

Interviews with the Dead

Heddy Honigmann: Memory Made Visible

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[K A R I N W O L F S]

Heddy Honigmann's award-winning ode to life, *Forever* (2006), is set mainly in a cemetery. In this documentary she visits the famous Paris cemetery of Père Lachaise and brings the dead back to life by asking the people amongst the silent stones about the reason for their visit. A young Japanese pianist fondly explains how Chopin has helped her to keep the memory of her dead father alive. An Iranian man finds comfort in the work of writer Sadegh Hedayat because 'he wrote about things that people dare not speak about'. And a South Korean attempts to express his admiration for Proust in broken English. Honigmann transforms the silent monuments into speaking stones whose expressive power is universal. This is an art in which she has no equal, and one that has won her many awards as a maker of documentary films.

Honigmann's 2007 European Film Awards nomination for best documentary for *Forever* was just one in a long series of national and international nominations and prizes which demonstrate the recognition her work has achieved from film critics, professional panels and the public. As well as many retrospectives all over the world and national and international awards for her individual films,



Forever (2006)



in recent years she has also won four prizes for her oeuvre as a whole: the Jan Kassies Oeuvre Prize from the Stimuleringsfonds Nederlandse Culturele Omroepproducties (Dutch Cultural Broadcasting Fund) in 2003, followed by the Humanistisch Verbond's (Dutch Humanist Union) Van Praag Prize in 2006, the Outstanding Achievement Award at the Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival in 2007 and the San Francisco Film Society's Golden Gate Persistence of Vision Award which she won, also in 2007, at the San Francisco International Film Festival.

Bridge

A cemetery played a significant role in the creation of Honigmann's very first film, the documentary *Israel of the Bedouin* (L'Israele dei beduini, 1979). She decided to make this film after a trip to Israel during which she protested against the destruction of a Bedouin cemetery to clear land for a Jewish settlement. The politically aware Honigmann, then a student at the renowned Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in Rome, soon returned to Israel with fellow-student Carlo Carlotto and rolls of film to give the powerless Bedouin a voice. The film was shown at international film festivals in Venice, Rotterdam and London.

The cemetery returns in later films too, as a bridge between past and present, an anchor for memories and a source of inspiration for the living. In *Metal and Melancholy* (Metaal en melancholie), for example, a layered portrait of taxi drivers in Lima which was Honigmann's breakthrough film in 1994, she goes with a female *taxista* to visit a grave for the nameless dead on All Souls' Day. The woman tells Honigmann how she drew strength from a near-death experience. In *Good Husband, Dear Son* (Goede man, lieve zoon, 2001), a film about the murdered menfolk of a village in the former Yugoslavia, an old man who used to play at weddings and parties walks amongst the white columns of the village graveyard. Time and again he places his hand on one of the stones to introduce a member of his family, 'This is my eldest son... This is my brother... cousin... brother-in-law...'. He then gives a brief account of the destroyed life that the memorial represents.

In her first fiction film with professional actors, *The Front Door* (De deur van het huis, 1985), two housemates, Johan and Karel, are pondering a sentence in a newspaper cutting from 1943, in which calamity and passion coincide: 'The world is disintegrating, and we pick precisely this moment to fall in love,' Johan (Titus Muizelaar) reads. Then he wonders out loud: 'If you wanted to finish this report, who would you have to ask to find out about the missing pieces?' 'God, Johan,' his housemate Karel (Johan Leyssen) responds, 'you're not going to go and interview dead people, are you?' Anyone familiar with Honigmann's work will suspect that that is precisely what she would like to do: question the past so as to become acquainted with the dead, and so gain a better understanding of the present and of the living.

