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## Zurich

### Sacha Polak

**Producer** Marleen Slot, Dries Phlypo, Jean Claude van Rijckeghem, Karsten Stöter, Benny Drechsel. **Production companies** Viking Film (Amsterdam, Netherlands); A Private View (Sint-Amansberg, Belgium); Rohfilm (Leipzig, Germany). **Director** Sacha Polak. **Screenplay** Helena van der Meulen. **Director of photography** Frank van den Eeden. **Production design** Jorien Sont. **Costume** Sara Hakkenberg. **Make-up** Françoise Mol. **Sound** Miroslav Babic. **Music** Rutger Reinders. **Sound design** Markus Krohn. **Editor** Axel Skovdal Roelofs. **Cast** Wende Snijders (Nina), Sascha Alexander Gersak (Matthias), Barry Atsma (Sven), Martijn Lakemeier (Hitchhiker).

DCP, colour. 89 min. Dutch, German, English.  
**Premiere** 7 February 2015, Berlinale Forum  
**World sales** Beta Cinema

We don't exactly know what happened. But Nina has gone off the rails due to a shocking event, paired with the sudden realisation that she hasn't led the life she thought.

The young woman goes to ground in the anonymous world of motorways and service stations, restless and constantly on the move to avoid ever having to look back. The director follows her movements from as close as possible, a state of closeness that gives the film its texture. Nina and the camera end up in a state of delirium, drifting and drifting away. Nina once again finds herself in a long-distance lorry driver's bed, spends a couple of days with him, he even introduces her to his children, before she ends up back on the road. The montage jumps between different times and makes memories flare up – of easygoing moments, of another man. The scenes are only loosely connected and do not add up to the story of a life. Sometimes the camera lingers on Nina's face, registering the different facets of an all-encompassing grief – running the gamut from absolute hopelessness, anger, to sheer despair. Sacha Polak's film lets the viewer almost take part in the grieving process.

Anke Leweke

## A woman wants to disappear

If you have a dream in which you are chased by a cheetah, it may suggest that you need to be more active in pursuit of your goals. It could also symbolise that something is missing in your life – or that you somehow feel that you are missing the mark as far as your purpose in life goes. Alternatively, a cheetah may appear in your dream when you are trying to move on in life and something keeps bringing you back to the same dilemma.

Once we had wrapped up the writing of *Hemel*, Helena van der Meulen and I soon started dreaming about a new film. The development process of *Hemel* went smoothly and we definitely wanted to continue our cooperation. *Hemel* is about a motherless child. *Zurich* is about a childless mother.

Nina is played by Wende Snijders. Who Nina really is (before Boris's death) is something we barely see in this film. Nina is traumatised right from the start. Who is this woman who is capable of abandoning her own child? I think this film will give rise to moral questions. We are probably more used to the idea of a man abandoning his children than a woman. I want to portray a woman who deeply loves her daughter Pien, but who becomes a threat for the child due to Boris's betrayal and her own inability to mourn. What she really wants is simply to disappear because she's been swept off her feet and can't look after her daughter any longer. I approached this film like a dance film; a film aimed at portraying a feeling from the subconscious – the feeling of wanting to disappear and of not being able to cope with responsibility any longer.

*Zurich* has been split up into the parts 'Hund' and 'Boris'. Both Hund (a dog) and Boris die in the film, and they are both important to Nina. We've had lengthy discussions about the structure of the film. How we would narrate the story in the correct emotional order. I think this is a story full of suspense and I hope the story will leave the viewer with mixed feelings.

The first part of the film shows a woman who suffers a heavy blow when her boyfriend dies, and it considers the question of whether Nina will return home at all or if she'll find comfort in Matthias's arms for good instead. We don't yet know about the existence of a daughter.

The second part shows the blow caused by the news and the incomprehension it gives rise to. What I like is that the end actually feels like an end and that you can look back later and realise that the end is not the end. The film ends chronologically with the death of Hund, the dog – an emotional blow and one that allows her to face Boris's death for the first time. It's a blow that might bring Nina back to Pien, something we deliberately choose not to show, something for the viewer to fill in.

## Not afraid of self-exposure

We've also added scenes with Sven and Paco, without Nina. I did this to try and make *Zurich* a broader story by introducing more characters. The film still has to lean on Nina's experiences, though. Therefore, we carefully picked the moments during which we do not see her but do get on with our story. The scene with Paco and his friends at the cemetery may therefore feel a bit odd, because you want to stick with Nina emotionally, but I must say I love such scenes because they create a bit of friction.

