

Le double secret – the ambiguous secret
Interview with Jef Cornelis on The Music Box, Les Vacances
de Monsieur Mag, Een Weekend met Meneer Magritte (Zaterdag
& Zondag)

KOEN BRAMS & DIRK PÜLTAU

"Magritte was in two minds about the title. In an updated postcard from Paris to Mesens in Brussels, he wrote: 'Ayant réfléchi, je crois qu'il faut mieux laisser le premier titre Le double secret plutôt que Les deux secrets. Je te prie donc de le conserver au catalogue.'"

David Sylvester, in: *René Magritte, Catalogue raisonné, I: Oil paintings 1916-1930.*

Koen Brams/Dirk Pültau: *Do you remember when you first saw paintings by René Magritte?*

Jef Cornelis: In 1958, at the world exhibition. I was seventeen, then. Expo '58 is a reference point for me, and not only for me, I think. But I have always had difficulty with French surrealism. Breton and his associates are not my cup of tea. And it was very difficult to separate Magritte from that lot. I needed time to be able to look at Magritte seriously. I never had any trouble with Giorgio De Chirico.

K.B./D.P.: *When did you really learn to value Magritte's work?*

J.C.: I saw a terrible Magritte exhibition in 1980, at the Paleis voor Schone Kunsten (Palais des Beaux-Arts) in Brussels. That exhibition bothered me for a long time. It conjured up an image of Magritte that was completely wrong. I don't think I really became interested in Magritte's work until after reading *Bedrieglijke gelijkenissen – de spiegel in het werk van Magritte (Deceptive Similarities: The Mirror*

in the Work of Magritte) by Bart Verschaffel, published in Archis magazine in 1986.

René Magritte (The Music Box)

K.B./D.P.: *In 1994, together with Bart Verschaffel, you completed The Music Box, a film that also includes René Magritte's work.*

J.C.: *The Music Box* actually stemmed from Magritte's work. In 1992, the Hayward Gallery in London held a major exhibition of Magritte's work. I saw that exhibition together with Bart Verschaffel. That was the actual beginning of our preparations for *The Music Box*. I had received a small amount of money to go to London. We were able to work in London for two days – on something that would not be broadcast until 1994.

K.B./D.P.: *Why did you invite Bart Verschaffel to visit the Magritte exhibition with you?*

J.C.: After *Container*, the discussion programme on 'civilization', which I had made together with Bart Verschaffel and Lieven De Cauter, they were very badly treated by the VRT (Flemish Radio and Television). I thought that was really out of line. In 1990, Bart and I had completed our first monograph film, *Dames en Heren Jan Fabre (Ladies and Gentlemen Jan Fabre)*. Bart had moreover since asked me to do a film for the Philosophy and Literature project to the *Antwerp: Cultural Capital* programme. That film, *Voyage à Paris, (Journey to Paris)* was partially realized with funding for Antwerp '93. They asked me to do an essay on Antwerp, and I left for Paris! Bart and I spent a lot of time together in those days.

K.B./D.P.: *Where did your interest in seeing the Magritte show come from?*

J.C.: We were out prospecting, in response to David Sylvester's retrospective catalogue on Magritte. Sylvester worked on it from 1969 – two years after Magritte's death – until 1993. It was completely financed by the Menil

Foundation, including administrative expenses. That Magritte retrospective was my only reason to go to London, as a representative of a VRT art programme.

K.B./D.P.: *Was Magritte's catalogue raisonné the incentive?*

J.C.: No, that was not yet on the market, but the monograph was. I know that for certain – as sure as I know that we were not allowed to film in the Hayward Gallery.

K.B./D.P.: *Your trip to London was for which programme?*

J.C.: I don't remember. Some cultural programme, but I don't recall which one. During that period, I did the most impossible assignments for the public network, projects that didn't mention my name, luckily. I had to squeeze films like *The Music Box* in between all those assignments. We did see something there, in London, for certain. Bart Verschaffel and I spent two days there together, and then something started to develop. It grows, while you're walking around. There were many elements in Magritte's work that led us to Henri De Braekeleer. In November 1938, Magritte gave a lecture at the Royal Museum for the Fine Arts in Antwerp. Was it then that he first saw De Braekeleer's work? At the end of the 19th century, James Ensor had given a lecture on De Braekeleer at the Jeu de Paume in Paris. Ensor was very precise in his writing about De Braekeleer. What connects the work of these three artists with Jan Verduyck is their interiors, indoor spaces.

