

**"A reflexive attitude towards television: that's very difficult"**

**Interview with Jef Cornelis on his films about literature**

**Koen Brams & Dirk Pültau**

**Koen Brams/Dirk Pültau:** *What do you think of when you think of the year 1980?*

**Jef Cornelis:** In one word: stability.

**K.B./D.P.:** *What do you mean?*

**J.C.:** My daughter, Eva, was born in 1977. After that, I built a house in Antwerp, together with her mother, Kristien Kloeck, whom I still live with. Around 1980, my life became stable, and that can be taken literally: I have never moved again since then.

**K.B./D.P.:** *In 1980, you were mid-career. You started working for the Belgian public broadcasting corporation in 1963, and your last film, De kleuren van de geest (The colours of the soul), which you made with Paul Vandebroeck, was broadcast in 1997. 1980 is the exact middle point of your career.*

**J.C.:** Mathematically, that's true, but you also know that I was forced to stop. It was not my choice. It was just over. The End. Schluss. Fini. I happened to have put in enough years. Financially, it was doable.

**K.B./D.P.:** *In the years around 1980, your work primarily focused on literature. Your film on Oscar de Wit, the Dutch writer and artist, was broadcast in 1979, and Het gedroomde boek (The dreamed book) was aired in early 1980. That film was made up of fragments from Vita Brevis, the collected works of Maurice Gilliams.*

**J.C.:** Yes, that's true, but – most of all – I remember that time as the period when I was really ill. I had a liver infection. It looked like hepatitis C, but they eventually found it to be another syndrome, with symptoms identical to hepatitis C.

**K.B./D.P.:** *When did you get ill?*

**J.C.:** After the filming for *Het gedroomde boek* was finished. Just before the final shooting, in November 1978, I was in Florence for a week, together with Geert Bekaert.

**K.B./D.P.:** *You were in Florence for a television project?*

**J.C.:** Yes, we wanted to do a film about Florence – the old city as a historical monument – but the project never got off the ground. We wanted to focus on a number of cities like Florence, primarily on the public spaces in

those cities. It was supposed to have been a series. Geert Bekaert actually had a chronological overview in mind. I wanted to deal with it differently, which is to say, visually. We never resolved it. But I also never got the money together. In any case, it would not be until 1983 before I would work with Geert again. That was for the film on Charles Vandenhove, the architect. Florence was a kind of goodbye.

**K.B./D.P.:** *When you returned from Florence, in mid-November, 1978, you completed the filming for Het gedroomde boek. Did you immediately start on the editing?*

**J.C.:** Yes. Editing the images was not so difficult, because everything had been described in detail in the script. I think I went home at Christmastime feeling good about it. Then I got the liver infection. In the beginning, it was sheer hell, because I wasn't able to do anything. But after a while, I was well enough to resume work again. I did the mixing and the off-synchronisation of *Het gedroomde boek* lying down – in three languages: Dutch, English and French. I was actually there for all these versions. But officially, I only went back to work in May of 1979.

### **With cool obsession**

**K.B./D.P.:** *Only a few months later, on 5 September, 1979, Belgian Radio and Television (BRT) broadcast your film, entitled Oscar de Wit: Drawings and texts. That film was completed in a very short time. The publication of Met koele obsessie (With cool obsession), the book by Oscar de Wit, which was the motivation for the film, also dates from 1979. How did you get the idea of making a film with Oscar de Wit?*

**J.C.:** Georges Adé had read the Oscar de Wit book. I had always been in very close touch with Georges. He recommended the book to me. I read it and immediately decided to make a film about it. It had been a long time since a book written in Dutch had made such an impression on me. That also had to do with being ill: the only constructive thing I was capable of was reading a book. I have given the book to several people as a gift.

**K.B./D.P.:** *Was Georges Adé involved in realizing the film?*

**J.C.:** No, he only steered me in the direction of Oscar de Wit. I wanted to do the film on my own.

**K.B./D.P.:** *Why? What was it about the book that attracted you?*

**J.C.:** I found *Met koele obsessie* a gripping book. I still pick it up from time to time. De Wit brought up a lot of subjects that concerned me: Indonesia, Multatuli – Max

*Havelaar* was part of the curriculum at the Film and Television Academy in Amsterdam, where I had studied in the early 1960s. But most of all, it was De Wit's references to Stendhal that fascinated me. As a teenager, when I was 15 or 16, I read *Le rouge et le noir*, and after that, I continued to be interested in Stendhal. I understood what De Wit was referring to in his drawings! Those direct and not-so-direct references to Stendhal certainly had an effect on me.

**K.B./D.P.:** *Why were you fascinated with Stendhal?*

**J.C.:** My favourite is *Vie de Henry Brulard*, Stendhal's autobiography, with all those – countless – little drawings. Stendhal has always inspired me, because he was a city person. He went to the theatre, took walks in the city, went out to eat. What was there for me to do in Brasschaat, in Flanders? Nothing. Stendhal, Beyle – they were my youth. Beyle also had a strong relationship with his grandfather.

**K.B./D.P.:** *In his review of Met koele obsessie, Carel Peeters, the critic for Vrij Nederland, also made the connection between the Oscar de Wit book and Stendhal's work...*

**J.C.:** If I remember correctly, he was about the only one who had anything positive to say about the book. Oscar de Wit had a hard time of it. He was completely rejected, even though he received an award for his book – the 1980 Lucy B. & C.W. van der Hoogt Prize from the Society for Dutch literature.

**K.B./D.P.:** *Oscar de Wit wrote about the fine arts – for example, about Spoerri, Hopper, Picasso and so on, and he was active as an artist. Did he also interest you as an artist?*

**J.C.:** Yes. I was also curious about him because of that. He also drew cartoons, by the way, which are shown in the film. The group that he belonged to, the people around Roland Topor, never interested me – that kind of morbidity.

