



Rots Filmwerk & Netherlands Film Institute Productions (NFI)

present
in coproduction with the NPS

CAN GO THROUGH SKIN

KAN DOOR HUID HEEN

a film by **Esther Rots**

Netherlands 2009 / 35mm / 1:1.85 / color / 97'

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SYNOPSIS

The life of Marieke is transformed by an act of violence. She decides to escape from her hometown and buys a remote and derelict cottage in the Zeeland countryside. By making a new start, she hopes to be able to shake off the violent experience, but the cold and loneliness only add to her feelings of fear and vengeance. With the arrival of summer and a new love, Marieke seems to be regaining strength. But slowly, she loses this grip on her life.

Marieke is a cheerful and carefree woman in her early thirties living the fast life in Amsterdam. Until her boyfriend suddenly leaves her. She wallows in her grief, rings up friends, and in a drunken daze acts as if everything is fine. Then, a pizza delivery-boy breaks into her house and assaults her. A friend comes to her aid, and they escape in a panic.

A few weeks later, Marieke impulsively buys a remote and derelict cottage in the Zeeland countryside. In these new surroundings, she thinks she will be able to shake off her painful experiences. She embarks upon renovating her new house, hoping it will take her mind off things but she feels choked by the wide-open winter environment. She doesn't feel safe in her new home, and regards the friendly and helpful villager John as an intruder. Then when the pizza delivery-boy's verdict turns out to be very mild, she becomes frustrated and filled with vindictiveness.

Through Internet chat rooms she meets fellow victims who, like her, are willing to take matters into their own hands. She rises above being the victim and in this process slowly learns to control her fears.

At the onset of summer Marieke seems to be returning to her former self. Her joint quest for justice with her fellow victims empowers her. She adds fresh energy to the renovation and becomes more aware of nature blooming around her. She even starts a relationship with John, gets pregnant and claims to look forward to having a baby. But without realising it, she loses control of her life.

Director's statement

What is it that the mind lets us experience? What gets through to us; what gets shut out; what resides in the subconscious; how do we fool ourselves? All of my films toy with similar ideas: the tremendous and intense difference between knowing and feeling; the conscious and the subconscious; reality and the auto pilot of everyday life; interpretation and fact – and how these are remembered afterwards. I find such processes deeply fascinating: the wonderful logic of the subconscious.

The bubble of Marieke's carefree urban life is burst abruptly. Everything grinds to a shrieking halt. Without being able to do anything about it, **she is changed from a 'free human being' into a 'victim' in a matter of seconds.**

How do you carry on from there? How do you survive such total mental breakdown? I have tried to provide an answer to these questions by staying as close to myself as I could: what would I do?

I would probably not want to think of it anymore (or so I think). So that is exactly what Marieke does. She shuts it off, leaves everything behind, and starts over, hoping that the hypnotising regularities of renovating her new home will restrict her from other thoughts. However, the hypnosis only clouds her mind further.

The control over her fear gives way to paranoia, and the desolation of Zeelands' landscape, wide and claustrophobically outstretched, starts to affect her in strange ways. She obsessively barricades her doors and windows, hardly ever goes outside, and stops taking proper care of her self. Her way out, is escaping into fantasies where she thrives on being able to control the one that hurt her. This also empowers her enough to deal with John's stampede into her life, with his broad gestures and his closed mind. As their relationship develops and without Marieke being aware of it, John changes everything.

Another question I was trying to come to grips with is: **How do you deal with a legal system protecting the rights of offenders, instead of the victim's? Along with the instinctive, all-consuming feelings of vengeance from which there is no relief?**

I have decided to show as little as possible of Marieke's process of radicalisation and the rigid and violent double life she leads, because Marieke, when she is with John, shuts out this vindictive life to be able to control her conscience. The fact that she finally found a purpose for her feelings of vengeance, results in her regaining control over her life. And near the end of the film we even see shreds of the carefree woman from the time before the drama begins.

I have tried to use **Marieke's point of view** as consistently as possible to tell the story, and to clarify her feelings by trying to make you feel what she feels, by presenting what she sees, hears and feels as a fact.

As a consequence, subjective camera positions are always the most attractive ones to me: using a multitude of points of view, over-shoulders, and subjective perspectives. I want to see what the main character sees, instead of watching her watch.

