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A PARRADOX IN CARIBBEAN CINEMA? AN INTERVIEW WITH MINIMAL MOVIE FILMMAKER PIM DE LA PARRA, PRAGMATIC DREAMER FROM SURINAME

EMIEL MARTENS

Résumé

*Pim de la Parra est un cinéaste surinamais qui a commencé sa carrière aux Pays-Bas une décennie avant l'indépendance du Suriname. C'est le réalisateur de **Wan Pipel** (*Un Peuple*; 1976), le premier long métrage surinamais jamais réalisé, et de *l'Odysée d'Amour* (*Odyssey of Love*; 1987), le premier long métrage néerlandais situé sur une île caribéenne néerlandaise, Aruba. Dans cet entretien avec Emiel Martens, De la Parra parle de son modèle de «production cinématographique minimaliste», ainsi que des défis spécifiques de l'industrie du cinéma postcolonial dans une région fragmentée comme les Caraïbes.*

Abstract

*Pim de la Parra is a Surinamese filmmaker who started his career in the Netherlands a decade before Suriname's independence. He is the director of **Wan Pipel** (*One People*; 1976), the first Surinamese feature film ever made, and *Odysée d'Amour* (*Odyssey of Love*; 1987), the first Dutch feature film set on a Dutch Caribbean island, Aruba. In this interview with Emiel Martens, De la Parra discusses his model of "minimal moviemaking" as well as the specific challenges of a postcolonial film industry in a fragmented region such as the Caribbean.*

Pim de la Parra (Paramaribo, 1940) is a seasoned and prolific Surinamese filmmaker with over 50 years of experience in independent feature filmmaking. His film career began in the Netherlands in the 1960s where De la Parra rapidly established himself as a charismatic pioneer of Dutch film. Together with his former school friend Wim Verstappen, he shook up the Dutch film industry by producing a profitable series of low-budget erotic feature films, of which *Blue Movie* (1971) still ranks in the top five of most successful Dutch theatrical films. This success enabled De la Parra to make two more expensive movies outside the Netherlands, one in his native Suriname. In the 1970s, the filmmaker produced *Wan Pipel* (1976), the first Surinamese feature film ever made; in 1980s, he made *Odysée d'Amour* (1987), the first Dutch feature film set on the Dutch-Caribbean island of Bonaire. Both films flopped at the Dutch box office, which forced De la Parra to return to low-budget filmmaking. He became a master of what he calls the *minimal movie* and put out multiple films in only a few years' time. In 1995, after successive disillusionments, De la Parra retired from the world of filmmaking and settled in Suriname. However, his passion for filmmaking remained strong and eventually led him to launch the Surinamese Film Academy in 2005. The Academy's learning-by-doing program benefits from De la Parra's extensive experiences in the field of low-budget filmmaking. In pursuit of his dream of a local film culture in Suriname and the rest of the Caribbean, the now 75-year-old filmmaker tirelessly passes on his pragmatic model of *minimal moviemaking* to the next generation. This interview, which took place in two parts via Skype (January 18 and February 1, 2012), chronicles De la Parra's long illustrious career spanning over five decades.

Martens: Could you first briefly introduce yourself?

I was born on January 5, 1940, in Paramaribo, Suriname, which was at the time still a Dutch colony. My father was a descendent of Sephardic Portuguese Jews who arrived in Suriname around 1644. My mother was half-Creole and half-English. She passed away when I was seven, after which my paternal grandmother and five aunts—the sisters of my father—looked after my younger brother and me. They did not raise us in the Jewish tradition, but in the tradition of the Moravian Church—Protestant missionaries hailing from the city of Herrnhut in former East Germany. My father was very busy earning money to maintain our household. He ran a pharmacy and was a wholesaler of medicines.

Martens: How did you get interested in filmmaking?

*I developed an interest in filmmaking from an early age. In the 1950s, my father was the co-founder of the Suriname Film League and organized monthly screenings of predominantly European art films for its members in a rented cinema in Paramaribo. I never missed a screening. I started to read several film magazines that my father received from the Netherlands, in particular, *Film Forum*, which was in the 1950s the most prominent film criticism magazine in the Netherlands. I read about Dutch films, Italian*



Fig. 1. Pim de la Parra on the upper veranda of his childhood home in Paramaribo, Suriname. He lived there from age seven to twenty with his father, brother and five aunts. De la Parra used to have his bedroom on the first floor while the ground floor functioned as his father's pharmacy. "My father was very busy earning money to maintain our household. He ran a pharmacy and was a wholesaler of medicines." Photo credit: In-Soo Productions / Fu Works.

films, French films, German films, British films, Hungarian films, Swedish films, you name it. And I thus saw some of these films at the screenings the Suriname Film League organized. I found it all very interesting and there and then I decided to become a filmmaker. I initially wanted to go to Hollywood, to the Los Angeles Film School, because for us teenagers Hollywood was the mecca of the movies. At the time, the movie theatres in Paramaribo chiefly showed American

movies, often already—and illegally—within one week after their U.S. premiere. The appeal of Hollywood was very evident in Suriname. However, my father did not have the money to pay for my studies in Hollywood, so instead I went to the Netherlands, where my brother already attended university. In the time it was considered normal, almost required, to study in the Netherlands, in the “real world.” You just didn’t remain in Suriname if your parents could afford it. My father was not rich, far from it, but he was able to support me and my brother in the Netherlands. I went to Amsterdam in 1960 and decided to study Political and Social Sciences, interests which my father had stimulated. During my second year I attended a lecture series on film by the director of the then-just-established Film Academy, which instantly grabbed my attention. I wasn’t really interested in the other courses anymore—I didn’t pass any of my exams—and the following year I switched to the Film Academy. That’s how it all started.

