

MELK

a film by STEFANIE KOLK

BENJITA
FILMSALES

lemming
film



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CONTENTS

- 3 SYNOPSIS
- 5 INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR
- 8 BIOGRAPHIES
- 9 LEMMING FILM
- 11 CREDITS
- 12 CONTACT

SYNOPSIS

Days after giving birth to a stillborn baby, Robin's breasts start to produce milk. Unable to throw the milk away, Robin takes the unusual decision to donate her milk. As her quest for a place to donate becomes more difficult than anticipated, more and more milk starts to crowd her freezer, relationship and life.





INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR

Could you tell us more about the beginnings of MELK?

A few years ago, I got an invitation for a film festival in London. I had to leave my 1-year-old daughter with my partner in Amsterdam because she had caught a cold. I was still breastfeeding her at the time, but I decided that this week of separation was a good moment to quit. I started to cut back on the pumping, and after a few days in London, it was as if my body got the message: every morning, I noticed my breasts were emptier than the last. To my own surprise, that felt deeply unsettling.

As I wandered the streets of London my older sister came to mind. Many years ago, she'd had to cut back on her milk after the stillbirth of her firstborn baby. I felt there was an element to her loss that I hadn't given due thought before: the milk. I wondered: what if she, or someone in her situation, wouldn't stop pumping, but continued instead? I became fascinated with this idea, and decided to look if I could find any women who took this path.

What was the research phase like?

At the time, I was a member of a Facebook group where parents share their breastmilk with one another. I decided to share my question in a post, and got a lot of response. A few of those responses were from women who had donated lots of their milk after losing a baby. I talked to these women and their partners and met some of them. One lady had donated over 60 liters. She told me the pumping gave her fixed moments in the day to reconnect to her body, and thereby to her baby. But also, the thought of her milk still having a use gave a bit of meaning to a loss that was hard to give meaning. This was a response that I got from multiple women. One of them, interestingly, put it the other way around: that the thought that her milk wouldn't have any use at all, was an unbearable thought. That really touched me. Donating, for her, was very simply the only option. That calm clarity of thought, and the act of following a feeling like that, struck me as brave.



How did these women inspire Robin's journey to find a new home for her milk?

I wanted to give Robin the same kind of power that I felt in these women. She is simply going to get the milk to its new home. Getting rejected hurts, but it has no bearing on her resolve. For her loved ones, and for us as her cinematic bystanders, this kind of unwavering resolve makes us a bit nervous. Is what Robin is doing healthy? And is it normal? Our expectations around grief, especially grieving mothers, are highly culturally informed but universally strong. My sister got a lot of strange looks when she went back to work a few days after losing her baby. But the opposite also happens: if you stay in bed for three months after you lose your baby, people will tell you that this is too long, and that you need to get up.

This sense of time, the rhythm or length of the grief, is expressed in the style of filmmaking.

Grief doesn't have a natural end, but a film does. In a way, this film is a prologue to the phase of grief that you're more likely to see in a film. Robin feels that she has something important to

do before she can let herself go. We wanted to give a rhythm to Robins drive, creating a sense of inevitability. We found this rhythm through our editing and choices in framing. We filmed our scenes in shots that are simple and give us the sense that we are standing next to Robin, respecting her space. DP Emo Weemhoff and I were inspired by early Lee Chang-Dong's simple, stark framing and editing, allowing inherent tensions to arise rather than pushing them. Sound design and music help us sense the time passing between shots and scenes.

Physical, non-verbal presence also plays an important role in the film. Robin joins a silent hiking group for people mourning a loss. Although the hikers don't need to know whom another hiker might have lost, they find comfort in a kind look, by sharing a space together.

The bond between a mother and her baby begins wordless. For me, the film has in a broader sense grown into a big vehicle for wordless communication, which for me is still a very powerful aspect of how we relate to and understand one another. And how we support and comfort each other, just by being physically present.

In the film, Robin's partner Jonas embodies this support.

During my research phase I was surprised by the partners. I met a man who was just deeply proud of his wife for having produced and donated so much milk. As we spoke, just the memory of the amount of milk still touched him. I felt it would be stupid to make Jonas into an antagonist, after meeting this guy. But of course, for him, there was also an inherent tension in his wife's mission. Because, how long do you continue? And how, as a partner, do you broach that subject? You, too, are grieving the loss of the pregnancy and baby, but the loss is not physical in the same way it is for the birthing partner.

What was it like to work with Frieda Barnhard?

