



DOUBLE DUTCH

Sex! Blood! Violence! Yes folks – Paul Verhoeven is back. With his new WW2 Resistance thriller *Black Book*, the man who gave us “20 seconds to comply” and Elizabeth Berkley thrashing around in a pool has gone Dutch again...

WORDS MATT MUELLER

[Paul Verhoeven]



[Paul Verhoeven]

PAUL VERHOEVEN'S NAME HAS BEEN synonymous with pushing the sex-and-violence envelope since the early days of his career, when, as the enfant terrible of Dutch cinema, his films featured explicit sex, full-frontal nudity, gory brutality and male rape. But for all his joyous vulgarity, Verhoeven – who studied to be a scientist and got his training shooting documentaries for the Royal Netherlands Navy – also proved himself an adept storyteller in the likes of 1977's Oscar-nominated Dutch Resistance tale *Soldier Of Orange*.

Decamping to America in the mid-'80s, Verhoeven quickly showered his over-the-top sensibilities into multiplex cinemas, kicking off with the medieval bloodlust of *Flesh + Blood* in 1985, before launching himself into the stratosphere with *Robocop*, *Total Recall* and *Basic Instinct*. Combining wicked deadpan humour with confrontational politics and forthright sexuality, Verhoeven crafted exhilarating, not to mention occasionally crass, pulp fictions that peddled a strong line in amorality. And even when audiences and/or critics scoffed at his films, he was happy to roll with the punches – as he did when *Showgirls* was nominated for Worst Director at the annual Golden Raspberry Awards and he became the first nominee ever to turn up and collect his Razzie in person...

But those knocks take their toll, too. His satirical (and prescient) sideswipe at American imperialism, *Starship Troopers*, spawned charges that he was a closet fascist, and he followed it up with a take-the-money-and-run job directing *Hollow Man*. For Verhoeven, it was time to take stock, and he turned his back on Hollywood to develop projects with his longtime scriptwriting partner Gerard Soeteman – one of which was *Black Book*, a World War II suspense-mystery about a young Jewish woman who goes undercover for the Dutch Resistance.

It's Verhoeven's first foray into Dutch cinema since 1983's *The Fourth Man*, and it's peppered with all

the unflinching sex and violence you'd expect in a Verhoeven movie. It's also a solid wartime thriller featuring an outstanding central performance from Carice Van Houten, who goes the distance on screen for her director – dying her pubic hair, getting doused in human excrement and falling in love with an SS sturmführer. Ah, Mr Verhoeven, how we've missed you...

In *Black Book*, your Jewish heroine falls in love with a Nazi. Did you worry she might be unsympathetic?

"She's probably one of the most positive heroines I've used in my movies. A lot of my female heroines, like Sharon Stone in *Basic Instinct*, are much more opportunistic and egocentric. I see Rachel as much more sympathetic."

But by sleeping with an SS officer, doesn't her moral compass go awry?

"Depending on how important you think sexuality is, is how much it has to do with a moral compass or not! That's an attitude that has been created by Western civilisation; sexuality should not be something that is so overestimated. She's not thinking, 'Okay, let's fuck this German officer' – she does it only at the

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request of the Resistance, to find out if there's the possibility to liberate someone. I don't think she loses her moral compass, ever. I mean, falling in love is not losing your moral compass, is it?"

There was a six-year gap between *Black Book* and your last film, *Hollow Man*. Was that because *Hollow Man* wasn't a great experience for you?

"It was okay as a movie and they paid me a good salary. It was more me thinking, 'Well, I can continue on that line and make high salaries and not feel that I'm doing something that interests me, or I can look at another kind of movie with less salary and a smaller budget but perhaps I can do what I want.' And ultimately it took me more than a year to say, 'Okay, forget about \$5, 6, 7 million salaries and \$100 million budgets. If I do a movie now, it has to be something I believe in and not just something the studio believes in.' *Hollow Man* was fine for the studio, but not for me."

How about *Starship Troopers*, which you made before *Hollow Man*... It bombed, but were you happy with it?

"Well, that movie was completely misunderstood – it was about five or six years before people thought that it might not be about me being a Nazi but that it was me talking about the United States."

The Nazi charge is pretty ridiculous...

"But that was all over Europe, too. There were many, many reviews saying that I was a neo-fascist. Even in the *Washington Post*! They were warning people against this movie because it was made by a Neo Nazi! That was what I got for making *Starship Troopers*."

