

# “A Fabulous Painting in which I Would Live”<sup>1</sup>

## Paul Delvaux’s Pictorial Poetic of the Railway Periphery between Art and Urban History

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Aesthetic experience is irreducible. Words cannot ‘explain’ painting. Neither words, nor images can ‘render’ the experience of a place. But both writing and painting have the power of creating their own virtual places. Between the places of the city, the imag(in)ed places of painting and the written places of literature, historiography or theory, there is both direct communication and subtle, subconscious exchange. In this paper, the painting of Belgian artist Paul Delvaux (1897-1994), assigning prominent roles to architecture and the city, is read through these disciplines’ lenses. It is argued that apparently marginal sources like art and literary history can provide fresh insights into architectural and urban history. Likewise, a marginal, architectural and urban-historical reading of Delvaux’s œuvre can cross-fertilize the art-historical interpretations so far triggered by his work.

The fact that throughout his career, spanning almost three quarters of a century, Delvaux was rather silent as to the meaning of his work, triggered, as Régine Rémon points out, a proliferation of explanatory hypotheses and theories, albeit without being actually convincing.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, as Gavin Parkinson argues, “convincing” contemporary art history does not need to take the form of the traditional art historical “deductive, positive, rational,” “mystery-solving” approach, derived from the modern, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century mystery novel (typified by Conan Doyle).<sup>3</sup> Rather, for an art like Delvaux’s, the “problem-raising-solution-seeking” modern method should better give way to postmodern writing, inspired by the Borges-type detective story. Such writing should recognize and assume contemporary art’s irreducible “ambiguity, uncertainty, doubt, vagueness, and lack.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore, Delvaux’s construction of a patrimonial, mnemonic image of the railway periphery, with an impact on the late-twentieth-century appreciation of minor urban heritage is not a matter of “demonstration” but rather a possibility and a matter of analogy. Likewise, biographical aspects and written statements of the artist are not to be taken as ‘proofs,’ but rather as incentives for interpretation.

1 Our translation of a partial quote from the painter, inscribed in the Delvaux Museum in Saint-Idesbald [“Je voudrais peindre un tableau fabuleux, dans lequel je vivrais, dans lequel je pourrais vivre.”] We borrow this title from Olivier Cousinou: “Un tableau fabuleux dans lequel je vivrais.” In Paul Delvaux. *Le rêveur éveillé* [Paul Delvaux. *The awoken dreamer*], ed. Philip Van Bost et al. (Gent: Snoeck, 2014), 9-11.

2 Régine Rémon, “Après avoir longtemps cherché, j’ai enfin pu choisir” [“After long having searched, I was finally able to choose”], in *Paul Delvaux. Peintre des gares* [Paul Delvaux. *Painter of Railway Stations*], ed. Régine Rémon (Bruxelles: Luc Pire, 2009), 15. We list hereunder several other works on Delvaux, different from the ones referred to in the text: \*\*\*. *Catalogue de l’exposition Paul Delvaux 1897-1994*. Wommelgem: Blondé, 1997; Barthelman Z., and van Deun J. *Paul Delvaux: Odyssey of a Dream*. Saint-Idesbald: Paul Delvaux Foundation, 2007; Basch, Sophie, and Paul Delvaux, Hidryma Vasilë kai Elizas Goulandrë. *Delvaux and Antiquity*. Bruxelles: BAI – Musées royaux des beaux-arts de Belgique, 2009; Butor, Michel and Jean Clair, Suzanne Houbart-Wilkin. *Delvaux, Catalogue de l’Œuvre peint*. Bruxelles: Cosmos Monographies, 1975; Devillers, Virginie. *Paul Delvaux: le théâtre des figures*. Bruxelles: Editions de l’Université de Bruxelles, 1992; Scott, David H. T. *Paul Delvaux: Surrealizing the Nude. Essays in art and culture*. London: Reaktion Books, 1992.

3 Gavin Parkinson, “The Delvaux Mystery: Painting, the Nouveau Roman, and Art History,” *Nottingham French Studies* 51.3 (2012): 299, 311-13.

