

MAGIC REALISM: MODERNITY AND POSMODERNITY IN CINEMA

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Abstract. *André Delvaux* (born Heverles, Belgium, March 21, 1926 – died in Valencia, Spain, at October 4, 2002) is a Belgian film director, the founder of the Belgian national cinema. After having studied German philology, law, piano, André Delvaux filmed some documentaries for TV. The feature movies (1965) is *The Man Who Has His Hair Cut Short* (*L'Homme au crane rasé*), after Johan Daisne's book. Other movies: *One Night, a Train* (*Un soir un train*, 1968, after Johan Daisne's book *De trein der traagheid*, with Yves Montand and Anouk Aimee), *Rendez-vous at Bray* (*Rendez-vous à Bray*, 1971, after Julien Gracq's novel *Le Roi Cophétua*), *Belle* (1973, with Romanian actress Adriana Bogdan), *Femme entre chien et loup* (*Een vrouw tussen hond en wolf*, 1970), *Benvenuta* (1983, with Vittorio Gassman and Fanny Ardant), *L'Oeuvre au noir* (1988, after Marguerite Yourcenar's book). His films always played in a set between reality and fantasy, as magic realism. He is a great master of modernity and post-modernity.

Keywords: André Delvaux, Belgian Cinema, reality, fantasy, modernity, post-modernity, magic realism.

Dysnarration instead of narration

That is the enunciation of a postmodern concept fully validated by how narration is instituted in André Delvaux's films. It may seem surprising that such a body of work, while postulating the illusory, is in fact heavily and programmatically *anti-illusory* thanks to an operation to disavow narration as traditional storytelling. A remarkable connoisseur of the content and expression of cinematic narration, Professor Francis Vanoye calls this attitude *dysnarration*.¹

The effects of *dysnarration* entails the participation of the reader-spectator who is forbidden narrative euphoria, at least in its traditional manifestations: disillusion of realism and referentiality, disillusion of continuity. Equivalence is being instituted between consecution and consequence as a deduction similar to cause to effect linking. This way, the illusion of transparency decodifies everything and even manages to entertain.

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¹ Francis Vanoye, *Reçit, écrit, reçit filmique*, Éditions Nathan, Paris, 1989.

Let us approach André Delvaux's films through the lenses of François Vanoye's dysnarration procedures.

“The Process of becoming”

Arbitrariness permeates each of the filmmaker's stories. We can be sure of Govert's path in the story. Could it have been possible for us to expect him to end up in an asylum? Who could imagine the travel of Anne and Mathias, two people rational, poised and very attentive to the world around them, as death inducing? Does the man really believe that by letting Anne accompany him to a routine conference in a different location he is throwing her into the jaws of death? Julien is himself almost oblivious of what could happen to him in the woods that he may not escape for being slave to arbitrary love. Where is Lieve leaving with the child at the end of *Femme entre chien et loup* (Woman in a Twilight Garden/Woman Between Wolf and Dog)?

Underlying *simplicity* and reductionism as opposed to the very concrete complexity of reality touches on cultural clichés, stereotypes that Post-Modernism drastically reprimands. Just look how complicate things become for Mathieu, the poetry lecturer, when dreaming of the beauty in the nearby woods! How paralyzing and irrelevant the automatism of his life as a provincial intellectual are!

Most appropriate Delvaux example as far as sensibility to narrative laboring goes is *Benvenuta*. A filmmaker writing a screenplay as a “structure that want to be another structure” (Pasolini²) - tries to do her research with an auctorial source for a novel she would like to turn into a movie. As Vanoye writes, “Dysnarration replaces a finished product with elements of a product *in the process of becoming*.”³ Moreover, even the product in the process of becoming is missing in the cited film. The unrealizable is stronger than auctorial wish. Delvaux suggests some possible paths of arbitrariness, a reference to what Vanoye calls “*the reality of reality*”⁴. Can that be found at Delvaux? We notice the narration of a narrative, the “reality of reality,” namely Livio's diary, evidence of the existence of their love being thrown into fire. This *scriptural* sample, a personal diary (on a loved woman who is forced into a platonic, mystic love affair as a result of the Milanese magistrate's proposal that they give up on physical love) on its ambivalent form and, inevitably, duality (proof of a bodily fire and then of repression) that in the end is burned imagines what a *dysnarration of dysnarrative* would be: unreality of unreality, impalpability of impalpability, non-

² Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Empirismo erotico*, Milan, Garzanti, 1972.

