

Once It's Gone, It's Gone'

Interview with Jef Cornelis about the television films Mens en agglomeratie ('Man and conurbation', 1966), Waarover men niet spreekt ('Things that aren't mentioned', 1968) and De straat ('The street', 1972)

Since the early 1960s the Flemish television producer Jef Cornelis has explored the conditions of television as a public medium. A number of his early films look at the changes that have occurred in urban public space. Reason for *Open* to publish an interview with him by Koen Brams and Dirk Pültau as part of a broader investigation of Cornelis' work.

Jef Cornelis (b. 1941) worked as a filmmaker at VRT, Belgium's Dutch-language public broadcasting company, from 1963 to 1998. In those 35 years he made more than 200 television films, mainly on architecture, the visual arts and literature, but also on social issues, cultural philosophy and cultural sociology. The shortest film, on the Belgian painter Raoul De Keyser (1971), lasts just 2 minutes and 52 seconds; the longest, which is aptly entitled *De langste dag* ('The longest day', 1986) and deals with the opening of the art events *Chambres d'amis* and *Initiatief 86* in Ghent, lasts 6 hours, 15 minutes and 48 seconds. One particular feature of Cornelis's work is its almost constant reflection on the medium of television. One example is the monthly programme *De IJsbreker* ('The Icebreaker', 1983-1984), in which people discussed cultural topics such as fashion, literary journals, tattoos and so on. However, the people were always in different locations, and their communication – or, in many cases, their lack of it – could only be shown with the help of a whole battery of cameras and tv monitors.

Jef Cornelis's work has earned a degree of recognition in Belgium and abroad. One of his first films, *Abdij van 't Park, Heverlee* ('Park Abbey, Heverlee', 1964), won the Grand Prix for Documentary Films at the Belgian Cinema Festival. In 1973 Cornelis received the Golden Prague Award at the 10th Prague Television Festival for his film *De straat* ('The street', 1972), which he made in collaboration with the architectural theorist Geert Bekaert. Following an exhibition and a series of screenings of Jef Cornelis's work by the Maison de la Culture et de la Communication de Saint-Etienne in 1991, his name became known in other European countries, including not only France but also Germany and Poland. A catalogue was published to mark the exhibition.

The Jan van Eyck Academie in Maastricht, a post-academic institute for research and production in the fields of fine art, design and theory, has been researching Jef Cornelis's work for some years now. The research focuses on three previously uninvestigated areas: (1) the unorthodox television idiom that Cornelis developed, the typical stylistic qualities of his work and the issues involved in presenting art and culture on television; (2) the documentary value of his television films, and (3) the unusual conditions of production in which the films were made. An essential part of the research is a public programme of lectures, interviews and debates.

The initial findings of the research have been published in nos. 117 and 118 of the Belgian journal *De Witte Raaf* (www.dewitteraaf.be). More information on Jef Cornelis and the research project can be found at www.janvaneyck.nl. Cornelis's films are preserved by Argos in Brussels (www.argosarts.org).

KOEN BRAMS/DIRK PÜLTAU The film *De straat*, which was first broadcast in 1972, wasn't your first project on public space and spatial planning, was it?

JEF CORNELIS No, it wasn't. The first film of mine to deal with those issues, called *Mens en agglomeratie* ('Man and conurbation'), dates from 1966. It isn't a title I would have chosen, but I suppose that's what they were getting at. Just the word *conurbation* sets my teeth on edge.

How did you get involved in that project?

I was thrown in headfirst! Ludo Bekkers, a producer in the Artistic and Educational Broadcasting section of the BRT (as the VRT was then known), put me in touch with an architect called Walter Bresseleers and asked us to make a film about the new ideal city, taking Dubrovnik and Stockholm as examples. In Stockholm they'd made the city centre completely traffic-free – no cars at all. It seemed the ideal solution for the problem of the city after the Second World War. . . . The internal combustion engine really was a disastrous invention.

Who was Walter Bresseleers?

He worked for Léon Stynen, one of the leading representatives of CIAM in Belgium. Bresseleers was Stynen's favourite, though he never became a partner in the firm. In any case, Bresseleers made extensive use of the CIAM repertoire in the film we made.

Why Dubrovnik and Stockholm?

Those cities served as models until the late 1960s. I made a reconnaissance in the winter, and shot the film in the summer. As I edited the film I began to realize I wasn't happy with what Bresseleers had written. What he was basically doing was harking back to a model that was already outdated. I was involved in a project I hardly knew anything about. Don't forget I never went to university.

How did you solve the problem?