In 2012, *Zurich* was selected for the first residency of the Berlinale. Together with five other filmmakers from different countries I was given the opportunity to work on the film in Berlin for a period of four months. I was provided with a coach with whom I elaborately discussed the screenplay. This was a very inspiring time for me.

Helena showed me the TV programme *24 Hours With...* by Wilfried de Jong, in which Wilfried de Jong and Wende Snijders spent twenty-four hours locked up in a room together. Wende was changeable and fascinating. The idea to use Wende as an actress gave rise to the plan for *Zurich*. We got Wende involved in the script development right from the start. It was quite a risk to let such a demanding role be performed by a singer. For me, it was important to find the similarities between Wende and Nina and to let them become one. I thoroughly enjoyed working with Wende. She really threw herself right into it, from screaming at the top of her voice to complete self-exposure. She is not afraid to be ugly or vulnerable. We found one another in making things we consider important without making concessions.

Sacha Polak

## The reversal of cause and effect

*Zurich* is an artistic feature film of the un-Dutch road movie genre. The starting point was creating a leading role that would fit Wende Snijders like a glove. Besides being a wonderful singer with great presence, Wende is also an intriguing and surprising personality, who adopts such an open and (seemingly?) vulnerable attitude, that time after time the opposite threatens to be achieved. This inner conflict formed the inspiration for this role and this screenplay. A character that balances between attraction and revolt and creates both intimacy and distance in the audience is something I consider ultimately filmic.

In order to incorporate as organically as possible Wende's personality with that of Nina, the fictional leading character, and to increase the feeling of authenticity, we approached Wende right at the beginning of script development. This allowed her to grow along with the screenplay, which allowed Wende to put herself in Nina's position and vice versa.

The idea for the narrative structure of the film arose from the story we wanted to tell: two parts, in a narrative structure that was reversed.

As a result of the non-chronological order the question of 'what exactly happened' remains unanswered until the very end (giving it away would be a spoiler...). The accompanying reversal of 'cause and effect' is more important, though. The first part of *Zurich* ('Hund') shows the consequence of a terrible blow that befell Nina (the effect). The second part ('Boris') happens before the actual blow takes place (the cause). Or rather: the blows – one by fate and the other by her own doing.

That is why the second blow is worse, both for her and for us.

## Placing yourself outside time

This emotional climax of the film, which chronologically happens much earlier, takes place at the end of the film, thus forming the climax of the viewing experience.

The first part of the film ('Hund') follows Nina, running away from emotions that are too intense: love, grief, anger and guilt. Lots of guilt. Feelings that are too contradictory to cope with just like that. It needs time. And she claims this time by placing herself outside 'our' time, as it were. She stops taking part in a world that keeps on turning as usual. Nina lets herself 'be lived', as it were, until the wound begins to heal and she is able to step back into her own life.

'Hund' shows the disorientated wanderings of a woman who has been thrown off balance, a woman and mother (though we don't

know that yet) who cannot or will not return home, by her own doing (but we don't know that yet, either).

All she has brought along is her voice. That is what she falls back on. The only way for her to start giving room to her emotions is by singing and humming, whispering or screaming.

Why Nina is unable or unwilling to return home is revealed in the second part ('Boris') – in retroaction. This part is no whimsical wandering; on the contrary, it unwinds in an implacable straight line from one dramatic event to the next.

Both parts avoid explaining Nina's character psychologically or otherwise. Without explaining her emotions, let alone judging her behaviour, the film wants the viewer to sympathise with Nina, with room for her own mystery, something inimitable that makes her unique and for that reason moves us. Just like in real life.

*Helena van der Meulen*



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**Sacha Polak** was born in Amsterdam in 1982. She graduated in 2006 from the Netherlands Film and Television Academy in Amsterdam with her short *Teer*. In 2009, she took part in the Directors' Lab at the Binger Filmlab in Amsterdam. *Zurich* is her second full-length feature film.

### Films

2006: *Teer/Tar* (23 min.). 2007: *El Mourabbi* (10 min.). 2008: *Drang/Craving* (26 min.). 2008: *Onder de tafel/Under the Table* (40 min.). 2011: *Broer/Brother* (10 min.). 2012: *Hemel* (Berlinale Forum 2012, 80 min.). 2013: *Nieuwe Tieten/New Boobs* (67 min.). 2015: *Zurich*.