

Flemish Popular Film: from *Cut Loose* to *Loft*

The Flemish film industry has always been a strong competitor for the favour of its home market. And when it has dealt with local subjects, on occasion it has attracted an unexpectedly broad public, often in large numbers. Think of the priest Daens (a popular historical figure), who in autumn 2008 followed his success in Stijn Coninx' well-known film with sell-out success in the musical.

Forceful statements are usually only half true, and that applies in this case also. Take for instance the Flemish box-office hit *The Alzheimer Case* (*De zaak Alzheimer*) by Erik Van Looy (with ticket sales of around 750,000), a film with no very strong Flemish flavour to it. On top of that, although the author of the book was the Fleming Jef Geeraerts, director Eric Van Looy followed Anglo-Saxon models for every little bit of his film. But because the film was so very convincing, the public poured in. That 2003 success by Erik Van Looy was a real shot in the arm, for it was then some years already since Flemish films had attracted such large audiences to the cinemas.

It was a long time before Van Looy produced another feature film: not until the autumn of 2008 (and it became an all-time number one Flemish box-office hit). Meanwhile, the film-maker Jan Verheyen had several hits with a series of deliberately popular films that lacked the broad appeal of an *Alzheimer*, but when taken together did bring in a similar public. The two *Team Spirit* films, *Alias*, *Gilles* (*Buitenspel*) and more recently also *Missing* (*Vermist*), were able to post substantial audience figures.

With *Cut Loose* (*Los*), based on the novel by Tom Naegels, Verheyen to some extent distances himself from the broadest conceivable audience and takes on a more social, and therefore less popular, topic. That is nothing new in Verheyen's career, incidentally: he did the same thing in 1996 when he adapted Tom Lanoye's novel *Everything Must Go* (*Alles moet weg*) for the big screen. On that occasion too he had in mind a more cultured audience that had probably not seen his other films.

One of the characteristics of Naegels' book is that it is the novel of a journalist who is also an essayist and columnist, and to whom it is second nature to speak his mind about social problems (for further evidence of this, read his essay in this yearbook). Yet at first sight the opposite seems to be true: *Cut Loose* is indeed a seemingly rather biographical story about a character called Tom Naegels who faces a number of difficult moments in his private life. His relationship with his girl-friend breaks down, (because) he has a new girl-friend: the attractive Pakistani immigrant Nadia. This relationship, too, proves more difficult than expected. In addition to Tom's love life there is also a grandfather who is ill and demands the right to decide for himself when he will die. Naegels recounts all these events with an atmosphere of self-mockery and irony, rather as Woody Allen has done throughout his career. However personal it may all seem, you soon get the feeling that for Naegels-the-author these events are first and foremost the stimulus to think about a number of important subjects: about euthanasia, about societies in which different cultures find it hard to live together. Often the narrative is very close to the real problems in society, as for example the street disturbances with Moroccan youths that took place in the Antwerp district of Borgerhout in 2002.

Verheyen remains faithful to most of the themes and story lines in the film. As regards the structure, he corrects the chronology that was less clear in the novel. He sometimes shifts the accents and gives a few characters a more important role than in the book. The most striking change is that Verheyen and his script-writer have opted to reproduce the main character's reflections as short intermezzos in which he turns to face the viewer directly against a white background. Opinion is divided on whether this works or not. The answer depends on whether or not people think the actor is a good Tom Naegels. And whether the actors wouldn't have needed stronger direction, and whether the whole thing couldn't have been spiced up a bit because the characters seem rather bland, certainly when compared to the energy and the dedication of the actors in director Christophe Van Rompaey's debut film *Moscow, Belgium* (*Aanrijding in Moskou*). A movie,



incidentally, that got the Krzysztof Kieslowski Award for Best Feature Film at the Denver Film Festival. This decision was motivated by 'its warm and witty portrait of a working class woman, a film which transcends the stereotypes of the romantic comedy genre', as the Denver Film Society reported.