K.B./D.P.: *We found a document in your archives, dated October 10, 1992, written by Bart Verschaffel. It outlines the content of The Music Box. It is already clear there that the film would be dealing with domestic interiors, the bourgeois, and it mentions the four artists. "De Braekeleer, Ensor and Magritte's 'art inside the home' not only shows the ambiguous place of art in the bourgeois way of life. It also shows related solutions to being an artist in the bourgeois period. None of them chooses to pose as a genius and/or a misunderstood genius – the Bohemian. They all wear a hat. All three of them play the piano. They exemplify a way of living as an artist in a (petit) bourgeois culture: by playing a*

double role, by spying and sending secret coded messages into the world, by being recognized and knighted. [...] Vercruyssen comes after this 'Belgian solution'. He exemplifies a kind of 'posthumous variation'. Because, who is the artist, if even the character of the bourgeois-artist disappears, and the artist no longer has a hat to wear?"

J.C.: Bart Verschaffel's reflections on conventionality are partially based on the classes he taught at the University of Antwerp. It was then, in late 1992, early 1993, that I began negotiations with Charly Herscovici, who held the copyright on Magritte's pictures.

K.B./D.P.: *Why?*

J.C.: I was nowhere without Herscovici. He had the rights.

K.B./D.P.: *How did Herscovici get the copyrights?*

J.C.: That's a pedestrian story. Georgette, René Magritte's wife, never got around to making a will. Dying didn't exist for her. The Magrilles had no children. Gisèle Ollinger, head of Modern Art for the Belgian Royal Museums of Fine Arts, arbitrated in order to get a judge to get something down on paper. Charly Herscovici, who never left Georgette's side, was awarded several rights. When Georgette died in 1986, there was no notarized will, only a statement of intent, but that proved to be enough. Herscovici is the man who walked the dog, that's all. But I have always been able to work well with him.

K.B./D.P.: *You wanted to obtain the right from Herscovici to broadcast Magritte's work?*

J.C.: Exactly, otherwise the film would have been prohibitively expensive.

K.B./D.P.: *How did you approach the matter?*

J.C.: I contacted Charly Herscovici through Jan Martens of the Mercator Foundation. But I needed to have something to negotiate with, or it would never have worked.

K.B./D.P.: *How do you mean?*

J.C.: I proposed trying to put Magritte's short films – I didn't know in what state they were in – back together again. What had happened was that in October 1956, René Magritte

bought a film camera. In the early years, in particular, he filmed a great deal on 8mm, in black-and-white. From the time he had a Super 8 camera, he again filmed a lot, this time in colour, until his death in 1967. In early December, 1965, Magritte asked Robert Rimbaert, who worked for the Francophone Belgian Radio and Television (RTBF), and Jean Raine, a French artist, to compile a montage of all the films. So, to do the compilation, they cut up all the reels. But it was never actually made into a film, and when René died two years later, Georgette rushed off to Jean Raine to pick up the chopped-up bits of film. They were put in a box, which did not turn up again until after Georgette's death, at the public auction of the Magrittés' estate in 1987. Gisèle Ollinger, as one of the few who knew about the box's existence, managed to purchase the films for the Royal Museums – for a ridiculous price, 50,000 or 55,000 Belgian francs (€ 1,250-€ 1,360). David Sylvester was terribly frustrated. He wrote about the film segments, and there are a few stills reproduced in his book, but he didn't realize that he had missed his chance until after the Royal Museums had made the purchase.

K.B./D.P.: *How did you know about the existence of the films?*

J.C.: A documentary had been made on the films back in 1976, financed by the Ministry of French Culture. It was a 25-minute montage by Catherine de Croës and Francis de Lulle. But it was Gisèle Ollinger who tipped me off. A portion of the films had ended up in the Film Museum because they wanted to restore them. Another portion ended up with the Royal Museums. When I learned that, I offered to reconstruct the films. I also went looking for Robert Rimbaert and found that he also had a few remnants of the Magritte films, a few envelopes with ten or fifteen frames. I immediately had a good starting point for negotiating with Charly Herscovici. It eventually resulted in a contract between the Flemish Radio and Television (VRT), the VAR (the advertising agency allied with the VRT) and Herscovici. The VRT had commercial rights for only five years, but that was not my concern. I

just wanted to make *The Music Box*. Charly Herscovici helped pay for part of the production by temporarily releasing the rights. I was also the producer for the film, in fact, because who else in the public network would be interested in Magritte?

K.B./D.P.: Wasn't *Rik Sauwen* the producer?

J.C.: I never saw Rik Sauwen.

K.B./D.P.: *Rik Sauwen was at the press showing of Les Vacances de Monsieur Mag. He was interviewed. Quoting from a review in De Morgen, "Rik Sauwen is convinced that the BRTN's high expectations for this documentary will succeed well outside Belgium."*

J.C.: Nothing was ever done with that. Sauwen did know the French-speaking milieu, but he never concerned himself with Magritte. It didn't interest him.

K.B./D.P.: *You said that you were not allowed in the Hayward Gallery. How did you get your hands on the pictures of Magritte's work?*

J.C.: Once again, via Jan Martens of the Mercator Foundation. The exhibition travelled from London to New York and from there on to Houston and Chicago. Jan Martens shepherded me into the Menil Foundation. Charly Herscovici agreed but didn't help me.