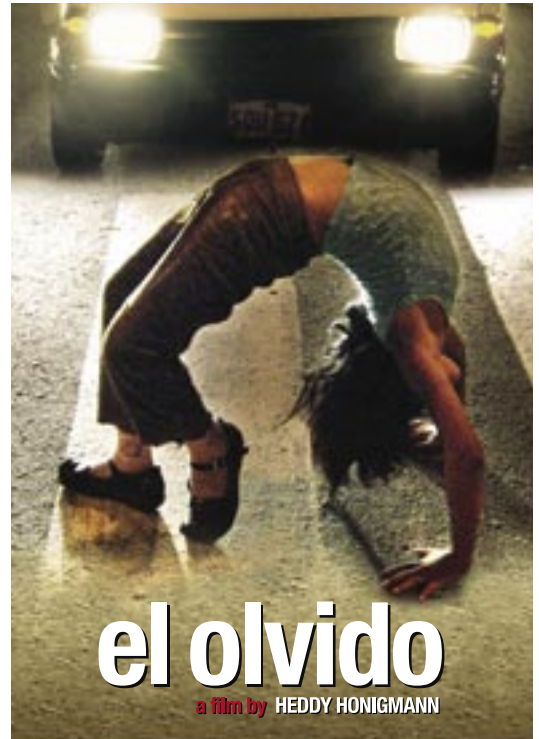
Favourite dish

Regarding the importance of memories in her work, today Honigmann says: 'It's to do with the way I grew up – in a family where so many people are no longer there. They're kept alive through stories. Memories shape a person.' In the same way as the loss of memory slowly destroys a person, as Honigmann demonstrated in her first feature film, an adaptation of J. Bernlef's novel *Mindshadows* (Hersenschimmen, 1988) about a man slowly losing his world to Alzheimer's.

In the first episode of *The Way to the Heart is through the Stomach – Recipes that must never be forgotten* (Liefde gaat door de maag: Recepten om nooit te vergeten), a series of twelve short documentaries about food-related memories which Honigmann made in 2004 for the public broadcasting network, Honigmann's mother Sonia prepares 'vrennekes'. This is Heddy's favourite dish and it comes from Grabowiec, the Polish village where Sonia lived with her Jewish parents and sister until they all fled to Peru, just before the German invasion in 1939. While she prepares the food, Sonia talks lovingly about the people who stayed behind, the aunts, grandparents and great-grandparents murdered by the Nazis whom Heddy knows only from photographs. Honigmann's father, an Austrian Jew who survived Mauthausen concentration camp, arrived in Peru only after the war. There he met Heddy's mother, who was studying drama and was a promising actress, but after her marriage settled for life as a housewife. Her father became a well-known cartoonist in Peru and, later, a businessman. Heddy Honigmann was born in Lima on 1 October 1951.



Mindshadows
(Hersenschimmen). 1988.
Nederlands Filmmuseum,
Amsterdam.



Soon after her parents emigrated from Peru to Israel in 1971 the twenty-one-year-old Heddy completed her studies in biology and literature and then left the country of her birth because there was no film academy in Peru. She travelled through Mexico, Israel, Spain and France, before going to Rome to study film-making, where she met the Dutch conceptual film-maker Frans van de Staak. It was love at first sight. She followed him to Amsterdam, where they married. Honigmann has been a Dutch national since 1978. Recently she has completed a new documentary film – *Oblivion* (El Olvido) – for which she returned to her birthplace, Lima in Peru, to create a further portrait of ‘*a forgotten city, a forgotten people and a forgotten country*’. This time, unlike in *Metal and Melancholy*, it’s not the taxi drivers who give us their take on things but the waiters and barmen who keep the country’s political and economic masters supplied with food and drinks.

The filmmaker’s gaze

Honigmann’s development as a film-maker is apparent in her oeuvre, which falls roughly into three periods: her early opinion pieces from the beginning of the 1980s; her fiction films from the late 1980s and early 1990s, in which

monologue often plays a major role; and, finally, her documentaries, from the mid-1990s to the present day.

Honigmann's work initially took the form of political opinion pieces: *The Fire* (Het vuur, 1981), *The Other Side* (De overkant, 1982), *The White Umbrella* (De witte paraplu, 1983), in which she investigated herself and the world, often with a philosophical slant in the style of Van de Staak. In her fictional work (*The Front Door*, *Au Revoir* (Tot ziens, 1995), *Mindshadows*, her attention shifts to life's big issues, such as fear and love. The passionate, life-affirming side of Honigmann's work, as a counterpoint to the dead past, can perhaps be seen most clearly in films such as *Au Revoir*, a movie about an impossible love, which was nominated for the Golden Leopard at the Locarno International Film Festival in 1995, and *Your Opinion Please* (Uw mening graag, 1989), a short and humorous story



Your Opinion Please
(Uw mening graag, 1988).
Nederlands Filmmuseum,
Amsterdam.

from 1989, in which an insecure young woman asks the viewer whether she is really attractive enough. However, that passion and humour are not lacking in Honigmann's later documentary work either. To see this you only have to watch *O amor natural* (1996), in which Honigmann uses Carlos Drummond de Andrade's erotic poems to get elderly Brazilians talking about their own love-lives, with mischievously sparkling eyes.

