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# **ROB ROMBOUT**

# **35 YEARS ON THE MOVE**

**DOCUMENTARY FESTIVAL EINDHOVEN 2018**

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**DOCFEED**

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# FOREWORD



Ernie Tee, Professor Film History & Film Analysis at the Dutch Film Academy  
Photo by: Rob Rombout

## **The Travels of Rob Rombout February 2018**

**By Ernie Tee, Professor Film History & Film Analysis at the Dutch Film Academy**

'When film made its first appearance in 1895, many of us were forced to stasis. In the course of the nineteenth century travel lust had prompted us to develop many other ways to transport us to distant places, in addition to maritime traffic. But very soon after the introduction of the Cinématograph from the Lumière brothers it was film that took us to the most inaccessible regions of all continents, including the ice-cold polar regions. At the same time, we as film public, were sentenced to small, and later larger, darkened rooms,

which we were not supposed to leave as long as the film played. This is the situation that has descended on us since the coming of film: we have all become explorers, without having to leave our city, our village, our place. Because of film, travelling was no longer a matter of moving our bodies, but made travel settle into our imagination. And how rich did our imagination get when fed with all those beautiful, silent travelogues in the beginning of the last century?

Nowadays these conditions are gone of course: the physical movement is fully optimized and democratized, with ease everyone gets to the farthest corners of our planet and film has nothing more to tell us, since we ourselves are the suppliers of the most daring travel films with all our different types of smart apps. These films' goals are not to challenge our imagination however, but are evidence: they have to demonstrate that one has been at that place.

Rob Rombout is a filmmaker who brings travelling back to our imagination with his documentaries. The filmmaker, living a nomadic life himself most of the time – as a Dutch Zaanlander who ended up in Brussels with his Portuguese wife, but travels a lot around the world for his films – leads us everywhere, from Paris to Moscow, from China to the Kerguelen Islands in the southernmost part of the Indian Ocean, from the Azores to the Urals, where Rombout discovered an extraordinary documentary film festival in the isolated town of Perm. And mostly we have ended up in Amsterdam through his films, though not only the Amsterdam in the Netherlands, but also the Amsterdam in the Indian Ocean (Île Amsterdam), the Arctic Island Amsterdam northwest of Spitsbergen, and the Amsterdams at fifteen places throughout the entire United States of America who are allowed to carry this name.

But all these destinations are not the actual subject of the films of Rob Rombout. We may be taken anywhere and everywhere, but the films tell us more about the journey towards it, about travelling, about being on the go. In the filmportrait about Dutch writer Joost de Vries, made by Rombout in 2016, the filmmaker takes the writer on a train journey, as to literally loosen the writer's views from the ground in which they are rooted. And in many films of

Rombout we specifically experience the journey before we arrive at the destination ('Perm-Mission, 'The Azores of Madredeus'). But, once arrived, it is as if we are not yet convinced of the durability of the destination in the films of Rob Rombout. When he visits processions and taurada's with Madredeus on the Azores, a custom in which enraged bulls are released in the streets, it seems like it is a study on the firmness of the ritual from the filmmaker. In other films it seems Rombout is openly looking for an excuse to leave the place again. For example, the film he made about the Alsace, 'The Passengers of the Alsace', does not have the Alsace as its subject, but deals with the question of what the inhabitants of this region, often coming from elsewhere, find so special about having become a true Alsatian. It is as if the filmmaker, perhaps out of disbelief, searches in others their reasons for moving to an area and stay there.

A rewarding arena for Rombout is formed by all those settle-locations, that have a temporary character and where departure somewhere in the future is certain. For example, at the Queen Elizabeth 2, where Rob was shooting his film 'Transatlantic QE2', and for the Queen Mary 2, a gigantic cruise ship, on which he filmed 'QM2, The Enterprise'. This also applies to the Northern see drilling rig with its regular crew, where he filmed 'Black Island', and certainly also for the Nord Express train, with which he travelled from Paris to Moscow to portray his fellow-travellers and many people who lived and worked along the route ('Nord Express').

The being on the move in Rob Rombout's films is expressed by the loose, sensuous way in which the filmmaker builds up his films. Nowhere you can find the restrictions of a tight narrative structure. Destinations are allowed, but the journey itself may still surprise us in many aspects.

In an age where everything is within reach, travel itself is the great forgotten path. Not in the films of Rob Rombout.'



Still from documentary: 'Transatlantic' by Rob Rombout

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# THE MAN THAT TALKED TOO MUCH



**DIRECTOR** ROB ROMBOUT **SCRIPT** ROB ROMBOUT **DOP** ANDRÉ LEPLAT  
**SOUND** JEAN MARC GEUNS **EDITING** ROB ROMBOUT  
**PRODUCER** CANAL EMPLOI LIÈGE

# SUMMARY

**The Man that Talked too Much**  
**L'Homme qui en Disait trop**  
1985 | 26 min

A film about the protest, lead by trade union staff representative Roger Vandermeiren, against Monsanto (a actory near Antwerp), or having defended a colleague that was accused of theft. Vandermeiren is dismissed by Monsanto for having defended that colleague. The layoff causes a strike, and after a seven-week struggle, Roger Vandermeiren's dismissal is confirmed. But Vandermeiren wanted to have that unequal duel: proud until the end, the old bull collapses in the arena after an unfair and inhuman fight. By that winter night, Monsanto's lights pay a last tribute to Vandermeiren's courage. Director Rob Rombout accurately and lucidly understands and analyzes the trade unionist's dismissal. His plain point of view never lapses into demagogy, and he manages to interest us in the struggle. He shares the tragedy of that unimportant worker with us with great sensitivity. The film is built like a thriller and freshly reminds us of events that our memory had cast away.