K.B./D.P.: *So you travelled to Houston?*

J.C.: Yes, I had to move heaven and earth at the VRT, but finally I got the authorization. The Director of Television was dead against it. There was no money.

K.B./D.P.: *Jan Ceuleers?*

J.C.: Yes, I was negotiating with Jan Ceuleers all the way to the men's restrooms at the VRT. I got four tickets. After all, I couldn't film everything just from David Sylvester's monograph, which had been published in association with the travelling exhibition. We were able to work on the paintings, one on one. It was great at the Menil Foundation. We were allowed to film on the days they were closed, Mondays, in the evenings and at night, two evenings and nights in total. The museum closed and we could work, without security. They even

gave us permission to consult the archives. Bart was there too, although his Philosophy and Literature project for *Antwerp 93* was taking a lot of criticism.

K.B./D.P.: *How did you select the works you filmed in Houston?*

J.C.: That was very simple: just get everything, inhale it all, as quickly as possible. Paul De Cock was cameraman. The exhibition was very complete, from the period around 1926 up to and including the end of the story. We began in the first gallery and kept going until the last room. The people at the Menil Foundation were very confident about their documentation. Who else – besides them – had a serious archive? No change was forthcoming either, until later, after the Irène Hamoir collection was donated to the Belgian Royal Museums. Today, the Royal Museums have the world's largest Magritte collection.

K.B./D.P.: *If you did so much filming in Houston, then only a fraction of it was used in The Music Box?*

J.C.: That's true, but I recuperated a lot of material a few years later in *Les Vacances de Monsieur Mag*.

K.B./D.P.: *How did you focus a camera on a Magritte painting?*

J.C.: I aimed on what you did not see at first sight.

K.B./D.P.: *Were you looking for specific things within that framework?*

J.C.: I did something I never used to do – I do it a lot with Magritte: there is quite a bit of camera movement. We really did make some choices.

K.B./D.P.: *You filmed the paintings in an empty space. There are a few shots where you back away. The viewer sees the empty room – the intimacy of the empty room, something Magritte himself painted so often. You can show a painting with or without a framework. There are several shots in which you move in, towards the painting. First you see the painting*

with a frame, then the camera zooms in until you see the painting without the frame.

J.C.: Then the picture is no longer an object on display. We made use of those different possibilities.

Henri De Braekeleer (The Music Box)

K.B./D.P.: *In The Music Box, Magritte's work is linked to that of De Braekeleer...*

J.C.: ...no, no, it's not about 'linking'. If you bring some of Magritte's pictures together, they seem to fit together, and that is also the case with De Braekeleer. This is something we literally said to each other at a certain point when we were talking about it: that some paintings mesh with each other, and that you can go back and separate the different works, but you can never again shake off the connections, the series. That not only applies to series' within one oeuvre, but also for series' drawn from several oeuvres.

K.B./D.P.: *So you wanted to create a series in The Music Box.*

J.C.: Yes, one that stays with you.

K.B./D.P.: *As you had done in the exhibition you did at Witte de With in Rotterdam, in February, 1995?*



J.C.: That series in the first room, with two Bruce Naumans, Ensor's picture of a skeleton painting, the tuba by

Vercruyssen, and the 1928 Magritte, *L'Inondation* - a vulva like no other...

K.B./D.P.: *Let's talk about the 'components' of The Music Box, about De Braekeleer's oeuvre.*

J.C.: Bart Verschaffel and I have always talked about De Braekeleer. It is something we have in common. Back in 1957, I went to a Rik Wouters exhibition at the Royal Museum of Art in Antwerp - alone, not with my parents. I was sixteen years old and returned home with a catalogue. I was actually interested in other things, not the work of Rik Wouters. I saw De Braekeleer in that museum! I got stuck on the De Braekeleer paintings, and that has always stayed with me. It was reinforced by Maurice Gilliams's essay *Inleiding tot de idee Henri De Braekeleer (Introduction to the Idea Henri De Braekeleer)*. Now I think it's a sentimental text. (...) Bart Verschaffel has a better opinion of that essay. I think Bart has everything that has ever been written about De Braekeleer. It is a passion we share. When you hear that De Braekeleer quoted Baudelaire out loud and was declared insane by the people around him... I don't think Gilliams was really interested in Baudelaire.

K.B./D.P.: *What in particular drew you to the work of De Braekeleer?*

J.C.: There is something very thought through in De Braekeleer's paintings - they are strong images. I think Vercruyssen has also produced strong images. I differentiate between strong images and paintings. Ensor made good paintings, but not great, powerful images. Or he did only during a very short period, until 1909, the period when he drew on his family situation: the absent father figure, and that closed environment where he is stuck between his aunt and his mother, who run the household. There are personal dramas everywhere. With Magritte, there is that whole family context, his mother committing suicide. De Braekeleer, too, has a problem; he can't get his background out of his system.

