This is the published version (version of record) of:
De Bruyn, Dirk 2005-01, Putting out of place in its place : an interview with Jan Willem van Dam, Senses of cinema, no. 34, pp. 1-9.

Available from Deakin Research Online:
http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30013246

Reproduced with kind permission of the copyright owner.

Copyright : © Dirk de Bruyn, June 2004
What You Expect From The World Behind You or: Verwar de staat waarin u verkeert (...niet met die van uw omgeving)

by Dirk de Bruyn

Jan Willem van Dam is a Dutch independent filmmaker. He was born in Dokkm, in the Netherlands in 1962 and has made a number of short and feature-length films including What You Expect From The World Behind You or: Verwar de staat waarin u verkeert (...niet met die van uw omgeving) (Netherlands, 2004, colour, video, 150 mins) and Kakaja Zemla (1992, 20 mins, 16mm). Both were shown at the 2004 Rotterdam International Film Festival. What you Expect... had its premiere there and Kakaja Zemla, one of van Dam's first films, also played at the Festival in the “Resistance” program of the larger D-Light retrospective.

Kakaja Zemla is a micro portrait of unfashionable, unwieldy painter, Igor Yaruskin, from Leningrad, during the time of Perestroika. Somehow this quirky redundant subject manages to capture something of the times. The camera work echoes a spent, pared down existence in its washed out, Russian-made and processed film stock. As van Dam accompanies Yaruskin through his local environment, a restless wandering camera manages to come back and stay with its seemingly out of sync subject. Inside the home we seem to be viewing a past that never existed but somehow through the convergence of history, exists now. It is the film's disjointed, menial construction that reinforces this impression. Yaruskin belongs but does not belong at the same time, and like Schrodinger's cat, it just depends when you do the looking.

In What You Expect... ambiguities in form and its relationship to content are further explored. The film subtly plays with the tensions between senses of displacement, belonging and place as they are experienced by those living in and moving through the nation states that constitute the European Common Market today. What is dissected and contemplated is a kind of current euro-tourist state: both as landscape and as a way of being.

What You Expect... captures sisters Manon and Madou Engels on holiday in Tuscany. At times they are in the landscape talking to each other, at other times to the locals or observing some local event. The camera follows them around and at times stops to contemplate the landscape itself. Are we watching a documentary, an essay film, an experimental contemplation, a fiction film? Is it just a travelogue, is it making a political point, is it about memory, about existence? The film hovers in-between to open up a space in such grey areas, this no-man's land. It slumbers in these shadows of form and representation, as you would travelling through Tuscany in summer. Time has stopped, time is irrelevant. It is the landscape that exists. But there are laid back conversations taking place between the film's subjects and between the film and its audience.

This film converses with the territory opened up by such work as Godard's Weekend (as its end-point) and Tarkovsky's Nostalgia (as its echo). A difference is that that was film and this is video, more fluid, like water, finding its level. This Tuscany is the landscape...
in which Nostalgia was shot and there are anecdotes from the locals about their experiences of the Tarkovskys. These revelations are encountered rather than introduced. There is a small overgrown abandoned house where Tarkovsky is supposed to have stayed: a trace of a trace. We are and we are not connected.

The following is an interview with Jan Willem van Dam conducted at the 2004 Rotterdam International Film Festival relating to these films and van Dam's strategies and filmmaking practice in the Netherlands.

– Dirk de Bruyn

* * *

Dirk de Bruyn: To begin, I would like to ask you about your short film Kakaja Zemla.

Jan Willem van Dam: that was shot in Leningrad around the time of Perestroika. Yes, I went off without research, I always wanted to go to Russia and suddenly it was possible. We knew somebody there. And I thought I'm going to make a film no matter how and I'll see what will happen. I wanted to meet people and not be the radical filmmaker from the outside. I also wanted to go inside the houses, meet somebody and get to the soul.

So I met different people who were interesting, and some not interesting, but they didn’t think that much about me making a film with them until I met this Independent Artists' Association of Leningrad. I was at a meeting there and they were happy for me to make a film about them.

