



CAFARD IS A FULL-LENGTH ANIMATION FEATURE MADE USING MOTION-CAPTURE TECHNOLOGY. BUT, AS VETERAN FILMMAKER JAN BULTHEEL EXPLAINS, THIS ANTI-HEROIC SAGA SHEDDING LIGHT ON A FORGOTTEN PAGE OF WORLD WAR I HISTORY IS A LOT MORE THAN A CHANCE TO SHOW OFF THE TECHNICAL WIZARDRY OF MO-CAP.

PORTRAITS **BART DEWAELE**

the capturing of

Cafard, the new film from Flemish filmmaker Jan Bultheel, now in the final stages of production, is Belgium's first full-length animation auteur film since Raoul Servais made *Taxandria* 20 years ago. Bultheel's last animation project, *International Hareport* – an engaging 6 x 26-minute fantasy TV series shown in France and Belgium in which animals have the ability to fly – may have basically been kids' stuff. But *Cafard* the movie is something else again: an astonishing, potentially tragic but finally uplifting story which draws on the real-life story of a Belgian battalion sent to Russia during World War I.

"It was my wife who told me about it," says Bultheel. "I was immediately drawn to that story because it had so much potential for drama. Those guys were like the elite of the Belgian army and then they are sent to Russia, to go travelling around the world for nothing. That must be the most frustrating thing that can happen."

For his film, Bultheel also drew on the story of another real-life character: a world champion wrestler from Liège called Constant Le Marin, who was a member of the armoured car division, the ACM (Autos-Canons-Mitrailleuses). In the movie, he becomes Jean Mordant, a fictional wrestler from Ostend, who is away from home in Argentina when war

breaks out, competing in the World Championships. He wins, but his celebrations are cut short by the terrible news that his teenage daughter Mimi has been raped by a group of drunken German soldiers. He rushes home but finds Mimi almost catatonic from shock. Bent on revenge, he – along with his manager Victor and nephew Guido – join the ACM battalion. But the heavy steel-plated vehicles prove useless in the Flemish mud and are sent instead by the Belgian King Albert to help out his cousin the Czar on the eastern front.

taking the long way round

Caught out in a country being ripped apart by revolution and civil war, Jean and co see very little action and what they do witness gradually saps their belief in human goodness. "I've seen the whole world," Jean writes in a postcard to Mimi, "but I didn't see heaven anywhere." Finally – and this also is based in fact – they "take the long way round", returning to Europe via China, the Pacific and the United States. But Jean is too late: Mimi, her powers of resistance sapped by war-time starvation and mental trauma, has succumbed to the Spanish flu epidemic which devastated Europe in 1918. There remains, however, one thing which gives Jean the strength to live on...



cafard

CAFARD

a new man in a new era

Cafard is the French for 'cockroach', those ubiquitous, indestructible little creatures that will be scurrying round Planet Earth long after we humans have left the building. Cockroaches have a pretty low approval rating, so that probably accounts for the word's colloquial usage in French: 'avoir le cafard' means 'to be feeling blue'. In the film, Cafard is used as a semi-affectionate term for the squat little armoured cars in which Jean Mordant and his friends go to war.

"We see *Cafard* as arthouse but we really think we can get the youngsters, 16 to 18", says producer Arielle Sleutel, who founded production company Tondo Films with Bultheel with the immediate aim of making *Cafard*, and the more general ambition of 'making obstinate authors do their thing'. "Animation films like *Waltz With Bashir* and, hopefully, *Cafard* can open up a different audience. You can make an animation film not just for children but also to reach adults." "Jean is like an anti-hero," says Bultheel. "At the beginning of the film, he goes out to avenge his daughter with a romantic, idealistic view of himself as the father, the warrior. Then he gets tangled up in the war. He sees things, he hears things... He actually takes his revenge at one point in the film but that is not at all satisfying and, at the end, he comes back with a lot fewer ideals but with a very realistic point of view – a new man in a new era."