In retrospect, the fiction films in monologue form (*Mindshadows*, *Your Opinion Please*, *Four Times my Heart* (Viermaal mijn hart, 1990), *Stories I Tell Myself* (Verhalen die ik mijzelf vertel, 1991), *Knitting-Needle in Aquarium Fish* (Breinaald in aquariumvis, 1993), *How Many Strips to Calcutta?* (Hoeveel strippen naar Calcutta?, 1993) almost seem to be preliminary studies for the portraits that Honigmann was to produce in her later documentary work, when she shifted her gaze to the world around her and entered into conversation with the people she encountered there. It was with these films (*Metal and Melancholy*, *O amor natural*, *Underground Orchestra* (Ondergronds orkest, 1998), *Crazy* (1999), *Dame la mano* (2004), *Forever*) that she made her name and gained international recognition.

O amor natural (1996)



The mind's eye

Although 'memory' is still the driving force behind her films, she usually speaks of 'survival' as the central theme of her work. The survivor has looked death in the face and escaped, against all odds, thus demonstrating the passion and vitality that Honigmann celebrates in her films. Whether she is portraying the taxi drivers of Lima, who use their ingenuity to cope with the recession in *Metal and Melancholy*, the street musicians living in exile in Paris in *Underground Orchestra* or the Cuban community in New Jersey that meets up every week at La Esquina Habanera to dance the rumba in *Dame la mano*, the stories they tell give the people in her films a face and a history.

The magic of Honigmann's work lies in how she makes visible the history and memories of the faces. Her layered approach to presenting people and their memories can perhaps best be seen in the opening sequence of her documentary *Crazy*, in which she spoke to Dutch servicemen about their experiences during UN missions abroad. In this film she swiftly transforms a completely unfamiliar face into one whose history is plain to see.

'I am a captain with the Royal Netherlands Army,' announces a man's voice, ac-



Crazy (1999)

accompanied by images of a white UN helicopter taking off, beautiful cloud formations seen from the air, and a long take of railway carriages full of refugees, all accompanied by 'Nessun dorma' from Puccini's opera *Turandot*. 'From October '92 to May '93, I worked in Cambodia for the UN organisation there,' the voice continues. Even before we see his face, he tells us that he took this music with him to Cambodia, where he drew a great deal of strength from it. 'Whenever I hear it I'm back in Cambodia, with those people and their terrible situation,' says the man. And then we see his face for the first time, in a close-up that lasts over a minute. As he listens to the music in silence, we are already starting to form an idea of what the man's inward gaze can see. The history playing out before his mind's eye can be seen flickering on the projection screen of his face.

Joan of Arc

Honigmann's interest in the expressive power of faces goes back to her childhood in Lima, when she used to spend all her pocket money on going to see any films that were on in the city, not only at the ordinary cinemas, but also at the university film club and the Museo del Arte which showed classic films. She has particularly fond memories of Carl Dreyer's silent film *La passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (1928), with Maria Falconetti in the title role. Honigmann says, 'I dedicated a poem to her face, to her expressions. The way the film's edited allows you to hear her suffering. Even though it was a silent film, you could hear her whispering: Help me, God. What are they doing? I am innocent.'

The faces that Honigmann presents in her films are never just talking heads; they are faces that speak to us and come to life through their stories. Honigmann does not interview these people; she has a conversation with them. In interviews, the answers are often fixed beforehand, but Honigmann wants to be surprised by her conversations. For this reason she does not edit her own voice out of her films, but places herself as a guide between her subject and her audience. She is a link between the past and the future, both as a survivor – if it had been up to the Nazis, she would never have been born – and as a messenger, someone who passes on stories to other people.

She often gives the subjects of her documentaries something to do while they're talking, so that they forget the camera and reveal their story in a more natural way. This ranges from everyday actions, such as watering plants or making a cup of coffee, to activities that are relevant to the story, such as preparing food, tidying a grave or demonstrating some action that is connected to a lost love. In many of her documentaries she employs themes to which the speakers can pin their memories: music in *Crazy*, *Underground Orchestra* and *Dame la mano*; poems in *O amor natural*; and objects in *Good Husband*, *Dear Son*. She always keeps the focus firmly on the unadorned storytellers, avoiding any prettification, because that would detract from what her work is all about: making visible the stories behind the faces. ■

www.heddy-honigmann.nl

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