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Sven Augustijnen,
Iets op Bach
(*Something on Bach*),
1998, video, colour,
sound, 37min, stills

Previous spread:
Cher Pourquoi Pas ?,
2007/11, artist's
project for *A Prior*
#14, 2007, and
installation (here,
detail) with posters
and vitrine with
original magazines
and publications,
2011. Images
courtesy the artist
and Jan Mot, Brussels

Neither Fish nor Fowl, but Real Bodies: The Films of Sven Augustijnen

– Sophie Berrebi

The muffled laughter of the camera operator accompanies its jittery movements, as it sweeps upwards and across the façade of a building on the other side of the street, in the opening shot of Sven Augustijnen's film *Iets op Bach* (*Something on Bach*, 1998). The camera peers into several windows to reveal here and there empty offices and bicycle storage. It finally reaches a set of windows that look onto a large, brightly lit and sparsely furnished room, decorated with paper garlands and stocked with snacks and drinks. A party seems to be in progress, and a dozen people move around, chatting and gesturing animatedly. The camera settles on this scene, alternating between close-ups and wider shots, moving jumpily from left to right and back, sporadically losing its

exacerbated personal interactions with millions.¹ A bride shows up and then a man with bloody hands announces jokingly that a baby is born.

What is this girl doing, readjusting her hairpiece using the darkened windowpane as a mirror and winking at her reflection? And who is that boy smiling at, as he rubs off the steam from the glass and peers out into the dark? The ambiguity is lifted when a group of smokers steps onto the balcony to shout the artist's name, waving at him. At this point, now that the artist's cover is blown, it seems that it's time for the video to end. And yet the party goes on, its protagonists once again oblivious of the artist filming them, their laughter and discussions drowned by the soundtrack composed of several pieces by Johann Sebastian Bach. The music is out of sync with the action, and instead seemingly rhymes a flow moving between fiction and reality, theatre and party. In this respect, it serves a similar purpose to Shafi Hadi's haunting jazz score for John Cassavetes's *Shadows* (1959), a film that ended on the memorable line: 'The film you have just seen was an improvisation.'

When the end credits roll, no such text appears on screen, but the names of the choreographer Alain Platel and dancers from the Belgian company Les Ballets C de la B are enough to suggest that this 'something' on Bach is a dance improvisation recorded by the artist. But just as Cassavetes's film wasn't exactly what it openly stated (it was in fact reshoot in a scripted version following an original improvisation),² so is *Iets op Bach* more than a straightforward recording.

This is not only because it is a 37-minute film that has very little to do with the much longer dance piece, of the same title, that was performed by Les Ballets C de la B on stage

Sophie Berrebi looks at Sven Augustijnen's use of the body and gesture to signal characters – and lacunae – within history.

focus. It shows us a fight between two girls, while a man skips across the length of the room in ballet moves, his open, printed shirt fluttering about as he twirls and jumps. Outside, dusk settles into darkness, and the blackened frames of the windows fragment the party scene: drinks are drunk, conversations continue in twos and threes and games are played. Occasionally the revellers all get up and briefly dance together, ignorant, it seems, of the prying camera. Yet even at this distance there seems to be something skewed about the party: the gestures seem a little self-conscious, the gaiety somewhat excessive, the lights just too bright. It looks like a pantomime as much as a real party, and evokes those reality TV shows in which young adults locked up together share

1 This comparison can only be made retrospectively as reality TV only became a staple of European television in the years that followed the film's making.

2 See Ray Carney, *Cassavetes on Cassavetes*, London: Faber and Faber, 2001.

internationally in 1999; it is also because of the presence of the artist. Although he is not visible on screen, he is clearly audible throughout the film, muttering and chuckling as he reacts to the scene that unfolds on the other side of the street. The length of the film and the self-insertion of the film-maker break from habitual formats of performance registration. Or rather, this presence creates not one but two performances in progress, which generate one another: the artist, in a posture that recalls James Stewart in Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954), cannot exist without an object of scrutiny, in this case the dancers, who in turn know there is someone out there watching them perform. In an essay on performance documentation, using the concept of 'performative utterance' coined by J.L. Austin to define verbal statements that simultaneously constitute actions, Philip Auslander argues that performance documentation is not descriptive but performative: 'The act of documenting an event as a performance is what constitutes it as such.'³ In *Iets op Bach*, this process becomes mutual. By documenting through video registration what would otherwise be a private brainstorming or improvisation session in preparation for a dance piece, Augustijnen turns the session into a (public) performance. At the same time, the dancers not only paradoxically acknowledge the presence of the 'spying' camera, but they perform *for* him and, in this way, they construct Augustijnen as a film-maker. Looking back at *Iets op Bach* after having seen his widely discussed latest film, *Spectres* (2011), reveals the extent to which this early and lesser-known work, made while he was a resident at Jan van Eyck Academy in Maastricht, created a blueprint for many of his films to come.

