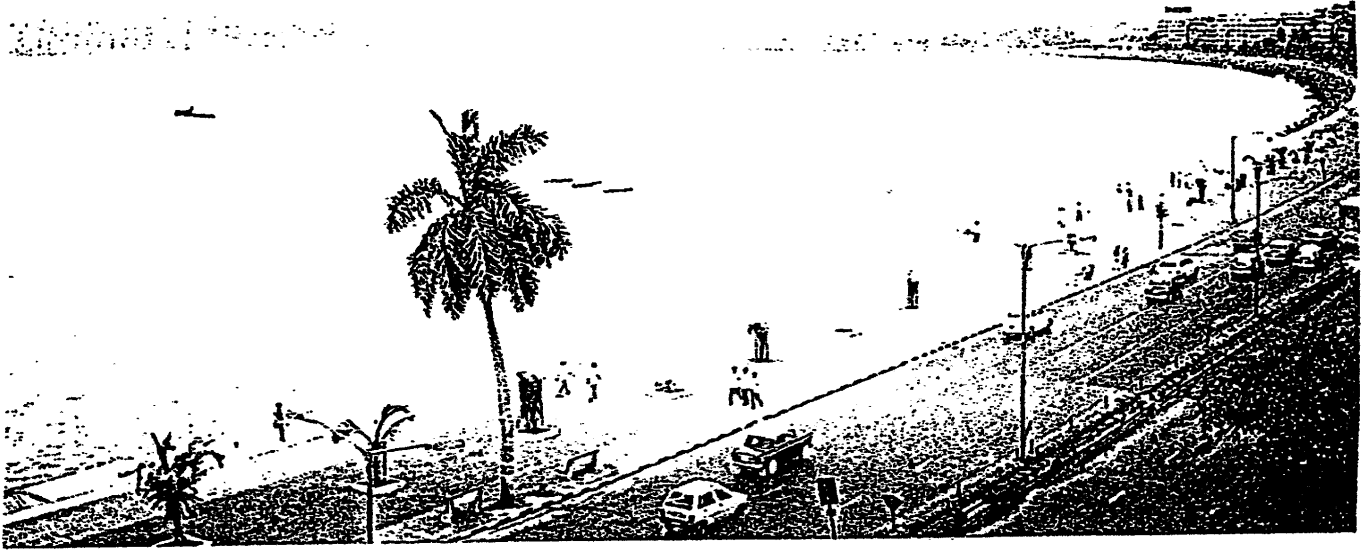
IN THE 1880s, PAUL GAUGUIN published the treaty of Wehli-Zunbul-Zahde, often referred to as *Le papier de Gauguin*. The source is unknown; Gauguin himself claimed that the treaty was Middle Eastern and from the beginning of the Christian era. In this excerpt, a set of rules is outlined for the painter to observe. The decorum the painter is capable of infusing in his figures is the precondition for upholding the beholder's respectful attention:

"Let everything you do breathe calmness and spiritual peace. Avoid therefore, figures in movement. All your figures should be static. When [the painter] Oumra created a picture of the torture of Okraï, he didn't let the executioner raise his sabre... nor did he let the sufferer's mother writhe with sorrow. The Sultan on his throne knits his brows in anger, the proud executioner beholds Okraï as a prey that deserves pity... Thus, an hour easily passes in front of this scene that is more tragic in its silence than if the figures' poses – which, after the first minute, would have been impossible to hold – had resulted in condescending smiles."

The painter Oumra set the act of viewing at work on a horizon of reflexivity between beholder and image, where the temporality of the image is summed up as an incremental moment that is somehow

continuous with that of the beholder. In their films, Willem de Rooij and Jeroen de Rijke mix the formal rules of painting, time-based arts and epic film, thereby infusing iconicity with a narrative tension.

Their works are shot on 16 and 35mm film. Crucial to the presentation of their films is the relationship to the codes of film screening, where the unique characteristic of the film – its duration – is emphasised. It is important to grasp the progression of images within the parameters of beginning and end. The film should be shown at fixed intervals, or on request, in a more or less darkened space. The film is projected on the wall, or on another part of the existing architecture – since a separate screen would objectify the projection – while the autonomous character of the projection is maintained by means of the empty space on the wall around the image that forms a frame. The projector and audio equipment are placed in a soundproof box, and sounds of nearby installations or street noise are diminished as much as possible in order not to interfere with the soundtrack of the film. Benches are provided for the audience, something which accentuates the presentation's duality between cinema and exhibition space. "The dictatorial character of the film screening doesn't bother us; it is an integral part of watching film," the artists state. "Demanding (temporary) attention for images partly defines the content of our work."