My own diagnosis is that the thinking behind the direction in *Cut Loose* is too close to what we are familiar with from television fiction, which seems somewhat anaemic in the darkness of the cinema. Not everyone will agree, because the film did reasonably well in the cinema and was screened at various festivals: Montreal, Utrecht, Nîmes, Hamburg, Cairo. Its subject certainly played an important part in this. In a review in *Variety* the verdict was as follows: 'Though the screenplay occasionally skirts TV territory, this good-humored pic about weighty issues remains involving.'

Not long after *Cut Loose* came the release of Erik Van Looy's long-awaited film *Loft*. In the time it had taken slow film-maker Van Looy to produce two films, fast film-maker Verheyen had completed four. Meanwhile Verheyen is also involved with *Dossier K.*, a new Jef Geeraerts adaptation that was originally to have been shot by Van Looy. The content of *Loft* is very different from that of *The Alzheimer Case*. Yet stylistically

Cut Loose (Los, 2008),
directed by Jan Verheyen.

there is considerable continuity. The actualisation and finish of *Loft* is extremely meticulous, undertaken with great professionalism and with a high production value, to use the official term. Unusually for our part of the world, but that may also be partly due to the fact that in Flanders films rarely seek to adopt the idiom of the American suspense thriller so literally. Even exceeding it in certain respects, for it is not without reason that the reviewer on twitchfilm.net describes it as follows: 'Smart, stylish and, yes, sexy – the trailers embedded below would be definite red-banders here in North America for both blood and lady-parts – this looks every bit as impressive as Van Looy's breakthrough film.'

The sound mix – a perpetually running soundtrack which includes rhythmic staccatos – keeps the dynamics permanently high, artificially high. A paper bag of groceries falling to the ground hits the floor with the effect of an exploding grenade. The spectator is immersed in a manipulative mechanism that he, or she, submits to willingly and compliantly. Anyone who re-

Loft (2008),
directed by Erik Van Looy.



sists this process is not the ideal viewer for this film.

Not only the radical choice of genre, but also the particular type of set design gives the film a rather anonymous personality. The interior of the eponymous loft that the five friends in the film share with each other to carry on their extramarital adventures, looks like the interiors in glossy magazines: lonely, chilly and clean, as if they do not really belong in real life but only in expensive design boutiques. It was not by chance that the newspaper *De Standaard* latched on to the film with a competition to give the lucky winner the interior in the film as a prize: 'Win the fatal interior from *LOFT*, worth 72,000 euro!'

The main character in *Loft* is not a single individual; here we have a group of individuals, friends who clearly spend a great deal of their lives together and share good and ill with each other. Over the course of the story it gradually becomes apparent that the strongly professed camaraderie and friendship is no more than a facade, and that behind it there lurks a less attractive underlayer of deceit and treachery. In *Loft* it is a murder that sets in motion the inevitable mechanism of general unmasking. The search for the perpetrator proceeds, as in a real *whodunit*, according to the rules of logical deduction, the technique Hercule Poirot was so good at.

It is a form of drama in which the plot is regarded in a rather structuralistic and mechanistic manner. This approach is less concerned with a reality that the plot refers to, than with the mechanism that makes (or fails to make) that plot efficient enough to surprise the view-

er, to wrong-foot him or her, to arouse, to scare, etc.

In this method the way the characters are depicted does not create any real depth, but rather pegs for the plot to work with. Similarly, the one-liners the characters come up with are shrewd and functional rather than psychologically revealing.

To sum up one can say that *Loft* displays more virtuosity than profundity, entertains and titillates more than it puts forward a view on anything whatsoever, even the central theme of adultery. In this respect the subject seems better suited to the raunchy and commercialised climate of television, in which voyeurism and unbridled curiosity have become second nature. Or to the games culture that seems to have become so essential in the media world. Or to both together: the endless flood of reality programmes, in which reality is presented in the form of a game.

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Cut Loose: www.losdefilm.be – *Loft:* www.woestijnvis.be

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