

THE POETICS OF PLAAT

Two programs with restored films by Henri Plaat



Ten films by Dutch artist and filmmaker Henri Plaat have recently been digitally restored by the Eye Filmmuseum in Amsterdam. The two curated programs presented below offer a cross-section of his cinematographic oeuvre and contain visual experiments and absurdist short fiction films, as well as examples of his lyrical travel films. His work stands out in terms of photographic composition, use of light and colour, as well as experiments with stillness, movement and the use of music. Scenic landscapes, the beauty of decay and places lost in time are recurring themes in his work.

Fashion from New York, 1980

The films of Henri Plaat show us a world that is miraculous and full of beauty, but also a world replete with history, traces of the past and memories of war and destruction. He draws from a multitude of sources: desolate landscapes and dilapidated old cities, archaeology, ancient writings, but also pre-war films, film divas and sound recordings. Plaat observes and sees things which for most of us remain unnoticed, but which he translates with his rich imagination into a world of fantasy, resisting the harshness of reality. Free associations between the atrocities of World War II, film stars of the 1930s, and a world in decay go hand in hand with dream-like absurdism and great imaginative power. For Plaat, humour is an antidote to the idiocy of human induced tragedies. He describes his films as 'atmospheric movies, often photomontages with mixes of war sounds, airplane rumble, Zarah Leander's voice, Wagner's music... all fragments, leading to amazing effects'.

Henri Plaat travelled a lot, to Greece, the Middle-East, India, the United States and South America. During his travels his fascination began for 'places of the past', characterised by decay and destruction. He recorded on film what he saw and edited the silent fragments into pure visual cinema. Like his drawings, collages and gouaches, Plaat's 16mm films blend imagination with reality. 'I love the colours of weather-beaten walls, patches, damp spots, corrosion. I think it's beautiful when damp patches appear on a white wall and layers under the plaster flake loose.'

Every film stands out in terms of its visual refinement, composition, the use of light and colour and moments of poetry. His films are never narrative, but create a poetic atmosphere of wonder and appeal to the spectator through their playfulness, which is often the result of improvisation and visual experimentation. His editing process contributes to this playful effect, as he often avoided assembling his film on an editing table. 'When I have received everything back from the laboratory, I cut the shots loose and hang them on a large washing line in the room. Then I start moving them, sliding them back and forth across the line. That can take a week or sometimes a little longer, especially if you notice that something needs to be added.'

Henri Plaat (born in Amsterdam in 1936) was trained as a visual artist and created an extremely rich and versatile oeuvre of graphic work, drawings, gouaches, collages and more than forty-five films. He started to make films in 1966, first on 8mm and later on 16mm. His interest in film was strongly motivated by the visual qualities of Kodachrome and Tri-X reversal stocks. These stocks could translate his preference for light, shadow and colour. With the exception of *Moroccan Light*, which was shot on colour negative, all films mentioned below were shot on reversal stock. When Kodak discontinued the production of Kodachrome in 2009 and the painterly quality of the film stock decreased, Plaat lost also his interest in making films. For the new digital restorations the most original material was scanned.

Programme 1 (73 minutes)

The Poetics of Memory and Decay

The Strange but Unknown Star

1969, colour, 8 min., 16mm to DCP

With: Louise

Guest stars: Marlène Dietrich, Greta Garbo and Eva Braun

Production: Henri Plaat

The title sequence and the accompanying music introduce the spectator to an atmosphere of classical Hollywood movies. The star is a little girl, dressed as a diva from the 1930s. She wears a rubber mask, and gives a performance sitting in a red club chair and reading magazines in



A Strange but Unknown Star, 1969

which film stars of decades ago come to life again. We hear Annette Hanshaw singing, while Marlène Dietrich appears behind a mixture of eggs, chocolate powder, sugar and raisins.

Second War Hats

1986, b&w and colour, 4 min., 16mm to DCP

With: Anita Crack, Theo Jeuken and Henri Plaat

Set design: Theo Jeuken

Make-up: Leon Koning

Production: Henri Plaat



Second War Hats, 1986

Somewhere in a bombed city: from a manhole in the street transvestite heads show beautiful ladies hats. We see the latest fashion and hear cheerful music while the war continues. This film was made after a distressing trip to Warsaw, and was in 1989 awarded with the L.J. Jordaan prize.

Absürd

1973, b&w and colour, 2 min., 16mm to DCP

With: Louise and Otto

Production: Henri Plaat



Absürd, 1973



Fashion from New York, 1980

Short absurd film in which a mix of music and German spoken texts support an ominous atmosphere of threat, fear and doom.