Willem de Rooij and Jeroen de Rijke, still from the film *Forever and Ever*, 1995.

In these films, made to be seen and contemplated rather than read, the demand for attention to the images becomes a way of considering aspects of human communication. In this way, the content and the way it unfolds in the experiential and spatial strata of the films and the screening situation, can best be termed universal. At the same time, location and atmosphere seem select and specific. *Chun Tian* (1994), which is Chinese for spring, depicts an Asian couple taking turns beholding each other amorously in the midst of a flourishing rhododendron garden; *Forever and Ever* (1995) is filmed in and around Bombay; *I'm Coming Home In Forty Days* (1997) was the result of a four week stay in Greenland; and *Of Three Men* (1998) is shot in a mosque. But this form of knowledge is inherently contradictory. The rhododendron garden in *Chun Tian*, despite the whole work's Chinese colour and tone, is shot in a park in Amsterdam. The mosque in *Of Three Men* is situated in the artists' neighbourhood, and even the scenes in *Forever and Ever* don't persist as 'Indian' images – they look like it could be anywhere.

On the other hand, non-places never enter the pictures; the films' dynamic, *vis-à-vis* the viewer, evokes mental as well as visible images that tickle the imagination and the desire to go places. On a deeper level, perhaps, the film's viewer finds that it isn't the problem of finding some kind of peace in the new experiences of a foreign place; the hard part is to settle in with the idea that the place you really belong is further away than geographical distance.

De Rijke/de Rooij's moving images find their resonance in elementary narrative modes, told in ways that simultaneously dwell in and displace plain

scenic and stylistic devices. The images are appealing and enjoyable emblems of beauty (the abundant rhododendron garden in *Chun Tian*; the open landscapes and starry sky of *Forever and Ever*, etc.). When actors are used, their appearance is limited to a few scenes, giving the film a sense of being always on the brink of narration. The recognisable plot of epic film – held together by the symmetry of beginning and end – are broken up into isolated events, held in long scenes and left open to be explored by the eye and the beholder's expectations.

The use of the camera is elementary and 'invisible'. When a static camera position isn't used, panning and zooming are executed with deliberation and calmness. In their first films, de Rijke/de Rooij aligned their narrative techniques with traditional narrative techniques, and those of soap operas (which are stylistically like Hollywood, but even more standard). This legacy was tweaked in another direction in the artists' collaboration with the Bombay film industry – Bollywood – for the production of *Forever and Ever*. It goes for all their works, though, that the richness of each scene is emphasised, each being much more than what is required of it as a functional setting.

The opening shot of *Forever and Ever* is a long pan over the skyline of Bombay. This is followed by a slow zoom-out from close-up of a young woman, standing on a balcony by the bay, in the same cityscape. She is alternately staring into the camera with an inscrutable though slightly troubled expression on her face, sometimes running her hand through her hair. Hard cut, then five scenes in the countryside, making up a sequence with two protagonists. The quarrel of a young couple begins in English on the soundtrack,

accompanying a panorama of the landscape, before the actors themselves appear. Their car stops on a deserted road, she leaves the car, runs down a brink, traverses the image and the landscape, followed by him. He finally catches up with her on a lakeshore, where they stand and stare at each other. The sentences "It is beautiful, isn't it?" and "Oh yes, it is very beautiful" are uttered on the soundtrack in the man and woman's voices, respectively, without either of them moving their lips.

New hard cut to the exterior of a vacant, luxurious villa. The next nine scenes explore the villa's interior while a telephone rings without being answered. Hard cut to a panorama with the black profile of a mountain in the day's very fast sunlight; a small light is distinguishable at the bottom of the mountain. The next scene shows two adolescent boys by a bonfire, the one telling the other how stars are born, a scene which is narrated in nine rather swift cuts. The film ends with a close-up of one of the boys, whose face is suddenly lit by an artificial 'divine' light and real sound falls out. "Every star... may be a Sun to someone," he says brightly in a heavy Indian accent, his illuminated face solemnly turned to the night sky. The film is about 17 minutes long.