There was this whole company of people with the board, the bookkeeper and the president of the organisation. There were seven or eight people in this beautiful Georgian furnished house in Leningrad. The fact was that it was clear that the president was a big man, with a beard, long hair, and he was constantly talking and looking at me and...

DdB: … trying to size you up?

JWvD: Yes. And he said I was welcome to make a film about him also and go to his place and visit and blah blah blah and at the end he also said “Well I've studied psychology and I can see you're a good person and...” all these things that scared me off... (laughs). I mean: you may feel that but you don't have to say it and also not deduce that it's psychology so you can recognise a good person. But they were all there and it was also clear that they cared a lot about money which is understandable because they were in difficult times financially.

DdB: This was right when they were just coming into contact with the West...

JWvD: Yes ... and they've got this little park where they sold art. It was forbidden to sell to western people. So what westerners would do, and it was the trick, was put dollars, of course they wanted dollars, in a newspaper and give it to the artist and take a painting or come back later and get a painting taken by somebody else and brought to the western tourist or dealers.

It was clear people just cared about money so when the board and everybody went upstairs at a certain moment one man remained in the room and I said, what are they doing? Ah, he said, talking about money again. And it was clear to me that he was the guy to make a film with. Igor Yaruskin cared about art, it was clear enough, not about money.

He knew he was in a difficult position also because he was not going to change his style because of the new air. He was always making 18th century west European like paintings and he loved that.

DdB: He makes a statement in the film that he doesn't like Miro and a few other people.
JWvD: Yeah. For him modern art is cold and I added some arrogant pictures of Miro, Malevich and others to accompany his statements: “I don't like Malevich I don't like Picasso etc…”

DdB: Well this is really a complete digression but you've mentioned Malevich and I thought of *The Black Square* when one of the characters in your feature film started to talk about how she only dreamt of black blobs... maybe we can talk about that later.

So how did you go about shooting the short film then, because there are some moments in it where the camera really wanders when he's talking and sort of captures something very fleeting about that run-down landscape. You're also getting something of the personality of the place in what you were doing.

JWvD: I was first with another person who helped me for the first three weeks to get things started... to get the film stock which was also a problem because I had no bobbins which fit in the camera only just little rolls of film...

DdB: Because this is Russian film?

JWvD: Yes, so I had to get some bobbins, and it was hard to get them there but I got a few and then had to put the film from that on the bobbins so I could start filming. But I only had three bobbins. After three weeks the girlfriend I was with in Leningrad went home again, and then I started shooting. It was the first moment and the interesting thing is he feels lost in his own country and I also felt lost. Then you get this same kind of feeling when you shoot in between when he's not in the image that affects and influences you.

DdB: And there was something very vulnerable, even the film stock looked very thin...

JWvD: Well for the most part it was developed in Russia and yeah it gives a special (laughs) ... lost resonance because they used the chemical baths too much, much too long and then the film gets a bit spotted.

DdB: Well it works.

JWvD: It sure does, but I also asked in a laboratory in Holland if they had a list, or examples of mistakes they made so I could see them and maybe ask them to make the mistake but they were really like “Oh no we don't... if you want sepia you can have sepia…”

DdB: And then you go to Leningrad which is one big mistake and everything works out fine. You also had an interesting story about what you had to do to get the film processed in Leningrad.

JWvD: Yeah (laughs), because at first they said it was impossible to process it in one day. I needed it in one day because I didn't have the bobbins and I wanted to also see what I did, of course. So I heard that I had to go to the back of the laboratory and there were all these... they looked like doctors ... they had these high hats, these women, and they would take the film in and give it back to me developed the next day as an illegal transaction. It was then 25 cents per three minutes. If you did it legally it was 50 cents per three minutes.

DdB: Well that's pretty surreal. You've made a few kind of personality portraits. How did you begin with such work?

JWvD: I didn't study or anything. We have something in Holland called the Free Academy where you’re able to learn things yourself and there are some assistants there to help you out if you have a technical problem. So I was there for a few years to learn...
how to work with film. But we wouldn't discuss much what we made. It was a very solitary process. I liked that you were not judged all the time. You could just make your things and develop your own ideas about film. I squatted when I was younger and so I was always living with groups of people. We had a discotheque and you get into this...

