

Raoul Servais

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‘Fifty years after the invention of animated film, I went looking for the mystery of hand-drawn moving images. It was nice to invent what already existed but searching for it cost me a lot of time!’



Harbor Lights, cellophane on decor, 1960

He is called the magician of Ostend. Raoul Servais is a visual artist, designer, draughtsman and above all a film-maker. His world is akin to a cinema filled with poetry and mystery, a place where stories and legends find their way through the imagined time. Servais remains close to himself and shows us the world. The heroes in his films are street lamps, sirens or moths. Soldiers attack, Pegasus rears and a harpy prepares her assault. Raoul Servais searches for the right drawing style, atmosphere and colour for each new scenario. Visual art is a great source of inspiration, but you never make a film on your own. What the artist is unable to depict himself, he will allow others to work out graphically. Servais' oeuvre reflects a film industry in evolution, from cut-and-paste work to a digital world. With every film that he makes, his desire grows. Not just to challenge himself, but also the animated format.

— Introduction

Raoul Servais is a self-taught film-maker. As a child, he was already fascinated by the mystery of cartoons. Together with his father, he watched numerous films starring Charlie Chaplin, Charles Vanel or Felix the Cat. This planted the seed of a never-ending hunger for film and a determination to unravel the mystery of hand-drawn moving images. The animated film world is exceptionally closed, and its secrets are anxiously guarded. Servais experienced this first hand, but it didn't hold him back. Even so, it took him years to acquire the necessary expertise and – in addition to earning a living – to save up for the all-important film equipment. His very first camera was made out of a cigar box and pieces of Meccano. Raoul Servais' tremendous dedication and the numerous awards he has received throughout his career are testimony to his innovative vision and the contribution he has made to animation. When KASK in Ghent established an autonomous animated film course in 1963, then a unique development in Europe, Servais was given the opportunity to share and develop his knowledge and know-how.

Raoul Servais is a committed artist who uses his imagination as a weapon. The deep scars left by the Second World War permeate his films. Memories from that dark past are intermingled with dreams and a large dose of fantasy. In a grandiose way, Servais succeeds time and again in reconciling humour, sadness, fear and desire. What at first glance appears to be an animated film for children will betray far greater depths, thus making it hard for adults to ignore. Servais' filmic oeuvre – which currently comprises sixteen titles – is striking for its diversity and the way in which it deliberately deviates from Disney's winsome style. No two films are ever alike. Raoul Servais is constantly stimulated by the potential of animation, but perhaps even more so by its limitations. He feels his way through the stories as he draws. Animation is a technique that serves the narrative. A common thread throughout his varied filmography might be the constant search for ways to combine reality and animation. From the sixties to the present day, this has provided a fascinating trajectory for a visual artist who is constantly challenging himself. Every film he realises gives him an additional reason to do things differently and better the next time.

This permanent museum wing presents Raoul Servais' work as a draughtsman, painter, designer and animator. In addition to the numerous preparatory studies and drawings that were created during the making of the films, a comprehensive selection of independent work is also displayed. Often, these pieces will betray a fascination for a subject or motif that will sooner or later appear on screen. The siren that Servais often drew in the forties returned twenty years later as the heroine of a film. This new museum wing reveals the collaborative nature of animation and the creative process of film-making in general. After all, making a film is not something you do alone.

No film without cinema.
In a changing programme,
the films by Raoul Servais
can be viewed in their
entirety in Mu.ZEE.
The titles are grouped
into blocks, each lasting
approximately 30 minutes.