I sought help from people such as Frans Van Bladel. I also asked Geert Bekaert to come and take a look at the second or third cut. At the time they were both writing for journals such as *Streven* and *De Linie*. Walter Bresseleers was very nice about it all and accepted the changes. Other-

wise he would never have given us permission to shoot sequences for *Waarover men niet spreekt* at his home.

Waarover men niet spreekt ('*Things that aren't mentioned*') was your second major project on architecture and urban planning, this time in collaboration with Geert Bekaert.

It was Geert who pointed me in the right direction. I'm really glad I met him. He taught me a lot, and there weren't that many people I was prepared to learn from. This was our first joint project.

Waarover men niet spreekt was made in 1968 and consisted of three parts, each about 35 minutes long.

The first part, *Home sweet home*, deals with illusions about individual housing, *Alice in Wonderland* is about the state of urban planning in Europe, and the third part, *Een hemel op aarde* ('Heaven on earth'), looks at a number of urban planning situations in Italy, Switzerland and Holland. *Waarover men niet spreekt* was the start of a whole sequence of tv programmes that can quite fairly be thought of as a series: *Bouwen in België* ('Building in Belgium', 1971), *De straat* ('The street', 1972), *M'Zab, stedelijk wonen in de woestijn* ('M'Zab, urban housing in the desert', 1974), *Een eeuw architectuur in België* ('A century of architecture in Belgium', 1976), *Ge kent de weg en de taal* ('You know your way around', 1976), *Vlaanderen in vogelvlucht* ('Bird's-eye view of Flanders', 1976), *Vlaanderen 77* ('Flanders 77', 1977) and *Rijksweg N°1* ('Highway One', 1978).

You could say De straat is stylistically very similar to Waarover men niet spreekt.

Certainly.

In fact, you could almost call it the fourth instalment of Waarover men niet spreekt.

Yes, that's right. What I was just trying to say was that the films were part of a series that effectively culminated in *Landschap van kerken* ('Landscape with churches', 1989), the last film I made that was based on a text by Geert Bekaert.

Although stylistically that's a very different film.

I was a bit older by then.

Propaganda

When did you first meet Geert Bekaert?

My father had a subscription to *Streven*, so I must have seen things Bekaert had written. I think I first spoke to him when my film about the abbey in Heverlee was shown in Antwerp in November 1964. Ludo Bekkers introduced us.

Do you think Bekaert and Bekkers were already planning to make films about architecture and urban planning?

I'm not sure. They may well have been. In any case, Bekaert made a number of TV programmes about architecture without me being involved.

When did the idea of working together with Geert Bekaert first arise?

I think that was Bekkers' doing. I was delighted to meet Geert, to discuss things with him – he was someone I could cling on to.

*How did *Waarover men niet spreekt* come to be made?*

I wanted to make short, compact films about architecture and urban planning, from 5 to 20 minutes in length – propaganda films to fill up the gaps in between bits of *Bonanza*, in place of the commercials that were broadcast in America. I wanted to reach the ordinary public – not so as to be popular, but to be quite literally in the middle of things. In those days everyone in Flanders watched *Bonanza*. I remember Bekaert, Bekkers and myself discussing the idea while on holiday on the Belgian coast.

*Ludo Bekkers tried to sell the idea to his superiors at the VRT. He wrote: 'We believe we can deal with the various aspects of this new concept of urban planning in 21 broadcasts. Some of them, lasting from 3 to 30 minutes, could be treated pretty much as "commercials". The basic idea is that we are trying to sell a product – in this case urbanization. As far as the subject matter is concerned, we have to assume that the audience is inert.' Did Bekkers know you were planning to broadcast the 'commercials' in the middle of *Bonanza*?*

I don't know. But we certainly agreed about the overall concept.

In the end the plan fell through. What went wrong?

There was a tremendous amount of discussion about it, including with the head of programming, Jozef Coolsaet. At the time I was quite highly regarded at the BRT, since films such as *Alden Biezen* (1964), *Abdij van 't Park, Heverlee* (1964) and *Plus d'honneur que d'honneurs* ('More honour than honours', 1965, a film about Westerlo Castle) had proved quite successful. But even so, the plan was turned down. It was naïve of us to think we could disrupt programming like that.