Do you regret making it then?

"No, not at all – because I thought, 'History will correct.'"



Gentlemen prefer blondes: a pre-bleach Rachel (Carice Van Houten)



Where there's smoke: Hans (Thom Hoffman) is the Dutch Resistance guy...



The Good German: Sebastian Koch is Oskar Schindler-style love interest Ludwig Müntze



Local bike: Rachel has to bunk up with Nazis to survive...

Consider this a di-worce: Paul gives Arnie a hand on the set of *Total Recall*



So *Black Book* is a reaction to both those criticisms and the, er, hollowness of *Hollow Man*?

"Well, *Black Book* was an old project that my scriptwriter Gerard Soeteman and me had started in the '70s but couldn't solve. Then in 2001 Gerard called me and said, 'We have the wrong protagonist. It should be the girl who survives, not the boy.' For 20 years, it was always about the sailor boy and it didn't work. We couldn't get him in a natural way into German headquarters – switching to the woman, she was able to use her sexuality to get where she had to be."

What ever happened to the *Crusades* project you were planning with Schwarzenegger?

"That was a project that came up when I was doing *Total Recall* with Arnold in Mexico. We were sitting in his trailer and he said, 'What I would really like to do in the next couple of years is a movie about the Crusades. That interests me very much.' I said, 'Well, I'm your man because I like the period very much too.' Then I went to a writer I knew, Walon Green, who wrote *The Wild Bunch*, and by about 1993, we were building Jerusalem in Spain. But then the production company, Carolco, got themselves in problems because they were doing two big movies at the same time – the other one being *Cutthroat Island*, which of course was a disaster..."

"I learned a lot from Arnold, especially social things. He was already a politician then"

They should have done *Crusades* first!

"Carolco thought, 'We have Geena Davis and Michael Douglas' – although he left – 'and the first pirate movie in years!' They felt that *Cutthroat Island* would be more successful than having Arnold Schwarzenegger and me on the *Crusades*. Big mistake!"

Would you like to work with Arnold again?

"Oh yeah, he's fabulous. He's very easy-going, and an enormous support for the director. There were many things that they tried to change on *Total Recall* and Arnold would always come forward and say, 'I want that scene – if you take that out of the movie, I'm on my way back to LA.'

"I learnt a lot from Arnold, especially social things. He was already a politician then. He was very much into, 'How do we manage the crew so that everybody keeps their enthusiasm?' He would organise parties... He's a very gifted man, although from a political point of view there are elements I disagree with. But he is the Governor now and I am just a filmmaker, so he can do whatever he wants!"

Do you keep in touch with him?

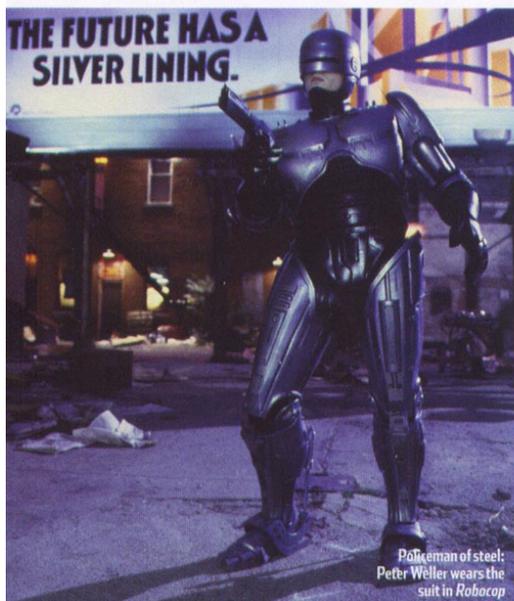
"Not at all. The last time I saw him was one year before he became Governor and I felt that he had already turned his back on the film industry. He was disappointed, he felt there were no interesting projects any more; we had tried to set up *Crusades* with other studios, nobody dared to do it and so he was like, 'Okay...' He didn't tell me he was going to go into politics but I knew that he was highly interested."

Were you offered *Basic Instinct 2*?

"Several times."

Did you hate the script?

