

This thesis analysis the steps I made towards observational films. It examines how previously disparate elements; observational writing and spatial and emotional evocative cinematography, became congruent in my piece 'De Huid Voelt' (Skin Feels) that lead towards a triptych observational video portrait in where I address my changing perception of my parents and of my hometown. These short films depict the struggles of observing the aging bodies of my parents, the fear of entering my old neighbourhood park at night and my attempts to leave my hometown behind. In this project I want to express the difficulties concerning letting go of and simultaneously holding on to the environment one grows up in.

Log of process

The log of process is divided into four subchapters: Screenplay, Schiermonnikoog, Dance video and Observational film. Throughout the year I changed from one possible project to another, beneath the different projects are explained and why it evolved as it did.

Screenplay

Last year I started my first two trimester projects without a screenplay. My working methodology consisted of going out with

a camera to find interesting spaces to shoot and later create a narrative out of these shots in the edit. In the third trimester I wrote a screenplay on beforehand and then shot the film. Although the set up worked fine, the screenplay was not good enough to make the film interesting. My plan this year was therefore to advance on writing skills and use the same set up as in the third trimester.

In the summer I started writing a short story in novel form. My plan was to adopt this short in a screenplay to make a short narrative film out of it and a photograph series that would support the narrative of the film. They would entail one aspect of the film's narrative, but the photographs would go more into depth of that subject than the film does. Together they would form a widely balanced view of the impact that leaving your hometown has on an adolescent, who tries to find a new home in Rotterdam, where he is unable to settle down. The guy lives on himself, feels isolated, alienated and not able to make contact with other citizens. He goes for a night out drinking in a city that he feels has a disharmonic character, which causes the indifference between citizens of Rotterdam and causes him to feel singled out from his environment.

The critique entailed that the motivations of my characters were not clear enough. I read two screenplay books (Field, S. *The Screenwriter's Workbook* and Beukenkamp, G. *Schrijven voor*

film, toneel en televisie (Writing for film, theatre and television) to gain a better understanding of characters motivation and necessities a screenplay should consist of. After reading the both books a lot of changes in the screenplay were made. A girl was introduced, because I hoped meeting another adolescent who feels less alone and abandoned in this city would shine a different light on his opinions about the disharmonic character of the city. Divorced parents were introduced, thus the guy has an argument with his mother and had no place to go besides his father in Rotterdam, which he has not seen in years. This created a sense of essence for having no other place to go and as a base for his miserable feelings. It also gave the story more drama, instead of focussing on the troubles of leaving your home.

Why change?

After struggling for a few months with screenplay writing, I still wasn't able to write a screenplay that entailed characters with clear motivations and a clear directors view on the story. This year I did not see it progress into a screenplay that would be good enough to be turned into a film. Thus I decided to move away from the written word and move back to the image making process again.

Schiermonnikoog

During writing the screenplay I made a lot of photos in Rotterdam. The photos shared a lot of similarities even though the subject changed. I went for a week to Schiermonnikoog, an island in front of the north coast of Holland, to take a step back from my work and to be able to analyse my own photography. In this week I made a thorough analysis of my own working methodology in my photography (see next chapter). Although the week was meant as a week of rest, I couldn't stop myself by shooting images that could be formed into a short film. Afterwards I realised that my working methodology in my photography is similar as my working methodology in filmmaking. Back at school I started editing and from the edit derived a ghost story of two lovers hunting each other. The guy was literally hunting the girl, shots of the camera in hand when the boy runs. The girl was hunting him in his mind, shots of the girl on the back were it is not clear if she is really there or just in his mind. When a teacher pointed out the similarities it shared with Tarkovsky's *Solaris*, I watched the film as well as Soderbergh's remake. I enjoyed seeing both films and understood the similarities. Tarkovsky's book 'Sculpting in time' provided me several interesting insights on his motivations and working methodology. Not only on art and film but also on his philosophy behind his film. He has a very clear idea on what the function of art is and the reason

why he makes his films. This immediately also points out the differences between my short film and *Solaris*, because I have no clear idea what my film is about and what I want to tell.