— Poetry

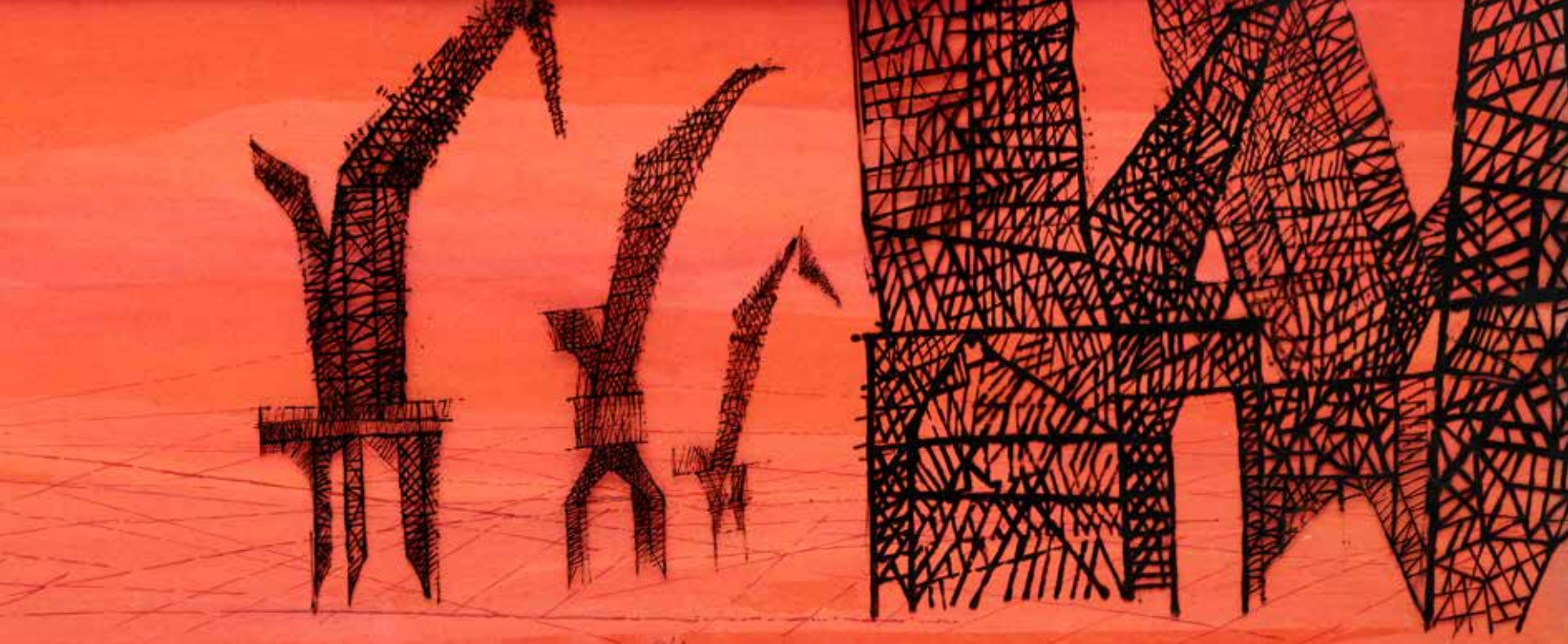
‘Nostalgia is the food of poetry.’

Servais’ nostalgia breaths the salty air of Ostend. A bygone streetscape with Victorian houses is etched in his early childhood memories. From his bedroom window, young Raoul heard the sea with its serene but untameable character. In *Havenlichten* (Harbour Lights) (1960) a lamp post rescues a lost fisherman when the lighthouse falls asleep. This particular film was an education for Raoul Servais. In what would become his first fully-realised animated film, the greatest challenge was to combine moving images and sound. In this case, the popular folk song ‘Het Loze Vissertje’ (The Cunning Fisherman). The film garnered awards because Servais – despite the many mistakes he made – renounced the ever-popular Hollywood/Disney style. The film was greatly inspired by the visual arts. Just like the protagonist, colour also becomes a character in the story. Servais won the Grand Prize for animation film at the National Film Festival in Antwerp with this film, which put his name on the map as a film-maker.

Valse Noot (The False Note) (1963) follows a street musician who wants nothing more than to conjure up music from his barrel organ and make people happy. Yet they are all ‘busy, busy, busy’ doing everything and nothing. The musician dreams of playing great concerts on a magnificent organ. It seems an impossible task, not least because all his songs end on a false note. Here, Servais plays a fantastic game along the borders of animation and reality, using newspaper clippings, photographs and banknotes as building blocks for the city in which the story unfolds.

