

BE GOOD,
IF YOU CAN'T BE GOOD,
BE GOOD AT IT
Boom Boom Boom Boom

Letters/Lettres

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Film Essays/Commentaires
cinématographiques

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For our mothers,
Who lead the way still
And for all women
who write savage thoughts,
who're coarsened by their art,
who practice the art of survival—
This one's for them
For those who've preceded us
and those who'll follow.

A nos mères et à toutes les femmes
qui nous ont précédées.
Et à celles qui viendront.

into their same place with only a few notes or old cards discarded, as the small memories I must force myself to let go of, not knowing if they'll ever be found again in the depository of my mind. Small steps to decluttering my existence. I hope there will be time for more.

MEMORY GAMES

Writing this final letter to you now, at the end of our residency cycle, brings me back to the beginning of our correspondence. Reflecting on time, and its tricks, I'm reminded of the panic I felt when we did the test screening of Ute Aurand and Maria Lang's *Butterfly in Winter* (*Der Schmetterling im Winter*) (2006). Do you remember that?

Almost a year ago exactly, in April of 2019, we had organised with Ute that we could screen the film at Beursschouwburg for our first public encounter of the residency. On stage, at the arts centre, I would read my first letter to you, 'On Personal Politics', and share some thoughts I'd written on *Butterfly in Winter*, we'd screen that film, and you'd share your film *A Tongue Called Mother* in return. It would be an evening of reading, a joint screening of portraits of care, and a conversation between us, moderated by fellow artist Ingel Vaikla, and an intimate audience. It was balanced to perfection in time, 20 minutes of words to 20 minutes of images, 40 minutes of words to 40 minutes of images. I remember your words of encouragement, pre-performance: *Breathe. Slow down. Eyes up. Pause.* Bodily and time-based tips to help keep my reading on par with the other finely tuned (and timed) elements of the night. (Thank you!)

Earlier on that day, however, I was thrown completely off keel. When we received the film, fresh from Berlin, encased in a silver tin, the technician hooked it up to the 16mm projector, and the film began at an awful rate, flickering through scenes, actions of care, faster than I ever could recall! Looking at you in horror, frightened we were damaging the film or playing it at the wrong framerate, I flew off to check the digital version I had stored on my desktop at work, and returned, confused, with my own time-based projections.

Not long after discovering the film in one of María Palacios Cruz's programmes at Courtisane Festival 2017, I had written fondly of it to my father in *Streaming Consciousness*—of that same year:

The film captures the daily routine of a daughter caring for her elderly bedridden mother: lifting her out of bed, washing her down, dabbing her gently dry, moisturising her skin with ointments, clothing her carefully, combing her hair lovingly and tying it away neatly. (...) When she lays her mother to rest, we see the daughter pluck ripe vegetables from their vegetable patch in the garden. Then the rituals begin again, another day.

I was so convinced then, when writing, by my false memory, that the film was slow in composition. I had written:

We watch time passing slowly, inside of the house, as the daughter fastidiously tends to her mother's needs. Day in day out, she repeats these actions devotedly. The vegetable garden, however, is our compass in time as we see the seasons change outside. This cyclical life symbol is then echoed in this portrait of life approaching death, of day becoming night. In this diary of the same, every day is reborn the same, only the world outside is changing.

How had I come to that conclusion in my recollection? It must have been the repetition of the same. That time, although moving fast on-screen, was slowed or congealed by the repetitive structure, by my desire, by my memory. In any case, with the flurry of emotions that came with preparing to be 'on stage', I stored this riddle to solve at a later date.

Do you remember the reception of the film? I recall that someone rushed out of the screening, audibly upset. It wasn't the sound of someone leaving to catch public transport, or leaving to be the first at the bar, or leaving because they were bored out of their wits. It was the sound of someone deeply moved by the scenes of sacrifice on-screen. They (unfortunately) didn't linger to discuss their reaction, outside, restored to calm. However, I did have a number of people opening up to me afterwards, discussing their own relationships to parent-child roles, ageing relatives, care, vulnerability.

Although (or precisely because of the fact that) the film is mostly silent, it made a resounding impact on our audience. As I recall, we didn't talk after the film. It was the epilogue of our evening. And, after it screened, as Ute and Maria Lang weren't there themselves to

talk, the lights went on, and people left the hall. Thankfully, most met us downstairs, at the bar, to fill us up, again, with lightness and laughter for we'd—in fact, I should talk for myself—I'd emptied myself of all my energy and a great portion of emotions, the ones usually reserved for private spheres, which left me feeling empty, yet strangely heavy. The heaviness of deflation, when you feel flat to the floor.

When I'd recovered, I wrote to Ute thanking her for the film. And when sharing with her the strong reactions induced by her film, I couldn't resist confiding my confounded moment in her. She replied: '[It's] very interesting what you write about how you remembered DER SCHMETTERLING [*Butterfly in Winter*] as a slow film!' In her generous return, she unfolded the notion of rhythm in her edits, in her body of work:

When the fast rhythm in my films is discussed, I often say that to experience something very fast or something very slow can be in retrospect the SAME—I want my films to be remembered as ONE—like looking into a glass ball (of a good witch) where everything is seen together at the same time—the linearity is gone.

