

Updated November 11, 2013

## 62nd International Film Festival Mannheim-Heidelberg, 2013

### Expressing the Ineffable By Leo Bankersen



"Drift" (Benny Vandendriessche)

The first image shows a naked man at sea, attempting to balance with great difficulty on a small raft. The waves make it hard for him to steady himself. He falls in the water, almost drowning, but again and again he manages to stand atop his life-preserver. We watch and watch, and can feel the helplessness creeping in.

This uninterrupted shot lasts for several minutes. It forms the pre-title sequence of *Drift*, at once telling us very little and a great deal of what we can expect in this remarkable first feature of Belgian director Benny Vandendriessche.

Very little, because the struggle on the raft seems unrelated to the scenes that are about to come. To be certain, the same man reappears, but now we find him in a snowy Romanian landscape. Two policemen accompany him to the place where he has to identify the body of his wife, who ended her life after suffering from an incurable illness.

A lot, because much of the emotional core of this film concerns grief, helplessness, and the feeling of being cut off from the normal world, as well as the very physical performance of the main actor, hint at a different way of looking that is already present in this metaphorical struggle at sea.

While introducing a screening at the Mannheim-Heidelberg Festival, Vandendriessche told the audience he did not aim for a conventional narrative film, but rather for a picture that unfolds as an experience.

We needn't worry however that it will become an excessively elusive event. A basic narrative is firmly in place, mainly consisting of some flashbacks showing us the man and his dying wife during their last days together in a Romanian hotel. This acts as a framework for the main body of the film, scenes in which we see the man trying to escape from the pain caused by the loss of his beloved. He is running through the barren landscape, trying to bury his head in the ground; letting himself fall and fall again in a painful ritualistic way; silently watched by large packs of stray dogs that are prominent in many parts of *Drift*. The stray dog too is a sorry creature that has to survive on his own, cut off from a life together with humans, as one of the policemen explains early on.

The dogs are real strays, which can be found in vast numbers in Romania. It's just one of the elements that shows how Vandendriessche found a very intuitive and at

the same time very straightforward and effective way of merging reality together with a fictional story and the more performance-like rituals by the main actor, Dirk Hendriks. No surprise to find that Vandendriessche developed *Drift* in close collaboration with Hendriks, an artist who is working in an area where installation, film and performance overlap. A



"Drift" (Benny Vandendriessche)

very physical presence is key to his work, and the same can be said for his contribution to *Drift*, where words are kept to a minimum.

What is also very much to be admired is that Vandendriessche manages to express the ineffable, the all-consuming feeling of grief, in a way that is very different from the mechanical emotions of conventional narrative cinema. One could argue that the feelings involved are expressed here in an unusual, but actually even more honest and direct way.

*Drift* is creating a kind of emotional landscape of strong and unexpected images that stay with you long after the screening. Body language features as an important element, both in the intimacy of the flashbacks as in the way this big bearded guy is torturing himself to forget the real pain of his loss. That at least is one of the ways this could be interpreted, for *Drift* is very much open to different readings, without resorting to the obscure. *Drift* could be seen as the visualisation of an inner world, following the stages of grief from denial to acceptance. It's brutal, sensitive and poetic. And when it comes down to it, very moving as well. The final parting of life – an astonishing scene – is conveyed with great restraint, thereby actually heightening its disturbing effect.

One special find Vandendriessche has saved for the end is a piece of archival footage of a dance, performed by the same actors that portray the man and his wife in *Drift*. This black and white fragment was shot fifteen years ago. The bodies are still young, and their love dance is a celebration. Vandendriessche uses it as if to say: *Drift* is not only about grief, but a story of love as well.

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