The False Note, cellophane on decor, 1963





Sirène (Siren) (1968) takes us to a desolate port that serves as the backdrop for a beautiful encounter between a mermaid and a cabin boy. The city has two colours: blue for the romantic and sentimental, red for the dramatic. Hoping for a catch, a poor fisherman casts his hook in vain. Large cranes loom threateningly overhead. They revolve around him like fossilised creatures. The city turns red. A young cabin boy whistles a melancholy song. The city turns blue and a graceful siren comes swimming towards him. The grasping cranes disrupt this

romantic idyll and hurl her onto the quay with a thud. Panic! Alarm! The city turns red again. Hordes of gendarmes, a chimney sweep and other dubious riff-raff join together like an amorphous melted block around the lifeless body of the siren. What follows is a mockery of the long arm of the law, after which the cabin boy is left alone. All that remains is the outline of his beloved, marked in chalk on the quayside. The city turns blue.

Siren, cellophane on
panoramic decor, 1968

— Sagas and legends

‘Sagas and legends are
the best means of
falling asleep and are
created by insomniacs.’

These are the stories that are constantly being reinvented. Whenever they touch us, they move us deeply. *Winter Days* (2003) is about a man who gives shelter to a freezing heron and becomes entangled in the memory of a woman. *Winter Days* or *Fuyu no Hi* is a Japanese animated film by the film-maker Kihachirō Kawamoto. It is a collective work based on a seventeenth-century Japanese renku poem by Matsuo Bashō, which the latter wrote in collaboration with his friends as a kind of *cadavre exquis* (similar to the parlour game known as ‘Consequences’). The poets took it in turns to compose verses without prior knowledge of the previous lines. Kawamoto, in turn, invited his film-maker friends to each animate several lines of verse (without any knowledge of one another’s work). The complete work consists of 36 animated films made by 35 international animators. Servais animated the following lines:

My grass hut –
where I offer the heron
a lodging
Having to hide
while the hair grows back – Bashō

Raoul Servais translates the things that touch him into a visual style that he finds enchanting. An admiration for the Latem Schools accords with a tragic story that he based on his neighbour and his beloved horse. In *Pegasus* (1973), a farrier builds his own maze of steel horses when rapid technological progress takes hold. We know Pegasus as the powerful winged horse of Greek mythology, born of the love between Medusa and Poseidon. When the vain Bellerophon desires to ride the animal to Mount Olympus, the Home of the Gods, he incurs their wrath. Pride comes before a fall. Pegasus is stung by a fly and rears up, causing Bellerophon to crash to the ground.



Pegasus, decor in gouache and chalk, 1973



Halewyn's Song, study for character, 1968

With his version of Pegasus, Raoul Servais creates a beautiful ode to the countryside and her past glory. Modern technology is lost on the farmer with his horse and cart. The old farmstead in the countryside still serves as an image in a painting. An elderly unemployed farrier sits in his workshop with nothing to do but chase an irritating fly. The man is missing his horses. He decides to make a horse out of steel and places it, like the statue of a saint, in a nearby chapel. What ensues, quite literally, goes over his head. When the farrier waters his handiwork, it begins to grow. Before he knows it, an immense army of steel horses has sprung up around him – like a true Trojan invasion. The context of this film – the hinterland of Ostend where the artist went to live in the early seventies – reflects Servais' love of the robust character of Flemish Expressionism. He invited Norbert Deseyn to make the scenery and drawings for this film.

The commissioned film *Het lied van Halewyn* (Halewyn's Song) (1976) is based on a medieval song. Mr Halewyn's hypnotic singing lures girls from the villages to a gloomy forest from which they never return. The film is part of a series of short films about centuries-old European legends and tales. Servais was specifically commissioned to make a film about Halewyn and used a labour-intensive animation technique involving paper cut-outs and metal foil. This lends the work the appearance of stained-glass.



—Mystery

‘Mystery can be found
in old castles and houses
as well as the gaze
of certain women.’