4 Parkinson, “The Delvaux Mystery,” 312.



Fig. 1. Paul Delvaux, *Train du soir* [Train in evening], 1957. Oil on wood, 110 x 170 cm

The paper follows several steps: an argument is outlined first as to this research's relationship with existing scholarship on Delvaux; then, the declinations of railway space in Delvaux's painting are briefly surveyed, highlighting the importance in his work of marginality as a concept; thereafter, a closer look at several paintings emphasises Delvaux's strategies of displacement and idealisation in relation to the actual places inspiring the works on the one hand, and to contemporary railway developments in central Brussels on the other hand, thus revealing a relationship between anxiety and heritage; thereby, contemporary, especially Belgian, post-war developments in the field of urban conservation are evoked; comparison is then drawn with other representations of the railway space in European art history, pointing to Delvaux's specific memorial approach; further, Delvaux's *mise-en-valeur* of the railway periphery is discussed against the backdrop of the French literary avant-garde contemporary interest in the poetry of the everyday, highlighting the role of the railway therein; the different perspectives are finally brought together as open questions on reassessing Delvaux's role within the cultural dynamics related to the industrial and the minor urban heritage.

### Reading Delvaux between art and urban history

"I would like to paint a fabulous painting, in which I would live, in which I could live."<sup>5</sup> Thus reads a much-quoted confession of the painter. Delvaux also acknowledged the pleasure of "living all paintings" while he was making them as well as the pain of separation, once a canvas was ready. At the same time, he acknowledged his pictorial aim of reaching "harmony and equilibrium."<sup>6</sup> Between this classical end, his idealist vision of the artist as one who knows to see and transcribe reality on the one hand, and his expressionist desire of living in the painting (one might be reminded of Jackson Pollock's being in his paintings), a breach insinuates. It is the same breach of uncertainty as between "I would live" and "I could live," between childhood, its mnemonic actualization in the present and a projected, improbable future. In the reading proposed here, between what a place is, how it may be imag(in)ed and what it might never be.

5 Laura Neve, "Paul Delvaux dévoilé. Poésie, mystère et fantastique." Koregos. Revue et encyclopédie multimedia des arts: <http://www.koregos.org/fr/laura-neve-paul-delvaux-devoile/6169/>, 20.06.2016.

6 Régine Rémon, "Après avoir longtemps cherché," 15.

In trying to reassess the boundaries between art and life, yet through the venerable medium of painting, Delvaux both resonates with and differs from the artistic ideas emerging in the late 1950s and 1960s, since the French *Nouveau réalisme*, the Italian *Arte povera*, or indeed Pop Art, were all currents that revisited the everyday environment for inspiration. Without ever resorting to abstraction, to the ready-made, to un-conventional spaces of display or to the new media, Delvaux's practice seems marginal: at the margins of Surrealism (which he never fully embraced), at the margins of post-WWII artistic currents. He goes astray from the main contemporary currents and fashions, constantly cultivating an art that favours reflection, study, classical equilibrium and harmony, painstaking attention to minute details all across the canvas (thus aligning with the great traditions of Mediaeval and Northern Renaissance painters), an absence of gestural expression, matched by high precision in rendering architectural and anatomical configurations, deep space viewed from a single vantage point.

Scholarship on Delvaux – and railway space in particular – tends to privilege a reading through the prism of the psychological. Aligning Delvaux with the surrealists, André Breton framed this specific reading, further reinforced by other critics, seeing in the delvalian images “the empire of one woman, always the same, who reigns over the grand *suburbs of the heart*.”<sup>7</sup> Likewise, while acknowledging the crucial importance of place in Delvaux's art and noticing “the likelihood of the places drawn, urbanised and architecturised [*sic*] by the artist,” Olivier Cousinou reads them as “the stage-scenery of a painterly praise of the art of *mental promenade*.”<sup>8</sup> In 2009, the inauguration of the TGV station Liège-Guillemins occasioned the exhibition “Paul Delvaux. Peintre des gares” at the Liège Grand Curtius Museum. In the catalogue, Régine Rémon reviews the main stages and metamorphoses of the railway theme in Delvaux's work, noting the continuity of the artist's preoccupation for the railway world.<sup>9</sup> However, while highlighting the emergence, absence and/or reappearance of the train, the tram or the station at different moments, little is said about the importance of the place, about the compelling architectural presence within Delvaux's images. While discussing “the theme of stations and trains” several authors fail to address the significance of *place* itself, to discuss Delvaux's highly selective attitude with regard to the depicted places proper (streets, squares, waiting rooms, train platforms etc.), rather taking for granted a reading of Delvaux's places as metaphorical stage sets for the wanderings of the soul.<sup>10</sup> While recognising the importance of Delvaux's painted architecture, most literature considers it as mere stage set, décor – thus, inevitably relegating it as secondary in relation to the figure(s). Therefore, much is left unsaid about the consistent and consequent *mise-en-valeur* by the painter of a specific architectural corpus, namely the turn-of-the-century industrial and suburban Brussels built milieu, which becomes increasingly prominent in his art starting with the late 1940s.