# NO PRESENT FOR NOËL

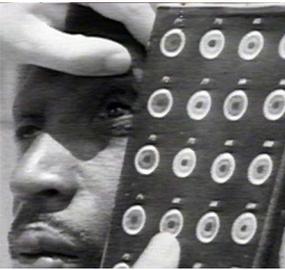


**DIRECTOR** ROB ROMBOUT **ASSITANT DIRECTOR** DANIEL DELMELLE **SCRIPT** ROB  
ROMBOUT **DOP** ANDRÉ LEPLAT **ASSISTANT CAMERA** ALAIN MARCOUN  
**SOUND** J-N CEUENS **EDITING** MARIE-FRANCE COLLARD  
**PRODUCER** CANAL EMPLOI LIÈGE

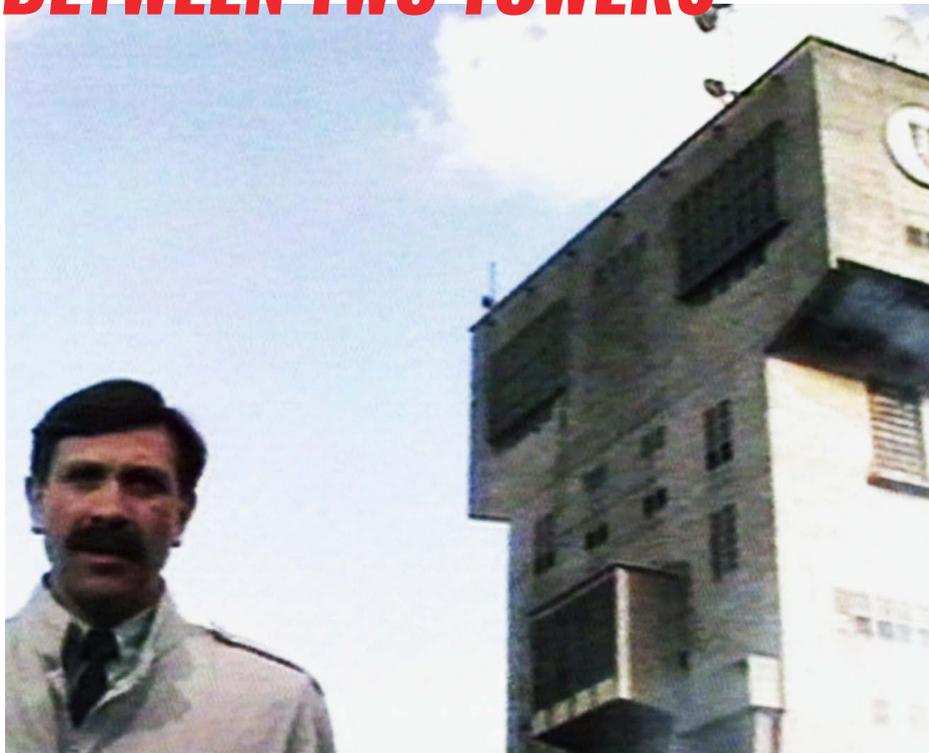
# SUMMARY

**No Present for Noël**  
**Pas de Cadeau pour Noël**  
1986 | 22 min

A look into the life of 42 year old Noël Ntunda, who's living on welfare which is just enough for him not to starve. He was born in Rwanda and has lived in Belgium since the age of twelve. His days all look the same, punctuated haphazardly by chance encounters in bars and interviews with social workers. Noël agrees to show the places he visits daily and tells about the places which have shaped his life in Belgium. The story oscillates between past and present. Director Rob Rombout, respectful of the character, follows him in his meanderings and questions him point-blank. Noël also explains himself, he is funny, sweet and captivating: 'There is an ocean between what I expected from life and what I have become'.



# BETWEEN TWO TOWERS



**DIRECTOR** ROB ROMBOUT **ASSISTANT DIRECTOR** NADIA CURTO **SCRIPT** ROB  
ROMBOUT **MONOLOGUE** CHRISTIAN JANSSENS, **DOP** KOMMER KLEIJN  
**ASSISTANT CAMERA** CHRIS RENSON **SOUND** FABIO LANI  
**EDITING** ADRIANA MOREIRA DE OLIVEIRA **PRODUCER** GSARA

# SUMMARY

Between Two Towers

Entre Deux Tours

1987 | 16 min

In this film, Rob Rombout compares two totally different towers, located on each side of the Belgian-Dutch border. One is used as radar and transmitter for the AFCENT (Allied Forces Central Europe), the other, built in Eben-Ezer, is the symbol of a universal, mystical and deeply pacifist thinking.



# NORD EXPRESS



**DIRECTOR** ROB ROMBOUT **SCRIPT** ROB ROMBOUT, CHRISTIAN JANSSENS  
**DOP** LOUIS-PHILIPPE CAPELLE **ASSISTANT CAMERA** MARC RIDLEY **SOUND** OLIVIER  
STRUYE, PAUL HEYMANS **EDITING** ADRIANA MOREIRA DE OLIVEIRA **PRODUCER**  
PARADISE FILMS

# SUMMARY

**Nord Express**  
1990 | 52 min

The film 'Nord Express' recreates the 48 hours journey by train from Paris to Moscow, and the passengers on these tracks. Crossing the continent in 48 hours is a new challenge for inter-European communications. A challenge continuously met, despite two world wars, blue pencil marks on military maps, a wall dividing a city in two. The time - our own - is one of great upheaval, filled with the noise of machinery. In Paris, railwaymen are laying the new TGV lines; in Berlin, the wall is crumbling; at Brest (USSR) the team is replacing the standard gauge bogies with wide gauge bogies. Galina, the Soviet sleepingcar attendant, is making tea. In the corridor, Theodore the student is looking out of the window, just above the curtain. In front of painter Ben Wargin's workshop, in West Berlin, the wagons rush past at top speed. In a variety of ways, the film viewer is like a traveller: his trip is one that has a start and an endpoint, where in between the route is planned by the story that is showed. Sometimes the story doesn't seem to be going fast enough: it slightly slows down in its journey. At other times the developments follow each other at a rapid pace and the journey progresses well. There is always a degree of awareness of its final destination, but both this and the route towards the end is uncertain: the film is highly unpredictable, and its appeal largely derives from this uncertainty about the course of events.



