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***The Upshot of a Relationship***

preceded by the screening of *The Master and His Pupil* (NL 2003)

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At a certain point in *The Master and His Pupil*, the film you watched the other day, the conductor Valery Gergiev says to one of his students: "The first 20 seconds are the most important for a conductor when he directs a new orchestra. The orchestra will know immediately what kind of conductor they have in front of them. As a conductor, you can't say: "I don't know exactly what I want, but tomorrow I'll know for sure." The orchestra will say, "Well, if he doesn't know, why should we know? He's better paid."

In any case, for me the first minutes of a film are also extremely important. It's the deal you make with your spectator. Whenever I watch a film, if the first few minutes aren't convincing, what follows probably won't be either. Try it yourself. This is how it works most of the time.

It's not only important for the first minutes of a film, but also for the first impression that you have of a subject you choose. It can be anything that strikes you: a person, a situation, an object, a newspaper clipping, a remark by someone that makes you tick. There HAS to be a point of departure where there's no way back. In other words, you will continue, either as a spectator to watch the film, or as a filmmaker to make the film.

This doesn't mean that you can never be in doubt. I doubt all the time, and I even show my doubts: to my main characters, to my crew, to my editor, to everyone who wants to hear my doubt. So don't think that in order to come to a great result, one should not have doubts. Doubt is a key element when you make a film. Of course, don't confuse it with a condition for making a film. But one has to allow oneself to doubt in order to be receptive to other ideas.

So it's a matter of doubting and then making a decision. Don't be afraid to doubt. When he wrote his famous last string quartets, Beethoven endlessly changed the structure and instrumentation and everything. We can see all this in his notebooks. And in the end he wrote on the score in red: "So muss es sein – This is the way it has to be!"

If you're not convinced yourself, how will your audience be convinced? So if you don't like the decision you made, change it as many times as you want until you're satisfied. It may seem a bit contradictory, but doubt and decision go hand in hand, and for that you need to trust yourself and the people that you work with. If they understand that you're looking for something, they'll try to help you find it. They'll be committed to you and to the project.

In the case of the orchestra conductor, he's already made many decisions at home while studying the piece. In the case of a film that's already been made, the decisions have already been made as well, so we are confronted with decisions and not with doubts. Then you can say: "Yes, I'm convinced. I'll stay and watch or listen, or I'll leave the theatre and do something better with my time."

But in order to get to making decisions while shooting and editing, I advise you to always show your doubts. Then the people around you will feel committed to the project and to you. You'll be free to openly talk about the process in your head so that, for instance, your cameraman, your editor, or composer will know where an idea is coming from. Then they can help you and offer their ideas. It's like ping pong – you need someone to hit the ball back to you.

Ideas don't come fully formed; they need to be shaped. And it's by talking and trying and tasting that ideas become reality. As Oscar Wilde said: "Whatever is first in feeling, comes always last in form."

This is very important for the development of an idea, especially in documentary filmmaking, where the situations that you film are almost always different from the way you imagined them when you wrote them down. They will always be different from the time you first witnessed a situation upon which you based your idea. Next time you get there, a few months or a few years later, after having struggled to raise money and to find a crew, the sun no longer shines like it did the first time, or the person no longer says those great words like before, the house no longer exists or they're building a new one so you can't record your sound properly. It seems to be a rule that conditions and luck were always better during the research.

Yesterday some of you watched a film I made in Barcelona called *Yo soy así*. For more than ten years, I wanted to make a film about this place. The place existed for more than 100 years. Finally I got the money and got everything together, and when I arrived in Barcelona, the place had been closed down. So you have to be flexible when making documentaries, and see if you can solve the problems on the spot. In the end, we found the owners, and the place was still completely the way it was. So we were able to re-open it and shoot the film. I found all the actors and all the people who had performed in this place, so we could shoot what I wanted. But sometimes things don't work out this easily.

So never be afraid that people will think that you don't know what you want as a director. If a cameraperson says to you: "What are we going to do today?" And he or she just waits for instructions, I suggest that you find someone else to shoot your film. Documentary is teamwork, and most of the TV station people that send you away ahead of the crew are making a big mistake in doing so because your subjects, the characters that you're going to film, have to get used to you and to your crew. Otherwise there's no trust, which is the most important thing if you want to get close to the lives of the people you're filming. You're not paying these people, they're not professional actors, they didn't ask you to film their daily lives in the first place, so why should they let you in at all? The result of doing everything on your own is that when the crew comes in, the people that you just seduced to work with you and who feel at ease with you, will feel intruded upon by the crew. They'll see them as intruders or strangers, and it'll take days and days to make them feel comfortable with you and your people.

