

TRACES OF SMOKE

Frans van de Staak

The central character in this low-budget feature is a woman who finds herself facing an interrogator. The nature of the accusation is not revealed. The woman communicates with the interrogator by making drawings which are at first as untidy and chaotic as those of children. Gradually there is however more line in the sketches, until in the last, she shows herself behind a fence. Between the interrogations, scenes have been inserted in which 26 so-called witnesses, (A to Z) are introduced, including both friends of the film-maker and some of the best-known actors from the Dutch film and theatre world.

The characters are friends and acquaintances of the woman, who disappeared from their lives overnight. The witnesses first only appear alone. We see them in their homes answering questions that the viewer cannot hear, but can guess at. These monologues are filmed in a documentary fashion. At the end of each interview the witness leaves his or her home for some kind of waiting room alongside the interrogation room where they eventually all meet. They answer questions from the interrogator but also react to each other's sentiments about the woman. In these scenes, the dramatic tension between the characters and their texts is emphasised by complex camera movements along the witnesses towards the woman.

Within the web of statements which support or contradict each other, a picture of her character slowly emerges in the mind of the viewer. In addition, the interrogator has an ambiguous identity and function. Sometimes he directs his questions at the woman, sometimes he just looks at and listens to the witnesses, acting as a kind of

sounding board. The witnesses also have an elusive role and identity. Who or what they are is left open; they only exist thanks to the sensuality or obscurity of their language. Most witnesses are eventually of the opinion that the woman is guilty, but of what, that remains the question. The only thing of which there is no doubt is that she is an eccentric; a mysterious woman who has freed herself of everything and everyone through one radical deed, but she still can't say 'I'.

Traces of Smoke is based on a play by Lidy van Marissing, who has already helped write two earlier screenplays for Frans van der Staak. Although Van der Staak has not wanted to hide its theatrical origins and has changed nothing in the (literary) texts, the result is primarily an experiment with pure cinematographic means, be it a very accessible one. Frans van der Staak is also known as a cutter and producer for other film-makers. ••

