

42th International Film Festival Rotterdam

Slow Criticism

Review Dana Linssen author of Festivalists and editor in chief of de Filmkrant

Silent Ones, Ricky Rijneke Netherlands/Hungary

Dana Linssen checked in from Amsterdam and travelled all the way to Rotterdam to see Ricky Rijneke's impressive first feature Silent Ones, that takes us on board of a cargo ship to sail to unseen places between close and faraway and one life and another.



WITH A BANG AND A WHISPER

In the beginning there is silence. Nothing but silence. And then 'silence' is the first word we hear in the impressive debut feature of Rotterdam based but filmic globe trotting and truly international film maker Ricky Rijneke (1981) *Silent Ones*. There is no light in the beginning of this film, no divine spark, just silence and a landscape in the fog. It is pre-light, pre-creation, pre-beginning. And then there is this voice-over that speaks to us from a land beyond that mist. It is Csilla's voice, a young Hungarian woman who crawls from a car-wreck after a crash. Her voice resounds in our heads, buzzes in our ears as if we have been deafened by the blaze ourselves, as if it is the whisper of an echo, a big bang, muted, hazed, fleeting and fragile like water molecules.

Loopholes

If it was the big bang in our universe that set the space-time-continuum into motion, it is the big bang in *Silent Ones* that brings time to a grinding halt. And we hear the reverberations and aftershocks of that standstill resonate in the sound design and musical score of composer Andrey Dergatchev (who also did the music for Andrey Zvyagintsev's *The Return*). It is a soundtrack that creates loopholes from one slowed down timeframe to another. It makes us travel with our ears. As if our eyes, our most commonly used cinematic receptors have become defective senses. Or different senses. More perceptive to Rijneke's atmospheric image-scape that slowly unfolds a fable about a brother and a sister lost in an interzone between life and death, here and there and elsewhere, time and timelessness, reminiscence and recollection.

Csilla (an almost see-through performance of Hungarian actress Orsi Tóth) wanders off from that car wreck, takes a little ferry on an endless sea, boards on a cargo ship and sails off on the waters of remembrance in search of her brother Isti.

Touch and water

Silent Ones isn't a film about a story, but a film in search of a story; about a main character that is looking for the clues that may give direction to her quest. We are guided by Csilla's monologue intérieur, which is as much a first hand account as it is recalling events that have already happened in another reality. It is a film about touch and water, clay and blood. It is as mystical as it is material. And thus bears echoes of great European film directors like Tarkovski or Béla Tarr.

Once we see beyond these first impressions, these first impressionistic viewing experiences that defy a traditional reading and challenge us to watch this film with a cinematic intuition, instead of an analytical eye, the ingenious, non-linear structure of the film discloses itself. The reciprocity between Csilla's thought-stream creates different layers of reality, while the imagery takes us from the ship to a forest, to an anonymous harbour (which in fact is shot in the Rotterdam port), to unending roads where immense trucks line-up in an endless queue.

Her testimony could be that of someone who survived a car accident, and lost her brother, with the ambiguous awareness that life goes on. Must go on. It could describe the trauma of the loss. It could be a reflection from beyond, or from the in-between. It could be that Csilla is adrift herself in that vast space of that split second between life and death. The circular, looping structure of the film seems to suggest all that, and more, and all of that at the same time, but leaves it open in a way that confronts us with our own mechanisms of hope and fear.

That is even converted in the photography (a shared credit for *Hukkle* and *Taxidermia's* Gergely Pohárnok and Bouli Lanners regular Jean-Paul de Zaetijd), that discloses as much about Csilla's state of being as it obscures. Not only in the fog, but also in clever framing, in the claustrophobic ship's quarters, where the use of mirrors and frames in frames implies that every image and every scene might be nothing more than a visual echo, an after-shock.

Hansel and Gretel

Ricky Rijneke shot *Silent Ones* over the course of four years, in as many seasons and all the different shades of the bleak morning light. She constructed a mythical landscape within a radius of 50 kilometres of her Rotterdam hometown. She shot in the port area, and the polders of Zeeuws-Vlaanderen. She shot skies that were never seen on this earth and horizons that are only talked about in fairy-tales. In a way her Csilla and Isti are a contemporary Hansel and Gretel, or the 'last two people in Rotterdam' like the story of the same name from an unfortunately not very well-known Dutch children's book, abandoned by their families, or the last two survivors after an unnoticed apocalypse, disoriented in an unwelcome geography, just trying to find their way home.

The meticulous and persistent style of the film bears affinity with two other female Dutch film directors. The tactile imagery is akin to the work of Esther Rots (whose 2009 *Can Go Through Skin* was shown in the Berlin Forum). Whereas her uncompromising minimalism recalls some moments in the works of Nanouk Leopold (whose upcoming *It's All so Quiet* will open the Berlinale Panorama Special in February) where location, architecture and space slowly merge with the mind-frames of the protagonists.

Our eyes tread gently on these fragile grounds. Footfalls echo in the memory. Before it all comes to an end. With a bang and a whisper.

Dana Linssen is the editor in chief of de Filmkrant.

<http://festivalists.com/post/42287919233/silentones>

http://www.filmkrant.nl/_regisseur_index_R/8622