I have a Spanish background, and you've all tasted Spanish food, so I'll made a comparison with my filmmaking. I could compare my way of making documentaries with the way of preparing a great dish without a recipe. Some cooks work with a book in hand. Let's compare them to fiction filmmakers. While others improvise on the spot with the ingredients that were available at the market. I would compare myself with the latter. There's an idea, I know where I'm going, but I want to let myself be surprised at any time, at any moment with something better than I could have possibly imagined before. I'll come to some examples later on.

To be guided and influenced by coincidence is what attracts me most. To find and catch a story in the reality of the moment around me I find more challenging than just shooting what I wrote down weeks or months or years before. It's risky, of course, but in the end one develops a kind of mental state in which you can actually TRUST your chance. I have many examples of the most successful scenes in my movies that I could never have imagined and that actually happened by pure coincidence. Later on, I'll show a few of these.

Many times when the camera was already packed and we were ready to leave, something happened that was too good to be true, and we would just look at each other as a crew, and unpack the gear and continue shooting. Other times you don't even shoot what you came for. This also happens. Don't be afraid not to shoot what you came for because on the other corner something could be happening that's far more interesting than what you actually came for.

So you need to be flexible yourself, and also have a flexible crew that is not afraid to change and switch, but who help you follow and change immediately in a given situation. Michael Ballhaus, a famous and great cinematographer I met a few years ago, once told me: "Sonia, you always have to push your luck." So this is what I say to you now, especially to the documentary filmmakers: trust your luck that you will be

at the right place at the right time. But also don't feel defeated if nothing happens at all, neither what you came for, nor a nice surprise! Shit happens, and the next day will bring new opportunities.

When I started thinking about this lecture, a few keywords came to my mind as a point of departure that are very important like 'concept' and 'idea.' But also we need a sense of humour, drama, and compassion. I'm sure you've spoken about all this throughout the week. All of these elements are important. And all of these keywords, together with others such as 'fascination,' 'curiosity,' 'inspiration' – they're all metaphorically speaking the pots and pans, the oil and salt, the onions and the garlic, the rosemary and thyme of the films. Everybody who likes to cook has his favourite set of pans and basic ingredients in the kitchen. Without those, there's no dish, so to speak. So all of these keywords are part of what I try to incorporate into my films.

I'll sum up a few more basic elements for you, not necessarily in order of appearance, but elements that I always hope will be visible in a documentary film of mine, regardless of the subject matter: A certain kind of timelessness, without losing its historical value or relevance, a context, but always with a universal thought behind it. For instance, I tried to put all of these elements into the opening of what I just showed: the historic value, the symbolic value, the exposé of the movie.

There are also some elements that I very much dislike and don't use if possible: I hate judgemental films or films that pretend to offer the ultimate answer to a problem or situation. Also the so-called fly-on-the-wall documentaries – I don't believe in those because even the fly makes a choice. I also don't care for films which try to cover everything about the subject. For instance, with this film [*Only the Brave*], the bullfighting film, when I finished it, journalists asked me if the film was pro or contra bullfighting. And I said it's not about pro or contra. I always got the same questions because people already had an idea about what kind of film it would be based on the subject. So I told them to watch the film first, and then we could talk about their questions.

You can go on talking about ingredients or elements that a film needs, but in the end, what guides me most of all is that I always try to aim for total freedom in content and form. Otherwise there will not be, what I would call, organic perfection. You can reach a very high level of technical perfection, sometimes with a lot of money, but if you are obliged by anyone to film a person or situation that is not of your own choice and that you dislike for your film, that brings no 'magic' to your film. How sharp and great and everything is, it will be a disaster for your film and will therefore spoil your idea and the money and time. This may seem a bit pretentious to you, but if this happens, the film will lose its personal flavour and your personal signature will be lost.

Again, to use the bullfighting film as an example, it was my first film so coping with my doubts was very difficult. The producer was afraid he would lose money. But at the same time, one of the scenes that I had lived through for months and months was the scene where the bullfighter is being dressed in light, as we say in Spain, where the helper dresses him. In order to shoot this scene in a very good way without it being under the same stressful conditions of the real bullfight, we arranged it. We organized the bullfighter and the hotel room and the lighting and everything, and we shot only the dressing. But the moment we started shooting, I realized that it was no good. And this was my key scene. My whole film was based upon this scene with the man with his hairy leg being inserted into a pink stocking. But the scene was really bad. There was no magic, but I didn't dare say this. We were shooting on film, so it wasn't like video or with a hard drive where you could just delete the scene.