# TRANSATLANTIC, QE2

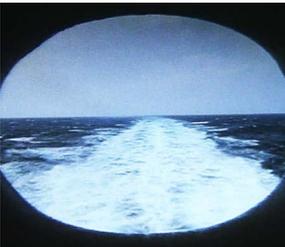


**DIRECTOR** ROB ROMBOUT **SCRIPT** ROB ROMBOUT, JEAN-PHILIPPE LAROCHE **DOP**  
LOUIS-PHILIPPE CAPELLE **ASSISTANT CAMERA** MARC RIDLEY, ZOE SALMON  
**SOUND** PAUL HEYMANS **EDITING** ADRIANA MOREIRA DE OLIVEIRA  
**PRODUCER** NOTA BENE

# SUMMARY

Transatlantic, QE2  
Transatlantique, QE2  
1992 | 52 min

Over 1800 passengers and 1100 crew members board the world's largest ship, the last of the transatlantic liners; they are bound to live close together for five days at sea. For 150 years Cunard has maintained maritime links between Britain and the United States. The Queen Elizabeth 2 made it's first voyage to New York on May 2, 1969. After five hundred years of Atlantic ship crossings, the QE2 is the last ocean liner in activity. The ocean liner's role has changed over the years. Once an indispensable and single means of transport to distant lands, the ocean liner is now a haven of pleasure, providing isolation, escape, and distraction. First there is the unpredictable ocean and a never changing seascape, then the arrival in New York, the destination that seemed so far away, like a New World.



# BLACK ISLAND



**DIRECTOR** ROB ROMBOUT **SCRIPT** ROB ROMBOUT, JEAN-PHILIPPE LAROCHE  
**DOP** LOUIS-PHILIPPE CAPELLE **ASSISTANT CAMERA** JEAN VAN GUT  
**SOUND** PHILIPPE SELLIER **EDITING** ADRIANA MOREIRA DE OLIVEIRA  
**PRODUCER** NOTA BENE

# SUMMARY

**Black Island**  
**L'Isle Noir**  
1994 | 19 min

In a small space on board the F.G. McClintock, eighty men and one woman work around the clock looking for oil at sea. In the North Sea today, next to sixty thousand people are living off-shore. In such a space facing the wild sea, little room is left to express your state of mind. After 'Nord Express' which tells the story of the famous railway link between Paris and Moscow and 'Transatlantic, Queen Elizabeth 2', a portrayal of the last liner sailing from Europe to America, Rob Rombout's film, 'Black Island', is a new approach to a micro enclosed society behind closed doors (in French: Huis Clos).



# THE AZORES OF MADREDEUS



**DIRECTOR** ROB ROMBOUT **ASSISTANT DIRECTOR** OLGA BAILLIF **SCRIPT** ROB ROMBOUT **DOP** JEAN-PAUL DEZAYTIJD **ASSISTANT CAMERA** JEAN-FRANÇOIS HENSGENS **SOUND** PAUL HEYMANS **EDITING** ADRIANA MOREIRA DE OLIVEIRA  
**PRODUCER** MONA LISA FILMS

# SUMMARY

## The Azores of Madredeus

### Les Açores de Madredeus

1995 | 40 min

A poetic portrait of the famous Portuguese band, Madredeus, filmed in the magnificent surroundings of the Azores. The Azores offer an unpredictable landscape where light itself, under the influence of a whimsical climate, can completely change in a minute. The music of Madredeus is at home there. Teresa and Pedro tour from one island to the others and rediscover some of the multi-ethnic origins of their music. Landscapes, testimonies and popular feasts rituals recall the themes of their songs.

Madredeus leading vocals are performed by Teresa Salgueiro, Pedro Ayres Magalhães plays de guitar and is the composer, Francisco Ribeiro plays violoncelle and sings, accordion is performed by Gabriel Gomes, José Peixoto also plays guitar en on keys Carlos Maria Trindade.



# PERM-MISSION



**DIRECTOR** ROB ROMBOUT **SCRIPT** ROB ROMBOUT, PASCAL PEREZ **DOP** PASCAL PEREZ  
**SOUND** PASCAL PEREZ **EDITING** RACHEL LAMISSE  
**PRODUCERS** GOOD & BAD NEWS

