

Jef Cornelis and the medium of television

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Jef Cornelis is a Belgian director of a vast number of films and programs for the Flemish Belgian Radio Television network (BRT—now the VRT).¹ From 1964 to 1996, he directed more than 100 films on a broad array of topics related to the areas of contemporary culture and art, Flemish landscape and architecture, literature and music. These films and programs are compelling to us today for their experimentation with the televisual format, technique and style, their choice of subject matter and in the way debate and conflict played out. Indeed, many are outrightly prescient. This is all the more surprising for a contemporary viewer, in that they were all produced by a public television network and not independently, something that would be unthinkable today.

Although Cornelis studied at the Film Academy in Amsterdam it was his experience living away from Antwerp, his hometown, and his interest in French cinema at the time that impelled him to pursue film work. He was 22 when he was hired by the Artistic and Educational Programmes section of the BRT in Brussels where he was soon given free rein to make a film about the Park Abbey (*Abdij van Park Heverlee*, 1964) near Leuven, one in a number of prize-winning films that reveal an incisive and probing use of the camera in its dislocation of the subject from centre stage in favour of what exceeded, escaped or was marginal to the subject—a strategy that marked his whole

career. Cornelis was a great admirer of Alexandre Astruc who coined the term *caméra stylo* as defining an auteur theory of filmmaking that would become associated with the cinema of the Nouvelle Vague. He does indeed use the camera to turn architectural details, volumes and passages into the protagonists of his film, as he would with artworks and artistic contexts, thus giving his subjects an autonomy that is pressed onto the viewer.

Cornelis was motivated by a relentless curiosity for the medium of television and its communicative properties and formats combined with a profoundly inquiring mind. Topics ranged from featuring contemporary art and events, architectural heritage, urban planning, bodybuilding, sentimentalism, exoticism, magazine culture, parapsychology, musical associations, cultural policy, intoxication and trance music. Fascinated by different forms of knowledge and social constructs and how they intersect with contemporary culture and society, he explored the televisual format to stage, frame or give free rein to their encounter in a critical and often provocative manner. His desire to foster debate, to render here and now the crux of an exchange, and to bring image and place together lead him to realize live films and programs using satellite links in the 1980s, such as in the series *Icebreakers (Ijsbreker, 1983-84)* and in the marathon six hours film *The Longest Day (De langste dag, 1986)*.

Cornelis was extraordinarily single-minded in imposing his way of working and his concept of how a topic or subject should be broached in film whether the project was assigned or proposed by him to the network.ⁱⁱ He negotiated earnestly to obtain what he deemed essential (multiple mobile camera crews used for sports events; filming from a helicopter; using satellite links; creating a new program format; using different film stock; building unusual film sets; working with a specific technician, scriptwriter or commentator). The success of a project was dependent on the team he was able to put together and its commitment to his approach. Intense and rich intellectual exchanges with a constellation of collaborators with whom he worked repeatedly were crucial to giving shape to the complexity of his framework and discourse. He developed long-term

relationships with the architectural historian and critic Geert Bekaert with whom he made socially critical urban films, the writer Georges Adé who probingly interviewed artists in many of his films on exhibitions and large events, the teacher and curator Chris Dercon, who provided him with scripts and an investigative approach to his subjects and Bart Vershaffel a polemical philosopher who co-hosted the controversial and ill-fated *Container* talk-show series along with the art historian Lieven de Cauter.

Although he was not always successful at realizing his projects—the interviews done by Koen Brams and Dirk Pültau with Cornelis (available at the research website jefcornelis.be) attest to how politics at the network did not always play in his favour—the BRT nevertheless offered him, for over thirty years, by way of a scattering of supportive superiors and colleagues, a space of his own in which he was able to explore the televisual medium as a critical site for experimentation. The BRT at its creation in the early 60s shared the utopian values of public broadcasting endeavours at the time practicing openness and improvisation within a society that was questioning institutions, social conventions and colonial power well into the 70s. Over the years the possibilities for critical experimentation disappeared and Cornelis left the BRT after realizing his last film *The Colours of the Mind (De Kleuren van de geest)* in 1997.

Cornelis refuses the term director to define his work and rightly so. He was a *realisator*: a maker of films and, as a number of critics have stated, a televisual essayist. In his practice he *actively* worked through ideas—something we can hardly say about any television network director today—one that was engaged and took position in relation to the viewer and the conventions and limitations of his medium, and that let conflict, irresolution and indeed failure be constitutive elements of his work.

In the last decade, his work has been increasingly presented and discussed in the context of contemporary art (ironically there is very little place for it in television today): in art academies and museum symposia and in significant exhibition contexts, notably *Inside the White Tube: A Retrospective View on the Television Work of Jef*

Cornelis (ARGOS, 2016), *In Focus: Jef Cornelis* at the Liverpool Biennial (2014), *Barely There, Part 1* at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (2011) and *Are You Ready for TV?* at MACBA Museu d'art contemporani (2011, Barcelona). Many of his programs do indeed address contemporary art, artists, exhibitions, cultural policy and events and are, from today's perspective, significant for what they reveal about exhibition making, artistic ethos, and the politics of events. However, this work should be experienced and studied in the context of Cornelis's entire output particularly by artists, curators, academics and the wide community of cultural workers because of how he opened up for himself, and others, a space for a counter-practice within the communicational technology of his time.

NOTES

ⁱ Extensive information on and analysis of Cornelis's work for television is available online at ARGOS, Centre for Arts and Media (Brussels), which has all of Cornelis's television archive for viewing www.argosarts.org. In the winter of 2016, ARGOS presented the exhibition *Inside the White Tube: a Retrospective View on the Television Work of Jef Cornelis* curated by Andrea Cinel

ⁱⁱ See the interviews collected by Koen Brams and Dirk Pültau : <http://jefcornelis.be/interviews.php> and particularly "No Question that Television Equals Politics" on the battle to realize the series *Container* : http://jefcornelis.be/interview_06.php.