In this paper, a complementary attitude is proposed, suggesting that the imaged places might be read not only as places of the mind, but also as subjective inventories of real places and types of places, pseudo typo-morphological surveys of the specific architectures and urban areas dear to the artist, namely the industrial turn-of-the-century railway-neighbouring peripheries. It is argued that many of Delvaux's images can be read as architectural *capricci*, contributing to a specific taste-formation, much like the eighteenth-century *capriccio* painters contributed to the general appreciation of antique monuments.

7 André Breton, 1965, *apud*. Paul Delvaux Foundation, *La route de Rome. A road to new horizons*. [http://www.delvauxmuseum.com/docs/Route\\_de\\_Rome\\_EN.pdf](http://www.delvauxmuseum.com/docs/Route_de_Rome_EN.pdf), 26.09.2016. Philippe Robert-Jones, “Paul Delvaux ou l'écho poétique” [P.D. or the poetic echo], in *Paul Delvaux. Peintre des gares* [Paul Delvaux. Painter of Railway Stations], ed. Régine Rémon (Bruxelles: Luc Pire, 2009), 14. Our emphasis.

8 Olivier Cousinou, “Un tableau fabuleux dans lequel je vivrais” [‘A fabulous painting in which I would live’], in *Paul Delvaux. Le rêveur éveillé* [Paul Delvaux. The Awaken Dreamer], Philip Van Bost *et al.* eds. (Gent: Snoeck, 2014), 9. Our emphasis. Our translation [“la vraisemblance des lieux dessinés, urbanisés et architecturés par l'artiste;” “le décor d'un éloge pictural de l'art de la promenade mentale.”]

9 Rémon, *Après avoir longtemps cherché*,” 15-28.

10 Besides the already cited articles, see also Régine Rémon, “Un univers ferroviaire” [“A Railway World”]; Laura Neve, “Un rêve d'Antiquité” [“A Dream of Antiquity”], in *Paul Delvaux. Le rêveur éveillé* [Paul Delvaux. The Awaken Dreamer], Philip Van Bost *et al.* eds. (Gent: Snoeck, 2014), 29-36.

## Railways and liminality in Delvaux's painting

The notion of marginality, the disquieting feeling of experiencing a liminal position between apparently opposed physical categories and psychological realms is one constant feature of Delvaux's art. The threshold between city and nature is a recurrent characteristic. In much work, whether featuring the railway universe or not, open perspectives are constructed, wherein the civilised, urban foreground is juxtaposed to the natural landscape. The pavement of alleys, platforms or streets verges either on the raw soil dotted by scattered stones, on the sand of a beach, on mountain slopes, or on the inscrutable depth of a wood; behind the rooftops, green hills often punctuated by cypresses can be grasped. By Delvaux, nature and culture, psychological and social space, intellect and instinct coexist. The liminal character of Delvaux's painted places is further emphasised by the direct juxtaposition of interior space and nude figures with the public space; by the intimate association of the industrial with the domestic, a typical feature of the railway peripheries; by the insomniac mood of nocturnal scenes, activated as much by artificial lighting, as by wandering, gesturing, encounter and contemplation.

At the same time, whether in the form of realistic graphic work or of painted *capricci*, the railway universe is constantly present in Delvaux's work. Trains, industrial sites, urban fringes, suburban housing are among his preferred sites of inspiration, as well as constitute familiar places. These formed either the immediate context of his home (the old Luxembourg station of the quarter Leopold, or the small stations of the Watermael-Boitsfort districts – all in Brussels), or were seen by Delvaux during the regular journeys from Brussels into the countryside, either southward, to his mother's native village Antheit, or northward, towards the family's seaside residence in Saint-Idesbald. From the very beginning of his painting, Delvaux was fascinated with the "intense life" of industrial sites, as he made hundreds *in situ* works depicting with almost archaeological precision the factories along the Meuse Valley: *La gare de Statte* [The Statte station] (1930, 1936), *Marchin* (1931), *La gare de Spa* [The Spa station] (1932), *La gare de Huy* [The Huy station] (1933), *Le vicinal devant la gare de Statte* [The vicinal in front of the Statte station] (1934). In a sober, realist mood reminiscent of Impressionism, he repeatedly represented the area of the Luxembourg station: *Gare du Luxembourg sous la neige* [Luxembourg station under snow] (1922), *Vue de la gare du quartier Léopold* [View of quarter Léopold's station] (1922). It seems, however, that around 1925 the artist himself destroyed much work from the time of these formative years.<sup>11</sup> It, nevertheless, remains the indelible fascination, pursued along his entire life, for the industrial peripheries and for railway sites in particular.