DdB: You were part of this young culture that was happening at the time.

JWvD: Because when you live with so many people you also have to find out how to deal with people because you can't always go with it. People were also using drugs and dying or whatever. I had to work out how to place that in my own life so as not to get psychotic or whatever. It's that difficult age from 18 to 28. How to deal with your environment which is so beautiful and the people are so beautiful, but sometimes it's so harsh. How to deal with this harshness. I knew that it would be good to have something, and that of course, became the camera. A tool to make it functional, to help you deal with it.

DdB: So that was a way of you beginning to make sense of your environment using the camera to make sense of it for yourself. This is a very personal use of film. What were those first films that you made?

JWvD: Well the one you saw in Russia was one of the first and then I made two at the same time. The other was about a friend; well it was about a couple who were living together in Amsterdam. I made a film about them and I had a story. It was documentary-like but it was one of the few films where I wrote the lines. I once heard a phone call on radio about a girl who didn't come home anymore because her parents always walking around naked. She couldn't invite people home, she felt bad about that if they were walking around naked. What do you tell your guests? So she had problems with her parents and once she phoned them again and they said come home and it's OK. They convinced her to come home. As soon as she came home she saw they were naked again so she left again (laughs). So I took this girl as an inspiration for the girl in the film because you could see that she also didn't trust herself, the girlfriend of mine. So I used that storyline and my friend had never acted before. I just asked her "will you do it?", she said yes and I asked another friend will he do it? They didn't hesitate. So every time I would give a page with text, they would read it once and just go for it and they never made mistakes. I wasn't interested in the acting... acting for me is also that I have to see the real people and we all know they act.

DdB: Everybody acts in a way, but not in a way that actors act. Well I could see that that could be a rehearsal or an issue also relevant for the film What You Expect From...
The other thing you said about the process of working, which sounds like what Godard has done in the past... he's worked with his actors in this way. Is he one of your influences?

JWvD: There are a lot of influences. Certainly also Russian and Asian cinema. That's why I like to jump in my films to see if it's possible to show admiration for different kinds of films. Because sometimes people really think you can't.

DdB: I now think in innovative film we've moved from this place where people are the first to do something to a place where it's more the issue of how you put different things together and how creatively you can integrate different influences. That seems part of your project. About What You Expect From..., could you say a bit about the planning you had to do or the financial issues about making it happen?

JWvD: Yes, we've got a few funds in Holland and there is a small art fund in Rotterdam and they have supported me for ten years. They have the idea you should support people for a long time. It's not big money. The last time was the most I got which was 15,000 Euros, but it's very good because they support you for a while. They say OK we want to see you develop something and not all the time pick a new person. They do this if the plans are good.

DdB: That's right, in some places there's that issue where they support someone for a certain time and when they get to a certain age that's the end and they have to find a
new way and they've also be weaned into a certain way of working and they have to start again completely.

**JWvD:** But in this way it's also like they don't give money to too big projects. So if you keep it small and it's sure that they also have the feeling of an influence or it has something to do with their art fund then it's OK but if it's a project of 500,000 Euros they won't pay 10,000 Euros because it's no use. They are not the sort of films that can be produced with them I mean. Then you've got the Rotterdam Film Fund, which is an economically based film fund. An economical fund gives you money if the plan is OK with another fund, if you also get money from another fund. They don't talk about concepts. Then you have to spend 100% of the money you get from the Rotterdam Fund in Rotterdam, as well as 50% of what you get from any another fund. And when you make a film in Italy, it's not that easy to do. But I had a Rotterdam cameraman, Rotterdam sound person and did a lot of post and pre production in Rotterdam. So I spent it, and I worked with a lot of people, paid the cameraman a hundred Euros a day. Normally they cost 500 or a 1,000 Euros a day. I also worked with a lot of filmmakers.