Martens: You didn’t finish your studies there, but you did manage to complete your first film and to launch your own film magazine during this period. How did you experience your time at the Film Academy?

From the beginning I was primarily interested in the practical side of filmmaking. How does it work and what does it cost? I went to the cinema about 20 times a week, mainly to watch bad B-movies, just to get the feeling that I could do that too. The theoretical courses didn’t interest me at all—and I didn’t try my best to pass them at all. As a result, I became the first student of the Academy who was not allowed to advance to the second year of the program. However, I did become the first student who actually made a film. In 1962 my fellow student Rudi Kross and I gathered some funds and produced *Megalopolis I* (1963), a one-hour film about a Surinamese man who is living in the Netherlands but does not feel connected to the Dutch state. In the same year, together with the like-minded students Nicolai van der Heyde and Gied Jaspars, I founded a new Dutch film magazine after the example of the *Cahiers du Cinéma*, the leading French magazine of radical film criticism. We titled it *Skoop* and published articles that challenged the establishment of Dutch film criticism. Since we were now film critics, we could visit all the press screenings. One day I watched Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *Mamma Roma* (1962), though I

couldn’t stay until the end as I had a theoretical exam. But I was so gripped by that film that I decided to skip the exam and just abandon my studies at the Film Academy altogether. This was in 1964.

Martens: One year later, in 1965, you started your own film company, *Scorpio Films*, together with Wim Verstappen, another student of the Film Academy who had joined the editorial staff of *Skoop*. From that time you put out film after film and also became successful both in the Netherlands and abroad. How did you manage to realize such a constant stream of film work?

I think it had to do with the temperaments of Wim Verstappen and me. We were young and eagerly wanted to make films. We operated under the motto, “it doesn’t matter what and how you film, but that you film.” We would rather make 10 bad movies than not make one movie at all. We produced our first feature film for 10,000 Dutch guilders [almost US\$6,000], which was the lowest production budget for a Dutch feature film ever. The film, entitled *De minder gelukkige terugkeer van Jozef Katús naar het land van Rembrandt* (1966, *Jozef Katús’ Less Fortunate Return to the Land of Rembrandt*), garnered some critical acclaim on the international stage for its *nouvelle vague* style—for example, Jean-Luc Godard spoke highly of it at the Cannes Film Festival. The buzz helped to get a constant production going, though it was always a battle to find funding. Our big breakthrough came with our third feature film, and my first feature film as director, *Bezeten: Het gat in de muur* (1969, *Obsessions*). For this film, we were able to secure a budget of around 700,000 guilders [US\$400,000]. It was a Dutch-German co-production and, because we had international ambitions, spoken in the English language. We got support from Martin Scorsese, whom I had met in 1967 at a film festival, and American music composer Bernard Herrmann, who was introduced to us by François Truffaut. I had always wanted to make a thriller à la Hitchcock and *Obsessions* was it—a film about murder and mystery and, like many other European films made in the 1960s, the decade of sexual liberation, about sex. *Obsessions* became the biggest Dutch box office success of the decade. Abroad the film did even better. In total we sold *Obsessions* to 120 countries worldwide. At the time explicit nudity in Dutch films was still relatively new and clearly selling, so our next batch of

movies all had candid sexual content. Most of them were films about cruel love that challenged the conventional relationship model of the time; I think that was, in retrospect, the greatest common divisor of the \$corpio films. Of all our so-called "erotic" movies, *Blue Movie* (1971) became by far the most successful. The film attracted over two million moviegoers in the Netherlands and made us instant millionaires. It gave us the financial freedom to make films that we really wanted to make, films that reflected our personal experiences and interests. Verstappen went on to direct *Dakota* (1974), a film about a Dutch man who runs an airline on the Dutch-Caribbean island of Curaçao, following his passion for planes and Curaçao, where he had spent most of his childhood. I decided to direct *Wan Pipel* (1976, *One People*), a film about a young Creole Surinamese student in the Netherlands who returns to Suriname when his mother is nearing her dying day. *Dakota* and *Wan Pipel* were our most expensive films so far—in fact, they went way over budget—but they both flopped at the Dutch box office. We fell deeply into debt and two years later, in 1978, \$corpio was officially declared bankrupt and "Wim & Pim" went their own way again.

Fig. 2. "Pim & Wim" in front of the Cineac Damrak theatre in Amsterdam, the second week of the Dutch release of *Bezeten: Het gat in de muur* (1969, *Obsessions*). "Obsessions" became the biggest Dutch box office success of the decade." Photo credit: Frans Bromet. Courtesy: \$corpio Films



Martens: *Wan Pipel* is often considered the first Surinamese feature film ever made. You shot the film in 1975-1976, a time when Suriname was gaining independence from the Netherlands, officially granted on November 25, 1975. What did you want to achieve with your film during this critical transition period? And why do you think it flopped in the Netherlands?

