

# Alex van Warmerdam's *Borgman* (2013) as a study in visual contrasts

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The main focus of this article is on the setting in the Dutch filmmaker Alex van Warmerdam's 2013 film *Borgman*: the lush forest from which emerge the eponymous Borgman and his gang at the beginning of the film, and to which they return at the end, and the ultra modern, box-like, upper middle-class villa set in a clearing on the edge of the forest that occupies the central part. While this curious bookending appears to confront the viewer with the two opposing worlds of a primordial forest and modern civilization, I argue that the two are in fact intertwined: the evil or the irrational of the forest can erupt at any time, even in the meticulously maintained façade of modern civilization where people live under the illusion of being safe. The central symbols that unite the two worlds are open doors and large windows. While the filmmaker allows the viewer plenty of interpretive leeway, he refuses to be fixed. What my reading makes clear, though, is that the separation between the two worlds is fluid. The symbolic function of doors and windows as portals and passage-ways suggests that one domain readily infiltrates another, resulting in a strange but playful mix of civilization and the primordial, the rational and the irrational, order and chaos, comedy and drama, and, finally, of Calvinism and Catholicism. What this all means is up to the interpreter. However, this much is certain: the opening of a window or a door has consequences, and we better be prepared for who or what we are potentially letting into our lives.

Key terms: Contemporary Dutch cinema; psychological thrillers; absurdism; home; invasion stories; black comedy.

## Introduction

A dog barks.<sup>1</sup> So begins Alex van Warmerdam's film *Borgman* (2013). Then we see a priest, a forest warden, and a blacksmith arming themselves with a spade, a

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shotgun, and a long spike in order to flush out (human) intruders from a forest where they are literally holed up in underground hollows. They escape. A caption that sounds vaguely biblical briefly appears on the screen before the opening sequence, and reads: "*En ze daalden neer op aarde om hun gelederen te versterken.*" ('And they descended on earth in order to increase their ranks.')

<sup>2</sup> As this cryptic motto appears only fleetingly, one might promptly forget it. However, it does contain the plot of the film in a nutshell. Those who descend are the intruders, led by the eponymous vagrant (Camiel) Borgman, and their purpose in the film appears to be the recruitment of new members. They do so by insinuating themselves bit by bit into the comfortable lives of a well-to-do middle-class family – consisting of Richard, a television executive, his artist wife Marina, their three children, and an au pair – that lives in a leafy neighborhood somewhere in the Netherlands. While some characters appear to be receptive to the mysterious cause of the intruders, others are clearly not. The ones who are in the way are systematically killed off. Real violence, however, remains off-screen. While the chase of the intruders by a priest, a forest warden, and a blacksmith in the opening scene has the audience immediately in its grip, the movie does not go back to it and it is therefore never explained. In fact, very little is explained in the film; we never find out who the intruders are, where they come from, what their mission is, or how and why they select their new recruits. We are clearly in the realm of mystery here, and, by all accounts, van Warmerdam would have it no other way.

### Who is Alex van Warmerdam?

Alex van Warmerdam was born in 1952 in Haarlem (Noord-Holland), in an intensely Catholic enclave within a Protestant community. Although the family later moved to Den Bosch (Noord-Brabant), they moved back to Noord-Holland while van Warmerdam was a teen, settling in the port city of IJmuiden, 17 kilometers north of Haarlem. Here he continued to be exposed to the typical kind of 'Calvinist Catholicism' that exists in Catholic enclaves in some predominantly Protestant parts of the Netherlands. Although Van Warmerdam describes his upbringing in multiple interviews as "*netjes, braaf, katholiek*" ('tidy, good, Catholic'; Nas 1999, 34), the solid bourgeois side was always mixed with the artistic, as his father was a set designer who also conducted theater workshops. Alex van Warmerdam himself evolved over time as a Dutch polymath, becoming a celebrated screenwriter, film director, and actor, as well as a painter and a playwright. In 1980 he founded the theater group *De Mexikaanse Hond* ('The Mexican Dog') together with his brother Marc van Warmerdam. In addition to six short films and TV films, he has thus far produced ten feature films, beginning with

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<sup>2</sup> All translations are my own.