**DdB:** So there is a community that you feel you're a part of. How did you become part of it, and what's it like?

**JWvD:** It's not like the New Wave, it's not like we agree about …

**DdB:** … aesthetically about things?

**JWvD:** Yeah, it's not like a Dogma thing, there are no rules. Everybody makes their own films and we help each other, for example, we work cheap for each other. We still feel like we're not doing it for the money. We're doing it for the filmmaking.

**DdB:** And that's been pretty healthy?

**JWvD:** That's good.

**DdB:** So would you say that the more independent filmmaking in Holland is in quite a healthy state, there are quite a lot of things being done?

**JWvD:** In a way but, then again, where's the public?

**DdB:** Well you had a full house.

**JWvD:** But that's at a festival. If you see how the public in Holland is towards independent cinema then it's very low interest.

**DdB:** Well it's quite true anywhere really.

**JWvD:** That's true but in Germany, for instance, there is another atmosphere. People watch experimental films; they're used to strange stories which present art in another way, different to the art house films of today which are for the most part about the man and woman problem. And you think well, we don't need that anymore or that's just for other cinemas.

**DdB:** No right. So that's about the third or fourth time an idea is presented, those films. They are not ground breaking.

**JWvD:** I'd like to come back a bit on the funding. When I asked for money from the Dutch Film Fund, before they didn't have any trust in me as a filmmaker. But then there was this new Commission and suddenly I was a good filmmaker: “he can edit … he can film … he is good… they said”. Luckily there's now also a special experimental fund within the Fund. But the first time they were ready to fund one of my films then the board said no, he can't make a two and a half hour film because how is it going to work... how are you going to keep the tension or how is he going to tell the story?

**DdB:** Which are all very conservative ideas.

**JWvD:** And it's strange that there's an experimental part which is called Investigating...
or Experimenting Film. Well I'm investigating time also and film. So I wrote a letter saying it wouldn't be longer than one hour. I got the money and I didn't keep my promise.

**DdB:** Hopefully they're happy with the result.

**JWvD:** They don't think anything about it, not the board. I mean the commission, I know they like those things but the board and the people they really don't care.

**DdB:** Lets talk about *What You Expect From...* You mentioned that you were investigating time. I mean it is a long film but I thought it was about slowing time down. I noticed in your introduction you said that it could have been just one moment. There is this level where you're presenting a state of mind, almost a state of existence. What sort of planning did you do for that film?

**JWvD:** I did research in Italy. It's also influenced by the fact that I'm not making one film at a time. They always have to do with each other, they are connected. Before this film I made one about a priest. It was about philosophy and religion, and a person with one truth, which a priest is: *De geestelyke verovering van de wereld* (2001). After that film I also felt like it had to do with beauty because more priests are also talking about life after life or life after death. And they talk about it like, yeah, I don't believe that there is anything (laughs). So a film can act as an eye opener, in this case that priests are also unsure.

**DdB:** They're living the same life we are.

**JWvD:** It is in that context that the film with girls began. I knew one of the sisters already for a long time.

**DdB:** So they are sisters?

**JWvD:** Yes they are real sisters... and she has this strange view on life which is a bit detached from things. She listens, but she always makes her own stories in a kind of way and then she listens to you all evening and then she will make up her own mind about what you've talked about.

**DdB:** And it doesn't correspond with what you've said?

**JWvD:** No and this dis-attached feeling from the world is what I wanted to inspect. To see that you're there, and at the same time you're not there. But it's got this beauty. Also not caring about understanding it but taking it.

**DdB:** Is it like a dissociated state?

**JWvD:** In a way. But then without the physical or spiritual problems.

**DdB:** Right, without trauma maybe.

**JWvD:** It's a state of mind or state of being.

**DdB:** It's not an escape or anything?

**JWvD:** No. In their case their mother also said it's really how they are. While other people when they watch the film sometimes think the girls have these stupid little philosophies which is childish or whatever. Well that's how they really are and that's how people also are and it's in a way a non-cynical film, it's how they talk.

**DdB:** So you got these two women and you gave them certain directions?

**JWvD:** Sometimes when we did movements with the camera I would say we'll walk from there to there and you from here to here. But most of the time I'd put it all in a documentary situation or real situation like the petrol station or in the restaurant or wherever. And they would just be there being filmed.
What You Expect From.