Following this early work, Augustijnen oriented himself towards other subjects and formats. Predominant has been his interest in Belgian history (in particular colonial history) and in Brussels as its locus. This are the subject of photographic and text-based works — *Une Histoire belge* (*A Belgian Story*, 2007) or *Les Demoiselles de Bruxelles* (*The Young Ladies of Brussels*, 2008) — as well as films that

closely examine cultural policy and its geography — *Mission Mont des Arts* (*Mission for Mont des Arts*, 2002), *Une Femme entreprenante* (*An Enterprising Woman*, 2005) — or the underground narratives of the city, such as gay cruising in the video *Le Guide du parc* (*The Park's Guide*, 2001) or theft in *L'École des pickpockets* (*The School of Pickpockets*, 2000). Other formats have included newspaper publications (*Panorama*, 2005) and printed material (an issue of *A Prior* magazine and the books for *Les Demoiselles de Bruxelles* and *Spectres*),⁴ which have allowed him to articulate documentary information in other ways than through film, although the latter is arguably his focus at the moment.

The performative enunciations that make up *Iets op Bach* are of prime importance for Augustijnen's films, in which an unverballed but clearly discernible exchange between the artist holding the camera and the protagonists in front of it is always perceptible. This exchange opens up questions as to the kind of film we are looking at. Neither fish nor fowl, his film work tests different genres and thrives in this indeterminacy between fiction and different documentary modes. The absence/presence of the artist behind the camera is what distinguishes his films both from the 'fly on the wall' aesthetic of Direct Cinema and the editing strategies and verbal exchanges behind and in front of the camera that often occur in *cinéma vérité*. Augustijnen's muted but noisy presence also differs from performative documentary forms in which the film-maker becomes a narrator of his or her film. In *Iets op Bach*, for example, the sounds made by the author that can be heard alongside others coming from the party, and which are juxtaposed with a distinct musical soundtrack, articulate an unsettling disjunction between the different layers of sound, and between sound and image, that continues in his later work.

In *L'École des pickpockets*, completed two years after *Iets op Bach*, one of the most striking features of Augustijnen's film work appears clearly: his ability to convey ideas through the attentive recording of facial expressions and bodily movements.⁵

3 Philip Auslander, 'The Performativity of Performance Documentation', *Performance Arts Journal*, issue 84, 2006, p.5.

4 See Sven Augustijnen, 'Cher Pourquoi Pas?', *A Prior*, issue 14, 2007, pp.6—145; S. Augustijnen, *Les Demoiselles de Bruxelles*, Brussels: Projections, 2008; and S. Augustijnen, *Spectres*, Brussels: Asa Publishers, 2011.

5 This ability might be partly the result of his early collaboration with Alain Platel and Les Ballets C de la B.

Sven Augustijnen,
Spectres, 2011,
HD video, colour,
stereo sound,
104min, still.
Courtesy the artist
and Jan Mot, Brussels

L'École des pickpockets follows two seasoned pickpockets over the course of a day as they train their novice, Palle, in a nondescript, bare interior. For the pickpocket teachers and their sidekick, their business is nothing less than an art that the more vocal of the teachers describes with much flourish — setting up training exercises, correcting Palle's mistakes, demonstrating the subtleties of different techniques and eventually calling up passers-by to create an almost live situation as a final test for him. But as much as the teachers revel in exposing an aesthetic of pickpocketing, it is the movements of his hands that convey the deftness of the technique. Here Augustijnen's camera follows the repetitive moves of the pickpocketing attempts at close range. The editing becomes sharper and faster, turning the training into a kind of ballet. The capturing of bodies in motion here seems to be, even more clearly than in *Iets op Bach*, what motivates the camera movement. The aim is not to set a scene, to film power relations between individuals or to convey a glimpse of their motivations, but rather to closely record how the gestures and expressions of an individual reveal profoundly ingrained skills or, in the case of Palle, newly acquired ones. The interest in the psychology of characters is replaced by close observation of their physical presence in space — something

that, at the time of the *nouvelle vague*, motivated Jean-Luc Godard to quip that *Le Mépris* (*Contempt*, 1963) was a documentary about Brigitte Bardot.⁶ *L'École des pickpockets* is, like *Iets op Bach*, doubly performative. Not only does the master pickpocket accompany his gestures with words describing his actions, but he also repeatedly refers to the artistry of his skill, using a vocabulary whose double-entendres implicate the artist behind the camera. 'There you're not an artist, you're just stealing', he remarks to Palle as the pupil fails to gracefully relieve an unsuspecting victim of his pen or wallet. Later on, when he explains, 'to become a pickpocket you need to perfect the desire of pickpocketism', he unknowingly brings into close parallel the desire of the pickpocket with that of the artist making a film, who is challenged to 'take' images of his protagonists with a comparable swiftness and precision.

This act of including words in the film that can be interpreted as directly describing the filming in progress takes a different turn in Augustijnen's most recent film, *Spectres*. As with *Le Guide du parc* and *Une Femme entreprenante*, the film focuses on a single figure who guides the artist and his camera throughout the story, while also being the subject of his investigation. But whereas *Le Guide du parc* performed film-making as prying

6 Cited by Marie-José Mondzain in *Images (à suivre)*, Paris: Bayard, 2011, p.285.

and *Une Femme entreprenante* as a result of opportunities and smart moves, *Spectres* defines film-making as believing in the power of one's own story. The mediator here is Jacques Brassinne de La Bussiere, a former Belgian civil servant who occupied different posts during and after the handover of sovereignty in colonial Congo, and who has an evident delight in performing for the camera. The film follows the functionary-later-turned-historian as he retraces the events surrounding the arrest and assassination of Patrice Lumumba, the first Prime Minister of the independent Republic of the Congo, on 17 January 1961, shortly after the proclamation of independence from Belgian colonial rule, on 30 June 1960. Brassinne wrote a dissertation on the subject, but his narrative has been contradicted: the story of Lumumba's death is contentious in the Congo and

Belgium, in both official and non-official histories, and the search for personal and direct accountability is profoundly intertwined with that of moral responsibility.⁷

In L'École des pickpockets, one of the most striking features of Augustijnen's film work appears: his ability to convey ideas through the attentive recording of facial expressions and bodily movements.