I already wanted to make Wan Pipel since 1962. When Rudi Kross and I made Megalopolis I, we agreed that we should make a Surinamese feature-length fiction film; that was what it was all about, that was our mission, our dream. But then the fame and money came and we put

the idea on the shelf for a while. However, the success of the *Scorpio* films not only enabled us to put more of our own money into a feature film about Suriname, but also to get funding from the Dutch Production Fund for such a film. When we heard that Suriname would become independent, we realized that this was the right moment to write the script and submit it to the

fund. So that's what we did and we got the funding. It was still not sufficient, but the Surinamese government supplied us with finishing funds. From that moment we knew that *Wan Pipel* would become the first full-fledged Surinamese feature film—and one with a clear political statement about the relation between the Netherlands and Suriname. You have to remember that Rudi and I were some kind of Surinamese revolutionaries. We strongly believed in the independence of Suriname—and this belief also inspired *Wan Pipel*. The three main characters of the film served as metaphors: the Dutch woman Karina for the Netherlands, and the Creole man Roy and Hindu woman Rubia for Suriname. Though Roy and Rubia don't have the same ethnic background, they share the same nationality and together are responsible for the future of their new country, independent from the Netherlands. The ending of the film, when Roy and Rubia say goodbye to Karina at the airport, is very much a symbolic farewell from their former colonizer. At the same, the permanent homecoming of Roy speaks to all the Surinamese people living in the Netherlands, inciting them to return to Suriname to build the new independent nation. During the 1970s, almost half of the country's entire population, about 300,000 Surinamese people, migrated to the Netherlands because they thought they would be better off there. With *Wan Pipel* we tried to show them that they could, and should, succeed in their home country. When the film was completed, we first released the film in Suriname; we just had to, because it was above all a Surinamese film. The premiere, which was attended by Johan Ferrier [the first president of the Republic of Suriname], was a very memorable night and the film became a huge success. The people of Suriname went to see it one, two, three, even four times in the theatre. I think they could all recognize themselves in the main characters, who spoke—in the three languages commonly spoken in our nation, Hindi, Dutch, and our lingua franca Sranantongo—to the imagination of the entire Surinamese population. Though I don't believe that a film can change the world, *Wan Pipel* was a story of the world and a document of the time. Some people even considered, and still consider, the film to be the anthem of our new nation.

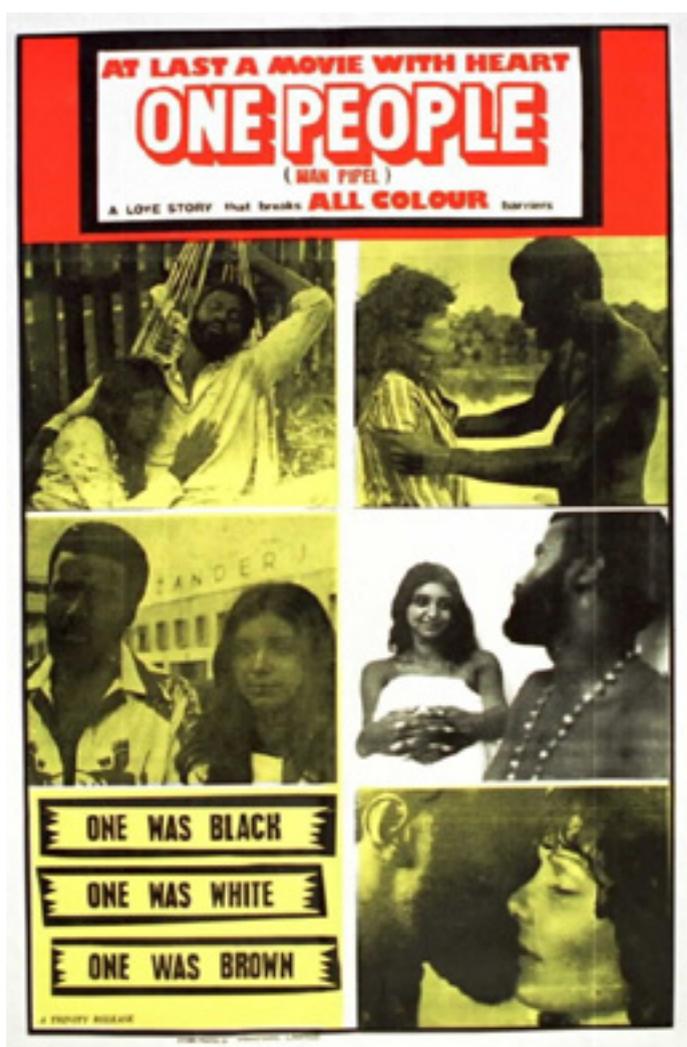


Fig. 3. The poster of the first Surinamese feature film, *Wan Pipel* (1976, *One People*), which was used for the film's theatrical distribution in Guyana. "The three main characters of the film served as metaphors; the Dutch woman Karina for the Netherlands, and the Creole man Roy and Hindi woman Rubia for Suriname." Design: the Theelucksingh family.

