

In his debut feature, positively bristling with controversial emotions, Dutch director Martijn de Jong captures the multi- faceted process of mourning in an unusually picturesque manner.



*Fedja van Huêt and Thekla Reuten in Narcosis*

Losing a loved one is always traumatic, no matter the circumstances. But what if the person does not leave a single material trace behind? Not even anything to be buried – just memories? The complex and difficult-to-distinguish five stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance) form the backbone of Martijn de Jong's intimate and well-judged *Narcosis*, which has just competed in the International Competition of the Thessaloniki International Film Festival and went home with a Special Mention and the Audience Award. Meanwhile, it has also been announced as the official Dutch submission for the Oscars.

Today's first-world men who need to prove their masculinity but have never had the chance to fight in a war opt for extreme experiences: risky activities they pay for in order to feel like the conquerors of the world. That must have been the case for John (Fedja van Huêt), a happily married man who follows the calling of his Dutch ancestors to explore the unknown, leaves his fairy-tale house with his beloved wife Merel (Thekla Reuten) and two

kids (Sepp Ritsema and Lola van Zoggel) behind, and goes off to dive into some exotic waters somewhere. But he never comes back, and nor is his body ever found. Does the *Narcosis* of the title refer to the dreamy state of mind that brought him there, to the ghostly phantasms that will start to overwhelm his loved ones after his disappearance, thus replacing his absent remains, or to Merel's sporadic seances in the hope of contacting dead people? Whatever the answer is, the fable that follows is delirious enough in order to justify such a choice and nurture fruitful associations in the viewer's imagination.

At first, one gets befuddled in one's attempts to separate now from then, and the truth from the imagined, as the narration constantly jumps back and forth between past and present, recollections and daydreaming. Gradually, it all starts to make sense as the viewer's gaze gets absorbed into Merel's stream of consciousness, in which she is trying to wake up from this nightmare while her widowhood and single parenthood mercilessly drag her back. Her attempts to make rational decisions, such as selling the house and turning a new page, alternate with reminiscences about her happy moments with John, assuring her that the process of letting go won't happen any time soon.

"The pain will always be there... And so will the feeling of missing him," states the legal representative who tries to formalise John's death, whereupon Merel angrily sends her away as all possible illusions about living peacefully with the loss have been swept away. Somewhere next to her, the children are processing their dad's vanishing by creating their own singular realms to take refuge in, and thus everyone in the family finds themselves on a lonely island within this common land of sorrow that they all inhabit. That is, until another disaster threatens their togetherness.

What makes *Narcosis* a special film on the otherwise oft- portrayed theme of loss and mourning is the way in which the fluctuations of this grieving woman's scattered mind interrelate with the fluttery, agitated autumn landscape outside and with the overall rhythm of her surroundings. This is an effect achieved thanks to the harmonious combination of Thekla Reuten's refined performance as the lead character, Martijn van Broekhuizen's poetic camerawork and Lot Rossmark's bold editing. Their cinematic talents come together in a visual dance of pauses, glimpses, ethereally lit frames and silent contemplations which, when put together, outline the very essence of fleeting happiness and uncertainty in life, which is what the film is ultimately about.

*Narcosis* was produced by the Netherlands' Oak Motion Pictures, while its international sales are handled by Coccinelle Film Sales.