**K.B./D.P.:** *Was he successful as an artist?*

**J.C.:** He was in the beginning, in Paris. Jean Clair wrote about Oscar de Wit, in the exhibition catalogue for *Nouvelle subjectivité – Un autre document sur le retour de l'expression figurative.*

**K.B./D.P.:** *What did you think of his visual work?*

**J.C.:** I was intrigued by one work, the self-portrait with the headdress. That work is very close to Matisse, but he didn't see it. Somebody who would dress up like that and hide himself behind it was what intrigued me: the costume party and the historical period that he was imagining

himself to be in – he tried to evoke all of that.

**K.B./D.P.:** *You were interested in it because of the self-representation?*

**J.C.:** Yes.

**K.B./D.P.:** *What about his other visual work?*

**J.C.:** I thought that some of the landscapes were successful.

**K.B./D.P.:** *In addition to the fine arts, Met koele obsessie deals with an enormous number of other subjects, including psychology and literature, but its most important subject is undoubtedly De Wit's reflection on his own childhood and youth, especially in Indonesia, where he ended up in the camps during the Second World War. His father and mother did not survive the camps, and De Wit was put on a boat and sent to Holland on his own. He was taken in by a foster family.*

**J.C.:** One day, there was that child standing on the docks in Amsterdam. I can picture the cold and the misery, and then somebody picking him up. Just like that, and a new existence is slapped onto him. I need images, and there are good images in that book, such as those scenes with the mother in the camp, where everything is going really horribly, for him, I believe, and certainly for her. I think that in the book, you can really feel the fear of a child.

**K.B./D.P.:** *In your film, De Wit reads a passage about 'images'. In that fragment, he also explains the title of his book by saying, "What it is about is making images. What it is about is the idée-fixe, the obsession, the fixation of that obsession. It is not about the romantic, inspired obsession, but the cool, hard, arrogant obsession, something that gnaws and eats away in an image, but at the same time, something that cannot be defeated."*

**J.C.:** De Wit never stopped looking for his family. I was gripped by the tale of social collapse. I had probably not read very much of that kind of thing, or maybe not at all.

**K.B./D.P.:** *What did you think of the way the book builds up to the climax, the death of his father and – especially – the death of his mother?*

**J.C.:** The book also deals with another perspective. Oscar de Wit comes from an entirely different area: psychology and educational science. He had been an education researcher, but he suddenly broke off from all that. He left everything behind and set himself up in Paris as an independent artist. There were a lot of points for me to connect with.

**K.B./D.P.:** *The book is very intelligently constructed. It actually falls into two major sections, which partly mirror one another. The first section is called 'mothers', the second, 'fathers', and both begin in the same way – with diary entries from Malaga. The mutual reflections of the two sections of text, and then a not strictly linear construction, show a very lucid – and complex – way of coping with autobiography. Met koele obsessie even contains a system for footnotes, which also functions autonomously! Nonetheless, at many points, the author is exceptionally narcissistic and sentimental, to the point of being irritating.*

**J.C.:** I'll let you take responsibility for that statement.

**K.B./D.P.:** *The film, on the other hand, has a very simple structure. It starts with a self-portrait of Oscar de Wit, followed by interview fragments, interspersed with De Wit reading from his own writing, segments from Met koele obsessie. Who chose the fragments from the book, Oscar de Wit or you?*

**J.C.:** I made the selections.

**K.B./D.P.:** *It is worth noting that the sequence of the fragments respects the sequence in which they appear in the book. You did not select any fragments from the two sections that 'mirror' one another.*

**J.C.:** No.

**K.B./D.P.:** *In terms of form, in the film, there is a kind of mirror reflection. At the beginning of the film, when he is reading the text fragments, Oscar de Wit appears at the right-hand side of the screen, then frontally, and at the end, he is on the left.*

**J.C.:** The camera work was done by Paul De Cock, an outstanding cameraman.

**K.B./D.P.:** *Was that your first film with Paul De Cock?*

**J.C.:** Yes. First I wanted to work with another cameraman, but the Gilliams film was the break-off point.

**K.B./D.P.:** *Would you say there was a break with Guido Van Rooy, the cameraman with whom you had worked for so many years?*

**J.C.:** Yes, because it was not working any more. I have said it before: I never grew old with people my own age.

**K.B./D.P.:** *The book includes a lot of different kinds of texts – autobiographical segments, essay passages and stories, or in other words, fiction as well. In that sense, you could say that it is a rather experimental*

book...

**J.C.:** Experimental? I never experienced it that way. I don't think that I saw that myself.

**K.B./D.P.:** *The fragments that De Wit reads aloud in the film are almost exclusively autobiographical in nature. The exceptions to that are the passages in which he reflects on autobiography as such. The other types of texts are not dealt with in your film.*

**J.C.:** That is true.

**K.B./D.P.:** *How did you come up with the idea of having his wife, Lieneke van Schaardenburg, interview De Wit?*

**J.C.:** His wife has a prominent role in the book.

**K.B./D.P.:** *Had you considered having somebody else do the interviewing?*

**J.C.:** Absolutely not. You seem to forget that I have to have the writer's permission. They can always send you packing. Someone who writes has the great advantage of not having to put himself on display. You need permission from an author in order to put him in the visual image. You have to act as if you were very naive, or you won't be able to get it together.

**K.B./D.P.:** *Had you thought about doing the interview yourself?*

**J.C.:** No. I have rarely appeared in front of a camera, because I know what you have to give up to do it. Primitive people who do not want themselves to appear in any image – that is a very understandable attitude. I presumed that Lieneke van Schaardenburg would take on the role of a journalist. But that didn't happen, and it was a good thing for me. At first, I wanted a detached approach, but it became exciting instead.