The film is made of short, seemingly choreographed sequences accompanied by Bach's *St John Passion*. The camera follows Brassinne, who diligently visits different witnesses and historical actors of the period, and makes them rehearse their interpretation of the assassination, first

⁷ See Ludo De Witte, *The Assassination of Lumumba*, London and New York: Verso, 2001. Augustijnen has recounted how, during one of their encounters, Brassinne referred to De Witte as his 'spectre'. See, for instance, Sven Augustijnen, *Spectres*, Brussels: ASA Publishers, 2011, p.4.

Above and left:
Sven Augustijnen,
L'École des pickpockets
(*The School of*
Pickpockets), 2000,
video, colour, sound,
48min, stills.
Courtesy the artist
and Jan Mot, Brussels

in Belgium and then in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where he eventually leads Augustijnen to the alleged location of the killing, in the region of Katanga. There, Brassinne's efforts to find the exact tree against which Lumumba and two of his close associates were shot end in failure, and he has to admit that the evidence is lost. But what could be an anticlimax introduces instead a reflection on historical discourse and its use of material evidence. Several sources are shown or discussed in the film: maps, letters, telexes. Instead of opposing the solidity of material evidence to the flickering of individual memories, *Spectres* shows how material evidence can be debated and interpreted to accommodate different truths; how history is a discourse constructed by some only to be revised by others; and how there is no such thing as a simple or absolute truth. As historian Marc Bloch reminded his readers in 1941: 'Texts and archaeological

documents, however clear and compliant they appear to be, only speak when one knows how to question them. [...] In other words, every historical research presupposes from the outset that the investigation already has a direction.'⁸

Admitting, discouraged, that the tree has been cut down, Brassinne blurts semi-ironically that its disappearance 'simplifies things'. Indeed, it puts a final stop to his efforts and that of others to minutely reconstitute the string of events of that fateful night leading to Lumumba's assassination. But at the same time, the disappearance of the tree, apparently cut down by villagers, makes all varieties of speculation possible once more. It feeds the self-justification of Brassinne's enterprise, and his tireless rehearsal of arguments and facts before the camera, his interviewing of witnesses and his helping them out when their memory fails, and his performing of history in front of the

8 Marc Bloch, *Apologie pour l'histoire, ou métier d'historien* (1949), Paris: Armand Colin, 1993, p.77. Translation the author's.

camera that offers him a stage. *Spectres* invites us to consider Brassinne's apparent ability to easily slide between the different and largely incompatible roles he has assumed in this story, as witness and historian, never bothered by contradictions or by the shamelessness of his behaviour, as when he jovially recounts Lumumba's final hours in a now ruined house in Lubumbashi to its local inhabitants, or adopts a sycophantic tone in order to coax the daughter of Moïse Tschombe, the former leader of secessionist Katanga, to testify for the camera as she visits her father's grave in Etterbeek, Belgium.

The film does not present Brassinne's investigation of the murder, accomplished over many years, but a condensed re-enactment of this research. In the process, it shows how he has internalised its arguments and conclusions. His body, with its decisive stride, ample gestures and pensive expressions, is a site of conflict between the documents he evokes verbally and the memories he recalls: in choosing to make a film about a historical event

without using any archival footage, Augustijnen lets the bodies perform history. Occasionally the camera widens its angle to show Brassinne in a particular setting — such as the house of Lumumba's widow, Pauline Opango Lumumba, in Kinshasa, or the Church of Notre Dame of Laeken, Belgium during a ceremony marking the sixteenth anniversary of the death of King Baudouin. In these scenes, which show how power relations are deployed within space, Brassinne is inserted into a wider political body.

The foregrounding of the body is, in *Spectres*, more charged with meaning than in Augustijnen's previous films, for Brassinne's overactive presence calls upon the irretrievably absent body of Lumumba, whose murderers allegedly attempted to make all his physical remains disappear. Lumumba is the real protagonist of the film, the reason that, for all of Brassinne's efforts and agitation, it is never possible, as spectators, to identify with him as a lead character. Brassinne is only ever the reverse shot of the spectre of Lumumba.

Sven Augustijnen,
Le Guide du parc
(*The Park's Guide*),
2001, video, colour,
sound, 44min, still.
Courtesy the artist
and Jan Mot, Brussels

So much becomes clear in a scene evoking a passage of Claude Lanzmann's film *Tsahal* (1994) that shows Ehud Barak listening to a recording of a battle he was involved in. In *Spectres*, a deflated Brassinne sitting on a sofa is finally rendered speechless as the voice of Lumumba fills the room, in a recording of the extraordinary speech he gave on 30 June 1960, on the occasion of the handover of power from Belgium to the Republic of the Congo (later the Democratic Republic of Congo).

