



‘My Very Own *Citizen Kane*’, Inspired by Godard and Fellini: Frans Weisz’s Adaptation of Remco Campert’s *Het gangstermeisje*

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Abstract: No Dutch filmmaker in the 1960s explored the connections between cinema and an artistic undercurrent in art and literature as distinctly as Frans Weisz. This is, first of all, proved by a prize-winning short commission film about authors in search of a reader, which premiered at the Book Ball in 1965. Secondly, his choice to collaborate with poet-novelist Remco Campert, which led to the novel *Het gangstermeisje* (1966), is an attempt to adopt the mentality of the artistic avant-garde from the 1950s into Dutch cinema. This novel, written by a cinephile, takes cinema as an art form seriously. In turn, Weisz’s debut feature gives evidence of an overriding ambition, which manifests itself in a hodgepodge of several high-art influences. *Het gangstermeisje* shares its deliberate narrative impasses with Jean-Luc Godard’s *Le mépris* and Federico Fellini’s *Otto e mezzo*, while stylistically inspired by Godard’s *À bout de souffle*. The history of Dutch cinema illustrates, however, that fiction film could only prosper commercially once the internationally oriented directors of the 1960s, like Weisz, sacrificed their artistic aspirations for ‘national cinema’ as a model in the early 1970s.

Keywords: Dutch art cinema / Nederlandse art cinema – film and literature / film en literatuur – Frans Weisz – *Het gangstermeisje* – Remco Campert – Federico Fellini – Jean-Luc Godard

In his *Van Fanfare tot Spetters*, Hans Schoots examines the claim that the rebellious stance taken by some Dutch filmmakers in the 1960s is in fact a belated aping of the mentality of an artistic avant-garde from the 1950s. Even though *Fanfare* (Bert Haanstra, 1958) had been a tremendous box-office hit with more than 2.6 million viewers, this fact had little bearing on later filmmakers. For a young generation of aspiring directors who attended the then newly founded Nederlandse Filmacademie [The Dutch Film Academy],¹ Haanstra, born in 1916, represented a 'cinéma de papa': he deserved respect at best, but one could not truly admire his *Fanfare*.

The aftermath effect of *Dorp aan de rivier* [Village by the River] (Fons Rademakers, 1958)² was ultimately more substantial than of *Fanfare*, partly because its scriptwriter, the Flemish Hugo Claus, was affiliated with experimental and innovative developments in literature, theatre and visual art. Like many of his colleague-painters from the Cobra movement (Karel Appel, Constant, Corneille) and many of his poet-friends who were part of the so-called Vijftigers (Lucebert, Simon Vinkenoog, Remco Campert), Claus was interested in primitive painting styles and associative linguistic expressions, dismayed as he was by petit-bourgeois conventions.³ Although a key scene was omitted as too bold and radical, to the dissatisfaction of Claus, his efforts with *Dorp aan de rivier* can be taken as the proverbial swallow but this one did make a (brief) summer, for Dutch cinema was to undergo an unprecedented sea-change in a time span of less than a decade.

During the period 1965–67 several filmmakers attempted to catch up with European 'art' cinema. Rademakers adapted a play by Claus into *De dans van de reiger* [Dance of the Heron] (1966), which bore a strong resemblance to Alain Resnais's *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* [Last Year at Marienbad] (1961);⁴ Adriaan Ditvoorst received accolades for his *nouvelle vague*-inspired short film *Ik kom wat later naar Madra* [That Way to Madra] (1965) at international film festivals from Jean-Luc Godard and Bernardo Bertolucci, and proceeded to make the bleak, yet aesthetically pleasing *Paranoia* (1967), based on a novel by W.F. Hermans; Nikolai van der Heyde's *Een ochtend van zes weken* [A Morning of Six Weeks] (1966) had a similar plot as Claude Lelouch's *Un Homme et une Femme*, released a few months later; in both films a racing driver embarks on a romantic liaison with a woman. Yet no Dutch filmmaker explored the connections between cinema and an artistic undercurrent in art and literature as distinctly as Frans Weisz, while at the same time keeping an eye on international tendencies.

One cannot escape the impression that Weisz is one of those filmmakers who think that cinema can only come to full fruition provided it digests the influences of literature and visual art. His short commission film *Een zondag op het eiland van de Grande Jatte* [A Sunday on the Island of the Grande Jatte] (1965) demonstrates this, but his debut feature *Het gangstermeisje*

¹ De Nederlandse Filmacademie was founded in 1958 and this vocational school became officially acknowledged in 1960.

² *Dorp aan de rivier* attracted 301,979 spectators.

³ Hans Schoots, *Van Fanfare tot Spetters: Een cultuurgeschiedenis van de jaren zestig en zeventig* (Amsterdam: Bas Lubberhuizen, 2004), p. 28.

⁴ See Peter Verstraten, 'Theatrical Films and Cinematic Novels: *De dans van de reiger* and *L'Année dernière à Marienbad*', *Image [&] Narrative* 17 (2) (2016), 61–73.