**K.B./D.P.:** *At a certain point she says, straight to his face, "I have, by the way, the feeling that you actually hate women, me for example, and that this has something to do with your mother – the fact that your mother gave too little is being played out against me." He answers, "Yes, there is something to that, but it is not true that I hate women. It is more a love-hate relationship."*

**J.C.:** I knew exactly what I was doing.

**K.B./D.P.:** *You could have come up with a strategy to filter out the sentiments and the resentment that are so irrefutably present in the book, but in the end, you actually amplified them by having De Wit's wife be the interviewer. It's embarrassing.*

**J.C.:** The way I dealt with it absolutely follows the

autobiographical line.

**K.B./D.P.:** *Your approach shows narcissism for what it is – narcissism.*

**J.C.:** I asked someone who was intimate with him. It is a mimetic approach.

**K.B./D.P.:** *The interview takes place in his apartment in Paris.*

**J.C.:** It was a tiny apartment. There wasn't much room.

**K.B./D.P.:** *Oscar is sitting at a table with his book and Lieneke is sitting in front of him, but she is blocking the view. She only appears in profile. In fact, you don't see her very well at all, as the camera is continually scanning Oscar de Wit's face. Your protagonist was jammed into his seat – he couldn't escape. Was that your mise-en-scène?*

**J.C.:** Yes and no. We had to set it up to accommodate the light. Paul De Cock could do a lot with very little light.

**K.B./D.P.:** *The film was shot with Kodak Ektachrome. You had to request special permission for that. It was very ambitious where the material was concerned.*

**J.C.:** I didn't want to work with Agfa Gevaert. At the BRT, everybody was required to work with it. It was terrible – everybody standing in line, waiting. Those Agfa Gevaert films were probably mounted somewhere where people had friends. As film producers, who did Agfa Gevaert think they were? It really bothered me, every time, while the rest of them thought nothing of it. There were so many unspoken agreements between people at the BRT, which I just could not go along with. That started back in 1963 and it continued right up to the end.

**K.B./D.P.:** *Ludo Bekkers was the producer of the De Wit film. In a draft list of the credits, you were initially described as director. That was scratched through and replaced with 'realisator'. Can you say something about that, about why you are always listed as 'realisator' and not as director?*

**J.C.:** A director manages an estate, a property. That is where the word comes from. The term 'realisator' dates from the first years of Flemish television. That description far more precisely describes what it is about. A director – that is somebody who does the news. The director of the news? That's just pushing buttons – nothing is being added to the story, nothing is being made.

**A grim place**

**K.B./D.P.:** *Was making films about literature a big step?*

**J.C.:** I have never been part of the literary scene, but I have always had contacts with writers. I got to know Georges Adé, who published under the pseudonym of Laurent Veydt, in the second half of the 1960s. I had met Hugues Pernath even earlier than that. He approached me in 1964, when he had seen *Abdij van 't Park (Abby in the park)*. We often did things together. In that period, I was also very close to René Gysen, and through him, Paul De Wispelaere. Together with Walter van Dyck, René and I worked on a film scenario in 1965 and 1966. But *Y* – that was the title of the film – was rejected by the committee for Dutch Language Films. I also worked on a film project with Daniël Robberechts: *Een nare plaats/een naar landschap – hersenbeelden (A grim place/a grim landscape: mental landscapes)*.

**K.B./D.P.:** *Did you approach Daniël Robberechts for that project?*

**J.C.:** Yes. The idea was to do a programme on architecture. It was at the point when Geert Bekaert and I were parting ways.

**K.B./D.P.:** *Did Robberechts agree immediately?*

**J.C.:** No, I had to do some serious talking to convince him. What is a grim place? We couldn't come to a conclusion. Like people obsessed, we went out looking for dismal, eerie, off-putting places, but each time we found something, one of us would not be convinced by what had affected the other. We spent an awful lot of time in Daniël's back room.

**K.B./D.P.:** *What you are now telling us about how the film came about is identical to the story in Een nare plaats (A grim place). The personalities – Frank Verbeek, a teacher at the NUHO (advanced non-university education) college in Antwerp; Gilbert De Schutter, radiologist at a university teaching hospital; and Hélène Van Nieuwland, a teacher in experimental psychology at the Catholic University in Louvain – spend all their time looking for unpleasant places, and there are always repeated arguments rejecting the proposals.*

**J.C.:** Yes. The telephone conversations between the three characters are mostly about what they imagine to be grim places. The dialogues were written by Daniël. We set up the scenario together. *Een nare plaats* is a telephone film. I thought that was fantastic.

**K.B./D.P.:** *The film is about unpleasant places, but deals mostly with something that Robberechts was extremely interested in: the medium, about what the 'power' of a medium is. Or to put it in the words of Gilbert De Schutter, "Now then, there isn't anything that you can*

*film without changing something about what you are filming." At the end of the film, H el ene Van Nieuwland comes to a typical Robberechts conclusion: "And the powerlessness that we now feel in the face of such a banal, unpleasant place can probably be ascribed less to the medium itself than to the use that we have been making of it for so long, to the codes that we have ascribed to it for so long. So I would just say, change those codes, make the necessary repairs to the medium." Did you go to Robberechts with the idea of doing something about unpleasant places or with the idea of doing something about the medium of film, or the medium of television?*

**J.C.:** I wanted it to be about unpleasant places. It had to be a film about architecture. In the end, we found common ground at that site near the South Station. It was Dani el's proposal. We reached an agreement about it. We hung around there for a long time.

**K.B./D.P.:** *Did you already have ideas about which actors would be involved?*

**J.C.:** Yes, we talked about that. For example, I approached Fran ois Beukelaers. I was already working on the budget, but then the project was scratched.