*Abel* in 1986 and followed, among others, by *De Noorderlingen* in 1992, *De Jurk* in 1996, *Ober* in 2006, and *Schneider vs. Bax* in 2015. *Borgman* premiered in 2013. It became the first Dutch movie in 38 years to be selected for the Cannes Film Festival the same year, and it was also the official submission of the Netherlands to the Oscars 2014 best foreign language film category, suggesting that the movie was critically well received. However, neither the director nor his films are easy to categorize. As Van Warmerdam writes, directs, and even performs in most of his own movies, sometimes playing the lead role, he is very much an art-house director and an *auteur* in the sense that he is a filmmaker whose individual style and complete control over all elements of production give his films a very personal and recognizable stamp.

In this sense he is far less compromising than his older contemporary, the famous Dutch director Paul Verhoeven, born in 1938. Although Verhoeven is known in the Netherlands primarily for his 1973 film *Turks Fruit* ('Turkish Delight'), based on the novel of the same name by Jan Wolkers, he is best known in North America for directing the Hollywood science fiction films *Robocop* (1987), *Total Recall* (1990), *Starship Troopers* (1997), as well as the erotic thriller *Basic Instinct* (1992). In other words, Verhoeven's years in Hollywood resulted in him becoming more commercial and mainstream. This is also evident in his 2006 film *Zwartboek* / *Black Book*, the first film that he directed following his return to the Netherlands in 2002 (see Buffinga 2014).

Refusing to compromise his artistic vision, Van Warmerdam makes no concessions to mainstream appeal, and he openly criticizes Verhoeven for doing so. This results in considerable hilarity in interviews with Van Warmerdam in which he is asked to give his opinion on Verhoeven's work and openly condemns *Black Book*, such as an interview with Matthijs van Nieuwkerk during the *Nederlands Film Festival* in Utrecht on 29 September, 2006, available on [YouTube](#). Moreover, many of Van Warmerdam's films are veritable family enterprises, which adds to the unique and personal style of his films, and *Borgman* is no exception: his brother Marc van Warmerdam is the producer; another brother named Vincent was responsible for the musical score; the director himself appears as Ludwig, one of the intruders; his wife Annet Malherbe plays the role of Brenda, another recruit in the film; their son Mees van Warmerdam has a small role as an altar boy in the opening sequence. Filmed in Bloemendaal, Noord-Holland, *Borgman* is a Netherlands/Belgium/Denmark co-production. This may explain, in part, why two of the lead actors, Jan Bijvoet and Jeroen Perceval, who play the vagrant Borgman and the husband Richard respectively, are from Belgium, while a third actor, Sara Hjort Ditlevsen, who plays the au-pair girl named Stine, is from Denmark.

Nothing is easy to pin down in Van Warmerdam's work, and this is conscious and part of the director's appeal. In *Borgman* the director blends the realistic and the fantastic, and mixes comedy with drama, the horror genre with the absurd, the uncanny, and the archetypal. The result is a playful mix that is surreal in the sense that it is strange and unusual and has the qualities of a dream. The absurdist quality of his films stands out so much that one finds the word absurdism in many of the critical material written about Van Warmerdam's work, such as Loes Nas' article on the early work *De wondere wereld van Alex van Warmerdam: Absurdisme in de eigentijdse Nederlandse film* ('The wondrous world of Alex van Warmerdam: Absurdism in contemporary Dutch cinema'; Nas 1999), or Peter Verstraten's article *Middle-of-the-road Absurdism: The cinema of Dutch director Alex van Warmerdam* (Verstraten 2014). Verstraten calls the absurdism "middle-of-the-road" because of the director's deadpan humour, whereby a fairly ordinary starting point typically leads to increasingly bizarre ends. In fact, Van Warmerdam is credited for introducing this absurdist quality to Dutch cinema, which, up until he came onto the scene with *Abel* (1986) was dominated entirely by the realist tradition (Nas 1999, 32). This, too, distinguishes him from Paul Verhoeven, who tends to avoid artistic conventions that take us out of a recognizable world.

Van Warmerdam is a liberal borrower of generic conventions, both in terms of narrative genres and film genres, and is loath to use any of them in their pure form. To do so would mean giving up the playful aspect for which he strives. This confounds the viewer and makes the film difficult to 'read'. The director has been quoted as saying: "*Ik wil dat het allemaal niets betekent, maar op een manier dat het iets zou kunnen betekenen.*" ('I want it all to mean nothing, but in such a way that it could mean something.') (Schuhmacher 2013). Van Warmerdam himself is averse to putting in his films explicit (social) messages, psychological motivations, and unilateral meanings (Verstraten 2014, 6, 19). This does not mean, of course, that critics have to let themselves be limited by what artists do or do not want to explain about themselves and their work. However, the director gives viewers so much interpretative leeway that this critic decided to forego the search for social messages and focus instead on the more structural aspects of the film, particularly in terms of its setting. To me the most striking elements in the film are the visual contrasts. For example, the movie opens in the verdant surroundings of a lush forest from which emerge the eponymous Borgman and his mysterious accomplices. The upper middle-class villa, which provides the setting in the central part, is a "box-like compound of ultramodern hard-edged sterility on pristine grounds" (Rooney 2013, n.p.) set in a clearing on the edge of the forest. At the end Borgman and his gang return to the forest from whence they came. While this curious bookending appears to confront the viewer with the two