# SUMMARY

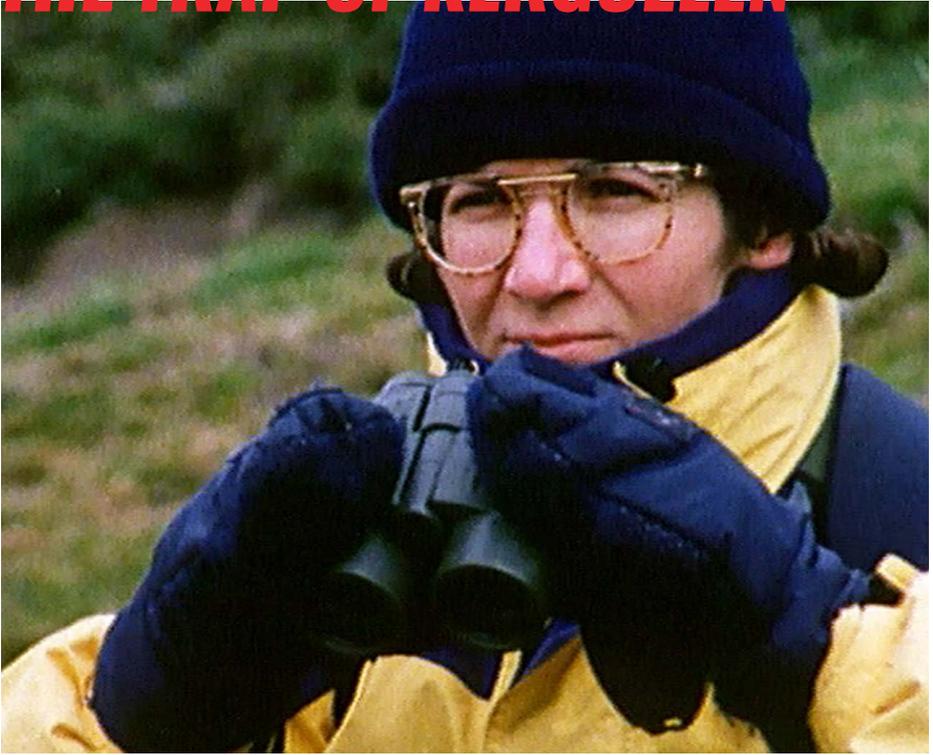
## Perm-Mission

1999 | 52 min

A close look behind the scenes of the fascinating Russian film festival; Flahertyana in Perm. In the heart of snowy Russia in the Ural mountains, a strange festival of documentary films takes place, the Flahertyana Film Festival, as a tribute to the American film director Robert Flaherty. In an isolated city called Perm, forty some Russian film directors take stock of documentary cinema today. Heated debates at minus 25 degrees Celsius.



# THE TRAP OF KERGUELEN



**DIRECTOR** ROB ROMBOUT **ASSISTANT DIRECTOR** ROGIER VAN ECK **SCRIPT** ROB ROMBOUT **DOP** SAMUEL DRAVET **SOUND** GRIET VAN REETH  
**EDITING** ADRIANA MOREIRA DE OLIVEIRA **PRODUCER** ROMBOUT / VAN ECK

# SUMMARY

**The Trap of Kerguelen**  
**Le Piège de Kerguelen**  
2000 | 40 min

A film about a mission to trap and investigate wild cats that were left on the archipelago in the far south of the Indian Ocean, and how they adapted to the harsh climate of the 'isles of distress'. It was in 1772 that navigator Yves de Kerguelen, an oceanographer, discovered a lost archipelago in the far south of the Indian Ocean.

In his log, he wrote, 'These isles are a fearsome trap. We found nothing there and we left nothing there if it weren't for the few cats we had on board.' Two centuries later, the scientists of the 'Popchat' mission, specialists in the field, land on the Kerguelen Islands.

What was their goal? To trap the cats that became wild in order to observe how they adapted to the freezing climate. Yet who observes who?



# CANTON, THE CHINESE



**DIRECTOR** ROB ROMBOUT, ROBERT CAHEN **SCRIPT** ROB ROMBOUT, ROBERT CAHEN  
**EDITING** MAUREEN MAZUREK **SOUND EDITING** GILLES MARCHESI  
**PRODUCER** LES FILMS DE L'OBSERVATOIRE

# SUMMARY

Canton, the Chinese

Canton, la Chinoise

2001 | 52 min

A portrait of the Chinese city Canton, and its eight million inhabitants who deal with the social, cultural and urban chaos. Canton is said to be the most Chinese of all cities. It is also a megalopolis with eight million inhabitants, a city gone wild, where traces of the past disappear under concrete and tarmac and where chaos rules the organisation of time and space. The protagonists – the film’s messengers – are caught between two cultures, two systems, between two conceptions of art. All of them are preoccupied by their own cultural survival, doomed to become the observer of a massive urban transformation. In this experimental documentary, the five characters form an involuntary group that must confront this mass of humanity. There is always a screen between these actors and their surroundings: a window, a photograph, a painting or a language barrier, for instance. Through the intimacy of feelings, the interpretation of signs and aimless wandering about, the film addresses the notion of what it means to be in China and at the same time not be there. Personal stories come together with images to create the vision of an incredibly mobile, perhaps imaginary city.



# THE PASSENGERS OF THE ALSACE



**DIRECTOR** ROB ROMBOUT **SCRIPT** ROB ROMBOUT **DOP** SAMUEL DRAVET  
**ASSISTANT CAMERA** THIERRY SITTER **SOUND** GRÉGOIRE DELANDES, SUZANNE  
ERKALP **EDITING** ADRIANA MOREIRA DE OLIVEIRA  
**PRODUCER** LE MEILLIEUR DES MONDES