K.B./D.P.: *In your Ensor selection, it is conspicuous that a lot of paintings have paintings within the paintings: a*

painting in the picture, a painting on an easel in a room. This draws Ensor's work closer to Magritte. The Music Box only includes Ensor's interiors.

J.C.: That is true, and it is no coincidence. I don't think that Ensor was a great image-maker. May I say that? Magritte, in the beginning, was very concerned with putting something together, with composing something. They are strong images, in the most modern sense of the word. Magritte's oeuvre – it has a number of points that I can live with. I have tried to get as close to it as possible. It is a good thing I'm interested in painting! I am not interested in stills: a film still is false. A close-up of a painting, or a part of a painting – now *that's* something. Balthus also produced some fantastic images. I'd give the entire French cinema for fifteen paintings by Balthus.

K.B./D.P.: *If you say that De Braekeleer is an image-maker and Ensor a maker of good paintings, what consequences does that have for the way you film?*

J.C.: I knew when I was filming Ensor's work that I should go no further, that I should not do anything more than reproduce the image as well as possible. I think I was actually only after the pictures of Ensor's funeral – that coffin being carried into the church.

K.B./D.P.: *And Vercruyssen? Was that specifically your contribution?*

J.C.: Yes, I think I kept on insisting on it. I looked at that work for a very long time. In 1990, I also made a film about Vercruyssen's work, and I interviewed him myself.

K.B./D.P.: *The title of the film is the title of a short Laurel & Hardy film.*



J.C.: Yes, *The Music Box* was Bart Verschaffel's idea. It is the film in which a woman asks Laurel & Hardy to deliver a birthday present for her husband – a piano – to her home, and the husband proceeds to hack the piano to bits with an axe. It was fortunate that I was able to get a copy of the Laurel & Hardy film, free of copyright. If we hadn't had *The Music Box*, our film would not have happened. It was something we could work with: *The Music Box* as the box in which the instrument is kept. What's that thing – the art – kept hidden in there? It's too bad it was an upright piano, because artists had grand pianos – the Vercruysse grand pianos. But it is not only a box where a musical instrument is kept. It is also a coffin. And the Flemish artists have always worked with masks. De Braekeleer did as well. When we see all those guitars in *De Braekeleer*, then we are turned into dreamers imagining female figures everywhere. *De Braekeleer's* language led us to the other artists, because they had probably all seen that, too.

K.B./D.P.: *Is the specific metaphor of The Music Box also related to the Vercruysse work, the music box, because a music box literally appears in The Music Box?*

J.C.: The Vercruysse music box has followed us all, from the moment it was made. At least, it followed me and a number of other people. I have always understood Vercruysse in relation to the work of Ensor, Magritte and De Braekeleer. Let me be

perfectly clear: in my opinion, Broodthaers' work does not fit into this, although I have nothing against Broodthaers.

K.B./D.P.: *What was the scenario of The Music Box?*

J.C.: There was not actually a lot on paper. Bart Verschaffel and I had many long discussions. At a certain point, our conversations crystallized into a central idea for the film. For example, the idea of the Laurel & Hardy film, and that then generated other ideas in turn. At a certain point, we decided to put our ideas to a few outsiders: Geert Bekaert, Dirk Lauwaert and my wife, Christine Kloeck. We organized two recording sessions, on two different days, one with Dirk Lauwaert and my wife, and one with Geert Bekaert and my wife. Bart Verschaffel explained our ideas to them. Bart has an incredible didactic ability, something I don't have. Apart from the footage we had of the work of Magritte and Vercruyse, we had no film material for the other artists, Ensor and De Brækeleer.

K.B./D.P.: *It comes across as a little contrived, explaining the thesis of the film to Dirk Lauwaert, your wife and Geert Bekaert.*

J.C.: Bart and I were actually very uncomfortable sitting there. We thought we had strong hypotheses, but we were not completely sure of ourselves. But you think those people are just sitting there for the show?

K.B./D.P.: *Yes, it looks as though the guests are there just to keep Bart Verschaffel's discourse going. Dirk Lauwaert says nothing, Geert Bekaert intervenes once and your wife plays the interested bystander.*

J.C.: We didn't rehearse that! Moreover, we had seriously considered that Lauwaert and Bekaert would shoot down our arguments. That would have been interesting. In fact, those conversations were a kind of dress rehearsal to composing the film. We edited the two sessions together. I was mostly concerned with the direction of the facial expressions.