However, when we brought *Wan Pipel* to the Netherlands, only three Dutch cinemas were interested in screening the film. The others did not want to screen it because, I realize in retrospect, it was a film with Black people in it. At the time it came as a great shock to me. Now I understand. It was pure racism. I contacted the prime minister of Suriname, Henck Arron, with the request to provide some extra funding to print more copies, so that *Wan Pipel* could have the same big opening as all the other \$corpio films. He agreed and the film got the release I wanted, in 25 theatres nationwide. However, the Dutch people did not show any interest in the film and the Surinamese people in the Netherlands did not really know of it—they were not yet united at the time—so only a few weeks later *Wan Pipel* was out of the theatres again. It was a huge disappointment.

Martens: After the disappointment of *Wan Pipel* and the bankruptcy of \$corpio Films, you decided to stop making movies all together and to move to the Dutch Caribbean island of Aruba. Why did you decide to make this move? And how did you get back into the Dutch film scene?

After the bankruptcy of \$corpio Films, I decided to write my autobiography, *Prins Pim: Overdenkingen van een levensgenieter* (1978, *Prince Pim: Thoughts of a Bon Vivant*). It contained many critical passages about the Dutch film funding system, including that the Production Fund did not want to finance films taking place overseas featuring Black people. After that, it was finished with me. I couldn't get any subsidies for my film projects anymore. I did make one more low-budget film, *Dirty Picture* (1980), an artistic black-and-white movie recorded without any sound, a silent movie that wasn't a success; one week after its release it was already taken out of the cinemas. I got more and more disillusioned with the Dutch film climate and when my marriage also ended after 18 years, I just wanted to leave the Netherlands.

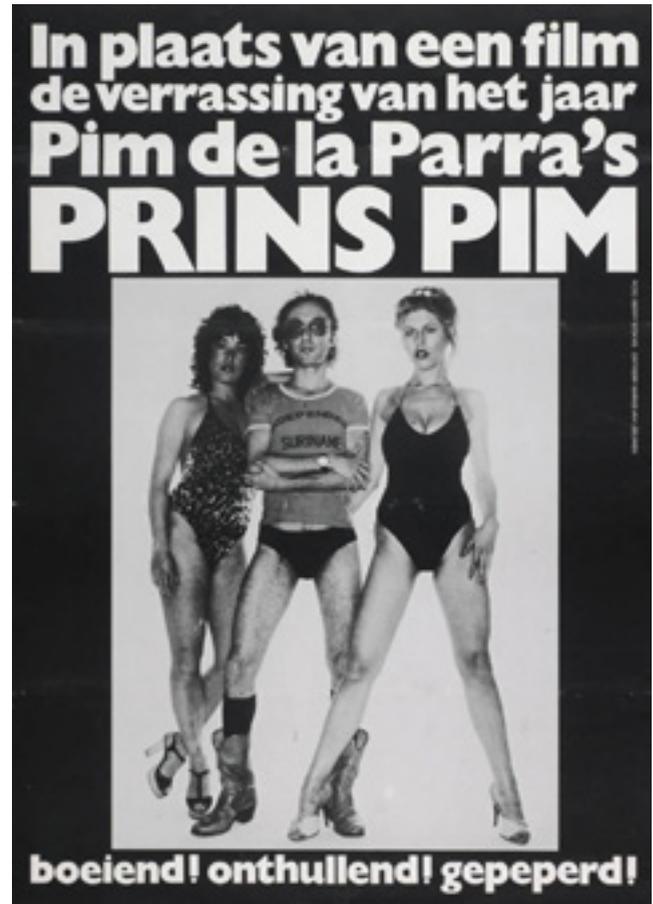


Fig. 4. The promotional leaflet of De la Parra's autobiography, *Prins Pim: Overdenkingen van een levensgenieter* (1978, *Prince Pim: Thoughts of a Bon Vivant*). "It contained many critical passages about the Dutch film funding system, including that the Production Fund did not want to finance films taking place overseas featuring Black people. After that, it was finished with me." Photo credit: Berry Stokvis. Design: Marius van Leeuwen.

I didn't want to return to Suriname, where a violent military coup d'état led by Desi Bouterse had just happened, so I left for Aruba with a one-way ticket. My period there started out as a sabbatical, but in next to no time I got the idea for a feature film about a love affair on the island. I approached Hetty Los, a young filmmaker who had just finished the Dutch Film & Television Academy, and we decided to make this low-budget production as co-scenarists and with ourselves in the leads. For us it was mainly a way to show Aruba to the Dutch audience. The result became *Aruba Affair* (1981), a 74-minute television film that we shot in six days during the annual Aruba Carnival. After that, I continued my sabbatical until a few years later I met a Dutch woman, Djoeke Veeninga, who invited me to come and live with her in the Netherlands. Back in Amsterdam, I founded a film production

cooperative, Altamira Film, together with producers Ruud den Drijver and Lea Wongsoredjo—thus not a company **with limited liability** but a cooperative **without liability**—which seemed wise after my previous experiences. If one of our films would now flop, creditors would only be able to collect the debts from the cooperative and not from our private money. In practice, this meant that we started a new cooperative for each new film we were about to make. In total I made three films under the umbrella of Altamira Films: *Paul Chevrolet en de ultieme hallucinatie* (1985, *Paul Chevrolet and the Ultimate Hallucination*), *Als in een roes...* (1986, *Intoxicated*), and *Odyssee d'Amour* (1987, *Odyssey of Love*). So that, in a nutshell, is how I got back into the Dutch film scene.

