

# B

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## Theatre and Cinema

### *The Films of Alex van Warmerdam*



Alex van Warmerdam in  
*Abel* (1986).

Coming from the world of the theatre, the young Alex van Warmerdam (1952-) occupies a special place in the still not fully developed field of the Dutch feature film. To date he has made only two features, *Abel* (1986) and *The Northerners* (De Noorderlingen, 1992). A small output, as yet; and it is for its quality rather than its quantity that we shall be considering it here. This question of its quality led to fierce debate in the Dutch film world: was it filmed theatre or pure cinema?

The slightly absurdist characters, the lengthy dialogues, the disconcerting camera work and lighting and the more than artificial design occasioned considerable confusion in a film culture in which realism, both in documentaries and features, had always played a major role. But both sides in the debate were agreed on one point: *Abel* and *The Northerners* offered a unique view of what may be called the Dutch character.

Alex van Warmerdam was a complete novice when he became part of the film scene with his debut *Abel*. After studying graphics and going to art school in Amsterdam he seemed destined to become a painter. Perhaps inspired by his father, who was a stage manager, he made theatre his hobby. When he moved to Amsterdam he came into contact with a music group who were developing a kind of total theatre. He joined the group, along with his brothers Mark and Vincent (now an award-winning composer of film music). Under the name Hauser Orkater it was to play an important part in creating an unconventional kind of theatre.

Van Warmerdam's interest in cinema arose from his work on two television films made by Hauser Orkater, which included drawing the storyboards. With the type of logic characteristic of his work, he says: 'On the one hand it became clear how difficult film is, but on the other a kind of simplicity emerged. You shoot something, for example someone going out of a door. Then you pick that up on the other side, splice it together and it looks as if he's going through the door.'

Starting from this optimistic simplicity, Van Warmerdam set to work on the scenario for *Abel*. Out of long dialogues between three people developed the story of *Abel*, the withdrawn son who is too afraid of the outside world to leave home but is finally driven out by his father.

Without going in for detailed psychological explanations ('I don't like psychology. It completely throws me.'), Van Warmerdam gives his characters individual peculiarities. Throughout the film, for example, Abel is preoccupied with cutting buzzing flies in half, while his father wolfs down one copious meal after another on the grounds that: 'We must eat well because we're not working class'. In her own idiosyncratic fashion the seemingly docile mother, Duif, opposes the father's decision to turn Abel on to the streets.

'The smell of sprouts' is an expression in Dutch denoting everything that is petit bourgeois and small-minded, and in *Abel Van Warmerdam* uses an abundance of fish and fishy smells to underline these traits in his characters, in whom they are exaggerated and absurd but still recognisable. He abhors and mocks this small-mindedness while at the same time cherishing it as his inevitable heritage. Both in *Abel* and *The Northerners* there is a fascinating contrast between the almost affectionate depiction of pettiness and the design, in which this man of the theatre turns his slight fear of theatricality into a style.

*Abel* was shot almost entirely in the studio, using completely artificial sets, colours and lighting. Fake snow swirls round an old villa whose windows look out on to ultramodern skyscrapers. The characters always wear the same clothes, like figures in cartoons. Distances are all wrong, and the few locations are turned into sets. The streets are deserted; trees, lamp-posts and cars are carefully kept out of the picture, except for an occasional red Lada. Everything is redolent of cardboard and fakery.

Through their quasi-naturalistic acting Henri Garcin as the father, Olga Zuiderhoek as the mother and Alex van Warmerdam himself as Abel succeed in giving a tragicomic and at times moving logic to this illogical universe.

Van Warmerdam's debut caused a sensation in a national cinema balancing unsteadily between art and commerce, between small-scale, state-funded art films and big, relatively expensive commercial films, also subsidised, aimed at the international market. Other Dutch films released with varying degrees of success in the same year as *Abel* included the Oscar-winning *The Assault* (*De Aanslag*) by Fons Rademakers, the box-office hit

The housing estate in  
*The Northerners* (1992).