[*Illusion is a Gangster Girl*] (1966) is even more relevant, for this film is, as I will explain, the result of a dialogic co-creation between Weisz and novelist Remco Campert. Moreover, as can be gathered from Weisz's statement that *Het gangstermeisje* was meant to be the film to 'end all films', it is the most daunting and cinephilic enterprise from that period. In the spirit of Australian film critic Adrian Martin's plea that, in the case of a very small cinephile nation, its names and works 'need to be inserted into a global history',⁵ I will read Weisz's feature film through the prism of the work of Jean-Luc Godard and of Federico Fellini's *Otto e mezzo* [8½] (1963), with which it shares deliberate narrative impasses. This may seem like a bold gesture, for *Het gangstermeisje* has now been practically, albeit unjustly, forgotten, whereas Godard is acknowledged as a revolutionary filmmaker and Fellini as one of the grandmasters of Italian/European cinema. The reason why *Het gangstermeisje* pales in comparison to Godard's *Le mépris* [Contempt] (1963) and *Otto e mezzo* in terms of aesthetic quality, is, paradoxically, because of Weisz's ambitious, or rather, overambitious undertaking. As a result, his film turned into a hodgepodge of several high-art influences. Since the 'art' cinema circumstances were not as favourable in the Netherlands as in France and Italy in the mid-1960s, Weisz's grandiose debut feature was doomed to fall flat in a country with an as yet immature fiction film tradition.

Authors in Search of a Reader

Since Haanstra was too busy with the promotion of his film *Alleman* [Everyman] (1964), Weisz was approached to shoot a 20-minute film to be screened for a special occasion, the so-called Boekenbal [Book Ball] on 13 May 1965. The black-and-white picture *Een zondag op het eiland van de Grande Jatte* introduces several people, male and female, young and old in slow-motion, in a park with a pond.⁶ In an atmosphere reminiscent of the picnic and boating scenes in *Partie de campagne* [A Day in the Country] (Jean Renoir, 1936), they are enjoying the sunny weather. At one point, however, the camera captures some 'strange outsiders' among the trees. These black-clad men are writers, 'as silent, unnoticed observers present in an innocently moving community'.⁷ They are magically repositioned at a table next to some card players, apparently a reference to the short *Partie de Cartes* [The Card Game] (Louis and Auguste Lumière, 1896). Once we get a re-establishing shot of the park, it has the very same composition of the famous 1886 painting *Un dimanche après-midi à l'île de la Grande Jatte* by the French post-Impressionist painter Georges Seurat. The characters all stop in their tracks, still as statues, while we see the swans still swimming in the pond. Suddenly it starts raining, and a few shots later, the park is practically deserted. The next scene has a visceral quality, because it uses vivid camera movements and visual contrasts: three riders on horseback move towards the camera until the camera pans with them to the right. A group of people, looking for

⁵ Adrian Martin, *Mise en Scène and Film Style: From Classical Hollywood to New Media Art* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), p. xv.

⁶ Thanks to Rommy Albers from EYE for showing me a 16mm print of this film.

⁷ 'bevreemde buitenstaanders' ... 'als stille, onopgemerkte waarnemers aanwezig in een argeloos bewegende gemeenschap.' The quotes in Dutch are taken from the script: Frans Weisz and Anton Koolhaas, *Scenario en draaiboek-fragmenten van de film Een zondag op het eiland van de Grande Jatte* (Amsterdam: Commissie voor de Collectieve Propaganda van het Nederlandse Boek, 1965), p. 9. All translations are mine unless indicated otherwise.

shelter against the rain, are running to the left, followed by a traveling shot forwards behind them. The rhythmic editing alternates between the horses (briefly out of focus, when close to the camera) and the people. While traveling, the camera also pans to the left and to the right to show the writers with umbrellas, standing motionless. After the people enter a castle, the writers also head towards the castle, but the screen goes black for a second to indicate that they are too late. Subsequent shots are often filmed through the grid of a window: because of the rain on the window pane, from the inside we can vaguely discern the motionless writers, while they witness the activities inside. The people use books for different purposes than they were originally intended for. Books are spread over the floor, and a woman is able to step forward without touching the ground; someone uses a book as a wedge to keep a sash window open; a young woman carries a book on her head, like a true model. Thereupon the camera pans from left to right and back again to show windows behind which children are throwing books at each other, while loose pages fly through the air, 'like the dry leaves' in the park.⁸

In a subsequent scene, the authors have withdrawn to a library, and after some hesitation start to write increasingly more feverishly.⁹ The sound of their typing changes into a melody and as the rhythm increases, the editing accelerates, showing us pictures of a great number of writers. In the next sequence, the camera zooms in on characters reading books amidst heavy traffic and a girl is embracing a boy while reading a book behind his back. A woman jumps from a diving board and a subsequent underwater shot shows her reading a book, followed by a window cleaner on a stepladder, also reading. The writers return to the castle lawn, whereupon all the characters inside stop what they were doing and stare outside. The woman with the book on her head faces the camera. A reverse shot shows that a handsome young man is about to approach her. It is clear that she uses the book to seduce him, and as he comes closer and seems about to kiss her, the camera slightly tilts up and he takes the book off her head with a sudden movement. He goes outside and starts running. The other people all go back to the park, and end up in the very same set-up of the Seurat painting. Meanwhile, the young man is jumping around on the lawn, and while doing this, his movements are briefly interrupted by freeze frames, and letters start to appear on the screen.

Taking the screening context into account, *Een zondag op het eiland van de Grande Jatte* can be considered as a playful short film. To start with, it is ironic that, for an audience comprised of a great number of authors used to work with text as their material, the entire film is wordless: no dialogues, no voice-over. Moreover, the writers-in-the-film only strike awkward poses in their dark coats and seem totally out of tune with the shiny, happy people in the park. The implication that they live in an ivory tower, disconnected from ordinary citizens, is confirmed by the film's subtitle, *Seven Authors in Search of a Reader*, an unmistakable nod to Luigi Pirandello's play *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921). After witnessing through the windows how books are abused as material objects, there is another streak of playful irony. The only way to make contact with the readers is not by starting a conversation with them, but simply through the melodic sounds of the typewriters. The actual content of their texts seems irrelevant, they are only capable of mesmerizing people through the rhythmic, but apparently

⁸ 'als de dorre bladeren', Weisz and Koolhaas, p. 15.

