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Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

Sandra den Hamer on Streaming and Artistic Freedom

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Sandra den Hamer has run a film fund, headed the Rotterdam Film Festival, and spent fifteen years building Amsterdam's EYE Filmmuseum into what locals now half jokingly call a temple of cinema. This year she's at the Transilvania International Film Festival as a member of the official jury.

And when asked how her sense of what makes a film resonate has shifted over four decades, she doesn't reach for nostalgia. She reaches for the audience's eyes. "If you now look at films from the '60s, you will probably think they are slow, slow in editing, slow in the way they tell the story," she says, "because we are now used to seeing films quickly, on small screens. Our eyes are really used to rapid changes now." Streaming, she adds, hasn't just changed distribution, it's quietly rewriting the grammar of cinema itself. "You can see the effect of the success of streaming platforms. It's doing something to the language of cinema."

And yet, for den Hamer, the essence underneath all of it hasn't moved. "Cinema is between art and entertainment, but for me, and I think also for this festival, cinema is really art," she says. "It's a form of expression from an artist. So I'm always looking for what's the voice of the artist. What is he or she trying to tell us, either in the story or in the images themselves." She remains, by her own admission, stubbornly attached to the theatrical experience, binge watching habits notwithstanding.

"I still feel the best way to enjoy cinema is in a cinema," she says. "When you sit down together, you feel together. Even if the person next to you is a very big person blocking your view, when the film is finished, you feel sort of together, because you've experienced it together."

That conviction sits uneasily alongside a structural problem den Hamer has watched worsen from the inside. During her years at the Dutch Film Fund, financing productions across a continent where no single country can make a film without international co production, she kept running into the same wall. "We produced many films which are too little seen by the public," she says bluntly.

"It's so hard for smaller European countries to make exploitation models for films that are successful." Europe, in her telling, has gotten very good at making films and not nearly good enough at getting people to watch them.

Her own conversion to cinema as a calling, rather than a job, traces back to a single screening. Volunteering at a festival as a theater science student in a small Dutch city, she saw an early Tarkovsky film, "The

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Annette-Kolb-Str. 16
D-85055 Ingolstadt
Telefon: +49 (0) 841-951. 99.660
Telefax: +49 (0) 841-951. 99.661
Email: contact@european-news-agency.com
Internet: european-news-agency.com

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Sacrifice," and the experience reorganized her plans on the spot. "I thought, I've never seen this in my whole life," she says. "I want to know more about this kind of groundbreaking filmmaking."

She switched her studies to film. Two decades later, she was running a festival herself. Coming from what she describes as a small hometown with a single cinema that screened nothing but Disney and commercial fare, the discovery of Tarkovsky, and later Béla Tarr's eight hour "Sátántangó," which she's rewatched in full more than once, became the kind of encounter she still measures other films against, even while acknowledging the irony of naming the most canonical possible influence. "It's quite dull to name Tarkovsky," she allows, "but there are many of these films and filmmakers that stay with you."

That conviction has hardened into something close to a mission statement for public film institutions. "I think we should defend the art of filmmaking, and with that, we also defend society and democracy," she says. "If only commercial entities produced films, and we know what happens with algorithms, you see more and more of the same, then public institutions, festivals like this one or TIFF, should defend what is not easy to find, or not easy to make. What is, in a way, a vulnerable form of art. I think that's what we should stand up for."

Asked what separates filmmakers who endure from those who simply have a moment, she draws a line between artists and professionals, without dismissing either. "Tarkovsky made very few films. Béla Tarr made ten films, and he could only make those ten, not just any film," she says. "There are also film professionals I have a lot of respect for, who can move easily from project to project. But I have so much respect for filmmakers, even younger ones I've seen here this year, whose names I can't mention because I'm on the jury, who are so persistent in wanting to make exactly what they want to make."

Running both a museum and a festival, den Hamer says she's never experienced the supposed tension between preserving cinema's past and chasing its future. At EYE, that meant pairing a historic film collection with active VR and archival footage projects. "I wanted the museum to be eclectic, bringing different trends together," she says, resisting the institution's own reputation as a cathedral. "It can also be a market, where you walk around and choose for yourself, and the different things are in dialogue with each other."

If there's one thing den Hamer hopes survives every coming shift, it's the big screen itself. "I hope we still keep making films for the big screen, using the full screen, the wide landscapes, the length, the beauty," she says, "because if we only see films on small screens, we will change the language of cinema." She doesn't see this as a fight against streaming so much as a case for sequencing: cinema first, then television, then platforms, then, ideally, classrooms and cultural institutions. "It's not that you choose either the cinema or the streaming platform. I hope cinema can be the window for a film, and that it has many more lives, like a

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Looking back at the hardest stretches (building EYE's new building as the real estate market collapsed, then reinventing festival programming when cinemas shut during the pandemic, swapping film screenings for outdoor sculpture installations to stay within distancing rules), den Hamer credits no single strategy beyond assembling the right people. "It's like a football team," she says. "You need the best person for exhibitions, the best person for education. The people you work with are the most important thing. And then you have to reinvent and be flexible." She measures her proudest accomplishment less by the buildings than by what happened inside them.

Watching Rotterdam grow from a small art-house audience of cinephiles into one of the Netherlands' biggest public cultural events, without ever compromising the work on screen, remains one of den Hamer's proudest achievements. "I wanted five-star reviews in the newspapers, but also queues down the street," she says. "Combining public interest with the highest form of art, that happened in Rotterdam, and it happened because of the work."

Asked what she would tell her younger self, den Hamer answers simply: "Be confident." Nervousness, she adds, is not a weakness but proof that what you are doing matters.

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Annette-Kolb-Str. 16
D-85055 Ingolstadt
Telefon: +49 (0) 841-951. 99.660
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