*So instead the two of you made *Waarover men niet spreekt*, three films lasting just over half an hour each. What the trilogy has in common with the original plan is its dogmatic, almost aggressive approach to the topic. The first two parts are particularly unsparing in their criticism of architecture and urban planning. To quote the opening lines of *Home sweet home*: 'What are these things that aren't mentioned? The dreams in which we want to make our homes, the dreams in which we can live and be ourselves. The homes in our heads, not the heads of architects or urban planners.'*

The first part, *Home sweet home*, is particularly blunt. I wanted to puncture people's illusions about individual housing. We wanted to talk about 'things that aren't mentioned', a reference to the first sex education films.

The film states in the most negativistic terms that housing has fallen into the clutches of spectacle and the market. The message is almost hysterically pessimistic: 'Housing's had it.'

It's fair to call it propaganda.

At the start of Part 1 the camera focuses on the door knocker. Someone knocks on the door, and the next thing you see is a series of pictures from an ice-skating spectacular – instead of entering the house, you are catapulted into the world of spectacle and television.

'The medium is the message.'

Why this emphasis on marketing and spectacularization?

What I was concerned about was the consumer culture and the death of authenticity. The first episode is a 'blind' one. It's about popular will, the

will of the people. Incidentally, you find the same thing in all social classes – I don't just mean the lace-curtain brigade.

The first two parts of Waarover men niet spreekt depend very much on the editing, rather than the voiceover or the soundtrack. The argument is provided by the sequence of images, as we indicated in connection with the door knocker. For instance, the pictures from the ice spectacular are followed by shots from a car stuck behind a brass band. Then suddenly we see pictures of the Shah of Iran 'in full regalia, re-enacting for television viewers those solemn moments in which he placed the imperial crown upon his own head and that of his lovely consort.'

As I said, it's about everyone. But I'm not really trying to educate people or explain things. I mean, I don't explain much, do I? If there was any disagreement between me and Bekaert, it had to do with my aversion to education. Bekaert was far more education-minded. He's is a man of conviction, not to say an idealist.

What was the mentality that led to films like these? Can you tell us something about that? What was the prevailing idea about housing and urban planning in 1966 and 1967?

There was no debate – there was no platform for a debate. But outwardly there was no sign that anything was the matter. Flanders was covered with buildings in next to no time.

No debate?

None. The only things you might call debate involved Bekaert, or Karel Elnó, only he was more concerned with design. We looked to Holland for inspiration.

Because a debate about urban planning was going on there?

Oh yes, most definitely. We wanted to break the silence in Flanders – and we succeeded. A great deal was written about *Waarover men niet spreekt* in the general as well as the specialized press. There's never been so much interest in my work as there was back then.



The Street

The film De straat partly deals with the same things as Waarover men niet spreekt.

Bekaert felt we shouldn't be talking about what had been built, but about what hadn't – the empty tube formed by the street. We shouldn't be talking about the built-up sides – although pavements were a grey area – but about what was defined by the sides. The film should be about the non-physical public domain. I don't know if we succeeded.

Even so, De straat focuses on one aspect: the impact of motor traffic on urban planning. At one point we are told: 'Nothing but a road is left of the street, a "moving machine" as Le Corbusier would call it, with equipment like that of a factory to facilitate fast communication; a machine, like any other machine, that only knows its own rules and by no means considers what is beyond it.'

Once mobility becomes an individual affair, the street changes. The unbuilt space is gone. The street has become hazardous. Stations, shopping malls and so on have become places of refuge – but they are one-sided, mono-functional places. People don't live in malls – all you have is shops.

There are lots of contrasts in the film between places where the authentic street supposedly still exists, for instance in Alberobello and Locorotondo in Italy – a street linked to the community, where the houses and the street merge – and our cities, where the street has 'vanished'. The film is an indictment.

I don't feel 'indictment' is the right word, but anyway . . . let's say that *De straat* is a tendentious film, and successfully so, for instance in France when the Greens first began to emerge, especially in the south, in places such as Aix-en-Provence and Avignon. The film's also been shown at a number of festivals, by invitation, and an English version has even been made. It ran for a long time, including in Italy.

You won the main prize at the 10th Prague Television Festival. The television company also seems to have liked it, as you won the Bert Leysen prize, the BRT's top award for in-house productions – quite something for such a polemical film!

The Prague festival was the leading festival in the former Eastern Bloc. It was a greatly coveted prize.

What's striking is that the Eastern Bloc and the green movement were both interested in the film.

Presumably it fitted in with their ideologies – as though anything could ever be changed. But it can't! Geert Bekaert may have been a bit more optimistic, though.

If you really do think in such black-and-white terms – ideal housing versus cities wrecked by car traffic – why have you never been more closely involved in the protest movement? Filming the Conscienceplein in Antwerp was only an indirect form of protest. The Antwerp Free Action Group (VAGA), which was set up in June 1968, succeeded in getting the square closed to cars.