⁹ Thirty writers have a cameo-appearance in the film, among them – except for Campert – Gerard van 't Reve, Cees Nooteboom, Ed Hoornik, Adriaan Morriën, Jan Cremer and Belcampo.

meaningless playing of typewriter keys. The mutterings on the soundtrack do actually hypnotise the potential readers to such an extent that the young man towards the end, in a surprising and comic gesture, prefers a book over the promise of a kiss, to the amazement of the young woman.

In addition to its playful tone, *Een zondag op het eiland van de Grande Jatte* is littered with a variety of highbrow references. Except for the shots which copy Seurat's painting and for the allusion to Pirandello's play, the statuesque figures in Weisz's short film are reminiscent of *L'Année dernière à Marienbad*, while the torn-out pages flying in the air seem derived from the slow-motion pillow fight in *Zéro de Conduite* [Zero for Conduct] (Jean Vigo, 1933). Weisz's film thus also showcases its artistic side, which suits the occasion of an event promoting (Dutch) literature as Literature.¹⁰ Most ironic, however, is that this film, made for this particular evening, was to win a Silver Bear at the Berlin International Film Festival,¹¹ and would turn out to be Weisz's most viewed film of his career, an irony not lost on him.¹² Nonetheless, the change in viewing context from a commission film for the Dutch Book Ball via festival darling to a movie screened in a cinema affects the reception of the film: with each new context, its artistic allure tends to become slightly stronger. The references in the film to literature, visual art and art cinema, unerringly apt on its first screening, became, once released as a regular film, 'too precise', to quote from the review in *Monthly Film Bulletin*. Hence, this otherwise positive review – praising the film's striking compositions and excellent photography – has to conclude that Weisz lacks 'the discipline to shed superfluous weight'.¹³ The fact that its tongue-in-cheek references surpass a narrative skeleton befits a commission film for an artistic event, but is less appropriate for a theatrical release.

Cinema on a Par with Literature

Because of its artistic allure, *Een zondag op het eiland van de Grande Jatte* can be seen as a stepping stone, not to say blueprint, for Weisz's next movie, for which he had anything but low ambitions. He announced his *Het gangstermeisje* as 'my very own *Citizen Kane*', a reference to Orson Welles' 1941 debut feature, which has become a celebrated classic.¹⁴ One could call Weisz 'the great pretender' for that, but his statement is not without some self-deprecation. Since Welles, who was given the opportunity to make a film thanks to his famous radio-play *The War of the Worlds*, was a total novice on the set, he was also a bit at a loss, yet turned his inexperience to his advantage. Weisz likes to paraphrase Welles, who claimed that the less a director knows about the technical aspects of cinema, the more he can demand from his crew.

¹⁰ See Schoots, p. 67. In his *Van Fanfare tot Spetters*, Schoots compares the film to René Clair's Dadaist short film *Entr'acte* (1924), which also premiered at a special occasion: it was shown during the interval at a ballet performance.

¹¹ Another important prize was the Staatsprijs voor de Filmkunst.

¹² In the documentary series *Allemaal film: De Nederlandse film van 1945 tot nu toe*, Weisz said that it seemed as if this short film had attracted more spectators than all of his subsequent films together. *Allemaal film*, devoted to the history of Dutch cinema, was broadcast in nine episodes on television by the AVRO in 2007. It was produced by IDTV and presented by actor Jeroen Krabbé.

¹³ Anonymous, 'Een zondag op het eiland van de Grande Jatte', *Monthly Film Bulletin* (January 1970), 112.

¹⁴ 'In 1966 wilde ik met *Het Gangstermeisje* een "film to end all films" maken, mijn eigen *Citizen Kane*', in Anon. 'Leven met Charlotte', *NIW*, 22 November 2011, <http://www.niw.nl/leven-met-charlotte/>

According to Weisz, it is the task of the director to pursue his imagination, and how to visualise the director's fantasy is up to all the (other) people on the set.¹⁵ Hence, to have a trigger that kindled his fantasy was a big leap for Weisz in his role of director. Once he had read the first fourteen pages of an as yet unfinished manuscript by Campert, he betted that a close collaboration between himself and the novelist would be rewarding.¹⁶ They held a great number of meetings, often in the company of producer Jan Vrijman, to discuss a script, which mirrored their own situation.¹⁷ Campert started writing both the novel and the scenario, while Weisz was already shooting. Ultimately the book was published before the film was released.

Both Weisz and Campert's starting-point was to treat cinema as if on a par with literature. This was quite a bold attitude at the time, for literature usually had a more privileged status than cinema: W.F. Hermans's abrasive comments at Rademakers's 1963 adaptation of his novel *De donkere kamer van Damokles* [The Darkroom of Damocles] (1958) still reverberated. Campert, however, insisted that any rivalry between literature and cinema should be avoided.¹⁸ In his novel, the scriptwriter Wessel Franken is asked to write a film scenario around the word 'gangster girl', suggested to him by the director Jascha who works in Rome. The entire novel should be seen as a search for creativity, for Wessel can picture a gangster woman, but a 'gangster girl' offers only vague and loose images. The word triggers a series of associations on Wessel's part: she is a face on a pillow in the morning sun, though she never sleeps; she is a bespectacled stranger's dream image from which he does not wake up; memories of Wessel's first wife Olga suddenly pop up as well. All these random deliberations are indications that Wessel remains stuck in atmospheric sketches. Towards the end Jascha, who has come over from Rome ('in Rome, everything is film'), scribbles a few lines based on his conversation with Wessel:

[T]he camera tilts up in an endless movement and we see how the gangster girl bends over the journalist, covers his corpse with her coat, gets up and walks away (location: empty and rainy industrial estate?) – behind her the ranks of gangsters and bodyguards close up.

