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IT FOLLOWS

Endurance and the Art of Guido van der Werve: Nummer veertien, home

APRIL 22, 2015 BY ROBERT SPARROW JONES IN BLOG



For me, the act of running is pure and sublime. Minimal in preparation, the simple tying on of a pair of sneakers and slipping out the front door makes the ordinary a bit wild. Even the short distances I run, hovering around five or six miles, are always a worthy journey because of the chance at the unknown. This active contemplation in nature often brings me home drenched and sour, my legs scratched and briar-laden, sneakers caked with mud. But the pace allows the mind to wander, and in endurance is solitude. The act brings one with nature; in a way, we become wild. I return exhausted always, but complete.

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Guido van der Werve is an artist/composer/filmmaker who, through the need to create an autobiographical work, became interested in mountaineering. His ultimate goal was to climb Mount Everest. For Mountaineers it is necessary to acclimatize at the base camp of Mount Everest (5,400 meters) for two months to improve the blood's capacity to transport oxygen. This seemed the ideal time for van der Werve to work on this autobiographical work. For him the possible looming near-death experience could trigger a deep, reflective mood. In preparation, he summited Aconcagua in Argentina, the highest mountain outside of Asia (6,962 meters). It was a certain test of high altitude, but the experience was not pleasant. Said van der Werve of the experience:

I had expected it to be tough, but the lack of oxygen made me feel terminally ill. I think I was looking for wisdom during this period and was hoping to find some at the summit. I had heard the stories: "If you make it to the summit, you realize it's all worth it" and "You climb up a boy and you come down a man." After two weeks of pain and suffering, we finally reached the summit. Besides being completely exhausted, I didn't feel anything. I decided to leave my Mount Everest ambitions for what they were.

After resigning from the possibility of coaxing out a reflective mood with a near-death experience on Everest, van der Werve created the exploit artificially by composing a requiem.

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This would become the soundtrack for *Nummer veertien, home*, Guido van der Werve's most recent work—a 54-minute poetic film, intertwining his youth in Papendrecht, Netherlands with the lives of his childhood heroes, Frédéric Chopin and Alexander the Great. All is told and structurally based on van der Werve's lovely classical requiem: three movements and twelve acts.



The movements correspond to the three disciplines in the triathlon (swim, bike, run). The twelve acts follow the classical structure of the requiem (1. Introitus, 2. Kyrie Eleison, 3. Gradual, 4. Communion, 5. Sequence, 6. Tract, 7. Sanctum, 8. Agnus Dei, 9. Offertory, 10. Libera me, 11. Pie Jesu, 12. In Paradisum). I didn't use the original mass text but wrote my own libretto. The texts are based on my diaries, experiences, memories, and the mass text itself. The twelve parts of the requiem are all in a different minor key so the requiem becomes half a book of preludes. The musical theme consists of the notes d.e.a.d.

As a young pianist of twenty, Frédéric Chopin filled a silver goblet with soil from his boyhood home of Warsaw and embarked on tour of Europe. As war broke out, he was never

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to return. In Paris he settled in self-exile where, for eighteen years, he composed music based on Polish folk melodies and musical structures: Mazurkas and Polonaises. When Chopin lay dying in Paris, 1849, at the young age of 39, he was longing for his homeland and asked his eldest sister, Ludwika Jędrzejewicz, that his heart return to his beloved Poland. He died soon after and, dutifully, she had the organ removed, preserved in excellent cognac, and wax-sealed within a crystal jar. After spiriting the package beneath her skirt, she stealthily passed Austrian and Russian border guards to eventually rest her brother's heart in a pillar at Warsaw's Holy Cross Church. It bears an inscription from the Book of Matthew 6:21: "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."



Nummer veertien, home is a loving, endurance journey of promise, solitude, and resolute longing. The film, expressed by van der Werve's soulful requiem, also acts as a visually voluble cinematic interlude of sublimity. It begins with piano and a slow cascading movement down the pillar to Chopin's heart's grave. Steadily the scene pulls back to reveal van der Werve in a forbidding rubber wetsuit at a Steinway grand. Atop the piano sits a silver cup (a vessel he will subsequently fill with the soil of Chopin's boyhood home). Continuously the scene opens to the ensuing violins, then the entire orchestra spanning the dark hardwood pews of Holy Cross Church. As if the camera is attuned to adagio the interior expands vertically to balcony, pipe organ, and the succeeding choir. All twenty string instruments and a forty-piece choir is framed in a brilliant uninterrupted sequence; movement matching the score—a cinematic motif and foreshadow of an arduous passage to come.

Tricia Khleif

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The visual journey is also an actual extreme performance on which the traveler has shed everything extraneous. Stripped down to the essentials, the self is reduced to its barest rudiments, leaving just the baggage of thought. At the end of that opening scene, van der Werve, stands from the piano in his rubber wetsuit, takes the silver cup, and parts the orchestra. Comically, and yet with complete earnestness, he runs up the road to step into the river, and to begin swimming 26.6 km. The breadth and depth of the river engulf van der Werve. He plies heroically against its aggressive, muddled water. The entire duration of the actual journey took van der Werve over three weeks, a triathlon covering more than 1,500 kilometers—seven times the length of an Ironman. From the Church of the Holy Cross in Warsaw to the Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris, he swam 27 km in two days, cycled nearly 1,400 km in eight days, and ran the remaining 289 km in seven days.