Martens: Of these three Altamira films, *Odyssee d'Amour* was yet another film made in the Caribbean. In the 1970s you were one of the few filmmakers in the Netherlands with an interest in the newly independent nation of Suriname; in the 1980s you seemed to be one of the few to pay attention to the Dutch Caribbean, that is, the islands of the Kingdom of Netherlands located in the Caribbean. Why did you, after *Aruba Affair*, want to make *Odyssee d'Amour*?

I just felt a need to make another film in the Dutch Caribbean. In fact, I wanted to make one feature film in all three ABC islands, Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao. *Odyssee d'Amour* was again a film about cruel love, this time entirely set on Bonaire. It was also again a very personal film—I essentially only make films about my personal experiences and fascinations—in the sense that it featured a man who retreats into himself and into the wilderness after the death of his son, as he thinks that it's his fault that his son passed away. At the same time, I sought to portray how Dutch male expats living on the ABC islands use their privileged status to wreak havoc on the love lives of the local women by playing multiple mistresses against each other. *Odyssee d'Amour* tells the story of a Dutch engineer working on Bonaire who tries to escape from the monotonous isolation of island life by keeping a string of Native mistresses. The film was, like *Wan Pipel*, spoken in three languages—Dutch, English, and the lingua franca Papiamentu—while the soundtrack contained some Spanish songs to reflect the country's diverse history and culture. The film was shot in only 17 days with three camera crews; one for underwa-

ter recordings and two for regular recordings. This enabled us to shoot quickly as we could record at two different locations at the same time. The logistics were very complicated; it was almost run like a military operation. Despite all this, I was very pleased with the result. I personally find *Odyssee d'Amour* one the most beautiful films I have ever made. However, the film flopped badly at the Dutch box office. Nobody came out to see the film. I think Dutch people were still not interested in a story that was set overseas featuring Black people. Besides, the film was probably too intellectual and artistic; there was, for example, no happy ending, which is what most people want to see when they go to the movies. The film got very bad reviews in the Netherlands and only two weeks after its release it was taken out of the cinemas.

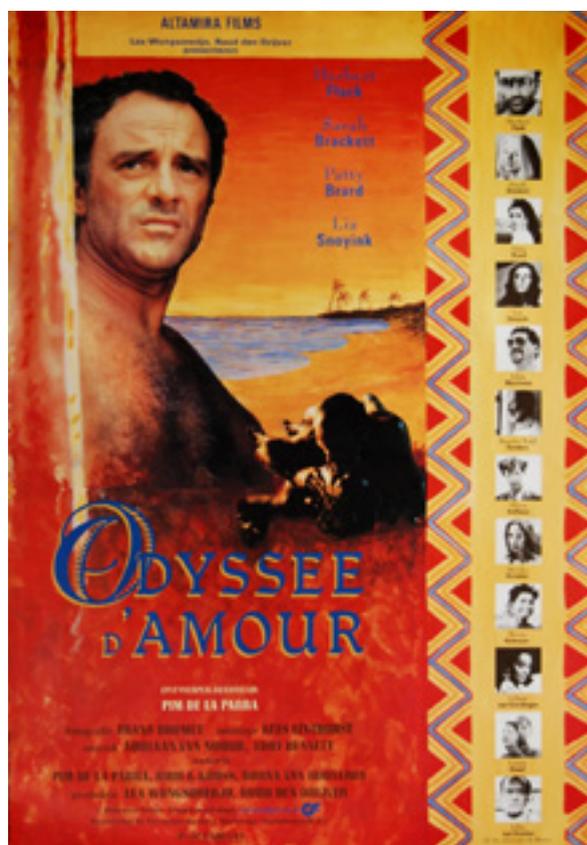


Fig. 5. The original film poster of *Odyssee d'Amour* (1987). "I sought to portray how Dutch male expats living on the ABC islands use their privileged status to wreak havoc on the love lives of the local women by playing multiple mistresses." Design: Fenna Westerdiep. Illustration: Ton Leenarts.

Martens: Your three Altamira films marked the early development of what you would later call *minimal movies*, a highly pragmatic mode of low-budget independent filmmaking. Could you explain the concept of *minimal movies*, which would become your trademark?

The period of the *minimal movies* started officially after *Odyssée d'Amour*, but you are right, the concept originated while making these three earlier films. In fact, I was already immersed in the craft of low-budget filmmaking from the very beginning of my career, when we put out film after film with *\$corpio*. These films were all made in a short time span with a low budget. *Paul Chevrolet* was made in 12 days for approximately 350,000 Dutch guilders [less US\$200,000], while *Als in een roes...* had only eight shooting days and a budget of 300,000 guilders [almost US\$175,000]. Then, *Odyssée d'Amour*, became, with a budget of 1.2 million guilders [almost US\$700,000], the most expensive film I was ever able to make, but the production still greatly reflected *minimal moviemaking*. When the film became such a box-office failure, I again couldn't get subsidies anymore. However, because the project was funded through a cooperative, this time I didn't end up in debt. I was determined to continue making films outside the regular grant scheme and, in order to do so, I had to perfect the craft of low-budget filmmaking. This is when the idea of the *minimal movies*—low-budget and super-fast-produced feature films—came into full practice. First of all, I started to offer profit shares instead of salaries to the members of the cast and crew, since I didn't have money to pay them. These shares were based on a distribution code, with the director, producer, and cameraman receiving the highest percentages, namely five percent each, and the other personnel working their way down to even half a percent of the well-defined revenue performance. This way I was able to reduce the budget of my films significantly. Secondly, we never worked with a script. We had an overall idea of the story, but only on set would the storyline be developed, largely through improvisation, a key feature of the *minimal movie*. Thirdly, returning to a strategy I mentioned earlier, for each new film we founded a new cooperative, with a different board per film. Often I acted as chairman, while the cast and crew filled the remaining board positions. These strategies were not only designed to reduce the cost and risk of making a film, but also, and importantly, to cre-