It was an easy decision to cast Frieda Barnhard in this role, not just for me, but for everyone involved at the time. I see Robin as a kind of quiet rebel, someone who carves out her own path

in dealing with the loss of her baby. Frieda has both a lightness and a darkness to her presence, she can handle silent moments with dignity and dialogue with wit. I felt these things were directly appropriate for the role, and that Frieda didn't need to tone them down. My role became to encourage her that she was doing the right thing bringing herself to the role. Because I felt that that's what the film is about.

The physical part of the preparation also helped all of us. A good friend had just given birth. Our special makeup artist Rolf van Eijk recreated my friend's body on Frieda: her postpartum tummy, her breasts, down to the specific color of her nipples. The nipples could actually squirt milk, and Frieda could feel it when the breast pump extracted milk from them. The whole crew showed this kind of dedication to the topic. Quite a few of our team turned out to have experienced pregnancy loss or baby loss, or knew someone close-by who had experienced it. I remember the set as a dedicated, concentrated place.

You shot around Nijmegen, your home town, and worked with many non-professional actors.

I wanted to film the story in a setting I knew and believed. We shot most outdoor scenes around Nijmegen, where I grew up. While Robins loved ones are played by professionally trained actors, all (para)medical professionals you see in the film have medical jobs in real life. For the shoot, I deconstructed the scenes into role-plays, so the dialogue you're hearing is largely improvised. Especially during the hospital shoots, it gave us the awkward sense that we were listening in on doctor-patient conversations.

We found the hikers through street-casting. Because we received over 500 applications, we were forced to handpick the group using photos and videos, using our intuition. Coincidentally or perhaps not coincidentally, it turned out we had picked wonderful, kind people who formed a strong bond on set. The atmosphere during these days was really lovely. The hiking group we picked has become a hiking group in real life.



BIOGRAPHIES



STEFANIE KOLK (Director)

Stefanie grew up in Nijmegen, Netherlands. She studied biophysics and lived in Japan for two years before entering the Netherlands Film Academy. Her graduation short *Clan* and shorts *Harbour* and latest work *Eyes on the Road* premiered at Locarno International Film Festival's Pardi di Domani International Competition in 2016, 2017 and 2019. Stefanie's films have shown at festivals around the world, in Dutch cinemas and on Dutch national television. She was a participant at Berlinale Talents 2019 and a Talent en Route at the Netherlands Film Festival 2019. Her first feature film *MELK* was selected for Berlinale Script Station 2021.



FRIEDA BARNHARD (Robin)

Frieda Barnhard is one of the most promising Dutch actresses of her generation. She starred in series such as *Dag & Nacht* (NPO, 2023), *Bestseller Boy* (NPO, 2022), *Ares* (Netflix, 2020) and *Judas* (Videoland, 2019). Frieda featured in films such as *Kiddo* (2023), *Lost Transport* (2022), *Nr. 10* (2021) & *The Girl Who Was Cursed* (2021). On stage, she played roles in *The Doctor* (2022) for the prestigious International Theatre Amsterdam, *Age of Rage* (2019) and *Vrijdag* (2021).



ALEKSEJ OVSIANNIKOV (Jonas)

Aleksej graduated from the Mime Training at the Amsterdamse Hogeschool Voor de Kunsten with his own work: *Annihilation - I reduce to nothing*. The work was picked up by Het Debuut (Via Rudolphi) and was immediately given a national tour. Aleksej also played in performances by Bouke Schweigmann, Karina Holla, Wild Vlees, Dries Verhoeven, Marcello de Evelien and Davy Pieters, among others. On screen he appeared in films *Brussels* (2017), *Free Fight* (2018), *Flikken Rotterdam* (2021) and *Der Amsterdam Krimi* (2022). For his performance in *Free Fight* Aleksej was nominated for Golden Calf in the category Best Actor in a Teledrama.



LEMMING FILM

Lemming Film is one of the leading film and tv series production companies in The Netherlands, with a sister company in Germany and Belgium. Since 1995 our aim is to create productions with high quality which reflect contemporary society. We focus on both the national and international market and aim to work with the best local and international talent to reach a broad audience.

Our productions are regularly financed from several international sources, are award-winning and widely shown at prestigious festivals.

In 2021 Lemming Film founded a new creative alliance with eight other independent production companies called "The Creatives", to jointly develop a slate of high-end drama series and feature films.

Today Lemming Film is run by CEO/producer Leontine Petit and producers Erik Glijnis and Tom van Blommestein.