'Well,' Wessel says, 'If everything else is like this, we have made a classic film'.¹⁹

¹⁵ See Peter Verstraten, "Hoe meer een personage zich bewust is van zijn rol, hoe naakter hij is": Interview met Frans Weisz', in *Scènes uit een huwelijk: Psychoanalyse & Film*, ed. by Sjeff Houppermans, Marc De Kesel and Peter Verstraten (Amsterdam: Dutch University Press, 2006), p. 63.

¹⁶ Campert had already delivered the script for Weisz's very first short film *Helden in een schommelstoel* [Heroes in a Rocking Chair] (1963), a 30-minute spaghetti-western *avant la lettre*.

¹⁷ The discussions between Campert, Vrijman and Weisz are reported in the book *De film: Het gangstermeisje* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1966). Jan Blokker and Rob du Mée are also credited as scriptwriters, but this is because they had participated in some of the numerous discussions and meetings between Weisz, Campert and Vrijman (p. 10).

¹⁸ Campert said during one meeting that a film about a writer too often results into an 'overestimation of writing' ('overschatting van het schrijven'), *De film: Het gangstermeisje*, p. 14.

¹⁹ "[D]e camera komt omhoog in een eindeloze beweging en we zien hoe het gangstermeisje zich over de journalist heenbuigt, haar jas over zijn lijk legt, overeind komt en weg begint te lopen (location: leeg en beregend terrein van pakhuizen?) – achter haar sluit zich de rij van gangsters en bodyguards. " Ja, zegt Wessel, als de rest navenant is dan hebben we een klassieke film gemaakt' (Campert, pp. 147-8).

Wessel's remark is slightly derisory, because by this time he has come to realise that he is not capable of fulfilling his ambitions. At one point, he seems truly inspired and writes down some words in a notebook, but then the moment is over. Once he is back at his typewriter, he 'can hardly recall the images and smells that forced him to frantically write down all those keywords in his little notebook.'²⁰ Wessel is not just indecisive as regards the script, but it appears that he suffers from a general infirmity of purpose. He has gone to the south of France, uncertain whether to continue with his second wife Leonie with whom he has a child. Initially the marital crisis was still suitable for a story, 'but later everything became devoid of narrative'.²¹ As another token of his irresoluteness, the five brief italicised chapters can be cited. He is in the process of writing a text about a psychotic bass player living in a hotel room near the seaside. He doubts whether he will ever finish the text, for it lacks a backbone. He is consistently unable to produce more than three or four sentences, as he has not decided on a specific story. The italicised passages describe no more than vague sensory impressions and, to underscore the bass player's confusion, faces of people melt into 'one neutral face that looked at me, no, looked far beyond me'.²² In the end, he sinks into psychosis and the mere announcement that there is a telephone call for him makes him recoil against the wall on his bed, 'sobbing in horror'.²³

The story about the bass player – 'Is it a story at all? No, there is no narrative'²⁴ – is emblematic of Campert's novel. The text is filled with promises of events, but none truly materialises. At one point Wessel thinks that Max will shoot his much older boyfriend Danny, but after a few suspenseful pages, the couple are just sitting quietly together. A neighbour is missing, but then he is simply back again. He thinks of leaving Leonie, but in the end he returns home without a clue whether they will continue their marriage or not. The problem with Wessel, this writer searching for creativity, is that he can be visited by dozens of thoughts, words, images, but they finally evaporate into thin air, so that a true denouement is lacking.

Significantly there are many asides about cinema in *Het gangstermeisje*, and this medium predominantly acts as a trigger for Wessel's imagination. In the first chapter, there are no fewer than three quotes, in French, derived from Italian director Michelangelo Antonioni, some wise words by actor-producer Mack Sennett, some praise for the *nouvelle vague*. But references to film as such are not the most telling indication of a fondness for cinema. Yet in the first chapter, the narrator gives a rough description of Leonie's facial features: large, dark brown eyes, snow-white teeth, full lips, a slightly coarse nose, but adds to this: 'Who can properly describe a face these days? Who is patiently enough?'²⁵ These sentences not only suggest that the craft of precise and literary descriptions is one from the past, but, more importantly, that elaborate descriptions are redundant in a novel in which writing a script is the main goal. A description in a novel tends to be specific, but cinema has an 'overspecific' nature: if we were to see a shot of Leonie, there is immediately 'such an excess of visual details that the specific qualities of those

²⁰ '[H]ij kan zich nog maar nauwelijks de beelden en de geuren te binnen brengen die hem dwongen zo koortsachtig al die sleutelwoorden in zijn zakboekje te noteren', Campert, p. 93.

²¹ '[P]as later werd alles verhaalloos', Campert, p. 20.

²² '[Tot de gezichten] 'één neutraal gezicht werden dat me aankeek, nee, ver voorbij me keek ...', Campert, p. 119.

²³ '[S]nikkend van afgrijzen', Campert, p. 165.

²⁴ 'Is het wel een verhaal? Er is geen verhaal', Campert, p. 131.

²⁵ 'Wie kan er nog een gezicht beschrijven? Wie heeft er nog het geduld voor?', Campert, p. 19.

details are in danger of going unnoticed'.²⁶ The lack of interest in the description of a face is an indication that the narrator does not value literary devices over cinematic principles.