It is an epic tale, but what really gives *Cafard* its unique flavour is the highly unusual use Bultheel makes of motion-capture (mo-cap) technology. For those who have somehow missed the past 15 years of cinema, mo-cap is what enabled Peter Jackson to bring Gollum and King Kong to life. An actor wears a suit covered in capture points whose movements are mapped into a computer; on that computer, a model is then built up into an animated figure. The movements are realistic, but the end-product can be as realistic – or as poetic – as the animator wants.



an actor-driven film

Mo-cap is usually used – as the examples above indicate – in the special effects area. But Bultheel, who had previously used the technique in theatre shows, was after something different. "The main thing about *Cafard* is that it's really an actor-driven film," he explains. "Normally, motion-capture is used for things that are not possible otherwise, and it's always done on the basis of a storyboard. But the way we use it is almost like in theatre... We didn't have a storyboard but we discussed the film scene-by-scene with the actors, and then they acted it like in theatre – not with a camera, not like 'Now we are going to shoot the close-up' and 'Now you come in and open the door and sit down'. We played out the whole scene in one go and it's only afterwards when I got all the mo-cap data in the computer that I put in the camera.

"Mo-cap doesn't film," he explains; "it's just the registration of movement. Afterwards, you can put your camera wherever you want: you don't shoot the person, you just record the movements and the voice. Then you can go in with the camera, the lights, the backgrounds and the props, and construct the scene layer-by-layer."

The advantages are, says Bultheel, that you can combine animation with actor-driven filmmaking in a unique way – and that it doesn't take nearly as long as a hand-drawn or CGI animation film. In the lead-up to Christmas, 12 people were working full-time on *Cafard*, a co-production



between Belgium (70%), France (20%) and the Netherlands (10%). But the core crew consists of just five, plus five main actors for the original mo-cap sessions. Now, nearing the end, the texturing of the main characters takes up most of the director's working day. Texturing, he explains, is what happens after you make a clay-like model on the computer. "It's just an object. Then you unfold it and you can draw or paint the colour of the skin, the eyes, the hair, the clothes: that's texturing."

"Cafard is a film for an adult audience. In it, CGI-technology is stripped to a bare minimum. The final result is a simple graphic universe that emphasises the dramatic action of the characters over technological wizardry"

TEAM TONDO



ARIELLE SLEUTEL

After studying at HRITCS in Brussels, Arielle Sleutel began her career as a production manager and commercials producer. In 2002, she took on the role of producer for features and documentaries. Credits since then include Hilde Van Mieghem's *Love Belongs to Everyone* (2005) and Dorothée Van Den Berghe's *My Queen Karo* (2008); the TV series *The Emperor of Taste* (2007); and now the auteur animation film *Cafard*.

JAN BULTHEEL

Jan Bultheel started out in the film industry as an animator, then from 1986-2001 directed literally hundreds of commercials. Since then, he has split his time between theatre – directing an animated film for the theatre performance of 'Ricky, & Ronny & 100 Stars' – and cinema. Bultheel began scripting and developing *Cafard* in 2012. He also created the animated TV series *International Hareport*.



back to the drawing board

For Bultheel, *Cafard* marks a return, after 35 years in the movie business, to the craft for which he was initially trained. "I was educated as an animation filmmaker," he says, "but then at that time – the early 1980s – there was really no way of earning your living with animation in Belgium. So I did all the usual commercial kind of stuff." Clients included Coca-Cola, PlayStation, Mercedes, Belgacom... "Then, in 2000, I quit commercials because I was really fed up with it, and automatically fell back on my first love. That's why I made *International Hareport*: to get back into animation."

Now, he is doing his best to reinvent the genre, not least by doing away with the storyboard. "I believe a storyboard can be an obstacle to true creativity," he told Eurimages when

he applied for support. "*Cafard* rests on the talent of its actors and their artistic interpretation of the dramatic roles. Forcing dialogue and actions to conform to a pre-defined storyboard limits this artistic freedom.

"Motion-capture technology is an innovative industry on the rise," he added. "*Cafard* is a film for an adult audience. In it, CGI-technology is stripped to a bare minimum. The final result is a simple graphic universe that emphasises the dramatic action of the characters over technological wizardry.

"Adult animation is on the rise," he says now. "Mo-cap is just a technique – one which we have used in a more honourable way than usual." ①