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The Magic Realism of *The Man Who Had His Hair Cut Short* (1965)

By Gertjan Willems

1965 saw the release of André Delvaux's feature film debut *The Man Who Had His Hair Cut Short* (*De man die zijn haar kort liet knippen*). The film soon gained international critical acclaim and became widely regarded as a modernist classic from Belgian cinema. In 2021, the Royal Belgian Film Archive CINEMATEK made a restoration of the film, which is now being picked up by several film institutions and distributors throughout Europe.[1] The sophisticated manner in which Delvaux filmed the blurry line between reality and imagination not only earned him a reputation as master of magic realism, it also seems to keep fascinating new audiences.[2]

The man who had his reality imagined

In *The Man Who Had His Hair Cut Short*, we meet Govert Miereveld, a lawyer and teacher tormented by his infatuation with a student, Eufrazia Veenman, or Fran for short. We witness three defining moments in his life. The film opens with Govert, who is daydreaming about Fran. His wife wakes him, because he must go to the graduation ceremony. On the way, he swings by the hairdresser, where his hair and scalp receive an extensive treatment. He does not really have time for this, but it relaxes him, and he wants to look his best, because he is planning to declare his love to Fran. However, at the ceremony, he does not manage to speak to her.

The second part of the film takes place a few years

later. Consumed by his unrequited love, Govert has left teaching to work as a court clerk. One afternoon, he attends an autopsy that throws him profoundly off guard. In the third part of the film, he arrives at a hotel after the autopsy. Fran, who is now a celebrated actress, is staying there as well. At night, Govert knocks on Fran's door, and while they barely look at each other, let alone touch, they profess their love for each other. In an incoherent, somewhat cryptic manner, Fran also recounts the affair that she had as a student with Judge Brantink, Govert's predecessor, and speaks of her missing father, whose description matches the corpse involved in the autopsy. She asks Govert to shoot her with her father's pistol, and he ultimately complies.

That is the summary of the film. As a viewer, however, one is left uncertain whether it all actually happened in that way. As evidenced by the voice-over and the many point-of-view and over-the-shoulder shots, Govert acts as a narrator, thus presenting us with his version of the facts. The narration conceals the alienating power of the film. Right from the opening credits, in which we see Govert resting and daydreaming of Fran, there are hints about the dubious veracity of the images. However, the unreliability of Govert's subjective narration does not become fully apparent until the end of the film, when it is revealed that Govert is telling the entire story from a mental institution.

This immediately brings to mind Robert Wienes's *Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (*Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, 1920). In this milestone of German Expressionism, the same final twist overturns the objective veracity of everything that we have just seen. The entire film displays the subjective experience of a psychiatric patient. The ending of *The Man Who Had His Hair Cut Short* also emphasizes the subjectivity of a mental patient and places the entire film in a different light, albeit in a more subtle manner. For the viewer, it is impossible to distinguish between objective reality and the reality experienced by Govert, as the two worlds merge imperceptibly. This creates confusion for the viewer – a confusion like that felt by Govert. It is this sublime playing with the border between reality and imagination that imbues the film with its status as a masterpiece of magic realism.

One special feature is that the viewer discovers the

doubt concerning what is being shown in the film along with Govert, at the moment he realizes that he is also a spectator. In the film room of the institution, he is watching a news reel featuring Fran. Is she still alive? Did he not actually murder her? Was she merely wounded, and did she recover? Did Govert perhaps not shoot after all, or might the entire dramatic encounter with Fran in the hotel room never have even happened? Or is the news reel a figment of Govert's imagination? The news reel does not provide Govert with any answers, it raises doubts, just as the entire film does for the viewer. Delvaux explains his intentions as follows: 'Asking questions: that seemed to be the main thing in the film' (in Daisne [1947] 1966: iv).[3]