Why change?

When the Schiermonnikoog piece started to come together into a small narrative I immediately saw this as a pilot for a similar narrative, but then based in a city environment. The feeling of desire, which is present in the Schiermonnikoog piece, would be even stronger if the background wasn't an island, but an industrial, deserted cityscape. Because then the surrounding would indicate that people live there, yet they are not present in the film, which makes the two characters cut off from society. Besides this facet I have always been interested in creating evocative spaces out of city spaces by my cinematography (as explained in the chapter working methodology).

Dance video

I re-shot the basic narrative of the Schiermonnikoog film in the city environment of Rotterdam, with the same working methodology as used on the island, however now I worked with dancers as actors. Together with the dancers I hoped to expand the narrative and I expected their input to help me on a more direct interaction between the main characters. I chose dancers, because there is no speech in the film and the

narrative was to be conveyed through body language. The change of scene from an island to the city of Rotterdam alienated the two main characters even more; the city décor thus emphasizes the fact that they only have each other in an seemingly less empty cityscape. It also created an atmosphere of questionable realities; it's not clear if her presence he is confronted with is a reflection of his own imagination, or she is a new version of her, or if this is his new reality. I worked with a story that was based on Tarkovsky's *Solaris*. The boy sees his passed away girlfriend, who committed suicide, in a city environment with no other people. First he struggles to understand the situation. Then he is delighted to see her and wants to make contact with her. However he only sees her on the back. She will not give in, because she feels everybody is still mad at her and the reason why she committed suicide is because she can't confront her beloved ones anymore because she is too ashamed, she can't stand the by her mind invented 'eyes' of her beloved ones. Therefore she can only show him her back. When she is enticed by him she becomes ready to give in to his attention, because he persuaded her by his dance, there is a moment of reconciliation. However this moment makes him aware how much pain she caused him by committing suicide, which causes him to move away from her, from this ghost figure. They both realise that their once shared love for each other is not present any more and they let each other go.

Why change?

Together with two dancers I created the above written story into a film. The material was nice, but not sufficient, again the motivations of the characters were a problem for the viewer to relate to them. My plan was to make another film where the girl would be a robot and he would awake her by a strict pull on her hair, she would become mad at him leaving him, then pity this decision and go back to find him. She would find him turned into a robot. Before starting this new version I made the film, *De Huid Voelt (Skin Feels)*. I saw the film merely as a side project. After the positive critique it received and analysing my view on the film and its process I decided to move away from the whole dance video/schiermonnikoog project and continue to make observational films.

Observational film

A few weeks before the assessment I stayed the night at my parents house. When I opened the door of my bedroom, my father opened the door of the bathroom. I saw him naked and I hadn't seen him naked for a long time. He walked into his bedroom and the light from outside transformed his body into a vulnerable man instead of my strong father. I kept that image in my head the next couple of days and decided to write a small text about it. I usually write a small text after I undergo an observation I find interesting, however normally I limit it to

text, because I want to make a book out of them. Because this was visually so interesting I decided to accompany the stories with images. I developed the story further and went back to parents house to film both of them (my mother was embedded in the story). After my shoot, I recorded my own voice as voice over and started editing. In the edit it stood out that almost half of the text I wrote down was told via images, therefore I reduced the text largely, which empowered the piece.

After I decided to stop working with the dancers and to completely focus on observational films, I wrote two more short observations and started to film them as well. Here a new problem derived. In my previous work, I went out in an environment to find interesting spaces where I can create aesthetic shots. Now the process was the other way around, first I made an observation, than I wrote a piece about it and than I was limited to the space to observation was about. Thus I couldn't always make work as aesthetic as I used to do, especially in the bus this caused problems, because I could only point my camera outside without creating a well-framed image.