opposing worlds of a primordial forest and modern civilization, the two are in fact intertwined: the evil or the irrational of the forest can erupt at any time, even in the meticulously maintained façade of modern civilization where people live under the illusion of being safe. The central symbols that unite the two worlds are open doors and large windows.

### The forest

The forest appears dense and lush and green, achieved through close range camera work and a number of travelling shots. The film's lead, Camiel Borgman, looks every bit a drifter or vagabond with his long, straggly hair, unkempt beard, and dirty clothes. Asleep in an underground lair in the middle of the forest, he conjures up "childhood tales of trolls", demons and monsters, or "Stoker's vampires buried with their earth" (Callagher 2014, n.p.). However, the hideout is well stocked and equipped with a primitive but well-functioning periscope made from a steel pipe with an elbow piece. Moreover, this drifter uses a cellphone to try and warn his accomplices Ludwig and Pascal, who are sound asleep in their own underground hideouts, about the posse that is tracking them. The anachronism evoked by the use of a cellphone in a forest with hideouts that appears to be set in the 19th century is van Warmerdam's playful way of working with a wink and a smile, counting on the audience's recognition of the chronological inconsistency. But then again, this forest is closer to civilization than the camera work with which it is portrayed seems to suggest. We are after all in the Netherlands! At the edge of the forest, Borgman comes upon a modern service station with a public restroom where he washes his hands and adjusts his straggly hair.



Figure 1. Borgman appears from his underground lair. Still from movie. Reproduced from [New York Times, June 6, 2014](#).

## The house

As is characteristic of many of Van Warmerdam's films, it is a seemingly small event at the outset that sets the action in motion: "A family having Christmas dinner in *Abel* (1986); a waiter serving patrons in a restaurant in *Ober* (*Waiter*, 2006), or a household watching while a woman is eating her meal, as in *De laatste dagen van Emma Blank* ('The Last Days of Emma Blank', 2009)" (Verstraten 2014, 13). In *Borgman* it is the hobo Camiel Borgman's knock on the door of unsuspecting homeowners. After scouting out a wealthy neighborhood and ringing the doorbell of a large villa in the *Amsterdamse Stijl* ('Amsterdam School') – a style of architecture in brick that was popular in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the Netherlands – he asks the female owner, as if this were the most normal thing in the world, if he could perhaps take a bath at her house as he is quite dirty. She promptly shuts the door, wanting nothing to do with this unsightly vagrant. Undeterred he approaches a second villa that comes into view only after he follows the curve in a rather long driveway. In a point of view shot that shows us what the character is looking at as represented by the camera, the director gives us a panoramic perspective of a large house designed in the austere architecture and international style of modernism, with a concrete, bunker-like exterior, and a visual emphasis on horizontal and vertical lines provided by a flat roof, solid wooden doors, and large windows. The back of the house, as we see later, appears less impenetrable; large patio doors and windows, providing an unobstructed view of the expansive backyard and the woods beyond, break up the concrete walls. However, they also allow anyone an unobstructed view of its occupants, thereby exposing their vulnerability and defencelessness in spite of the pillbox exterior.



Figure 2. Front of the house. Still from movie. Reproduced from <https://grotesqueground.wordpress.com/tag/symbolism/>.





Figure 3. Back of the house. Still from movie. Reproduced from <https://extremelongshot.files.wordpress.com/2014/04/vlcsnap-00081.jpg>.

