

Theatre: screen of reality

Somewhere between a documentary performance and a video installation, the “filmic theatre” produced by the Antwerp-based group Berlin explores and portrays our planet’s cities and towns, revealing like books what is happening in today’s world. After *Bonanza*, the group is now creating *Moscow* in Louvain and Brussels. An interview with Yves Degryse and Caroline Rochlitz.

What was your thinking behind the *Holocene* project – a series of portraits of towns and cities spaced out over a number of years – when you launched it in 2003?

Yves Degryse: We wanted to talk about what’s happening now. Some directors start with a piece of dramatic writing; we start with a city. But the approach is still pretty much the same. Like with a play, we’re seeking to discover universal resonances at the heart of the small stories and people there. The town offers a depiction of life, the diverse human community with all its conflicts and contradictions. The people who live in them are our characters. I [editor’s note: Yves Degryse] had already experimented on a kind of “filmic theatre” with the Flemish group SKaGen, using framing and editing techniques and transposing dialogues from films and documentaries to the stage.

You’ve explored Jerusalem, then Iqaluit – the Inuit capital with a population of five thousand in northern Canada – then *Bonanza* – a hamlet with seven residents in Colorado – and now *Moscow*. How do you choose these places?

We have to feel that there are theatrical elements which have more about them than just superficial detail. A certain distance is also important. We question the city from every aspect, including its clichés. So we have to be able to discover it and look at it with fresh eyes. When we arrive, we’re just like tourists or children. The choice comes from our intuition and a plan. After the chaotic hustle and bustle of Jerusalem, we were looking for silence: we looked north and found Iqaluit on the map. Then we wanted to explore an even smaller community and a friend mentioned *Bonanza*. We found out about it and decided to go there. We try to sketch out the path we’ll take and then see where chance takes us. Ideally we’d like to wait, do some work on a city and then determine the next stage.

How do you go about understanding a place?

We work in three phases. We read up a lot about it to confirm our intuition before going there. Then all three of us go on location for a fortnight. We go to places and meet local people who are going to steer our research and open up new ideas. Then we come back with the entire crew to film over two periods, each lasting a month.

At what point do you come up with the stage form of the show?

From the start of the *Holocene* project, we wanted to study each place by figuring out what was specific about it and then defining the most appropriate aesthetic form and stage tools to reproduce its character. We wanted to remove ourselves from this mania for categorising disciplines because it confines an approach to a means of expression, whereas our expectations, our “states of being” and our creative imaginations change. In concrete terms, the form starts to take shape after our stay on location – so before the first shoot – because the stage device, number of screens, their mobility etc. have a huge influence on the way we film. During the second period of filming, we’ve decided on the form and we can add to the material we’ve collected as required.

How do you choose who you interview?

It all depends on the town. In *Bonanza*, we drank lots of coffee with the residents! To start with, we just talked and then we gradually introduced the camera. We obviously couldn't do it like that in a capital city like Moscow with a population of ten million. The approach is more theoretical. We never do an interview in the street because that's more like reporting or TV. We determine the direction we want our work to go in and the types of "character" who seem to us to represent the city's various social, political, religious and cultural positions etc. We contact people who in turn put us in touch with others. We ask to talk to them for at least an hour. We're often surprised by getting answers that weren't what we were expecting. The discussions follow a precise framework, with questions common to everyone and other, more specific ones. For example with *Moscow*, we asked everyone: "*Is Moscow a circus?*"

You encounter a variety of different points of view in it, like pieces in a mosaic. Do you use the same questions to highlight the divisions and the various different ways of looking at things?

Yes. The portrait is compiled from images of it given to us by its residents. Then we forget about the questions that have guided our work and everything else that seems superfluous to us. The spectator doesn't see what was in place for collecting the words and images.

Being somewhere between documentary cinema, theatre and an installation, could we say that your shows fall within the term "documentary installation"?

Being artists, that's not a question we ask ourselves. We do portraits, whether they're documentary, theatre or dance. We propose devices that play with different dramaturgies and audience relationships. *Bonanza* follows more of a theatrical path, with a narrative development, a beginning and an end. We refuse to think of it as an installation. On the other hand, *Iqaluit* offers a way of going round it as you would an installation: the spectators can choose how long to take and their path through it. The question of genre only crops up before the show: programmers want to know where to put us. Avoiding classification can be an advantage and allows us to present our shows in different venues and on different circuits.