As a final example that literature and cinema are not in competition with one another, let me refer to the scene in which Wessel visits a shabby film theatre in the south of France. Although the title is never mentioned, it appears to be a so-called peplum film, a 'sword and sandal' movie, set in the Greco-Roman era. The hero is a 'blonde aurochs',²⁷ played by an American actor; there is a cruel emperor; there is an old fat scoundrel about to buy a woman although her breasts are considered too tiny. While Wessel regards it as silly amusement, topped by the preposterous meeting between the hero and heroine under a full moon over Cinecittà, he suddenly wonders whether it is a boring scene at all. There is so much to see in fact: her tiny hands over his big, pink ears; a poorly performed kiss; the loss of one of her sandals as Roman soldiers approach; a soldier picks up the sandal and throws it in the direction of a meowing cat.²⁸ Wessel clearly does not want to make a film like this, and his ambitions even go beyond a 'classical film', as can be inferred from his remark to Jascha. It is striking, however, that this peplum does not become an object of derision for Wessel, but is rather seen through the eyes of a cinephile, the cinema lover who can find pleasure in obscure details, poignant facial expressions, striking body language and who can exert a fascination on supporting actors. Cinephilia concerns a passion and desire for cinema as such, not just for the canonical titles, but also for underrated B-movies. The way Wessel enjoys the peplum is a clear indication that Campert's novel treats cinema in all but a condescending manner. This is underscored by one of Wessel's random notes: 'There is hidden truth in the most mendacious film'.²⁹

Salute to *Le mépris*

Though Campert and Weisz held elaborate discussions about *Het gangstermeisje*, there is a number of obvious differences between the novel and the film. I will limit myself to highlighting two seminal ones. Firstly, whereas the novel started with the word 'gangstermeisje', the film has already a concrete image, or rather two images, of the title character. In Weisz's film, Wessel is commissioned to adapt his own bestselling novel into a screenplay for an Italian movie. Since Wessel's wife Leonie is on the cover, she is the (original) gangster girl, but to her disappointment, an actress named Kitty has been cast for the film. Wessel's stay in the sunny but quiet Menton is intercut with a makeshift visualisation of the script, just as in the novel, but all the scenes – or rather, situations – are centred around the enthralling image of Kitty. Secondly, in the film Wessel does not go back to Amsterdam, but sets off for Rome, and while the Italians praise him for the script, they demand considerable changes nonetheless. He is introduced to Caspar Alfieri, one of Italy's best screen writers who likes the girl's coolness, but is not convinced by the overly introvert detective. Jascha backs Caspar's opinion up: the detective is too closely modelled after the thoughtful writer himself, yet he is meant to be a man

²⁶ Peter Verstraten, *Film Narratology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), p. 55.

²⁷ '[B]londe oeros', Campert, p. 46.

²⁸ Campert, pp. 47-8.

²⁹ 'In de leugenachtigste film schuilt waarheid', Campert, p. 41.

of action, as tough as the gangster girl herself. Wessel, however, insists that the detective should be the girl's 'opposite or her completion', and this disagreement is the prelude to the end scene when the protagonist distances himself from the entire project. Wessel walks onto the set during shooting, takes control of the sound equipment and tells the crew, including a baffled Jascha, that he wanted to tell the story of a man pursuing his own happiness who became a prisoner of his own fantasy. 'I fell in love with a woman I had created myself. A word, an image, the gangster girl. I got caught up in a shadow play that only seemed a play to you, indeed, but for me it was a serious matter. I do not want to become a victim, so finish playing the game, but without me'.³⁰ Wessel then walks away from the set, in the direction of the Colosseum, while shooting continues with the shot in which the gangster girl Kitty kisses the detective, just before killing him.

Whereas the entire episode in Rome is absent in the novel, it is tempting to suggest that the final part was added to establish analogies with two key European art movies, both released in 1963. Weisz was not a stranger to ambition, as indicated before, but he was perhaps well aware that, as a newcomer in the field, he could not be in the league of Godard and Fellini. The parallels to Godard's *Le mépris* and to Fellini's *Otto e mezzo* are not to be taken as attempts at imitation, but rather as a fleeting homage to their work.³¹ Like *Het gangstermeisje*, *Le mépris* is about a screenwriter, but this one is strictly paid for his services to an American producer in order to curtail the artistic aspirations of the German director, played by Fritz Lang. The director disparages the fact that the producer wants to turn *Odyssey*, the epic hero of Homer's classic tale, into a 'modern neurotic'. Suffice it to say for the sake of my argument that Godard articulated in *Le mépris* his own conflicts with his producers. Until that moment he had been able to make films on his own terms, with limited means. Since Godard had built himself a reputation by that time, Joseph E. Levine and Carlo Ponti not only secured a higher budget for him, but also contracted the sexy French movie star Brigitte Bardot. At his producers' request, Godard shot the film in ravishing colours and in the CinemaScope format of 2,35:1, but then has the director-in-the-film Lang sarcastically remark that CinemaScope is only for snakes and coffins. Use Bardot as a sex symbol, his producers insisted, and Godard shoots a naked Bardot for more than three minutes, but in a static long shot that is boring rather than sexy. And when director Lang talks about B.B. – the initials generally used for Bardot – he has the German writer Bertolt Brecht in mind. Hence, Godard does play by the rules of his producers, albeit in such an unorthodox manner that it creates an effect of estrangement. Strictly speaking, he gives in to their demands but always with an ironic twist.

