



THERESE HENNINGSEN: No specific starting point was suggested, so it's open. I know Anouk, but Anne... we haven't met. Would you mind making a little introduction?

ANNE BILLSON: I moved to Belgium in 2011; I'd lived in France before, and I was looking to move somewhere... I've always loved Belgian symbolist and surrealist art, Belgian films. I was completely obsessed with *Daughters of Darkness* by Harry Kümel, which I saw in the early 70s, trekking across London to see it on a double bill with Danish *Dentist on the Job* (John Hilbard, 1971). One of those films that changed my life. I've been wearing red lipstick ever since.

ANOUK DE CLERCQ: You know, I've never seen it, which is insane.

TH: I've never seen it either.

AB: It's a wonderful Ostend location. I've done the pilgrimage. I've stayed in the Thermae Palace, the hotel they partly filmed at, and I worked with Harry Kümel. It inspired me to watch all of Delphine Seyrig's films: *Last Year at Marienbad* (Alain Resnais, 1961), *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (Chantal Akerman, 1975), and of course *India Song* by Marguerite Duras (1975), of whom John Waters, I think, said 'she makes the kind of films that when you recommend them to your friends, they want to punch you in the mouth.' Actually, this is a recommendation because Waters loved Duras. Did you ever hear of this *Film Comment* series, called *Guilty Pleasures*? Well regarded film directors would choose rather... trashy films. When they asked Waters he chose films by Ingmar Bergman, which I think is wonderful.

What else can I say? I'm a freelance writer and journalist. I've written some books. Nothing set in Belgium yet, but I'm sure I will one day. Have either of you seen the English soap, *EastEnders*?

AC: I was born in Belgium. It's not something that we... or I at least I was watching. We had our own soaps, but we knew it was a big phenomenon in the UK – and in other parts of the world, I'm sure – and it did make me curious about 'pub life.'

I mean, watching Therese's documentary, *After Time* (2023) – and seeing the stills Stanley selected for this book – it reminded me that it's so completely right to show the work in Ostend. How well do you know it, Ostend?

AB: I know Ostend beer. Popoulou, is it? There are very nice bars. I particularly love the hotel, famously filmed in *Daughters of Darkness*. There was a wonderful public swimming pool next door and, if you hit it at the right time, you had half the pool to yourself.

AC: Yeah, it's gone now.

AB: I knew that they had plans to change it.

AC: They just got rid of it. Gone. They built a new one, but nothing like the beautiful brutalist building you're referring to, next to the Thermae Palace, by the sea. This building they had plans to turn into a museum about our colonial history, but rather than do that... they just razed the building.

AB: Have they kept the statue of Leo?\*

AC: Oh, yeah.

AB: I thought Belgium was in the process of trying to get rid of those [statues]?

AC: They're still debating it, but debate is a big word for what it is that they're doing; they're talking about it, they're *considering* it...

AB: Procrastination.

AC: Exactly. The statue of Leopold II is still very much there. And with Monokino, this screening platform that I co-run: by the sea in Ostend, we show films all over town, all over Ostend, but mainly in Kaap, which is this pavilion with a big window overlooking the sea. It's part of the same complex as the Thermae Palace, at the far end, and it's right next to the statue of Leopold II. So, every time you show something there, you pass him. In fact, one of the first things I did in the early days of Monokino... We were being blocked by the city's powerbrokers. They did not want us there, which of course made us want to be there all the more. The more they tried to sabotage our initiative, the more we wanted to stay. But then – at a certain point – they took away some of the money that was promised to us, and then I was in a really very, very bad mood. I happened to pass Leopold, and I projected all my anger onto him. At that time, we had made stickers to hand out to people and on the back of the sticker was an invitation to think with us about a possible cinema by the sea, inviting people to send us films related to the sea... I decided to put the sticker on the tiny note that is next to the statue, giving an indication of the colonial history that this man represents. It was an act of anger. But five seconds later I thought, my God, what have I done? This is not good