³ F. Vanoye, *op. cit.*

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 200.

representation of non-representation; the utmost disjunction of para-realities, metafiction, as some returnable images of a self-denying reality.

If we were to take each of François Vanoye's scoreboards to comment on dynarration (by an invitation to see the films of Godard, Robbe-Grillet, Chantal Akerman - a Belgian woman - and M. Duras) which is just a short list, at the end of which he lays three points that allows us the favor to call even André Delvaux (a Belgian filmmaker born at Louvan, the commune of Heverlee, near Porte de Tirlemont, on March 21, 1926) we will surely find illustrating materials for each of them. We will stop at one example only that compels any critical discourse to see André Delvaux perhaps like some model for self-reference sublimation of dynarration. Professor Vanoye detects the usage of burlesque dynarration by Woody Allen, who really is a master of deconstructions (Harry). A recognized genre like the burlesque is used by both authors, Delvaux incorporates it as a quote (some explicit postmodernism) in *Rendez-vous à Bray* (*Rendez-vous at Bray*, or *Fantomas in the Feuillade* version). Delvaux (reality of reality) make an artistic documentary featuring Woody Allen (*To Woody Allen, from Europe, with Love*, 1980) making a film starting from a different author and other film (Fellini's *Otto e mezzo*). Mother of all coincidences: arbitrariness is always "programmed".

Come-back, flash-back, feed-back?

None of these returns, of looking back, is considered as typical for postmodern processualities that, according to Jean-François Lyotard⁵ does not mean repetition but it elaborates an "initial forgetting," in a complex process of "ana-" forms. Lyotard mentions four forms of initial forgetting: (ana)lysis, (ana)mnesis, (ana)logy and (ana)morphosis.

We will be trying to present how they occur in Delvaux's films, where each time there is a '*possibility*' manifest that is also an exposure to events in a way characterized by "evenly-suspended attention." The shock upon receiving the meaning is so strong with some of the filmmaker's characters that they feel it as an event per se. Many of his characters' failed self-realization is expressed as pleasure at and suffering in accepting the incommensurable. The cineaste is joining his negative characters in a textual show, an ambiguous imagination, of *impresentability*, which existence ritualistically tutors the destiny of failures.

We could identify a "dispute" between the regret to fail absolute intelligibility and the nostalgia of trying. This out of synch between intentionality and finality is what Delvaux often postulates when decomposing the personality of those brought under the magnifying glass of *computational analysis*.

⁵ See J.-Fr. Lyotard, *Le Postmoderne expliqué aux enfants: Correspondance, 1982-1985*, Paris, Galilée; *The Postmodern Explained to Children: Correspondence, 1982-1985*.

More than once, his models seem to simulate some artificial behavior grafted on human behavior. Analyses are conducted like paradigms of cognitive sciences. We have to say that “Le cognitivisme postule l’existence de représentations mentales symboliques, conçues comme des énoncés d’un langage formel interne et considère les processus cognitifs comme des processus computationnelles opérant sur ces représentations selon un système de règles formelles.”⁶

Although it has nothing of a scientific documentary regarding a medical subject, *L’Homme au crâne rasé* (*The Man Who Had His Hair Cut Short*) ends up in a psychiatric hospital like a version of Nosferatu, a title that is on the short list of a the author’s affinities, as a possible conclusion, that in no way is forcefully stated, at the end of trying, experimenting with formal sub-systems. We are witnessing a cartographic decomposition of the human brains in all their affective functionalities. The lesson of the abyss where Delvaux’s characters fall is at the same time a demonstration of mental imagery. Objects and people known to Gover are cognitively updated in ulterior circumstances. The school environment, the medical and judiciary environments as well as the psychiatric environment, all of them have their particular stimuli. There is only one person that is accepted as the guide throughout this process: Fran. Through and with her we manage to identify the real Godfried Miereveldt, to whose “cerebral” autopsy the cineaste invites us, displaying, in a rare virtuoso manner, an ensemble of events of visual imagery.