Godard's film about the making of a film is indirectly about his resistance to be assimilated by money-eager producers, in which the protagonist-screenwriter is misused as a pitiful pawn. Godard's strategy to make a deliberate and creative mis-translation of commercial cinema turned into a film that became acknowledged as one of the key art movies of the 1960s. And although Weisz did not seek to emulate *Le mépris* – for that would have required a director of

³⁰ 'Ik ben verdwaald in mijn eigen fantasie. Ik ben verliefd op een vrouw die ik zelf had opgeroepen. Een woord, een beeld, het gangstermeisje. Ik ben verstrikt geraakt in een schimmenspel dat ik zelf had uitgedacht dat voor jullie altijd een spel is gebleven, maar voor mij ernst is geweest. Maar ik wil geen slachtoffer worden, dus spelen jullie het spel maar uit, maar zonder mij.'

³¹ Insofar as *Het gangstermeisje* can be taken as a homage to *Le mépris*, it is at least striking that Campert's novel explicitly celebrates Vladimir Nabokov's novel *La méprise* [Despair], Campert, p. 131.

Godard's stature and as prolific as him – the film *Het gangstermeisje*, not Campert's novel, pays homage to it in its final part. To start with, in Weisz's eyes, Kitty Courbois, whom he had cast as the enigmatic gangster girl, could pass for the Dutch equivalent of Bardot, despite the difference in hair colour (black versus blonde).³² Both films are partly set in Rome; both films highlight the restrictions a scriptwriter has to deal with; both films stage the tension between art/creativity and commerce/conventions without devaluing cinema. *Le mépris* was an adaptation of the Italian novel *Il Disprezzo* (1954) by Alberto Moravia, a satire on the exploitative film industry. In Moravia's book, it is evident that literature is to be privileged over cinema, but it is Godard's achievement that the two media are given more or less equal status. Godard's keen resistance to the demands of the producers articulates that cinema can be employed in an artistic fashion as well. It was relatively simple for Campert to take cinema seriously, for as a writer he had to do no more than quote Antonioni in an affirmative fashion or to describe a peplum movie in a non-pejorative way. The task is much harder for a filmmaker, but saluting *Le mépris* with its avowed distrust of financial appetites, was one solution in *Het gangstermeisje* to avoid the predictable preference of words/script over images/film. Both Godard and Weisz criticise cinema (as an institution) but do this in a language that at the same time celebrates the medium's aesthetic potential.

Otto e mezzo as an Art-Film Fairy Tale

If Godard's *Le mépris* undermines the usual dichotomies between art/commerce and literature/film, *Otto e mezzo* is about an artist's deadlock in creativity. The main protagonist in Fellini's movie is film director Guido Anselmi, who has a gigantic and very expensive space tower built, to make an apocalyptic and intellectual science-fiction, but he has forgotten why he thought it was a good idea. Guido has had some successes, but he fears being exposed as a fraud: in the opening scene, we see him being suffocated in a car, and when he escapes by flying through the air, people try to pull him down with a rope on his ankle. He spends his time in a health resort as a necessary break from all the hectic, but even there he is bothered, time and again. Aspiring actors and actresses hope he will remember them when he will start casting; the Catholic Church wants to prevent him from including blasphemous scenes; journalists eagerly inquire about his progress; his co-writer Daumier makes denigrating remarks about gratuitous script episodes and explains to him that if he is not creating truly necessary things, destroying his frivolous ideas is a better option. To complicate matters, his wife comes to the fashionable spa, while his mistress is already there. At the same time, he has daydreams about a harem and a beautiful young woman in white. She triggers, as Marilyn Fabe observes, 'the common male middle-age fantasy that "If I could just meet the right young, beautiful woman, my vitality would come back and my problems would be solved"'.³³ At the end, when it seems that the film project will be aborted – to Daumier's delight – Guido sees the woman in white again as well as a magician friend, and all the people who inhabit his fantasies gather near the space tower.

³² Weisz had been thinking of casting an Italian actress in the role of the gangster girl, but he decided at an early stage that Courbois should perform that part. He was extremely fond of her and she had also played in his *Helden in een schommelstoel*. See the book *De film: Het gangstermeisje*, p. 30.

³³ Marilyn Fabe, *Closely Watched Films: An Introduction to the Art of Narrative Film Technique* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of Berkeley Press, 2004), p. 155.

Guido starts giving instructions with a megaphone: it will be the beginning of that long delayed film, *Otto e mezzo*.

This brief synopsis gives some clues as to superficial parallels between Weisz's and Fellini's film.³⁴ Both protagonists are struggling with a script for a movie; they are fascinated by the alluring image of a woman – the actress supposed to play the gangster girl; the woman in white; they are suffering from insecurities and panic attacks due to the pressure exerted upon them; the house of the gay couple Danny and Max in Menton is a place to work and relax for Wessel, like Guido's spa resort; whereas Guido is bombarded with many requests at this spa, Wessel has to deal with the cynical views of the depressed Max on the one hand and with his daydreams about the paranoid bass player on the other. At the end of *Het gangstermeisje*, Wessel makes himself heard from a high trestle, while Guido takes up a megaphone to make himself heard, although their announcements are crucially different. For Wessel, this is the moment to distance himself from the project, but for Guido this marks the moment that his creative crisis has been resolved like magic, when he stops listening to Daumier and is delighted by the vision of both the woman in white and the magician. Despite the similarities in the stories, there is nonetheless an insurmountable difference, marked by an antipodal starting point. Whereas Guido as Fellini's alter ego suffers from anxiety after his incredible successes, Wessel as a stand-in for both Campert and Weisz is a novice to feature-length cinema. This difference, as I will argue, shows itself stylistically.

