

## **NIEUWE TEKST CONSTANZE**

**Highly personal yet visually captivating, About Alma and Gris-Nez is an intense, powerful piece of filmmaking. The first time we watched Constanze Wouters's film we were fascinated by its innocence, its poetics of close-up. Constanze's lighting and framing brilliantly balances realism and expressionism, breathlessly shifting between the intimate and the melodramatic. With echoes of Lynne Ramsay, About Alma and Gris-Nez, is a gorgeous meditation on urban alienation. We are pleased to present Constanze Wouters for this year's CinéWomen Edition. Constanze, tell us about your trajectory as a filmmaker. What inspired you to express yourself in this medium?**

Van Der Keuken, one of my idols and one of the greatest filmmakers ever, once said: "Filmmakers are the artists who can't really focus on one thing". Unlike a musician or a painter, a filmmaker needs the freedom to use photography, sound, actors and editing to tell a story. I like to use everything that I find interesting, all things that trigger my expression. The French word 'bricolage' is maybe the best way to express it: putting things together and making a composition out of it.

Although it was an obvious choice for me to study film at the KASK, the film academy in Ghent, I am surprised sometimes to still find a new reason why cinema fits me, why I express myself through this medium. For me, images are not the most important thing. I enjoy connecting all the elements a film needs.

One way or another, cinema always has to do with people. This too is really important in my work. I want to express my love to the human kind. Cinema has the ability to create a world where people can live in and where we can fall in love with them. To be connected with people, I think, is the only option I have.

**How did you become involved with About Alma and Gris-Nez and what attracted you to this film?**

About Alma and Gris-Nez is my own story. Once I tried to film my mother. I wanted to make a documentary about her and the depression she suffered from during a certain period in her life. But that seemed impossible for me. I did not want to frame my mother in a world that represented the truth. The emotions my mother and I felt at that time were far too complex for that.

It turned out that it was better to concentrate on myself: a young girl wanting to understand her mother. Almost intuitively I started to write a script for fiction. The distance that fiction creates, gave me the power and the opportunity to make the story of my mother and me smaller and bigger at the same time, more suitable for a film.

This distance, this definitely false representation, was what I needed to tell this story.

**Poetic in its vision and realist in its expression, About Alma and Gris-Nez deals with poignant issues of dislocation and identity in modern society. How did you develop the script of your film?**

To be honest, I wrote the script in just one afternoon. First trying to make a documentary gave me all the inspiring situations I could use in a fiction film. This film is really true to life. It is just fictionalized.

I experienced my depressed mother as a person with moments of reasonable and unreasonable thoughts, with alternately a demanding presence and a distant one. I chose to use a naive gaze by just looking at this contradiction. The naivety lies in believing that a strong structure could capture this reality. Obviously, that is not the case. It was a deliberate choice to work this way.

The poetic style of my film on the other hand is more a result of the love I feel for 'bricolage'. My films are always poetic. I always use poetry to conceal an inconvenient reality.

**We have deeply appreciated your clear, original storytelling. About Alma and Gris-Nez reveals a cinematic style that honors spontaneity and improvisation. Did the overall structure unfold before the camera, or were you already aware of these various pieces of the puzzle?**

The film was completely put into script before shooting. I did search for an actress who really understood the story I wanted to tell. Hilde understood what the daughter in this film was trying to do. The contradiction I was talking about earlier, the distant and the demanding, that is exactly what Hilde is perfect in as an actress.

**About Alma and Gris-Nez is elegantly shot in 16mm. Shooting on film is getting more and more rare, can you tell us something about this amazing experience?**

I tried to find a format which on the set would give me the sense of documentary as much as possible. Because of the use of analog film we were forced to work in a focused way and experience the shooting more intensely. We only had a limited amount of film, so the right atmosphere had to be there at every moment. I trusted this would go fine. Right from the beginning, the vibes we needed were present on the set. The crew, Hilde and myself were completely permeated by it.

What I was afraid of, though, was that something would go wrong with the film rolls. What if they would be exposed incorrectly, get stuck in the camera or appeared to be older than we thought? Many things could go wrong. I had never used analog film before so I had to rely completely on the director of photography and his assistant. For me, the shooting days did not end before I could lay my hands on the digital version and could see with my own eyes that it had worked.

I was more than happy to see that the texture of the images could never have been equaled with digital film. It was exactly the texture that I had been looking for and that Matilda needed to capture her mother. You could say Matilda was in fact unable to cope with the smoothness that comes with digital filming. There had to be some 'noise' to make this picture happen.

**How did you develop the characters of Alma and Matilda?**

Alma and Matilda represent my mother and myself. Because 'About Alma and Gris-Nez' ultimately became a fiction film, I also fictionalized the characters. This influenced the way

of writing down the characters and situations. I would never be able to film my mother when she finds herself in difficult circumstances. In this film I could do so, or more precisely: Mathilda could. During the whole process of filming – until this moment – the denomination of the characters proved to be confusing, even ‘schizophrenic’: Matilda or me, my mother, she, Alma or Hilde?

**A portrait of human alienation, About Alma and Gris-Nez captures the subtler details of human behavior. What is your preparation with actors in terms of rehearsal?**

My first plan was to write a scenario that was the result of Hilde and I acting and playing together. I tried it out a few times but decided to stop because the picture would develop in another way. Too much rehearsals would disturb all the documentary elements. The most important preparations were long hours of talking between Hilde and myself, so she would perfectly understand her character and its origins. We changed the house in which we filmed into a cold, dull place full of sadness.

