



# Headhunters

**Director:** Morten Tyldum  
**Country:** Norway  
**Date:** 2011

**A review by Phillip French of *The Observer*.**

The cinema, as Karl Marx might have said, repeats itself, first as a Scandinavian thriller, then as a Hollywood remake. An American company acquired the rights to remake Morten Tyldum's *Headhunters* while it was still in production. They'll have trouble in making a movie half as good or half as authentic.

Although inevitably indebted to American models, *Headhunters* is firmly rooted in the Scandinavian experience, and it moves with the speed of a demented lemming heading for the cliff-edge of a fjord. The film is adapted from a novel by Jo Nesbø, the Norwegian crime writer who is now up there beside the Swedes Henning Mankell and Stieg Larsson, and the screenplay is the work of Lars Gudmestad and Ulf Ryberg, old hands at this kind of thing, the latter having adapted novels by both Mankell and Larsson.

Nesbø's other books feature tough, hard-drinking Oslo police inspector Harry Hole (pronounced "Hurler"). *Headhunters* is narrated by the suave, secretive, deeply self-conscious business executive Roger Brown (Aksel Hennie), who is nearly as proud of his fine head of hair as he is of his trophy wife, Diana (Synnøve Macody Lund), a beautiful Amazonian blonde several inches taller than him and with a degree in art history. She's high maintenance, partly because of her clothes but mainly because Roger subsidises the fashionable Oslo art gallery she runs and has installed her in the modernist house he feels is her due. Topically, her favourite artist (in the novel at least) is Damien Hirst.

Roger has a highly paid job as a headhunter, recruiting senior managerial talent for leading international corporations. More significantly, to pay for his extravagance, he has a lucrative sideline in stealing works of art with the assistance of a cheerful crook employed by a security firm. Between the two activities there is what Roger and his business associates would call synergy. His headhunting enables him to case the careers and homes of rich, middle-class applicants who own valuable paintings.

During the opening credits, Roger's no-nonsense voiceover explains the five rules of art theft. He then proceeds with a poised wit to demonstrate his manipulative gifts by bending a client to his will while extracting the information he needs to steal a valuable lithograph of Edvard Munch's *The Brooch*. Roger is not particularly likable and his vicious world of international commerce is unattractive, though it glitters in a *Mad Men* way. He is more like Patricia Highsmith's psychopathic antihero Tom Ripley than Raffles, EW Hornung's gentleman thief. However, a malevolent fate comes up the Kattegat in the form of Clas Greve (leading Danish actor Nikolaj Coster-Waldau) to pursue the complacent, hubristic antihero.

Greve is a handsome, wealthy, charismatic son of a Dutch father and a Norwegian mother, apparently between jobs, having recently worked for a major military contractor. Roger seeks him out for Pathfinder, a conglomerate run from Oslo, and sees him as a target for theft as he secretly owns a valuable Rubens that apparently came into the family's hands by way of Nazi confiscation during the second world war.

Greve, of course, is not all he seems. He's a trained special forces operator with experience gathered around the world, as well as something close to the devil incarnate, a man with no morals and no capacity for empathy. As he goes mano a mano with Roger across Oslo and around the magnificent surrounding countryside, our sympathies gradually shift to his desperate but increasingly resourceful quarry, who

attempts to stay alive by understanding his complex position. Edgar Allan Poe's story "A Descent Into the Maelström", you may recall, is set in Norway, and its narrator, caught in the giant whirlpool, saved himself by carefully observing his predicament and working out an escape route.

With his brilliant antagonist at his heels, Roger goes on the run. He's attacked by a fierce dog. He takes refuge in a rural privy under six feet of excrement, urine and bubbling chemicals, using a lavatory roll tube as a ventilator. He goes over a cliff with only two obese cops to soften his fall. He's shot, stabbed, threatened with poison, betrayed and has transmitters planted in his hair. He changes identities thrice. Nothing is exactly illogical and each surprise is cleverly prepared for in this cool, brutal, intelligent movie.

In his excellent new book, *Death in a Cold Climate: A Guide to Scandinavian Crime Fiction*, Barry Forshaw throws a revealing light on the phenomenon of the Nordic policier (interestingly, the French slang term for the crime films and the detective novel is "le polar"). He distinguishes between the different countries, between male and female writers, and sees a clear line reaching down from the shared background of bloody, painful Icelandic sagas and Nordic mythology, through the dark social and psychological explorations of Ibsen and Strindberg and on into the 20th-century experience of war, occupation, resistance, collaboration and neutrality guilt. Then there's the clash between rapid social change and traditional ways and the postwar years bringing technical innovation, immigration, affluence and troubled socialist utopias.

All this is reflected in *Headhunters*, and Forshaw is also informative about Nesbø, the former professional footballer, rock musician and economist who seems to know everything. It's also noteworthy that in the recent wave of European second world war movies, the eponymous Norwegian resistance hero of *Max Manus* should have been played by Aksel Hennie, and that Mads Mikkelsen, the most realistic of Bond villains in *Casino Royale*, appeared as the idealistic Danish resistance leader in the similarly factual *Flame and Citron*.

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