The meta-reflection on the illusory character of the film medium is also found elsewhere: 'My image is deceptive', says Fran in the hotel room. 'Maybe you will carry on looking, Govert. But don't look any further. It can't be found'.[4] Fran's words are equally addressed to the viewer, who is trying to figure out exactly how things happened. Neither for Govert nor for the viewer is it possible to find out the objective truth. This insight provides Govert with resignation at the end of the film: 'The world always seems so scattered. I see the truth, in duplicate, in triplicate. But that scatteredness, that's precisely what I believe in'.[5]

The Belgian who had a European vision

When *The Man Who Had His Hair Cut Short* had its television premiere in late 1965, reactions in the Belgian press were lukewarm. This stood in contrast to the international praise that the film would subsequently garner. Film festivals throughout the world acclaimed *The Man Who Had His Hair Cut Short*, and the film was received with enthusiasm. This was especially the case in France, where it was praised in magazines including *Cahiers du cinéma* (Anon. 1967) and *Positif* (Ciment 1966), as well as by such filmmakers as Jean-Luc Godard, Chris Marker and Alain Resnais. As noted by the influential critic Michel Cournot in *Le nouvel observateur*,

> Films in the class of *Citizen Kane*, *Pierrot le fou* or *Salvatore Giuliano* do not appear in numbers as high as 10 or even 5 per year, taking the whole world production into account. One of the most recent such works

is *The Man Who Had His Hair Cut Short*.[6]
(Cournot 1966)

Only after the film received such foreign recognition did appreciation start to grow in Belgium, where it won the grand prize at the seventh Festival of Belgian Cinema in late 1966. Perhaps it was the force of habit that led Belgian critics initially to respond with little enthusiasm to a film from their own country. This is not surprising, given that only few feature films of high artistic quality were made during the post-war period. Modernist exceptions such as *Seagulls Die in the Harbour* (*Meeuwen sterven in de haven*, 1955, by Rik Kuypers, Ivo Michiels and Roland Verhavert), *If the Wind Frightens You* (*Si le vent te fait peur*, 1960, by Emile Degelin) and *From the Branches Drops the Withered Blossom* (*Déjà s'envole la fleur maigre*, 1960, by Paul Meyer) provided evidence that film talent was indeed present. Yet, there was no professional framework or structural means of production to allow that talent to flourish.

For this reason, various initiatives emerged in the 1960s to promote art films. The most important initiative was the introduction of a system of cultural film subsidies in 1964 (for Flanders) and 1967 (for French-speaking Belgium). These were nevertheless not yet available to Delvaux at the time of producing *The Man Who Had His Hair Cut Short*. Another initiative emerged from the Dutch-speaking Belgian public broadcasting service (at that time, BRT), which saw to the creation of several television films based on well-known Flemish novels.

The BRT also approached Delvaux, for a film adaptation of the (in several languages translated) novel *The Man Who Had His Hair Cut Short* (1947) by Johan Daisne, an author and film critic whom Delvaux had long admired.[7] Also Delvaux's second film, *One Night… A Train* (*Un soir, un train*, 1968), would be based on a book by Daisne. The BRT asked for a mediumlength television film. Delvaux, however, who had been making short films and reports since 1953, saw it as an opportunity to direct his first feature-length film. To this end, he raised additional money from the then Ministry of National Education and Culture. Filming started in the spring of 1965, with a total budget of around BEF 2.6 million (which equalled a bit more than USD 52,000 at the time).

Delvaux's films typically combine a strong Belgian

embedment with an explicitly international focus, both in terms of film style and with regard to production design and distribution. Just as the Belgian national anthem (the Brabançonne) resounds at the beginning of *The Man Who Had His Hair Cut* Short, Delvaux positioned himself explicitly as a *Belgian* filmmaker. Perfectly bilingual, he made films in both French and Dutch, with stories and resources from both parts of the country. Seeing his multiple culture and identity as a great wealth, he tried to incorporate this explicitly into his films.[8]

Delvaux always paired his attachment to Belgium with an international, largely European focus. For example, the French-Italian Mag Bodard[9] (also a producer for Robert Bresson, Jacques Demy and Agnès Varda) produced his next two films. The position that Delvaux held on the European art cinema scene was further reinforced through collaborations with well-known actors, including Anouk Aimée and Yves Montand (*One Night… A Train*), Anna Karina and Mathieu Carrière (*Rendezvous at Bray* [*Rendez-vous à Bray*, 1971]), Marie-Christine Barrault and Rutger Hauer (*Woman in a Twilight Garden* [*Een vrouw tussen hond en wolf*, 1979]) and Fanny Ardant and Vittorio Gassman (*Benvenuta*, 1983).