K.B./D.P.: *Where did those shoots actually take place?*

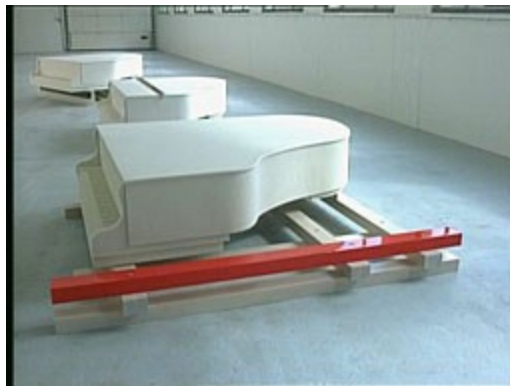
J.C.: I had access to a studio that was usually empty. The decor was really cheap. I am always interested in putting

people in a closed space and filming from a height. The viewer sees the material lying on the table, as the Laurel & Hardy film runs in a loop. That set-up is no accident. I wanted it clear that no one could leave. There is a scaffold surrounding the table. You would have had to crawl underneath it to get out of there.

K.B./D.P.: *You didn't start shooting Ensor and De Braekeleer's work until after those sessions?*

J.C.: No, we had already done the filming of Magritte's work and I was already certain that I had enough material to make a second film. I just had to find some editing time. That was never a given. But I first needed to find the money to finish *The Music Box*. It all came about in fits and starts. I've always had to organize my work that way. I partially gleaned the Vercruysse shots from the film that I had made with and about him in 1990, for his exhibition at Van Abbe Museum in Eindhoven. In addition, I had also done some shooting at Castello di Rivoli, when Vercruysse exhibited there in 1992. He showed *Tombeaux* there that had not been in the Eindhoven exhibition.

K.B./D.P.: *Did you travel to Turin especially for The Music Box?*



J.C.: I don't think so. I think I first used those shots for some art programme. And I filmed the Vercruysse grand pianos at the home of the collectors, Anton & Annick Herbert. That's how *The Music Box* came about. I did some shooting the De

Braekeleer and Ensor work with a different cameraman, at the museums in Antwerp, Brussels, Doornik and Ostend, as well as several private collections. No effort was too much to film all those paintings. It wasn't until during the shoots that we really had a good insight into De Braekeleer's hidden elements.

K.B./D.P.: *Do you mean that literally, that you were still making discoveries when you were filming the paintings?*

J.C.: De Braekeleer - that was a revelation during the filming. Which says how inattentively we had both been looking at it until then. Bart Verschaffel was there a few times during the takes - not in Antwerp, but in Brussels. By focusing the camera on the material for a long time, we made some phenomenal discoveries, like the woman with the earring in *De man bij het venster (The Man at the Window)*. There is a woman with an earring worked into the reflection of the male figure by the window. Those two messages - some say we're imagining it. But from now on, if I see a picture by De Braekeleer, I think there will be something to see in it that I hadn't seen before.

K.B./D.P.: *Verschaffel's argument during the two sessions, about the secretive side of De Braekeleer, then, was confirmed in a rather spectacular way. But the viewer does not know that you did not yet have all the 'proof' of that. That 'evidence' certainly illustrates Verschaffel's argument, to be sure, but in the film, they are inevitably without comment, because Verschaffel's argument was already on tape. For that reason, it seems that it was not Verschaffel who developed the discourse, but the camera. It is a visual discourse. The camera seems to move, as it were, in order to find something out. The focus is on one single part of the painting, then the camera is raised, and that creates the meaning.*

J.C.: That is correct.

K.B./D.P.: *For that reason, it is an especially complex film. Far more is shown than is explained. It is only later, in his article, "Het heimelijke in het werk van Henri De Braekeleer"*

(Hidden Elements in the Work of Henri De Braekeleer), published in *De Witte Raaf*, that Verschaffel explicitly brought together all of his insights, including 'discoveries with the camera', into the secretive elements in De Braekeleer's work.

J.C.: It was very interesting for him to collaborate on film projects like these. He has, by the way, always reported the genesis of those ideas very accurately. Bart could never have written that essay on De Braekeleer without the help of the camera.

Les Vacances de Monsieur Mag

K.B./D.P.: For the other two Magritte films, *Les Vacances de Monsieur Mag* and *Een Weekend met Meneer Magritte*, it was again Bart Verschaffel who did the research.

J.C.: That's right, and once again, it resulted in another essay.

K.B./D.P.: Was any filming done for *Les Vacances*?

J.C.: No, everything was already available: the films from Houston, the *catalogue raisonné* by David Sylvester and Magritte's own short films. There was enough material to do a film on Magritte's entire oeuvre, about Magritte the person, and about the way he perceived his role as an artist. First, the film segments of Magritte's films had to be reconstructed.

K.B./D.P.: How did you go about doing that?

J.C.: I had access to AVID editing technology. All the pieces were put onto a hard drive. Then I started rearranging the puzzle. The segments had been very clumsily cut, but that was more an advantage than a disadvantage. Each splice was in fact unique. Someone had kept trying to cut right on the frame line, but most of the time, they were off to one side. If you have a good AVID technician, you can try out 20 or 30 possibilities in less than twenty minutes.

