

## 38. An eye for freedom: Spinoza and Terstall in Amsterdam

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In 2005, in a jam-packed cinema in Tunis, I saw the Dutch movie *Simon* (2004) by Eddy Terstall. The movie was part of a film festival organised by the European embassies, at which each country showcased their best movie from the past year. Terstall was present at the screening, and introduced the film in fluent Arabic and French. He warned the audience that the film – which is about the universal themes of friendship, love and death – may appear rather exotic to many of the Arabic and European audience members, as in *Simon* these topics are explored within the city boundaries of a liberal Amsterdam, where there is a tolerant attitude to sexuality and soft drugs, gay marriage is a commonly accepted fact and assisted dying is a legal option enabling someone who is facing the prospect of unbearable suffering to terminate their life in a dignified way. It just so happened that the Spanish offering at the same festival was the movie *The Sea Inside* (*Mar Adentro*, dir. Alejandro Amenabar, 2004), based on the true story of a quadriplegic who loses his battle with the Spanish legal system and the Catholic church for the right to terminate his life.

### Spinoza's heir

The contrast between the different approaches to the same problem could not have been displayed more clearly. These films show that, even within the European Union, there are still major cultural differences when it comes to morality (including sexual morality) and ethical dilemmas. *Simon* addresses a range of different taboo topics, and is a movie which perhaps could not have been made anywhere but in 20th-century Amsterdam. With the emphasis he places on freedom of speech and lifestyle, Terstall could be considered an heir to the ideas of Baruch Spinoza, the philosopher born in 17th-century Amsterdam, who considered freedom to be an important prerequisite for ethics and politics. Although Terstall never explicitly invokes his fellow townsman, he states in his book *Ik loop of ik vlieg* ('I Walk or I Fly', published in Dutch) that he wants to show through his movies that free thought and action is a hallmark of civilisation that is worth drawing attention to. In that sense, his films can be considered Spinozan treatises in defence of freedom. Below you will find some observations on the natural affinity that exists between these two free-state thinkers.

To start with, both Spinoza and Terstall view Amsterdam as a city that exemplifies the way that freedom and tolerance can lead to great prosperity and a healthy society. Although Spinoza was cut off by his Jewish community in Amsterdam, and his writings were largely published anonymously or posthumously and for a long time were forbidden throughout Europe, in his *Theological-Political Treatise* (1670) he sang the praises of Amsterdam as a flourishing city in which people 'of every nation and creed' lived together in harmony and were equal in the eyes of the law. Spinoza cited Amsterdam as proof of the success of freedom of thought and expression. Although Spinoza did not consider this freedom to be boundless, his philosophy centred on the struggle for freedom of thought and expression. In his films, Terstall shows what the contemporary free state of the Netherlands looks like. In the wake of growing secularisation and the breakdown of traditional religious and socio-political barriers that unfolded from the 1960s onwards, the Netherlands began to look more and more like Spinoza's ideal of the free state. The titular character in *Simon*, played by Cees Geel, is a tough-looking guy with a sharp sense of humour who runs a coffee shop in Amsterdam. Camiel (Marcel Hensema) is Simon's friend and the story's narrator; he is a dentist and, in the course of the story, gets married to estate agent Bram (Dirk Zeelenberg). Simon has two children from his relationship with a Thai woman,

both of whom moved in with him after her death. When Simon learns that he has terminal cancer, he decides not to wait for the end, but opts for a gentle death at a moment of his own choosing, surrounded by his friends, ex-girlfriends and family. Camiel and Bram will go on to look after the children. Terstall's films tend to feature an eclectic cast of people from all different walks of life, ethnic backgrounds and denominations. The urban landscape – Amsterdam's in particular – is the backdrop against which they lead their lives freely and openly.

For Spinoza, freedom was not determined by the principle of free will, a point on which he disagreed with his teacher and contemporary, René Descartes. Spinoza considered Descartes' theory – that there was a specific part of the brain (the pineal gland) that was the seat of free will, and that it was this that gave people the ability to act at their own discretion – to be a bizarre and completely inadequate idea. Spinoza believed that freedom is achieved by arriving at an understanding of the true causes of our emotions, and recognising the necessity of certain events by placing them in a broader context. For example, Spinoza stated that someone who is mourning the loss of something will be less sad when they come to realise that the loss was inevitable. In his *Ethics*, the philosopher gives countless examples of insights which will lead to greater understanding, and by extension to greater freedom. Placing this in a contemporary context, we can look to *Simon* for an illustration of the life-and-death ethical dilemmas that are raised by the debate on assisted dying, a debate that had not yet arisen as such in Spinoza's time.

However, Simon's choice to terminate his own life can be regarded as a Spinozan acceptance of the necessity of dying, and the subsequent freedom to deal with this in a dignified manner. Viewed from this angle, assisted dying is not the imposition of (Cartesian) free will and thereby a denial of the will of God. But making this active choice cannot be seen as a moral duty or dogma either – indeed, this is essential if one is to have the freedom to arrive at a well-considered ethical decision on one's own terms. *Simon* powerfully shows how this choice is made, taking into account the broad range of different emotions involved in the process. A belief in freedom even when faced with non-negotiable situations, a freedom bounded by the vulnerability of human existence but unimpeded by dogmas – that is the second similarity between Terstall and Spinoza's worldviews.