Delvaux found his unmistakable painterly voice after several revelatory encounters during the early 1930s, among which that of the intense and mysterious atmospheres of Giorgio De Chirico's metaphysical pictorial universe (not ignoring the trains in the latter's visions). This unleashed his personal, never after abandoned quest for "the rediscovery of poetry in painting."<sup>12</sup> Trains, trams and urban railway sites feature in his mature work of the 1940s – early 1950s like *Phases de la lune III* [Phases of the Moon III] (1942), *Une rue la nuit* [A street at night] (1947), *Train de nuit* [Night train] (1947), *Le Train Bleu / La Rue Aux Tramways* [The blue train / The tramway street], (1947), *La Voix publique* [The public voice] (1948), *L'âge de fer* [The iron age] (1951). Railway (neighbouring) places are often accompanied by his signature-style figures, the staring-woman, dressed or lying, nude, partly draped, or wearing *belle-époque* dresses, the dressed or nude self-portrait, all composing the magic-mood nocturnal scenes for which Delvaux became known. Like in the rest of his oeuvre, inspired by classical antiquity, in the railway and Brussels suburban scenes too, architecture plays a major part.

If in much of the 1940s and early 1950s paintings an atmosphere of anxiety prevails, clearly not without connection with the war and its aftermath; it is during the late 1950s and 1960s especially that a particular body of railway-inspired work emerges, imbued with intimacy and

<sup>11</sup> Rémon, "Après avoir longtemps cherché," 15.

<sup>12</sup> Delvaux, quoted in G. Ollinger-Zinque & F. Leen (eds.), *Paul Delvaux 1897-1994*, exhibition catal., Brussels, 1997:21 *apud*. <http://www.phillips.com/detail/PAUL-DELVAUX/UK010116/10#>, 28.06.2016.

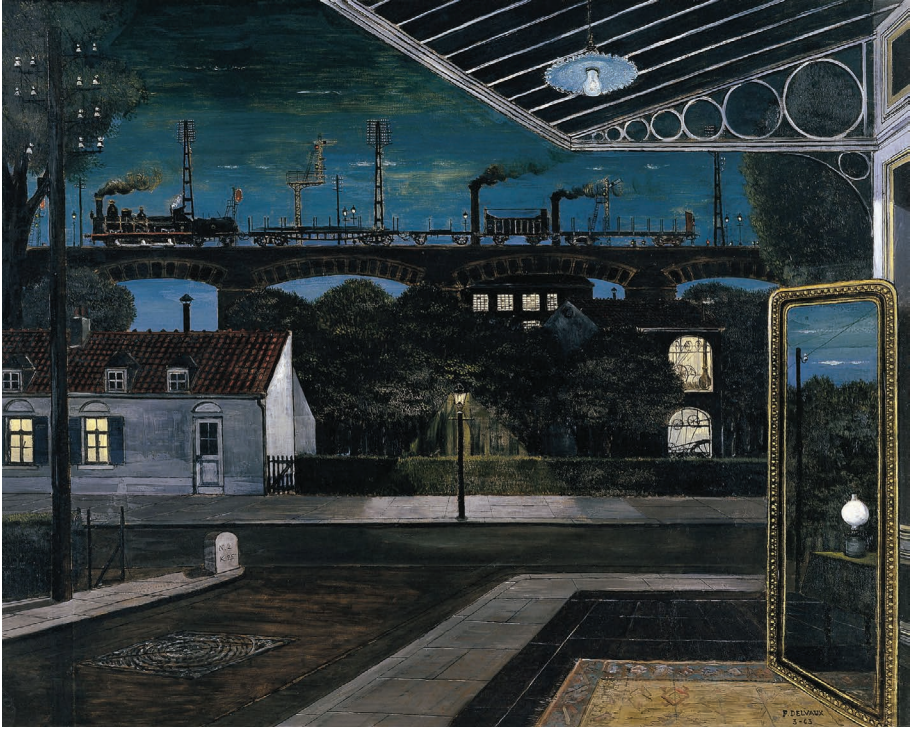


Fig. 2. Paul Delvaux, *Le viaduc* [The viaduct], 1963. Oil on canvas, 100.3 x 130.8 cm

