

La Madre, il Figlio e l'Architetto

Country
NL

Year
2012

Director
Petra Noordkamp

Duration
16:10



Shadows of houses in a Mediterranean land, sharp close-ups of a modern church, geometric shapes crowned by a huge white sphere. Layered over them, an electronic soundscape and a female voice, speaking in the first person about love and murder, and how the two relate to the perception of architecture. Those are the ingredients with which photographer Petra Noordkamp constructs her film debut *La Madre, il Figlio e l'Architetto* ('The Mother, the Son and the Architect'), which is also the first instalment in her trilogy about the Sicilian town of Gibellina. The narrator is her alter ego: 'For me, visiting a building is like watching a film. Roaming through the corridors is choreographed by the architect who decides where you turn a corner, who predetermines the window through which you can lose yourself in a view...'

Noordkamp is fascinated by architecture, especially Italian. Midway through the 1990s she had a brief romance in Rome with a certain Emilio, the son of an architect. Years later she learned to her astonishment that he had killed his mother. The question of how and why haunted her for years. By chance, around the same time she was reading all sorts of texts about the history of Gibellina, an old town destroyed in 1968 by an earthquake, about how artist Alberto Burri covered the ruins with white cement, and about the construction of a new town nearby.¹ Part of that new Gibellina was the Chiesa Madre with its typical white sphere. This 'Mother Church' intrigued Noordkamp, though she didn't quite know why. But when she discovered that architect Ludovico Quaroni was none other than Emilio's father, the various storylines came together in the church: her adventure with Emilio, his family history and her own passion for architecture. And so she sought a way to bring those complex connections together in a film. Many filmmakers begin their projects with

1 The third film in Noordkamp's Gibellina trilogy focuses on Burri's artwork *Il Grande Cretto di Gibellina* (NL 2015, Petra Noordkamp, 15:00).

2 Interview with Petra Noordkamp on 6 February 2017.

3 Noordkamp became aware of the importance of a good text when she saw *Il Girasole*—A House Near Verona (CH 1995, Christoph Schaub & Marcel Meili, 16:23) and *Die Hütte* (BE 2007, Sophie Nys, 12:00). That impression was confirmed two years after *La Madre, il Figlio e l'Architetto* when some viewers 'lost interest very quickly' in her next film *Arcadia* (NL 2014, Petra Noordkamp, 10:20). This film is about the new Gibellina, in particular the remarkable contrast between the collection of interesting buildings by idealistic architects and the abandoned streets. Noordkamp combined slow imagery with an abstract soundtrack; there was no story—the theme was just alienation.

4 In 2017, Noordkamp again teamed up with a professional author, Ramsey Nasr. Her film *Als je terugkomt woon ik aan het water* (NL 2017, Petra Noordkamp, 14:00) looks at the experimental neighbourhood of EVA-Lanxmeer, and she takes a close look at nature. Architecture does not feature prominently, but it is central to the text: An architect talks about his encounter with a woman, who asked him to design a house. She is waiting for a man and hopes to win him back with the house. There is a subtly elusive form of intimacy between the architect and the woman.

5 *Als je terugkomt woon ik aan het water* also mixes various genres. Noordkamp uses a fictional story to reflect on a real neighbourhood. The narrative excellently captures the complex psychology between architect and client.

a script, but as a photographer Noordkamp is accustomed to working 'from the image'.² She first has to see, stroll around and experience a place before it enters her consciousness. She likes to draw inspiration from the work of Günther Förg and Aglaia Konrad, whom she admires for their purity and slowness. Yet she also knows that 'architecture alone is not enough for a great many people'.³ She had never visited the Chiesa Madre, so she travelled to Sicily to see how the church affected her. And in Rome she spoke to numerous people who knew Emilio, each of whom shed some light on the murder. What should she do with all these conflicting stories? Upon her return home, she contacted Maria Barnas, a writer whose work she admired on account of its 'blending of personal stories and facts', combined with 'poetry and philosophical meditation'. Barnas lent the script a literary quality.⁴

Noordkamp also drew inspiration from the work of Juhani Pallasmaa (2001:13-36) on the subjective experience of architecture: 'The perception of space and architecture is strongly influenced by your own history and how you feel. There is no distinction between mental and physical space.' This awareness is the central thread that runs through *La Madre, il Figlio e l'Architetto*: 'Afterwards you can talk with someone about the building you've visited together, like you do when leaving the cinema. The chances are slim that you've seen the same film.' Yet how did Noordkamp succeed in conveying that awareness? Too many viewpoints would detract from the story, Barnas thought. She felt that Noordkamp needed to stick closely to her own perception. What did that church embody for her? What was her position in relation to the complex family affairs of the Quaronis?

She opted for one personal perspective in a layered narrative. According to Noordkamp, that would resonate with a large audience. *La Madre, il Figlio e l'Architetto* became a subjective literary documentary with a surprising interplay between text and imagery, enriching rather than duplicating each other.⁵ The text lends a unique meaning to the contemplative shots of exterior fragments of the church. Though the narrative is rooted in reality, Noordkamp conveys it with so much tension and verve and the storylines connect so seamlessly that they almost seem too good to be true. The filmmaker plays a game with reality and balances between fiction and reality, causing the viewer to think not only about what he sees and hears in the film, but also about his personal perception and appreciation of architecture in general.