How would anamnesis happen in Delvaux’s characters? In one of the most genuine postmodern attitudes, the cineaste invokes with each step *that which cannot be represented* in a representation. In his quest to write down the antecedents of the illnesses from which his characters suffer, illnesses that can be identified as originating with the sphere of “modern” neurosis (schizophrenia, paranoia), the director proceeds in fact in an elevated, Platonist manner, as he tries to fix the memory of ideas contemplated by the soul in a prior existence. The Delvaux individual sometimes seems to invoke a demarche similar to that at the end of a pray in a Catholic mess.

Most of the illnesses are conditions of the soul, to which repetition we should be permanently condemned, although it is not sure that the reiteration of the come-back with the aim of reinvigorating and salvaging some of the initial forgetting does not become an impiety per se, the useless guilt of an absent content. What is the use to Govert of the relapses in a sentimental nebula deprived

⁶ *Vocabulaire de sciences cognitives*, PUF, Paris, 1998, pp. 85-86. We emphasize the following idea: “Cognitivism postulates the existence of symbolic mental representations, conceived as statements of an internal linguistic language and considers cognitive processes as computational processes operating on these representations according to a system of formal rules.” *Our translation*.

of any affective, sexual resolution, be it a cognoscible one? Is Mathieu any happier for letting himself in his turn dragged by the illness of escaping into the unknown? Who gives Mathias the assurance that by remaking a memorialist trail, compelled by the cineaste, through the imminence of the death of his beloved woman, or strictly intimately, in some spiritual meaning, he will truly manage to understand what happens with his existence? Probing the inscrutable becomes only the *modus vivendi* of the postmodern man, and surely of Delvaux's characters.

Elevation toward spiritual matters, an anagogical aspiration characteristic of Zenon as the master of a famous alchemical formula, "l'œuvre a noir," the abyss, a stage of matter separation and dissolution, leads us from the subterranean labyrinth of existence – sometimes seen daily – to the scriptural horizon of breaking free from prejudice, to finding oneself, undoubtedly in an ambiguous, confusing marking. By strangulating the specter of reality, as some Post-Modernism *avant la lettre*, Zenon is saving the honor of the name, as Lyotard would say.⁷ Would this way he save the mankind from the threat of the unforeseeable? Like a genuine postmodernist, again inspired, Delvaux does not provide a clear-cut answer. He knows better than anyone that there is no such resolution.

Is there any Delvaux image that can be construed other than the sign of anamorphosis? Distortion should not be understood here as some deformity, either concavely illustrated as a series of cavities, or convexly, jutting out. Delvaux mirrors are quite commonplace in the universe of his films, but their image is in itself anagogical, sublimated. When carving into the human soul, litotes, reduction initials such deep-going investigations. When extrapolating, it imagines a story or tandem, which he infuses with the functionality of a mirror that we could take to be convex, although Delvaux differentiates, indicates alterity and supports it through narration and images. Through the mirror of the Benvenuta-Livio couple, he warns us about the destiny of another couple about to be, Francois-Jeanne. The former is getting away, while the latter seems to be getting closer to us. Neither is truly describable.

The absence of absence

Postmodern cinema discourse based on dynarration is sometimes identified as metafiction based on the implicit, absence, allusion, but not always – as truly happening when scientific knowledge, in order to be understood, needs a

⁷ See Lyotard points out in *La condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir*, Paris, Les Editions de Minuit, 1979 (*The Postmodern Condition: A Report of Knowledge*, University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

helping narration, which is inevitably vulgarizing, even when we consider its mass persuasion force.

Yet, absence is all the more ambiguous, and to say that the further from the knowledgeable subject a man, a thing a situation given as currently inexistent, in the near plane, are, the better they become known means in fact to recognize the paradigmatic capacity of filmic narration.

Delvaux is undoubtedly one of the grandest masters of laying out on the silver screen one of the most overwhelming postmodern feelings – longing after the departed, after the one than never comes back, after he or she who will never mean physical presence, will not commit and not accept sentimental contracts.

Delvaux's otherness is in fact one that is impossible to be close. His narrations are in fact calligraphies of para-realities, instead of realities. The chain of absences get integrated in the end with an affective dominant, but even its split is done in a postmodern manner, without big dramas, without clear-cut conclusions, without dramatizing overvaulting, without tears.