**K.B./D.P.:** *By whom and for what reason?*

**J.C.:** It was axed by Ludo Bekkers. One morning, he rudely informed me that *Een nare plaats* was being cancelled. He had another project that he preferred instead. The project we had set out to do was a difficult one, and expensive. He wanted out. That was no doubt also convenient for the director of television, Jan Van der Straeten.

**K.B./D.P.:** *Later, you never felt you wanted to dig up the scenario again?*

**J.C.:** No. My disgust was too overwhelming.

**K.B./D.P.:** *The films about Oscar de Wit and Het gedroomde boek were produced by Ludo Bekkers. The literature films, which you made later, with Jacq Vogelaar, Dani el Robberechts and H.C. ten Berge were produced by Dirk Christiaens. Did that change had anything to do with the debacle of Een nare plaats?*

**J.C.:** That is more than probable.

### **All the flesh**

**K.B./D.P.:** *The film with Jacq Vogelaar, which was produced and broadcast in 1981, has an unusual history. It looks as though the original intention had been to make a film on the Dutch author, F.C. Terborgh.*

**J.C.:** Yes, that's right. Frans Boenders absolutely wanted to make the film with me and I couldn't get out of it. The Terborgh project came to a halt because of something totally unexpected. The author died.

**K.B./D.P.:** *At the Flemish Radio and Television archives, we found a document, a single sheet in your handwriting, written to somebody called Jan. In it, you say that Terborgh is dead, and you write, "... but Jacq Firmin Vogelaar can be done with the same resources. Everything will still be the same, except the name and the content. [...] Not a single date will change. There is a new assistant, Elvira Kleynen."* To whom was that note written?

**J.C.:** That would have to be Jan Van der Straeten, director of television.

**K.B./D.P.:** *Terborgh died on 26 February 1981. On 13 March, you were already on your way to Amsterdam to speak to Vogelaar about the television film. You were incredibly fast in exchanging the Terborgh project for a different project.*

**J.C.:** If a programme couldn't be broadcast, we had to come up with an idea as quickly as possible, one that no one could say no to. The broadcasting corporation was a factory, where every day a lot of hours of television had to be produced. How could you avoid getting caught up in the treadmill, and how could you arrive at doing what you wanted to do? Ideas – I certainly had enough of them, but you had to make sure that you got the funding to realize those ideas. I always worked with very limited resources in order to be able to avoid obligations and fixed assignments.

**K.B./D.P.:** *You acted incredibly quickly, but what was the reason you decided to make a film about Jacq Vogelaar? Was it another suggestion from Georges Adé?*

**J.C.:** No. I had just read Vogelaar's book, *Alle vlees* (*All the flesh*).

**K.B./D.P.:** *Alle vlees was published in 1980. Had you already read it?*

**J.C.:** Yes. Before the book was released, segments of it had been published in *Raster* magazine.

**K.B./D.P.:** *Did you ask Daniël Robberechts to work with you on the Vogelaar film?*

**J.C.:** I had worked with Daniël on *Een nare plaats* for a long time. I knew that Daniël and Jacq were close. Daniël and I had not grown farther apart because of the demise of *Een nare plaats*. No, we went through all that together. That was horrible.

**K.B./D.P.:** *It was not the first time you had spoken to Vogelaar. You had filmed him back in 1973, for the Kunst als kritiek (Art as criticism) series.*

**J.C.:** That was a series of short films, which Georges Adé and I did together.

**K.B./D.P.:** *In 1972, Vogelaar had published his collection of essays under the same name: Kunst als kritiek. It included ten texts as examples of a materialistic concept of art, a reader with texts by Adorno, Benjamin, Lukács, Enzensberger, Horkheimer and so on.*

**J.C.:** How did we ever manage to get that into *Openbaar kunstbezit* (a programme on visual arts)? That is the question.

**K.B./D.P.:** *The beginning of your film Na Alle vlees – portret van een werkwijze (After All the flesh: portrait of a working method), the film on Vogelaar, is very formal. Jacq Vogelaar and Daniël Robberechts are sitting at a table. We see several copies of Alle vlees on a book rack. Robberechts plays the devil's advocate, and says, "There are a number of established ideas about Jacq Firmin Vogelaar, and I would first like to hear a few words from you about that. I have noticed that the media has a specific image of you. On the one hand, you are the fuming, sectarian, Marxist, materialistic literature theorist who, if it were up to him, would have 99.9% of all Dutch literature burnt. On the other hand, you are a writer of unreadable books, books with no humour, books that are reflections of very bad taste." Vogelaar does not react. Then, Vogelaar's bibliography rolls across the screen, followed by critical passages on the respective titles, while the author reads off-screen from Alle vlees. Once the whole thing has been run through that way, Vogelaar comes back, in frontal view. He says that he does not want to discuss the image that the media has of him. He wants to work. Then that same space comes back into view. Vogelaar and Robberechts have changed places and the copies of Alle vlees have been turned around. Now we see the back cover of the book: a painting by Francis Bacon.*

**J.C.:** Thanks to *Alle vlees*, I learned to appreciate Bacon. I found a starting point in Vogelaar's book, a story from which to take off. One of Vogelaar's qualities is that he takes an oeuvre and makes it relevant, or puts it into perspective.

**K.B./D.P.:** *The beginning of the film is very formal.*

**J.C.:** Vogelaar and Robberechts are performing a theatrical piece. This is their entrance. In opera, it is done the same way.