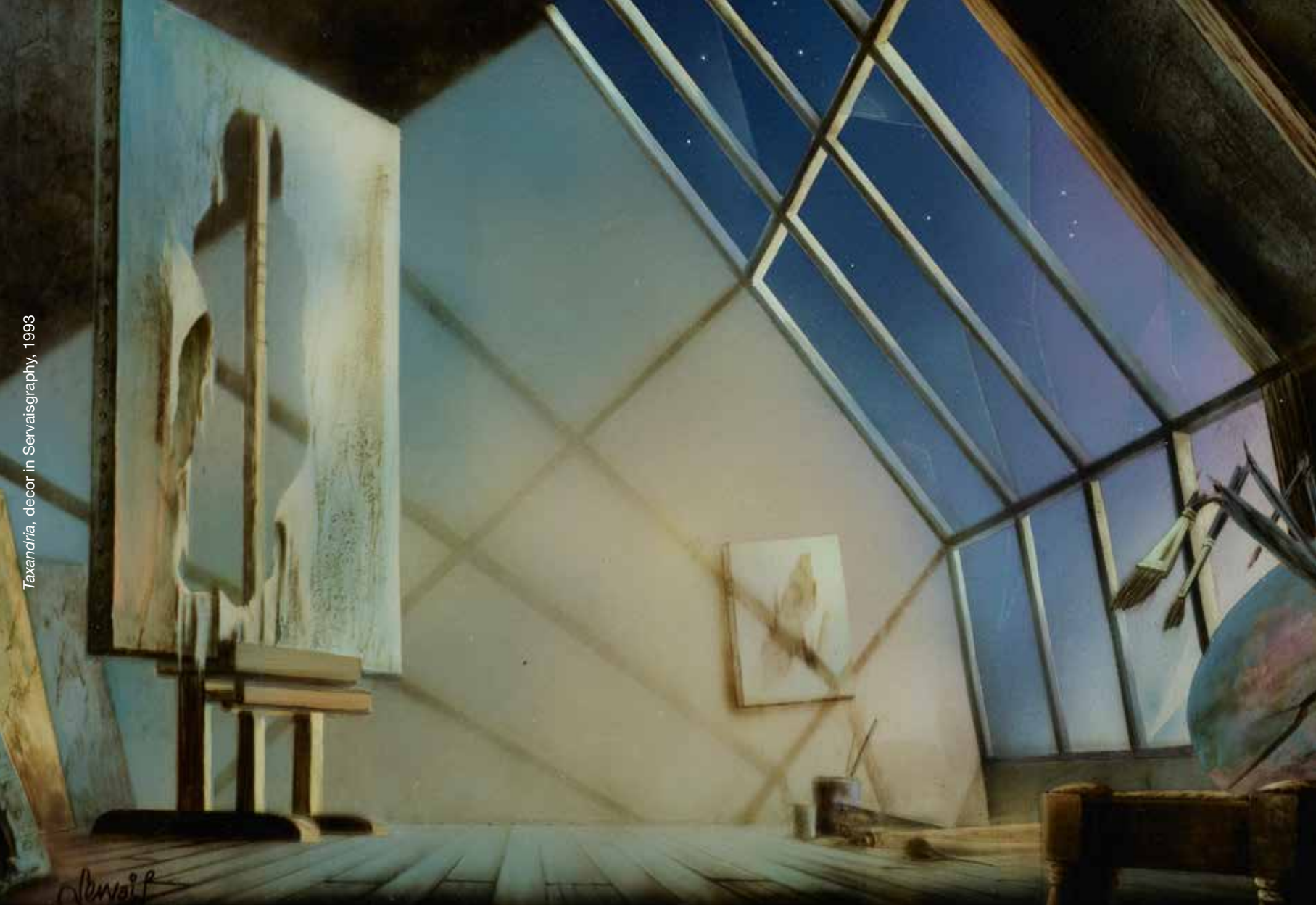
Like a moth, we enter a painting by Paul Delvaux where something strange is happening. A station waiting room becomes the ballroom of mysterious dancing women. *Nachtvlinders* (Nocturnal Butterflies) (1998) is an ode to Delvaux's oeuvre. For this work, Raoul Servais used his own patented technique – Servaisgraphy – to blend filmed images and animation. This gives rise to a surreal and picturesque atmosphere. In this technique, the characters are photographed in black and white and printed onto cellophane. They are coloured with gouache on the reverse and integrated with the decors, which are slid underneath. Servais explained that he was looking for 'interesting interconnections between the visual arts and the art of animation'. He said: 'I have ventured into this uncertain zone, into this kind of "no man's land" between the real film and the painting, and there are still many things to be discovered in that respect.'

