

Film

What will the domestic and international visitor encounter in Leeuwarden and Friesland in 2018? A lot! I'll give just a few examples. On the square in front of the Oldehove, Leeuwarden's Tower of Pisa, a remarkable *Lân fan Taal* is being built, an 'experience centre' for language diversity. The time-honoured *Oerol* Festival on the island of Terschelling is being expanded under the title *Sense of Place*, a large-scale landscape project with a Mondrian salt marsh in the Wadden area. In the *Grote Kerk*, the producer Jos Thie is setting up a performance with stories of 750 Frisian and foreign churches, called *Under de Toer*. The internationally renowned felt artist Claudy Jongstra, whose tapestries can be seen in the MoMA and who has dressed Lady Gaga and Madonna, among others, is turning her farm in Friesland into a *Farm of the World*. For the towns on the *Eleven Cities Skating Tour*, eleven artists have designed an artwork-with-water, called *Eleven Fountains*, among them the Frenchman Jean-Michel Otoniel (Franeker), the Spaniard Jaume Plensa (Leeuwarden) and the Fleming Johan Creten (Bolsward). For *Potatoes Go Wild*, seed-potatoes from Friesland will be sent to Malta with Frisian poems, and in March will return as mature Malta potatoes with Maltese poems. There is the literary project *The Sea! The Sea!*, co-produced by the Flemish foundation *Behoud de Begeerte*. International dance and theatre productions will be shown under the heading *Strangers on Stage*, a Polish-Dutch theatre company will perform *Lost in the Greenhouse*, a play with music, in the vegetable glasshouses of St.-Annaparochie, Opera Spanga is producing *Aida* in the open air in both Spanga and Valletta, thousands of sportspeople will be coming to the European Sports for All Games (traditional sports) in Friesland, and so on.

Let this much be clear: Leeuwarden-Fryslân 2018 will be a great European cultural feast. You have to be there!

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Longing for Perfection

The Red Turtle by Michael Dudok de Wit

The life of Michael Dudok de Wit (b. 1953) was changed by a digital message from Japan. In 2007, the Dutch animator received a surprising e-mail from Studio Ghibli, the renowned Japanese animation studio responsible for such hand-drawn masterpieces as *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988) and *Spirited Away* (2001). It contained two questions: 'Your short film *Father and Daughter* is marvellous; do you have a distributor in Japan?' and 'Would you make a full-length film for us?'

Dudok de Wit, who had grown up in Laren in North Holland, studied animation in Switzerland and England and has for a long time lived in London, had never previously made a long animated film. And what's more, in interviews he had always said he never wanted to make one. But the offer from Japan could simply not be refused. At the animated film festival in Annecy he once said: 'It took me two months to get over it. I just couldn't believe it'.

However, it took another nine years after that first mail in 2007, two and a half spent in production, before the end product of this collaboration finally saw the light of day in May 2016. One of the reasons for this was Dudok de Wit's extreme perfectionism. In the documentary *The Longing of Michael Dudok de Wit* (2016),¹ which keeps track of him during the production of the film, he talks about this: 'I cannot



Michael Dudok de Wit, still from *The Red Turtle*, 2016

accept that something is finished. I go home every day with the feeling that I haven't done well enough. I work towards an ideal, though I know I can never achieve it.' However, the final result turns out to be well worth the wait: the film, called *The Red Turtle*, is an extraordinarily beautiful, philosophical and completely wordless fairy tale about a castaway washed ashore on an uninhabited tropical island. This nameless man desperately builds one raft after another, but each time he thinks he is about to escape he is thrown back into the sea by a mysterious red turtle.

The premiere of *The Red Turtle* was at the Cannes Film Festival, where it was awarded a special prize called *Un Certain Regard*. The international press also showered it with praise. *The Telegraph*, for example, called it 'a compassionate, wistfully beautiful film'. And then, in its first five days in Dutch cinemas, it drew ten thousand viewers; a record for a Ghibli film and exceptional for an animated film for adults.

Dudok de Wit, already one of the Netherlands' leading film artists for several decades, although he is little known among the general public, more than deserves this success. This feeling increases even more when one watches the abovementioned documentary. It is almost endearing to see Dudok de Wit at work in the film. For example, when he goes out on his own to study and film the surf, and then when he is viewing the images he shot, and becomes completely absorbed in how marvellous the shadow at the edge of the water is. One of the French members of his team actually describes him as 'a big child, always with his head in the clouds'.

Dudok de Wit is always looking for beauty in details. In an interview he called it 'adding a personal poetry'. 'Starting with a realistically stylised controlled movement, I add a personal signature. That is the secret of animation.'

Dudok de Wit's signature is clear to see in *The Red Turtle*. It is especially the elegance of the movements that is striking – of the animals and people, but also of the clouds and the water – and the simplicity with which it is conjured up on the screen. In *The Longing of Michael Dudok de Wit*, a Spanish animator says: 'Michael takes a very minimalist approach. He can set down the essence of what he wants to express in just a couple of perfectly drawn

lines. He looks for the essence of things. But it is very hard to arrive at this essence'.

You also see this combination of simplicity and elegance in his earlier, much rougher and sometimes almost abstract short films. But *The Red Turtle* is also related to the rest of Dudok de Wit's oeuvre in terms of its theme: longing is the thread that runs through his work. For example, his Oscar-nominated short film *The Monk and the Fish* (1994), a droll comedy in watercolour style, tells of a monk who obsessively pursues a fish. Until he finally learns how to live in harmony with the creature. The Oscar-winning *Father and Daughter* (2000), until recently his best-known work, also has many points in common with *The Red Turtle*. In this eight-minute minimalist masterpiece, a daughter returns again and again to the place where she last saw her father sailing on the sea. She herself grows up, the seasons change, she grows old. And still she continues to stare hopefully at the horizon, just like the castaway in *The Red Turtle*.

Where does Dudok de Wit's fascination with the theme of longing come from? He called it 'a beautiful pain' in the same interview: 'Alongside love, I find deep longing, even though it sometimes hurts, the finest feeling you can experience'. And in this interview, regarding the inspiration for *The Red Turtle*, he says: 'I was very happy with my girlfriend, now my wife, and with my work. And yet I was aware I was looking for something else'.

But at that time he didn't know exactly what he was looking for. In the same way as it never becomes entirely clear what the man in *The Red Turtle* longs for so much. But it may be Dudok de Wit's pursuit of the ultimate beauty, combined with his perfectionism, that made him so restless. In another interview, with striking frankness, he said that 'it is a longing that every artist experiences, the longing for the ultimate beauty. But this longing has another side to it. From an early age I was very susceptible to... I don't want to call them depressions... they are more like periods when I don't feel the passion for life very strongly. What presents itself is a sense of emptiness.'

The Red Turtle is the ultimate depiction of this emptiness. And as far as the ultimate beauty is concerned, Dudok de Wit will probably feel that he didn't quite succeed in his first full-length animated film. After all, as far as he is concerned, it is an

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

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1 Available online at:
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