

SIGNALEMENT

Henk de By

translation: Misha Donat

As my former chief of division, Welk von Schnomm, used to say, "Macho, Macho, always with his head in the clouds!"

Even at the time when my regiment consisted of only thirteen men, I had four of these men shot for mutiny.

To celebrate the day I took an aperitif, leafed through a few newspapers, and tried to imagine what Schnomm would have said if he had read them. "These Christians", he would have said, "these Christians, who would have expected it of them?"

Rather, we will accomplish this military duty happily and with a clear conscience for our state and our people.

Defence is the citizen's duty.

Free competition for the arms industry.

The German armed forces of the future.

The complete Christian will be the most useful soldier.

An unconditional "Yes" to German armament.

No divine instruction against armament.

The soldier's right - no hollow phrase.

The politician's duty.

Whoever really wants to convey this awareness to the German people in the duty of peace or the eventuality of war will be able to lead the young people to the barracks and give them the leaders who will win their trust.

To be the hammer or the anvil...

It was not the soldier that Jesus told to take up another profession, but the prostitute, thereby very clearly showing that Jesus recognised the necessity of soldiering.

Inn would be the right wife for me, but since she has been divorced seven times she is sceptical about the idea of marriage. Also, we are worlds apart: she comes from a strictly Protestant family, and I from a strongly Catholic one. All the same, the figures tie us symbolically together, since she has been divorced seven times, I have been wounded seven times.

An important visitor – get dressed quickly!

General von Machorka-Muff, welcome to the capital.

I nominate Colonel Erich von Machorka-Muff as brigadier general.

But, Minister, the uniform?

It was hanging there, covered in decorations.

Jean-Marie Straub, film-maker. Born in Metz, in France, on 8 January 1933. Studied at the universities of Strasburg and Nancy. Directs a film club in Metz. 1954: first project for a film biography of Bach. Leaves that year for Paris. Meets and assists Abel Gance, Alexandre Astruc, Jacques Rivette, Jean Renoir, Robert Bresson. Approaches Gustav Leonhardt for the Bach film, and talks to Heinrich Böll about the project.

Meeting with Danièle Huillet, whom he will marry.

1958. Called up for military service in Algeria, he flees to Germany. In Munich he continues his research into Bach.

While reading Heinrich Böll, he rediscovers his own anger at the rearmament of Germany.

He finances 'Machorka-Muff' himself, taken from Böll's short story 'Bonn Diary'.

In the following extract the recently promoted Erich von Machorka-Muff inaugurates an institute named after a marshal who fell into disgrace because he lost only 8,500 men in battle, whereas Hitler's strategists had calculated that if he had been courageous the losses would have been 12,300 men.

But today it can be proved, and I am prepared to lay the material in front of the public, that the army under our honourable marshal lost 14,700 men at Schwichi-Schwaloche. I repeat: 14,700 men. It can, then, be shown that his army fought with bravery, and his name has been cleared.

The foundation stone contained a photo of Hürlinger-Hiss, and one of his epaulettes. And we went to a solemn service in the cathedral.

There, Inn acknowledged in a colonel her second, in a lieutenant-colonel her fifth, and in a captain her sixth husbands.

Your eighth will be a general.

You came to Germany.

Yes.

Do you consider yourself now a French film-maker, or a German, or international?

No, I don't know. I think one can't be an international film-maker, it's very bad. What kills the cinema is co-productions: as soon as you try to make an international film you make a bad film. I think cinema is the truth found in what is specific. I think the more specific a film is, the more it is firmly rooted, the greater the international audience it can have. The more German a film is, the more international it is. But if you try to make an international film, you only end up making something of no interest.

The work of Heinrich Böll also forms the basis of his second film, 'Nicht versöhnt'. Straub didn't film Böll's novel, he made an autonomous film in which it is as though the reality and truth hidden in the novel were laid bare.

Straub's rigorous, almost ascetic style has engendered some vehement discussions.

He seeks authenticity. Not actors performing a text, but non-professionals reciting it. No dubbing, but the original sound.