"No, it was not about the script. The script needed some work but we all agreed that things should be changed. But I said, 'I'll do it if we shoot it in New York. I don't want to shoot it in London because it'll take the edge out of the movie.' New York has this grittiness and darkness as a nice contrast to the [LA-based English artist] David Hockney colours



Police man of steel: Peter Weller wears the suit in *RoboCop*



Hollow pursuit: Verhoeven orders fried Bacon in *Hollow Man*

I used in *Basic Instinct*. "But the most important issue I had was that I wanted next to Sharon Stone a star of the stature of Michael Douglas. Because I knew that Sharon was so brilliant because Michael gave her so much—just by being right in her face and pushing her talent to the maximum. They refused; they said, 'We have Sharon.'"

She keeps saying that you tricked her into baring all in *Basic Instinct*...

"She has changed her story about ten times now!"

Now she says she walked into the projection booth after the first screening and slapped you in the face!

"It's all nonsense. Of course she didn't do that! She was pretty pissed off when she saw it, although it was done under circumstances she was fully aware of, but then she was sitting surrounded by her friends and managers and agents and everybody got upset because they thought this new part of her life would be fucked up by that shot. So she came up to me after the screening and demanded that I take the shot out."

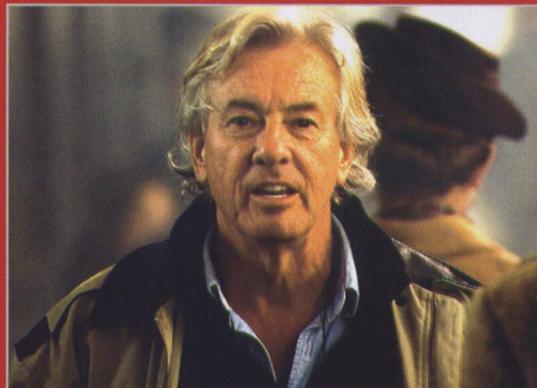
What was your response?

"I said, 'No. We shot it with your permission, you looked at it on video and said it was fine.' I don't know why she continues to change that story!"

PHOTOS: REX FEATURES/ALLSTAR/RONALD GRANT ARCHIVE

DUTCH MASTERS

It's not all swear-y, ultraviolent sci-fi – but lots of it is! The best of PV on DVD...



— always a plus. The 2005 two-disc SE headlines a classic pidgin-English yak-track from PV and the Governor, and is as bulging with extras as Arnie's sleeves. GET IT ON: R2

BASIC INSTINCT (1992)

Whilst far from his best work, this is probably Verhoeven's signature work, seeing as it oozes profane indulgence, from sleazy Michael Douglas to Sharon Stone's immortalised snatch. Stone was never better before or since (avoid the sequel) and Jerry Goldsmith gives it a veneer of class with his noir-esque score. Typically, the best version is the US Director's Cut Ultimate Edition. GET IT ON: R1

SHOWGIRLS (1995)

Oh my. Look up "so bad it's funny" in the encyclopaedia and there's a picture of Elizabeth Berkley having an ice cube rubbed on her nipple by a choreographer in *Showgirls*. Now a flick of legend, this is tacky with a capital ACK. *Instinct*'s scribe Joe Eszterhas pulled out all the stops and you get a sense that this may be more ironic than it feels – which is even more probable in the light of *Troopers*. Las Vegas is pretty well captured though. GET IT ON: R2

STARSHIP TROOPERS (1997)

Many people took umbrage to *Troopers* and decided Verhoeven was a fascist in liberal clothing. But closer inspection (and a brain) shows an incredibly prescient satire on American foreign policy, predicting the Bush effect smack-bang in the middle of the Clinton years. Plot is simple – man wages war on giant alien bugs. That's it. Cue lots of pretties sharing showers, ammo and combat while PV alludes to the fact that mankind pretty much started it. The American two-disc SE is locked and loaded with bug-splattering extras. GET IT ON: R1

SOLDIER OF ORANGE (1978)

Verhoeven's debut (and his first German occupation movie) features star-making turns by Rutger Hauer and Jeroen Krabbé and some pretty intense torture sequences. The Dutch-students-in-peril flick gets a reasonable DVD package for a World Cinema release, but lacks the punch of PV's later platters. GET IT ON: R2

SPETTERS (1980)

Infamous for its scenes of gay-bashing and gang rape, Verhoeven's dirt-bikers melodrama is a patchy affair but has the thematic and stylistic seeds of his future Hollywood output, with solid work again from Hauer as the charismatic bike leader and Krabbé as a reporter. The more explicit (surprise!) R1 director's cut has a commentary from Verhoeven. GET IT ON: R1

FLESH + BLOOD (1985)

