

## A Report on the World Premiere of Wendelien van Oldenborgh's *Bete & Deise* (2012)

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On Friday 27<sup>th</sup> of January 2012 many gathered to attend the world premiere of Wendelien van Oldenborgh's latest work: *Bete & Deise*. The event was held at WORM in Rotterdam and formed part of the International Film Festival Rotterdam's 'Short Film' programme. It was an eventful and crowded evening which started with an introduction by director of If I Can't Dance Frédérique Bergholtz, followed by artist Wendelien van Oldenborgh who introduced the film *Câncer* (Glauber Rocha, 1972, 86 min) which was then screened. *Câncer* was Van Oldenborgh's choice as a prologue to the screening of her film *Bete & Deise*, a choice later discussed in a conversation between Eric de Bruyn and Wendelien van Oldenborgh, understood as a film that complements and speaks to the artist in her research and investigation of labour conditions. The evening ended with sets by DJs Baba Electronica & DJ Lonely, and DJs Marfox and Nervoso, which resonated fittingly with the music heard and references made in the artist's work.

Wendelien van Oldenborgh's film *Bete & Deise*, commissioned by If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want to Be Part of Your Revolution, is the final work in a trilogy that includes *Après La Reprise. La Prise* (2009) and *Pertinho de Alphaville* (2010), with *Supposing I Love You. And You Also Love Me* (2011) as an entre-act or a prologue to *Bete & Deise* (2012).

The film *Bete & Deise* is eponymous to the two women who encounter each other in a building under construction in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Bete Mendes and Deise Tigrona engage in a dialogue that suggests a questioning of what it means to perform and what it means to be part of a public sphere. The respective autobiographical narratives are representative of a larger socio-political context – that of Brazil over the past few decades – represented through two women from different backgrounds and generations. The generation gap that resides between Bete and Deise, and the fact that there is no concrete ground for comparison or approximation, becomes more obvious throughout their conversation and yet their sympathy for each other does not go unnoticed.

The narratives unfold to getting to know these two women, unravelling their past, their background and how in their own way they have given meaning to the idea of a public voice. Bete Mendes (1949) was involved in the armed resistance group of the student movement against the dictatorship, and was part of the labour movement in the 1970s, co-founding the working party Partido dos Trabalhadores at the close of the decade. She has continued to maintain a political career alongside her acting career in popular television (telenovela) since the 1960s. Deise Tigrona (1979) is one of the most powerful voices in the Funk Carioca movement today. Growing up and performing as a singer in the impoverished community of Cidade de Deus, she rose to great international popularity with her music in 2005.

Different forms of collectiveness and activism transpire in the dialogue, emphasizing the generational gap and the different sociological issues that emerge from different contexts and times. This is evident when Bete tells about her generation's struggles to obtain work permits and the process undergone in order to establish regulations for future generations. Next to this, we become aware of Deise and her generations' struggles for finding employment.

The setting of Bete and Deise's encounter should also be noted, where, similarly to other works in the trilogy, the artist conceives an architectural, aesthetical construct. The work harmoniously merges the theatrical and the filmic. The general set-up makes us feel the warmth – with all its connotations – of a Rio de Janeiro setting. Some yellow panels appear and disappear throughout the film. In addition to emphasizing an idea of an aesthetical, architectural construct, one could suggest that they function as points of references for the viewer, perhaps even as *perspective points*. The general architectural set-up suggests a neutral space, one that pertains to no personal relations with one or the other protagonist. It nevertheless has the scale of a house, suggesting a certain intimacy and an underlying scenario for an encounter to take place. As with a *tabula rasa*, this neutral space is gradually filled with the stories being

told and we witness both characters starting to appropriate the space and build a relationship to their surrounding. This can be noticed at such instances when Deise refers to a window in her story and she points to a window in the space, almost making us believe that her story actually took place in this setting. Other external factors also come into play, as with the noise of a helicopter that passes by and interrupts Bete's story, which coincidentally, reminds us of the helicopters she mentioned earlier. These unplanned factors allow for a strong emphasis on realism and further affect or resurface the character's personal memories throughout their evolving narratives and through the dialogue of their encounter.