By shifting to John's perspective only during the last few scenes, we see Marieke a bit more distantly, revealing a woman who is utterly losing her battle and herself.

Spending lots of time on site with **a very small crew**, secluded in the freezing cold like Marieke, gave rise to that special kind of intensity and intimacy required for this film. And by filming chronologically, I was able to alternate between recording days and editing the recorded material, and if needed, to continue writing the script. At that point, the editing partially determined what was further required. In this way, the film was able to grow in an organic fashion.

INTERVIEW with ESTHER ROTS

After three successful short films, *Can go through skin* is your first feature film. Why this transition?

"Mart Dominicus was the *Filmfonds* artistic director, and he came up with the Ten to Watch project. Ten talented filmmakers received a budget for writing a film scenario. I was one of them. Before then, I had never seriously considered it. I even once said that I would never make a feature film. Perhaps it would have happened anyway, eventually, but the chance Mart offered me was the decisive push."

***Can go through skin* is your first feature film scenario?**

"No. At the time I had started working on the scenario for *Now she yells*, a film I will make after this one, together with my brother Hugo and *Circe Films*' Stienette Bosklopper. Writing progress was slow, though. I wasn't used to adhering to scenario rules and structure. I usually write more instinctively. For me, a scenario is no more than a guideline, an aid in filming. The reasons why I write something, I do not want to explain to myself. I'm afraid the magic will disappear if you already start analysing at this stage. It is perhaps similar to poetry. There are poems that are better read personally than having them read to you. This resulted in considerable tension in the writing process, a battle between what needs to be told and what I need to feel and experience in my script as a guide for filming. I wasn't making any progress. To escape this, I started writing the *Can go through skin* scenario. It just took off. I considered it a hobby. For my own enjoyment I allowed myself to do some writing for this, and then I made myself return to *Now she yells*. This turned out to be a very productive approach – for both scripts."

What was the idea underlying *Can go through skin*?

"There was none. It was like knitting: I started out, but didn't know whether it would become a sweater or a shawl."

The story is not based on personal experience?

"No, the story isn't autobiographical. I did use myself as a guideline though: how would I react to something like that? By staying close to myself, it retains reality. I am fascinated by things the mind can't grasp. Experiences you don't really dare to imagine. Such things intrigue me."

What was the starting point?

"The argument between Marieke and her boyfriend. I've had a relationship with my husband for over thirteen years. I have thought about what would happen to me if he were to just leave one day. He lives a different life, and may have thoughts that are completely different from what I imagine him to think. I think everything is going well, but suddenly we appear to have grown apart. I found that an interesting point to depart from."

How did you arrive at the idea of the assault?

"That was just as big a surprise for me as it was for Marieke. I wasn't planning on writing a story about a woman who gets sexually assaulted."

You claim that producing equals prioritising. What did you consider priorities in *Can go through skin*?

"It was about rough outlines. Such outlines matter to the coming about of a film. Where is the money going? I required seventy recording days. This was possible because I also wanted to work with a small crew. However, for example, I also wanted the liberty to adjust the scenario during recording without obligations to explain why, so that my intuitive approach would not be jeopardised. In addition to this, it is crucial for me to have a clear picture of finances, to know what represents what, and what I can substitute things with. "

Why did you choose Rifka Lodeizen for the leading part?

"Rifka doesn't ask why – she just does it. She is diverse, her timing is excellent, and she is able to perform the same scenes differently time and time again. Right until I know where it should be going. As a director, I have two major shortcomings. I do know in advance what things shouldn't be like, but I often don't know what they should be like. This is hard and frustrating – especially for actors. They mainly hear what isn't right, but seldom hear what's good. The second problem is that I am very extreme. So I write a scenario that is very extreme emotionally, and add "you should forget three quarters of it" as a comment. Then, during recording, I tell them how I envision things, and this could very well be the absolute emotional opposite. On set, these two polarities need to be joined. At that point, something magical happens because of the camera or the acting, I can't even point out exactly what it is, and I just know: this is it."

How did you go about preparing Rifka for the part?