A down-and-dirty account of medieval mercenaries starring Hauer and Jennifer Jason Leigh announced Verhoeven's arrival on US soil. A pleasingly grimy sword-swinging actioner, but, as ever, alienated some with its brutal rape scenes. The R1 has a Verhoeven chat-track and is uncut. GET IT ON: R1

ROBOCOP (1987)

Every filmmaker should have a masterpiece and this is Verhoeven's. He never quite achieved the same combination of gut-wrenching ultraviolence, on-the-nose political satire and real emotional impact again, but *Robo*'s saga of Alex Murphy's (Peter Weller) transformation from gunned-down family man to part-man, part-machine, all-cop is a high point of profane '80s cinema. Even ED-209 is iconic. Best buy is the Trilogy boxset, complete with theatrical and director's cuts for extra gore! The sequels are good value only as an illustration of just how remarkable a job the mad Dutchman really did, whilst behind-the-scenes shots of Weller walking around normally in the suit suddenly make you appreciate his physical skill at performing all of Robo's robotic movements. Classic. GET IT ON: R2

TOTAL RECALL (1990)

Arnie got a career upswing, following up *Predator* and *Twins* and building to his apogee in Jim Cameron's mega-sequel *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, with PV's pumped-up action take on Philip K Dick's short story *We Can Remember It For You Wholesale*. Is Arnie's Doug Quaid really an interplanetary spy out for revenge on Mars, or is this all part of the memory-implant holiday he asked for from engram-peddlers Rekall? To his credit, Verhoeven leaves this question wide open right up to the end, but we do get to see Arnie shoot Sharon Stone in the forehead

Romancing the Stone: Mike Douglas turns on the sleaze in *Basic Instinct*



One of her stories was that she had invented the scene. And now she has added this nice touch that she slapped me in the face. I would have slapped her back immediately if she had done that!"

What about the *Robocop* franchise? We heard that you might revisit that...

"Ed Neumeier and I – he's one of the original writers – were discussing the possibility of resurrecting *Robocop*. It never came to fruition. There were ideas that we developed but we never put it on paper. And ultimately, I wouldn't push it too hard because I feel that I'm better off without sequels."

But you produced the straight-to-DVD *Hollow Man* sequel, right?

"I had nothing to do with it. They asked me if they could use my name."

You've recorded DVD commentaries for all your films. So you're a big fan of the old discs, then?

"Very much so. I do commentaries for all of my DVDs. Because it's an opportunity to leave something behind that, even if perhaps my vision is not the correct one, at least people would know what I meant. They might dismiss it and say, 'Well, Paul Verhoeven doesn't know himself... I see deep Freudian traumas.' Which I don't believe in,

"I'm a big fan of DVDs – I try to give them everything so it's kept for history"

but it's possible. But at least people can get to see what I thought."

Do you listen to commentaries yourself?

"Not unless it's a movie I really love. But of a lot of the movies I like, the directors are dead, so there will never be a commentary. I would have loved to hear Hitchcock talk about *Vertigo* or David Lean about *Lawrence Of Arabia* or *Bridge On The River Kwai*, movies that I've studied and studied and studied..."

Do you have a big DVD collection? Any special favourites?

"I have a lot of DVDs and I throw a lot of them away after a certain time because they're irrelevant. But there are ones that I look at still for guidance or technical possibilities. I've studied the movies of James Cameron. I made a big study of *Terminator*

before I did *Robocop*. I still look at a lot of classic movies too, be it [Sergei Eisenstein's] *Ivan The Terrible*, *The Rules Of The Game* by Renoir, Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*. So I'm a big fan of DVDs, and when they ask me to work on a DVD I try to give them everything – my photographs, my storyboards – so that it's kept for history. It's like putting it in a lowbrow museum, but at least it's there!"

Is there any sci-fi story that you've always wanted to adapt?

"I always have the feeling that there should be another movie about humans coming into a foreign planet, but I haven't found that story. If there would be an interesting science fiction story that comes close to me like *Total Recall*..."

"I thought it was fascinating in an American movie to get to a scene where one of the principals tells Arnold Schwarzenegger after one hour of fighting, 'It's all not true, you have been dreaming.' When I read that, I was like, 'Fuck! That's original!' It goes against all the rules to tell your audience halfway through that they've been looking at shit, and then tell them one second later that the story goes on! If I could find something like that again, I would jump on it immediately." ■

Black Book is released on 27 April and will be reviewed next issue