\* Leo refers to the bronze statue of the second King of Belgium, Leopold, mounted on a horse and surrounded by renderings of his subjects. In 2004, the hand of the Congolese man who is part of the statue, and who crouches gazing up at Leopold, was attacked with a chainsaw. The left hand was removed in a reference to a common punishment meted out to Congo's population during the Belgian monarch's reign. The 'vandals,' who self-identified 'De Stoeten Ostendenoare' ('the bold Ostenders'), offered to return the hand if the royal family and the Belgian state apologised for their colonial history. It hasn't happened yet.

for Monokino; you know, for the future of this collective. I went back and tried to take it off, but the sticker was really good – it wouldn’t come off. And then I called the police to tell them... ‘I did an act of vandalism. What should I do?’ Anyway, they were laughing with me.

[*Laughter*]

TH: So why is it that you think *The Lock-In* is perfect to do in Ostend? I’m curious.

AC: A lot of people call Ostend ‘Brussels by the sea,’ Bruxelles-Plage. It’s true that a lot of people from Brussels and Antwerp come for a day or a weekend by the sea, so a lot of tourists, and a lot of people have second homes there. These are people with means or at least more means than most of the people who live in Ostend, which is a very poor city. It used to live from the fishing industry, but that’s mostly gone. There’s a lot of poverty and much of it is hidden, because the city government doesn’t want you to see it. People are pushed to the edges of the city, with a lot of big ‘projects’ taking over the city, the city centre. There is a gentrification project and many events they do that use a lot of money to attempt to draw people in with means, but there are places still where there is the ‘real’ Ostende, so to speak, where people who live there *are*.

Monokino was blocked, and considered a nuisance or even a threat to the establishment, because we were challenging with our programming the way the city’s government was handing out money to cultural events that cater mainly to visitors, tourists...

AB: Bourgeoisie.

AC: Yes, not the people who live there. So, in all humility, we were trying to change that. In this sense we felt like a relation to people who were also treated this way. So in a sense, like some of the people that I saw in Therese’s documentary, which I really loved, by the way. Beautifully gentle, the way you approach the people...

AB: And speak to them so well. You got them talking, they were completely at ease. It’s such a gift to be able to do that.

TH: I’m from Denmark, so initially came to London’s East End as an outsider. I lived for a long time in Haggerston. I don’t live anymore in the East End, but I know the pubs quite well, and I was always drawn to that space, in particular to those kind of *real* – whatever that means – East End pubs that have a sense of where you can spend time, extended periods of time, without any specific expectation of what might come out of that time. There was a sense of shared space that I hadn’t really encountered in Denmark in the same way.

Stanley asked if I wanted to do it; to document this ‘tour’ across the East End pubs. The framework – or the dogma – was that I should only film during

the time of these specific screenings, and only with whoever happened to be there at that time. I never made any prearrangements or post-arrangement with anyone I filmed, so in this way there was a tightness, or something, an interesting challenge for me in that idea. This, I thought, is interesting because it mirrored in a way the sense of the pub as a possible space, and as something where something might be generated within a specific context.

I like working with people, but there were also technical obstacles that shaped the approach: it is only me and I only have my camera – with its directional sound recording – and it’s hard with the sound in the space of a pub... So, I had to be in close proximity to people, wanting the diegetic sound. I wanted direct encounters, not a layered or worked sound in any way. This guided my approach, which is a way I like to film anyway.

People were so open to speaking to me partly because they knew why we were there. I didn’t have to explain that much prior to filming, because the context of the filming was the screenings, these durational screenings. Each pub showed a year in a single day: so one pub would show the entirety of *EastEnders* in 1985, but only pub shots. This basically fell within opening hours, it could be eight, it could be eleven... Why some of the years have so much more time in the pub I don’t know. I met such amazing people... I think it relates to one of the things that I feel really drawn to; something that has a framework, something preconceived in a way, but that collides or meets with the unexpected. That’s a really nice way to think about both filmmaking and the social space of the pub.