So I was seeing all these hundreds of Euros going down the drain as the film roll went through the camera, but I didn't know how to stop the scene. And then the cinematographer Ellen [Kuras] looked up from the camera and said, "Sonia, there's no magic." [laughs] Fortunately, the producer believed her. Because the scene was no good, and we needed the tension of the moment where the actual dressing is happening right before the bullfight, we decided to travel for three more weeks with the bullfighter and his 'quadria.' I would do the sound and Ellen would do the camera. We would be a very small crew, and we would grab the dressing scene piece by piece. So in the editing, you can see that in one shot he's wearing red and in another green, but it doesn't matter because it's about the tension and the magic of the

moment, and not what colour he's wearing. So it's a very important point to always break off shooting when you don't believe in what you're filming.

Anyway, how to come to all this without even having started to think about a subject? For me, in any case, it's true that most of my ideas begin with the form I'd like to use. Like with cooking, I look for a subject that fits into the form like with my favourite saucepan, where I think, "Ah, I'll make a great fish in this pan. Because of the size of the pan, the fish will fit perfectly." Of course, sometimes it can be the other way round: I find the fish – the subject – first and think what pan, what form will I use for it.

So when someone says to me: "Oh, this or that would be a great subject for you," I always think to myself: Do I have a form that will fit this subject? And secondly I ask myself: Do I find the subject important enough? Will I want to spend a year or two of my life in my kitchen preparing this subject to invent a new dish?

This is where two keywords come in that always help me make a decision: attraction and intuition. Do I feel attracted? Am I curious to know more? Does it have historical value? Will I be able to tell or show something we didn't see or know before?

For me, this is all a matter of intuition. There's no secret about it. Someone can offer me a great subject for a film about, let's say, a very famous person, but if I'm not personally attracted to or curious about the subject, then I have to make a big effort to accept the offer. Although the attraction can also be WHY I DON'T FEEL ATTRACTED. This can also be a point of departure. For instance, this whole film about bullfighting started because I thought it was a very boring subject, and I couldn't understand why so many people feel attracted to bullfighting. So this film was made in order for me to find out what makes people tick. Why do so many people feel attracted to bullfighting and make it a way of life to be a bullfighter or a part of the bullfighting world? So this is a very good example of how you try to make discoveries about something that you don't like.

Of course, when you're a professional you'll always be able to make a film about any subject. You have to as a professional. But without freedom, it will be more of a commission, made with professional means, and there's nothing wrong with that. That's really good to do as well. But it will lack a certain personal touch that makes the film go beyond the subject. You could also call it the free soul of the film.

One of the things that I also find very important for a documentary film is that everyone should be able to understand it and use it for different purposes, and be able to watch it from different backgrounds and angles. Again the bullfighting film was for me a film that I wanted to make that everyone in the world would be able to understand without spoken words. I added the spoken word much later. I was inspired to do it like this because I was shooting a film in the desert of Kenya. I was the cinematographer, not the director. I was walking around in these 'espadrilles' that you tie around your ankles. These people that we were filming in the desert were not used to wearing shoes. So when I was tying up my shoes, these people would all gather around me and watch. I thought if these people had the means to come and film me with their curiosity, they would probably make a whole scene of only me tying my shoes.

So with the bullfighting film, I thought there was only one way that I always see it. I'd never seen the soul of the people. You never see why they're doing what they're doing. So I thought that if I could make it in this way that even a person in the desert can understand why these people want to do this [bullfighting], then I could succeed with the my story.

For instance, the film you watched the other day, *The Master and His Pupil*, can also be seen from many different points of view. When people ask me: What is your film 'about'? I always start laughing a bit because one could think of many answers. It's a film about understanding music. It's a film about how to conduct a symphonic orchestra. It's a film about students learning how to understand the composer Scriabin and how to conduct his symphonic compositions. And so on.

But my personal aim was to make a film about the transmission of knowledge. That's what made me tick. After the première, I overheard various remarks from different people. One said, "This film should be seen by all first-year conservatory students." The other said, "No, it should be seen by all first-year psychology students." And the next one said: "This film should be compulsory for all first-year film students." And another one said: "No, it's a film for all people who want to become a teacher." So in the diversity we find unity.