CREDITS

a film by STEFANIE KOLK

LEMMING FILM presents in co-production with NTR

FRIEDA BARNHARD, ALEKSEJ OVSIANNIKOV

| | |
|-----------------------------------|---|
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| Director of photography | EMO WEEMHOFF <small>Nsc</small> |
| Production design | NADIDE ARGUN VAN UDEN |
| First assistant director | ANNA VAN SCHIJNDEL |
| Costume design | SARA HAKKENBERG |
| Makeup & hair | RENEE WIJNHOVEN FLOOR FENNIS |
| Production sound mixer | KOOS VAN DER VAART |
| Sound design & re-recording mixer | JACOB OOSTRA |
| Editor | MAARTEN ERNEST |
| Line producer | JESSIE MENTJOX |
| Co-producer | MARINA BLOK |
| Producers | ERIK GLIJNIS LEONTINE PETIT |
| Screenplay | STEFANIE KOLK NENA VAN DRIEL |
| Director | STEFANIE KOLK |

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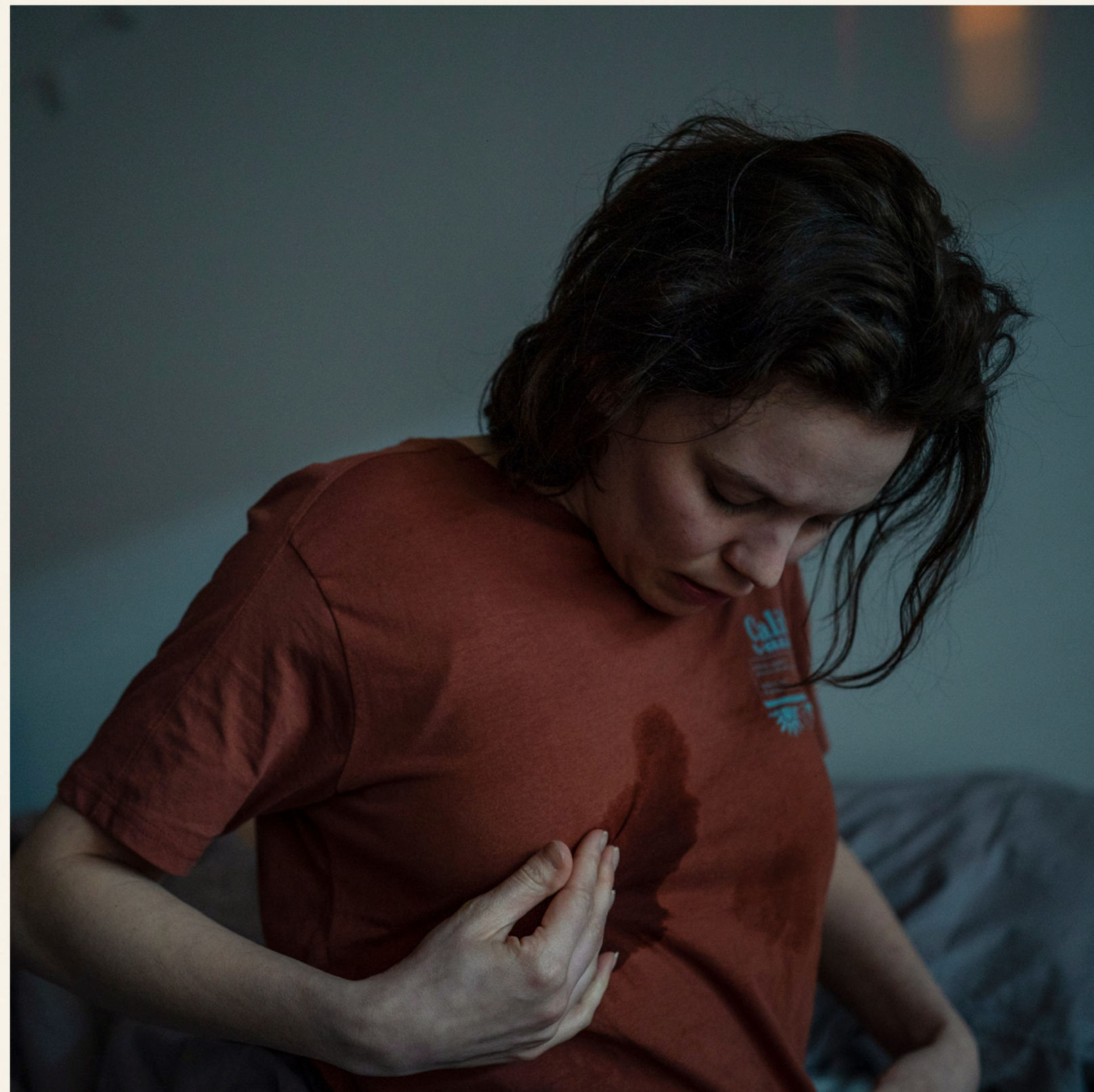
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