While it may be another example of Van Warmerdam's humorous and playful ways, it is interesting that the vagrant Borgman has no luck gaining entry into the first house designed in the Amsterdam School style, while ultimately succeeding in finagling his way, albeit through a back door, into a house designed in the modernist style of an international movement that defies the expressive ornamentation associated with the Dutch movement of the Amsterdam School. We do know that this house was purpose built, because, as Van Warmerdam explains in interviews, he could not find anything suitable for the kind of story he was trying to tell (see Driessen 2013). The starkness and austerity suggested by the concrete or stucco exterior along with the straight lines and the right angles of the house that he designed has none of the intimacy and *gezelligheid* ('coziness') that many of us typically associate with the Dutch domestic sphere. However, the style of this house seems to be an apt reflection of the stark and cold lives of its occupants: a middle-class television producer named Richard, his artist wife Marina, their three surly teenage children, and an au pair from Denmark. The atmosphere is tense from the beginning, dominated by the husband's unrepentant racism, which comes to the surface, for example, when they are in the process of hiring a gardener. It also comes out in his fretting about office politics, as well as in the power struggles at home, combined with the wife's feelings of guilt and need for love. Characters rarely smile in Van Warmerdam's films; their facial expressions are either blank or reserved, no matter how amusing or bizarre the situation is. This leaves the viewer mystified. Critics often take note of Van Warmerdam's poker-faced characters and his "deadpan approach" as a director that turn his films, "with their often awkward and/or horrific content, into a mixture of discomfort and dry comedy" (Verstraten, 2014, 16). Absurdity rules. The film shows a world estranged in a manner typically associated with the grotesque; there is a conflict, a clash, or a mixture of the heterogeneous, a

conflation of disparities at every level, the kind of which Wolfgang Kayser writes in his seminal book *The Grottesque in Art and Literature* (1981). In *Borgman*, gardeners are dressed in business suits; an innocent couple – the old gardener and his wife – is killed; their heads are encased in buckets of concrete and lowered to the bottom of a lake, upside down with their legs swaying in the water like aquatic plants; a young girl – one of the three children – kills off a man who is pleading for help by dropping a concrete paving block on his head. Van Warmerdam's film shows not only a world estranged and a lack of harmony in the world as it is presented to us, but also in the viewer's response to this world, as it is no longer recognizable.

### Doors and windows

The link between the evil and chaos that lurk in the forest and the controlled, but uncomfortable domestic atmosphere that reigns within the modernist villa are doors and windows. Doors and windows have many symbolic meanings. They are liminal places in the sense that they are thresholds. However, as thresholds they are not so much places as they are media (Patterson 2011). While doors, like gates or portals, readily admit passage, windows are mainly for visual permeation. They mediate between the inside and the outside, blurring the boundary, bringing the outside in and the inside out. Put differently, windows are "the interface between the ecosystem of the house and the natural ecosystems outside" (Patterson 2011, 5).

A window and a door are opened at the beginning of the film, thereby letting in the intruder and his conspirators. As Borgman approaches the villa, he stops to survey the property, and as his eyes glance upwards a point of view shot shows a woman opening an upstairs window. It is a classic motif in horror tales such as F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1924), based on Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), in which Lucy stands in front of an open window thereby luring in the vampire Count. Spying the woman at the upstairs window provides Borgman with the boldness to ring the doorbell. The husband Richard answers the door but refuses to let him in, even beating him up after the stranger taunts him by suggesting that he is on intimate terms with Richard's wife Marina. While this is an outright lie, Marina nevertheless feels sorry for the man and nurses him back to health, even letting him stay in the gardener's cottage. Bit by bit, Borgman slips into the main house and inserts himself into the household. While the three children and the Danish au pair immediately fall under his spell, the husband Richard seems oblivious to his presence. Marina instantly comes under the mind control of the vagrant as well, "as is affirmed in the scenes in which he sits, naked and squatting over her, recalling Henry Fuseli's 1781 oil painting *The Nightmare*" (Verstraten 2014, 18; see also Callagher 2014). "Just as in the painting, it seems as if the demon



is capable of injecting her with nightmares" (Verstraten 2014, 18), the subject of which is invariably her husband Richard's aggressiveness, such as she had just witnessed in relation to the stranger at the door, as well as the increasingly violent behavior directed against her.



Figure 4. Borgman squatting over Marina. Still from movie. Reproduced from [The Globe and Mail, October 4, 2013.](#)



Figure 5. Henry Fuseli: *The Nightmare* (1781). Detroit Institute of Arts. Reproduced from [Wikipedia.](#)

As a result of these nightmares, Marina becomes more and more suspicious of Richard, eventually telling Borgman that her husband has to die. In the end not only will the husband die of poisoning, but also Marina herself, after Borgman offers her a glass of wine. It appears that the huge hole that the gang of conspirators – hired in the meantime as the couple's gardeners – had dug in the middle of the garden was destined to become the homeowners' watery grave. Meanwhile their children as well as the nanny have joined the gang after being drugged, rendering them instantly docile, and undergoing a small operation, which results in a scar on their back that marks their belonging (Verstraten 2014). Just before the end of the movie, the window blinds are drawn and the back door is locked, thus signalling the end of the movie, while Borgman and his accomplices return to the woods, accompanied by their new recruits.