The move towards observational short films feels natural. If I compare the process of my film with the dancers and the film of my parents, they occur to be very different. My motivation for the dance video has always been a vague stray of thought, I was never able to clearly formulate my motivation. This made

it difficult for my dancers to perform, because how and what was not clear for them. Comparing this to the film of my parents, writing the text in the beginning already clearly outlined my aim of the film, thus this gave me a lot of confidence towards the shoot with my parents. It was a new experience for me to start a shoot with on beforehand knowing what I want to shoot and how it should look like and then in a well known surrounding. Normally my working methodology allows me to discover interesting non staged shots on an unknown location, now I had a strict idea of what I needed. After putting the voice over of the text and the images in the edit together I knew I had a working combination. In two weeks I was able to combine every asset acquired before and make a short film with a clear narrative opposed to a half year struggling of making a short experimental film.

I feel that this film finally reaches the mode of address I am looking for in my work. I've always been interest to make work that is emotional, work that moves the audience. In my previous work I have been struggling with this mode of address, because my motivation for the piece and the aim of my piece was unclear, it made it hard for the viewer to engage emotionally with my work and to sympathise with the characters. With this new piece, its intimate and profound mode of address and the clear narrative enable the viewer to engage with the story.

Working methodology

To gain a better insight in my own motivations, I started to analyse my own work. After analysing a selection of 127 of my own photos I found the following facets as a lead pattern in my work:

Depersonalisation:

In the majority of the photos which entail people, the people are depersonalised. In most photos the people in the photo are framed in such a way that they are singled out from their environment, which makes the subject look alienated. Another important aspect is that, for the viewer, there is almost no facial recognition possible with the people in the photos. I distinguish three forms where there is hardly any facial recognition possible at all; the people in the photos stand with their back towards the lens, they are too far away from the lens for the viewer to see their faces or their faces are out of focus. This creates an image which feels more like a reference of a human being than as a portrait of a person. Because of this depersonalised facet, the people photographed, become unreachable. The photographer, me, can only observe them from a distance, but is not able to make contact with them.

There are situations when there are two people singled out of their environment. Although it is clear that they have a relationship and therefore appear less alienated than a single person singled out does, they still appear as depersonalised figures. In the 127 photos, six obvious couples are to be distinguished. In the six photos the viewer sees four of the couples on the back (Image 1-4), one couple on the side (Image 5) and one couple in front (Image 6). Even in the photo of the couple seen from front, the viewer cannot see their faces. This is because the sun behind the duo casts a shadow over the identity of the persons photographed. The role of light and the position of the source of light is important in all my photographs. In five out of six couple photos, the source of light is behind the couples and in the one where there is also a source of light between the couple and the lens, the source of light behind the couple is the most important for the photo. Light travelling to the lens of my camera is thus interrupted by depersonalised couples. Even if they form a clear entity together, the light creates impersonal shadows out of them.

The role of light:

I am enormously interested in the journey of light from its source towards my lens. When there is no strong source of light, say for instance on a cloudy day, I hardly make any photographs at all. When there is a strong source of light I

nearly always shoot directly towards the source of light. However there always has to be something breaking the journey of the light towards my lens, because the objects (a person or a tree) that break the journey of the light make the journey worthwhile. The light behind the object creates a stage for the object, but the object also creates a stage for the light. This is evident with people photographed on the back. Because the source of light is almost always behind the people photographed, the people photographed on the back immediately obtain an aura of self-determinism. They look like people who choose their own path with confidence. It is as if the lens serves as a guide to point into the right direction and the source of light attracts the people. The photos of people who walk towards or who look in the direction of the camera, walk or look towards an empty world. As if there is nothing behind the camera. The people seen on the back walk towards the light, towards a better future.

Objects:

Besides people being singled out in many of my photos, there is also an amount of singled out objects to be distinguished. Most of the time, this object is a lamppost. In these photos the lens is pointed from the bottom of the lamppost upwards directly towards the light of the lamppost. In the background we see the sky or a tree around the lamppost, but we do not see other lampposts or other sources of light. This gives the

objects shot a strong form of autonomy, yet simultaneously a feeling of alienation. They are strong enough to survive on their own, but they are not part of the rest of the world.

When I make a photo where there is both a singled out object and a depersonalised person in the frame, the person becomes as autonomic and as alienated as the object.

The photos on the escalators are a good example of this. One is shot in the subway of NY (Image 7), the other in Utrecht Central Station (Image 8). Both photos are forthwith framed in the same way, shot from the top of the escalator the lens pointing downwards and shot from the centre which makes the space is symmetrical. The way of framing turns both spaces into a closed space, only available to the object, the person and the photographer. It is like the person is been captivated for a moment by me in that space. The one in NY, we see him on the back, the one in Utrecht we see him on front, yet we cannot see his face. They are impersonal bodies, trapped in a closed space that is just as autonomic and alienated as they are.

The Moment:

I have a great desire to become a part of the moments I photograph. However I can only function as a distant observant, instead as a participant. I am conscious of this and therefore I hardly come close enough to capture an image of a sharp face, and if I do come close enough I make sure

there is a strong source of light behind the person which makes his/her face ambiguous. The distance of the photographer with the subject enables the viewer to observe the moment of someone else without intruding. That is why in so many photos people are seen on the back; the photographer can only capture their moment, walk behind them in their road towards the future and can never become an active participant. The light behind the people creates a special atmosphere around the moment, as if it amplifies the importance of the moment. The framing, the source of light all create something extra, as if the photographer is present of a turning point of his subject without interrupting.

Conclusion:

The light that shines from the sun or lamppost can be seen as a spotlight for the people or object to make their moment seen by the world, yet the people or object are also a stage for the source of light, because they break the journey towards the lens. The use of light by me changes the person or object from an unseen person to a reference of a human being captured in, which seems, an imported moment of their life; the light creates depersonalised figures in a phantasm environment or creates shadows in an alienated space out of them. However the role of light is ambivalent, because although light presents the people a stage to be seen by the world, light also makes them depersonalised. The photographer of these images, me, can

only be a distant observer of people who I have no facial recognition of, I can never become an active participant of the world of my subject. I can only capture as a depersonalised subject in a closed alienated space.

Connection with previous practice

When I made the above analysis of my own work, it was at the end of my week vacation on Schiermonnikoog. The first two days my girlfriend was accompanying me and we shot the short film, with ourselves as the only actors in the film. After writing the above mentioned analysis, I realised that all these aspects present in my photography, are present in this film. Most of the shots made of my girlfriend are of her back (Image 9), and the ones that are in front, I use light in a way that you cannot see her face clearly. The role of light is again very important, it makes the main character depersonalised and unclear to the audience, the light is most of the time behind the actor and the lens points directly towards it (Image 10-11). The framing creates an autonomic, alienated person out of my main character. When I changed my project towards observational films, the above mentioned facets remained valid. Even when I filmed my father, I used light to create a shadow out of his body. This transformed his body into a vulnerable shadow image of someone I regard as untouchable in a way. My mother is also depersonalised or there is a 'gekraste'' window between her and the camera or she is filmed

on her back. Again my role is limited to a distant observer who can only portray the aging bodies of his parents from a certain distance, without facial recognition. I can't play an active role in their aging I can only notice it and capture it, as my way to preserve it. Thus changing to observational filmmaking seems as a logic change, because it was always present in working methodology.

Why

I believe that in my previous work I wanted to portray the ambivalence nature of our society. This can be shown in shots of our infrastructure, buildings, public space and by human interaction with public space or by the interaction between humans. When I look at my work before my observational pieces, I see within each shots or within the combination of different shots a nature of ambivalence arising. I want to portray this with a few examples of stills from shots that I sense double emotions simultaneously.



Vulnerable & powerful



Distant, cold & warm



Cold, hard, but beautiful

In his book 'Sculpture in time' Tarkovsky speaks about Leonardo da Vinci's painting *portrait of Ginevra Benci*, that he used as an example for one of his scenes in his film *The Mirror*.



'The picture affects us simultaneously in two opposite ways. [...] It is not possible to say what impression the portrait finally makes on us. It is not even possible to say whether we like the woman or not, whether she is appealing or unpleasant. She is at once attractive and repellent. [...] It is possible for us to see any number of things in the portrait, and as we try to grasp its essence we shall wander through unending labyrinth and never find the way out. We shall derive deep pleasure from the realisation that we cannot exhaust it, or to see the end of it. A true artistic image gives the beholder a simultaneous experience of the most complex, contradictory, sometimes even mutually exclusive feelings.'

Now I'm not implying that my work is of the level Tarkovsky speaks about, I'm merely writing it down in order to gain a better understanding of what I see in my own work. I think this ambivalence make the actual shots strong, but because they don't convey a clear story together the value of this ambivalence decreases. This is because the red thread of the story I wanted to convey is not clear enough to me. In my observational pieces the red thread is immensely clear. Regarding the film depicting the aging bodies of my parents, there are also opposing emotions evoked. On the one hand it is a beautiful portrait of how the bodies of two young seniors look like on the other it is a portrait of their fear of the

son for their aging bodies and him being afraid that their bodies won't last long anymore.

'*Mirror* was not an attempt to talk about myself, not at all. It was about my feelings towards people dear to me; about my relationship with them; my perpetual pity for them and my own inadequacy-my feeling of duty left unfulfilled.'

As Tarkovsky writes in his book he was criticised because *Mirror* was too much of a self portrait. I think the quote above ventilates the mode of address I was looking for.

Annotation; relation to project.

Tarkovsky's *Solaris* is an important inspiration for this project. What I find intriguing about his *Solaris* is the calmness in the relationship between Kelvin and Hari. There seems not to be any urgency in their acts. Kelvin seems unable to become upset about seeing his wife again who killed herself because he left her, maybe because he suffered so much he has lost all emotions. However deep down as a viewer you sense the awareness within Kevin that he has to make a decision if he is going to erase her for good or not? There is one conversation that stands out for me. Hari asks Kelvin when they speak about her suicide: 'Did you think about me?' He replies: 'Yeah, but not always.' I find this intriguing because normally when people ask someone who mourns a loved one they want him to

stop thinking about him/her all the time. But when you are directly confronted with the one you mourned for you would be eager to say that you thought about him/her all the time. Thus I find this nuance in Kelvin's sentence interesting.

I think the scenery in Tarkovsky's Solaris for the effect of alienation works better than in Sodenberghs Solaris, because the form of the spaceship is round opposed to the stretched out one in Sodenberghs. This circle form creates a form of repetition and stagnation. It feels as if they don't progress at all on this ship. This makes their feeling of being captivated in a repetitive relationship with no solution stronger. As I plan to do with the city décor of Rotterdam. By framing my characters as singled out from the other citizens but in a city décor will create an alienated effect.

Steven Sodenberghs Solaris is interesting in its more in depth experience of the interaction between Kelvin and Rheya. Their relationship is much more intense, Kelvin seems to fall in love again with her, while in Tarkovsky's Solaris, Kelvin seems to immediately understand that erasing her is inevitable. By re-falling in love with Rheya, Kelvin allows his own earthly rationale to be replaced with a new Solaris rationale. This is extremely interesting for my project, because my main character has to be convinced that there lies a certain life form in the character he is chasing. We also see scenes from the past of how their relationship on earth

was. This sketches a better image of how their relationship evolved, yet it also makes it a bit too explanatory which I don't find completely necessary.

