

## Film and Theatre

### A Western in Italy

Anton Corbijn's *The American*

*The American*, the second feature film by the Dutch photographer and director Anton Corbijn (° 1955), tells the story of Jack, an American contract killer (played by the superstar George Clooney), who, after a dramatic shoot-out somewhere in the snow-covered countryside in Sweden, goes on the run and finds a temporary home-cum-hiding place in the desolate Abruzzo region of Italy. But the past continues to haunt him...

On the basis of this brief summary and the atmosphere of suspenseful tragedy and resigned gloom, *The American* can best be described as a melancholy gangster thriller. But in his superb photo book *Inside The American*, a photographic diary of the whole production, Corbijn says that in fact the main model for the film was his favourite film genre, the Western: a man murders someone, goes on the run and hides out in a small western town. As an outsider he comes into contact with the priest (the spiritual element) and the whore (the carnal). But the past catches up with him. There is a shoot-out and he leaves the town again. A 'classic' scenario, in other words.

Neo-western or not, the least one can say of *The American* is that it is not exactly the sort of film one would expect from Anton Corbijn. But by now he is used to doing unusual things. He certainly cannot stand being labelled. Although he had been acclaimed worldwide for his photos of U2, David Bowie, Elvis Costello, R.E.M. and others, he was gradually getting absolutely sick of invariably being called a 'rock photographer'. He was a photographer plain and simple. So when, after directing several dozen music videos for the likes of Nirvana, Metallica, Nick Cave and Depeche Mode, he felt like making a real film, it was definitely not going to be a 'music film'. Even so, he made his debut in 2007 with *Control*, a black and white film on the prematurely truncated life and self-inflicted death of the Joy Division singer Ian Curtis.

It was the Joy Division's first album, *Unknown Pleasures*, that prompted Corbijn to come to London then. He felt the urge to live in the place where this music originated, and at the time his explanation was



that he wanted, after all, to make a music film. But he himself did not want to call *Control* simply a biography of a rock musician. To be more specific, he said, it was in the first place a tragic love story. In any case, it was considered good enough to open the prestigious *Quinzaine des Réalistes* section at the 2007 Cannes Film Festival.

After such a successful debut, it seemed inevitable that Corbijn would continue to make films. Or not? In the photo book mentioned above, he writes that making *Control* had been 'a life-changing experience', but also that the unavoidable promotional tour for the film had been 'so soul-destroying' that immediately afterwards he returned, at least for a while, to photography, his first love. But it was not long before he realised he had irrevocably caught the film bug. And so he went in search of 'another adventure, another story'. One thing was for sure: it certainly would not be another story of

England in the 70s or about a dead musician, though of course these were exactly the scenarios people were sending him. On the contrary, it had to be a completely different genre of film, a piece of real fiction, something contemporary and something in colour too.

Then Corbijn received a scenario based on the novel *A Very Private Gentleman* by the English author Martin Booth. It appealed to him somehow. He left for Italy with the scenarist Rowan Joffe, more specifically for the little-visited region of Abruzzo (where Booth's story was set) to find the locations and inspiration needed.

The leading character in *A Very Private Gentleman* is an eccentric Englishman who combines his job as a contract killer with one as a gunsmith. However, it was decided to make this Englishman an American, and the possibility was mooted of trying to interest George Clooney in the part. But on the very day of his appointment with Clooney, he woke up to a nightmare: he saw on the television news that the Abruzzo region, and in particular the town of L'Aquila, which he had selected as the main location, had been struck by an extremely destructive earthquake. 6th April 2009 became one of those days he would never forget. He was convinced that the whole project was dead and buried.

But George Clooney was interested in the scenario and agreed to do it. And after some extra exploration of Abruzzo new locations were found. L'Aquila was replaced by Sulmona and scenes were also shot in the mountain towns of Castel del Monte and Castelvechio. Scenes had to be framed carefully so as to keep the buildings destroyed or damaged by the earthquake out of shot.

The plot of *The American* cannot be called particularly original or innovative (the silent loner, the whore with a heart of gold, the final contract), but this is more than compensated for by the marvellous photography (though fortunately it does not lapse into postcard aesthetics) and meticulous compositions. Even so, the *dénouement* remains (relatively) surprising. But before that point is reached, several major characters have crossed the silent Jack's path, including a mysterious client called Pavel (played by Johan Leysen) and a female client (Thekla Reuten) who apparently needs a very specific weapon.

Anyone expecting a typically frantic action film about a hit man on the run will be disappointed. There are a couple of shoot-outs and action sequences, of course, including a chase on a Vespa, but the narrative tempo of the film remains largely calm, almost contemplative and melancholy, and stays focused above all on the restrained yet intense performance by George Clooney. Yes, Jack is in someone's sights, and he is the first to realise it, but Clooney is able, in almost all circumstances, to simultaneously control the stress and paranoia this brings while yet making them palpable.

A final comment on the Western references: at a certain point we see Jack in a café drinking an 'Americano' coffee, and on the television there's an excerpt from *Once upon a Time in the West*, with Henry Fonda in the lead and a soundtrack by Ennio Morricone. For those viewing *The American* who do not immediately recognise the excerpt, the director Anton Corbijn has provided a regular who proudly gives the name of the director: 'Sergio Leone. Italiano!'