K.B./D.P.: How much material was there in all?

J.C.: One hundred eighty-seven minutes and thirty-five seconds. I tried to reconstruct each reel – a reel is, I think, three minutes. Besides, I had an idea about the number of reels – from the papers of Robert Rimbaert and Jean Raine, who had cut everything up. Based on what I saw and based on what I knew from the correspondence, as well as the sloppy way the films were cut, in many cases I could make out which piece belonged to which. I also had fairly good blueprints of the houses where Magritte had lived. And I had seen the houses, in order to better assess the images. But the correspondence was the biggest help. Why did he go to Ostend? Incidentally, as soon as he had purchased the camera, the Magrittes went to visit Irène Hamoir and Louis Scutenaire in Ostend, and they visited the Ensor house! In the letters, you find out that the Magrittes went to visit Georgette's mother's grave, on the first or second of November, somewhere in Charleroi. His correspondence is almost 17th- or 18th-century. He corresponded with a lot of people. Anyway, we managed to reconstruct about 40 short films. They are not all exactly three minutes. Actually, that work should be done over again. You could make them really beautiful if you wanted to. There was documentation, too.

K.B./D.P.: *Documentation?*

J.C.: About 700 pages were produced. Each image has been indexed. There are copies at the VRT and the Film Museum. Eva Binnemans, my assistant, followed up on all that. It was time for me to quit, I can say that.

K.B./D.P.: *Why?*

J.C.: I had never done a reconstruction like that before and I wanted to be as comprehensive as possible. My biggest frustration was that I could not upgrade the physical quality of the material. It was in poor condition. We had to be satisfied that there was anything left of it at all. Films were probably also destroyed at the Magrittes', because of the reels being badly spooled. The films he had purchased, of Laurel & Hardy, Charlie Chaplin, Picratt and Max Lindner,

looked better than what he himself had shot. They were no doubt less 'used'.

K.B./D.P.: *Irène Hamoir's accounts are incorporated in Les Vacances.*

J.C.: Irène Hamoir was a key figure for me. Obviously, she is a prominent presence in a large number of the films. And, Irène – Sirène – was one of Magritte's lovers. She was the most authoritative witness. I approached her in 1994, the year before she died. I wanted to go through those 187 minutes with her and ask her very specific questions.

K.B./D.P.: *Did you go through the full 187 minutes with Irène Hamoir?*

J.C.: Yes, and I stopped every time I wanted to ask her something. We started in the afternoon and finished around seven o'clock in the evening. I wanted to know who appeared in the films, where they were filmed, and so on. It was probably one of the last times that she appeared in public. I don't think I made any mistakes. Although, someone doing further research would probably discover mistakes, but I was financing my own film.

K.B./D.P.: *Who interviewed her, you or Bart Verschaffel?*

J.C.: I did it myself. I couldn't afford to lose any time.

K.B./D.P.: *What did Hamoir say about the films?*

J.C.: Hamoir relativized everything. She said Magritte only did it to amuse himself. I think he went to a lot of trouble to amuse himself. We didn't develop much of a conversation, in fact, although I must say that Hamoir was still incredibly clear-headed.

K.B./D.P.: *Irène Hamoir received an honorarium for Les Vacances.*

J.C.: Really?

K.B./D.P.: *Yes.*

J.C.: That was nice of me. I spent a day with her. I no doubt thought it only logical to compensate her.

K.B./D.P.: *Suzi Gablik also received an honorarium.*

J.C.: Suzi Gablik? I'd be amazed at that. I did call her several times, because I thought she was an important

witness. She not only wrote an important essay about Magritte, but she stayed with the Magrittes for a time and took part in several of the short films. But if I so much as mentioned a few names of others involved on the phone, the conversation was over.

K.B./D.P.: *She is thanked in the credits.*

J.C.: Yes. I wanted to meet her, but she didn't want to, it's that simple. And no honorarium was paid. Suzi Gablik was the first person who seriously analyzed Magritte's work. She was very important for the reception of Magritte's work in England and the U.S., even though David Sylvester pushed everyone aside after that. She needed visual material for her book and she approached Charly Herscovici, but Charly wanted money. That put her off. She wanted nothing more to do with Belgium. That was all too obvious.

K.B./D.P.: *When did you begin editing Les Vacances?*

J.C.: I had no money, no money for the editing. I had to go around to the various departments, begging. I went looking for scheduling gaps. For that reason, I often did the editing in the summer. Institutes like public networks come to a standstill in the summer, just like hospitals. *Les Vacances de Monsieur Mag* was truly created on the editing table. We had everything at our disposal, so it was just down to editing it into a comprehensive presentation. That's something I haven't experienced very often during my career.