*This Frenchman makes German films as no German could. An extract.
A reunion after twenty years of two classmates, two mentalities:
Schrella, who fled Germany in 1942 for political reasons, and Nettlinger, whom
Nazism and the war have led to high office.*

Chicken.

I'll take the entrecote.

And smoked salmon?

No, thanks.

I'll have it. You're missing something really delicious.

To drink?

I'll have Beaujolais.

Beer.

Ruthless political hatred between schoolfellows; persecution, interrogation, hatred drawing blood – but twenty years later it is of all people the atrocious persecutor who rescues the returning refugee from jail.

I'd be sorry if you thought I doubted the sincerity of your motives and feelings. I don't even doubt your remorse. But the roles you played then and play today are the same.

Perhaps you don't know what I did for your sister.

You protected Edith?

Yes. Vacano wanted to have her arrested. He put her on the list again and again, and again and again I struck her name off.

Your good deeds are almost more frightful than your misdeeds.

And you are more merciless than God.

We are not God, and can lay no more claim to his mercy than to his omniscience.

Are you by any chance going to let that marvellous salmon go back?

Of course –

But you can't...

Listen to what the son of a waiter has to tell you:

a really fine man never submits to the tyranny of waiters.

By the way, is Vacano still alive?

Of course, he's only fifty-eight, and – he's one of the in-corrigible ones.

And you?

If you could only understand me, I'm a democrat, a democrat by conviction.

What became of Trischler?

Trischler?

Old Trischler who lived in the lower harbour. Don't you remember Alois either, who was in our class?

Oh, now I remember.

We searched for Alois for weeks without finding him, and Vacano himself interrogated Old Trischler, but he got nothing out of him, nothing at all, nor out of the woman. – The district down there was often bombed.

Good God, what's the matter, what are you going to do?

Would you please have this wrapped for me so that the fat doesn't leak out?

Certainly – the potatoes too, sir?

No, thank you.

Would you rather I killed you? I can't stand it any longer.

Reactions to 'Nicht versöhnt' after a screening at the film museum in The Hague.

We'd like to have some opinions on the film by Straub.

It has nothing to do with Böll's book.

But do you find the film interesting?

No. You shouldn't make a film of a book like that.

In itself, the film could have been good, but not with this scenario. It's a failure.

Very compelling. And if one has read the book, perfectly understandable.

I read it five years ago, and it brought it back to mind perfectly.

A director shouldn't allow himself to render a film incomprehensible. To me, the film is incomprehensible.

The great force of the film is that the events unfold on different levels, which gives it another dimension.

You could say that the film isn't restricted to the screen, but, because it makes leaps in time, an original world appears.

There's one element that attracted me, but I was put off when I noticed it was played in a very theatrical style. There's no *mise en scene*.

Why this monotonous diction? I didn't understand it. Perhaps it was deliberate, it's possible.

You need time to appreciate it, but at the same time I have the impression that it made a basically simple problem quite complicated. To me, this is a straightforward story.

You weren't bored?

No, not at all.

It's oppressive. The atmosphere is... One is plunged into something which seizes you by the throat, but one doesn't know what it is. As far as the complexity described in the programme and in the presentation of the film goes, it didn't bother me. The transitions are less complicated than I thought.

For many, the film and the book have a difficult relationship.

Are the book and the film complementary?

No. I think it's better not to have read the book.

The book and the film have their own identity.

But this relationship provokes a new scandal:

Böll's publisher, Witsch, takes out an injunction to have the film destroyed.

Straub seeks refuge in Switzerland with the film, and presents it at festivals where Nicht versöhnt wins many prizes – among them from a jury that includes Pasolini, Joris Ivens, Bertolucci and Godard.

For many, as we have just heard, the problem is that Straub doesn't respect chronological continuity.

The past becomes the present. Time is stopped.

What is the reasoning behind this peculiar chronology?

It's simply a film about a present-day family, a German family of citizens living today, and because of something, let's say political, although I don't like the word, they simply become aware. And this awareness comes from the fact that they become conscious of a continuity, and that what was called Nazism – in fact, to describe it provocatively, didn't exist. They become aware that it existed a long time before, and that it germinated in society, and that because this continuity was there, and because in Germany, unlike in Italy, for example, it wasn't purged from within – the Italians hanged Mussolini – and that's important: they freed themselves from fascism with violence, albeit very late, but they freed themselves.