# SUMMARY

## The Passengers of the Alsace

### Les Passagers de l'Alsace

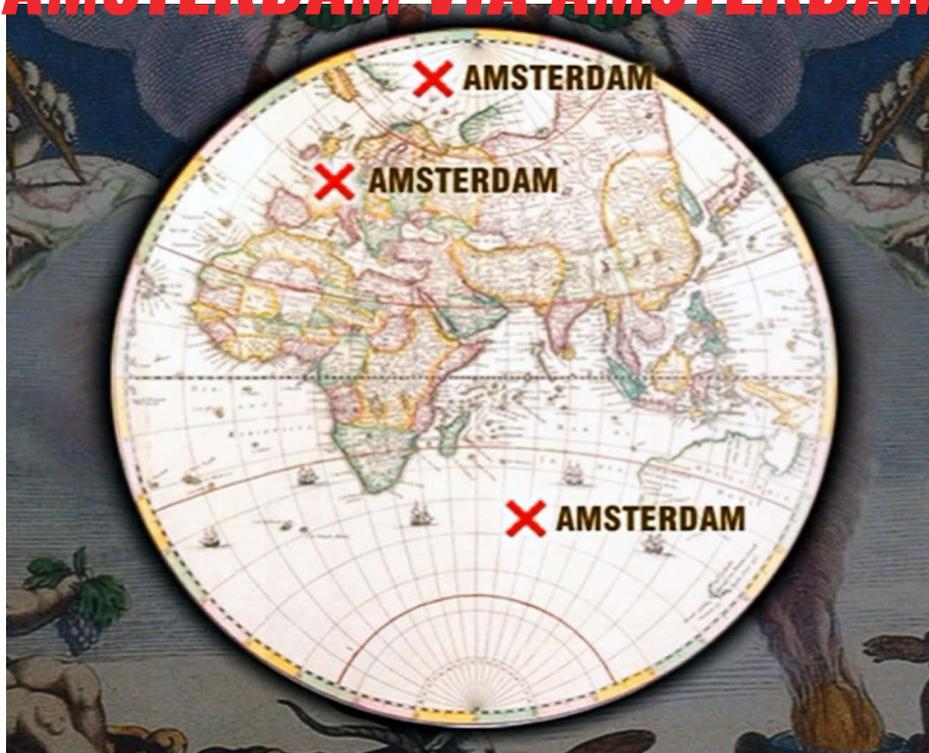
2002 | 52 min

In his quest to answer his questions about identity, Rob Rombout visits the region Alsace. On a train he meets 'ordinary' people and interviews them on issues that apparently have no link with the Alsatian regional identity or the clichés that generally characterise the Alsatian.

Fascinated by travelling, Rob Rombout tries to share his feelings with us, as a stranger, a passer-by, who meets a region and its inhabitants and progressively shows his perception of the Alsatian identity, or identities, at a given moment. The way they observe: the gaze. As in a train, everyone is following their own route. It is the movement of life. Following those three lines, Rob Rombout goes beyond the capture of personal history and weaves the threads of several particular stories that tell us the collective story of life in a region, as in a snapshot of a moment shared with others, with strangers randomly met on a train. He paints the landscape of life, in the movement of the passing time.



# AMSTERDAM VIA AMSTERDAM



**DIRECTOR** ROB ROMBOUT **SCRIPT** ROB ROMBOUT **DOP** SAMUEL DRAVET,  
WILLY STASSEN, LOUIS-PHILIPPE CAPPELLE **SOUND** GRIET VAN REETH  
**EDITING** ROGIER VAN ECK, RUDI MAERTEN **PRODUCERS** ROMBOUT / VAN ECK

# SUMMARY

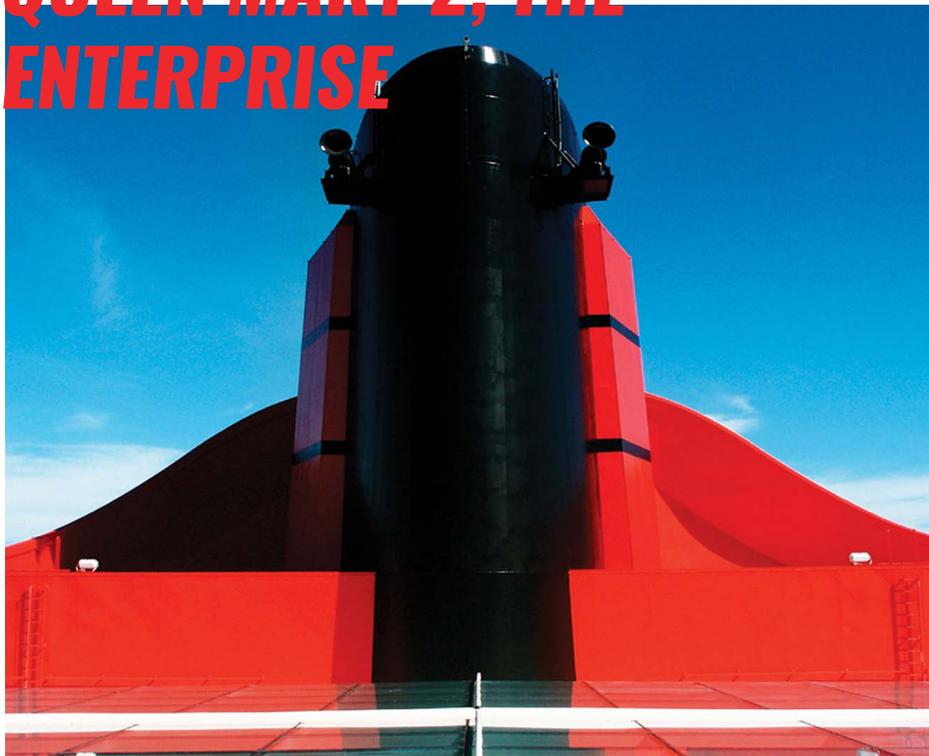
## Amsterdam via Amsterdam

2004 | 80 min

A cinematographic expedition to the northern and southern extremities of the world. 'Amsterdam via Amsterdam' is a road movie from the Dutch capital, Amsterdam, towards two homonymous islands. One is integrated in the French Austral and Antarctic Lands, the other is part of the Norwegian Spitsberg archipelago, in the glacial Arctic Ocean. Two film makers, Rob Rombout and Rogier van Eck, followed the footsteps of two illustrious 16th century Dutch navigators: Willem Barentsz and Cornelis de Houtman who left Amsterdam to open the routes to the spices islands.