K.B./D.P.: *Was Bart Verschaffel present at the editing of Les Vacances?*

J.C.: Yes, the whole time, but not with *The Music Box*. He was the only one who set foot in the kitchen. The others didn't want to. We spent an enormous amount of time at the editing table, together with an excellent editor, Danny Staes. We made the film at the editing table. Literally. There was no script.

K.B./D.P.: *Les Vacances is a very complex film. There are pictures of the paintings, fragments from the short, staged*

films, and fragments from the films of the paintings, and the voice-over is sometimes a commentary, but at other times there are quotations from letters; the soundtrack is very much a presence. In the different ways that voice, sound and image are used, the multi-layering of Les Vacances outdoes all other films.

J.C.: That is very true.

K.B./D.P.: *What were you focusing on?*

J.C.: On the period from 1926 to 1930, until the elements appeared, the famous eight elements (fire, forest, plank, skin, bell, cloud, façade, paper clipping) that we had seen at the big exhibition. What was not much represented in that exhibition was his *période vache*. We filmed those paintings from good reproductions. We could not get access to the paintings because at the time, Irène Hamoir had most of them. I think the *période vache* is just as powerful as Duchamp's *objets trouvés*.

K.B./D.P.: *When you say that there was no script and that the film was made at the editing table, that means that you were making associations, the whole time you were sitting there.*

J.C.: Yes, with the paintings, the books, the films, and so on.

K.B./D.P.: *In Les Vacances, for instance, you first show In memoriam Mark Sennett, a painting in which a wardrobe is portrayed: one door is open and you see the dress of a woman with 'real' breasts. You follow that painting with a fragment from a film in which Magritte opens another wardrobe and sees a tuba, which he places on a table. Subsequently, you show L'Histoire centrale, a painting of a female figure whose face is completely covered by a cloth. There is a tuba and a suitcase beside the woman. In your film, we only get to see the woman and the tuba. Then another fragment from a film follows, in which two people are kissing, while their heads are completely covered with a cloth. Did you check on when those paintings were made, and when the films were made, or were these just visual associations?*



J.C.: I don't recall doing any systematic checking.

K.B./D.P.: *So it was nothing more than visual rhyming?*

J.C.: Yes. Magritte bought his camera in 1956. By then he had already finished all those paintings.

K.B./D.P.: *The films always came after the paintings? Are you certain of that?*

J.C.: Except when he filmed in the garden. Then it was almost simultaneous. He painted, then placed the work in the garden and filmed it.

K.B./D.P.: *You could say that in staging the films, Magritte parodied his own work?*

J.C.: Why not?

K.B./D.P.: *How were the subtitles determined? 'Without life, no art', 'René Magritte', and then the address in Schaarbeek.*

J.C.: That was his address, with his telephone number. That phone number is typical of me: you can call it if you like. Someone becomes a very tangible presence.

K.B./D.P.: *Les Vacances de Monsieur Mag was broadcast in 1995, on March 28th.*

J.C.: Yes, but the film was first shown in a cinema, on a big screen.

K.B./D.P.: *What was the reason for that?*

J.C.: My madness, no doubt. I thought it was necessary, for myself, but also for George De Decker and Ward Weis, who had made the soundtrack, and also for Walter De Niel, who had done the sound mixing. The VRT had a fantastic mobile studio. It had very expensive equipment that, most of the time, never

got used. The soundtrack was made in that van, and the van was driven to the cinema so that everything could be shown and heard under the best possible circumstances. The VRT allocated money for it and BARCO lent us the additional material: a large format beamer, in a real cinema.

Een Weekend met Mijnheer Magritte

K.B./D.P.: *The Music Box was broadcast in 1994, Les Vacances de Monsieur Mag in 1995. After that, you did yet a third film on Magritte: Een Weekend met Mijnheer Magritte (A Weekend with Mr. Magritte), broadcast in 1997. For you, what did Een Weekend met Mijnheer Magritte add to Les Vacances?*

J.C.: I had the time. I had time to do the editing, which is very rare in a television studio, and I was able to prolong my career. I hadn't been sacked quite yet, but if they had found a way to throw me out, they would not have hesitated to do so. I managed to carry on for another three years, for myself. It was a strange process.

K.B./D.P.: *But if you were shooting Les Vacances in 1994, why do you want to make another film, with just Magritte's films, without all the image associations?*

J.C.: I had sunk my teeth into Magritte, because I did not think that Magritte's relationship to the cinema was not such an innocent phenomenon. I believe that it is a part of his oeuvre. Irène Hamoir trivialized it, but even so, every Saturday she played her part in scenarios that gave totally different meanings to some of his paintings. I did not want people saying it was nothing.

K.B./D.P.: *It is rather odd that in your first film you made obvious connections between his paintings and his films, while that aspect is totally absent in Een Weekend.*

J.C.: I had already invested so much time in that project. I wanted something of it to last. But as always, I had to go looking for money to complete the film.