AC: That may be why I think it’s so perfect for us. When we do something with Monokino, yes, we show a film and yes, the film is related to the sea. But by now, because we’ve been doing this for several years, our audience is mixed. Most people are locals, and they know they’re coming to see an adventure; they know it’s not the film they’ll see in the multiplex. After the screening, we talk with people to hear what they think of the film, and what it triggered in them. There are so many stories that people are telling us – just like in your film – and just like when you say the pub is a shared space, this too is that space. People share their stories willingly, openly. And that’s the most beautiful thing that’s happening. People really want to share and really want to tell their stories. We have heard and gathered so many over the years – the funniest, the most moving – and it’s such a joy. And I sense that in your film.

AB: Because everybody here is much younger than me – Stanley also – I was wondering if you knew the origin of the term *lock-in*?

TH: That would be great if you know it.

AB: Okay, because Britain – or suddenly England – had the most stupid licensing laws ever. I think it wasn’t until the early ‘90s that pubs were allowed

to open longer than 11 o’clock – or 10 o’clock on Sundays – and then they closed for the afternoon. It was all to do with the First World War, or maybe the Second World War – I can’t remember which – where they didn’t trust the working class to provide munitions without getting drunk, you know, and doing their factory work drunk. So, they really stamped down on opening hours and that just lasted. It was absolutely ridiculous.

If you were a regular at a pub in the ‘70s and ‘80s, when I went to pubs mostly, you would have something called a ‘lock-in,’ which was an illegal thing where you would keep serving drinks after the pub had officially closed. That was the lock-in. You had to make sure that – if you were raided by the police – you could either get rid of your drinks or just, convince them ‘we’re just talking here’ or whatever. Stanley must know this, but I know he was born in the late ‘80s or something, so he might not have experienced that.

AC: But we have experienced the lock-in during the lockdown? Is that about that as well? Yes, there were a number of pubs... I mean, I was in Berlin at the time, but I’m sure like all over the world that people had lock-ins. I hope they did, but... not.

TH: *After Time* (the title of the documentary film) means the same thing. Steve, the pub landlord of The Globe in Morning Lane, told us that: *after time*, or just ‘afters.’ I thought this was a nice phrase, and it’s basically the same title then as *The Lock-In* it documents, but in different words. The Globe in Morning Lane shut down whilst *The Lock-In* was happening. They closed only a couple of days after we were there, though it reopened some months later (under different ownership) as a ‘craft’ pub.

AB: There was a pub in... I think it must have been Smithfield Market. I don’t know if Smithfield Market exists anymore since London is being demolished, even as we speak, by developers. I was working on a student film, and we did a night shoot, and we went to this pub at about eight in the morning. It was the ‘80s and this pub had special dispensation to open early in the morning for the meat porters, the people who worked at the market. One thing I remember is we tried to sit on some barstools and the barman said to us, ‘No, no, no: those are for the meat porters.’ We never saw the meat porters, but this is sort of a mythical idea of people in bloodstained aprons...

AC: What I’ve read about *The Lock-In* and what I’ve seen in the documentary reminds me similarly of one of the earliest experiences we had with Monokino. An eighty-year-old woman passes by the screening space as we’re setting up and asks what we’re doing. We tell her we’re a nomadic film platform and we’re showing films that night, and that she should come by that night. Buster Keaton’s *The Navigator* (we have a very eclectic taste: from Buster Keaton to Hayao Miyazaki to Ben Rivers, we do it all so long as it’s beautiful and related to the sea).

We opened the doors that evening and there she was, holding this framed picture under her arm. ‘*I brought something to show you.*’ It was a photograph of herself in her 20s in a bikini on the beach, with the sea in the background. She asked us if she could show everyone in the room. Well, of course... So she went around while everyone was sitting waiting for *The Navigator*. Stories like this one pile up. It’s amazing how open and how willing people really are, wanting to share their stories.

TH: Yeah. Often we think that people don’t want to share. I think we have an expectation of overstepping a boundary by asking, but I feel the opposite is often the case. In my documentary you see that it often starts by people commenting on *EastEnders*. I’m not personally so familiar with *EastEnders* either, in that way it’s also an exploration for me. And then it wanders off to become about people’s own lives.