DdB: And why did you pick those locations?

JWvD: Ah, they're the places I came across during research. Sometimes different people were there. The philosophical/religious group of people were there unexpectedly. They got in the film because they were there and I knew I wanted to do something with such people, with people who have some, offer some counterpoint to the dis-attachment in the film by the way they are trying to explain the world.

DdB: But there was one question I thought was very strong for the film when that woman asked, what's the impetus for turning the everyday or the mundane into something interesting. That question went to the heart of the film, and then I think the man sort of came up with the idea about the incubus and so on. I thought he was very detached from her question, which maybe gets into that relationship again you talked about with one of the sisters. What is the difference in the personality of the two sisters?

JWvD: But they both have an interpretation of the situation. I put them somewhere and they trusted me and they trusted the situation. They didn't feel like they had to react to things, they just went into it smoothly and also when they cried, or when one of the sisters cries, it happens at such a moment and it's just a moment, there's no real reason for it. There can be hundreds of reasons but it's just what happens.

DdB: Well then there's that metaphor of a butterfly that comes through that lives for a day or three days. It's talked about in a very matter of fact, mundane way. There is this idea of a fleeting life. In our terms, it's also a speeded up life. Yet the film is two and a half hours and it's really stretched out and it's really slowed everything down...

JWvD: Mmm. Mmm. Mmm.

DdB: So Tarkovsky comes up in the film. There was a house that he used. One that he had owned and there were things being said about his stay and people had some contact with him. There was some kind of subtle myth around the place of this presence, or past presence. There was some talk about him having died two years after he bought this house. Did you know that that was there before you went?

JWvD: During the research I heard about it.

DdB: You didn't know about the house did you?

JWvD: I didn't know about the house no. Also it was very hard to find because nobody knew it exactly and then it was in a rainy period and they said you can't get there. At a certain moment at the end of the day we found it. We couldn't get to it because there was all this jungle. It was totally covered and then we went back the next morning and we were all working to get through this jungle of plants to get into the house. I was together with a production leader and he was doing the research. He's also a filmmaker and loves the work of Tarkovsky so when you enter that house it feels like there is still the atmosphere of a Russian family (although they may have never really lived there). In fact there was only a porcupine living there. But it's like that way in the film. I always notice that when you talk to people or whatever some person gave their hand to the pope. Somebody knew this terrorist Reid with his bomb shoe or whatever. If you live in a small society with few persons it always has lines to the bigger world. The known world, or a world that has it's own myths. And these things live next to each other in a very interesting way, it's just there.

DdB: Well Tuscany sounds like an interesting place too, it seems like a remnant of a way of existing between people that came out in the film. Everyone's got their own little area, and this idea of the personal and ownership. Someone in the film actually
mentions that it's the place where the idea of the Republic came from. I don't know if that's true or not, but I did like the way that people seemed to relate to each other there, that you entered something essential.

JWvD: Yeah, somebody asked last time if I put it there on purpose or left it in, the part about the Republic, and I'm sometimes not honest or I don't like questions after the film. So I said well, for me it's clear, if it's in there it has importance. So then I said well it didn't matter, but then I knew I was lying which I hate...

DdB: Yes. Interesting. So how much did you shoot? How long did you go down there for?

JWvD: Six weeks. We researched three weeks and I did some shooting at the research stage. And then six weeks, which was three weeks with cameraman and crew and three weeks with the girls there. I did that shoot.

DdB: And who was there when you did that shoot, there was you, the girls, and who else?

JWvD: The cameraman and the sound ... and the production was sometimes there.

DdB: Now the other thing I hadn't thought about till now. Some of those shots in a way sort of reminded me of Godard's Weekend. Doing this sort of travelling, you know. It's like you came across some of these people and they became part of the film. And there's also this question: what's a documentary? Is it just about making films about the surroundings, about moods? These are questions that come up for me.

JWvD: About natural situations...