The build-up of the dialogue has an element of the unexpected which complements the constructed setting in which it takes place. In addition to the fact that both Bete and Deise did not receive a pre-determined script, this ad-hoc dialogue develops genuinely. It is broken at instances by strong pauses; the narratives go back to earlier topics or move on to a different one. Similarly, the setting switches between night and day. And yet this is done with a general organic feeling to it. The contradictions appearing in the construction or montage of the settings can also be understood as mirroring the inherent contradictions between (and of) Bete and Deise. What unravels in the eye of the viewer is a montage in which the artist plays with ideas of a *mise-en-scène*, or rather renders it ambiguous, all the while putting forth a *mise-en-abîme* of her protagonists. This choice can be understood through Roland Barthes' essay *Le Troisième Sens* (1970) where he noted that film stills are rich in details and in potential narratives. Viewers are further challenged to combine words with what they see. This is precisely the exercise that the artist is asking from her viewer. In addition it highlights the artist's process of deconstruction and (re-)construction that is adopted and takes the shape of a montage. One could even propose a step further and argue that the artist is in reality 'performing' her work and is asking us to 'perform' with her. As such, with Van Oldenborgh's work, the idea of performance is rendered more complicated and ideas of narrativity take centre-stage.

The camerawoman, a silent character observing and listening into Bete and Deise's dialogue, is in movement and switching between close-ups and wider shots. Interestingly enough, we are always able to view the person listening in the dialogue, even when it is a close-up. To view the person listening instead of (only) the one talking is an interesting approach to the idea of 'prise de parole' and 'prise de vue', but also a statement about freedom of speech in general, in the sense that active listening is just as important as being able to express one's voice. The literal translation from the French of 'prise de' is 'taking hold of' or 'grasping.' The first connotation that is evoked is one of 'activism' where 'to take a hold of one's voice' is an action as opposed to a passive gesture. Thus, 'to observe' and 'to speak' are performative actions that play out throughout the work and transpire onto all dimensions of spectatorship: the artist, the viewer, the protagonists, the camerawoman. One could also propose that the supposed dichotomy between speech and observation is negated in Van Oldenborgh's *Bete & Deise*, as she constructs a montage where what is seen (the constructed setting) is parallel to the sound-overs (Bete and Deise's dialogue) that is at times disassociated and non-continuous, leaving us, the viewer (referring again to Roland Barthes' note mentioned earlier) to fill in the gaps and read between the lines (or in Van Oldenborgh's work, to see in-between the slides or scenes).

It is also worthy noting that 'prise' is a French term that additionally refers to a 'take' or a shot scene, as would be understood the title of Van Oldenborgh's first work in the trilogy *Après la Reprise. La Prise* (2009). The idea of a 'prise de parole' was raised again during a Q&A with the artist, when a member of the audience asked Wendelien van Oldenborgh how she perceived the role of the artist in her work, and where does the artist come into play? Naturally, one could refer to the artist's position, as the one who has initiated the encounter, or even the one who allows us a 'prise de vue' of Bete and Deise's 'prise de parole.' In other words, the artist's role is one that functions as a process of raising awareness, making us see, all the while allowing for her protagonists to speak up. One is also tempted to think of 'prise de conscience' (to become aware of), which may be perceived as Van Oldenborgh's ultimate goal.

In the days that followed the event, moments and parts of the dialogue kept coming back to mind. This made me realize how Wendelien van Oldenborgh has managed to break the distance between the viewer and a film, and draw a close intimacy with her characters. Yet I could not help but feel that there was more

that has not been said, that not everything was expressed, leaving me with a feeling of slight uneasiness, conscious of the extent and bigger context from where the stories of Bete and Deise have emerged, and the limits and problematics of freedom of speech.

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