According to Fabe, *Otto e mezzo* presents itself as a self-reflexive work with 'flamboyant camera movements, audacious edits, and a self-conscious score'.³⁵ The entire movie is an amalgam of Guido's creative choices, traumatic childhood experiences, and fantasies, displayed without any clue for the spectator to clarify what is what, as the famous Saraghina sequence illustrates. When Guido is listening to the cardinal, he sees a voluptuous peasant woman, which triggers an old memory of the prostitute Saraghina on the beach. The flashback is shot, as Fabe claims, in a 'distanced, highly stylized manner, embellished with symbolic overtones, [and] satirical thrusts'.³⁶ Since the priests do not want the young Guido to watch this woman, they start to chase him in 'the sped-up motion of silent slapstick comedies' that emphasises their stiffness.³⁷ The priests put the boy on trial, but Guido's mother is portrayed by the very same grey-haired woman who is cast as the mother of the middle-aged Guido, indicating that 'she is just as ashamed of him now as she was back then'.³⁸ It is implied that both the church's punishment and the maternal sorrow have had an impact on Guido's psyche. Most importantly, however, is that *Otto e mezzo* frequently mismatches shot-to-shot transitions, thus merging 'disparate spaces and condens[ing] time'.³⁹ By doing so, *Otto e mezzo* not only 'captures the

³⁴ In Italian films dialogues were often not lip-synch and this is even worse in *Het gangstermeisje*. Since some of the main actors did not speak Dutch – Paolo Graziosi as Wessel, Gian Maria Volontè as Jascha – the spoken words had to be dubbed anyway. But while Weisz was shooting the film, Campert kept on sending new lines, which made the movie even less lip-synch.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 153.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 157.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 156.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 163.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 166.

distorting process of memory',⁴⁰ but also foregrounds the cinematic nature of this post-neorealist film: this is not a registration of reality, but a creative interpretation. Thanks to its triumphant ending, Fellini's movie shows that artistic creativity can benefit from conflict and that 'movie magic' can be a joyful resolution to all the demands exerted on Guido's psyche: film can function as a wishful screen for one's inner complexes.⁴¹

What makes *Otto e mezzo* a true 'art-film fairy tale'⁴² is that the extremely expensive space tower is only used as a background to the happy dance of all the characters. Even Guido's producer has joined in as if, finally, all commercial considerations are bypassed in this film. At least, so it seems, as Guido – as Fellini's alter ego – has built himself such a reputation that his name is as much a synonym for art as for commerce. At this point, Campert and Weisz part ways with Fellini and his experienced co-writers. They still have to make a name, and Weisz's reference to *Het gangstermeisje* as 'my very own *Citizen Kane*' is evidence of his eagerness and at the same time it is an acknowledgment, perhaps ironic, that he himself is still ignorant, like Welles in 1941. The story itself is about an ignorant character, Wessel, who has no say in the business or knowledge of the practice of filmmaking, but sticks to his aesthetic principles. Although *Het gangstermeisje* can be compared in terms of narrative to films that are about the experiences both Godard and Fellini had in their careers as directors, in terms of style, however, Weisz's film comes close to Godard's debut feature *À bout de souffle* [Breathless] (1960).

Alienating Devices: *À bout de souffle*

Using Welles, who made *Citizen Kane* at the age of 26, as a yardstick, Godard realised that he was already (too) old when his *À bout de souffle* was released after he had just turned 29. It was 'absolutely essential', Godard later declared, 'that this first attempt should prove to be the work of a master'.⁴³ With his *À bout de souffle* Godard had used a conventional gangster story in order to 'remake, but differently, everything the cinema had done'.⁴⁴ The iris-in, the dissolve, a frontally staged shot, all these techniques of early cinema appeared, just once, 'as if they had just been discovered or experienced for the first time'.⁴⁵ At the same time, Godard violated all kind of moribund cinematic conventions to disorient the spectator – going from a high-angle establishing shot to a big close-up; the use of his infamous jump-cuts; a crossing of the 180 degrees axis, a highly eclectic, post-synchronised soundtrack. Even though the budget for *À bout de souffle* was extremely low, Godard made a film as daunting as the 'monumental *Citizen Kane*', pushing editing to new limits.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 168.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 172.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Cit. in Michel Marie, "It Really Makes You Sick!" Jean-Luc Godard's *À bout de souffle* (1959)', in *French Film: Texts and Contexts*, ed. by Susan Hayward and Ginette Vincendeau (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 201.

⁴⁴ Cit. in Marie, p. 206.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 206.

⁴⁶ Marie, p. 206.

À bout de souffle is filled to the brim with alienating devices that betray a certain impatience on the part of an aspiring director. Such deliberate brusqueness in style can also be detected in Weisz's *Het gangstermeisje* with its frontally staged shots, brief inserts, unorthodox framing, relatively fast zooms, out of focus shots, swish pans. Let me cite as an example the scene some twenty minutes into the film, which starts with a long shot of Wessel's spouse Leonie, in bed, staring with a blank look. This dissolves into a big close-up of Wessel's face, but when the camera tilts down and tracks back, it is a huge banner hanging at the ceiling of a crowded hall. At the back of the shot we see black-clad 'gangsters' enter the hall in the company of Kitty, in a white dress. A subsequent shot shows that Leonie is present as well, while photographers record her unhappy facial expression. Many other shots in *Het gangstermeisje* are visually deceptive, if not downright discontinuous. We see Jascha and Wessel looking from a balcony, we then presume on the basis of continuity editing that the subsequent shot coincides with their focalisation, but when the camera slightly pans to the left, we see the two men in the shot. Or a camera tracks back to reveal that we have been watching the scene via a mirror. In addition to this, the status of shots is often very difficult to determine. When we see Kitty, it could be that we see the actress, or a scene imagined by Wessel, or a shooting of the actual film. And to make things even more complex, shots with the bass player are inserted rather randomly. In short, thanks to the unorthodox shot transitions, *Het gangstermeisje* has an affinity with early Godard films, such as *À bout de souffle* and *Le petit soldat* [The Little Soldier] (1961), which were made as a transgression of cinematic rules. Just as Godard dearly wanted to be acknowledged as a Young Turk, trying to overturn the film establishment, the style of *Het gangstermeisje* seems to indicate that Weisz aimed to show himself off as the Dutch equivalent of the French director who, like Godard, took Welles's megalomaniac achievement as a key point of reference.

