

H-Net Reviews

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Oeke Hoogendijk. *The New Rijksmuseum.* First Run Features, 2015. Documentary film, DVD, 131 min.

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Capturing the Rijksmuseum Reconstruction on Film

The film *The New Rijksmuseum* is reminiscent of the captivating American *cinéma vérité* of the Maysles brothers' *Grey Gardens* (1975) in its unfettered access and unscripted exchanges. The Maysles brothers' original concept was to explore the money and fame of the politically and socially powerful Bouvier clan, including Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, but the film ultimately centered instead on the dysfunctional family dynamics of sidelined relations. In director Oeke Hoogendijk's new film, the original concept was to document the overhaul of the Netherlands's national museum, but as the film unfolds, it pivots around several factions promoting their individual causes within the decade-long renovation—museum staff, architect-designers, municipal authorities, and bike activists—who might have done better by practicing the art of *being like bamboo*: gracefully bending without breaking. Instead, there is little flexibility on the part of any camp, but ultimately, this is good news for advancing the storyline. In both of these brilliant documentaries, the cinematic seduction of the viewer is human and genuine, rather than a passive voyeurism of manicured, scripted elites who, in the case of Hoogendijk's project, are powerful, jet-setting leaders in the international art world. These films prove that the best documentary cinema reveals to us that what happens behind the scenes and between milestones in life can be stranger than fiction.

But let us begin at the beginning of the two-hour theatrical release of *The New Rijksmuseum*, which astound-

ingly shed half of its original documentary release's weight on the cutting room floor. Even at half-length, the viewer fully appreciates the mounting sense of frustration and slow passage of time that translated into a feeling of separation and loss for museum staff and public alike. The film makes clear that the closure was palpable within and beyond the halls of the Rijksmuseum, as a scheduled five-year renovation turned into a ten-year hiatus costing a half-billion dollars (375 million euros), far exceeding early estimates. Fortunately, once Hoogendijk had embarked on the film, she did not waver in her commitment to document the entire ordeal. Though faced with ten years' worth of reels from which to draw, she expertly channels renowned filmmaker Frederick Wiseman's great critical feel for developing a compelling arc in a documentary project through editing.

Along with her directorial talents, Hoogendijk seems to have had providential help with the storyline. Midway through the film, just when you think the renovation project will forever stagnate, enters a *deus ex machina*: the Rijksmuseum director, Ronald de Leeuw, unexpectedly leaves to retire in Vienna, stepping down from what should have been the crowning achievement of his career. The museum then hires Wim Pijbes as his replacement. A frank personality, Pijbes becomes the pivot-point in the film, an outsider who promises to inject needed vital energy into the languishing project. For the viewer, however, this is bittersweet, as Rijksmuseum cu-

director Taco Dibbits's hopes of becoming the next director are dashed right on camera. Euripides himself could have written the tragic script. (An unexpected happily-ever-after, just as this review goes to press: Dibbits has been appointed as the new general director, effective mid-July 2016.)

Hoogendijk's carefully orchestrated music, sound effects, and glimpses of museum objects and scenery (in the form of the original architect Pierre Cuypers's restored craftwork) do yeoman's labor of setting the stage. Through Hoogendijk's skillful direction, the works of art themselves emotionally involve us as if they themselves are actors. A few salient examples: in the opening salvo of the film (perhaps a nod to World War II?), gunfire-like popping sounds and images of flying sparks disorient us as if we are upon the field of battle, until, in a change of scene, large raptor-like, clawed machines begin to pick and tear at the structure of the building. This destruction (desecration?) is interspersed with close-ups of the gazes of painted faces peering from behind plastic wrap. "What is happening?" the frozen figures seem to ask. Or, in another example occurring roughly four years (and forty cinematic minutes later) into the renovation process, we hear unnerving sounds of laughter echoing through empty rooms while discordant images of death in painted masterpieces appear. This is shortly followed by scraping sounds that seem to intimate the slow, relentless decay of time—a recurring theme of the film. And, finally, the example most enrapturing to this reviewer, a wooden Buddhist statue, lying on its side, seems to quietly awaken from dark slumber as light slowly enters its storage area, a bit at a time, the light gradually swelling and reflecting in the lifelike inlaid glass eyes that almost seem to glisten with moisture. "Could it be possible?" the statue wonders. "Are we close to a return to normalcy?"

