

March 16, 2006
Nijmegen Journal

A Candid Dutch Film May Be Too Scary for Immigrants

By GREGORY CROUCH

NIJMEGEN, the [Netherlands](#), March 15 — This is not exactly a run-of-the-mill homework assignment: watch a film clip of an attractive woman sunbathing topless, and try not to be shocked.

"People do not make a fuss about nudity," the narrator explains.

That lesson, about the Netherlands' nude beaches, is followed by another: homosexuals have the same rights here as heterosexuals do, including the chance to marry.

Just to make sure everyone gets the message, two men are shown kissing in a meadow.

The scenes are brief parts of a two-hour-long film that the Dutch government has compiled to help potential immigrants, many of them from Islamic countries, meet the demands of a new entrance examination that went into effect on Wednesday. In the exam, candidates must prove they can speak some Dutch and are at least aware of the Netherlands' liberal values, even if they do not agree with all of them.

Opponents of the tightening immigration policies have pointed to the film — a DVD contained in a package of study materials for the new exam — as an attempt by the government to discourage applicants from Islamic countries who may be offended by its content.

Dutch politicians and immigration officials have dismissed those accusations, saying the film, blandly titled "To the Netherlands," is a study aid that will give potential immigrants an honest look at the way life is lived here.

"The film is meant for people not yet in Holland to take note that this is normal here and not be shocked and awed by it once they arrive," said Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a Somali-born member of the Dutch Parliament.

But Abdou Menebhi, chairman of Emcemo, a Moroccan interest group in Amsterdam, said the film was just another example of how the Netherlands was trying to limit immigration from Muslim countries.

"This isn't education, it's provocation," Mr. Menebhi said. "The new law has one goal: to stop the flow of immigrants, especially by Muslims from countries like Morocco and Turkey."

Citizens of some countries, in fact, are exempt from the examination, including those from the United States and [European Union](#) nations.

The Netherlands now has some of the strictest immigration policies in Europe, drafted in part during a period of rising societal tension after the killings of the anti-immigrant politician Pim Fortuyn and the filmmaker Theo van Gogh, who with Ms. Hirsi Ali made a movie critical of Islam.

In recent years, the government has increased age and income requirements for certain groups of immigrants, specifically as an effort to cut down on an influx of young Muslim women bound for arranged marriages here. Policy makers say they are concerned about an estimated 600,000 immigrants already here who do not speak

proper Dutch. Poor housing and high unemployment among minority groups is contributing to ethnic tensions in some of the largest cities, where incidents of violence against Jews and homosexuals have raised new concerns.

Dutch officials deny that the film "To the Netherlands" — or the new law for that matter — is intended to discourage further Muslim immigration. But they insist that they want all applicants to consider whether or not they would fit into one of the world's most permissive societies.

"This notion that we want to shock Muslims, that is complete nonsense," said Maud Bredero, a spokeswoman for Minister of Immigration Rita Verdonk. "They don't need to agree in their hearts with homosexuality, but we ask them to respect other people's rights. This is a free country."

The film indulges in a dose of Dutch frankness. Besides the snippets on homosexuality and nudity, it features a run-down neighborhood largely populated by foreigners plus interviews with immigrants who do not always describe the Dutch in flattering terms, calling them at one point "cold" and "distant."

The film warns of traffic jams, integration problems, unemployment and even possible flooding in a country largely below sea level. Some immigrant success stories are showcased, but one newspaper joked that the tourist board would give the whole production a thumbs down.

"This is not meant to make fun of ourselves or the people who want to come here," Ms. Bredero said. "But people do need to know what kind of country they are coming to. You have to know a little about the values here, like the fact that men and women have the same rights."

Well aware that simply watching a naked woman on film, for example, is prohibited by law in some countries, the Dutch authorities have created a second version of the film, minus bare breasts and gay kisses.

"Someone from Iran doesn't need to order the tape with the gays and the topless woman," Ms. Bredero explained. "They'll get an edited version."

But even in that version, nudity and homosexuality are discussed and portrayed because the applicant could be asked a question about them on the exam, Ms. Bredero added.

For her part, Ms. Hirsi Ali says she cannot understand why the film has become controversial, comparing it to all of the consumer warning signs one finds in the United States.

"When I was at Barney's in New York recently, there was a little board in front of the escalator, 'Watch out, you might fall.' This film has that kind of message," she said, explaining that some viewers have probably never met a homosexual or seen a nude beach. "It's for those who don't know."