Little League

In conclusion, I would like to suggest two reasons why *Het gangstermeisje* has remained under the radar. Firstly, as a token of his ambition, Weisz created a conjunction of incompatible influences. In *Het gangstermeisje* he mixed the young-guns mentality of the early Godard with the more mature meta-cinematic visions of both Godard and Fellini. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the idea that cinema could be artistic was already firmly embedded in countries like Italy and above all France, but it was rather alien to a Dutch audience in terms of fiction features. Viewers in the Netherlands were used to the idea that avant-garde and experimental films were artistic, as this had been enthusiastically acclaimed by the then influential de Nederlandsche Filmliga (1927–1933). Documentaries were also held in high critical esteem, which in the Netherlands were traditionally linked to visual art rather than cinema, thanks to the work of Haanstra, Herman van der Horst, Joris Ivens and Johan van der Keuken.⁴⁷ Conversely, Dutch (narrative) fiction film still had to gain quite some ground. The number of spectators of fictional art films was relatively small in the Netherlands, as is illustrated by Weisz's revealing account of the reception of *Het gangstermeisje*. When the film

⁴⁷ Bart Hofstede, *Nederlandse cinema wereldwijd: De internationale positie van de Nederlandse film* (Amsterdam: Boekmanstudies, 2000), p. 75.

was released, he often drove to a cinema in Amsterdam and the cashier would give him the thumbs up, as ticket sales were going well. However, there was a sudden decline. After six fairly successful weeks, the auditorium was practically empty, and Weisz concluded that a considerable number of cinephiles had come to see the film, but apparently there had been no word-of-mouth advertising for his movie. This fate of a modest public attendance befell practically every (black-and-white) Dutch film production in the mid-1960s: not only in the case of movies mentioned earlier, such as *De dans van de reiger*, *Een ochtend van zes weken* and *Paranoia*, but also *Liefdesbekenntnissen* [Confessions of Loving Couples] (Wim Verstappen, 1967), the Flemish-Dutch production *Monsieur Hawarden* (Harry Kümel, 1968) and *De blanke slavin* [The White Slave] (René Daalder, 1969).⁴⁸

In his study *Nederlandse cinema wereldwijd*, the sociologist Bart Hofstede describes the Dutch 'independent film' as the 'little league', which is in radical opposition to the conventions of Hollywood, the big league. The ambitions of the independent makers cater to an international audience, but while there might be some occasional screenings at film festivals abroad – *Het gangstermeisje* was in competition in Berlin for example – the market is often 'embarrassingly local'.⁴⁹ Whether Weisz's film was to become a success or not depended to a great extent on the revenues in the Netherlands, or rather, Amsterdam, as his almost daily car trip to check the ticket sales inadvertently indicates. Most of the fiction feature directors in the 1960s were to change course, and in films from the early 1970s, they sacrificed their artistic ambitions for 'national cinema' as a model. According to Hofstede, this category comprises among others humorous pictures and genre-films, and this will prove to be a profitable strategy in the early 1970s. The downside of the enormous box-office successes at home, as Hofstede notes, is that these films are conspicuously absent at international film festivals.⁵⁰ Rademakers attracted large audiences with *Mira* (1971) thanks to its sexually tantalising trailer, Verstappen with the erotic display of *Blue Movie* (1971), Weisz with the crime action of *De inbreker* [The Burglar] (1972), and Van der Heyde with the humour of *Help! De dokter verzuipt* [Help! The doctor is drowning] (1974). If *Het gangstermeisje* or *De dans van de reiger* or any of the other late 1960s low-budget productions had been a resounding success, then Dutch art cinema might have become a versatile niche. The flipside of the entertaining box-office successes – with *Turks fruit* [Turkish Delight] (Paul Verhoeven, 1973) as crowning achievement – was that the promise of a Dutch art cinema had been squandered in the early 1970s⁵¹ and would only be fulfilled to a modest degree in a subsequent decade, with among others Weisz's *Charlotte* (1981), and idiosyncratic films by Jos Stelling, Annette Apon, Marleen Gorris, Orlow Seunke and Alex van Warmerdam.

⁴⁸ *De blanke slavin* was the most expensive Dutch film at the time: it cost 1,100,000 guilders to make. Return: 20,000 Dutch guilders.

⁴⁹ '[P]ijnlijk lokaal', Hofstede, p. 138.

⁵⁰ Verstappen's *Blue Movie*, Verhoeven's *Wat zien ik!?* (1971) and *Turks fruit*, Van der Heyde's *Help! De dokter verzuipt* each had more than a million moviegoers, but none of them was selected for any important film festival, unlike marginal movies such as *Zwartziek* (Jacob Bijl, 1973), *Straf* (Olga Madsen, 1973), and *Mariken van Nieumeghen* (Jos Stelling, 1974), Hofstede, p. 123.

⁵¹ Ditvoorst was the one exception who refused to compromise, unless one considers his gangsterfilm *Flanagan* (1975) as an attempt to gain an audience. Yet *Flanagan* was too idiosyncratic a genre film to become successful.

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