Fascination for the go-betweens

Director David Bernet cites the unending curiosity, boundless thirst for knowledge and love of talking shared by so many interpreters as endearing qualities that cemented his decision to make a documentary.

Vincent BUCK.
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A filmmaker's view on interpreters. Model communicators or melancholy loners? Spiritual beings driven by a thirst for knowledge or seismographs charting historical processes? A little of each and much more besides, believes David Bernet, who is currently working on a documentary about four generations of conference interpreters. Vincent Buck spoke to David Bernet who was in Brussels scouting out locations.

David Bernet, what made you think of shooting a documentary film about interpreters?

Actually I first thought of it a long time ago. One factor was a conversation I had with an interpreter at the Berlin Film Festival some years ago. It made me wonder whether the work of interpreters might be an interesting subject.

However, my more deep-seated interest in the topic, which somehow dogged me for many years before I finally decided to act on it, derived from my reading of Gustave Flaubert’s Salammbo. Salammbo is a historical novel about the fall of Carthage. It begins with a marvelous description of an orgy outside the city gates. The Punic Wars are over and armies of mercenaries from all corners of the earth are loitering around idly. The conflict arising out of this ultimately leads to a colossal massacre. But before it does, a quite unique, somewhat ethereal-seeming species of being darts about amidst this motley, noisy crowd of mercenaries talking in all languages. They are the medium for diplomatic conflict resolution - slaves who are at home in every language imaginable. They all bear the same tattoo on their chests: a parrot. I took a liking to these delicate, spiritual creatures and that is how, as it were, I became fascinated by the literary depiction of the interpreter’s life as the life of an intermediary. That was in fact what first prompted me to concern myself with their modern counterparts.

What do you find particularly characteristic about the interpreters you have met? Is there anything they have in common, wherever they come from?

After the interviews that I have carried out so far with my co-author and producer Christian Beetz, I can say that there really are some common characteristics. I don’t know whether these are determined by the profession or whether certain personality traits are what attract people to this profession.

What I very much admire in interpreters - speaking at a very general level now - is their unending...
curiosity, their boundless thirst for knowledge and the almost painful precision of their work, as it appears to the observer. But without a doubt all interpreters love talking. That certainly seems to me to be linked with the profession. Some of our interviewees have described this spontaneity of communication as a “déformation professionnelle”. That may be so. But quite frankly I find it very endearing.

Conference interpreters often work hidden behind the scenes at major international events. Is this apparent in their behaviour, or do they strike you as absolutely normal human beings?

The point of a documentary film is to show the viewers things that are not absolutely normal and don’t enter into their usual field of vision. We promoted this project on the grounds that interpreters are often very colourful characters and, to a certain extent, inhabit a world of their own which can be made accessible by a film of this kind. But that really is my impression. I believe the combination of characteristics that makes someone become an interpreter - a quick mind, the constant desire to learn, empathy with complete strangers yet at the same time the greatest possible neutrality - it makes you view the world rather differently. But to return to your actual question: it seems to me that the behaviour of interpreters is indeed affected by their continual presence in prestigious environments. I do see that as something of a stimulus to enhance performance, if I may say so.

The content of what my colleagues interpret can sometimes be distressing. I'm thinking of interpreters who work or have worked at the trials of war criminals - from the Nuremberg Trials to the present-day Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. How do they come to terms with this? Do the interpreters you have interviewed have a particular way of coping?

We intend to find out. We haven’t conducted any in-depth interviews yet. But from what I have heard so far, that is a very arduous task. As far as I know, there is no trauma therapy for interpreters, just as there is none for journalists or doctors. I have a very long-standing personal interest in the question of how it feels to be right at the centre of things that are hard to bear in human terms, understanding every last detail and yet remaining as unaffected as possible. I think there is a psychology of neutrality at work here, but it has its limits. I have just been involved in making a film which poses this very question to members of Red Cross missions during the Second World War (to be shown shortly in Swiss cinemas with the title “Mission en enfer”). The result is a kaleidoscope of human survival strategies and stratagems that are very individual. Interpreters are undoubtedly not immune to these.

Some people say that conference interpreters are citizens of the world. In reality, the nature of their activities does turn a lot of them into globe-trotters. In your research work you have taken a particular interest in this jetting around and in a life lived between cultures. Why?

Yes, that’s true. My own attitude towards rootlessness is very positive. For me it is linked with a sense of freedom and an almost insatiable delight in the ways of the world. But the figure of world citizen has at least two faces. On the one hand, he or she is a cosmopolitan individual who embodies the dream of the community of nations and is perfectly composed, a model of communication skills and flexibility. On the other, a melancholy loner who knows that he/she will never really be understood by “sedentary” types. I have met certain freelances who take visible pleasure in portraying this image of world citizen. I am interested in both sides. It is a very cultured form of cosmopolitanism, which even in its most forlorn moments poses an intriguing conundrum: why are we constantly eager for new experiences? Why do we want to make the world intelligible? Oh, that was a rather pathetic way of expressing what I mean. But even so - for all my interest in the perpetual travel, with all its associated minor difficulties and pleasures, especially in terms of communication, I am also ultimately fascinated by this inherent sense of longing, however hectic a person’s lifestyle.
It’s interesting that your documentary focuses on four generations of conference interpreters. Why did you construct the narrative in this way, and how do these four generations of interpreters differ in your view?

Interestingly enough, there really is a big difference between one generation and another. I don’t want to dwell on this too much at the moment; after all, we have 60 minutes of film for that. But your questions are evidently geared to general perceptions of an interpreter “type”. And the role of a film like this is of course to paint what we might call a public picture of the profession, something that even nowadays is very sketchy or even non-existent in my opinion.

Roughly speaking, the film itself is made up of individuals who have identical or similar professional lives. No-one automatically represents an entire group or generation; in any event, our film does not specifically set out to create stereotypes. It deals with individuals. Nevertheless, the fact that we have chosen people of different generations does give us an opportunity to describe the fascinating changes in the interpreter’s working life and to show how the conception of the profession has evolved. The development of international communication in the past 60 years has been breathtaking: interpreters are one of its channels, and as such they are both dependent on it and shaped by it. The point in time when an individual became involved in this historical process affects his or her professional profile - although perhaps this too has more to do with the social role and public image of interpreters at a certain time, and less to do with the personality of an individual.

I do get the impression, however, that trends and currents in international affairs have a very direct impact on the professional image of interpreters. This is especially interesting in that these developments take pace in international circles, into which ordinary consumers of news reports have no insight. So maybe interpreters also act a bit like seismographs in respect of particular historical processes. It still remains to be seen how this can be shown on screen.

Thank you for answering my questions. I wish you every success with your film.

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