Lumumba's recorded voice is the only one in the film that can rival Bach's omnipresent *Passion*, a soundtrack that dwarfs Brassinne, his wannabe heroism and his claims to self-importance. These character traits are made clear at the outset of *Spectres*, as Brassinne is shown arriving at the stately home of Arnoud d'Aspremont Lynden — son of Harald d'Aspremont Lynden, the Belgian Minister for African Affairs at the time of independence — for an inaugural display of obsequiousness, set against Bach's thunderous music. The trajectory of his car drawing a large circle as it follows the road leading to the stately home visually closes a circle of choreographies in his films — one that opened with the improvised ballet steps set to Bach in *Iets op Bach*, followed by the precise moves of the protagonists of *L'Ecole des pickpockets* and the fugitive encounters of *Le Guide du parc*.

In a discussion with colleagues from *Cahiers du cinéma* in 1983, the French film critic Serge Daney argued that, next to the great erudite history of cinema as a history of forms, there existed a more mainstream history, a history of bodies in cinema.⁹ Augustijnen's means of using the body language of his protagonists to destabilise established genres of film-making demonstrates how intimately connected these two histories are.

9 'Passion de l'image: des Cahiers du cinéma à Libération. Entretien avec Serge Daney par Michel Crépu, Gilles Delavaud, Michel Mesnil et Olivier Mongin', *Esprit*, November 1983; reprinted in Serge Daney, *La Maison cinéma et le monde*, Vol.2, *Les Années Libé 1981—1985*, Paris: P.O.L. Trafic, vol.2, 2002, p.13.

Sven Augustijnen,
*Photos prises par
Jacques Brassinne
à Lubumbashi au
Shaba (Katanga),
le 16 juin 1988*
(Photographs taken
by Jacques Brassinne
in Lubumbashi in
Shaba (Katanga),
on 16 June 1988),
2011, 24 colour
photographs, scanned
and transferred
to digital format,
and shown as part
of the installation
Spectres. Courtesy the
artist and Jan Mot,
Brussels

Documentary as Anti-Monument: On *Spectres* by Sven Augustijnen

– Robrecht Vanderbeeken

Sven Augustijnen's latest film *Spectres* (2011) sheds light on a dark chapter of Belgian history: the assassination of Patrice Lumumba, the first democratically elected prime minister of the independent Republic of Congo, in 1961. The art institutions that have presented *Spectres* (such as WIELS in Brussels, De Appel in Amsterdam and Tate Modern in London, amongst others) have filled the important political function of publicly addressing and engendering debate on delicate topics that remain unsettled and repressed in Belgium.¹ With *Spectres*, Augustijnen demonstrates that the artistic realm can act as an arena in which to deal with the ghosts of Europe's colonial past, while at the same time confronting the spectres of documentary representation.

**Robrecht Vanderbeeken contextualises
Sven Augustijnen's *Spectres* within
national debates over the death of Patrice
Lumumba, showing how the film allows
the guilt of its protagonists to emerge.**

The Trauma of the Real

In order to clarify these claims, let's begin with a note on Hal Foster's *Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*.² In his analysis of the avant-garde and its contemporary currency, Foster signals a return of the 'real' as a concern of contemporary artists working in the 1990s in two complementary variations: the real conceived as physical materiality (e.g. works using the abject) and as sociocultural context (e.g. works adopting the model of ethnography). Crucial for his thesis is the role of trauma: according to Foster, this return is to be understood as a reaction

to the suppression inherent in the dominant modes of art-making during the 1980s and early 90s, particularly the use of the uncanny, surrealism and the simulacra. The assumption that trauma is a motivational force for making art is also relevant to Augustijnen's film, and indeed to postcolonial artistic approaches to the documentary more generally, in two ways. First, following a long tradition of interrogating the truth claims of documentary, and in a wider sphere the era of reality TV, mockumentary and docusoaps, the medium is confronted with the traumatic loss of authority. This trauma challenges artists to play with the documentary format in order to reflect on the possibility or otherwise of achieving a truthful representation. Second, in a postcolonial context, the memory of the colonial past is often put aside to assert a new and contemporary relation between independent countries. At the same time, such a relation is often haunted by the suppressed trauma of the colonial past and its still open wounds. Over the last fifteen years, the artistic realm has seen the return of both the colonial and the representational trauma in a number of artists' documentary films that revisit the past and rethink history by reflecting on questions such as the heritage of the colonial past in contemporary postcolonial cultures, the importance of personal memory and its fallibility, the blurring of fact and fiction in historical reconstructions and the multiple meanings of historical documents.

Spectres confronts both challenges, investigating the capacity of art to reflect on how histories are constructed while at the same time, and rather audaciously, readdressing a public taboo: the hushed

1 The film *Spectres* was part of the exhibition of the same name, which also included a series of photographs and archival material, shown at WIELS, Brussels from May to July 2011 and at Kunsthalle Sankt Gallen from August to October 2011, Kunsthalle Bern from October to November 2011, De Appel, Amsterdam from October 2011 to March 2012, among other venues. For more information see <http://www.augusteorts.be/projects/project/54> (last accessed on 6 August 2012).