Next to that Hilde had to be able to imagine she was in fact filmed by her daughter. We had to create the impression that mother and daughter were alone in the house, without crew, catering or lights. The director of photography, Ben De Raes, had to act as if he was Matilda filming her mother. He was forced to be me, Matilda, the daughter. By doing so, Hilde and Ben – actress and DOP – developed a connection in which I took no part. I realise I was very lucky with a crew and actress who understood this complexity and were able to make it happen.

**Can you tell us something about the shooting of About Alma and Gris-Nez?**

About Alma and Gris-Nez is a low-budget picture. The money I gathered for it – mainly by means of crowdfunding – was just enough to pay for the pellicule and its development. We had no more than six persons and one actress on the set. My boyfriend and some friends from school formed the crew. The film set was situated in my grandmother’s house and my mother took care of the catering. We borrowed a car to drive to Cap Gris-Nez and used it also as a place to sleep and cook in. All persons involved with the picture were present on the set, which created a cosy and intimate atmosphere. The preparations however were difficult and confronting. Failing was just not an option, so I was quite nervous in the beginning. Once the shooting began, the strains disappeared and the pieces fell in place. Sometimes I still dream about this period, it felt like holiday.

**About Alma and Gris-Nez is your first directorial debut. What was the most challenging thing about making this short film?**

I learned a lot about the distance a filmmaker needs with regard to a film. It was impossible for me to make a documentary about my mother because I was too involved with the subject. My mother is now back on her feet again, but for a long time that was not the case. I have a lot in common with my mother and the question I had when I started this project was whether we would share the same sensitivity. A lot of my anxieties start with the similarities between us. Apart from the resemblance with my mother, I wanted to learn more about myself.

Turning the picture into fiction raised a lot of questions, thematically as well as artistically. I had to find an artistic way to express my grief. In a documentary this would not have been necessary. About Alma and Gris-Nez is my first fully-fledged short film, and the making of it forced me to think about my future as a filmmaker. Do I prefer a large or small set, what is

the best way to communicate with the actors, which distance to keep in relation to my subject? I was challenged in many ways, on a personal as well as on a technical level. Making a film for me is not an easy thing to do. It is a rather painful, troublesome process, full of doubts and cursing and fears. It means starting over and over again and sometimes it even makes me sick. But once the picture is ready, the blood, sweat and tears suddenly disappear and make way for something you really wanted to create.

**We want to catch this occasion to ask you to express your view on the future of women in cinema. For more than half a century women have been discouraged from getting behind the camera, however in the last decades there are signs that something is changing. What's your view on the future of women in cinema?**

Gender equality is important. The fact that you ask me this question means that it is still an issue. When we introduced and presented scenarios in school, I never had the feeling that I had to prove myself more than my male colleagues. Also, in my class there were always more women than men so it never was a real concern to me. Generally speaking, women filmmakers are often very successful, so I'm not too worried. One remark though: if you look at the technical functions in cinema and if you perform as DOP or light or sound specialist, my experience is that you automatically enter a men's world. Overall I'm quite optimistic and think that gender issues will disappear in the future.

**The first time we watched About Alma and Gris-Nez we thought of Victor Erice's cinema: who among international artists and directors influenced your work?**

In my first grade at the film school in Ghent I got acquainted with the work of Johan Van der Keuken and he immediately became my hero. He made me understand what it means to feel love for a film character. More than any other teacher, he learned me the ins and outs of cinema. What is the effect of a camera on your character? How to relate yourself to the characters and your film? Where does documentary end and fiction begin?

Recently I discovered the film 'Extremely private Eros: Love Song 1974' by Kazuo Hara. It is incredible to see how he succeeds in making his audience fall in love with an anti hero, an anti character even. How old the film may be, the themes are still tremendously up to date. I'm inspired by the way this filmmaker relates himself to his characters but also by the sound he uses, the way he moves the camera and edits the scenes. For me, it is almost the perfect overall concept. I seldom watch a film over and over again but for this one I'm happy to make an exception.

Other sources of inspiration for me are filmmakers who question themselves and the medium they use, like Chris Marker, Ed Van der Elsken, Naomi Kawase and Abbas Kiarostami. I like to think of a good filmmaker as an open book. Not everything has to be 'meta', but I have to feel the urge of a filmmaker to bring a character on the screen. I want to feel that everything has been questioned: structure, subject, way of working, his relation to the film... Another filmmaker who brilliantly succeeds in all this, is Wang Bing. His cinema is genius.

**What do you hope viewers will take away from About Alma and Gris-Nez?**

It never occurred to me that this film could mean anything for anyone else but me. Although the film has not been successful at film festivals until now, I did receive a lot of positive remarks. The film was praised by many, which touches me. My stories are almost always about complex and harsh love affairs, uncommon and a bit inappropriate in everyday life. Film for me is a medium to express love. I may hope the audience sees the beauty of that.

**Thanks for your time and thought, Constanze. We wish you all the best with your filmmaker career. What's next for Constanze Wouters?**

At the moment I am working on a film about 'the beginning and the end', linked with the process of life. Birth, a new place to live, a new job or friend: each beginning leads me to an end, which is the start of a new chapter. My films are always difficult to explain before they're finished, because a lot is decided in the editing process. In a few months time the film will be ready.

THE END