There’s a woman in the film who I ask about her favourite bus route. I don’t know why I did. She tells me that it’s the number 8, because that was the route her mother took. Later in life her mother got dementia, so when she would go missing, they’d first call the bus garage. And so – for her funeral – they hired a number 8 for everyone to travel on.

AB: People underestimate how essential specific bus routes are to the fabric of London. I still remember the ones that I used to use, the numbers resonating in my head. The 68. 31. I don’t know whether they still run.

AC: Another shared space.

TH: I think it was Harold Pinter who once warned that writers lose the habit of listening to the people around them when they stop taking the bus and start taking taxis, or something, along those lines; that they stop being able to really observe or engage in the lives of other people.

AB: Would that be specific to London? I can understand that with the double deckers... The bus service in Antwerp is just terrible. I avoid it when I can and it’s always overcrowded, so you can’t use it as a space like that anymore. The tram too. Antwerp’s is the worst public transport I’ve ever encountered in my life. Really.

AC: It’s true. I don’t particularly like to take the bus, but in London I do, because if you get the seat with the big, beautiful window at the front, with life passing by and... I could take that bus the whole day from morning until night. I have.

AB: Maybe the bus experience is specific to London? I’ve never really thought about that because I haven’t lived there since 2001, but yeah, I guess I miss London buses (although I’m sure they’re worse now than they used to be). The other thing... I think I’ve only ever watched one episode of *EastEnders*, in the 80s, and it wasn’t even set in the EastEnd. It was when Angie and Dirty Den (as he was called) – who I knew

about even though I didn't watch the show – they went off to Venice. I think Angie lied and said that she had a terminal illness, so she got her husband with whom she was estranged to take her to Venice for a romantic weekend. I watched that because I'd just come back from holiday in Venice.

AC: I don't think I've ever seen a full episode, only snippets.

AB: It's amazing how everyone knows about it, and yet that's the only episode I've seen. I've never seen an episode set in the pub, for example, only in the form of *The Lock-In*, some of which are there in your film, Therese.

TH: Which, in a way, were accidental. I chose those specific shots for the framing more than anything. The only intervention was overlaying the sound from the extracts of *The Lock-In* on the monitors – to give them better clarity – and to include these fragments felt important in how they spoke with and against the 'real' stories.

There are contradictions and connections at the same time, because of course this portrayal of the East End is an image, an invention.

AB: The actors are kind of well-known and I don't know why I know them because I haven't watched it. Is it Phil Mitchell? I don't know... A bald character who keeps turning up in the artwork of someone called Cold War Steve who does very political collage. It's wonderful. The Phil Mitchell character is in his work looking on with sadness as politicians do ridiculous things. And then Anita Dobson: I know her because she appeared in a short film based on one of my novels as a sort of test to try to get backing for a feature film which never happened.

I only have the vaguest memory of this but I'm sure it was Anita Dobson. I couldn't find any information about it online, and of course if something isn't online it effectively no longer exists now. I started to wonder if I'd imagined this whole episode of someone making a short film of something I'd written with her in it. It was a ghost story... I like that, as though the whole episode is a bit of a ghost story in itself.

AC: I love that, what it speaks to, and I really love the idea of showing *The Lock-In* in the East End pub. It's like bringing it home somehow. Is anybody really watching TV anymore?

AB: I think a lot of people still watch *EastEnders* because I see people talking about it on social media sometimes. I don't take that much notice but it's obviously seeping into my consciousness.

TH: One of the other things I was thinking about in relation to *The Lock-In*. There's something interesting in the relationship between artists and the people in the pubs. I often think there's this assumption that artists are just gentrifiers, and that we can't somehow truly share a space. But there's a meeting; there's a shared

and open space that works. I don't know how you feel about that Anouk, but I was thinking you must have encountered it as well in the activities of Monokino?