2 See Hal Foster, *Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1996.

question of Belgian guilt in the sabotage of the first democratically elected government of the Republic of Congo (which was from 1965 called the Democratic Republic of Congo). In this respect, it is worth mentioning that the title *Spectres* refers to Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (1993).³ In Derrida's title, 'spectres' functions as an allusion to the opening statement in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels's 'Communist Manifesto' (1848), where communism is pictured as a ghost haunting Europe. For Derrida, after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the spirit of Marx is even more present than before: his spectre walks everywhere on the globe, calling upon us to confront the plagues of capitalism and create a new activist grouping called the 'New International'. The more Marxism is ignored, the more its spectre comes back. In the case of Augustijnen's *Spectres*, the ghost of the colonial past returns in the shape of a film with crucial political implications. It focuses on how an individual deals with his colonial past and, while doing so, it questions how a country handles the recognition of guilt, moral deficiency, harm and dubious political action.

Chasing Ghosts

Made one year after the fiftieth anniversary of the 1960 Congolese independence, *Spectres* adds to the celebration a critical finale and in doing so makes clear that Belgium missed a historical opportunity to come to terms with its colonial past. In the interest of delicate diplomatic

relationships and particularly in order not to offend the Belgian royal family, the Belgian government actively monitored the commemoration. Behind the scenes, for instance, there was ardent lobbying to prevent Raoul Peck's film *Lumumba* (2000) from being shown on television and in film festivals.⁴ As an alternative, the VRT (Flemish radio and television organisation) broadcast the series *Bonjour Congo* (2011), in which journalist Rudi Vranckx minimised or censored nearly everything that could place Belgian authorities in a bad light.⁵ Lumumba was mentioned, for example, but instead of devoting attention to Belgian involvement in the destruction of his government, Vranckx visits the Church of Lumumba, a sect that has seen hardly any white people for years. The leader of this church, Moïse le Libérateur, imagines himself an incarnation of both Lumumba and Jesus. With this eccentric visit, VRT not only reduces the memory of Lumumba to that of a diabolical madman,⁶ but also avoids the question of guilt, portraying instead the magisterial joie de vivre of the contemporary Congolese, despite their difficult living conditions – perhaps the very intention of the series.⁷

Spectres, on the contrary, zooms in on the unexplained political assassination of Lumumba, and sets its sights on those involved. As the accompanying text to this film indicates, the storyline is constructed as a portrait of one man obsessed with this historical event: Knight of the Order of Leopold Jacques Brassinne de La

Sven Augustijnen, *Drapeau de l'État indépendant du Katanga, cadeau de Moïse Tshombe à Jacques Brassinne, décembre 1960* (Flag of the independent state of Katanga, gift by Moïse Tshombe to Jacques Brassinne, December 1960), 2011, and *Vitrine avec une sélection des publications de Jacques Brassinne* (Display case with a selection of publications by Jacques Brassinne), 2011, as part of the installation *Spectres*, 2011. Installation view, WIELS Contemporary Art Centre, Brussels, 2011. Photograph: Philippe De Gobert. Courtesy the artist and WIELS Contemporary Art Centre

- 3 Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (1993, trans. Peggy Kamuf), London and New York: Routledge, 1994.
- 4 RTBF (Francophone radio and television broadcasting organisation) news filed a complaint about interference; VRT (Flemish radio and television broadcasting organisation) news mentioned nothing. See Guido Convents, 'VRT en 50 jaar Kongo: de wansmaak voorbij', *De Wereld Morgen*, 7 July 2010, available at <http://www.congoforum.be>. The Africa Film Festival would not only be placed under pressure, but also lost potential subsidies because of this; see Ellen van Campenhout, 'Afrika Filmfestival zonder Vlaamse subsidies', *De Wereld Morgen*, 15 April 2010, available at <http://www.dewereldmorgen.be> (both last accessed on 23 July 2012). The film *Lumumba* can nevertheless be seen in its entirety on YouTube.
- 5 See Ludo De Witte, 'De geesten van Leopold II en Lumumba dwalen nog steeds door dit land', 12 April 2010, available at <http://www.apache.be> (last accessed on 23 July 2012). In an interview with Geert Van Der Speeten published in the cultural supplement of *De Standaard* on 25 June 2011, Vranckx repeated his message once again: he hopes that we can learn to deal with Congo openly, without a feeling of guilt.
- 6 The demonisation of Lumumba was already a widespread strategy in the 1960s. See Ludo Martens, *1958–1968, 10 jaar revolutie in Kongo: de strijd van Patrice Lumumba en Pierre Mulele*, Berchem: EPO, 1988.
- 7 Another striking example of whitewashing is the bestselling book *Congo: Een geschiedenis* by David Van Reybrouck (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2010). Despite his widely showcased concern about democracy, in *Lumumba* he sees not an icon of collective struggle for independence, but rather a vainglorious rhetorician. At the same time, Van Reybrouck attempts to increase Belgian immunity by reducing criticism to a masochistic desire or an unproductive critique of the critique. See L. De Witte, 'David van Reybrouck masseert westerse bemoeienissen in Congo weg', 18 May 2010, available at <http://www.apache.be>; and Joris Note, 'David van Reybrouck tegen Lumumba. Was dat nu wel nodig?', 27 March 2011, available at <http://www.dewereldmorgen.be> (both last accessed on 23 July 2012).