The relationship of my characters in the Schiermonnikoog film is similar to that of the relationship of Kelvin and Hari. The woman in the red jacket has committed suicide, and the boy is confronted with her in a different reality. Although there are several differences in my film. In my film it's not clear if her presence he is confronted with is a reflection of his own imagination, or she is a new version of her, or if this is his new reality. In the Solaris films she committed suicide, because he left her. In my film the girl committed suicide, because she felt she did not live up to the expectations of her outside world, yet this thought was constructed in her own head. Thus the reason for suicide is not because someone inflicted something bad upon her, but she feels that she inflicts harm upon her beloved ones. The boy in the film wants to be with her, to tell her there is no need to feel sorry forever. She is unreachable to him, which is evident in the fact that he can only see her on the back, because she is not able to accept the fact yet that people are not mad at her and that this thought is created in her own mind. In his search to see her face, he finally meets her on the beach, where they reconcile.

The book Impro by Keith Johnstone has been a eye-opener. The book focuses mainly on improvisational theatre, but the content spreads across wider areas as social behaviour science, education and anthropology. He discusses four topics: statuses, spontaneity, narrative skills and masks and trance. In all four chapters he presents a new perspective on these subjects. He is convinced that our educational systems suppresses our fantasy and creativity, he also believes that everybody is able to come up with a story, he tells about tests that he did with people and they all could tell a story as long as they were convinced they were not responsible for it. He sees the world as a constant display of status power. He believes that actors only have to know their status in a way to create theatre. This is very helpful for me, because in the book he describes how different statuses and status changes is all we need for drama. Thus if I can work with actors/dancers and understand what their status is in relation to each other and where/when this changes than I came create drama, even without dialogue. The book has presented me a different perspective on how to create drama, in working with actors, but also in working with narrative.

The Catcher in the Rye is an important book for me. The endless stroll through New York of main character Holden is very recognisable to me. He distances himself from his direct surrounding and has problems to relate to anyone, besides to

people who are far away (sister Phoebe who is at his parents house which he can't visit). By distancing himself from his direct surrounding he alienates himself in big city. New York becomes the personification of all his problems. The phoniness of the people, their concerns with their statuses and their concerns about how one should act. I hope to portray a similar form of alienation in a big city in my film. Except in my film they are alienated by the way of framing and by the fact no other recognisable figures will appear on screen. Rotterdam will serve the same function as New York in the book does. Cold, disharmonic, desolated and filled with emptiness.

In his essay *The Thing from Inner Space*, Zizek analysis several Tarkovsky's films, among others *Solaris*. There is one passage I find particularly interesting:

'One is even tempted here to formulate this Tarkovskian logic of the meaningless sacrifice in the terms of a Heideggerian inversion: the ultimate Meaning of sacrifice is the sacrifice of Meaning itself. The crucial point here is that the object sacrificed (burned) at the end of Sacrifice is the ultimate object of Tarkovskian fantasmatic space, the wooden dacha standing for the safety and the authentic rural roots of the Home [...] Does this mean that we encounter here nonetheless a kind of Tarkovskian "traversing of the fantasy", the renunciation to the central element whose magic appearance in the midst of the strange countryside at the end of *Solaris* and

Nostalgia provided the very formula of the final fantasmatic unity? No, because this renunciation us functionalized in the service of the big Other, as the redemptive act destined to restore spiritual Meaning to Life.'

As I understand the above written quote is that Tarkovsky's main characters end up sacrificing their most treasured Object; the Object that serves as a base for security, love and harmony. By sacrificing this Object to the big Other, this sacrifice becomes the ultimate sacrifice to the big Other enabling the big Other to allow everyone else to keep their most treasured Objects, in a way to allow the world to keep spinning. I find this analysis from Zizek very interesting because when I analyse my Schiermonnikoog film, there is no sacrifice for the boy. He finally finds her and is allowed to be with her again without losing her again. If their meeting would have happened earlier in the film, there would be room for him losing her again and there would be room for him to make a resolute decision of forgetting her/letting her go (sacrifice, as happens in Tarkovsky's *Solaris*) or to pursue in a new reality to stay together (as happens in Sodenberghs *Solaris*).

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