ate openings for starting filmmakers, producers, and technicians to actually work on films. *Minimal movies* were intended to provide them with opportunities to acquire the skills relevant to the reality of filmmaking. We shot our first official *minimal movie*, *Lost in Amsterdam* (1989), in 11 days for a budget of 75,000 guilders [approximately US\$40,000], and in the following years we released many more.



Fig. 6. The original film poster of De la Parra's first *minimal movie*, *Lost in Amsterdam* (1989). "I was determined to continue making films outside the regular grant scheme and, in order to do so, I had to perfect the craft of low-budget filmmaking." Photo and design: Johan Vigeveno.

Martens: Yes, you were very productive during this period, particularly in the early 1990s. After *Lost in Amsterdam*, you successively worked on no fewer than 15 feature films (!) in the capacities of writer, director, producer, and/or actor: *Max & Laura & Henk & Willie* (1989), *De nacht van de wilde ezels* (1990, *The Night of the Wild Donkies*), *Let the Music Dance* (1990), *Two People, Analysis of a Seduction* (1991), *Labyrint der lusten* (1991, *Labyrinth of Lust*), *Het gelukzalig lijden van Derek Beaujon* (1991, *The Blissful Suffering of Derek Beaujon*), *Extravaganza* (1991), *How to Survive a Broken Heart* (1991), *Openbaringen van een slapeloze* (1991, *Revelations of an Insomniac*), *Fear and Desire* (1992), *Vrouwen van vandaag* (1993, *Women of Today*), *Dagboek van een zwakke yogi* (1993, *Diary of a Weak Yogi*), *The Best Thing in Life* (1993), *Round of Prisoners* (1995), and *De droom van een schaduw* (1995, *The Dream of a Shadow*). Why did you decide to move back to Suriname in 1996, when you were achieving such a high production output in the Netherlands? And when did you conceive of the idea to start a film academy there, when you had seemingly left the world of filmmaking after your return to Suriname?

**Life decided my
fate for me.**

Life decided my fate for me. By 1993 I had moved from Amsterdam to Rotterdam to pursue minimal movie projects there, but again I got pretty fed up with the boxed-in and narrow-minded environment of the Dutch film industry. I was producing films, but there was no money, no glory, no nothing. It felt I was stranding as a filmmaker. Around this time I learnt that my 88-year old father needed someone back home, so I returned to Suriname to take care of him. Before I left the Netherlands, in 1995, I handed over my entire personal and professional archive, including all my film tins, to the Dutch Film Museum. It really felt like my final break from filmmaking, at least in the Netherlands. During my first period in Suriname I mainly occupied myself with doing nothing. My father passed away in 1998, and out of the blue my son died in 2002, which kept me emotionally busy for quite a while. It was not until 2005 that I got involved in film again. A few years earlier, in 2002, Aruba-born film producer Eddy Wijngaarde and his wife Henah Draaibaar initiated The Back Lot Foundation with the objective to revitalize film culture in Suriname. In a time when our country did not have any cinemas at all anymore, he started to organize film festivals at the Thalia Theatre in Paramaribo. All of a sudden there was a place to screen films—that's when the idea for a film academy was conceived, because now we could actually release locally made films in the cinema and after that they could be broadcasted on local television. So in March 2005 I launched the Surinamese Film Academy and, with the assistance from Dutch subsidies and filmmakers, I composed a learning-by-doing program consisting of five short film courses:

scriptwriting, cinematography, sound, acting, and directing/producing. During these courses, the students, approximately 60 in total, worked together on the production of a pilot film, *Ala Di...* (2006, *In the Mean time...*). Upon completion, the 150-minute long film premiered at The Back Lot Film Festival in April 2006 and was subsequently broadcasted four times on local television, non-stop without any commercial breaks. It was a great experience—we really wrote history—so the following year we wanted to run the program again. We received another grant from the Dutch Ministry for Development Cooperation, which again enabled us to get three professional Dutch filmmakers for two weeks in Suriname to teach the different courses. While being educated, the students participated in the making of the feature-length experimental film *Het Geheim van de Saramacca Rivier* (2007, *The Secret of the Saramacca River*). Like *Wan*

Pipel, this film revolves around a Surinamese man living in the Netherlands who returns to his country of birth, this time a middle-aged university professor who visits Suriname for the first time in 40 years to celebrate his 50th birthday. He is joined by his younger wife, a Surinamese woman who came to the Netherlands when she was 20. The story, a psychological thriller, follows the couple on their trips through Suriname, during which they get entangled in a marital crisis—and a secretive conspiracy. The film premiered at The Back Lot Film Festival, after which it was once more broadcasted on local television.