Van Warmerdam is meticulous in terms of the blocking or prompting of the intended movements of the characters; all movements appear closely choreographed. He is equally painstaking when it comes to their positioning or framing within a scene, and for that reason the *mise-en-scène* is more telling than the psychological motivation of the characters. "The majority of shots [in the film] are static, and when the camera does move it is to follow a character or observe a situation, hardly ever to accentuate a mood" (Verstraten 2014, 10). Most shots, in fact, are both static and long-held, resulting in a fairly slow-paced, almost languorous film. Characters are often seen standing in front of windows, either looking in or inside looking out. Considering the window as a bridge mediating between the perceiving subject and the outside world, this enables them to see without necessarily participating. Persons standing at a window usually appear passive, because they are not really participating; their perspective is that of a spectator (Zocco 2013, 5). In the horror genre, moreover, windows are "typically a means of entrapment" (Caldwell 2008, n.p.), and this applies to Van Warmerdam's film as well, specifically in relation to Marina. A window often frames her character, for example, effectively containing or imprisoning her. The rectangle, which traditionally frames a window, is not a naturally occurring shape, that is, it is not an organic shape but "the shape of utility" (Patterson 2011, 8) and of man's domination over nature. Marina, who is burdened by feelings of guilt and who has been subliminally led to believe that her husband is violent towards her, feels imprisoned and controlled by him. By extension, therefore, the whole house becomes her prison.

One could draw an analogy between a window and a film frame in the sense that the many static or still images of characters framed by doors and windows ultimately make up the complete 'moving' or 'motion' picture of *Borgman*. Van Warmerdam, who was a painter prior to becoming a director, also produced numerous concept paintings and drawings during the pre-production of

*Borgman*, and these provide a fascinating look and an interesting insight into the artistic process of making this film. All of the images were created so that Van Warmerdam could provide a visual example to his art direction team. These concept images lend to the film a very painterly quality and also “helped him begin to create the dark, unnerving spirit of the film before the filmmaking process began” (Sharf 2014, n.p.). Looking at these concept paintings side by side, one again receives an impression similar to that of a ‘moving’ picture.



Figure 6. Alex van Warmerdam. Concept painting for *Borgman*. Reproduced from [Sharf \(2014\)](#).



Figure 7. Alex van Warmerdam. Concept painting for *Borgman*. Reproduced from [Sharf \(2014\)](#).



Figure 8. Alex van Warmerdam. Concept painting for *Borgman*. Reproduced from [Sharf \(2014\)](#).

The rectangle that traditionally frames windows and doors is also the shape that frames most paintings. Like windows and doors, a painting is a kind of threshold; it can give us access to another world beyond (Patterson 2011, 10). Interestingly, Marina, like the director Alex van Warmerdam, is a painter. In one scene, we see her working on a painting in her home studio, liberally – and passionately – running rags dipped in paint over a huge white canvas, thereby creating a wild visual composition of abstract shapes, forms, colours, and lines. It is her creative way of going beyond the frame of the canvas and transcending her own boundaries; creating art appears to be her only escape from a way of life that is otherwise quite constricting.

Patio doors are a cross between a window and a door. They provide convenient access while creating unimpeded views that flood interior spaces with natural light. There are two of them at the back of the villa, and these are in turn flanked by large floor to ceiling windows, virtually creating a glass wall that is made possible today by the use of modern construction materials such as concrete and steel. A glass wall erodes the boundary between interior and exterior, the private and the public (see Patterson 2011, 13-14). The patio doors in *Borgman* are wide open throughout the film, allowing easy access from the civilized but constricting and claustrophobic domestic space into the natural and organic but dangerous world of nature beyond, as well as the other way around.

The space between the two worlds is the extensive garden and lawn, which is ripped up by Borgman. The large hole they dig with a piece of heavy equipment is destined to become Richard and Marina's grave: both die of drinking red wine poisoned by Borgman and their bodies are unceremoniously tossed into the hole. Interestingly, the little cottage that becomes a temporary abode for Borgman and his minions sits at the edge of the lawn and the woods beyond. The structure is quaint and cozy, with intimate spaces and small paned windows, which are in direct contrast to the open concept main house with its large

expanses of windows. It is also painted in dark colours and obscured by surrounding trees and shrubs, so that it blends into the natural environment.