I've been running from the age of sixteen, but never in a very structured way. In 2008, I finished my film "number twelve" and, after working on that project for two years for fourteen hours a day, I needed some distraction. I started running to clear my head and soon I found myself running daily. In 2009 I ran my first marathon, in 2010 I ran three marathons, and in 2011 I ran 100 kilometers around my house in Finland. Last year, I started doing triathlons. Running gives me the structure to organize my life, it helps me to stay clear in my head,

and by running you produce endorphins and other substances that make you feel good. I never saw races as goals, but I always enjoyed the running itself. I always think it's a pity that the race is finished, I would rather continue. For this reason I started doing longer races and I'm currently training for an Ironman triathlon.



Adequately capacious, clear and brilliant, the landscape broods with sublimity. Spring is sweeping in, emitting an even light that stirs up the deepest colors, the richest shadows. It's a different kind of saturation, a light that is water-soaked. It's a landscape that is heavy laden with weather. This sensitivity is expressively captured in cinematography, offering paths through the landscape where the journey becomes implicitly mythic, steeped in van der Werve's haunt of heroes. Landscape is not just a backdrop, it's a living character. It is simply an amplification of the way that environment lifts the soul. The roads winding through bucolic melancholic fields are threads of a story—the rivers and streams are coruscating surfaces that are doorways into other worlds. These doorways become literal when the film moves to the artist's birthplace. Laid out in a grassy lot along the river, the entire orchestra plays. The moody weather brushes the trees, early in bud, and accentuated by a burst of forsythia behind the cello section. Far right, van der Werve enters in a dark suit completely on fire. He crosses in front of the orchestra and straight into the river to douse the flames.

These volatile tensions mark the film as nearly as comical as it is poignant. The series of calamities represent epiphanies

that embody a bittersweet coming of age yearning. The admixture of the outlandish, literally explosive moments are appropriate as van der Werve plays them deadpan. The comic underlies his earnest, careworn demeanor. These explicable metaphors create a wild actuality that leaves us pining for something left in our heart—that place we try to get as far away from as we can; the landscape of family, friends, scents, sounds we dote on through our entire lives. Home.

I abstracted a few important childhood memories to integrate into the script. Abstracting my personal memories and experiences is a process that I always apply in my work. I try to make my work as open as possible by doing this; I abstract the narrative until only the mood is left. Mood is a medium that everybody can relate to and, more importantly, everyone has their own relationship to the mood. The artist stops being important.

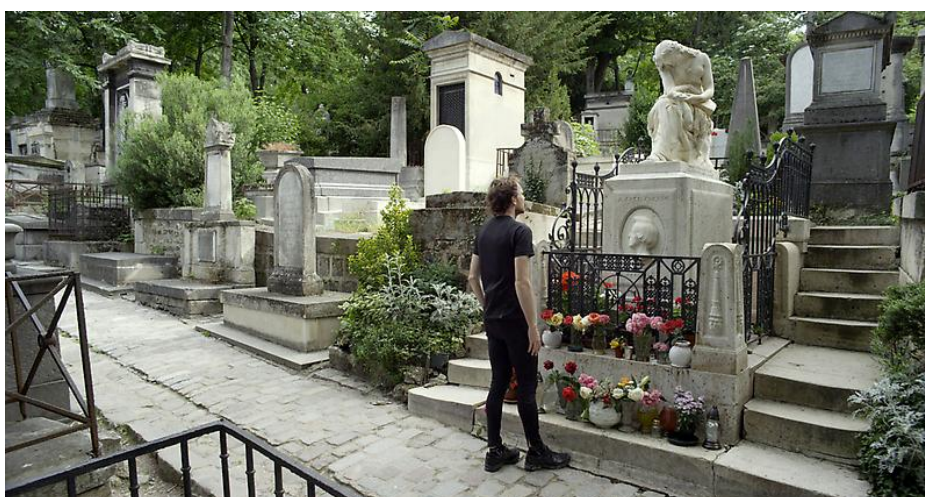


As a distance runner, I feel the endurance and solitude in *Nummer veertien, home*. When van der Werve finally reaches Paris, framed against the teeming traffic and the city-ambient noise, he is dreadfully worn. He rests on a iron gate, sweat-drenched, pain-squinted. This is where the oneiric and metaphysical become realistic: his tired slump, the heavy breaths. It feels like an ending and brings to mind Chopin's Prelude in E minor Op.28 No.4.—heart beating and breathing, despair at the same time searching, slowing relenting, but with resolve. Incidentally, it was one of the

pieces played at the composer's funeral.



When I'm running my mind is blank and when I stop, I'm confronted once again with my thoughts, demons, and everyday life. For this reason I don't run to finish, but see the finish line as a starting line for the next race. I think that this is the reason why I couldn't understand mountaineering. I would rather circle the mountain than climb it. I'm not interested in routes from A to B but more in the distance in-between.



Reaching Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris, where Chopin's body (sans heart) rests among luminaries such as Oscar Wilde, Sarah Bernhardt, and Jim Morrison, van der Werve places the silver cup of Polish soil and simply moves from the screen. Is he more of an embodiment of his accumulated miles, swimming, biking, running; is he the incarnation of

enduring forward motion? The Art World's cinematic poet of willpower, endurance, struggle and solitude, *Nummer veertien, home* is a performative feat of self-containment and a yearning to a return to innocence through a harmony with nature, and a continuum of the push and pull of the homeland.

Images: Film stills from "Nummer veertien, home" (2012).

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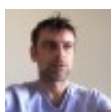
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Robert Sparrow Jones grew up in Northeastern Pennsylvania. He has lived and worked in Seattle, WA, Baltimore, MD, Athens, GA, and South Florida, and is an alumnus of Maryland Institute College of Art. He teaches at Kendall College of Art and Design and paints in an old Victorian House in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

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