Sometime later, I had the opportunity to correct my miscalculated experience of time when invited to write on a film in under 250 words for *Sabzian's* Prisma series. I proposed to the editor-in-chief, Gerard-Jan Clæs, to dig out, to extract, some thoughts from my original letter, which was *pages* long (not only on the film, but also on writing by Hito Steyerl, by Virginia Woolf, on the 2016 US election, Brexit, and general political despair...) in order to re-frame this film's time structure and reflect on the strength that's found in capturing fragility, which I'd come to believe more resolutely than ever those few years later. I concluded that time was, in fact, compressed in the edit:

In its stillness, it allows for moments of introspection, or projection, when you swap places with the daughter, or the mother, and question your own nature—your own ability to love, to care or be cared for; your own mortality. As you watch the daughter perform this sacrifice, caring for her mother as she once did for her, you feel the film's silent chords. Time is compressed in *Butterfly in Winter*—sped up by the rhythm of the edit—but its impact is slow-burning.

Do you know this line from Woolf: ‘For heaven’s sake, publish nothing before you’re thirty’? This really makes me laugh! How wise of her! But how restrictive, how contained, also. In a sense, that’s why writers like Sontag are so remarkable. They boldly state what’s on their minds then and there, and feel no qualms in correcting their statements at a later date. In writing, we approach a subject from our subjective experience, which is, surely, subject to change. On time, and subjectivity, Ute wrote to me:

Time exists only in the present moment while seeing a film or listening to music—but the after-effect is timeless... emotions are timeless, memory is timeless. Also, thoughts are timeless. That’s why I like to emphasize when talking about a film on what we experienced while watching it, what was I thinking, which feelings and emotions did I have? What do I remember—but not in terms of images? I like to focus on the whole. I am less interested in what the filmmaker’s ideas/intensions had been...

After Ute pointed to the holistic (filmic) experience of her oeuvre, I was sure that she wasn’t harmed by my miscalculation of her edit. As, in my writing, I had expanded on the film according to my recollection, to what had stuck, its sensations, rather than what really was there on celluloid. Like many of our audience, I, too, had personal reasons for relating to this film, for internalising it, for slowing down the film’s clock, for forgetting its mechanics, its cuts, its ruptures. They became seamless in my mind. The film was, is, like a blanket that I pulled over me. It took me back to my gran’s house, back to her last years, back to watching my mother care for her mother over a slowed, stretched out, and selfless period of time.

The more I get to know Ute’s work, I mean the more times I see her films, I realise I become closer to them, or they move closer to me. Of course, nothing new occurs in the films themselves, but I change. That’s the overwhelming feeling I had when re-watching her film *Kopfüber im Geäst* (*Hanging Upside Down in the Branches*) (2009) recently, after first meeting it some three years ago now. After the passing of both of her parents, she composed recorded fragments of everyday familial life—playing in the snow, sitting and talking around a table, looking at family pictures, visiting a parent at their sickbed—

into a short film of only 15 minutes, with black and white recollections interlaced with colourful memories on 16mm film. About this work, she said: 'I stand as an adult in the midst of childhood feelings, gazing at the disappearance of my family home and the changing relation to my parents' (as cited in the brochure of Courtisane Festival 2017). Only recently did this sentiment, truly, touch home. I had seen the film, without reading about it first, and watched it... impatiently. Perhaps wondering what would happen next, as if there had to be an arch, a narrative, or an event. (A sign of my immaturity in film at that time?) Perhaps I had questioned why I was watching this 'home-movie' footage—something so blatantly private. (A sign of my immaturity in feeling at that time?) I don't recall how I felt, actually. But, in that, precisely, it seems that I didn't really 'get it' then. I do recall that it was silent, and that made me uncomfortable. A friend of ours once said to me that she feels that silent films are violent. It's true that I can remember feeling somewhat unquiet, uneasy, in that experience. Maybe I just wasn't ready for it? Maybe it was, already then, too close to home? In any case, since the first viewing, I watched this film with different eyes now—quieter, less hectic, eyes. Patient eyes. Eyes that have experienced more. This film, in particular, now grabbed hold of me. It made me want to jump off my chair and start to capture the world around me, the people in my periphery, the ones I love, and hold them closer.

LOCKDOWN MOVIES:

Akerman has been another great companion this lockdown. She has been locking her characters in a domestic setting since she turned to filmmaking. Remember *Saute ma ville* (1968)? Young Akerman unravelling in her kitchen? (A familiar sentiment during the first weeks of lockdown.) Or *La Chambre*, the first film she made in New York, in 1972? The 360° panning around her apartment, crossing the still lives of oranges and coffee cups, young Akerman on her bed peeling an apple, and the camera turning and turning until it hits the corner of her room, then, like a pendulum, swings back and forth in the bedroom. It's reminiscent of my gaze during the bargaining stage: should I lie here, circling the room with my eyes, 'being in the moment', just me and my thoughts; or should I try to pin my focus down and declutter my life some more? (It's impossible to calculate what to do when you don't know how long you'll be in confinement. I'd perhaps better leave some messes for later.)