Finally, there is a third similarity. It may seem that both Spinoza and Terstall are making a case for pure individualism, in which everyone is free to do whatever they want. But both of them are aware that freedom is subject to conditions that relate to the individual's responsibility to the collective and the political domain. For example, in his treatise on freedom of speech, Spinoza states – under the adage 'live and let live' – that it is impossible to keep the peace if people are not willing to contain certain areas of freedom in order to ensure that others do not suffer from it. People should be able to express differences of opinion, with other people as well as the state, but these discussions should be driven by rational considerations rather than lies, anger, hatred or other negative emotions that do not lead to constructive thoughts. Ultimately, the purpose of every political entity (which, according to Spinoza, can never be represented by one single person or institution) is to increase individual freedom; in a free society, people are also responsible for looking after each other. Empathising with other people's emotions is a key part of Spinoza's life philosophy. In Spinoza's time, his insights were not exactly part of the political mainstream, nor did they accord with the opinion of the masses. In the year 1672 – referred to in Dutch history as the 'disaster year' – Spinoza was deeply shocked by the gruesome murder of the De Witt brothers. His landlord only just managed to prevent him from taking a placard to the site of the lynching bearing the words '*ultimi barbarorum*' ('you are the greatest of barbarians'). It is difficult to dispel the emotional charge that builds up around freedom, politics and the voice of the people and redirect that energy into the rational sphere. Spinoza was all too aware of this, and was not immune to it himself.

## Fragile balance

Terstall, too, has actively engaged with the political dimensions of an open and free society. A few months after the premiere of *Simon*, another gruesome event took place in Amsterdam: the assassination of filmmaker Theo van Gogh. Van Gogh was known for his outspoken opinions, and had made a movie about the radical side of Islam. He was murdered by a young man who had converted to fundamentalist Islam. In *Allerzielen* ('All Souls', 2004), a collection of short films paying tribute to Van Gogh, Terstall was one of the filmmakers who made a clear case for freedom of speech, free from the fear of violent retribution. In his film *Vox Populi* (2007), he went on to show how politics, the voice of the people and the opportunistic hijacking of populist opinion (as measured by vox populi and constant polls) in political agendas is resulting in a political climate in which frustration, fear and the daily talking points are increasingly putting freedom under pressure. Terstall's protagonist in the film, the politician Jos Franssen (Tom Jansen), ends up withdrawing from politics. The movie is a comment on the wider dissatisfaction that characterises the contemporary political climate in the Netherlands and the rest of the world, where dogmatic forms of religion and political rhetoric driven by negative emotion still make it difficult for Spinoza's ideal of a free state to become a reality.

Freedom continues to be the most important goal. In increasingly pluralistic urban societies, safeguarding freedom will become more and more complicated. Emotions, aroused by conflicting interests and ideas, will always play a part in the pursuit of freedom and, in a globalised world, are running higher than ever, as evidenced by the plethora of recent attacks on free speech and thought. If Spinoza had been alive today, he may also have become a filmmaker: he did, after all, work as a lens grinder and, as a philosopher, was keenly aware of the role the imagination plays in broadening one's mind. After the attacks on the Charlie Hebdo journalists in Paris, he would probably have gone out to demonstrate with a 'Je suis Charlie' sign as well. But he would also have urged people to try to *understand* the anger, hatred and frustration of the attackers – not to condone their actions, but to acknowledge the ways in which freedom and necessity can sometimes meet in the cruellest of ways. In his last movie, Terstall was inspired by the tolerant, spiritual side of Islam. *Meet Me in Venice* (2015) is a road movie about a father (Mauro/ Beppe Costa) and a daughter (Liza/Roberta Petzoldt) who meet for the first time in 28 years. Their journey from Amsterdam finishes in Istanbul with a visit to a dervish ceremony, and makes reference to a poem by the Persian Sufi poet Rumi, in which he advises the reader to 'become nothing'. This film, too, is centred on freedom and the quest to arrive at an understanding of emotions and necessity. But nowhere does Terstall convey a Spinozan message of freedom and tolerance more clearly than at the end of *Vox Populi*. The politician leaves the Netherlands and, looking down from the plane on the flatlands and reflecting on the ideal of a national free state, he says: 'Let it be a country in which you can practice your faith or have no faith, without fear; let it be a country above whose gateways are written the words "male, female, gay, straight, white, black – they are all equal, always"; ensure the economy keeps turning, but without the weak getting caught in the cogwheels.' That this ideal is not easy to achieve, is brittle in places and can only ever exist in a fragile state of equilibrium is another point on which Terstall and Spinoza agree, and is the very reason that the search for the ideal free state is one that should never be given up on.

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