Buissière, a former high-ranking official and important actor in the events that unfolded between the hasty decision to decolonise, the transfer of power and the disturbances that ensued, which led to the imprisonment and execution of Lumumba on 17 January 1961. Brassinne simultaneously performs as guide, commentator, involved party and symbolic figure who takes the viewer on visits to crucial historical places and actors. Augustijnen insistently follows his protagonist but remains silent behind the camera, only sometimes offering pointed criticism through the range of possibilities offered by film language: camera movement, image focus, rhythm and duration, music and rolling text.

Optical Illusion

It would seem that a title such as *Spectres* should be enough to warn the viewer that all is not quite as it seems; 'spectre', after all, can suggest not only 'ghost', but also 'optical illusion'. Such a playful but subversive perspective is also typical of the artist's earlier films. In *Le Guide du parc* (*The Park's Guide*, 2001), for example, he follows a narrator who guides us through the Parc Royal, which is situated between the Belgian Federal Parliament and the

Royal Palace in Brussels. In this friendly tour, with its historical digressions and local anecdotes, the narrative never mentions the fact that this park is also a gay cruising ground. The behaviour of passers-by in the background nevertheless clearly shows this use. Precisely because our guide refrains from commenting on what is happening around him, this clandestine story is accurately represented: by making his omission conspicuous, the film paradoxically renders explicit the conditions in which these social relations exist.

In *Spectres* viewers must also unravel the plot for themselves. Nonetheless, whereas in *Le Guide du parc* criticism emerges from the dissonance between the images that we see and the words we hear, in *Spectres* it relies on our knowledge of the historical context as well as our ability to decode the social forms implicit in the images. The film refrains from accusing the characters. They are simply ensnared by the camera: in their attempt to exculpate themselves, they give away their involvement. *Spectres*, however, is not a mockumentary, but rather its inversion: instead of presenting a fake story as true, a hidden reality is revealed by overexposing the very act of ignoring and concealing. Instead of claiming

Sven Augustijnen, *Spectres*, 2011, HD video, colour, stereo sound, 104min. Installation view, WIELS Contemporary Art Centre, Brussels. Photograph: Philippe De Gobert. Courtesy the artist and WIELS Contemporary Art Centre

Spectres, 2011,
HD video, colour,
stereo sound,
104min, still.
Courtesy the artist
and Jan Mot, Brussels

to present the truth, *Spectres* uses the medium as a means of interrogation that invites the viewer to reflect on the spectral existence of a suppressed history.

Noblemen Amongst Themselves

In terms of content, *Spectres* is not short of controversial material. Augustijnen's camera penetrates the private residences of many of those involved in the events leading to the assassination of Lumumba, in order to show their clumsy attempts to exonerate themselves of all guilt. Such a strategy would not have been possible without the participation of Brassinne, who took Augustijnen in tow everywhere, using his personal connections, because he expressly wished to have his own explanation of the assassination recorded — and what becomes progressively evident to the viewer as the film unfolds is how distant his motivation is from that of the artist.

The film opens with a sobering Sunday visit to the grounds of Count Arnoud

d'Aspremont Lynden. The extremely clichéd and even clownish presentation of what is usually associated with the aristocracy — castle, hunting dogs, servants, pleated yellow trousers and chequered Burlington socks — makes one suspect that this meeting is staged. But it later becomes apparent that it is the family itself that assiduously imitates tradition, seemingly clinging to bygone times of self-satisfaction with great nostalgia. Are these the ghosts that will be the subject of the film? In the early 1960s, Arnoud's father, Count Harold Charles d'Aspremont Lynden, was Belgian minister of African Affairs and wrote a controversial telex that opened the path for handing Lumumba over to his mortal enemies.⁸ This telex is the reason behind our visit. On the veranda, before lunch, with a view on a flapping Belgian flag in front of the castle, Brassinne and son Arnoud argue that this telex should not be considered as proof of complicity. The Congolese themselves punished Lumumba according to their customs and traditions; a decent

⁸ The telex reads: 'l'objectif principal à poursuivre dans l'intérêt du Congo, du Katanga et de la Belgique est évidemment l'élimination définitive de Lumumba [...] Bartelous en parlera à Tshombe.' ('the principal objective to pursue in the interest of Congo, of Katanga and of Belgium is evidently the definitive elimination of Lumumba [...] Bartelous will speak to Tshombe'.) For a critical analysis, see L. De Witte, 'Etienne Davignon en de laatste uren van Patrice Lumumba', 26 June 2011, available at <http://www.apache.be> (last accessed on 23 July 2012).

Sven Augustijnen,
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Belgian would not do something like that, they hastily assert.⁹

As if the flimsy plea from Arnoud for his father was not damaging enough, he brags that his son Harold, named after his grandfather, recently left for Congo for his first job in the Katanga mining business. ‘It has come full circle’, the Count jokes with the Knight.¹⁰ Indeed, following over a century’s worth of grievances, which include the traumatic massacres perpetrated under the regime of Leopold II in Congo Free State at the end of the nineteenth century,¹¹ the repressive colonial regime that ruled until 1960, and the country’s late dictator General Mobutu (whose rule extended from 1965 to 1997 and was supported by the West), neocolonial multinationals now profit from the rich soil of Congo. This is happening, again, at the expense of the local population.