In *Forever and Ever*, the different sequences intimate four stories. But each suggested storyline is punctuated with the inertia or laziness of the image: every new scene appears as a world in itself, every camera movement describes an effort, every jump cut is a lasting gap. The deceleration of narrative drive in the films leaves the ruminative atmospheres in the images as rich sources, as constants of sorts, leaving to grateful proliferation, in the mind of the viewer, each scene's suggestion of a 'before' and an 'afterwards'. *Forever and Ever*, true to its title, in this way offers us total views: The film begins in the morning and ends at night, implementing earth, water and fire in its logic, as if following a mythic text. In an epic sense, *Forever and Ever* strives to grasp the wholeness of things – the unity of everything.

A favourite scene: in the blue of the afternoon, a covered, shady verandah by a swimming pool. On the left side of the image – a fountain, on the right – deck chairs with perfectly arranged towels and a small mahogany table with a jug filled with yellow lemonade. Two glasses have been poured out. On the soundtrack, the telephone starts ringing again after having momentarily stopped, drowning out the lush sound of the fountain's falling water.

At times, the soundtrack of the films, though still anchored in the footage, assumes a separate life from it. As with the young couple in *Forever and Ever*, the compliments of the Asian lovers in *Chun Tian* take place only on

mately located between image and beholder, rather than in the loosely defined diegetic space of the film.

Mobile, impermanent, and abstract, and assuming a quality between that of sea and landscape, you are not entirely sure what you are looking at: The iceberg deprives you of a firm sense of scale and space. *I'm Coming Home In Forty Days* consists of three takes of an iceberg filmed in Disk Bay off Greenland's coast. The pitching, horizontal advance of the boat with the camera captures the slow transformation of the iceberg's outline on the background of a cold sky, and discloses the drama of structure and light on its surface.

The last minutes of the film show a greenish screen, a take in the Greenland Sea. If you scrutinise this green field, you are able to discern something that is not minuscule blots and scratches on the celluloid but tiny elements of marine life moving across the green field of the screen. The monochrome abruptly breaks off the progression of the depiction of the iceberg, and eliminates any ultimate narrative motivation. The iceberg is, for sure, a solitary and drifting protagonist. Moreover, the 17 minute long film every once in a while assumes physical dimensions in the viewer situation; something which is also accentuated in the title, lifted from a country and western song. The sentence "I'm Coming Home in Forty Days" suggests a storyline within the title that adheres to the dual, visceral ontology of simultaneously moving and staying in the same place.

In itself a frontier of visibility, the iceberg, as a prolonged representation, becomes overlaboured and proportioned by previous representations and experiences in the act of looking itself. The quiet iconoclasm of the film consists in the fact that iconicity becomes a conductor for visions that don't necessarily adhere to visual events. The strange fervour of the film persists as, on the one hand, one long *temps mort*, and on the other, as evidence of the fact that if time passes there is always a story: a story qualified in the exchange of individual projections with filmic imagery close to the media.

At the same time, *I'm Coming Home In Forty Days* is an exercise in trying to attain visual objectivity in front of a supposedly neutral object, an endeavour that proves to be vain. Apart from gently bobbing and swaying with the movements of the boat, the camera has to be moved and readjusted while filming, thereby giving away the insecurity of visual recording as well as retinal reception.

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the soundtrack. It is as if the slight, but decisive incongruence between image and sound has the effect of holding together the parallel tracks that are one step removed from the communication between the two actors. This renders their communication abstracted and impersonal. It distances the way communication 'should have' taken place, and communication becomes a form of expenditure which does not necessarily create the desired effects. Instead, we are offered the comprehensive intensities of sound and image, not only in the presentation of isolated scenes, that is, but also in the interplay between image and soundtrack. Narration runs as a tension kept open by the remoteness to epic closure. Themes and emotions are ulti-

and ambivalences inherent in the quick way we usually consume them. The personal spectrum of emotion and imagination, from the soulful involvement of horror and love to phlegmatic reverie, is evoked in the slightly reticent economy of the images. Narrative instinct is put off course, only to resurface as an unstable depth on the images' flatness. The viewer is attracted by the physical experience of his or her own space, by turns falling into the image and back again into the space from where it was projected. After the film has stopped, you are again left alone in a naked room with your own images, and the ones missing on the wall.

—Lars Bang Larsen