Using a precursor to Servaisgraphy, Raoul Servais created a harpy for the thriller *Harpya* (1979). This mythical being – half woman and half bird of prey – turns out to be a tormenting and domineering force. She pursues a man who not only loses his bread, but also his legs. With *Harpya*, Servais took a fairly radical change of direction when he opted for the thriller format. This mysterious, black-and-white film takes place within a belle époque setting. We see how a smart gentleman tries to help an ailing harpy but, in return, is terrorised in his own home. The poor man desperately tries to save some food for himself and runs away from his house in the direction of Friar Gargantua – a knowing wink to the character from François Rabelais' famous novel. But all in vain. The idea for the film came after a restless night filled with nightmares. In order to be able to translate these images into the film he envisaged, Servais knew that he needed to devise a new technique. After all, the film required a specific mix of animation and real images. The actors were filmed against a backdrop of black velvet. When the characters had to advance but seemingly without the use of their legs,

a real ditch was dug so that they could move around. The colours in the film are dark and extremely artificial, which imbues the work with a strange atmosphere. With his harpy who launches an attack on the petite bourgeoisie, Raoul Servais won the prestigious Golden Palm award at the Cannes Film Festival.

Mystery also reigns in the streets of *Taxandria* (1994), a realm in which opinions, women and even time are silenced. Against the majestic and ominous backdrop of a decaying world, a fantastic story unfolds about the suppressed desire for freedom. Fifteen years in the making, *Taxandria* is the only full-length feature film within the oeuvre. The design of the city is based on the work of the comic-strip artist François Schuiten who, with his eye for architectural details, has an unrivalled ability to create surprising landscapes and dilapidated utopian cities. After many ups and downs involving various producers and scriptwriters, *Taxandria* developed into a film in which live action takes precedence over animation. Many of Servais' original ideas were lost. The radical nature of the dictatorial Taxandrian regime, as it was first envisaged, was heavily diluted. To accentuate the sense of oppression, Servais conceived a rigid universe in which the characters were barely able to move. At the beginning of 2018, Raoul Servais turned his initial ideas for *Taxandria* into *L'éternel Présent – Un conte philosophique* (The Eternal Present – a Philosophical Tale) and included his original drawings.

Taxandria, decor in Servaisigraphy, 1993



— Oppression, war and resistance

‘Aggression is usually an individual act. When it happens collectively, people speak of war.’

The Second World War left deep scars. Raoul Servais’s work often reflects an aversion to senseless violence and oppression. In *Chromophobia* (1965), an army of grey soldiers robs the world of its colour. With symbols and graphic elaborations, the dark memories of the war years are inflected with humour and playfulness. Colour peacefully regains the upper hand. The film is very graphic and geometric in terms of composition. The stylised simplicity of the figures is the perfect foil for the humour. When everything seems to be lost and black rules the world, a jester emerges from a flower. He takes up the fight and starts to undermine the oppressors. It is a pacifist work that pits humour and hope against war and despair. More than fifty years later, it remains a topical film. *Chromophobia* was made after Servais received funding from the Film Division of what was then the Ministry of National Education. He was given carte blanche to follow his vision. The film was submitted for competition at the Venice Film Festival in 1966 and won the First Prize in the short film category. It was his first international breakthrough.