Jan Temmerman

*Translated by Gregory Ball*

[www.corbijn.co.uk](http://www.corbijn.co.uk)



Peter Missotten,  
*Montezuma*, 2010  
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## Radical Space

### Theatre Producer Peter Missotten

In the normal course of events this is how it goes: a theatre producer chooses a play and the decor flows from his interpretation of the piece. Not so with Peter Missotten. He has an image in his mind and so selects a specific play. 'Most people find that an illogical way of working, but don't you make the park first before you let the children play in it?'

Missotten (b.1963) began working in the theatre when he was nineteen, as a lighting technician in a production of *The Cement Garden*, based on the well-known novel by Ian McEwan which has also been filmed, by the Flemish producer Guy Cassiers (since to gain international renown). After that first experience in the theatre Missotten went off to study video art at Sint Lukas in Brussels, where he received tuition from, among others, Chris Dercon, who became the new director of Tate Modern in London in the Spring of 2011. The plastic arts have always been what fascinated and inspired Missotten the most, including in his work in the theatre that seeks to associate itself closely with performing and installation art.

To start with Missotten mostly did video installations. This was how he came to create *The Mind Machine of Dr. Forsythe* with Anne Quirijnen and An Marie Lambrechts. The idea was to make a utopian machine that could replace the choreographer William Forsythe, of whom Missotten is a great admirer, and which could create 'Forsythe choreographies' autonomously, like a machine. The video work, projections on six large glass panels borne by cranes was shown in the context of Antwerp European Cultural Capital 1993. The Filmfabriek, an independent production house for video and digital media that offers a home to a variety of artists, was also born out of that project in 1994.

Missotten had a stroke of luck with *Expect Poison from Standing Water*, which was created for the Pleinmuseum in Utrecht and toured alongside Les Nuits Blanches in Paris and at the Venice Biennial. This consisted of a video installation in which he projected image and text on to a water curtain, which hung like a digital water mirror above the space beneath. That new take on a landscape, the auditorium, is also apparent in his theatre work. For Missotten the accommodation counts as space.

For the last 27 years Missotten has continued to work closely with Guy Cassiers. He designed the set-



Peter Missotten, *Kwartet*, 2006

© Koen Broos.

ting and/or video work for a number of the latter's theatre and opera productions, including *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* (from the book by Roddy Doyle). In 2006 he was also responsible for the staging of *Sunken Red* (from the novel by Jeroen Brouwers), which was chosen for the Avignon Festival. When Cassiers was artistic director of the Toneelhuis in Antwerp in 2006 he asked Missotten, as one of the seven producers at that time, to create and present his own work under the wing of the city theatre.

Even though Missotten did not create any exceptional location theatre such as *Serre* (2007), which was played in a park, he did, as it were, create location theatre in the theatre. With Heiner Müller's *Kwartet* (*Quartet*, 2006) the public slumped on bean bags to look up under the rafters of the theatre attic where two performers on a glass platform were gradually being covered in snow. With *Weerslechtweer* (2010, could be translated as *Badweatheragain*) the set was immersed in light and the sound of T.S. Elliot's poem 'The Waste Land'. Does the 'normal' theatre auditorium fail to hold any interest for Missotten? 'On the contrary, I make very good use of the auditorium. You see the radical approach but also the space.' That was extremely obvious in his 2008 creation *De wilde wilde*

weg (the title is a wordplay that can be read as *The Wild One Wanted to go Away* or as *The Wild Wild Road*), in which he sent his actors up a wooden footbridge, a catwalk that stretched from the back of the stage to the first balcony in the *Bourlaschouwburg* in Antwerp.

In addition to being a producer Missotten is also a tutor at the *Toneelacademie* (Stage School) in Maastricht, where he teaches on the performing arts course. 'I see the *Toneelacademie* not just as a school but also as a place for productions where young people can try things out – together with the staff'. These are no careless words. That 'creating things together' goes from small performances such as *ILLBEGONE* (a co-production between the *Toneelacademie* and Manchester Metropolitan University that won the award for the best foreign production at the ITs festival in Amsterdam) to huge productions of operas such as Philip Glass's *Kepler* (Linz, 2009), or Bernhard Lang's *Montezuma* (Mannheim, 2010). When, in 2009, Missotten was given the prestigious commission to direct and stage the composer Philip Glass's new opera *Kepler* for Linz European City of Culture 2009, he was confident enough to let Karel van Laere – one of the first year performing arts students take care of the costumes.

Glass invited Missotten to produce after he had heard him highly praised by the director Russel Davies for the production of *Kwartet*. 'At the time there was still no music, only fragments of libretto. But I think in imagery, not in text. I rarely let the setting be determined by the narrative, which means there is an interesting tension between text and space that also makes it interesting for the performers to work on it with me. What fascinated me about *Kepler*, the mathematician and astronomer, was not his life but his way of thinking. When he discovered the planets move on an elliptical path he was disappointed that it was such a simple, ugly form', laughs Missotten. 'I showed