Fashion from New York

1980, b&w and colour, 8 min., 16mm to DCP

With: Rachel Mok, Theo Jeuken, Henri Plaat

Production: Henri Plaat

Edited as counterpoint to the Adagio of Beethoven's 4th Symphony we see a collage of realistic images of New York, surrealistic indoor shots and posing fashion models, with references to aphroditism and transvestism. The rough and sometimes enigmatic images serve as a counterpoint to the controlled harmony of the music.

Fragments of Decay

1983, b&w and colour, 12 min., 16mm to DCP

Music: Robb van Sintemaartensdijk

Production: Henri Plaat

From the left-overs of the films Henri Plaat made during his many travels, he made this film as an



Fragments of Decay, 1983

improvisation on deterioration and decay. Observation of ruins, coloured surfaces, and light and shadow alternate with portraits of elderly people or dead animals. A world in decay, but also a world of nostalgia, full of signs of time past, of how people created and lived, before it all falls apart again when relationships dissolve and lives evaporate.

Laughter in the Rosary!

1973, b&w and colour, 7 min., 16mm to DCP
With: Theo Jeuken, Louise, Judith
Production: Henri Plaat

Two schoolgirls act as society ladies evoking an atmosphere of the roaring twenties. Somewhere else a transvestite plays with the attention of the camera and tries to read while spaghetti descends on his head. All three perform to be someone else, while the music accentuates the play of dressing up and being out of everyday context.



Spurs of Tango, 1980



Spurs of Tango, 1980

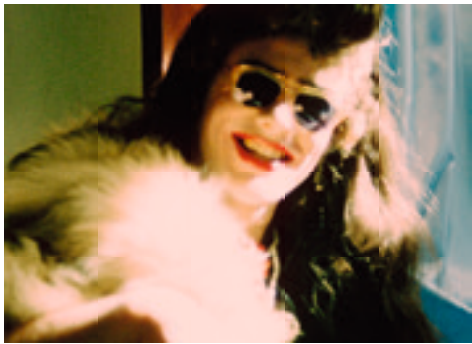
Spurs of Tango

1980, b&w and colour, 32 min., 16mm to DCP
Editor: Hetty Konink
Sound: Jan Holleman
Production: René Solleveld Productions BV

On his travels through Peru, Bolivia, Colombia, Uruguay and Argentina, Plaat filmed daily situations, sometimes secretly with an inconspicuous camera. Observing buildings, street life, graveyards, passengers in a train, and incredible landscapes, he wants to capture the omnipresence of the poetics of Carlos Cardel, the king of Tango who died in 1935. The film stands out in composition, light and colour in combination with the tango music. In 1981 Henri Plaat received the Dutch national film prize, the Golden Calf, for *Spurs of Tango*.

Laughter in the Rosary!, 1973

Laughter in the Rosary!, 1973



Ésta Coche, 1989

Programme 2 (59 minutes)

The Poetics of Wonder and the World

Ésta Coche

1989, colour, 7 min., 16mm to DCP
Production: 't Aambeeld filmproductie

The beauty of old cars from the 1940s in the empty streets and garages of Bolivia, Uruguay and Argentina. A story of colour, light and lengthy shots. Associations between the cars and houses with the same colours are made, creating an atmosphere that is strengthened with an emotional love song.

El Niño Perverso Y El Tío

1981, b&w, 11 min., 16mm to DCP
With: Casper and Theo Jeuken
Production: Henri Plaat

A frightening film about the relation between a boy and his uncle. Everything gets out of propor-



El Niño Perverso Y El Tío, 1981



Moroccan Light, 1995

tion when a gigantic Côte d'Or toffee causes a conflict in which the huge shoe of the uncle steps on the boy. The black and white images intensify the threatening atmosphere and turn the film into a surrealistic dream.

Moroccan Light

1995, colour, 41 min., 16mm to DCP
Sound: Rens Oomens and Stephan Warnas
Editors: Alexander Oey and Henri Plaat
Production: 't Aambeeld filmproductie

Picturesque documentary about a long journey made by Henri Plaat through the mountains and deserts of Morocco. Enriched with a delicate sound track, *Moroccan Light* is a colourful film about the blinding beauty of monumental landscapes and the fascination for human presence and social life in the midst of deserted sand hills. His landscape photography with his use of form, colour and composition reveals clear references to his work as visual artist.

Program notes by Eye senior curator Mark Paul Meyer

More information about the program and bookings:
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Second War Hats, 1986

