

arranged for the best possible distribution of natural light and the enhancement of natural ventilation. These circular spaces, surrounded by curved walls of books, were undoubtedly inspired by Mecanoo's earlier project in Delft. The atria also make it easy to view the building as a whole.

The library, 35,000 square metres in size, houses a study centre, a music library, a community health centre, rooms for multimedia, meetings and offices, exhibition areas, cafés, lounges and an auditorium. To limit the volume, a large part of the programme of requirements has been housed below ground around a circular sunken open-air amphitheatre.

The building is equipped with the latest technology so as to reduce energy consumption, and has thereby acquired the much-coveted BREEAM 'excellent' label. The circular metal ornamentation of the façade refers indirectly to the industrial crafts of the past, specifically gold- and silversmithing. It filters out harsh direct sunlight but retains transparency. The materials chosen for the floors - stone, ceramics and oak - mean that the building does not have the feel of a terminal or shopping mall. It assumes a domestic air, partly due to the unusual light entering through the facades.

This library houses several major collections. The undisputed highlight is the Shakespeare collection in the Shakespeare Memorial Room, originally built in 1882. When the original building was demolished in 1974, this interior by John Henry Chamberlain was moved to the old Central Library. Now it has once again been transferred to the new library. It is housed in a 'golden' volume in the upper half of the building.

This building has in the meantime won several prizes and is currently the largest public library in the United Kingdom. Some sources even claim that it is the largest public cultural space in Europe. Whether this is true or not, the building is indisputably a marvellous acquisition for Birmingham, and for lovers of architecture and culture it puts the city firmly on the map.

HARRY DEN HARTOG

Translated by Gregory Ball

Flanders' Films Go Hollywood

Let's begin by qualifying the title because it is slightly misleading, albeit intentionally so. 2014 saw the release in Belgian cinemas of new films by two talented and successful Flemish directors: *The Drop* by Michaël R. Roskam (° 1972) and *The Loft* by Erik Van Looy (° 1962).

These are English-language films and they were both filmed in America. Even before the films went into production, the Flemish newspapers were already giving wide coverage to both projects. Their respective cinema releases also attracted great media interest. It was in that context that the word 'Hollywood' regularly cropped up, often in titles and captions, for the combination of 'Flemish', 'film' and 'Hollywood' has a seductive ring, or at the very least it arouses the reader's curiosity.

For both directors this was their first American adventure. In the case of Erik Van Looy, also known for the thriller *The Memory of a Killer*, it was a remake of his 2008 box-office hit *Loft*, which attracted 1.2 million cinema-goers, a record for a Belgian film and one it will not be easy to break. Michaël R. Roskam, on the other hand, is a rather late-bloomer. He made his cinema debut in 2011 with *Bullhead*, which was an overnight success. Accolades were heaped on the film at home and abroad and, as the icing on the cake, it won an Oscar nomination for Best Foreign Language Film.

Flemish film directors who make a film for the big screen on the other side of the Atlantic are few and far between, even a touch exotic. And adventurous. Tintin in America as it were. But these two films have relatively little to do with Hollywood, if only because *The Drop* was filmed in New York and *The Loft* largely in New Orleans.

And why would a director want to produce a remake of a film he has already made? For Van Looy the answer is clear: 'I have always believed that Bart De Pauw's fantastic script deserves a global audience and the best way to achieve that is still an American remake. *The Loft* is a mainstream film, not a festival or art-house film'.



As *Loft* had been such a huge box-office success, some large Hollywood studios were interested in a remake. But then on their terms. Van Looy cites an amusing and telling anecdote in this regard: 'In the first exploratory talks there was a large Hollywood studio where they said: "Yes, we want to make the film and we don't want to change much. Only you can't have five men cheating on their wives. Can't we have them share that loft with two coming to watch basketball, two hockey and one cheating on his wife?" That's effectively what they said, but we didn't think it was a good idea.' So to retain as much control of the project as possible, *The Loft* was made as a coproduction between the Flemish production house *Woestijnvis* and the American independent film company *Anonymous Content*, known for (among other things) Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Babel* and Michel Gondry's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*.

Filming of the whodunit *The Loft* went off pretty much without a hitch, but the search for the right American distributor proved more problematic, even to the extent that the Belgian press began wondering out loud if Erik Van Looy's Hollywood adventure would ever get off the ground. But get off the ground it did, and at the end of January 2015 *The Loft* was released and on no fewer than 2,000 American movie screens.

Naturally, Michaël R. Roskalm's Oscar nomination for *Bullhead* had attracted the attention of American film studios. From the many offers that came his way, Roskalm chose *The Drop*, a contemporary crime drama set in Brooklyn and based on *Animal Rescue*, a short story by the famous American crime writer Dennis Lehane, whose novels *Mystic River* and *Shutter Island* had already been filmed by Clint Eastwood and Martin Scorsese respectively. *The Drop* is

an atmospheric thriller set against the background of organized crime's use of local New York City bars as money-laundering 'drops'. Hence the title.

The project was financed by Fox Searchlight Pictures, the art-house sister company of the legendary Hollywood studio 20th Century Fox. Whereas in Europe the 'art-house' description is a sort of hallmark that can (still) be gaily bandied around, Fox Searchlight Pictures is less keen on it because to them it sounds arty-farty and so not commercial enough.

Before agreeing to the project, Roskam had stipulated his own terms: he wanted the cast of his American film debut to include Matthias Schoenaerts, the lead actor in *Bullhead*. He also wanted the Flemish director of photography Nicolas Karakatsanis back behind the camera. And so it was. By some remarkable coincidence, we also find the names of both Schoenaerts and Karakatsanis in the credits of *The Loft*. In fact, Schoenaerts is the only Flemish actor who also appeared in the original *Loft*.

Naturally, for the rest of his cast Roskam had to consult with his American partner, but apparently there was broad agreement on that score, including Roskam's suggestion of signing the English actor Tom Hardy for the lead role and engaging the Swedish actress Noomi Rapace. American actor James Gandolfini, now extremely popular as a result of the television series *The Sopranos*, was an obvious choice too. Gandolfini died shortly after filming. At the risk of sounding cynical, his death generated additional publicity for the American release of *The Drop*. And that is typically Hollywood.

JAN TEMMERMAN

Translated by Alison Mouthaan