Fig. 7. A still from the third feature film put out by the Surinamese Film Academy, *The Secret of the Saramacca River*, with Kenneth Herdigein and Lucille Roberts in the roles of husband and wife in crisis. "While being educated, the students time participated in the making of the feature-length experimental film *Het geheim van de Saramacca Rivier* (2007, *The Secret of the Saramacca River*)." Photo by: Tom Erisman.



Martens: The learning-by-doing program of the Suriname Film Academy educates students in the craft of low-budget filmmaking. What is the overall objective of the Academy?

*The objective is to develop a continuous production of feature films in Suriname with an educational program that is based on my vast experience of low-budget filmmaking. Throughout my career I became an expert in making films with minimal resources and almost no money. Therefore I think I was the obvious person to return to Suriname to set up a national film academy. The program completely reflects the principles of **minimal moviemaking**. We always work with small, almost non-existent budgets. Public and private funding covers the operating costs of the Academy, replenished by the tuition fees paid by the students. The biggest overhead always consists of the travel and accommodation expenses incurred by the Dutch filmmakers who come and teach here. For the remainder, we only have to pay rent for a classroom and some equipment. We do not own any equipment—I have never owned any equipment, not even during my successful *Scorpio* period. Also, we don't have to hire a cast or crew, because the students work both behind and in front of the cameras. Sometimes local professional technicians offer us their services for free to help us out. Finally, to get our films on television, we always have to find a sponsor who pays for the airtime. In order to guarantee the continuity of the Suriname Film Academy, we aim to release one new film on each edition of The Back Lot Festival, which is now taking place at TBL Cinemas, a great modern multiplex cinema they opened in 2011—only then do we feel we have a right to speak. So far we have succeeded in this aim. The first film we put out with the Academy, *Ala Di...*, had a running time of 150 minutes and was made in one week of shooting, costing around US\$15,000. The second film, *Hori Yu Srefi* (2006,*

Blijf je zelf; Remain Yourself), marked the first co-production between the Suriname Film Academy and Film Institute Paramaribo, which was founded by Arie Verkuijl, a well-known architect who attended the classes and volunteered as a producer. This film was shot in 11 days with a “no-budget” of US\$10,000. The third film, *Het geheim van de Saramacca Rivier*, was made with a small grant of €30,000 and consisted of a 12-day learning-by-doing program followed by 22 students. The fourth film, *The Last Desire* (2008, *A Kriboi Angri / Het laatste verlangen*), was entirely financed by a Dutch real estate broker who just wanted to have his own film, to give away as an original Christmas present. He gave me €30,000 and for that money we could improvise another **minimal movie** within 10 days. After that, Arie Verkuijl largely took over the directing stick. He had already produced the first three films of the Academy and now it was time that I would produce films for him. He rapidly directed three movies, *Wat de vrouw wil... is de wil van God* (2008, *What a woman wants... is God's will*), *Ontworteld* (2008, *Uprooted*), and *Elk eind is een begin* (2009, *Every Ending is a beginning*)—but then he sadly passed away in 2010. Now I want to make one last feature film, *Krin Skin (Clean Skin)*, a remake of the Italian film *L'avventura* (1960) with a black protagonist, to try to rejuvenate the Academy for the next generation of Surinamese filmmakers.

Martens: With the Surinamese Film Academy you have managed to put out an unprecedented number of Surinamese feature films in only a few years' time. Do you think the production of *minimal movies* can contribute to the development of a sustainable film industry in Suriname and the Caribbean in general?

Not at all. I think it's simply impossible to develop a film industry here in Suriname. It's already difficult to make films in a country such as the Netherlands. When I started to make films there in the 1960s, the field of filmmaking lied fallow. Now there is something that could be called a Dutch film industry—an industry that, due to the support of all kinds of funding programs, is able to put out around 25 feature films per year. There is such a great infrastructure for filmmaking, but that's only viable because the Netherlands is a rich and populated country in Europe. In Suriname, one of the poorest countries of South America with a population of just over 500,000 people, such an infrastructure is just unconceivable. The country is too small in both capital and population to establish a national film industry. We have only one cinema here, TBL Cinemas, so you cannot generate any profit from locally produced films. You would thus need somebody who is either from a wealthy family, or funded with grant money, or just crazy enough to produce a film. I think I mainly belong to the latter category, the dreamer who just tries and tries and tries, because he just wants it that much. As said earlier, I am currently trying to get my last feature film off the ground. It's very difficult, but I will continue my efforts until I have found the money. I want to show the young generation here that you can incidentally make a Surinamese feature film. However, the idea of a Surinamese film industry is not realistic. There is simply no economic power and political will. I think the same goes for the wider Caribbean region, with the possible exception of Cuba, Jamaica, and Trinidad, considering their size in terms of capital and number of people, also in the diaspora. Yet still, in these islands, like ev-

erywhere else in the world, feature films are almost exclusively made by people from wealthy backgrounds. In Jamaica you see, for example, that most of the filmmakers are from the small, white- and brown-skinned elites, while the poorer, often darker-skinned people do not really get to enter the world of professional filmmaking. Also, I think that the Caribbean islands are too fragmented in terms of language to build a strong and unified Caribbean film industry. I am sorry, I am quite sombre, but I am afraid I am too old to deliver merely positive sounds. However, this does not mean that Caribbean cinema does not exist. Of course it exists! Caribbean cinema consists of all these individual initiatives in the region that have brought about, and brought together, a diverse body of films that are somehow connected through our history, culture, geography, and climate. There will always be young Caribbean people who will rise and produce films—and so every now and then such a film could reach the whole world. We just have to keep hoping and to keep dreaming.