What we have, therefore, are three types of dwellings: the underground hideouts of the intruders in the woods, where they are virtually one with nature, the ultramodern villa and the expansive lawn on which it sits, and the quaint little cottage that is situated on the threshold between the two. Having found their new recruits – the three children and the au pair – and disposed of those who are in their way, we see the gang at the end of the movie following the path that runs along the cottage and returning to their hideouts in the woods.

### Calvinism

In interviews related to his work, Van Warmerdam often responds to questions about growing up in a Catholic enclave within an area that is largely Calvinist (Driessen 2013; Nas 1999, 34; Schuhmacher 2013; Verstraten 2014, 6, 21). He speaks of Calvinism and Catholicism not in a religious sense but rather as a worldview, a way of looking at the world. According to the director, the “Calvinist form of Christianity in which Dutch culture is embedded, [...] is a particularly modest and restrained tradition” (Verstraten 2014, 6). This restraint informs his style of filmmaking throughout. “*Scheppen is schrappen*” (‘creating is deleting’) (Driessen 2013), as one critic writes in relation to Van Warmerdam’s filmic technique, which sees everything pared down to its essence: the shots are static, the characters appear emotionless and poker-faced, almost like marionettes (see Driessen 2013), they do not gesticulate much, there are no flashbacks, psychological motivation is negated, *mise-en-scène* is paramount, movements are choreographed, the humour is deadpan, and real violence remains off screen. Moreover, as the family does not receive many visitors and their home is isolated, the number of characters is kept to a minimum, giving the movie a stage-like quality as if it were a play. Sobriety and restraint also characterize the secluded and austere modernist villa with its right angles and horizontal lines, its square windows and large expanses of glass. However, the occult and often macabre content of this supernatural home invasion story and psychological thriller is at variance with the Calvinist tradition of restraint and sobriety and more in line with the imaginative spirit that is usually associated with Catholicism (see Callagher 2014; Schuhmacher 2013; Verstraten 2014, 6).

While it is awfully tempting to ascribe a particular meaning to all of this, Van Warmerdam reminds the viewer that he has a fear of unilateral meaning. He is more interested in the problem than in the solution. This, too, runs counter to the hermeneutics of Calvinism, whose goal it is precisely to suppress the possible ambiguity of images or texts, preferring to reduce things to only one, preferably very rational meaning (Verstraten 2014, 6). Broadly speaking, while the Pro-

testant imagination is viewed as dialectic, thinking in terms of either/or and stressing the unlikeness of things, the Catholic imagination is analogic, seeing things in terms of likeness and unity, welcoming paradox. Van Warmerdam embraces paradox as well. Instead of unilateral meanings, his films evoke “accidental” meanings, thereby guaranteeing indeterminacy (Verstraten 2014, 6). In other words, he encourages the viewer to look for meaning not in the obvious places, such as, for example, in seeing the movie *Borgman* merely as a critique of modern suburbia, class warfare, or the egoism and arrogance that often go hand in hand with an excess of wealth and prosperity in the western world, but in places that he might not even have thought of. This is in the final analysis also the reason for his refusal to abide by generic conventions, as these would limit the directions he could possibly take. Van Warmerdam's world is familiar and strange at the same time. All we can do is watch the film with an eye that acknowledges the banality, the tragedy, and the absurdity of everyday life, but while doing so our eyes remain glued to the screen and we cannot help but laugh (see De Voogd 2013).

### **Homo Ludens**

In interviews, Van Warmerdam always comes back to the playful element in his work, as if he had taken a page out of the 1938 book *Homo Ludens* by Dutch historian and cultural theorist Johan Huizinga. Van Warmerdam may not have built an entire theoretical edifice on the importance of play in the generation of culture and society, as Huizinga did, but he does foreground the element of play in all of his films. *Borgman* is no exception, as critics and bloggers have pointed out (De Voogd 2013; Driessen 2013; Schuhmacher 2013; Verstraten 2014, 16), since the ludic approach imbues the entire film, from the manner in which he plays with genre conventions or religious and moral themes, to the way he presents us with a world that is completely upside down. Moreover, Borgman himself explains to Marina that “he wants to play”, and he later reminds her that he is “playing the gardener”, thereby calmly carrying out the elaborate and absurdist schemes that are the foundation of all the black comedy in the film.

This playful and absurdist element is brought out most clearly, one could argue, in the very scene that some critics dismiss as “*onbegrijpelijk*” (‘incomprehensible’), “*gevaarlijk*” (‘dangerous’) (De Voogd 2013, n.p.), as “superfluous” and “out of sync” (Callagher 2014, n.p.), or “more pretentious than illuminating” (Rooney 2013, n.p.), namely the enigmatic playlet that is performed by Borgman's associates (Ludwig, Pascal, Brenda, and Ilonka) for an audience consisting of the titular hero, the two homeowners, their three children, and the au pair. It is staged on the lawn between the house and the forest towards the end of the movie, shortly before the married couple dies from poisoning. The audience



is symmetrically arranged, with the back of the house with its large expanses of glass clearly visible behind them, and the wooded area acting as a backdrop. Marina, flanked by Borgman and by her husband, is sitting in the second row, and the children and the nanny are sitting in the front row; while the second row underscores the love triangle and the tension between the two leads who are about to be picked off, the poker-faced new recruits are seated in the first row.



Figure 9. *Watching the playlet*. Still from movie. Reproduced from <http://www.blu-ray.com/movies/Borgman-Blu-ray/95421/>.

The playlet itself is a dance routine of sorts performed to the sound of a rather haunting melody along with percussive sounds consisting of regular beats or ticks reminiscent of a metronome. The music is by the director's brother Vincent van Warmerdam. The performers are the team that clean up after Borgman's crimes, and consist of the two chilly female disciples Ilonka, a ballerina, and Brenda (played by the director's wife), dressed in what appears to be a dirndl and apron, as well as Ludwig (played by the director) and Pascal, both dressed in ballerina skirts and tights, sneakers, and a suit jacket.

The dance is vaguely pantomimic and consists of three very short but distinct segments: in the first part, the two male 'dancers', each carrying a stick with a string or strip of cloth, spin the ballerina around as if she were a spinning-top; in the second segment, we see them probing and prodding with the same sticks what appears to be a human being (Ilonka, we presume) covered by a cloth tarp; in the third segment we see Brenda wearing a dirndl and moving a stick with a long strip of cloth attached to it in a twisting or spiralling pattern. The performance ends with Ilonka walking across the stage with the two male dancers, as if they were dogs on a leash, each carrying and hiding behind a black canvas or storyboard. While the German words "*ICH BIN*" are written in white capital



lettering on the first storyboard, we read "*WIR SIND*" on the second one. The short play ends with the performers taking a bow.



Figure 10. Scene from the playlet. Still from movie. Reproduced from <http://basementrejects.com/review/borgman-2013/>.

One could be tempted to interpret the cryptic words on the storyboards as an introductory lesson in the conjugation system of German irregular verbs, specifically the verb 'to be'. However, as they also happen to be the first person singular and the first person plural of this verb, along with the multiplication effect that is implied, one is reminded of the pseudo-biblical motto that briefly appears on the screen at the beginning of the movie: "And they descended on earth in order to increase their ranks." The words on the storyboard therefore seem to be a veiled reference to the conspirators' recruitment policy that the viewer might almost have forgotten. The fact that the text is in German may well be another directorial trick, and an attempt to explain it can only land the critic in hot water. What is clear, it seems to me, is that the allusion to the ancient children's game of "*tollen*" or "*tolspele*n" ('spinning the top') refers to the manner in which Borgman and his gang toy with the homeowners; while the former are the 'spinners', the latter are the 'spinning tops'. Moreover, the dancer in the first segment reappears, it seems, as a corpse covered by a tarp in the second one, while the third segment shows a 'spinner' without a 'spinning top'. The more sinister aspects of this game are softened only by the absurdity of the performance, and, in equal measure, by the gallows humor of the performers or perpetrators.

In the final analysis, the stage and the performance are a 'play within the film', a kind of synopsis of the movie's plot. It is also a *mise en abyme*, a kind of self-reflection or introspection that the movie's leads may or may not have understood as a veiled reference perhaps to their own fate. The surreal dramatic piece, finally, is another kind of window, one that gives us, the viewer, some insight into Van Warmerdam as a directorial trickster. His ludic approach to filmmaking makes him toy with us as much as he toys with his characters. Through the economy of its style, the paring down to the essentials, the symmetry, choreography, and framing in terms of the positioning of his characters, the playlet re-enacts on a symbolic level what the characters have gone through in the film, and, by extension, what the viewer has gone through while watching it. Finally, the staging of the performance itself on the lawn that separates the man-made world – with its straight lines and right angles – from the elemental or natural world beyond reinforces the notion that the primordial can erupt at any time.