In *The Man Who Had His Hair Cut Short*, the Flemish actor Senne Rouffaer plays opposite the Polish actress Beata Tyszkiewicz, who in 1965 also starred in *The Saragossa Manuscript* by Wojciech Has. Delvaux got to know her in 1964, while he was making a nine-part television series on Polish cinema for the French-language public television broadcaster RTB, for which Tyszkiewicz's partner at that time, Andrzej Wajda, was one of the tenors. For that television series, Delvaux worked with camera operator Ghislain Cloquet and sound engineer Antoine Bonfanti, who had already made their mark within the French nouvelle vague. Delvaux brought them along to *The Man Who Had His Hair Cut Short* and engaged Suzanne Baron – another celebrated name within French cinema – for editing the film.

The filmmaker who had mastered his style

In addition to Baron, other women were active in key positions behind the screens. Anna De Pagter contributed to writing the screenplay, and Delvaux's wife, Denise Debbaut (also known as Denise

Delvaux), was in charge of production. This did not prevent the film, as a product of its time, from conveying a patriarchal world-view. The teacher, the hairdresser, the judge, the pathologists: all of them are men. Female characters in the film are much less present, and they play subordinate, subservient roles. The only important female character in the story is Fran – a mysterious beauty who frustrates Govert, as he cannot possess her, such that he ultimately shoots her.

Looking at the film with today's eyes, this criticism is impossible to avoid. When the film was released in the mid-1960s, however, its gender patterns were not a point of discussion. Primary attention was directed towards the way in which *The Man Who Had His Hair Cut Short* related to the modernism of such auteurs as Michelangelo Antonioni, Ingmar Bergman, Jean-Luc Godard and Agnès Varda, who were involved with bringing artistic innovation to narrative film. Delvaux literally joined these filmmakers by calling on technicians with whom Alain Resnais and Robert Bresson were also collaborating. They were filmmakers with whom Delvaux shared a certain affinity. With Resnais, Delvaux shared a fascination for how film could serve to portray reality, memory and the confusion between the two. Like Bresson, Delvaux employed an extremely controlled cinematic style. There was little to no room for improvisation or impulsiveness. Partly due to the budget constraints, he adhered to a meticulous planning and a rather ascetic cinematic language. This included a minimalist, cool acting style and visual attention for particular details and actions.

The film's title scene, for example, can easily be called 'Bressonian'. We see Govert sitting at the hairdresser's, a place where he comes to rest. It is the only time in the film in which Govert experiences intimate physical contact: 'skin to skin', to use the words of the hairdresser. The entire scene is constructed of extreme close-ups; we never see an establishing shot. It is not the space that is important, but that which relaxes Govert: the hairdresser's hands. At first, it seems as if Govert's face is the focus, also because the entire film attempts to take us inside his head. However, it gradually becomes clear that the hairdresser's hands are truly central. The hands are portrayed with as much care as the