DdB: But you see it's not clear it's a documentary, is it a documentary? What is it? (laughs)

JWvD: (laughs) Yeah, I see it as a documentary, in a way. Because when I ask people to act or to do something like the phone call with the guy who talks about the scooters being broke. I don't give them lines and text so he himself makes a very long conversation and there's nobody at the other end of the line.

DdB: Oh isn't there?

JWvD: No. So you can see his thoughts about film...

DdB: Yeah, yeah ...

JWvD: In that sense it's documentary, it's showing how people think you should act for a film.

DdB: That reminds me of a story in India. Friends of mine did some filming there and the problem they had was that every time they turned a camera on everyone froze. They thought they were taking a photo and they had a certain way of thinking about being photographed.

JWvD: Yeah, so in that way the guy who chose the film for the festival he also made it because of what I wrote about it, that it's also an essay and it's about film and it's about documentary, it's about acting and so on.

DdB: It's about time?

JWvD: If the girls were more a subject of a study. There's not really any development in the characters. We don't get to know too much about them, hardly anything in a way.

DdB: But there are things, I thought it was important when they were dancing. Things started to happen there and then also when they talked about their dreams one of them talked about these things that had happened to her. The other one talked about blocks
of black. That for me confirmed certain things I was reading into the way they were responding to the situation. At times I felt there were these performances from the locals happening, which are natural, and the girls were there almost as spectators. Sometimes they felt comfortable, and sometimes they didn't. You could see they were reacting to that.

JWvD: Mmm. Mmm. Mmm.

DdB: And that also made me think of this whole idea of tourism too. On one level it was like a holiday. What can you say about that?

JWvD: The plan also started like that when we went to Tuscany because, four or five years ago, they were on holiday in that area. Not exactly that area, it was a bit closer to Umbria. But when I heard that, and knowing them both in the meantime, I could see them walking there, and being in their state or the way they were, or the way they are and this immediately brought up this idea I had to do that as a film, and see what is possible. But I also wanted… I could have made a real documentary …

DdB: Real in inverted commas …

JWvD: Real inverted … yeah (both laugh) without knowing the situation if you could call that a documentary, that you don't know. That you just follow or see what is happening. But I also knew that I wanted to tell things with the cadre or the image and with colours and put people in the situation.

DdB: At times I thought why the two – you could have made the film without having them there. But having them in there, the way you did it, added a degree of honesty about it. The presence of the camera and all that and the idea of the film was much clearer because they were there.

JWvD: But more people have said why are the girls in there? For me they make the film in the sense that people react to them and not because they feel so at ease, and they're not. I also thought about it this morning when I woke up that they never did something strange towards the camera. They never reacted to it like 'whaaah' or make a strange end to a scene or whatever.

DdB: The camera didn't react to them much either, although you did follow a couple of times one of the girls walking towards the other one.

JWvD: Mmm. But the strange thing is, in 40 hours of filming, that at least once they would release their tension – that the camera's there and just make a strange movement, or do something funny but they never reacted to it in that way.

DdB: I see. So also even in the material that you didn't have in the film, that didn't happen. OK, to get a bit more philosophical, you talked about this idea it's about nothing. You're interested in this idea of the surface of things. I think you achieved that but also coming from Australia and seeing that, I also perceive a level of history and a level of the traditions of representation that emerge and break through that surface, in that film.

JWvD: Mmmm. We can't comprehend a nothing that cannot exist? It is always about a nothing that can somehow “be”? That's what I thought about in making this film, can I make such a film, I don't know, let's try, let's see. That's the thing this history and these individual histories that live in people and these surroundings have a big influence on people. That's why the city, we hadn't been to the city. I also thought maybe we should end the film in the city – just the girls leaving and seeing perhaps what a city in fact is.

DdB: Well there was the presence of a city in her dream – one of the girls' dreams when she talks about what happens to people from the city when you come to these places. That had its impact.

JWvD: In a way it's there, it's there...
DdB: By not being there (laughs).

JWvD: Yeah, no, (laughs) it's true. But that's also the nice thing because people show all these things or you get this feeling without really looking for it. I mean I know what I'm doing and I know what I want but if you let people talk or I don't know what – all the layers of life come, if you see them, or can find them there.