Operation X-70, etching on decort, 1971



Chromophobia, cellophane on decor, 1965

In contrast to *Chromophobia*, *Operation X-70* (1971) offers a chilling view of the world at war. Servais' principal motivation was the protracted Vietnam War and the role played by the United States. The heavy bombing and use of poisonous gases – who doesn't know the iconic media images of children injured by napalm running for their lives? – reminded the artist of his own fears when, as a twelve-year-old boy, he fled from the bombs that pulverised Ostend to ashes in 1940. With the military sounding name of *Operation X-70*, a new chemical weapon is being tested in the belief that it will cause lethargy and elation. When the bombs fall on Nebelux by mistake, the gas turns out to have a completely different effect. The residents turn into angels and fly over the city in a dazed state. Servais realised that his own graphic techniques and drawing talents did not correspond to what he wished to communicate. As a result, he collaborated with Marc Ampe, who etched the decors directly onto metal printing plates. The film's grey and eerie atmosphere is permeated with the noxious green vapours of the X-70 gas. 'It was important, especially for this film, to circumvent the "cartoon" effect,' says Servais.

The digitally realised film *Tank* (2015) unites two storylines about war through the desire for a loved one. The film is a tribute to the bravery of soldiers during the First World War. Raoul Servais was inspired by a poem entitled *Le Tank* by Pierre Jean Jouve. On 15 September 1916, the British troops attacked a German trench with a device they had been developing in the utmost secrecy – the armoured tank. It was a turning point with major consequences for the troops on both sides of the divide. Servais reveals the ‘man’ behind the soldier. Inspired by Otto Dix, he produced drawings and sketches that were digitised by a young team of animators.

In *Atraksion* (2001), the characters roam through a desolate landscape in prison uniforms. The balls and chains around their ankles prevent them from breaking free, forced as they are to accept their fate. *Atraksion*, together with *Omleiding November* (November Diversion) (1962), is an anomaly in Servais’ filmography in the sense that of it being a live-action film with special effects, but no animation.

Tank, study for a character, 2015



— Pamphlets and parodies

‘I wanted to make something about
the manipulation of the individual
in a world ruled by money.’

In the case of pamphlets and parodies, content takes precedence over design. These are the forms in which the political or socially engaged messages in Servais’ work find expression. No two films are ever the same, because the content is the priority. With its acerbic themes and humour, *To Speak or Not To Speak* (1970) leaves us stammering. In this short film, the media figure asks vague and ambiguous questions about the current political situation. The man in the street barely gets a word in edgeways. Nevertheless, anyone who challenges a personality or opinion runs the risk of being used and suppressed. The typographic styles of the words in the speech bubbles betray the personalities of the characters. This film is a graphic parody – in its purest form – of the manipulation of the individual. Servais wrote the scenario when he was living in San Francisco as a guest tutor, during the giddy days of flower power. This film focuses on language, or rather, the constantly changing typography in which words are packaged. The man in the street is stopped by a reporter and asked for his views on the politics of the day. Text balloons encapsulate the hesitation and doubt of a man without an opinion. Those who do possess a point of view are initially celebrated with flower power, a reward with highly coercive and manipulative properties, or so it seems. This humorous film betrays Servais’ deeper political commitment. As an artist with critical left-wing convictions, he justifiably asks how we should deal with totalitarianism and the ‘silent majority’ – a question that is still relevant today.

Goldframe (1969) is a satire that criticises the generic style and way of filming in Hollywood. 'Why do we imitate it when we also have a graphic tradition here and our own personality?' he asks. In this film, we follow Mr. Goldframe – a nod to *Goldfinger*, the James Bond film that was released in 1964 – a serious 'movie producer' with obvious ambitions. To the sound of exhilarating jazz music, we see a man fighting with his own shadow. This short film, which for budgetary reasons was made exclusively in black and white, resembles the archetypal form of animation that closely resembles comic-strip drawing.