enchantment; Delvaux constructs a poetics of the railway periphery as a place of harmony and revelation. The analysis and the main arguments in the following pages focus on these latter creations including *Solitude* [Loneliness] (1955), *Faubourg* [Suburb] (1956), *Nuit de Noël* [Christmas night] (1957), *Le train du soir* [Night train] (1957) (Fig.1), *La route* [The road] (1959), *Petite gare de nuit* [Small station at night] (1959), *La gare forestière* [The forest station] (1960), *Faubourg* [Suburb] (1960), *Paix du soir* [Evening peace] (1960), *Printemps* [Spring] (1961), *Le passage à niveau* [The level crossing] (1961), *Le gardien de nuit II* [The night watchman II] (1961) (Fig.6), *Le gardien III / Horizons* [The watchman III / Horizons] (1962), *Les belles de nuit* [The beauties of the night] (1962), *Esquisse pour Petite place de gare* [Sketch for small station square] (1962), *Petite place de gare* [Small station square] (1963), *Le viaduc* [The viaduct] (1963) (Fig.2), *Chrysis* [Chrysis] (1967).

### “Feeling a hidden beauty”<sup>13</sup>

Which is the cultural relevance of Delvaux’s attempt to reveal the railway periphery’s “hidden beauty” during the 1950s and 1960s? How are his fragmented, marginal, yet intimate, strangely-domestic cityscapes composed and framed – drawing on Erwin Panofsky’s concept of “perspective as [a] symbolic form,” through which cultural meanings are attached to material signs, in this case, to the railway’s pivot role in creating a poetic of the urban periphery?<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Paul Delvaux, “Considerations sur la peinture” [Considerations on Painting], in *Paul Delvaux. Peintre des gares* [Paul Delvaux. Painter of Railway Stations], ed. Régine Rémon (Bruxelles: Luc Pire, 2009), 51. Our translation: “[...] sentir une beauté cachée].

<sup>14</sup> Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (New York: Zone Books, 1991).

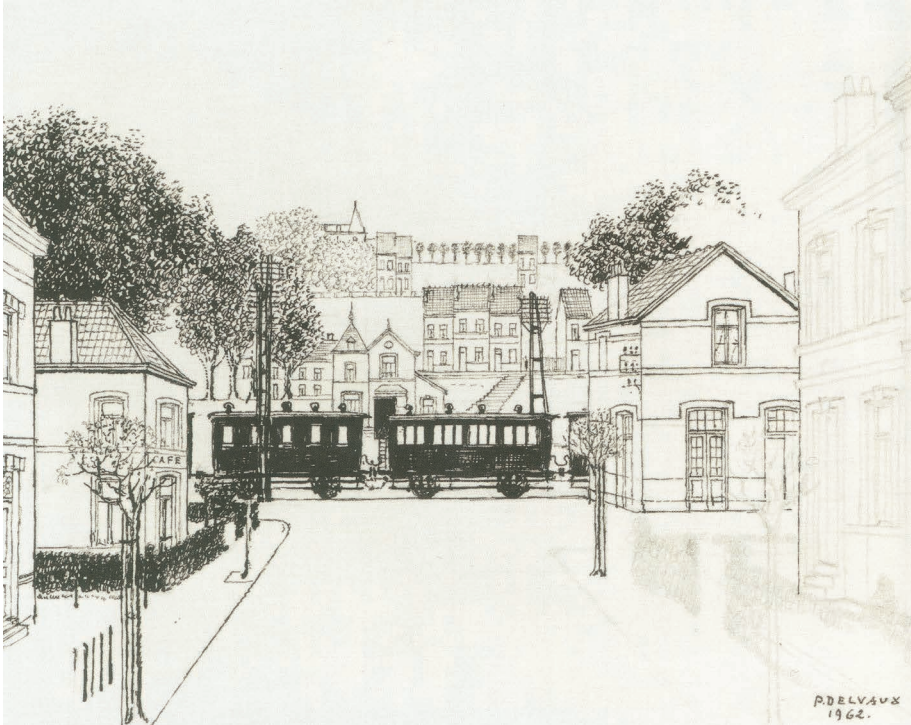


Fig. 3. Paul Delvaux, *Esquisse pour "Petite place de gare"* [Sketch for "Small station square"], 1962. Ink on paper, 27 x 35,4 cm