This particular film, *The Master and His Pupil*, is now being used all over the world for many different purposes, which for me is proof that it's necessary to make a film for oneself and not for an appointed group of people. Otherwise you lose your freedom and then it becomes an instructional film, or a pamphletistic film, or in any case not YOUR film.

I'll finish my lecture with an example. I once had to sit in a meeting with eight people, who had to decide if I would get an extra amount of money to finish the editing of the film I was making about bullfighting. I had no reputation at all. It was my first movie. Although a reputation is not always a guarantee that you'll receive money. Because the film was made in Spanish and there were no subtitles yet, I was asked to sit with them and translate simultaneously. Afterwards the commission had some questions and remarks before they decided whether or not to give me the money.

Since the film was not ready yet, and many decisions still had to be made, the eight commissioners started giving me advice about what I should leave in the film and what I should definitely take out. At a certain point, there was a huge controversy between them because one said: "This scene should really get cut because it makes no sense," and the other one said, "No, it's the core, the heart, the matter of the film. Without that scene the film would be lost!" They would go on and on endlessly, and in the end nobody was looking at me anymore. It was really very funny.

When they finally looked at me again, I told them the story of the old man, the donkey and the boy. The three of them had to walk to the village, and the old man said to the boy: "You're small. You can't walk for very long so sit on the donkey." The people that passed along cried out loud to the boy: "Hey you, young boy, how can you sit on the donkey and let the old man walk next to you!" So the old man sat together with the boy on the donkey. Then some other people came by and said: "Poor donkey! You'll kill the donkey with all your weight." Then they both started walking next to the donkey. Then another man passed by and said, "What stupid people. They have a donkey and they're walking."

So my conclusion to them was that if I followed all their suggestions, it would be the end of my film. They gave me the money – about 50,000 Guilders, which at the time was about 20,000 Euros – and a few more months so I could finish the film that I had in mind.

Before we move on to questions, I'd say always fight for your own idea and your own concept, with the help of your artistic intuition and the people around you. Let yourself be inspired by your own thoughts and ideas, and please don't let yourself be carried away by the pre-conceived ideas of TV managers.

**MAN IN AUDIENCE:** Why did you interview the conductor [in *The Master and His Pupils*] and not just have him on stage? The interview seems redundant.

**HERMAN DOLZ:** Maybe you're right – I should have taken him out. [laughs] I thought it would be important to also have him reflect upon the situation. If I had taken it out, maybe he would have become too distant in the combination of all the things that I filmed. I think it's also for the unity of the form that everybody reflects upon what is happening. But I didn't want him to discuss what he actually personally thought about the three pupils. So it was more to let him reflect. He only says a few words about what he thinks the overall importance of a conductor is that he doesn't discuss during the master class. I reduced him a lot, so maybe if I'd gone over it again, I would have trimmed him some more. But for the overall form, the structure, it was important to have him as well.

WOMAN IN AUDIENCE: Could you talk some more about form and subject, and which one should come first?

HERMAN DOLZ: I always try to find a form for the subject. Sometimes the form comes before the subject. So you need to find a subject for your form. In the case of the bullfighting film, it's a very clear example because I wanted to make the film as though it were for people who had never heard about the subject at all. I wanted it to then unravel like a puzzle. I wanted to experiment with how you reveal the information: What comes first? What will be the effect after fifteen minutes of a shot that you put here or there? How do you build up tension? I thought that bullfighting would be almost an anthropological approach to working with these matters.

With the film about the nightclub in Barcelona [*Yo soy así*], it was also about the form and content because there are also pre-conceived notions about such people. When you talk about transvestites, B-artists, a sleazy bar, people already think they know what the film's about. Of course, I wanted to destroy these pre-conceived notions. So how could I do this? In this case, it was a matter of experimentation with editing. Editing and editing and editing until the structure became clear. That has to do with the form because in a way you want to make a circle with a beginning and end, and you need to find the backbone. In this case, it was the stairs that he walks up and down. The stairway becomes the symbol for the film. When he goes up, he becomes a man. When he goes down, he becomes a woman. In the daytime, he goes shopping and takes care of his landlady. At night time, he transforms into a woman with red and blond hair. In the daytime, he's a grey mouse. You wouldn't recognize him on the street.

So I always try to find a point of transformation. Where do people transform? Where do they become elevated or something? The film about the Bodega Bohemia starts with this quote from Oscar Wilde, where he says it is through art and art alone that we can shield ourselves from the sordid pedals of actual existence. So I always try to find a point of view that will help me put the content into that form.