AC: Yes. It became the main reason to go on with Monokino, because first of all there was no cinema anymore in Ostend. There's only the multiplex; a concrete box with a popcorn shop showing blockbusters... The most soulless place you can imagine.

AB: I know the chain, it's horrible. But I've seen a screening of *Daughters of Darkness* in Ostend. A cinema on the front with red curtains? It was before lockdown...

AC: The last cinema that was independently owned, Cinema Realtor, was closed in 2015. There are no others. As such, we wanted to try and build a cinema... but that's where the sabotage and all of that came in. We were apparently a threat to the multiplex if you can imagine that. David and Goliath almost.

AB: Why can't you have both?

AC: We tried to explain that. It's an old, tiring discussion, and – at some point – we had to let go of it and just do our own thing. We also loved this idea of just being a cinema that goes into the city, curating the location, taking the work into different neighbourhoods and meeting people you might not otherwise. It adds to the sense of adventure. It also felt important to prove that it isn't just 'us' who love so much this work, and who can enjoy it. It depends on how you bring it; how you frame it; how it's contextualised. Our screenings are not always technically the best, but there's an atmosphere and a location that we've chosen carefully, and we work with people from the place. Our PT person is a woman in her mid-70s who single-handedly goes around with flyers and talks about and promotes the film... that she often hasn't seen. The films always trigger stories, stimulate people to talk about their lives.

AB: I think that's one of the big strengths of cinema: that it can be approached in so many different ways, not just the technical and the genre or the sociopolitical, but also the way it makes you think about stuff, or the way it inspires you to read up on things only barely related to film. It's a great catalyst for so many things. I'm still amazed when governments don't really seem to take it as seriously as things like theatre and literature. They think it's pure entertainment, but I think it's one of the most important and potentially powerful art forms there is.

AC: It can teach you so much about the human experience.

TH: And you can't explain in advance what is going to happen. Maybe that's the relationship between this pub space and spending time, which also is so rare nowadays, to be 'allowed' to spend time to work things out, and discover and experience, and

to nurture our response to things and the possibility to go with something that we could not foresee. That relates back to what I said earlier. I feel like those are the things that are often threatened, if we all the time want to know exactly what we are going to experience. I think that's what nice about Monokino, and how it relates to *The Lock-In*. If you create the framework where people feel able to contribute, they will.

AB: I think the multiplex style cinema is possibly in its last days, with so much home streaming and stuff like that. The focus of commercial films has narrowed so much in the past couple of decades, in that you get very few films about grown-ups anymore. It's all Marvel, but it feels it's coming to the end of that cycle. Cinema is looking for alternative places at the same time as people's opportunity for meeting each other in spaces – like pubs and libraries – is being curtailed by so much economic cutback. Though I don't think we can predict how things are going to go, but I'm sure it's going to be... cinema will have to rely more on things like your initiative, and Cinema Nova in Brussels. And possibly that people will make more of their own films? I wish I could be alive in twenty year's time to see what has happened to cinema, because I think it will change in ways we cannot possibly predict.

AC: That's true. There's no intimacy to be found in the multiplex, nothing. But it's true what you say that you see that the cinema experience is evolving into something more intimate, warmer, more on the human scale... That's also why I love *The Lock-In* project so much: it is on a human scale.

TH: There is a mourning there too. A loss of certain spaces, or the death of certain people, or the moving out or moving away, but there's also a generative insistence within it that says: regardless, we are going to create this space. That feels like a survival strategy or something, something that... rather than just saying, 'Oh, it's terrible,' we're going to make things and generate these spaces regardless.

AB: The element of the unknown is what makes it intriguing. And there's stuff that I'm sure I can't even conceive of because my brain's been bred in a certain way. I'm sure there's somebody somewhere with an idea that will come up that will revolutionise the whole idea of cinema, and shared spaces, which social media really doesn't do. It's useful as a tool, but it's not a shared space, it's not the pub.

AC: Seems like a good end for our conversation, no? I'm going to watch *Daughters of Darkness*.