hairdresser wields his instruments.
The attention that Delvaux pays to significant details is also expressed in the soundtrack. It should come as no surprise that Delvaux attached great importance to music. After completing musical training at the conservatory in Brussels in the 1950s, he accompanied silent films on the piano in the Royal Belgian Film Archive. The composer Frédéric Devreese was his brother-in-arms, with whom he would continue to collaborate throughout his entire career. For *The Man Who Had His Hair Cut Short*, Devreese composed music that not only contributes to the atmosphere but also helps to create meaning. For example, a ballad that Fran sings about 'three kings' serves as a commentary on the three men in her life, and the music reinforces the alienation of the main character.
The sounds are equally meaningful. One good example is the famous autopsy scene in the middle of the film. In his focus on the actions and instruments of the specialists, the scene provides a sort of mirror image for the scene at the hairdresser's. Instead of coming to rest during this only other moment of physical contact in the film (this time, between the corpse and the pathologists), Govert becomes overwrought. While there are introductory and closing establishing shots that clearly depict the space, we do not get to see the central subject of the scene: the corpse and the autopsy. The tactile sounds of the instruments with which the pathologists dissect the corpse are all the more audible. In this way, the sounds force the viewer to imagine the autopsy. At the same time, in the background, we hear the bucolic sounds of birds, the rustling of the wind and the ringing of a church bell. The contrast between the sinister and the idyllic sounds makes the scene even more oppressive.
The stylistic mastery with which Delvaux depicts the ambiguity between objective reality and Govert's subjective imagination is just as impressive today as it was in 1965, and it has inspired numerous other filmmakers. One of the spectators in 1965 was the future filmmaker Marion Hänsel, then 16 years of age, who would 35 years later choose *The Man Who Had His Hair Cut Short* as her favourite Belgian film:
The Man Who Had His Hair Cut Short is the first Belgian film I ever saw. I was 16 and

I never forgot it. It looked like nothing I was used to seeing in westerns, French comedies or Italian neo-realism. It spoke a strange language but it was mine, it showed a strange city and a strange country but they were mine. The everyday worlds that I knew were shown to me differently. The rhythm as well as the melody of the words were on another level of reality and swept me to 'another place'. Just like the main character, Govert, I felt spellbound, caught in a strange languor, against which I couldn't resist and which pleased me. […] I still feel the seductiveness I felt then. (Hänsel in Brussels International Film Festival 2000: 2)

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Endnotes

1. CINEMATEK’s restoration was part of the international programme ‘A Season of Film Classics’ (2021), coordinated by The Association of European Cinematheques ACE with financial support of Creative Europe: https://ace-film.eu/projects/season-of-classics/. Accessed 20 April 2022. An earlier restoration of the film by CINEMATEK led to a DVD release in 2005, after which CINEMATEK also included the film in a DVD series on Delvaux: https://cinematek.myshopify.com/en/collections/collectie-andre-delvaux. Accessed 20 April 2022.
2. An earlier, Dutch-language version of this article appeared in Anatomie van de Film (Willems 2021). Together with CINEMATEK, I also made a video introduction for this film, which you can watch on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TqokWZVsBMQ&t=2s. Accessed 20 April 2022. For other analyses of the film, see Aumont (1990), Colvile (2006), Mosley (2004), Nysenholc (2006) and Sojcher (2005).
3. ‘Vragen stellen: dat scheen in de film het voornaamste’ (translated from Dutch by the author).
4. ‘Mijn beeld is een bedrog […] Misschien blijf je zoeken, Govert. Maar zoek niet verder. Het is niet te vinden’ (translated from Dutch by the author).
5. ‘De wereld lijkt mij altijd zo diffuus. Ik zie de waarheid twee-, driedubbel. Maar die diffuusheid, daarin precies geloof ik’ (translated from Dutch by the author).
6. ‘Des oeuvres de la classe de *Citizen Kane*, de *Pierrot le fou*, de *Salvatore Giuliano*, il ne s’en fait pas dix par an, et même pas cinq, le monde pris dans son entier. L’une des toutes récentes est *L’homme au crâne rasé*’ (translated from French by the author).
7. More than twenty years after the film, Delvaux (1987) wrote a text in which he gave insight into the considerations he made during the adaptation process.
8. A few hours before his death on 4 October 2002,

Delvaux delivered a speech at a conference in Valencia, in which he highlighted the richness of his multiple cultural identity: http://filmgeschiedenis.be/portfolio/lauteur-dans-la-cite-2002. Accessed 20 April 2022.

9. There is a nice picture of Delvaux and Bodard here: https://www.francetvinfo.fr/culture/cinema/magbodard-productrice-emblematique-du-cinemafrancais-est-morte-a-103-ans_3384613.html. Accessed 20 April 2022.