Unintentional Whistle-Blower

This is just the first of many shocking visits in *Spectres*. Each time, suspicion of irregularities or a cover-up increases. The personal implication of Brassinne in the Lumumba case is also progressively revealed. The opening titles of the film inform us that he spent thirty years on a doctoral dissertation in which he tried to refute Belgium’s involvement in the assassination. Nonetheless, his laborious attempts to do so tend to generate the opposite effect. A few minutes further into the film, we find out that his dissertation — for which he received the highest distinction from the Brussels Free

University — was systematically deconstructed by Ludo De Witte in his book *The Assassination of Lumumba* (1999), leading to a parliamentary enquiry, which brought even more attention to this dark affair and further emphasised the involvement of King Baudouin in the aborted independence of Congo.¹²

Despite being best known for his political career, Brassinne profiles himself as a researcher whose only intention is to reconstruct the final days of Lumumba. But his obsessive attention to details,

Augustijnen demonstrates that the artistic realm can act as an arena in which to deal with the ghosts of Europe’s colonial past, while at the same time confronting the spectres of documentary representation.

locations and schedules increasingly diverts attention from the political and ideological implications of the event. Brassinne’s scientific smokescreen is intended to cover up his own guilt, a strategy that is systematically exposed in *Spectres*. Augustijnen chooses not to present his own analysis of the historical case, but instead attempts to portray the point of view of the main character as truthfully as possible, leaving to the viewer the task of reconstructing the sequence of events. It is not the case that various opinions are played off against one another in order to achieve an account that is as

9 In her review ‘Heart of Daftness’ in *Artforum* (September 2011), Rachel Haidu rightly notes that in this scene, i.e. with the shot of the showy socks of Count Arnoud, Augustijnen’s camera captures a sense of remarkable impunity that is typical of postcolonial Belgium, a nation that treats its colonial history as simply a dynastic one. Haidu, however, describes Brassinne as a chillingly self-deceiving protagonist. In this way, Brassinne is given the benefit of the doubt; he is a victim misguided by his pathology, not a sly deceiver who is well aware of the role he is playing and who might even enjoy the fact that he can get away with it.

10 In his analysis of the film, *Sven Augustijnen’s Spectropoetics* (Brussels: WIELS Contemporary Art Centre, 2011), T.J. Demos discusses the defence mechanisms at play in this scene. He refers, for instance, to the significant contradiction between the energy that Brassinne invests in participating in the film in order to defend his narrative and an enlightened remark that he suddenly makes, laughing smugly: ‘My opinion is certain, but others don’t have to share it. One is free.’ Also, driving away from d’Aspremont’s château, Brassinne nearly accidentally runs over the count’s dog, exclaiming with relief that if he had done so, he’d have been forbidden to set foot in the house again. Demos notes that Augustijnen’s inclusion of this small detail, where Brassinne’s emotional response is greater than his response to the fate of the Congo or of Lumumba, speaks volumes.

11 The period resulted in more than ten million deaths, although the exact amount has never been precisely determined. For a revealing but disconcerting report, see Adam Hochschild’s *King Leopold’s Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999). The heart of darkness, as Joseph Conrad termed it, is still beating in the heart of Brussels, where the huge statue of Leopold II on his horse continues to look majestically down on his subjects in Throne Square, or in the royal crypt of the Church of Our Lady in Laken, where King Baudouin lies buried next to the grave of his great uncle Leopold. Augustijnen’s camera briefly zooms in here when Brassinne takes us to the commemorative Mass of King Baudouin. Afterwards, it follows Queen Fabiola during an official greeting at her husband’s grave and comes to a standstill with a close-up on a photograph of Leopold II that is placed on top of his tomb.

12 See L. De Witte, *The Assassination of Lumumba* (1999, trans. Renée Fenby and Ann Wright), London and New York: Verso, 2001.

Sven Augustijnen, *Spectres*, 2011, HD video, colour, stereo sound, 104min, still. Courtesy the artist and Jan Mot, Brussels

objective as possible. On the contrary, only Brassinne occupies central stage. Precisely this lack of any dissenting voice makes this report shift from an attempt at factual refutation to an astounding (if inadvertent) confession. The furtive and sometimes amateurish filming style emphasises Augustijnen's capturing of an exceptional moment. Aesthetics temporarily becomes subordinate to the desire to record Brassinne's confession, like a blurred photograph taken on the run in order to just barely capture a unique event. This time, the truth is not somewhere in between; it is not one word against another, or a word against an image. *Spectres* presents a state of affairs that needs no reply: by defending themselves poorly and showcasing their indifference, those involved expose their role in the event.

At the film premiere, Brassinne brought an entourage with him, among them some fellow noblemen, in order to see the film in the company of journalists and prominent individuals from the cultural sector. For a moment, the Royal Flemish Theatre and WIELS Contemporary Art Centre in Brussels became a haunted house.