"We've talked a lot between us, but we have also wandered outside a lot, for example. I would have her shop as Marieke, for instance. I also wanted her to walk and move like Marieke. Rifka always looks at the ground; Marieke looks at the sky. We have devoted much time to details such as these. This went along very well because Rifka was searching for Marieke just as much as I was. That's pleasant. Rifka searches externally to herself. In the end, how she will emerge doesn't matter to her, but how Marieke will emerge does. Rifka is not hindered by her ego, and that takes a lot of professionalism."

Music plays a very important part throughout the film. Both the atmospheric music in highly varied arrangements, and the songs. Did you consult Dan Geesin on this prior to recording?

"I just said to him that I didn't want any voices. Since he is a singer himself, he decided to misinterpret that. Thought I didn't want to hear *him*. So he wrote some songs regardless and had them sung by Charlie Dee and Anneke van Giersbergen, who used to sing with *The Gathering*. That is very headstrong. He is very clever; he sees things in the film that other people don't notice so easily. That's why I gave him total freedom and let him just run wild. But the film doesn't contain a single note we didn't both want in it. Dan has recorded music using various instruments, but he has also taken sounds from the house. He recorded the sound of a suspended rope, for example, stretched up to the point where it snapped. He also strung iron wire between the attic beams and played it like an instrument. They are sounds with frayed edges and that is why they sound so authentic."

What were your main thoughts during editing?

The first version was an emotional battle of attrition. There were too many small, fractured scenes from Marieke's daily life. Too many internal explosions as well. The idea was to drive the audience just as mad as Marieke during those gruelling winter days, but it didn't work. I could have stubbornly clung to the concept, but that way I wouldn't cope with it myself. I put the film aside for a month, pondered it, and then cut it back to ninety minutes. Now I'm pleased with the film. So much is happening to Marieke already. It's a well-known sequence of events: a woman has a mental breakdown, leaves everything behind, and secludes herself in the country. This framework provides grip and tranquillity to people when they have the film wash over them. There's plenty of intangible elements as it is."

What are your hopes for this film?

"It would be nice if people would be talking about Marieke and the choices she eventually makes."

Esther Rots

Esther Rots was born in Groenlo (Netherlands) in 1972. She lives in Amsterdam. She studied at Academy of Visual Arts in Arnhem, then at the Dutch Film Academy in Amsterdam and

She made three short films screened at renowned festivals and winning many awards. *Speel met me* (Play with me, 2002) and *Ik ontspruit* (I sprout, 2003) were selected on competition at Cannes Film Festival, and *Dialogoefening* (Dialogue exercise no. 1: City, 2005) among other prizes has been awarded the *Gouden Kalf* for best short film and the *NPS Prijs voor de Korte Film*.

Written, directed, edited and produced by herself, *Can go through skin* is her feature film debut.

Can go through skin (kan door huid heen)

2009, 97min.

Dialogue exercise no. 1: City (dialogoefening no. 1: Stad)

2005 / 10min. (script, direction, editing)

I sprout (ik ontspruit)

2003 / 15min. (script, direction, production, editing)

Play with me (speel met me)

2002 / 12 min. (script, direction, production, editing)

Rifka LODEIZEN (Marieke)

Rifka Lodeizen was nominated for the *Gouden Kalf* award in 2004 for her leading part in *Simon* by Eddy Terstall. Among other productions, she also appeared in feature films such as *Nadine*, *Tiramisu*, *Sextet*, *Olivetti 82*, *Villa des Roses*, *Rent a Friend*, *De Boekverfilming*, and *Huffers & Hofdames*. On television, she featured in Telefilms such as *Escort* and *De trein van 6 uur 10*, the short films *Mercedes* and *Beet*, and television series such as *Gooische vrouwen*, *Evelien*, *De band*, and *Wet & waan*. Rifka has performed on stage in *Wina zingt*, *Arcadia*, and *De bittere tranen van Petra van Kant*.

INTERVIEW with Rifka Lodeizen

How would you describe Marieke?

"She's a cheerful and socially minded woman, with a fancy IT job. I'm not into computers at all myself. But at the moment I start playing her, she and her boyfriend have just broke up; she gets sexually assaulted and moves to a remote farmhouse, which she renovates by herself. I think she's tough. In a situation like that, I would be ringing friends or my mother right away. But that's something else that sets Marieke apart: she never has any contact with her family. There's something odd there. What I also like is that, as a viewer, you slowly discover that she hasn't really made proper arrangements for herself."

How did you get this part?