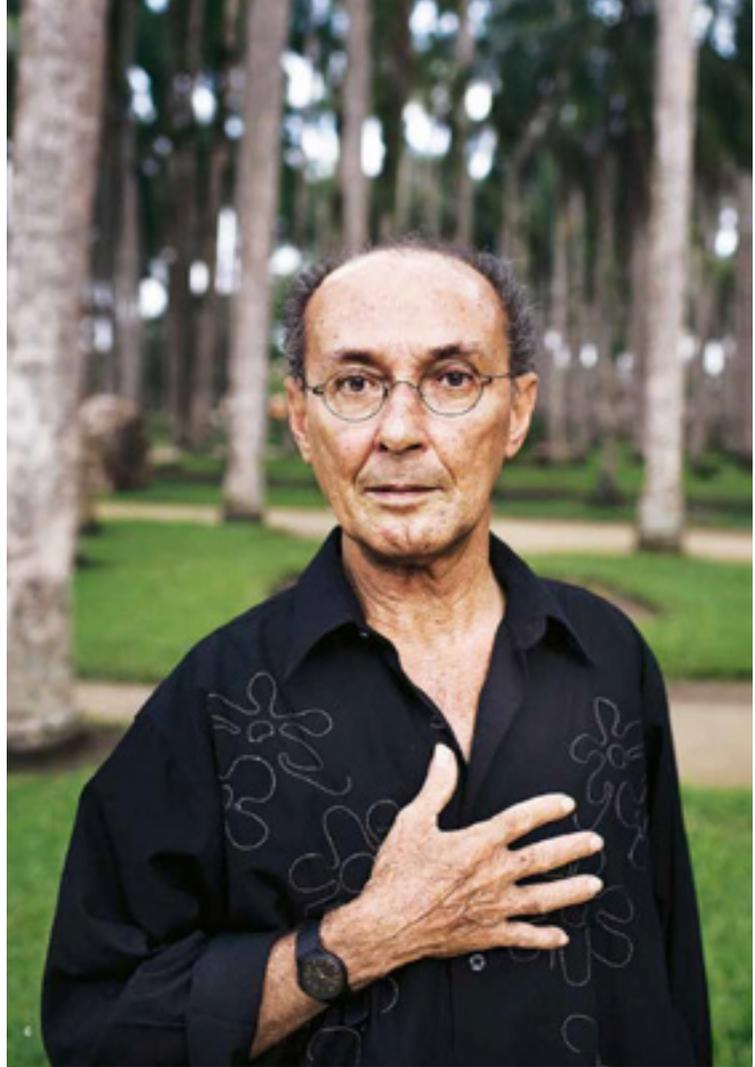


Fig. 8. A portrait of De la Parra in Suriname, 2011. "I think the method of learning-by-doing can be the savior of Caribbean cinema." Photo credit: Guus Dubbelman.

Martens: Do you feel that your learning-by-doing way of filmmaking could serve as a model to realize the dream of creating a film culture in the Caribbean?

*Definitely, I think the method of learning-by-doing can be the savior of Caribbean cinema. I am now trying to export the method to the rest of the Caribbean. As of late, I have been regularly invited to show my films in other Caribbean countries, mainly because *Wan Pipel* and *Odysée d'Amour* have been restored and subtitled in English by the Dutch EYE Film Institute. Both my early and more recent works are thus just now, sometimes decades later, being discovered in the region. My travels provide me the opportunity to meet the young people involved in Caribbean filmmaking and also to spread the idea of the *minimal movie* throughout the region. For example, last year I visited the Trinidad and Tobago Film Festival, where I not only showed two of my films, but also gave a workshop about *minimal moviemaking* to teachers and students at the Film Department of the University of the West Indies. They were all very enthusiastic and this year I will hopefully*

*return for 10 days to produce a feature-length film with their students according to the principles of the *minimal movie*, which they can then release at their annual festival. This way I try to chip in and contribute my part in the development of Caribbean cinema. On the other hand, who listens to an old man like me? I don't feel that the young generation always wants the advice of senior filmmakers. They do things their own way and that's no problem. Life is all about dynamics, about movements, about developments. Young people will always reinvent the wheel again. And they should make their own films. But maybe they want to take, at least, one advice from an old Surinamese man, and that is that they have to remember that they can already make a feature-length film in 10 shooting days and with a budget of US\$10,000. It's difficult, but it's definitely possible. If there is one thing I have proven over the years, then it's that.*



A recent portrait of De la Parra near the Palmentuin (Palm Garden) in Paramaribo, Suriname, 2015. Photo credit: Emiel Martens.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Pim de la Parra for taking the time to share his thoughts and experiences with me for this article. For a gripping documentary on his illustrious film career, please look out for In-Soo Radstake's *Parradox* (2010; <http://in-soo.com/nl/2012/03/04/parradox/>)