# QUEEN MARY 2, THE ENTERPRISE



**DIRECTOR** ROB ROMBOUT **SCRIPT** ROB ROMBOUT, LOUIS-PHILIPPE CAPELLE  
**DOP** LOUIS-PHILIPPE CAPELLE **SOUND** LOUIS-PHILIPPE CAPELLE  
**EDITING** ADRIANA MOREIRA DE OLIVEIRA **PRODUCERS** DUNE

# SUMMARY

Queen Mary 2, The Enterprise  
Queen Mary 2, Reine des Mers  
2004 | 70 min

From the start, it has been decided that the Queen Mary 2 would be the longest, the largest, the most expensive and luxurious ship ever built. We follow Micky Arison (ship owner and president of Carnival), Stephen Payne and Andrew Collier (architect and interior designer), the Commodore Ronald W. Warwick, engineers, marketing managers and artists as they take up the challenge. In 1998, Carnival, the largest cruise company in the world took over the legendary Cunard Company. Inside Carnival, a few people dared to suggest a crazy project: building a transatlantic liner in the Cunard tradition, which also responds to an American market always in search of new features and greater sensations.



# AMSTERDAM STORIES USA



**DIRECTOR** ROB ROMBOUT, ROGIER VAN ECK **SCRIPT** ROB ROMBOUT, ROGIER VAN ECK  
**DOP** BEN WOLF **SOUND** COLIN BANNON MATTHEW, J. MENTER, TREVOR COHEN  
**EDITING** FANNY ROUSSEL, ALICE DE MATHA , FRÉDÉRIC DUPONT  
**PRODUCER** SAGA FILM

# SUMMARY

## Amsterdam Stories USA

2012 | 4 x 90 min

A four part, six hour portrait of the United States and its history, as described by people living in towns called Amsterdam. 'Amsterdam Stories USA' is a road-movie tracing fifteen small places in the United States, all of them named Amsterdam. Two Dutch descent filmmakers, Rogier van Eck and Rob Rombout, crossed the country from East to West Coast, from their arrival in New York (former New Amsterdam) to California. Through landscapes, encounters and stories of the Amsterdams and the road inbetween, the six-hour film progressively weaves a singular image of the provincial and unknown (small town) America. The result is an intimate portrait and radiography of a protean country.

This arbitrary adventure has been realized over two years in four shooting sessions of five weeks each (between summer 2010 and autumn 2011). The six hour documentary is divided in four chapters of 90 minutes each : EAST - SOUTH - MIDWEST - WEST.



# ON THE TRACK OF ROBERT VAN GULIK



**DIRECTOR** ROB ROMBOUT **SCRIPT** ROB ROMBOUT **DOP** STEF TIJDINK,  
BENJAMIN WOLF, STEFANO BERTACCHINI **SOUND** YVES GOOSSENS-BARA  
**EDITING** ADRIANA MOREIRA OLIVIERA **PRODUCER** OFF WORLD

# SUMMARY

## On The Track of Robert van Gulik (2016)

2016 | 86 min

'On The Track of Robert van Gulik' is a documentary about Dutch writer, diplomat, Chinese specialist and scholar, Robert van Gulik. Robert van Gulik (1910-1967) is one of the world's most popular Dutch writers, but relatively unrecognized in his own country. As a diplomat, Chinese specialist and scholar, he became most famous with his detective series about Judge Dee, which in many ways, are projections of his own life: a permanent duality between his real life and the hero in his books.



# JOOST DE VRIES



**DIRECTOR** ROB ROMBOUT **SCRIPT** ROB ROMBOUT **EDITING** NINA HADITALAB  
**CAMERA** EMMANUEL AGYAPONG **SOUND** SAMUEL (SAMBO) CHAN  
**PRODUCER** OFF WORLD

# SUMMARY

Joost de Vries

2016 | 15 min

A portrait of writer Joost de Vries, giving an insight into his world, fascinations and urge to know everything about his subjects. He clearly opposes the relativism and cynicism of the previous generation of writers. The documentary is a meeting between literature and film, between writer and filmmaker.



# ROB ROMBOUT



Filmmaker Rob Rombout

## Biography Rob Rombout

Teacher and independent film maker Rob Rombout (1953) lives in Brussels since 1975. He teaches at St. Lukas, Brussels film and art school (LUCA). He is co-founder and executive of Doc-Nomads international Master. He has been an independent documentary maker for over 35 years. All films were shown on (national and international) television and festivals. He is a regular teacher at SKDA Hanoi, AUT & ALBA Beirut, ESTC, Lisbon and ESAP, Porto. He gives lectures and workshops in Brazil, China, Russia and France. He is actually directing an ambitious film in Porto (Portugal) and preparing with Rogier van Eck the third part of the Amsterdam trilogy.

## **Rob on writing and directing documentaries**

'Writing is the indispensable and, at the same time, controversial step to make an independent documentary. The big challenge is: How to predict the unpredictable? But writing is also a tool to avoid fast filming, a method to define the approach with precision. The more it is defined in advance, the stronger is the position towards a future producer, the easier it is to convince partners and protagonists to step into your project. It is essential to communicate (in advance) the method of filming. It can (exceptionally) be a 'natural' process; but it is more likely to be the result of an intellectual - and strategic - approach. In reality many things just happen but rarely in front of a camera. And if they do, they often look false. Spontaneous, natural or automatic filming is a (New Age) misconception.'