And in Germany this liberation came from outside. So what existed at that time cannot totally have disappeared.

Enno Patalas, editor-in-chief of Filmkritik magazine. Since Straub is one of the young German film-makers we asked him about the situation of the young cinema in Germany.

Is there a new young German cinema?

In any case there is a young German cinema, insofar as that for the first time since the war there are young directors. Until two years ago, the people who made films were more or less the same as those who had made films during the war and before the war, and almost no new faces appeared. And that has changed in the last two years. At the end of this year, in the space of two years, we have had perhaps twenty first-time directors.

In what way does Straub belong to this young German cinema?

On the one hand, I see him as a forerunner of it, because the two films he has made, which are not feature-length films – one of them lasts half an hour, the other not quite an hour – were made before this new German wave came into being, and did very badly commercially, they were hardly shown at all. One of them was shown as a supporting programme, and the other, longer, one, 'Nicht versöhnt', was hardly shown at all. Then, meanwhile, when all the others came out with their films, Straub could no longer work; and now he is a hope for the future. He belongs both to the prehistory of the young German cinema, and to its future. But in that time when all the others brought out their films, he couldn't work.

Last year, Jean-Marie and Danièle Straub, thanks to help from other film-makers and from critics, at last succeeded in persuading the Kuratorium junger deutscher Film and a producer to finance the Bach film.

In mid-1967, shooting began. Everything had been scrupulously prepared: locations in West and East Germany, the choice of the best musicians, hundreds of authentic costumes, technical material.

You are Joachim Wolf, the producer of the film. What is the film's budget?

The budget of this film is around 600,000 marks.

Is that a lot for Germany?

It's relatively little for a film like this, which is being shot with very good musicians who normally command high fees. But out of respect for Mr Straub, it was possible to produce the film for this sum.

I think you also know that he did everything to make this film possible.

Yes, Mr Straub is one of the few people who, once they have started a project, really take it seriously. He was in no way tempted to make something else because this film was postponed for so long before it could be realised. In this regard, he's a complete ascetic. He lives very simply, and survives...

What do you mean by "simply"?

In the last years, while it wasn't possible to make this film, he lived from translations, put a lot of his own money into the preparation of the film. Doesn't drive a car, for instance, has no telephone, lives together with his wife in a single-room flat in Munich. Which isn't a reason to feel sorry for him, and I think Mr Straub would be the last person to make any demands for himself.

But he lives for the film.

He only lives for the film, and you could say that the film is Straub, and Straub is the film. And the same goes for his wife.

The starting-point of the Bach film is the requirement not to use the music as a background, but, as Straub says, to present it as aesthetic material.

The story is narrated by Anna Magdalena, Bach's second wife, played by Christiane Drewanz, herself a musician.

I had a new little clavier book, which Sebastian had started for me with two new suites.

And for the Michaelmas fair of the following year he had such a suite engraved in copper as the first Partita of a clavier-practice. It was the first composition that he had printed. He then published such a Partita every year, up to five, which he had printed together with a sixth as Op.1.

In addition to music and Anna Magdalena's chronicle, short episodes in Bach's life are reduced to "moments" between the musical sequences.

The preparation of one of these moments, No.106 in the script:

The central figure is Gustav Leonhardt, who plays Bach.

Straub doesn't want to make him into an actor, he doesn't want any accents or expression in the text.

Here, too, he seeks complete authenticity.

Once again, yes.

At the beginning you were..., you were more free before.

Yes, it's difficult.

Again.

It is also called *bassus continuus*, or according to the Italian endings...

Your hand, in any case, has to stay there.

Which one?

The left.

And the right too.

It is also called *bassus continuus*, or according to the Italian endings *basso continuo*, because it continuously plays, while the other voices pause now and then, although nowadays...

And at *pausieren* one feels that you tried something natural.

I wasn't trying to be naturalistic.

I wouldn't like to have that.

I have the impression that you want to give us the impression that you're doing that in a naturalistic way.

