

ideal he will never be able to attain. But in *The Red Turtle* he certainly came very close.

JELLE SCHOT

Translated by Gregory Ball

1 Available online at:  
[www.vpro.nl/programmas/2doc/2016/het-verlangen-van-michael-dudok-de-wit.html](http://www.vpro.nl/programmas/2doc/2016/het-verlangen-van-michael-dudok-de-wit.html)

## Breaking Free from Expected Patterns Fien Troch

With *Home*, only her fourth feature film, Fien Troch (b. 1978) hit the headlines both nationally and internationally. The Film Fest Gent awarded her both the Grand Prix and the Audience Award, while famous festivals such as Venice and Toronto praised Troch for her strong author's vision. It is clear that the Flemish film-maker stands on the cusp of a definitive break-through, thanks to her stubbornness, persistence and individuality, and the determination with which she demands attention, not for herself but for her films.

*Someone Else's Happiness* (2005), *Unspoken* (2008), *Kid* (2012) and *Home* (2016) tell differing tales but have things in common. Troch always narrates from the general situation or the emotions and not from the story line. A second constant

is the fact that drama is intertwined with communication problems. 'When I'm writing I always feel intuitively more challenged by what remains unexpressed than by what is actually said', says Troch, 'while apparently idiotic utterings always tell me more about characters than fluent dialogues.' The daughter of film editor Ludo Troch learned a love of film at her father's knee, yet on her eighteenth birthday she didn't know what she really wanted to do in life. She thought of being an actress, but when she wasn't accepted for the training she went to the Sint Lukas Art Academy in Brussels – simply because she wanted to do something connected with the arts. It was during her studies there that she discovered her passion for film, thanks to her short films *Verbrande aarde* (Burnt Earth, 1998) and *Wooww* (1999). After graduation more short films followed (*Maria*, *Cool Sam & Sweet Suzie*), but Troch didn't feel inclined to spend years continuing with such finger exercises. And she was even less inclined to get trapped in the golden cage of advertising films, although these won her prizes and provided a good income.

What took precedence was that first feature film. Irrespective of the budget. For Troch it was about the artistic freedom that fiction films need. For her film is an art form: not a vehicle for telling a tale, but an end in its own right. Her debut, *Someone Else's Happiness*, is a mosaic of a film that follows twenty or so characters and shows how a village is dislocated by a mysterious fatal accident. The driver in question remains outside the frame; by means of the reactions to the drama Troch probes the *zeitgeist* and the malaise in society. The orphaned children and the narcissistic parents reflect a countryside characterised by loneliness. The result is an atmosphere film that brings subdued emotions to life with limited dialogue.

The somewhat detached approach is exchanged for intense involvement in *Unspoken*. This muted double portrait of a married couple who have swallowed their grief for their fourteen-year-old daughter who has disappeared without trace, attempts not to unveil the mystery but to examine how those who are left behind behave towards each other. Grief and pain are not expressed but come to life via silent, claustrophobic images. Loneliness, powerlessness and isolation have a stifling effect on the protagonists and that feeling is underlined by



Fien Troch

extreme close-ups, symbolically charged images and long silences broken by moving rejoinders. Troch avoids sentimentalism and obliges the observer to seek out the emotions for him or herself.

Empathy and identification are verbs for her; pleasure entails an effort. Film may, actually must, make people squirm. It's good that afterwards the audience feel confused, rebellious or sad. It is in this spirit that in *Kid* the world is seen through the eyes of two brothers – a seven-year-old rascal and his two-year-older good brother – who don't always understand everything. The absent father, the mother who is beset by creditors, the moribund farmstead; the what and the why of everything remains vague. The only clear thing is that the happy child is being forced to grow up.

Whereas her first three films formed a triptych around children, in *Home* Troch focusses on young adults. Including the generation gap: young and old live in their own, non-communicating worlds. At the centre is a seventeen-year-old, wrestling with his own identity, who has spent a period in a closed institution and is now hoping to find a new home with his aunt. But the unhealthy home situation of a new friend brings out both the best (friendship, loyalty) and the worst (betrayal, violence) in him. By opting for a not quite square 4:3 ratio image format, Troch creates a claustrophobic universe while the intertwinement of smartphone images, home movies and observational shots cause the generations to clash visually as well. *Home* is in a more narrative mode than Troch's earlier films; it is also an illustration where the hormones go berserk more, run in a documentary, realistic film style.

This film-author's cinema remains driven more by emotion than plot. 'I want to uncouple myself from what's in common use and research how I can give cinema something extra, via music, image and narrative style', states Troch, 'I want to free myself from expected patterns. Because cinema is an art form I don't have to be bound by conventions. I would love to make films for 500,000 viewers, but if it means settling for a compromise, then no.' Fien Troch is quietly and resolutely following the path to an original, lively and individual output.

IVO DE KOCK

Translated by Sheila M. Dale

## History

### Before She Became Mata Hari

#### Newly Discovered Letters by Margaretha Zelle

The letters and photographs published in this beautiful new book cover the last two years in the life of Margaretha Zelle (1876-1917) before she left the Netherlands and began a new life in Paris, becoming famous the world over from 1905 as the oriental dancer Mata Hari, *femme fatale* and female spy during the Great War.

Written between 1902 and 1904, these newly discovered letters were unknown to Pat Shipman when she published her biography of Mata Hari, *Femme Fatale: Love, Lies and the Unknown Life of Mata Hari* in 2007. They had been lying, forgotten for more than a century, in an attic chest belonging to her in-laws, whose help she was seeking during difficult divorce proceedings against her husband, Rudolph (John) MacLeod.

It is her own story, in her own words - the often heart-breaking tale of her bad marriage, aged eighteen, to a much older, authoritarian bully of a man, a colonial officer in the Dutch East Indies, a jealous, violent and syphilitic domestic tyrant, whose abuse and control, accusations and spying eventually became unbearable and led to their separation. Though he was an officer, he certainly was no gentleman: he refused to pay the alimony that was her due, and drove her to despair by taking away her little daughter, Nonnie. The courts were unable to intervene and to force him to pay up. So all the cards were stacked against her: separated, she still was a totally dependent woman, on a slow but inexorable trajectory to debt, destitution, despair, illicit liaisons and social exclusion.

The painful story in these letters, of her social downfall in Dutch society around 1900, reminds one of the bleak and bitter naturalistic novels in Dutch literature of the period, by Arnold Aletrino and Herman Heijermans; but equally of the autobiographies of her female contemporaries, the first woman doctor of the Netherlands, Aletta Jacobs, and the Dutch-French-Belgian writer Neel Doff. As *documents humains* Zelle's letters fill an important