

on doing another 100 shows, but I certainly have enough ideas for the future’.

CHARLOTTE VAN HACHT

Translated by Scott Rollins

Dries Van Noten, Tim Blanks and Susannah Frankel, *Collections 1-100*, Lannoo, Tielt, 2017, 912 p. (ISBN 978 94 0144 61 36). Also available in separate volumes: *Collections 1-50* and *Collections 51-100*.

Film

An Inverted Orpheus and Eurydice

Le Fidèle by Michael Roskam

When, after a Porsche Supercup contest, Gino (Matthias Schoenaerts) sees Bénédicte (Adèle Exarchopoulos) getting out of her racing car in the pits, his interest is immediately aroused. She – nicknamed Bibi – puts her life on the line on the racing circuit; he – nicknamed Gigi – does the same when he carries out armed robberies with his gang of thieves. Both are aware of the risks of their profession. Both are addicted to the kick. But then they fall in love.

Following *Bullhead* (*Rundskop*) (2011) and *The Drop* (2014), *Racer and the Jailbird* (*Le Fidèle*) is Michael Roskam’s third feature film and is similarly set in a criminal milieu. Roskam uses this world as an arena to link together paradoxical elements – innocence, crime, vulnerability, brutishness, feelings and lies – in modern *film noir* productions that are striking for their painterly authenticity and complex, raw and realistic character studies.

While in *Bullhead* the accent was on the absence of love, and *The Drop*, according to Roskam, was a ‘desperate search for innocence’, in interviews he has called *Racer and the Jailbird* ‘my melodramatic fantasy of love and death; of Eros and Thanatos’ – which according to Freud are the most fundamental urges. Roskam sees absolute love as a paradoxical tension between desire and surrender; the feeling of being confined that goes with attachment: ‘Like a dog that lies on the threshold with its head outside’.

What he had in mind was an amour noir, his own back-to-front variant of the classic *film noir*. To the



online magazine *The Italian Rêve*, Roskam said, on this topic: ‘Where mostly, love affairs are like a satellite around the crime story, I wanted this [to be] different... This is a love story where crime was the satellite’. In this regard, Roskam took inspiration, loosely, from the Haemers gang, which carried out a series of spectacular robberies around Brussels in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as kidnapping the former Prime Minister Paul Vanden Boeynants and succeeding in escapes from prison several times. *Racer and the Jailbird* also includes a spectacular robbery involving a shipping container; it elicits a boyish admiration, without the violence used being glamorised as is usual in American action films. This brute force is more sickening than anything else.

Shortly after they first meet, Bibi – who thinks that Gigi is in the car trade and commands him not to bring any flowers – asks what his biggest secret is. With utter honesty he answers: ‘I’m a gangster. I rob banks’. This sounds so absurd to her that she has to laugh out loud. However, it gradually becomes clear to her that his answer was no joke. Gigi the gangster is a wild animal that wants to be tamed by love. Their life together only has any chance of surviving if Gigi abandons his illegal activities: if he leaves the underworld for the upper world. Bibi does all she can to get him out of it; *Racer and the Jailbird* is an inverted Orpheus and Eurydice. But it is also a tragedy with an ambiguous ending, but more about that below. (Spoiler alert: the rest of this article contains details of how the story ends.)

The excesses from which *Racer and the Jailbird* suffers detract from the richness of its story: it too often emphasises what we already understand. Gigi surrenders again and again: to the police, to Bibi’s world – which to him is the equivalent of prison. The adage ‘no flowers’ is so good at typifying Bibi’s tough, independent personality that Roskam’s scenarists Thomas Bidegain and Noé Debré (who also worked on Jacques Audiard’s Golden Palm winner *Dheepan*) could not resist the temptation to use it so often that it becomes ridiculous. The same applies to the frequent presence of dogs, usually on a leash or in a cage. Gigi is afraid of them, Bibi isn’t.

While she thinks a pit bull is a fine dog, he sees it as a killing machine. It's a question of perspective that's determined by the experiences they grew up with: she as the carefree daughter of a rich family, he in juvenile institutions after his violent father had abandoned him.

'Would you follow me anywhere?' Gigi asks Bibi early on in the film over breakfast in her flat. 'Yes, of course,' she says and asks him the same. 'Yes, of course,' he answers. But then he reflects for a moment: 'No, it depends. Whether you looked behind you or not.' A sentence that is as crucial as it is casual, and which refers to the fidelity in the title. They can only be together if they dare to trust each other blindly.

Just as in the Greek myth, fate steps in. Once Gigi has ended up in prison, Bibi turns out to be terminally ill. She manages to arrange with a powerful Albanian underworld boss for Gigi to be freed after her death and to be shipped off to the city of their dreams, Buenos Aires. But Gigi does not wait for his ship: he slips through the Albanians' fingers and races to Bibi's grave in a superbly filmed drive through the mists of early morning Brussels. In the meantime we hear him – as a voice-over – asking Bibi, long ago, for her deepest secret too. To which she answers: 'I'm immortal'. Perhaps that's also why she said 'no flowers' – an answer that probably made him laugh just as much at the time as she did at his answer.

But which of them is it that looks back? Bibi at Gigi by arranging his destination following her death? Or him, as he races to her grave? Is this why the miracle of her resurrection in Buenos Aires does not happen? Or do they still meet again in the Elysian Fields? Roskam leaves it open: we do not see what happens to Gigi when he vanishes from view in the cemetery. This ambiguity perfectly fits the paradoxes that Roskam's work is founded on. And it challenges the viewers to figure out how far they would dare to put their faith in a mythical miracle themselves.

KARIN WOLFS

Translated by Gregory Ball

The Italian Rêve, 'Interview with Michaël R. Roskam: Torn Between Love and Noir', Valentina Carraro, 17 September 2017.

History

The Elites Consistently Charted a New Course

A Concise History of the Netherlands

James Kennedy's history of the Netherlands was not written for a Dutch public. It is part of a series published by Cambridge University Press, which includes concise histories of Spain, Brazil, Finland, Bosnia, Bolivia and many other countries.

Kennedy is an appealing choice for a project such as this. He is a popular historian and valued participant in the public debate. He is also 'an outsider': an American of Dutch origin, who grew up in the Calvinist Orange City, Iowa. He became a professor of contemporary history at VU University Amsterdam in 2003, and is now dean of University College Utrecht. His doctoral thesis, *Building New Babylon*, dealt with the cultural history of the Netherlands in the 1960s. All of that means he is able to view that history from an international perspective, perhaps less focussed on the historical discourse within the country itself, with all its hobbyhorses and pet topics. That discourse has become very lively of late, and has even taken on a strong political tint. So a little distance can do no harm.

The book is redolent with a spirit of solidity and restraint. Its very conciseness already makes it remarkable, covering the whole gamut from *homo heidelbergensis* up to and including Geert Wilders in around 400 pages.

Kennedy concentrates on the political, economic and social history of the Netherlands. He is especially sparing in his treatment of culture, and out of necessity he leaves out large swathes of the country's Asiatic history. But he does include the Caribbean territories, because a contemporary history of the Netherlands cannot ignore slavery. Kennedy rightly devotes attention to Tula, the leader of the Curaçao Slave Revolt of 1795, and to the poor Ghanaian Jacobus Capitein, the first black student to obtain a doctorate at Leiden University, in 1742 – though in fact there is some doubt as to whether he really did so.

The structure of the book betrays the fact that Kennedy's own expertise is in modern Dutch history, and he is particularly at home when discuss-