These creations are inspired by the encounter between a poetic feeling and a place traversed during daily walks up and down the railway lines in the area of Watermael-Boitsfort. Delvaux seems to have assumed the project, a kind of artists' social duty, to reveal the ignored aesthetic qualities of the industrial periphery, its non-evident *genius loci*, as he attempts in the 1950s-1960s creations mentioned above. He describes this aim himself, while openly acknowledging a change of mood, a shift of tone, from "anxiety" to "beauty" within his work:

"I might have painted anxiety, but today I would like to paint beauty, yet *amysterious beauty*.<sup>15</sup> [... ] an ordinary street, or one which seems ordinary as one travels along it every day without paying attention, suddenly becomes intensely poetic if the artist that has felt its beauty succeeds in fixing it on the canvas. The whole problem lies there: feeling a *hidden beauty* that stays therefore unnoticed and highlighting it so that it strikes those who have neither seen, nor felt, anything. How many times have I heard: 'I did not know this was so beautiful!' Here is one aim and one importance of painting."<sup>16</sup>

Close-reading works like *Faubourg* (1961), *Le gardien de nuit II* [The Night Watchman II] (1961) (Fig.6), *Esquisse pour Petite place de gare* [Sketch for Small station square] (1962) (Fig.3), one recognises the small railway station Watermael with its suburban surroundings, albeit differently

15 Delvaux quoted in Rémon, "Après avoir longtemps cherché," 25. Our emphasis and translation ["*J'ai peut-être peint l'inquiétude, aujourd'hui, je voudrais peindre la beauté, mais une beauté mystérieuse.*"]

16 Delvaux, "Considerations sur la peinture," 51. Our emphasis and translation: ["*[...] une rue banale ou qui semble l'être lorsqu'on la parcourt chaque jour sans y faire attention, devient tout à coup d'une intense poésie si l'artiste qui on a senti la beauté parvient à la fixer sur la toile. Là est tout le problème: sentir une beauté cachée et que par conséquent personne n'aperçoit et la mettre en évidence de telle sorte qu'elle frappe ceux qui n'auraient rien vu ni rien senti. Combien des fois ai-je entendu: 'je ne savais pas que c'était si beau!'. Voilà un des buts et une importance de la peinture.*"]

reconfigured in each painting.<sup>17</sup> In both *Faubourg* and *Le gardien de nuit*, the building is truncated of its single-floor side-wing, rendered whitewashed in the former image (it was whitewashed before its restoration), respectively with its characteristic brick-stone stripes in the latter. In *Esquisse pour Petite place de gare* (Fig.3) only the ground floor door and its framing are recognisable, the rest of the station building (distinguishable from the houses by its position, adjacent to the railway tracks) being invented. Nevertheless, in a 1985 fresco for a local cultural centre in Watermael-Boitfort, Delvaux rendered the Watermael station in a clearly recognisable manner, however still as part of an invented composition, grouping the most representative edifices of the neighbourhood. When comparing the paintings with the actual configuration of the station's immediate environment (Fig.5), Delvaux's strategies of displacement and idealisation become evident. In the "real" situation, it is hard to obtain a well-framed view of both the station building and the neighbouring domestic fronts, from either side of the railway tracks. The images, however, are clearly constructed such as to obtain balanced and harmonious compositions, quasi-symmetrically framed by facades that align along orthogonal axes, whereas *in situ*, the street pattern is rather irregular.

In *Le gardien de nuit III* [The Night Watchman III] (1962) and in *Petite place de gare* [Small station square] (1963) (Fig.4), a peculiar passenger building is depicted, displaying three gables aligned along the rails, reminiscent of industrial sheds; however, the building is akin to the Watermael station due to its red-and-white striped facades and to its delicate metal-and-glass canopy. In the latter painting (Fig.4), Delvaux operates another significant displacement, unusually placing the glass canopy not towards the rails and above the platform, but towards the square, such as to make this very characteristic feature of railway architecture part and parcel of the railway-generated public space. Moreover, although the immediate surroundings of the station Watermael are entirely residential, in *Le gardien de nuit II* (Fig.6) Delvaux includes another poetic licence, introducing signs of the industrial world: punctuating the horizon – the tracks parallel therewith – are smoky furnaces, a water tower and industrial gables. Thus, through displacement and idealisation, the actual places of Brussels' peripheries merge into celebratory images of peaceful coexistence of the domestic and the industrial, along the force line, the railway.