DdB: So what do you want? You said you know what you want.

JWvD: I mean I know what I want – where to put the camera or not. I don't have a special goal in film; it's not like I look back on my oeuvre and I know that's why it's my oeuvre. I don't know if the goal is to see what was bugging me then, or in what state I was in, or more generally to see what is the state of a person who makes films when he's 20, what I thought consciously about such things at the time.

DdB: So how old are you now?

JWvD: 40.

DdB: So do you think that's important, your age in the film …

JWvD: I can see the things I was struggling with always coming back in my films or not struggling.

DdB: No it's not a pain, film, it's maybe rather a preoccupation, interest.

JWvD: Yeah like when in one of my first films about a girl and a boy and I was clearly very busy with relationships and I had this vision about how it could be beautiful to just meet each other and leave without a big thing or just some nice days and that's it.

DdB: Right.

JWvD: And another film is about a guy I know who killed somebody; I was struggling to deal with that then. I was very preoccupied with what it has to do with me – I trusted the guy and then he killed somebody who he kept in his house for five years.

DdB: Oh that really happened.

JWvD: Yeah.

DdB: Could you still trust him?

JWvD: I know afterwards why I made the film. Everybody was talking about it and sometimes in a very bad way and I thought, come on just go to prison and visit him and stop this talking about it. People gossiping doesn't help. And I went to visit him in prison. He was a drug addict before and in prison I could see how clever he was and you can trust clever people in a way. I'd like to trust people to see that they survive and that they end up well. And that's what I trust about him. When I did an interview with him in the film he said thank you, and I said thank you to him. Because he also knew I took him seriously and that I wasn't condemning his actions, that it was about something more essential.

DdB: There was a real transaction occurring?

JWvD: Yeah ...

DdB: Well that makes me think: what do you think your relationship in the film was like with the two women?

JWvD: Their trust.

DdB: Trust. And seeing you said this thing about relationships and the thing I got out of this film was that there was much more – there was a trust but also a willingness to give a feminine some space, to flower or to just exist with them you know? So that
becomes important then – what importance those people have to you before you made the film. Were they, had you had emotional sort of connections with these people, did you know them quite well?

**JWvD**: Yeah I think the thing is with most of the people in my films that I would also like to be that way. That's what I feel when I'm making it – it's also with the priest in *De geestelyke verovering van de wereld* (2001). He has an openness and things I really like. A lot of my films are about people without a grip so they don't show off – there's a kind of honesty which they show. And which if you're open to it then the film opens up.

**DdB**: Yeah that makes sense because I can see how those women allowed you to approach that landscape in that way too. I thought the landscape had that honesty too as you were moving through it. Maybe it was able to be there because of the bell that these women had rung and it was setting up a certain mood which allowed the camera to travel through those places. Almost Tarkovsky-like but I think it's different, I mean Tarkovsky talks about “nostalgia” and you talk about something called nothing which is a bit more – a more diluted or softer sort of mood. Not one that's grabbing on their life to the past – has something more that's happening now and there really was a very gentle feeling.

**JWvD**: Well that's the thing also. I mean I like to keep a good atmosphere while working. To keep control over people who are in a way working for you or for the bigger plan they don't know about – you have to work with people who you trust and in all these six weeks we didn't have one fight although we were all sleeping in this little place but it all went very well. It was also the girls – they were entertaining in the evening, friendly and getting drunk and having fun and they felt this is a kind of holiday, and this is an interesting experience.

The older girl never saw Tarkovsky, for example. Immediately when she went home, she went to the video library to get a Tarkovsky film and she loved it. She works as a stewardess on an aeroplane.

**DdB**: Oh that's interesting too because it fits in with this idea of tourism again and this idea of floating around and being a bit disassociated. A very post-modern life.

**JWvD**: But in a way she was also introduced to a total other life. With this crew and this environment she loved to just also not really know what was happening but think it was good …

**DdB**: But that's come through in the film too and people could use that as a criticism that you don't know what's happening – that's almost what's behind your motivation for making the film, so it doesn't matter she doesn't know what's going on because that's what's happening (laughs).