Unfortunately, not quite. Through filmed conversations it becomes clear that at this point (now 2010) the project will not soon wrap up, not even in a year's time. Images of a seated Pijbes silently communing with Rembrandt's reinstalled *Jewish Bride* follow shortly upon the director's upbeat remarks to the assembled staff that "Renovation means that we are on our way to reopening." With his forceful optimism, Pijbes evidently either believes in the confident message he is sharing, or, as is more likely considering his body language, he desperately wants to. His reliance on the museum's collection of art to buoy him, as the film makes manifest, is in fact true for the rest of the staff, especially the curators. Critically, these scenes bookend a new wave of municipal *fietspassage* (bike passageway) meetings concerning

the route cutting through the museum. Part of the Rijksmuseum's initial 1885 construction, the bisecting tunnel was a concession to satisfy municipal concerns over potential snags in the city's traffic flow. Originally open to vehicular traffic, now limited to pedestrians and bicycles, this thoroughway has survived the attempts of three former Rijksmuseum directors to be turned into the institution's main entry vestibule. This time was no different. The testy argument over rerouting bicycles around the museum escalates into the *bête noire* of the renovation, and what Pijbes calls disgraceful "cobblestone-level debate." Perhaps channeling a sort of Dutch defensiveness, the upper-level Rijksmuseum staff worry that Amsterdam will be internationally perceived as provincial in its concerns, the antithesis of the message that the new, cutting-edge construction is meant to convey. Following closely on this saga, perhaps editorializing upon perceived international ennui concerning things Dutch, we join Parisian meetings with a dozing French interior designer (Jean-Michel Wilmotte), whose dramatically austere, dark, and modernist vision seems irksome to Pijbes. While Pijbes has veto power over his curators (at least in his own mind), and over the contracted French decorator and Spanish project architects (Antonio Cruz and Antonio Ortiz from Seville), to his great consternation he cannot overrule the staunch Amsterdam branch of the Cyclists' Union, who bring and win a legal case against the museum. It becomes apparent that Pijbes's seemingly petty chafing over gallery wall colors may serve as his sole outlet for that perturbation. Indeed, much of the tension and drama that carries the film forward centers on power struggles (big and small) among governance, the museum's institutionalism, and (as anyone who has renovated a home understands) the enormous entropy of construction: psychological, fiscal, and social.

The storyline is not unique to the Netherlands. The Louvre's remodeled entry, a glass pyramid by renowned Chinese architect I.M. Pei completed in the late 1980s, was seen by many in France as an aesthetic mismatch and political boondoggle, becoming a hot topic of public conversation. More recently, the contested renovation and expansion of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City may be a closer analogue to the Rijksmuseum scenario. All three cases evince that world-class museums are very much in competition with each other over forging vision, prestige, and reputation, hoping to lure more visitors with updated spaces, but also to encourage donations of (otherwise often unattainable) art masterpieces. However, careful strategic planning by staff is not enough to stave off criticism and controversy: the pub-

lic has come to expect unimpeded access to national art collections, and the cities that house these institutions feel ownership of them in their role as civic spaces, almost as if they are secular public cathedrals to culture and history. Currently, at the Met, extensive renovation is taking place in phases, which is perhaps the secret to keeping the various constituencies happy. Perhaps this is the ultimate lesson of Hoogendijk's film, an important takeaway for curators and politicians alike.

Closing the film, a Buddhist ceremony at the installation of the Rijksmuseum's Asian galleries serves as a sort of exorcism for all of the negative energy in the process. Indeed, this moment really points to the deep sense of reverence and mystery that many museums hold over us, shattered by the simmering tension in the film. It feels reassuring to the viewer to close this chapter and start anew, with all the art returned to its pedestals, and our

role returning to that of gallery visitor instead of somewhat embarrassed voyeur. Art historians and art lovers will come away from the film realizing that, perhaps subconsciously, in visiting the world's great museums, we simply wish to make pilgrimage to see our old friends, the works, and directly commune with them without all of the drama and unflattering insight into the myriad conflicts and choices made surrounding their polished presentation. Ignorance is bliss, and art a balm for the soul.

Ultimately, this film sets its cast of actors into a particular dilemma, and tests them, much like Greek tragedy. Returning to Euripides for a moment, it is said he composed most of his formidable tragedies in a dark grotto on the isle of Salamis; perhaps we can say that Oeke Hoogendijk crafted her poetic film achievement in the cavernous void of the empty Rijksmuseum.

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