Historical Reckoning

The final scenes of *Spectres* offer additional symbolic violence. Even if Brassinne worked as advisor to Moïse Tshombe for a while after the murder of Lumumba¹³ and then became a confidant of King Baudouin, he still hazarded a visit to the Lumumba residence, perhaps the last place that still incarnates his memory. Despite this, a friendly Brassinne acts as if he were completely at home here and, at the request of the daughter, casually dedicates a copy of his book to her mother, Patrice's widow, Pauline Opango Onosamba. The volume is *Lumumba Patrice: Les cinquante derniers jours de sa vie*, which he published together with Jules-Gérard Libois in 1966 under the pseudonyms Heinz & Donnay. Brassinne even dares to sign it: 'En souvenir de Patrice. En hommage amicale, Jacques Brassinne, novembre 2009' ('In memory of Patrice. An amicable homage, Jacques Brassinne, November 2009'). Further, Brassinne explains to the family in passing that Lumumba was a controversial figure because he did not respect royal protocol. This is a reference to Lumumba's speech at the independence

¹³ Moïse Tshombe was the leader of the secessionist region of Katanga. Lumumba was assassinated there, in the presence of President Tshombe and his ministers.

ceremony on 30 June 1960, where he spelled out the horrors of the colonial past; but rather than being intended to demonise the king, as Brassinne implies, this was meant to acknowledge those horrors as something from the past in order to take a step further and make way for a new relationship based on equality. Brassinne thereby discredits Lumumba in his own house by dismissing the historical relevance of his speech as a moment of political justice for the Congolese nation. Like King Baudouin, Brassinne in his turn misses the opportunity to settle with history. Instead, the knight avenges the accusation against his king by giving the relatives a lesson in etiquette.¹⁴ He emphasises that the old power relations are still applicable fifty years later. At the same time, the viewer is made aware of the fact that, in the case of Lumumba, ‘protocol’ functions as a royal immunity device, meant to exonerate the king from any responsibility for the colonial atrocities.

The absurdity of the situation almost threatens to conceal its seriousness. To avoid this, Augustijnen introduces a polyphonic effect: with swelling power, the singing of Bach’s *St John Passion* drowns out the voice of Brassinne. The chorus calls out: ‘Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!’ The song refers to the biblical scene where the Jews condemn Jesus to his crucifixion. The music enters at the moment when Brassinne has just told the widow that he met Lumumba in the Belgian embassy in Leopoldstad (now Kinshasa) in 1960, as the last Belgian to hear from Lumumba that the Belgians had been requested to leave the country. This was the beginning of the prime minister’s downfall: after ending diplomatic relations with Belgium, Lumumba was discredited in the eyes of the United Nations and sought contact with the Soviet Union for political backing. This was a sufficient reason for the CIA to start a mission to eliminate Lumumba, which led to his imprisonment. History teaches us

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¹⁴ King Baudouin, who also spoke at this ceremony, was so offended that he wanted to leave immediately afterwards. From the interview between Brassinne and Augustijnen reproduced in the book *Spectres*, which is offered as the catalogue of the exhibition, we can gather that there is a strong kinship between Brassinne and Baudouin. Brassinne, who is approximately the same age as Baudouin, is to this day an informer of the Belgian court. Brassinne had to leave Congo as a Tshombist under the Mobutu regime on 25 November 1965, the day after his second coup d’état. But in 1985 he returned by order of the court to prepare the visit of King Baudouin in honour of the 25 years of ‘independence’. See *Spectres*, Brussels: Asa Publishers, 2011.

that Brassinne stayed and Lumumba left. On the one hand, Bach's music follows the psychology of Brassinne, whom the viewer has just seen light-heartedly admitting to the widow his historical contribution to Lumumba's expulsion. On the other hand, the chorus, by way of counterpoint, also calls the Belgian nobility to order in a language that they would like to call their own, namely that of high culture. Lumumba is systematically portrayed by the Belgians as a devil, but with Brassinne's shameless display the devil shows his true face.¹⁵

Anti-Monument

This does not conclude the assault on the memory of Lumumba. In the following scene, Brassinne returns to the scene of the crime to establish the fact that the notorious tree where Lumumba and his two supporters were executed in a hail of bullets has vanished, and with it, the last remaining evidence of the crime that could still serve as a memorial.¹⁶ When Brassinne discovers this, he seemingly fails to see the obvious — that it underscores the fragility of his own research. On the contrary, he clumsily continues his scientific theatre and desperately follows his account of the facts. At night, we return for a complete reconstruction of the execution, backlit by headlights. Brassinne again walks back and forth in the high grass, haunted by his defensive narrative.¹⁷ He counts and measures, rattles on about the actual act, never about its significance. Then he lets the viewer know that the story ends here. Nonetheless, Augustijnen continues filming. The camera shoots an overexposed portrait, the background being one of the darkest pages in Belgian history. Brassinne wanders like a ghostly desecrator of graves in a place without a grave. This closing scene immortalises him as a part of a history that he, in his attempt to secure its closure, once again brings to attention. Just recently, in June 2012, the three sons of Lumumba managed to bring a lawsuit to the Belgian courts; eleven Belgians are being indicted for the murder of their father. Brassinne is one of them.

15 At the moment when Brassinne is leaving the residence, Lumumba's youngest son, who had run in the 2006 presidential election in Congo, suddenly enters — again, a moment of truth on screen. However, no attention is paid to the son. For Brassinne, Lumumba belongs to the past, and is not someone who can still play a role today.

16 The catalogue, *Spectres*, contains a text by Ludo de Witte in which it is suggested that a memorial for Lumumba should be erected at the place of execution. See *Spectres*, *op. cit.*

17 All traces are removed from the scene of the crime. The bodies were destroyed by cutting them into pieces, dumping them by the side of the road over several kilometres, and burning the remains or dissolving them in acid, as if dead was not dead enough.