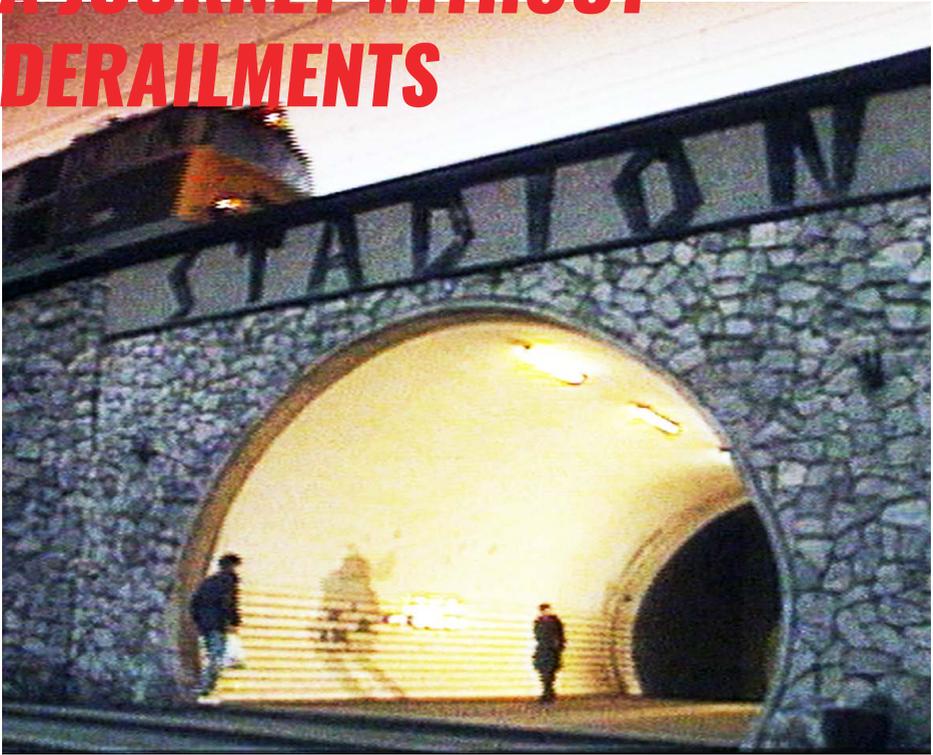
## **Rob on sound and voice in documentaries**

'When I was emphasizing the importance of sound during a workshop at the BFA (The Beijing Film Academy), students told me that their teachers teach them that 80% of a film is made by image and 20% by sound (in order to 'repair' errors of the image). As a statement I told them that I use the same percentages, the other way around.

One of the most under-estimated parameters of the language of a documentary is the voice of the director. For a long time it has been a nearly exclusively journalistic form of expression. Often the voice was illustrated with images, a kind of 'visual' radio.

In my films and as a teacher I have for a long time been focusing on the voice of the narrator, the final words and forms related to this, as there are the 'video-letter' or 'diary' and the 'road movie.'

# A JOURNEY WITHOUT DERAILMENTS



## **'A Journey Without Derailments'**

**Article in Dutch Movie Magazine Skrien, 1991**

**By Ernie Tee, Professor Film History & Film Analysis**

How broad the term 'video'; can (or should?) be stretched, has been proven at the ninth edition of the World Wide Video Festival in The Hague. In video art, film and television are no longer excluded, as well as the use of documentary and narrative in the medium which is no longer unimaginable. Hence, in The Hague they had selected two video works as highlights of the festival: 'Nord Express' by Rob Rombout (who will get a roulement in Belgium) and Private Hungary by the Hungarian Peter Forgács. These are two video works that both have time as subject, the time of travel and the time of the familylife. 'Nord Express' will be discussed on the following pages.

In a variety of ways, the film viewer is like a traveller: his trip is one that has a start and an endpoint, where in between the route is planned by the story that is showed. Sometimes the story doesn't seem to be going fast enough: it slightly slows down in its journey. At other times the developments follow each other at a rapid pace and the journey progresses well. There is always a degree of awareness of its final destination, but both this and the route towards the end is uncertain: the film is highly unpredictable, and its appeal largely derives from this uncertainty about the course of events.

'Nord Express', a videofilm by Rob Rombout, a Dutch video artist working in Belgium, follows the route of the Paris-Moscow express train. The film opens with footage of Gare du Nord and ends, nearly an hour later, with the arrival at the Moscow central station. In the meantime about two days pass, the duration of the trip. However, 'Nord Express' isn't the sort of film where the excitement is caused by the capriciousness of the trip, by an uncertain destination. There are no adventurous wanderings for the viewer in this film. On the contrary, the start- and endpoint are fixed in advance, and no cues are given to assume that the railway traveller will not make it, or the express train will never reach its destination. The journey laid before the viewer is not presented as a trip full of unpredicted events, but rather as a well-arranged trip by the way of the Russian capital as its endpoint.

### **Scattering**

However, 'Nord Express' does bring about a special experience due to the fact that Rombout hasn't made the trip, but travelling itself the subject of his film. 'Nord Express' breathes the atmosphere of a long train journey, where the travel spectator, for the time being, should try to entertain himself. During such a long trip everything you encounter is scattering: conversations with random fellow travellers, with train officials, the passing landscape, stations, cities, and so on. No derailments, no mysterious disappearances, no strange characters imposing upon you, in short, no excesses: everything is quite normal in the Nord Express from Paris to Moscow, and at the same time all those ordinary events on such a journey are by all means entertaining.