"A few years ago, I had a conversation with Esther about her short film *Dialogoefening*. We connected. I thought: this part is mine. This turned out to be a miscalculation. Later on, I met her at a movie scene party. She told me there was another part for which she was considering me. Those things happen all the time at such parties, but it was nice to hear nevertheless. A while later I was called by Oi Mundo asking me whether I would go to a casting for a feature film by Esther Rots. I was surprised. A casting? I thought that part fitted me like a glove? But I went anyway, twice even, and did my utmost."

Is Marieke an attractive part to play?

"It's a delightful part. There's no fun in playing the soft and agreeable girl. I do that at home sometimes. I know her by now. It's very shallow. This part is so attractive because it's about denial. And it only gets more interesting as she slowly starts to lose track, but doesn't fully realise it herself. There is no reflection at that point. Things have been too hard."

"It is the sort of part you start to crave at some point. In it, you get to show different aspects of the character and of your talents. It is very satisfying to play a psychologically complex personality in a wide range of situations and under various conditions. I very much wanted that. It seemed a lot of fun to do. It turned out to be hard in reality at times though, because I have regularly met my upper limits."

Doesn't that approach interfere with your concentration?

"It turned out not to. The mental process mainly occurred in the minds of Esther and Lennert. It wasn't just shooting from the hip, but a very meticulous search for the proper mood for a certain scene. Camera positions played an important part in that. I could hardly understand the language they spoke to do this. I truly was the one performing it. But it was pleasant for me to be present at the foundations of filmmaking. You don't experience anything of the process seated in a trailer. At times, all the attention would go to a technical flaw. That makes sense when you cooperate. If I experience a temporary malfunction, they have to wait as well. You usually get pampered during shoots. A chauffeur will pick you up at your home and you drive to the set. Lighting is already being arranged when you arrive. You get made up by the makeup artists, while they chat with you to make you feel good. You read your lines again, do a run-through and play the scene. All well and good, but very distant."

How did you prepare for the part?

"I have mainly been talking to Esther. We have gone over the entire script and talked about every scene. But it was also about Marieke's background. About the kind of woman that she is, what she does, where she lives. We've often wandered about town together. Marieke has a posture that is different from my own. She looks up, I look down. She walks differently, a bit like a giraffe, while my walk is more crooked. So I was forced to adopt a different posture. It was a lot of fun and very inspirational to work like that. You get the hang of it after a while."

The assault was not your most difficult scene?

"The main thing I dreaded was running naked in the street after the assault. Production asked whether they should close down the street for that. That would have probably just resulted in more spectators, though. Prior to recording I thought that I would have much to overcome, but when we actually recorded it I just did it and it was over before I knew it."

Were there any other films you've watched for inspiration?

"I did watch *Meisje* and *Rosetta* in order to grasp their style, because I knew that Esther appreciated their raw camera operation."

Wim Opbrouck (John)

Wim Opbrouck has featured in films such as *Manneken Pis*, *Man zkt vrouw*, *Verder dan de maan*, *Meisje*, and *Iedereen beroemd*, besides Flemish television productions such as *Man bijt hond*, *Wittekerke*, *Windkracht 10*, *De Rederijders*, and *Matroesjka's*. Opbrouck completed his studies at *Studio Herman Teirlinck* and played at *Blauwe Maandag Compagnie*, *Het Toneelhuis*, and *NTGent*. There he excelled in theatre plays such as *Ten oorlog*, *Aars!*, *de Leenane Trilogie*, *L. Ling of Pain*, *MacBeth*, *De asielzoeker* (*Louis d'Or* nominee), and *Ik val... val in mijn armen*.

CAST

Marieke

John

Pizzaman

Siska

Aniek

Klaas

Rifka Lodeizen

Wim Opbrouck

Chris Borowski

Elisabeth van Nimwegen

Tina de Bruin

Mattijn Hartemink

CREDITS

Script, Direction, Editing

Dir. of Photography

Composer, Sound designer

Sound

Focus Puller, Gaffer

Casting

Costume

Producers

Production

Coproduction

Supported by

Esther Rots

Lennert Hillege

Dan Geesin

Victor Horstink

Luuk Zonnenberg

Rebecca van Unen

Stéphanie Mariën

Trent, Hugo Rots, Esther Rots

Rots Filmwerk & Netherlands Film Institute

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