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That can also be ironical. A mixture of defiance and irony.

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Thanks. Stay there.

The film crew is international. The sound engineer is French, the lighting cameraman and operator are Italian. And since it is all filmed in direct sound, and the microphones must be invisible, everything has to be placed with great care. Straub's framing, as we have seen from extracts, is characteristic of his style. It is static, deliberate, without tension.

Almost all the pieces of music, even if they last from 4 to 7 minutes, are filmed in a single shot. The visual aspect serves only to strengthen the film's reality, which is to say the music.

Your left hand – is it going to stay like that, or do you have another solution? I mean, I have nothing against it.

OK, let's leave it like that.

But at the beginning, in any case, you can stay like that, or find another solution.

And at the beginning, in any case, I'd like what we found before.

Between the takes, an interview with Leonhardt about his first, and no doubt last, role in the cinema.

My first question:

How does a musician of such wide renown find himself in a film?

It was a big surprise, I have to say.

Because a director unknown to me, who was Straub, seemed to have chosen me as the musician best suited to play Bach.

And his choice was based on listening, ten years ago, to all the musicians who play the organ as well as the harpsichord, and also direct an ensemble.

Did you have anything to do with the choices of music and the responsibility for the music?

No, the pieces were all chosen by the director. But their performance is all in my hands. And the number of players in the ensemble interested me a lot both for historical and musical reasons, because it's exactly the number that Bach had. So for me it was a touchstone to be able to hear what Bach had imagined.

It's not true to say that Bach wasn't able to hear what he had imagined. We know the ideal number of musicians he wanted from his writings.

Which was respected here?

Precisely respected, yes.

A question about the wig and the costume for Bach. Do they still feel strange?

No, they've become quite normal. The first time you see your colleagues in costume it's strange, it makes you laugh, but the second time you get used to it.

Above all when we play music together, it helps. No, it's become completely normal.

Is it important to be so intensely wrapped up in Bach's life, and not just in the music?

It's important, even if I've never had the impression of playing 'Bach': I do it as a musician, but there is an element of unity. Everything you see in the film, the surroundings, the old instruments, and the costumes and the spoken texts, there is an element of unity, and everything was done in continuity – there was only one interruption in the recordings – and that element of unity was an important factor.

I hope the people who don't know Bach's music will have a revelation...

...from the music?

...Yes, and will discover something of the mentality of a man of the first half of the 18th century.

And will also discover Mr Leonhardt...

As Mr Leonhardt?

...as Mr Leonhardt, because the film increasingly becomes a film about Mr Leonhardt – you could almost say a documentary about Mr Leonhardt.

What I discovered later, and that was also important...

But I wouldn't like it to be taken as a nationalistic declaration – neither anti, nor anything – but I think it is also important that the person, shall we say, personifying Bach, is not a German.

On account of what happened in this country, mainly between 33 and 45. I'm happy that I found a Dutchman.

And what I hope the spectator will discover is cinematic material. That's to say, as I tried earlier to define, and to talk about something concrete, the sequence we shot yesterday – the 25th Goldberg Variation which Mr Leonhardt plays on the harpsichord, is a quite simple, fairly close set-up where we begin on his hands, in banal fashion on the keyboard, and we crane up to his face while his hands remain off-screen.

And we stay on his face, and what I call cinematographic material has to be discovered by the spectators.

One sees someone doing something in front of the camera, in front of a wall that's barely lit, because it's twilight, half-night, and this wall is just as important as the face, but all the same something happens on this face, which to me is pure cinematographic material.

In association with the Cinemanifestatie in Utrecht, where the Bach film had its premiere, Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet came to the Netherlands.

My first port of call in '58 when I left France was Amsterdam. The first city – direct from Paris to Amsterdam. I stayed there for two weeks.

Ten years ago, fleeing the idiocy of the Algerian war, Straub had not yet made any films. He had completed a script, 'Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach'.

Now this combative artist comes to Amsterdam with the film, the result of ten years of thought and work.

Knowing him, I am sure that he and Danièle Huillet have never had the least doubt that their 'Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach' would one day be realised.