Through an untroubled view on what might happen

before your eyes, you will certainly not be bored as a traveller on a long train journey like this. Rombout's camera does indeed carry the view of someone who does not withdraw himself into the boredom of a long journey, but carries the view of curiosity at the chatter of the people around him, to a railroad house along the route, to a passing wall painting, to what the train stewardess has to say. Moreover, the view is certainly not one of disinterest: it is not a wandering gaze, first here, then there. That would be the perspective of someone wondering how on earth to kill the boredom. No, the view in 'Nord Express' is almost a study: almost every frame is in movement, locking the images of the passengers, the engineer, the railway employee, the platform, and of the outside surroundings. But in its perfect seriousness the camera captures the most light-hearted topics: the painter-philosopher, who made a wall painting at one of the stations, his house which is right next to the railway, the Polish fisherman who makes a short train ride across the border almost every day to cast his fishing rod in a lake nearby, the train stewardess who is seated next to a vase with faded tulips telling about her wish to fill her life with arranging flowers, Nemsjinovska, the Russian gatekeeper, who clears the rails from snow with a broom, a medical student from Cameroon; all of them everyday people with everyday stories that can make a long train journey so enjoyable.

Equally light-hearted is the 'historical perspective' that accompanies the Nord Express. From time to time black and white images from the past are shown: the first railway works, the opening of the central station in Warsaw, railway workers in the Russian border town of Brest who swap the bases of the trains. But this historical digression doesn't form didactic images concerning the railway; they are as equally short as incomplete, they are accidental, as loose thoughts that come to mind when passing the stations and cities through which the express train is heading off to the East. For example, when the train arrives in Berlin (the old, divided Berlin), we only see a historical picture of the construction of the Wall, then a present-day image of its destruction, and finally two youngsters who are selling small stone leftovers of the East Berlin Wall. And whilst the train enters Warsaw, we see images of a party from the 1950s that took place at

platform three: Platform three was the place where Polish filmmakers at the time celebrated their Happy new year. The small outings to the past are like stretching the legs during long journeys. They are the images, impressions, from an accidental traveller, incidentally, not those of a documentary maker.

### **Visible time**

Time passes by, but for a traveller never unnoticed (unless he is in a deep sleep). The course of time during a trip is always set in a fixed framework, namely the framework determined by the time of departure and arrival. At what time that is exactly, is irrelevant. More important is the question of how far we already are, how long the trip is yet to be, how far we are removed from our destination. At each stop the exact time is checked, by which the film helps us by showing the exact station and time in the subtitles. The course of time is therefore not obfuscated, but, as required by a traveller, continuously registered, made visible. This visualization of the passing of time also happens in other ways. By using flashy video techniques the evening suddenly 'falls' as the train leaves a station: the afternoon blends into a 'nuit américaine'; No hard cut, and also no elliptical time jump: although the darkness may have entered (i.e. we went from the afternoon into the evening), the time-spatial continuity of the moving train is intact. The same train, the same houses in the background are still in the frame, except now the living rooms lights are on. A similar effect is used a little later in the film when a train window frame is used and the same smoothing takes place. A surprising technique, by which the course of time is abstracted by the time- space in the displayed scene, an abstraction that also belongs to the experience of traveller (who indeed isn't wondering; 'what time?' but 'how long still?'). This technique is not like the elliptical editing, an indication for the passage of time itself.

'Nord Express' is the journey of the express train Paris-Moscow itself. When in the last frame the nightly facade of the central station of Moscow is shown, the viewer realizes that the journey has come to an end. The feeling of having made a satisfactory, long journey dominates, during which, thank goodness, nothing strange, nothing grave happened. But this assurance was already given to the viewer earlier in the film, in the conversation with a group of tourists from Armenia, that had reported to him: 'Tout est bien, tout est normal'.

# AWARDS

## **No present for Noël (1986)**

First price, Festival Vidéo PSY | Lorquin, France 1987

## **Between two Towers (1987)**

Best video, Festival Vidéo | Liège, Belgium 1988

First price, Festival Vidéo & S-8 | Brussels, Belgium 1988

Big price, Festival de Montbéliard | Montbéliard, France 1988

## **Perm-Mission (1999)**

Award, Flahertyana | Perm, Russia 2000

## **The Trap of Kerguelen (2000)**

Special award, Festival Man and Sea | Vladivostok, Russia 2000

## **Canton, The Chinese (2001)**

Best documentary, Festival International du Cinéma

Francophone en Acadie | Moncton, Canada 2001

## **Amsterdam via Amsterdam**

Best foreign film, Route 66 Film Festival | Springfield, USA 2005

Silver Remi Award 39th Worldfest | Houston, USA 2006

## **Amsterdam Stories USA (2016)**

Nominated best documentary, Magritte du Cinéma | Brussels, Belgium 2014

Big price, 22nd International Festival of Ethnological Film | Belgrade, Serbia 2013

Audience Award, Indie Lisboa, Lisbon International Filmfestival | Lisboa, Portugal 2013

## **Personal Award**

Award, Aurelio Paz dos Reis, International Personality Award | Porto Portugal 2015

# ABOUT DOCFEED

About our festival, where we had Rob Rombout and his documentaries as our guest of honour. DOCfeed: Four days of documentaries in Eindhoven.

Our festival showcases an unique selection of the most recent and inspiring documentaries which are enriching in every aspect. At DOCfeed, we're all about being connected.

In addition to the film programme, roughly consisting of 80 titles, both international and national, both by starting and renowned filmmakers, there are also plenty of introductory talks, Q&A's, master classes, discussions, expositions and some good music. connect, discuss, agree, be surprised and experience the documentaries that you can only see first at DOCfeed.

See the most moving documentaries and talk with the filmmakers, closely examine the main character and question the director. Be ready to get moved and surprised during DOCfeed film festival. Explore unknown worlds and let the films guide you into a completely different reality. Experience moments away from your own reality and enjoy the viewing of docs here in the city of Eindhoven in the Netherlands.



Documentary Festival Eindhoven, DOCfeed

# COLOPHON

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Filmmaker Rob Rombout  
Photo by: Luca Rombout





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**ROB ROMBOUT**  
**35 YEARS ON THE MOVE**  
DOCUMENTARY FESTIVAL EINDHOVEN 2018

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