K.B./D.P.: *Een Weekend is divided into two parts, Saturday and Sunday.*

J.C.: The film sessions took place at the Magrittes', on Saturdays. We are virtually certain that they were usually between 8:00 and 10:00 pm. The Saturday evenings were primarily for drinking and having fun. Was that Magritte's idea of a social life, or was he putting his guests on? At 10:00 pm, everyone was mercilessly shown the door. There are stories about arguments if people didn't leave fast enough. The Saturday section of the film shows fourteen fragments from his staged films. In the Sunday part, there are eighteen fragments from the biographical films, such as the trip to Ostend and the shots of the Ensor house. Ostend is a classic in Belgian art: everybody's been there. There is a world of difference between Magritte and Ensor, but the first thing Magritte does when he has a camera is swing by the Ensor house. In both sections, Saturday and Sunday, the chronology has been respected. I thought that was very important.

K.B./D.P.: *The only editing is the selection from the films.*

J.C.: Yes, we had to keep that.

K.B./D.P.: *The tuba recurs in both sections of the film. The tuba is the connecting element. Although Sunday is actually biographical, the tuba does appear in it.*

J.C.: It was self-evident.

K.B./D.P.: *With that tuba, you make an important statement. The tuba appears in one of Magritte's staged films, in colour (Saturday), and it also turns up in a colour film shot in the garden (Sunday).*

J.C.: I didn't make those films, did I?

K.B./D.P.: *No, but you did make the selection.*

J.C.: The tuba appears in the film with Suzi Gablik. Magritte mostly did the camerawork himself, except in that long film with Gablik.

K.B./D.P.: *How did Gablik end up with Magritte?*

J.C.: Suzi Gablik found Magritte through Alexander Iolas. She

stayed with the Magrilles for eight months, in the last house they lived in. All of Magritte's old cronies had their eyes on her. Scutenaire was even in love with Gablik. For that reason, Irène Hamoir did not take kindly to her at all. Alexander Iolas was Magritte's gallerist. I knew Iolas from the 1960s, thanks to Martial Raysse's success with him. When I was filming in Greece in the early 1980s, I filmed his villa in Athens, designed by Dimitri Pikionis. There were artworks in the villa from the entire generation of artists that Iolas had sold, including Magritte. Because of Iolas, Magritte started painting in larger format, because the Americans wanted bigger sizes.

K.B./D.P.: *Does a character like Iolas fascinate you?*

J.C.: Yes, figures like that come out of nowhere. Without Iolas, Magritte's career would have taken quite a different course.

K.B./D.P.: *We can't read that fascination in a film like one about Greece.*

J.C.: It is of no interest to know about me. I think I need to hide that, because otherwise... That is actually what all those guys do, actually. The ambiguous secret – I didn't invent that!

K.B./D.P.: *Back to Suzi Gablik and the tuba. Is the tuba something that you only noticed when you saw the films, or had you already picked that up from the paintings?*

J.C.: From the paintings! That one painting, *L'Histoire centrale*, was included in the travelling exhibition, and it was already very significant for us, even then.

K.B./D.P.: *In the film, the tuba is pulled out from under a skirt. That is of course the strongest image...*

J.C.: You do know who was lifting up her skirt? That was Irène Hamoir. I talked to her about it. I tried to get her to

talk about it, but it didn't work, she fell silent. There must have been other material. There had to be.

K.B./D.P.: *Does that material still exist?*

J.C.: I doubt it. There are moments when you see that things are approaching the edge. It was right at the edge. He also took a few photographs that... There are enough indications of that. Scutenaire once wrote about a "une histoire érotico-fantastico-iconoclaste".

K.B./D.P.: *What happened to that material?*

J.C.: I have no idea, and I did not have the resources to go looking, either. I asked Charly Herscovici about it a couple of times, too, but I didn't get any answer. Did Georgette burn it? Alone, or with Charly? It is certain that pieces are missing, and that strange things happened at the Magritte residence, but don't ask me precisely what was filmed. I couldn't speak to Hamoir about it.

K.B./D.P.: *Hamoir primarily underplayed Magritte's films?*

J.C.: Yes, to her, it was just amusement. I see it differently. I very much appreciated those little films, especially in their attempts to reproduce the paintings. Taking a painting outside, every time, putting it on a chair and filming it - that's what you have to do. I also believe that he revealed something of himself in the films, when he took a certain angle and showed something specific, or when he also acted, himself, playing both sides of the fence. There are directors who simply cannot resist getting in front of the camera, and that happened with him too. Those various roles - that was what I was thinking about. Perhaps it has something to do with something I have missed in my own life. I have never done anything intimate with a camera. It has always remained abstract. Am I making myself clear? Because Magritte was not a professional, those films are not taken seriously. The films are ignored, even by the Royal Museums in Brussels, which organized the big Magritte retrospective a few years ago. The films are not taken seriously in Belgium - and that will stay that way, until it really becomes important.

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