**JWvD**: (laughs) And you have to put things together you have to … that's where the script comes in, something to see. At least give people another level to walk along with – there is the talk about Berlusconi and whatever, it doesn't matter so much. But they rent a place, rent a room talk a bit about what's in the environment and then again this is a normal film because things are being explained a bit – where they are put in a situation and they walk off again from this.

**DdB**: That's right, but there's also this awkwardness about that too. Talking, it's not really the mood of the film like you say it comes more to this other area of concern, this idea of mood. Given that all your projects are connected, where does this leave you now? What do you want to explore next?
JWvD: Youth. Youth in a kind of way – I worked together on a script or an idea with a Georgian girl I met. When I met her, she was 13, she was working in the film business already. I asked what she wanted to do with film later on, and she said I don't know, maybe just in production or whatever. And I said, don't you want to make a film because it's such a beautiful thing to do... She said, well I've been thinking about it and I said do you have ideas; vaguely, she replied. So I said could you write them down because I'd like to see what your ideas are about film. So she wrote a script in two nights which was rather amazing. It was about an older woman in an old peoples' house, who was about 80, who had a lot of relationships with men and ended up alone. But feeling happy about it, feeling good that it was a good life and whatever. I talked with her about it, that it was interesting that such a young girl thinks about such things. She said yeah well, I feel that's me, that's how I'm going to be. And how I always see my life as like things happening and I'm just going into the situation without knowing and not knowing where I went, I have some ideas of how I want things to end. Then you have this 13 year old girl who has in fact an idea about life, so we talked a lot about it and we're writing already for a few years and then a few months ago I went to Georgia again to speak to her about it ...

DdB: That's where you met her, through Georgia?

JWvD: Yes, because another friend of mine was making a short film there. This next film is going to be about her. I'm still thinking about it and when I get there it's sure to be different – but also her cleverness because she speaks six languages, she's incredibly smart. She can psychoanalyse you in five minutes. Also how people look at you, that they're naïve not knowing. She dreamt once, when she was three, that she was taken out of the bed – I don't know whether I should print this or if you should print this because then already my film is out there ...

DdB: These dreams play an important part of the set-up of the film do they?

JWvD: To start with ...

DdB: Are you going to film her or ... ?

JWvD: I want to film her in two situations, in the film and in her work also, because she works for this film company and she also orders people around. “This should be done, that should be done”. So you get this double idea about a young girl who is smarter than most of the people, and I want her to travel together with a real KGB agent I know. And the only thing he does is shoot with his gun.

DdB: So there's this kind of innocence but truthfulness married and contrasted with a complete duplicity...

JWvD: And knowing also when I was a child I was very angry that nobody took me seriously. I had to wait a long time that's why I also made the film with the priest because I always loved to talk to them because I thought they always said good things but what are they doing themselves about it. But if you ask them as a child they react like you should be... you know.

DdB: Well that's the post-modern world: every bit of authority is saying one thing and doing another.

JWvD: Yeah, yeah... She feels so often that people don't take her seriously in her thoughts and when I talk to her I don't feel she's young. I feel there's a total ... well maturity is never a thing of itself. I feel like I'm really talking to a person and there is nothing we can't talk about.

DdB: The interesting thing there is you feel you have to have some kind of human connection to someone and your work comes out of a very human experience, that you see in other people and reflect back on. I think that's the way you construct your films too, because you have those people in the films and they're also talking about you but that relationship stays there and there's a respect there about how you initiate things
constructed in the film itself.

**JWvD**: For instance with the Russian guy he always had to be drunk to film so I had to drink with him. He needed it ...

**DdB**: It's a state of mind ...

**JWvD**: And it's not always nice to drink when you're working or it's not nice for most of the time ...

**DdB**: But if you're reflecting and focused on another person then ...

**JWvD**: We go through it together ...

**DdB**: Well that might be a good place to finish.

© Dirk de Bruyn, June 2004

If you would like to comment on this article, please send a letter to the editors.