

SARAH VANAGT (BE)

**BOULEVARD D'YPRES
(1^e SUISSSE)**

sam16 août 19:00

CINEMA CAPITOLE 5 rue Neuve - Nyon



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**FAR° FESTIVAL DES ARTS
VIVANTS / NYON**

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C'est en bas de chez elle, sur le boulevard d'Ypres à Bruxelles, que Sarah Vanagt mène un nouveau travail d'investigation. Une artère au parfum méditerranéen connue autant pour ses magasins de gros que pour sa population marginalisée. Cherchant à fixer la mémoire du lieu, l'artiste parle avec les commerçants, les déchargeurs, les demandeurs d'asile, les hôtes de l'Armée du Salut et tous ceux qu'elle croise sur le trottoir. Elle les invite à raconter leur histoire sous la forme d'un conte – une méthode empruntée à l'historien italien Carlo Ginzburg. Un documentaire expérimental qui part du local pour interroger les systèmes de pouvoir à l'œuvre dans nos sociétés globalisées. La chronique audiovisuelle d'un espace en transit.

concept et réalisation: Sarah Vanagt / images: Katrien Vermeire / montage: Effi Weiss / animation: Amir Borenstein / son: Maxime Coton / production: Balthasar / coproduction: Centre Vidéo de Bruxelles (CVB), Kunstenfestivalde-sarts Bruxelles, Argos / soutiens: Fond audiovisuel flamand, Vlaamse Gemeenschapscommissie (VGC) / remerciements: Les Cinémas Capitole

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PRESSE

«BOULEBARD D'YPRES / IERPERLAAN»

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Boulevard d'Ypres/Ieperlaan

By Sarah Vanagt

(Film in French, Dutch and English with subtitles in Dutch and French)

Kaaistudios, Brussels

The great thing about documentary filmmaker Sarah Vanagt is that she's also a historian. She is not only aware that history is written by the winners, but also that histories can be contested, revised and re-written. In her latest film, she allows her own neighbours on the Boulevard d'Ypres in Brussels, immigrants, exiles and refugees, to tell their own stories. She sets this alongside archive footage associated with the boulevard's name: Ypres, the World War I battleground where hundreds of thousands lost their lives for a few feet of territory gained or lost.

Contrary to what one would expect, this footage depicts the soldiers from African countries, who were brought to Europe to fight in a conflict on behalf of the colonial powers. It's a beautiful piece of irony that a few generations on we have forgotten the sacrifices made on our behalf and that the men now telling their personal tales are living on the Boulevard d'Ypres in exile, as manual workers, importers and shopkeepers, asylum seekers and illegal refugees, living in and around the Salvation Army headquarters there. It serves to remind us that prejudice plays a role in cultural memory and official histories.

Vanagt is not a journalist and her documentaries serve to raise questions. Having completed her post-graduate degree in History at the universities of Antwerp, Brighton and Groningen, she went on the study at the National Film and Television School in London. At just 34 years of age, she already has an impressive body of work to her name, and in 2007 won the Golden Key, awarded for the best up-and-coming documentary filmmaker at Kassel's Documenta festival.

Her work is powerful because it is simple and eloquent, gentle and respectful. Some of the most recent work, such as *Power Cut*, was filmed in Central Africa, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo or neighbouring Rwanda. However, she is not a war reporter. While her work might often take place in communities deeply affected by conflict and deal with the affect of war on young people, it also broaches issues concerned with the genre itself and with the writing of history.

History serves ideology; it is used to legitimise national mythologies and justify self-interest. Vanagt questions concepts such as nationhood and identity. Her films are 'micro-histories', observations documenting the strategies applied by ordinary people in creating their own personal past, post-conflict communities trying to make sense of the killing, the rape, the bombing of civilians, of children pressed into the militia, of persons displaced by events and movements larger than individuals. This is fertile ground for an historian-cum-documentary-maker, the immediacy of history-in-the-making can be found in accounts of personal experiences and recent memories.

What her protagonists have to say is less important than how they say it. Unlike journalists who are looking for sensational material that will give them an edge over competitors in the overblown market of television news coverage, Vanagt is not in the business of sound-bites. She respects her subjects and allows each individual space and time to speak with his own voice. In *Boulevard d'Ypres*, the histories are 'fictionalised' by use of the third-person voice: 'he' replaces 'I' and this makes the confrontation easier for the story-teller and the listener. A mythical dimension is added as if these tales are becoming part of an oral storytelling tradition.

Paradoxically, it is through this imaginative prism, that we can best put reality into an historical context. Her work has often brought the speaker and the viewer closer using de-familiarising devices. The figures and the voices are divorced from each other by darkness, distance or voice-overs. In her first film, *Little Figures*, set on the Mont des Arts in Brussels, the voices of immigrant children held an imaginative conversation between the statues of three important figures from Belgian colonial history. In *Power Cut*, voices of former child soldiers were disembodied through darkness when the electricity supply was cut, as it often happens in the DRC, during an informal evening get-together. In *After Years of Walking*, the figures were placed at a distance in a vast landscape.