**K.B./D.P.:** *You could say that you knowingly played with*

*the clichés of the regular television broadcasts on literature.*

**J.C.:** You could interpret it that way. But after that, *Na Alle vlees* becomes a very supple film.

**K.B./D.P.:** *It did seem to be pushing the point on how Vogelaar was being received. Was that really an issue?*

**J.C.:** I didn't invent that. In his articles in *De Groene Amsterdammer*, Vogelaar was a very strong opinion-maker.

**K.B./D.P.:** *Did making the film go smoothly?*

**J.C.:** Absolutely. Almost nothing at all was prepared in advance. We would think something up and everybody would immediately agree. There were constant exchanges with everybody involved and the understanding between Daniël and Jacq was perfect. I remember that we went out every night, with Daniël, Jacq and the whole crew. It was the ideal meeting of minds. The filming in Amsterdam also went very quickly. I still knew Amsterdam pretty well, of course. We filmed the opening scene, for example, at De Bezige Bij, Vogelaar's publishers. We shot another scene at the University Library. We asked if we could film without any interruptions and it was no problem at all. I had a very good cameraman for those shots: Leo De Haes.

**K.B./D.P.:** *Following the initial scene at De Bezige Bij, in front of the camera at Vogelaar's home, Jacq and Daniël are making arrangements about what the film's approach should be. Vogelaar says, "It can't be a portrait of some little guy, just somebody who happens to write. I also want it to say something about the way I work. That is why you can also call it a portrait of a working method. I have a very distinct method, which is working in blocks. What is important is the combination, the relationship between those blocks. So we should try to keep making short fragments, a whole series of them, so that certain relationships develop between them." The film is indeed a series of links between short fragments. Vogelaar's introduction, which is entitled 'gebruiksaanwijzing' (instructions for use), is followed by the fragments, 'draaiboek' (scenario), 'vleesmolen' (meat grinder), 'diagram van de macht' (diagram of power) and so on.*

**J.C.:** Exactly. That is the structure of the film.

**K.B./D.P.:** *Jacq and Daniël keep coming back to the table, where they continue to discuss the progress of the film. They also talk about subjects that unfortunately do not get covered, such as the relationship between architecture and writing, the tattooed body and the history of the flesh. Occasionally, ironic remarks are made about 'the director'.*

**J.C.:** I could have cut all that out if I had wanted to. I

liked the way we got along with each other. In the film with Hans ten Berge, there was more distance, more detachment. His vision of the world is not that close to mine. Ten Berge is dead serious.

**K.B./D.P.:** *Your films on literature are about the authors' working methods, certainly the films about Vogelaar and Robberechts. In contrast, when you made a film about an artist, such as Magritte or De Braekeleer, you would put yourself in the position of the viewer. When you made a film about a writer, it was about the working method. How does a writer work?*

**J.C.:** That is my temperament. But you have to find people who want to and are able to do that, and whose work, of course, also allows for it.

**K.B./D.P.:** *In a review of the film in NRC Handelsblad, Myriam Ceriez wrote...*

**J.C.:** ...Myriam Ceriez was the ex-wife of Dirk Christiaens, the producer. She had acted in *Het gedroomde boek*.

**K.B./D.P.:** *She wrote that the film had been recorded on video, so that the authors could immediately see what they had just done. Certain scenes could be shot again.*

**J.C.:** That's true. I had Daniël and Jacq as involved as possible in the shooting process.

**K.B./D.P.:** *Was that the first time you worked that way?*

**J.C.:** No. I had already invested in my own equipment in 1969, a Sony, like the one Andy Warhol had. I mounted the video camera onto the film camera, so I knew what was happening all the time. I had video control, so I had control of the film camera.

**K.B./D.P.:** *Were several shoots done of certain scenes?*

**J.C.:** Certainly not very many. Maybe that scene in the small room, with all those documents – that room where he kept all those scraps of text for a book that was not yet finished, a book in which he wanted to do a portrait of entrepreneurs. That was a real hotbed – it was almost physical. It was also very intentionally kept dark in the film.

**K.B./D.P.:** *There are also various scenes in which the video monitor is blatantly present in the image. Making the film itself is a subject that is always under discussion. The film does a commentary, as it were, on its own evolution, its own 'the making of'. You can look at the film as a kind of meta-documentary about literature.*

**J.C.:** That may be true. But it is very difficult to have a reflexive attitude towards television. If you are

working on a production... I have always regarded *Alle vrees* as an opera.

**K.B./D.P.:** *What do you mean?*

**J.C.:** You can't just read that book. That book has to be discussed. If you read it, then you have to read it out loud. I had the ideal voice at my disposal, Vogelaar himself. If there were a single text that even now could serve as a libretto for an opera, it would have to be *Alle vrees*.

**K.B./D.P.:** *In the segment entitled stadschrift (writing the city), Robberechts and Vogelaar are in the image, with their backs to us. They are looking at the monitor, which is showing urban images: on the one hand are the rules, the signposts and traffic signals, and on the other are the infringements of those rules – walls covered in graffiti...*

**J.C.:** What that scene most of all reveals is that I was already working on *IJsbreker*, a programme where different people at different locations try to communicate with each other by way of monitors. Instead of filming Jacq and Daniël in the city, I used the monitor to bring the city into the living room.

**K.B./D.P.:** *Robberechts remarks – before you go out into the city with the camera – that Alle vrees primarily takes place out in the country. Vogelaar says, "In Alle vrees, it is perverse in as far as it has waving fields of grain in the sitting room; if you go outside, you come into a corridor, a busy street where people are constantly elbowing each other out of the way."*

**J.C.:** You could look at the presence of the monitor in Jacq's living room the same way.

**K.B./D.P.:** *In another scene, Vogelaar is stretched out on the sofa. The segment is entitled, 'op de divan' (on the sofa). Robberechts is sitting in the seat next to him and says, "Jacq, tell us something about your youth." Vogelaar answers, "Everybody always has to be telling stories. What are they telling? Everything that they have already heard a thousand times." And later, "Their stories are like answers to questions from psychiatrists, doctors, teachers, pollsters, applications committees, examination juries, policemen, therapists..."*

**J.C.:** Earlier in the film, in the segment *diagram van de macht (diagram of power)*, Vogelaar had already lectured about Bentham's waxwork show and Foucault's literature about it. The scene with the sofa was one of the last we filmed. Everyone had loosened up.

**K.B./D.P.:** *Myriam Ceriez commented that that scene was constructed formally, like a painting by Jean Brusselmans.*

**J.C.:** That's true. I have always built references like that into my films.

**K.B./D.P.:** *In 1980, you also made a film on Jean Brusselmans.*

**J.C.:** I think that was an assignment, during a period in which I didn't have too much to attend to. It is certainly not the ultimate film on Brusselmans. I have been interested in Brusselmans my whole life, but I never made the film about Brusselmans that I imagined myself making.

### **Writing**

**K.B./D.P.:** *The film on Jacq Vogelaar was broadcast on 18 September, 1981. Barely two months later, on 13 November, Belgian Radio and Television broadcast your film on Daniël Robberechts: De achterkamer (The back room). For that film, you again called on Oscar de Wit, the writer to whom you devoted your first film on literature. Why?*

**J.C.:** I was curious how a psychologist would look at Daniël's work. I meant it constructively, but Daniël clammed up. I had not expected that.

**K.B./D.P.:** *Oscar de Wit actually did remember that he was not very pleased with the conversation he had with Daniël.*

**J.C.:** I had introduced Oscar to Daniël's work. He wasn't familiar with it. Daniël was then already busy with that stencil project, *tijdSCHRIFT*, his one-man magazine that I had subscribed to, by the way. Oscar was interested, but I probably encouraged him to act too much like a psychologist.

**K.B./D.P.:** *In your film on the book, Met koele obsessie, De Wit himself says, "I tried to approach reality as closely as possible..." That could be a quote from Robberechts. In his speech for the Lucy B. and C.W. van der Hoogt Literature Prize in 1980, De Wit further said, "It is about insight into the function of artistic work in a democratic society. It is about insight into the position of the artist in that society. (...) It is about insight into the market mechanisms that determine the production of art, about insight into the function and the position held by the products of art."*

**J.C.:** There were certainly a lot of things that the two authors' work had in common, for example, their openness about countless intimate subjects, which most authors would prefer to keep to themselves. But their meeting went completely wrong.

**K.B./D.P.:** *The first thing you get to see in the film is*

*the author's handwriting. You do not see the author himself, but you do see the sentences he writes, including the changes and the scratching out.*

**J.C.:** At Daniël's request, I had a special device made, a kind of 'writing machine' that put the writing straight onto the screen.

**K.B./D.P.:** *He did not just want to act as if he were busy writing?*

**J.C.:** He wanted the writing itself to be shown, not the author who was doing the writing. It was an obsession of his. I did everything I possibly could to accommodate that. I think he spent a long time working with that equipment.

**K.B./D.P.:** *In your archives, there is a short letter from Robberechts, addressed to you: "(red) line 1: image of the written material and its use; line 2: explanation and commentary to the writing (this already has a bit of 'gestiek' – the gestural); line 3: incidental detours to biography and environment. I think a solid weave can be made out of those three story lines." In another document, those segments are even quantified, with 'biography' at a maximum of 10%, 'environment' a maximum of 10%, 'gestiek' a maximum of 10%, 'production' ('portrait of the writer as an apparatus for producing text') at a minimum of 70%.*

**J.C.:** By hook or by crook, he wanted to explain how he worked. It was a really strong desire of his.

**K.B./D.P.:** *The author was continually filmed as he was proposing certain actions that had to do with writing: the author who goes to the library in Ronse, the author who collects his mail, who writes, who reads.*

**J.C.:** Daniël read out loud. At least he always said he did. I wanted to show that.

**K.B./D.P.:** *Robberechts himself says in the film, "Actually I don't like to read aloud for other people, because I feel that the text is something intimate. For me, something that has been written down is something like a letter that you slide under someone's door, and then you run away as fast as you can. But I have had the experience that there is a lot to a writer reading aloud – it gives a lot of information. For my part, I have the feeling that my voice can damage my own text. But who knows? Maybe there are things I don't notice that in fact do come across when I read aloud."*

**J.C.:** Yes, his voice. That was something that at a certain point I insisted on. I had in the past, by the way, already asked him to read a text off-screen, for the **Rijksweg No.1 (State highway #1)** programme, broadcast in 1978. And even before that, in 1976, he had provided a

text for another film about public space, *Vlaanderen in vogelvlucht* (A bird's-eye view of Flanders).

**K.B./D.P.:** After *All the flesh* was a film that included a lot of improvisation. Was *De achterkamer* (The back room) produced the same way as *All the flesh*?

**J.C.:** No. We spent a lot of time on that. We had long discussions about the various places in the house that had certain meanings for him, about the way he used the house when the others were not there.

**K.B./D.P.:** *The film is almost a catalogue of places in that house. It is practically a topographical study, and you don't come across anybody except the writer himself.*

**J.C.:** His wife and children were not there during the day. We were dropped into the middle of his daily routine.

**K.B./D.P.:** *You really have the feeling that you are very involved with that house, in the way the house was put together.*

**J.C.:** The *Robberechts* film could only have been made in that house. I prepared the project very thoroughly with him in advance. There is nothing spontaneous in that film. Everything was drawn up in advance. We spent an awful lot of time in order to be able to do it all so precisely. That scene with the mailman delivering the mail and the trajectory that Daniël followed through the house to collect the mail – all of that was thought out beforehand. They were not easy movements for the camera. I edited the images of the mailman and Daniël on top of each other. You could say that it is a very stylistic film.