WOMAN IN AUDIENCE: So do you use this form when writing a treatment?

HERMAN DOLZ: If I already know it, I try to describe the form in the treatment. In the case of the Barcelona film, I also tried to explain that I didn't want to make a film about crazy monkeys. I wanted to take the opposite approach and show that the people in the film are actually like us normal people in the sense that we are not transvestites or mentally retarded. In the end, it's all about love and taking care and all these things.

So yes, I try to describe the form. Right now I'm making a documentary about cancer. The description of the form is that cancer is the phenomenon that I'm filming. It's like the main character of the film. And the people that I will film are standing in a circle around the phenomenon, holding one another hand in hand. One has cancer, another one is researching it. All these people have something to do with cancer. It's almost like a whodunit, where everyone is looking at the murderer or this evil thing, and everybody sheds a different light upon the matter. So this is a kind of help, a kind of form.

Another thing I described in the treatment is that I want to show it as a kind of planet in order to show the immensity of cancer. In the film I want to fly over the subject in a way like an eagle, and then go into a detail, and then fly up again.

So those are all ideas about form. Of course, the film will not show a planet, but metaphorically speaking I use my form a lot to explain what I want to make. But sometimes the film changes when I'm shooting.

WOMAN IN AUDIENCE: You talked about the film shoot as something precious that costs a lot of money. But nowadays most documentaries are shot on video and lots of people call themselves directors. There's not as much of a sense that film is something that you have to be careful with and really think about. Young directors these days are used to shooting lots and lots of footage. I sometimes miss the old days where we had to think more about what we were doing because we were shooting on film, and had only so many roles. We had to think about making the most of what we had. And with the editing, the process

was also completely different. So I would like to know if you also shoot on video these days, and if video has changed your way of working.

HERMAN DOLZ: I'm a very old-fashioned filmmaker, so I still shoot as if I were running those expensive rolls through the camera. It's something that I was taught or learned that my material is expensive. But it's not only a question of money. It's also a matter of the kind of focus that you need. If you just start shooting and shooting and say, "Well, I'll see you when I start editing," you're just transferring the whole problem to the editing room. And then it will take you ages to organize your material and to see what you actually shot. Now I'm shooting this new project on HD, and I'm working with a film cameraman from the old days. He's seventy years old. He was also one of the camera people who shot *The Master and His Pupil*. We try as much as possible to think it's a very expensive roll we're shooting with. Even though we're using memory cards, we still talk in terms of rolls. When I say twenty-five minutes, for me it's still 2 1/2 rolls. I still think in rolls. But of course sometimes I think, "Keep shooting. I'll figure it out later." But the minute I don't like what we're filming we stop immediately because too much material is terrible to have. You feel when it's good. It might be old-fashioned to say, "It's in the can," but that's how it feels when you get the shot you were looking for. I also try to tell this to younger people who work with me who don't know anything about this.

So focus is what you're after. And if it doesn't happen, then you better stop shooting because your editor has to watch it. Everybody has to go through it.

I just finished a film about a choreographer. It's been selected for competition at Documenta in Madrid in May. It's 48 minutes long. Talking about openings, we could watch the first five minutes or so to end the session. The film is called *Blanco*. It has many meanings. The choreographer in the film is called Conny Janssen. She's quite a famous choreographer in Holland and she's won many awards because she's such a talented choreographer. She asked me to make a film about her with the prize money she had just won. The prize was for her to do something in another medium other than her own. And her dream was for me to make a film about her. So she thought I would make a portrait about her and her life and her thoughts. But the only thing that I was interested in was where that first movement come from. From the blank page – blanco. What is the first word a writer or poet writes on his paper? So I wanted her to sketch her movements for me, and see where the movement starts. What makes the movement in the end become a dance movement? Now I'm also moving with my hand, but I'm not dancing. But there's something that makes it transform again. So it's another means of transformation.

In the beginning, she thought she could be in control of what I would film. In the first place, she hadn't danced in a very long time. She said, "I'm fifty. I'm too old. I don't dance anymore." And I said, "But I want to see it from you. The very first beginning: Where does it start?" So the whole film is about that blankness. It's about movement. [After showing clip from *Blanco*] So this is an exposé where I hope the viewer will be haunted and will want to continue watching. That's what I always try to achieve. In this case, the breath and the blank idea. Where does the idea come from? What's going to happen? Here the instrument is the body and the breath, and nothing else. So we go into her thoughts. Not her thoughts about what she says, but how she moves, and the moves themselves.