

SEEING THE DARKNESS, HEARING THE SILENCE: THE MINIMALIST CINEMA OF BAS DEVOS

by Diego Aparicio



Five years after his breakthrough with debut feature ***Violet*** (2014), Bas Devos made an impressive comeback into the festival circuit, premiering not one, but two new feature films this year, in the short span of just three months: ***Hellhole*** (2019) last February in Berlin, and ***Ghost Tropic*** (2019) in Cannes last May. If these noteworthy achievements tell us anything, it's that the Belgian auteur's distinctive style of visual poetry has not gone unnoticed by the international film scene. Now in its 4th edition, the [Novos Cinemas](#) film festival in Pontevedra (10-15 December 2019), will be hosting a retrospective to showcase Devos' newly-enriched filmography.

Conceived during the post-production stages of his second feature, ***Ghost Tropic*** was first introduced to audiences at the 51st Directors' Fortnight at the Cannes Croisette in May. The film follows Khadija (Saadia Bentaieb), a 58-year-old cleaner living in Brussels, on the only night in 20 years where she's fallen asleep and missed her stop on the metro. Forced to walk a long way home, Khadija wanders the streets of Brussels, beautifully shot on 16mm Kodak stock, daring to ask for the kindness of the strangers she encounters. Breaking the sacred tradition of working with ***I, Tonya*** DP

Nicolas Karakatsanis, Devos' familiar cinematic style permeates the entire film even in this collaboration with Grimm Vandekerckhove (***Racer and the Jailbird***). Otherwise, Devos' most recent work incorporates most of the other elements he has established as his trademarks over his 14-year career (including his short works): the minimal dialogue, long-take wide shots, and a fascination with the spaces inhabited by his protagonists are some of the primary characteristics of the Devos cinematic fabric.

Devos himself has said that, in some ways, ***Ghost Tropic*** can be seen as a counterpart to his earlier work, ***Hellhole***. While ***Ghost Tropic*** gives us a glimpse of a Brussels where one can dare to be vulnerable – by accepting but also offering help to strangers –, ***Hellhole*** paints a somewhat different picture of the Belgian capital. The title deriving from a comment made by Trump, ***Hellhole*** explores the state that Brussels is left in following the 2016 terrorist attack on the city. As opposed to the more intimate 4:3 aspect ratio used for ***Ghost Tropic***, in ***Hellhole*** we embark on a journey following, not one, but three protagonists in 1.85:1 – an interpreter at the European Parliament, Alba (Alba Rohrwacher); teenage student Mehdi (Hamza Belarbi); and the doctor that they both visit at different points in time, Wannes (Willy Thomas). The common denominator for everyone in the city seems to be that violence is no longer simply something they know through pixels on a TV screen, but something they could touch by extending their hands. The fear of death every morning on the subway is real. ***Hellhole*** is not interested in understanding how things came to be the way they are; it is the aftermath of the tragedy that concerns Devos here – and how these characters deal with the deaths around them, within the spaces they're confined.



In fact, this is a thread common to all Devos preceding films. ***Violet***, Best Film at the Berlinale Generation section in 2014, is itself an exploration of the aftermath of a death – specifically the stabbing of teenage Jonas in a mall, before the eyes of 15-year-old protagonist Jesse (Cesar de Sutter). As viewers, we are distanced from the stabbing itself, only observing it in fragments through an array of surveillance monitors. It is Jesse's grieving process that interests Devos, and the impossibility of verbalising his feelings to his friends and family: perhaps an important reason why the writer-director is a man of few words when it comes to writing dialogue. The main narrative is interrupted by pixelated and distorted patches of the mall camera footage, and sounds are selectively muted as Jesse tries to reconstruct the events and cope with the killing. Devos' repeated use of this idea of fragmented, missing information, underlines his intention and vision as director in his debut feature. Landscapes and rooms nearly hidden in darkness; characters often visible only as silhouettes; and a Deafhouse concert where the titular *Violet* is performed under dizzying strobe lights, are some of the key elements that give Devos' debut its distinctive style. The 4:3 aspect ratio once again invites us on an intimate journey alongside the protagonist. In trademark Devos fashion, long-take 360 pans make a marked appearance here, just like in ***Hellhole*** and his earlier works.

***We Know* (2009)** is perhaps the director's first short with a more well-defined narrative, and an accomplished use of effective and endearing dialogue. The film explores father-son relationships through the story of a son, father and grandfather, where the grandfather is nearing the end of his life, and the father is taking care of him. A son's love for his father is the overarching theme in this work. This perhaps explains why Devos departs from his previous fascination with darkness, and chooses to light up the set a bit more. There is no feeling of mourning here, but the force that strengthens the father-son bond is the impending death of the grandfather. Focusing on the youngest of the three male characters, the story is delivered again through an intimate Academy ratio.

In ***The Close* (2007)**, we observe two brothers emptying a cottage in the countryside. They enjoy a musical jam session together with their guitars, while having breakfast on mismatching pieces of furniture. This is the first time Devos shyly breaks his oath of silence, with the two characters briefly exchanging a few sentences. Yet again, in his characteristic style, none of the dialogue gives away any clues as to why the events are unfolding in the first place. The shots are once again fairly wide and the only close-up is that of a grieving male silhouette – just like in his earlier short.



In ***Pillar* (2006)**, our narrow field of view is often surrounded by a darkness – not frightening, but enigmatic. A morgue and a house are presented with a similar sort of ghostly silence, after the death of a couple's son. The house is surrounded by woods, an element featuring in Devos' earliest work as well – a silent natural landscape, which augments the silence of the characters themselves. A campfire near the house and the laughter of strangers are the only indication that life has not ceased elsewhere. The camera moves around slowly, as if to capture the entire space inhabited: its emptiness and its darkness, which are telling of the void inside the parents. The wider shots evoke feelings of a ghost-like voyeurism, with the viewers taking the perspective of the son's lingering spirit. Once again, hardly any words are spoken. The curtains are finally drawn open at the end, hinting that perhaps the older couple has started overcoming their grief, letting the light in their house once again.

In Devos' first short film, ***Taurus* (2005)**, we find yet again a rather enigmatic title. Two siblings, Thomas and Arne, wonder in the woods, their clothes stained in blood. As the sun sets, they hide from passers-by on their way to the city. Before Thomas calls their mother from a phone booth, he makes sure that Arne disposes of the weapon he's holding. It seems that we are witnessing the aftermath of a violent act, but it is entirely unclear who the victim is, and that seems to be entirely up to the audience to decide. Whether it was an abusive father or a wild animal, the children seem to be the perpetrators in an act of killing. But even that is assuming too much - Devos keeps almost everything to himself, the only spoken words here being

"hello" and the two children's names. The 360-degree rotations around our subjects effectively convey their state of fear and confusion, while the jump cuts suggest a lack of temporal awareness in their hazy state of mind. These are both techniques that find their way into Devos' later work again and again.

In fact, it is striking how consistent Devos has been in his craftsmanship over the past 14 years. From his very first short, the audience can already identify a certain style, which the director tweaks but never truly deviates from in any of his following work. But make no mistake: Devos is never formulaic. He may use similar filmic vocabulary in all his work, but the syntax is never the same. It is perhaps this consistency, and his confidence in the style he consciously pursues, that distinguish this Belgian filmmaker as a modern-day auteur. Slow-paced, minimalist cinema may not be everyone's cup of tea, but those who can appreciate it will find a lot to like in the works of Bas Devos.