**K.B./D.P.:** *Yes, it is very formal. But so is his work, isn't it?*

**J.C.:** He was maniacal in the way he worked on his last work: the total text. It became very clear to me when I was working there that his 'total text' was a very risky affair. I always found his early books, which were primarily autobiographical, very strong. I felt that the 'total text' demanded a lot of him, perhaps too much.

**K.B./D.P.:** *For the conversation between De Wit and Robberechts, the approach was relatively conventional. The biography of the writer is reviewed, and he is asked how he got into writing. The contrast with the approach to the film itself, with its emphasis on the formal, could not be greater.*

**J.C.:** Have you also looked at the other literary programmes that were being broadcast by the BRT?

**K.B./D.P.:** *Does the one have to be brought into*

*relationship to the other – the formal as antidote for the biographical?*

**J.C.:** He allowed that. You need to have someone who allows you to do what you do. It is a question of trust, and he was receptive to it.

**K.B./D.P.:** *It is a big contrast with the film on Jacq Vogelaar.*

**J.C.:** The film about Vogelaar is a city film.

**K.B./D.P.:** *In the Vogelaar film, various locations in his house are also filmed, such as his library..*

**J.C.:** I definitely wanted to film that library. That wall of books – now, that was a wall! The big difference between the two films has to do with the way the camera was used. Paul De Cock, who worked with me with Daniël, had a very formal style. His was a totally different approach than that of Leo De Haes, who did the camera work for *Na Alle vlees*. But Leo De Haes also produced exquisite camera work. That scene in the university library was done perfectly, right down to the details.

**K.B./D.P.:** *In the film on Robberechts, it is mentioned that he is supported by his wife, Cécile Faniel, and that the Flemish Community "does not consider the creation of original Dutch texts important enough to spend serious time on it".*

**J.C.:** Daniël was part of a group that was very involved with that issue. They wanted to establish a model in Flanders based on the Dutch system for subsidizing authors. That was probably the reason he wanted it mentioned.

**K.B./D.P.:** *The film was previewed to the press on 28 October, 1981. Georges Adé was there, we presume, because he addressed a letter to you, Daniël Robberechts and Jacq Vogelaar even before the film was broadcast.*

**J.C.:** I had nothing to do with the polemics.

**K.B./D.P.:** *It was a harsh text. He accused both authors, but mostly Robberechts, of not enjoying their work. "(...) It is only extremely rarely that I have the feeling that you enjoy, I mean that you are satisfied by, all that writing. (...) In R's case, the absence of all seriousness seems to be even more insanely obscured. The work presents itself as a serious preoccupation – but in fact it isn't. R's work, and certainly the way he is presented in C's film, is without a hitch even a parody of a so-called scientific investigation." How did you read that criticism by Georges Adé? Did you feel he was right in what he claimed?*

**J.C.:** I felt that his intervening didn't contribute much.

**K.B./D.P.:** *For his so-called fundamental accusation, he brought out even heavier ammunition: "Only I do have to conclude that people who are presumed to think, or to have thought that a correct attitude in art presumes a correct attitude in politics, and vice versa, and that you are not correctly judging your products if you do not involve the method of production in your investigation, that now, with the proposal of a monumental work, [they] apparently do not wish to pose such questions (I don't think that C would have scrapped them), and then just act as if they were the unquestioned important makers of important work." The production conditions were in fact very prominently put on screen in both documentaries.*

**J.C.:** I do not retract a single word or image from those films. I think things had already been going less than smoothly between Daniël and Georges. They had, however, been very close for quite a while. At a certain point, they had had a very interesting exchange of correspondence.

**K.B./D.P.:** *After the film on Robberechts was broadcast, Adé published a critical review in De Nieuwe. The tone is markedly milder, but he still took a shot at Robberechts: "(...) For Daniël Robberechts, De achterkamer was as much 'the portrait of a working method' as the film on Jacq Vogelaar was 'the portrait of a working method'. Well, that working method just seemed a boring enterprise." It is remarkable that he turned around his argument about "the author who presents himself as an important maker of important work". In De Nieuwe, he wrote, "(...) Maybe for a while, a few writers might still continue to believe in 'literature', and therefore will want to compose 'great works', until they realize that their voice and their cinematographic presence have actually become the medium of our time, and we will again find ourselves landed back in the oral tradition"*

**J.C.:** Again, I never got myself mixed up in that debate. I didn't feel it contributed anything.

### **Texan elegies**

**K.B./D.P.:** *How did you – finally – end up with Hans ten Berge?*

**J.C.:** Perhaps Jacq Vogelaar introduced me to his work? I can't say for certain.

**K.B./D.P.:** *As editor in chief of the first series of Raster magazine, he focused on the work of van F.C. Terborgh. De Bezige Bij also published a small book written by him: Een schrijver als grenskozak – F.C. Terborgh over zichzelf en zijn werk (A writer as a border Cossack – F.C. Terborgh about himself and his work) – a book on which Frans Boenders also assisted. You went on*

*to produce the film on Terborgh with Boenders.*

**J.C.:** Maybe it was through that book that I came across Ten Berge's work. I don't remember. In any case, I do remember that a lot of people advised me not to get involved with him. He had a reputation for being an extremely difficult man.

**K.B./D.P.:** *Which book convinced you to devote a film to him?*

**J.C.:** What really fascinated me were his translations of Eskimo literature, published in the book, *De raaf in de walvis (The raven in the whale)*. Ten Berge had also written about important issues. A few of the *Texaanse elegieën (Texan elegies)* were already done when we went to Texas, but the whole thing was not yet finished. What interested me was the parallel between Ten Berge and a famous Scheutist (a Catholic sect originating in Flanders), a Flemish man who had also been working with Eskimo literature. It intrigued me that a Dutchman was involved with those same stories. That Scheutist had spent his whole life on the North Pole and lived with the Inuit.