— Bibliography

Philippe Moins, *Raoul Servais*, 1999 (revised and supplemented in March 2018), published in : *Panoramic - Raoul Servais*, Borgerhoff & Lamberigts Gand, 2018

Johan Swinnen & Luc Deneulin, *De Tovenaar van Oostende – engagement, uitdaging en erkenning*, ASP Brussels, 2008

— Raoul Servais filmography

HAVENLICHTEN – Harbour Lights

ft 16 mm / 10' / 1960

Production : Absolon films-Anagram

DE VALSE NOOT – The False Note

ft 35 mm / 10' / 1963

Production : Absolon Films-Anagram

OMLEIDING NOVEMBER – November Diversion

ft 16 mm / 13' / 1962

Production : Raoul Servais

CHROMOPHOBIA – Chromophobia

ft 35 mm / 10' / 1965

Production: Absolon Films-Anagram

SIRENE – Siren

ft 35 mm / 9' / 1968

Production : Absolon Films-Anagram

GOLDFRAME

ft 35 mm / 5' / 1969

Production : Absolon Films-Anagram

TO SPEAK OR NOT TO SPEAK

ft 35 mm / 11' / 1970

Production : Absolon Films-Anagram

OPERATION X-70

ft 35 mm / 9'30" / 1971

Production : Anagram

PEGASUS

ft 35 mm / 8'30" / 1973

Production : Anagram

HET LIED VAN HALEWYN – Halewyn's Song

ft 35 mm / 12' / 1976

Production : Luna Film-Corona Cinematografica

HARPYA

ft 35 mm / 9' / 1979

Production : Anagram

TAXANDRIA

ft 35 mm / 90' / 1994

Production : Iblis Films, Bibo TV&Film,

Les Productions Drussart, Pascino Pictures

NACHTVLINDERS – Nocturnal Butterflies

ft 35 mm / 8' / 1998

Production : Anagram, Atelier aaa Annecy, Channel Four

ATRAKSION

ft 35 mm / 10' / 2001

Production : Anagram, Oeil pour Oeil Lille

WINTER DAYS – journées d'hiver

ft 35 mm / 50" / 2003

Imagica Tokyo

TANK

ft digital / 6' / 2014

Production : Santeboetiek&Lunanime

In pre-production

DER LANGE KERL (2019)

ft digital

— Colophon

Over the course of the past sixty years, Raoul Servais has worked with numerous artists, authors, composers, producers, cameramen and actors.... These include, amongst others:

For animation: Gilbert Declercq, Ronald Libin, Joëlle Servais, Véronique Steeno, Rudy Turkovics, Carl Van Isacker, Willy Verschelde.

For various animations: Eliane Absolon, Véronique Arkosi, Rosy Baert, Marc Braquez, Virginie Bourdin, Annemie Degryze, Marie-Paule Derycke, Paul Demeyere, Zarin Kalk, Vera Mulder, Maria Schramme, Philippe Taboureau, Marinette Vande Vijvere, Geert Vergauwe.

For the sets: Marc Ampe, Joris Bergmans, Norbert Deseyn, Suzanne Maes, François Schuiten, Paul Van Gyseghem.

Music: Ralph Darbo, Benedetto Gighlia, Lucien Goethals, Bo Spaene, Arsène Souffriau, Lucien Van Branteghem, Paul Van Gyseghem.

For the live-action films: Frank Daniel, Lou Demeyere, Pierre Drouot, Werner Edebau, Armin Mueller-Stahl, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Julien Schoenaerts, Walter Smets, Dominique Standaert, Fran Waller-Zeper.

On texts for publication: Luc Deneulin, Muriel Dubrulle, Philippe Moins, Silke Rochtus, Johan Swinnen, Jan Temmerman, Patrick Vanslambrouck, Frans Verstreken.

And countless temporary collaborators, trainees and students from KASK.

This permanent exhibition in Mu.ZEE is the result of a close collaboration between the RAOUL SERVAIS FOUNDATION (a non-profit organisation) and Jacques Dubrulle (President), who oversaw the coordination.

Scenography advice: Rudy Turkovics

Texts: Mieke Mels, Silke Rochtus

Visitor guide editorial: Inne Gheeraert, translation Helen Simpson

Design: Kaat Flamey

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Jos Van Liempt



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Opening times
Tuesday to Sunday
from 10am to 6pm
Closed on Mondays

Permeke Museum
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Opening times
Tuesday to Sunday
01.10 – 31.03:
10am to 12 noon
and 1.30pm to 5.30pm
01.04 – 30.09:
10am to 12 noon
and 1.30pm to 6pm
Closed on Mondays