Vanagt often uses children in her projects due to their imaginative capacities: "I think the imagination plays an important role in the way we deal with our past, and this is true for individuals as much as for historians...Fiction is very often the only way to access reality. This is an important lesson for a documentary filmmaker. And this is probably why I like to work with children so much because they step so easily from the one world into the other, from their imaginary world into the real world, from the world of the living into the world of the dead". (Interview with Francesco di Nardo in the catalogue for *Looking Over the Border*).

Boulevard d'Ypres is a new tack for Vanagt. She is working close to home; only one child is depicted and the protagonists speak directly to the camera. The street was built with money made from colonial trade, bananas, coffee and rubber, and this is reflected in the architecture. It is redolent of early 20th century bourgeois prosperity. The warehouses are now used by the Salvation Army and Northern African import businesses; contemporary denizens speak of civil war, inter-ethnic strife, poverty, unemployment and personal tragedies.

There is great strength and resilience there, survival and even entrepreneurial success achieved and maintained over 25 years by hard-working and tenacious immigrants in the face of European prejudice and bureaucracy. On the other hand, one of the inhabitants, a white, North American immigrant, speaks of a prince who came to Brussels for two months, fell in love with a Swedish princess and decided to get married and live happily ever after. At the time of filming, the prince was waiting for planning permission and an architect to transform the roof outside his windows into a terrace garden with rows of bushes and an iron fence like the crenellated battlements of his own private castle.

The film is about the micro-histories of the inhabitants, but also the street's economically fluctuating history. The film was premiered in the Salvation Army courtyard to a very mixed audience, wrapped in blankets against the unseasonal cold, under a leaky glass roof. This was a perfect ambience for the event; many of the spectators were locals and even participants and there were ripples of amused recognition. I have just one question to pose about this otherwise excellent film: are there no women with micro-histories to tell living on the Boulevard d'Ypres?

The film will be shown later in the month in the Kaaithheater, and Vanagt also makes video-installations and shows her work in galleries and museums. Her films are art, because only when documentaries, which lay claim to veracity, are framed within the context of art can they pass beyond stultifyingly obvious social criticism, the explicitly shocking, and the explanatory condescension of much reportage made for news channels like CNN and even the BBC. Art differentiates itself from the mass media by generating reflection that transcends topicalities. In our hasty western societies, at a time of global crises (financial, environmental and agricultural), when we are inclined to seek security through closed boundaries and exclusion, we need space and time for reflection, to break through trite binary oppositions and blinkered linear thought processes, to raise questions, many of which might be unanswerable, but broaden our perspectives. *Boulevard d'Ypres* is a thoughtful, graceful and sometimes amusing film that instills one with an odd sort of optimism by gently reminding us of our common humanity. Everyone who lives in a European town or city should see it.

Jackie Fletcher

BIOGRAPHIE

Sarah Vanagt studied history at the universities of Antwerp, Sussex and Groningen, and film at the National Film and Television School (UK). She makes documentaries, video installations and photos.

Her graduation film *AFTER YEARS OF WALKING* (2003) looks at the rewriting of Rwandan history after the genocide of 1994. In *LITTLE FIGURES* (2003), a short experimental documentary film, three immigrant children in Brussels play the role of three historical statues. The documentary film *BEGIN BEGAN BEGUN* (2005) and the video-installation *LES MOUCHOIRS DE KABILA* (2005) both focus on the play-world of children growing up in the war-torn border zone between Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo, and look at the way in which children deal with death, the recent wars and elections. The short film *FIRST ELECTIONS* (2006) is a single-screen version of *LES MOUCHOIRS DE KABILA*. In 2007 Vanagt first presented *POWER CUT* at the Kunstenfestivaldesarts in Brussels. The installation consists of short videos and photos made by three Congolese street children, and of voice-recordings by two young soldiers who took part in the recent wars in Congo and Rwanda. The single-channel version of this installation is called *SILENT ELECTIONS* (2009). In *HEAD* (2007), the installation Vanagt made for the Young Belgian Painters Award, she combined super 8 footage of the ancient city of Pompei with images of new-born babies. The video installation *ASH TREE* (2007) is based on Mary Shelly's childhood. A 5-year old girl wanders on a graveyard in London while she spells the letters on the graves. The child's first contact with the alphabet is at once her first contact with death. Since 2006 Vanagt works on a series of photos of special graveyards and monuments in Europe. The photo series *SOLAR CEMETERY* (2009), about solar panels on a Spanish cemetery, was made with a camera obscura, and presented on solar-powered light boxes.

BOULEVARD D'YPRES / IEPERLAAN (2010) is an experimental documentary shot in the street where Vanagt lives. She turned an empty store houses into a film studio, and invited her neighbours – a mix of refugees, shopkeepers, newcomers – to come and tell a story, a fairy tale. Vanagt's most recent film, the short piece *THE CORRIDOR* (2010) focuses on the mute encounter between a donkey and an old man in an English nursing home. Currently Vanagt is working on a film based on rubbings made in the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia.