

## INTERVIEW WITH NANOUK LEOPOLD



DIRECTOR OF “COBAIN”, A  
FEATURE FILM SUPPORTED BY  
EURIMAGES

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### WHAT BROUGHT YOU TO FILMMAKING?

I started at the art academy in the Netherlands after I had just left high school. There I worked with different materials and I always wanted to combine them. The photography teacher kept saying that I had to choose just one picture but I wanted to make whole series of images. When I found film, it was a very natural way to combine everything I liked working with: language, form, rhythm and sound. But it took a while for me to come to this conclusion.

**I READ FROM PREVIOUS INTERVIEWS THAT YOUR PRODUCER, STIENETTE BOSKLOPPER, WROTE THE SCRIPT OF “COBAIN” AND CAME TO YOU FOR ADVICE ON A YOUNG DIRECTOR TO TAKE UP THE PROJECT, BUT INSTEAD YOU DECIDED TO DO IT. WHY IS THAT?**

It might sound strange, but I saw all these colours when I first read the script. I had just finished a film that was very grey, dark and quite sad. I thought the “Cobain” script was very powerful. I was attracted to its

rhythm, and the prospect of making something fresh and young. It has this boy as the lead who disposes of all this energy to solve the world and his own problems. It really touched and inspired me. Stienette never thought I would want to do something like this. Yet for me, it was also a chance to start working with someone else’s material – not something I wrote myself – and it felt like the right moment to do that.

**I FIND THERE IS A SORT OF CONTRADICTIONARY AESTHETIC TO “COBAIN”. SOMETIMES IT USES SOFT PASTEL COLOURS AND OTHER TIMES THIS RED DARKNESS. HOW DID YOU COME UP WITH THE CINEMATIC PALETTE?**

When I start working on a film, my production designer Elsje de Bruijn and I go through many books of pictures together. They can be actions or colours or anything that we find that has a touch of what we are thinking about for the film. We end up with a whole library of pictures. This is the starting point. Next, I show this

to the director of photography, Frank van den Eeden, and he comes back with his vision of what he sees, and then the three of us select the pictures to make this little book. When we start making the film, we can always go back to this book. Locations are also very important to me, and I spend a lot of time on finding them. If you have a good location, then you have a lot of freedom and can do anything there. At the same time as I was looking for locations, I was doing tests with my director of photography. We found that if you shoot the streetlights at night, they turn red and it makes the image very intense. We also found other lamps that make it more yellow and other types that create other effects. When we saw the red we knew immediately that it was something we wanted to have in the film. That is also because we had this book beforehand and we were already thinking about this colour. The red in this film is its flesh and blood. You can see this even in the opening titles as a sort of premonition of where we are going and what the film is about. It's all about this birth and how you come into the world and how that can be unsafe. Cobain has never been safe. He entered the world without a mother who could take care of him.

### **BIRTH IS ONE IMPORTANT THEME IN "COBAIN". WHAT OTHER THEMES DID YOU WANT TO EVOKE?**

Yes, birth is the starting place for Cobain. This is also because, in wanting to save his brother, he is saying that he would have liked somebody to save him. In saving his brother, he is really also saving himself. I also like the change of position; that the mother becomes the child and the son becomes the parent. Cobain thinks he has to make decisions in order for them all to survive. So they have changed roles. If you think about everything they do, there is a sense in which she is more childish than her son. "Why do you worry about me? I don't worry about you, you do your thing and I do mine, we'll be fine," she says to her son. Yet she also has to be a real person. It's not like she is inherently bad, she's just not aware of her role as a mother. She doesn't see it this way. I also enjoy the part where we got to work with homeless people, which is in the scene in the park where they have the barbecue. We have this homeless foundation in my city, in Rotterdam, which is where we shot the film. It

is a place where people can go if they are homeless or have problems. You can go for coffee during the day and they try to take care of you. We asked the people there if they wanted to be involved in the film. Many of them ended up in the film, which is really nice. It gives it this touch of reality.

### **HOW DID YOU GO ABOUT CHOOSING THE MAIN ACTORS FOR THE FILM?**

My producer already had the actress in mind for the part of Mia (Naomi Velissariou). I saw about two other girls to make sure, but when I saw Naomi, I knew she was definitely the best person to take on the role. Mia has to stay agreeable. The viewer should love her, even though she is difficult and really harsh to her son. You should understand why Cobain likes hanging out with his mother. She is fun to be with in various ways, and she is also open. It's not just dark and heavy. I thought Naomi could give this woman this complexity of feeling.



Cobain @ Victor Arnolds

### **WHAT ABOUT FOR COBAIN? I HEARD THAT, INTERESTINGLY, HE WAS NOT AN ACTOR AND THAT YOU WENT INTO SCHOOLS TO FIND HIM?**

I wanted a boy aged 15 and usually they are not professional actors with long careers. Sure, there are some, but they tend to come from a certain type of family. I wanted someone from Rotterdam, and I wanted someone you could believe has experienced a rough way of surviving. Of course Bas (Bas Keizer) is actually from a really sweet family! We went into schools, sports facilities and anywhere you can find young people, looking for someone who would go on this adventure with us. It is a hard job being the lead actor, performing in every scene and carrying the film. We saw 500 boys and a 100 of them I tested myself.



And then eventually there was a little group of 12 to 15 boys we worked with over a few weekends. This way we could see them relax in front of the camera. You see if they are willing to play along and if they really want it. They grow so fast when they manage to relax. These boys were all very good, and they are all in the film as well. They are in the foster care home or in the park. However, Bas had this quality in his face, which gives the sense that he is between a grown man and a boy. There is a softness in his face that is very important for the part.



Cobain @ Frank van den Eeden

**THERE IS ALSO A STRIKING AND MUCH TALKED ABOUT SCENE IN THE FILM WHERE COBAIN PUTS MAKE-UP ON AND HAS SEX FOR THE FIRST TIME. WHAT WAS THE THINKING BEHIND THAT SCENE?**

People ask me about this a lot. There is not just one way to read the scene. It is not outspoken about what it means. However, it is showing a child in a new home and he is copying the behaviour of the new people around him. He is copying the behaviour of the pimp, for instance by running around with these girls on the back of his scooter – but he also sees the women doing their make-up every day and he plays along with that too. Somehow, he’s trying to feel for himself what the others experience. In a strange way he is both the pimp and the customer in that moment. He is also vulnerable because he does something that he’s not ready to do despite the yearning to try. He’s exploring who he is. For me, it is important to have these kinds of scenes in films – where there is not just one interpretation. People really want to know what it means. I think especially if the rest of the film is really clear, you need to have these moments in between.

**DIRECTORS OFTEN SAY THAT MAKING YOUR OWN FILM IS LIKE RAISING A CHILD. DO YOU THINK THAT IS TRUE?**

Yes, if you asked me which of my films is my favourite, I could not choose one. Now I have made six films and, in this way, they are my children. I could not say one is sweeter or better than the others.

**IT SEEMS THAT “COBAIN” IS VERY DIFFERENT FROM YOUR PREVIOUS FIVE FEATURE FILMS, AND YET YOUR OTHER FILMS ALSO REVOLVE AROUND QUIRKY FAMILY CONNECTIONS. ARE YOU PLANNING TO CONTINUE ON THAT KIND OF ROUTE OR ARE YOU THINKING OF BREAKING AWAY?**

Well, every story has its own environment. I had the farmer’s life in “It’s All So Quiet”. In “Cobain” I had the lives of pimps and drug addicts. Now I want to go back to having a female lead. I am writing a story about a woman in her late 40s, who is a hunter. She lives in Canada with her old father. It’s also about the community where she lives, in this little village next to a huge forest.

She trains men who want to go and have a weekend of hunting. She takes them into the woods and hunts with them. That’s the environment where the story will take place. Basically, I just need to go to the woods. Sometimes, it’s just a very small thought that keeps coming back and I know I have to place my story there.

**THE FACT THAT IT IS A FEMALE LEAD IS INTERESTING TO ME BECAUSE BOTH OF YOUR PRODUCERS FROM “COBAIN” ARE WOMEN. DO YOU CONSCIOUSLY SURROUND YOURSELF WITH WOMEN IN YOUR WORK?**

Not consciously, but yes, unconsciously. If you find someone you work well with, it is very rewarding to continue working with them because you acquire this vocabulary together through experience. I never work so much with other producers. I think it must have a meaning. In the beginning, people always asked me: “Why do you have a woman as the main character?” I thought it was such a strange question, because, why not? And yet, it kept coming back. Now I’ve made two films with male leads and, interestingly, no one bothers to ask. Nobody asked me: “Why do you make

a film about a boy or man?” It is not as easy to have a woman as the main character. It is still perceived as special or different. Maybe that’s also why I like to work with female producers. They grasp female leads better, although I also work very well with men.

### **HAVE YOU EVER FELT DISCRIMINATED AGAINST AS A FEMALE DIRECTOR?**

I went to Sydney this year for Europe! Voices of Women in Film. I was part of this group of young women presenting films from all around Europe. When it comes to the Netherlands, I think it’s one of the the most emancipated countries. We probably have the most female directors. So, I’ve always been aware that discrimination could happen, yet no one has put me down nor not taken me seriously. However, when I went to Sydney and we talked about this, I heard really different stories. For instance, one woman was told by her teacher: “You will get married and have kids and drop out, so don’t do it. You’ll take the place of a man.” In other countries, it can be much worse. I was also told that if you make art-house films, which are not very expensive, then men don’t care. I think that’s true. If you go where the money is – if you make this huge film with an enormous budget – then I think it is more difficult to do that as a woman. There will be so many more people testing you and questioning your capabilities. But I’m sort of in the corner and, because of that, I am free. They don’t care, and they aren’t interested either.

### **IS THERE SOMETHING YOU’D LIKE TO SAY ABOUT “COBAIN” THAT YOU HAVEN’T HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO SHARE IN OTHER INTERVIEWS?**

The other day, I spoke with a woman who runs a house for children that don’t live with their parents. She recognised a lot of what happens in “Cobain” from what these children live through on a daily basis. I wish I could show the film to each and every one of them. What touches me at the end of the film is when you see Cobain back in the Residential Care home with the other boys. They are all together on the grass, and you realise that all of these children have a story. Cobain is just one of them. It’s amazing to think that they are so young and they have to live through all these very difficult situations, such as parents killing themselves, neglecting them or being drug addicts. I think of all parentless children that each have their own story. We should look after them. I went back to that homeless

foundation in Rotterdam to show “Cobain”. You could tell all the young people were immensely pleased. They were proud that someone took notice of them, of a different kind of life.