Why start with reality rather than fiction?

Reality is much more surprising than anything we could have invented. Reality is stronger than any fiction. For the portrait of Moscow, we met no end of people who were madder and more inventive than us.

Yet putting together all these elements from reality in turn creates a fiction....

That's done through the editing process.

You could imagine a random process of words being juxtaposed by chance, whereas editing produces meaning. Are you trying to bring out the truth or a truth about a town?

It's impossible. In *Jerusalem*, for example, everybody we met produced a well-argued and convincing opinion. There are several truths. In the end, maybe you'll see our truth....

In documentary cinema, a point of view is expressed on screen through editing. Might the multi-screen device be a formal translation of your idea of a plural reality?

The people we filmed never spoke to one another and each person explains his or her point of view. These words meet for the first time in a fictitious way thanks to the editing process: the person on the right-hand screen appears to hear the opinion of the person on the left-hand screen. The stage device establishes a discussion between the screens and allows the plurality of what is being said to be heard.

Rather than the usual monologue on camera – on screen – you replace it with a form of “polylogue”. Your works bear witness to a variety of simultaneous viewpoints, “speaking” from different places in the space, both literally and figuratively....

How we edit it and how we stage it reveals the difference between our approach and a journalistic one. In *Bonanza*, each screen identifies one of the characters, who can be inactive for fifteen minutes while still being present. The interplay of images establishes the fiction and creates the relationship between the characters. It’s theatre, whereas in a classical documentary it would be impossible to show a forty-minute wait at a checkpoint like we did in *Jerusalem*.

While one screen shows the reality from a single angle, the multi-screen device allows us to see parallel actions off camera or another side of what is being shown in two dimensions. Covering 360 degrees as it does, is it an attempt to capture reality in all its facets, in its entirety?

We film different opinions like a landscape, i.e. by increasing the angles of shots.

This polycentrism is reinforced by the absence of any commentary, which usually has a unifying function in traditional documentaries....

The portrait has to be done by the residents, by the town.... We act as revealers and we consciously leave things out.

How do you choose your devices, for example the large model for *Bonanza*?

We simply started with observation. There were five inhabited houses, hence five screens. The people there had no contact with one another, but they could see each other from their windows. To enable the audience to see their isolation and their proximity, we came up with this model which is a site plan of the hamlet.

And for *Moscow*?

This city evoked the Moscow State Circus for us, doubtless because of childhood memories. Working on the circus is interesting for Moscow: in the past, it was something that produced amazement; today – and we looked behind the scenes – it signifies disillusionment and sadness. We’ve had a big top built, inspired by the domes of orthodox churches. There’ll be a string quartet, a piano and seven moving screens, carried by arms that will be moving the actors around.

You've gone from three screens (*Jerusalem*) to five (*Bonanza*), and now to seven for *Moscow*. Why seven?

It’s a reference to Stalin’s Seven Sisters. These historical symbols, now luxury flats and offices, reveal the clash between the past and the present. We asked people a lot about Stalin because his portrait is still very visible in the streets and parades. Nobody – not even in the artistic world or on the left – said to us: “*Stalin is a monster.*” All of them said that he did very positive things.

After visiting this city, what struck or surprised you in relation to the image you had of it before going there?

How hard the life and the people are. To be someone, you have to be hard. Muscovites aren’t interested in quality of life, just in money and power. They seemed aggressive and brutal to us. Everything is business. We wanted to interview people from the Nikulin Circus and they

demanded ten thousand dollars. “*Circus is business too*”, they told us. The very romantic image of the circus coexists with a business sensibility.

You seem to be showing your opinion, a point of view. What place does this have in your portrait?

Recreating this impression is very difficult because Muscovites change in front of the camera. They're not natural and focus a great deal on their city's image. In fact, we didn't try to show their mentality. It seemed more important to us to show the rise in the pro-Putin Nachi movement which is forming future generations. This will be “our” truth... our urgent need to speak out.

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