To me the Conscienceplein is a space that still has urban quality. The VAGA protests, with Panamarenko and the rest, were pretty unimpressive, judging by what I saw of them. The protesters hardly knew what they were doing there, quite frankly. Antwerp had already had it by the time they appeared on the scene.

If you listen to the voiceover in De straat, what you're basically hearing is a 1968 political pamphlet. So where are the pictures of 1968 demos?

I did use pictures from Paris, 28 seconds of film if I'm not mistaken. But I've never been such a fan of 1968. I was in Paris at the time. The street barricades struck me as a spectacular piece of play-acting. Not much actually happened. When the demonstrations were over, the communists went back to work and the students went back to college. I reckon the trade unions shot their bolt – they gave in too soon. 1968 didn't make much difference.

Why didn't you use photographs in the film?

I hate doing that – I really do. I'd rather use material that's already been on the television news, such as the revolt in Londonderry.

The same statements and pictures keep on recurring in De straat, but the text and the images differ in their impact. The pessimistic discourse is

almost unbearable, but the film material is different – the pictures can always be interpreted in more than one way

So much more depends on the viewer. That's the reason I'm so fond of cinema – pictures can be interpreted in more ways than texts can.

The end of the film is particularly complex and multifaceted.

You do know why I chose Chambord, don't you?

No.

I've had two really frustrating experiences in my life, two projects that I really wanted to carry out and wasn't able to: a film about the Palais Stoclet in Brussels, and one about the Château de Chambord in the Loire Valley. Robert Delpire, whose work included producing films for *Nouvelle Vague* directors, wanted me to make them.

Let's look at the final sequences of the film in more detail. A few minutes before the end, the camera is pointed at a street of town houses, and we hear the following voiceover: 'As we do not seem to be able to develop our own neighbourhood and new streets, let us at least keep the existing streets untouched, since they offer much wider and further living possibilities than those new residential areas and buildings which show no imagination whatsoever.' This is a call for the preservation of old buildings.

Yes, I'd sooner have the status quo than something even worse. . . . This is a slap in the face of modernity.

Before making De straat you made a number of shorter films for the cultural programme Zoeklicht, each about 5 to 10 minutes long, about the Cogels-Osylei in Antwerp, Art Nouveau in Brussels and the Patershol in Ghent. Each of these films is a call for the preservation of old buildings.

Nowadays that seems self-evident, but it certainly wasn't back then. After *Waarover men niet spreekt* we were more convinced than ever that preserving old, good-quality architecture and urban planning was the best option.

The last two-and-a-half minutes of De straat begin with a frontal view of Antwerp's main railway station. The camera then rotates 360°, away from

the station and finally returning to a frontal view of it. Once the camera has stopped moving and the station is in full view once more, we switch to a picture of the roof of the Château de Chambord. Antwerp's main station and the Château de Chambord speak the same architectural language – a visual rhyme.

Yes, it's the same with King Leopold II's buildings in Belgium. All nineteenth-century fantasies.

At the time you had to specify your reasons for wanting to go to Chambord. Let me quote: '... where the roof of the château reveals a utopian street ... as shown in many contemporary portrayals.'

Yes, the garrets. The people who lived in them could be summoned downstairs whenever needed. The women were completely at the disposal of the *seigneur* and everyone else. Very nasty.

The camera travels along the roof of the château, past the towers that surmount it and the ones with doors and windows, to the tower of the chapel. At the same time we hear the sound of a rocket being launched, and the first verses of Genesis are recited in English – American English.

The text is a reference to Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, of course.

The soundtrack makes the pictures of the garrets more complicated – almost as though the myth of the community is being fired off into the depths of outer space.

It isn't a utopia, it's an unreal moment.

It's a negative utopia.

Heaven cannot be found in this world.

This is not the only film that ends on a spectacular as well as mysterious note. Take, for example, Landschap van kerken, which ends with the Basilica of the Sacred Heart in Brussels. The final sequence is an illusion of infinity, with the camera circling round the replica of the basilica on display inside the building.



The whole church is a replica! The problem with the end of the film is an interesting one. I think one of the finest works of art is a painting by Ruscha called *The End*. But you can't get away with a sign reading 'The End'. There was a time when you could end any film that way, but not any more. Now you have to find an ending . . . and I also think you need a proper beginning. I can't stand it when films start off with credits.