The butcher and his wife in *The Northerners* (1992).

*Flodder* by Dick Maas (co-producer with Laurens Geels of *Abel*), the thoughtful *I Love Dollars* by Johan van der Keuken, the absurdist *The Pointsman* (*De Wisselwachter*) by Jos Stelling and the populist *The Good Hope* (*Op Hoop van Zegen*) by Guido Pieters.

With fifteen features and any number of documentaries being produced each year, it was widely felt that the Dutch film industry had come of age. The output was quite large and varied, ranging from commercial hits to artistic gems of high quality. Films such as *The Pointsman* and *Abel* even led to talk of a Dutch New Wave, the Holland School, excelling in caricaturing national traits and in its pronounced Dutch identity. The strong element of caricature gave rise to some concern about what other nations might think of the odd people in the smooth-shaven swampy delta called the Netherlands. But there was general agreement that the Holland School produced original and highly individual films. There was still hope for a small country forced to compete with giant European coproductions.

Eight years on the hopes of a Dutch New Wave have been dashed and the film industry is in deeper trouble than ever. Nonetheless, Alex van Warmerdam scored a success in 1992 with his second feature, *The Northerners*, which won the European Film Prize, the Felix, for best film by a young filmmaker.

Here again a story as improbable as it is recognisable is played out in an artificial setting. This time it is a new, unfinished and typically Dutch housing estate among the polders, fringed by carefully laid out woods. The inhabitants can be called the Postman, the Hunter, the Butcher and the Boy. They are emblems rather than people; their outlines largely determine their characters, as in comic strips and cartoons.

The story develops through their interaction. Outside events seldom affect its progress. In *The Northerners* the world stops at the edge of the woods surrounding the estate. A bus comes and goes but it brings only anonymous extras, the sole sign of life beyond the film location.

The postman (played by Alex van Warmerdam) functions as a *deus ex machina*. He knows what everyone is up to because he reads the post in the

woods before delivering it. The hunter rules the woods and sees himself as the conscience of the community. He tries to hide his impotence and sterility behind inappropriately authoritarian behaviour. His wife meanwhile finds consolation in the arms of the far from impotent butcher, who has taken advantage of various of his employees because his wife is frigid and suffers from religious mania. When she goes on hunger strike, the estate soon becomes a place of pilgrimage which is even honoured with a visit from the bishop.

Once the characters have been described, so has the film. *The Northerners* is not much more than a collection of anecdotes and jokes which serve to reveal Dutch sensitivities and to expose characteristic mores and customs. Sharper, harder, more dryly comic and less theatrical than *Abel*, this film uses measured scenes to make clear what it is like to live in a country that is at once Catholic and Calvinist, petty and narrow-minded, progressive and spiritual. Instead of the smell of sprouts or fish, here we have a palette of familiar odours, such as those of roast meat, unwashed socks, new-mown grass, pine trees and exhaust gases.

For all these reasons, *The Northerners* deserves praise. But when it comes to cinematic qualities – the technique of propelling the story forward through an organic sequence of image and sound in which each scene develops from a previous one and points forward to a later one and in which the action is influenced or strengthened by the camera work – in short, when conventional film criteria are applied, all is confusion.

The camera work in *The Northerners* is more static than ever and has no driving force. The cutting is dull and often slow, the soundtrack plain and barely supportive. Other problems arise from the disappearance of the protagonist (the postman) half way through, the failure of the other characters really to come to life, the lack of a strong plot leading towards the end and the fact that nothing is fully resolved. All these are reasons why we should, in the end, give a negative answer to the question whether Van Warmerdam's work is truly cinematic. But how much does that really matter? He steers his own idiosyncratic and highly inventive course between theatre and cinema, with the dialogue, the anecdote, the always slightly theatrical design and the often archetypal characters combining to create a completely unique picture of a world which appears very Dutch. When that world contains so much that is recognisable and enjoyable, the whole debate as to whether or not it is film pales into insignificance.

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*Translated by John Rudge.*