An emblematic character, absence takes on a lot of shapes in the cineaste's films. It becomes the pretext of some actions that otherwise would be hard to justify. Sometimes absence is unfolded like an absence of absence and then it will be hard to decipher some guilt complex in the forsaken ones or the ones who are cheated out of their promised meetings. Absent to Julien, Jacques (Rendez-vous at Bray) is a prestidigitator specializing in creating vacuum. Acting like an in-law of the protagonist, he dominates Julien, who is kept in the frame by the cineaste to make Jacques, precisely the one who makes absence into a coat of arms, better understood (or, in fact, misunderstood). I presume that unbeknownst to him, Julien is further playing a refusing part. He personifies the arrogance of the imberb, innocent, immaculate man who is ideologically, militarily and, undoubtedly, sentimentally non-committed, because in reality he is nothing more than the hidden face of the one truly missing. Jacques is not in his place in Odille's arms. He cannot stand the erotic overtures of the host, who is nonetheless charming, during the challenging initiating soiree. The language able to enthrall Julien is different. The language of utter absenteeism is a hyper refined tool. Jacques is not coming. Absence is also an explanation for the failure to meet in the woods. Jacques cannot possibly come, is what we are suggested in the end, when trains lay immobile on the railways and the papers shout the squadron was left grounded. By taking the path to the house hidden among trees on his way home from the train station, Julien proves that absence is the biggest trap in which he does not fall. When waking up after a night of love making, the woman he has possessed is no longer in bed. Apparently, it is this disappearance that has him excited. Seduced by a chimaera, he does not realize that he has met a woman conspicuous for absence, surely for the absence of the absent one summoned by him to prove how active inexistence itself can be. The love interest at the night

when Jacques was absent is a refined personification of absence itself. Seduction is multifaceted, and absence is precisely one of the facets.

What a commotion another type of absence can generate! To Govert in The Man Who Had His Hair Cut Short, Fran can only be the fully inaccessible woman in person. The man turns her unapproachableness into a pretext for his own suppression from existence. Govert “goes missing” because he has at least subconsciously realized that nothing encourages him anymore to hope that one day, no matter how late, Fran will feel good in his arms. The only thing that consoles him is his imagination, but imagination is nonetheless the best province for all possibilities impossible to materialize. Mentally alienated, the one in love with an irrevocable absence, feels (recreates) her face at the cinema, on the screen of the penitentiary-cum-asylum, which is precisely his bed of eternal grief.

Ann’s absence in *Un soir, un train* (*One Night ... A Train*, entails the most traumatizing torture: not believing that you have killed the loved one, yet living her absence, her snatching, her delving into the death’s waters. The *mise-en-scène* of absence – the most dramatic of postmodern postulates of the disintegration of being, although, honestly, “dramatic” does not resonate with the precept of postmodernism – points to another direction, to the games of the unpredictable, which in turn cannot be anything else but the absence of logics, of consistency and the intelligible.

Conclusions

Themselves absent, Delvaux’s characters refuse to accept that they are the bearers of cardinal absences, although they prove it precisely because of their absence. They behave like shadows of authenticity. They are masked exactly by the mask of absence, refusing to show how deeply doubled and, inevitably, absence generating their game of life and death is.

What is it that François aspires for in *Benvenuta*? A chimera, of course. He would like to particularize in film a generic female character without even being ready to provide contours for she who, presumably, possesses the secret of character alchemy, and what is meant here is Jeanne. She dies, making again absence into another obstacle to image aesthetics. Absences in Delvaux’s films happen as if in a chain reaction, but is not our entire existence but a journey through absences? See the catacomb opening up before Zenon. He is the only one that cannot self-delude. He embraces absence, precisely because he knows this way his presence will be more sorely felt. In his case, absence is no longer just a mask, but a philosophical warning.

There are more socializing incarnations of absence, for instance in... Woman Between Wolf and Dog. A women tired of her husband’s absence, Lieve accepts another absence, Francois. We are never told where he is absent from to

believe he can fill in the emptiness in the life of the woman who gives him shelter, food and love. As the principle of communicating vessels puts it, something is superfluous when something is always missing. Absence becomes the Great Game.

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