The end of De straat is not a conclusion. The film repeats the same message over and over again: the car has turned the street into a mere traffic route, rather than a place that belongs to and can be used by the community. The film is completely transparent, especially the voiceover, but basically also the pictures, whereas the end definitely isn't. It's enigmatic. You yourself refer to Kubrick's 2001, but in your files there's a document referring to David Lamelas. At the section on the main station and Chambord it says 'see Lamelas'. What did you mean by that?

The film's full of personal things like that. The Keyserlei, the Paardenmarkt and the Conscienceplein in Antwerp. Lamelas took stately pictures from various angles, indicating exactly when each one was taken, and that was probably in the back of my mind.

A Form of Living Together

Your files contain a short undated text, a sort of outline for the programme on the street, that reads as follows: 'For 1971-1972 the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven has scheduled an exhibition on the street as a form of visual environment. The exhibition is in line with an international trend of renewed interest in the street as a place where people can live.'

That was written by Geert Bekaert.

It may have been written after June 1970.

If it's undated, I've no idea. Was Harald Szeemann still involved in the exhibition project?

Yes, Harald Szeemann and Jean Leering are explicitly identified as the organizers. Bekaert also said that the exhibition was divided into four sections, and Jean Leering said the same thing in a 1970 text published in Museumjournaal.

So there must have been a good deal of discussion about it. That's interesting to know. But I don't remember all that much about the actual circumstances. Who influenced whom? I've always admired Geert for his ability to synthesize, which I didn't feel Leering had to the same degree. Leering was always very quick to pick things up from other people.

Bekaert also gives a number of reasons for getting the museum and public television to work on a joint project: 'The exhibition will not be confined to the museum building, but will be extended to the TV network. Conversely, television will be involved in a specific societal process, something that has hitherto only been done in the entertainment sector.' Instead of just doing features on exhibitions, you wanted a direct hook-up between TV and the museum.

Basically this pointed the way to *De IJsbreker*, the series of live programmes that I made in 1983 and 1984, in which different locations were hooked up to each other and to the TV studio.

A passage in one of Jean Leering's notebooks indicates that the television company was very taken with the idea: 'Spoke to Bekaert. He's persuaded Belgian TV to help us with De straat, for instance by shooting sequences which we may also be able to use in the exhibition.'

I seem to remember Jean Leering, Geert and myself discussing the idea several times.

You can see that from the minutes of the meetings of the working group that prepared the exhibition, which was called De straat, vorm van samenleven ('The street, a form of living together'). There's a pencilled reference to a proposal of yours, reading 'proposal by Cornelis: continuous live projection'.

I don't remember that, but it's certainly an idea that I put forward at various other times. For example, I made a similar proposal for the opening of Antwerp 93. I wanted to use all the CCTV cameras in the city. But the idea was turned down.

What exactly were you planning to do?

I wanted to take pictures from the CCTV cameras that were trained on parts of Antwerp and broadcast them live on TV for an hour. The cameras

had just been installed around the motorway and in the tunnels, and the pictures were fascinating. The police said we could go ahead, but BRT's lawyers turned it down flat. They said we'd need permission from all the people who would appear on the screen.

The joint project with the Van Abbemuseum was abandoned. You had a meeting in Breda on 29 September 1971. The minutes read: 'Joint exhibition – TV programme can no longer be made in originally suggested form. TV film must be recorded by end of this year.'

Yes, the idea was to get the film made in 1971. BRT's director of programming, Bert Janssens, gave the go-ahead on 22 October 1971. I wanted to shoot sequences in Italy from 19 November to 9 December 1971, but I had to cancel the trip because of riots in Milan and the unexpectedly early winter. Getting the film made was quite a performance, I can tell you.

The museum's minutes also indicate you had qualms about shooting a film in an exhibition. But that wasn't the reason the project fell through. The Van Abbemuseum archives contain an undated, unsigned letter to the chairman of the working group that prepared the exhibition, Tjeerd Deelstra: 'Jef Cornelis of BRT tells me their TV programme De straat has been postponed from January to June. They will be filming in Italy from 22 March to 14 April (see attached itinerary). That means we won't be able to use their material, which is a terrible pity.' The exhibition eventually opened on 2 June 1972 and, after being extended, ran until 24 September. The film was broadcast on 14 September 1972.

The exhibition and the film were completely different projects.

That's true. In fact, the film doesn't even mention the exhibition, or vice versa. And the emphasis is different – in the exhibition there's simply a statement somewhere that the street has been greatly transformed by traffic, whereas in the film that's the main theme.

Leering wanted to reclaim the street, whereas we felt 'Once it's gone, it's gone'.

You mean you can only preserve what's good?

For as long as it lasts.