**K.B./D.P.:** *The films with Oscar de Wit, Jacq Vogelaar and Daniël Robberechts were all filmed in their homes. You chose a different approach for your film on Hans ten Berge. You travelled with him to Texas. Was that your idea?*

**J.C.:** My first conversation with Hans took place at his home. I drove all the way to Zutphen, in the Netherlands. The film could have been made there, but I couldn't do that to him. At that point, he needed to get out of that house. It was the only feasible route. Hans ten Berge and I had one common reference point: Willie Nelson, *On the Road Again*. For the first time in my life I had the chance to work in Texas...

**K.B./D.P.:** *The idea of going to Texas came from Ten Berge?*

**J.C.:** He first proposed going to the North Pole, but there was no budget for that. Where Texas was concerned, we were instantly in total agreement. Why? Because he knew Texas really well. He had stayed in Austin for six months, as a Dutch literature professor. He knew the landscape and all the locations. There was enough material and he also really wanted to go back to Texas. So I would not have to go prospecting – there wasn't any money for that anyway. Later, I always insisted on reconnaissance trips, even for the series of five films that I did on South American cities in 1992.

**K.B./D.P.:** *Would you have done that trip to the North Pole if you had had the money?*

**J.C.:** Yes, I certainly thought that a good idea. His translations of Eskimo stories have really stayed with me. But the trip to the North Pole was not feasible financially. At that point, I couldn't guarantee that I could get a trip to Texas together either. In the beginning, Hans didn't have much faith in it.

**K.B./D.P.:** *You had to pull a lot of strings before you got the green light. Just as when you wanted to do Een nare plaats, two projects were being played off against each other. In the end, you were able to complete the film because money was saved on travel costs: the producer, Dirk Christiaens, offered to stay behind in Belgium.*

**J.C.:** Dirk Christiaens produced the films on Vogelaar, Robberechts and Ten Berge. It was a comfortable collaboration. The film on Ten Berge was done on a low budget.

**K.B./D.P.:** *How was the trip?*

**J.C.:** Very good. People had warned me that I would be back in a week, but I travelled around with Hans for three weeks. He never got me angry, even if it did get a little exciting at times. For a certain scene, I wanted him to make a phone call from his bed in the evening. He stuck his heels in for a long time before he was willing to do it. I told him we had to have shots like that and in the end, I managed to convince him.

**K.B./D.P.:** *What actually was your intention?*

**J.C.:** I felt it would be interesting to put him in front of the camera and hear him express his ideas. He was very good at formulating them – when he had the Ezra Pound manuscripts in his hands, the American poet whose work he translated, for example. I was also interested in the way he moved around the university, in the department of humanities. The people there were very flexible about letting us do the filming. When he pushed in those boxes – you could practically not even imagine it... I thought that scene turned out really well. Something like that can easily go wrong. His passion, too, when he picked up a photograph of Walker Evans: I was touched by that. He did it with reserve. His anger is also interesting, because he can internalize it. He wants something that is impossible, and then he becomes very difficult.

**K.B./D.P.:** *Can you give an example?*

**J.C.:** He wanted an interview with Willie Nelson. But that was impossible. At the time, Willie Nelson was on drugs, and he had also been in prison – as if he would just show up to humour the BRT...

**K.B./D.P.:** *Een dichter in Texas (A poet in Texas), the title of the film with Hans ten Berge, was an odd*

*project. Ten Berge was the subject of the film, but at the same time he was doing the reporting.*

**J.C.:** He was also the victim of his own project, because we didn't actually get hold of anything – nothing, anywhere. All of our ventures led nowhere. We were constantly walking around lost in that film. He wanted to go out on the Rio Grande: failed! The interview with Willie Nelson: failed. Everything went wrong.

**K.B./D.P.:** *Your four literature films are all very different. What they do all have in common is that someone reads in them. The author is reading out loud.*

**J.C.:** Yes, I think that is important.

**K.B./D.P.:** *Why?*

**J.C.:** I think an author always reads aloud. On a stage, it comes across very differently than on television. Where that is concerned, television has something extra to offer. It is something that the author gives away. If you are standing on a stage, you are not giving something away, you are acting.

**K.B./D.P.:** *In 1982, a press conference was held for the broadcast of A poet in Texas, in which you said that the film on Ten Berge would be your last film on literature.*

**J.C.:** Did I say that?

**K.B./D.P.:** *It was phrased that way in a review of the film.*

**J.C.:** It could be that I said it. I can focus on something, but after a while, I need to get out of it again or it starts to become suffocating. I could never spend my whole life doing the same thing. I just can't do it... If you are always offering the same thing, then you get sucked dry. As far as I am concerned, everybody can come into my space. In that sense, I am no artist. There is room for everybody.

**K.B./D.P.:** *Or did you turn your back on literature because you were preparing the IJsbreker broadcasts?*

**J.C.:** No doubt. I had wanted to do a live broadcast on art and culture for a long time, but the opportunity had to present itself. The Department of Cultural Affairs in the BRT was taken over by a new chief, Hilda Verboven, in the early 1980s, and I effectively had the chance to do *IJsbreker*. For a while, I could not take on any new assignments. I could not let myself get caught up in anything, so I could let myself get absorbed in a big project: television in which various actors in several places, by way of the television and with almost no mediation at all, tried to communicate with each other. I did not per se want to do something large-scale, but I

did want those specific instruments, to be able to either use or misuse them.

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