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Author(s)	Judy Bloch
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# Dutch director's drama reconstructs life under Nazis

By JUDY BLOCH  
Bulletin Correspondent

"Far, far away, in World War II ...": A storyteller's voice sets the tone for *The Assault*, Fons Rademakers' film about the lasting effects of long-ago experience.

There have been many approaches to the subject of pain and remembrance as European nations explore their Nazi experience on film. In *The Assault*, Dutch director Rademakers goes after the big drama in the lives of "small" people.

His latest movie (which just took an Oscar for Best Foreign Film) is an unabashedly epic treatment of the Nazi scourge in Holland and its lifelong repercussions for one man, Anton Steenwijk.

It is January 1945, and Holland is trapped in its "hunger winter," a double trauma of the Nazi occupation and devastating starvation. Still, things are relatively undramatic in the Steenwijk household — that is, the family of four has managed to survive the war thus far by not taking any risks.

But when a hated collaborator is murdered and left lying on the sidewalk, neighbors inexplicably drag the body to the Steenwijks' front yard. Retaliation is swift: The Nazis burn their home and murder all but young Anton, who survives the night in a dark jail cell.

Anton grows up keeping the experience — and all experience — at bay. He even chooses anesthesiology as a profession, just to be on the safe side. The years pass with their political upheavals, and the streets of Amsterdam are lively with demonstrations.

Anton walks through it all, determinedly unaffected. But the past inevitably comes back to assault the present, and, at middle age, he begins to unravel the mystery of his childhood loss.

It is a strange kind of epic that follows a man who wants to fade into the woodwork, and perhaps this is what makes *The Assault* seem to play against itself: The drama becomes overdetermined to take up the slack.

Derek De Lint, who portrays the grown Anton, may be Holland's answer to the one-dimensional man with his starchy good looks that reveal nothing. Even when Anton learns about an elaborate network of motivations that led to his family's fate, his ambivalence is stultifying — and, finally, a bit boring.

But if Anton's feeling for life's drama is suppressed, Rademakers' certainly is not. On a recent visit to San Francisco, the director revealed the natural temperament that led



Derek De Lint  
... as grown-up Anton

him to treat history as a kind of living novel, and the personal history that attracted him to the work of Harry Mulisch, who wrote the best-selling book on which the film is based.

Rademakers relates his own memories as if they were out of a script he's lived. "Imagine," he said, "German soldiers in your town... people literally starving in the streets, laying down and dying.... It was very sad. I wanted to show this reality, a reality that young people today don't know."

But his own experience rivals any film for improbable plot. A stage actor and activist in Amsterdam in the '40s, Rademakers was arrested

by the Gestapo for helping to harbor Jewish friends.

"Imagine," he said again, in seeming amazement at his own story, "the night I was arrested, the theater closed its doors after me. When the Burgermeister, who was a National Socialist, learned of this, he had me released."

Days later, his doorbell rang once again and there stood the arresting officer of the previous raid, come to warn him that he had again been targeted. Rademakers had time to escape to Switzerland. Only in the movies?

Rademakers still takes a great interest in the plight, during the war, of Holland's Jews, whose own council leaders thought (until it was too late and too obvious) that they could arbitrate lives with the Germans. So he naturally was drawn to the novel by Mulisch, whose sense of the ironies of the day came from personal experience: Mulisch's Jewish mother was sent to a concentration camp while his Austrian father was accused of collaborating with the Germans.

So here we have Rademakers, passionate and political, and Steenwijk, angry but anesthetized. If, in *The Assault*, Rademakers won't let Anton off the hook — when we leave him, he has been dragged to an anti-nuke demonstration in Amsterdam — it is for good reason. "There's always a war on," Rademakers maintains. "The abnormal situation is peace... because mankind seems unable to keep its fists in its pockets."