## Conclusion

While the filmmaker allows the viewer plenty of interpretive leeway, he refuses to be fixed. What my reading makes clear, though, is that there are two opposing worlds in the film: the ancient and timeless world of the forest in which evil creatures reside, and the man-made contemporary world inhabited by people who are not really all that agreeable or pleasant. The separation between the two worlds is fluid. The symbolic function of doors and windows as portals and passageways suggests that one domain readily infiltrates another, resulting in a strange but playful mix of civilization and the primordial, the rational and the irrational, order and chaos, comedy and drama, and, finally, of Calvinism and Catholicism. What this all means is up to the interpreter. However, this much is certain: the opening of a window or a door has consequences, and we better be prepared for who or what we are potentially letting into our lives.

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### ***Borgman* d'Alex van Warmerdam (2013) comme étude de contrastes visuels**

Cet article se concentre sur le décor du film *Borgman* (2013) du cinéaste néerlandais Alex van Warmerdam: la forêt luxuriante dont Borgman et sa bande sortent au début, et où ils rentrent à la fin, contrastée avec la villa de haute bourgeoisie, sorte de boîte ultra-moderne, qui se trouve dans une clairière à l'orée de la forêt où se déroule la partie centrale du film. Ce curieux sandwich visuel semble confronter le spectateur aux deux mondes opposés, la forêt primordiale et la civilisation moderne, mais je prétends que les deux sont en fait entrelacés; le mal de la forêt, ou son irrationnel, peut éclater à tout moment, même dans la façade soigneusement maintenue de la civilisation moderne où les gens vivent dans l'illusion d'être en sûreté. Les symboles centraux qui unissent les deux mondes, ce sont les portes ouvertes et les grandes fenêtres. Le cinéaste permet au spectateur une grande marge interprétative et refuse d'être fixé, mais ce que ma lecture rend claire, c'est que la séparation entre les deux mondes n'est point étanche. La fonction symbolique des portes et des fenêtres comme portails et couloirs suggère qu'un domaine pénètre facilement dans l'autre, créant un mélange étrange mais enjoué – la civilisation et le primordial, le rationnel et l'irrationnel, l'ordre et le chaos, la comédie et le drame, et enfin le calvinisme et le catholicisme. Ce que tout cela signifie, c'est au spectateur de décider, mais une chose est certaine: ouvrir une porte ou une fenêtre, cela a des conséquences, et nous ferions bien de nous préparer pour tous ceux que (ou tout ce que) nous risquons de laisser entrer dans notre vie.

### **Alex van Warmerdam's *Borgman* (2013) als een studie in visueel contrast**

Dit artikel behandelt de setting in de film *Borgman* (2013) van de Nederlandse cineast Alex van Warmerdam: het welige bos waaruit

Borgman en zijn bende tevoorschijnkomen aan het begin van de film en waarnaar ze aan het einde terugkeren, en daar tegenover de ultra-moderne rechthoekige welvarende villa op een open plek aan de rand van een bos die een hoofdrol speelt in het centrale deel van de film. In eerste instantie lijkt het alsof deze curieuze omkadering de kijker vooral confronteert met twee tegengestelde werelden, die van het oerbos tegenover de moderne beschaving. Ik betoog echter dat de twee in feite in elkaar overlopen: het kwaad of het irrationele van het bos kan op elk moment tevoorschijn komen, zelfs in de zorgvuldig onderhouden façade van de moderne beschaving waarin mensen leven in een illusie van veiligheid. De centrale symbolen die de twee werelden met elkaar verbinden zijn open deuren en grote ramen. De filmmaker geeft de kijker meer dan genoeg vrijheid, maar weigert tegelijkertijd zelf in een hokje gestopt te worden. Mijn interpretatie laat zien dat de scheiding tussen de twee werelden vloeibaar is. De symbolische functie van deuren en ramen als toegang en doorgang suggereert dat het ene domein het andere gemakkelijk infiltreert, met als resultaat een bevreemdende maar speelse mix van het beschaafde en het primitieve, het rationele en het irrationele, orde en chaos, komedie en drama, en tenslotte Calvinisme and Catholicisme. Wat het allemaal heeft te betekenen moet de kijker zelf maar uitmaken. Zoveel is echter duidelijk: het openen van ramen of deuren heeft consequenties, en we moeten maar beter voorbereid zijn op wat of wie we mogelijk in ons leven toelaten.