### Capricci of the railway periphery

A seeker of equilibrium and harmony, by Delvaux, there is not that much an architectural setting emphasizing figures, than there is figures highlighting and enhancing architectural settings. Therefore, in much of Delvaux's painting, it is perhaps impossible to clearly assert a figure-setting hierarchy: the presence of architecture and of the city is at least as important as that of figures. In *Esquisse pour le viaduct* [Sketch for The viaduct] (1963) there are two versions of a figure inserted in front of the right-side mirror: the sketch of a woman silhouette overlaps with that of a girl. Yet, neither has been retained by the artist in the final oil painting: the scene portrays the place itself, while the insomniac mood has been intensified, despite the removal of figures, through the introduction of brightly lit factory windows. On different occasions, Delvaux also expressed verbally his prime concern with place, with revealing its spirit, as well as the fact that sometimes figures were simply not necessary: "I tried to render the beauty of a railway station's waiting room. People are not necessary, as a station has its own life."<sup>18</sup> Rather than performing actions stemming from their own will as persons, his figures emphasize architectural configurations and induce moods: "for many painters, the figure had an active function: [...] the characters' action was the painting's theme. For me, nothing like that: the characters become active elements of the work's lyricism, without any other mission."<sup>19</sup>

17 The Watermael station was built in 1884, closed 1984, listed in 1992 and restored as cultural space in 2005, by A.M. & Origin. <http://www.aacarchitecture.be>, 27.09.2016.

18 Delvaux quoted in Rémon, "Après avoir longtemps cherché," 20. Our translation: "J'ai tenté de rendre la beauté de la salle d'attente d'une gare vide. Les gens ne sont pas nécessaires, car une gare a sa vie propre."

19 Jacques Meuris, *7 Dialogues avec Paul Delvaux* (Paris: Le Soleil Noir, 1971), 42 *apud*. Parkinson, "The Delvaux Mystery," 305. Our translation: "[P]our beaucoup de peintres, la figure avait une fonction active

At this point, an analogy can be drawn between Delvaux's creation of a valorising perspective of the late-nineteenth-, early twentieth-century industrial and urban heritage of the peripheries on the one hand, and the eighteenth-century painterly production of *vedute ideate* (idealised urban views) and architectural *capricci*, on the other hand. Gian Paolo Pannini (1691-1765), Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-1778), Hubert Robert (1733-1808), Francesco Guardi (1712-1793) and others created compelling images of partly extant, partly imaginary places, freely combining idealised views of neighbouring or distant antique Roman monuments. These artists contributed significantly to the formation of a taste for antiquity and indirectly the subsequent heritage conservation developments throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, Delvaux's architectural choices are far from neutral: they are assumed statements in defence of a valued cultural and built heritage. Besides the strictly selective architectural choice, what Delvaux also shares with the *vedutisti* is the anachronistic and/or incongruous use of figure clothing, juxtaposing his favourite belle-époque dresses to à l'antique drapery and (partly) nude figures, thus further problematising the history-historicity dialectics. Though subjective, these are no less accurate acts of heritage recognition; a personal heritage, which might, through displacement and idealisation, acquire universal values and become relevant for a wider audience. Indeed, Delvaux acknowledged his aim of depicting not just personal, but collectively significant values:

"I paint the trains of my childhood and thereby, my childhood itself. I have thus retrieved it to some extent by reviving my childhood tastes and rediscovering the freshness of those times. [...] I know that despite the pleasure of painting them, railways, stations are somewhat restrictive subject matters; but the displacement plays in the opposite direction and forces the subject to universality."<sup>21</sup>

### Liaisons secrètes

Delvaux's poetic imaging of the railway peripheries appears rather autistic when regarded against the backdrop of the significant railway works going on in central Brussels at the same time. This breach between urban reality and painterly vision may be read as another facet of Delvaux's reaction to (urban) history, through contrasting it with the historicity of the turn-of-the-century railway peripheries, on which an idealized vision, of peaceful railway-and-city coexistence, is projected. *Liaisons secrètes* [Secret connections] was the title of an October 2002 contemporary art exhibition, held in the undergrounds of Brussels' Central Station, to celebrate (commemorate might be a better word) the station's jubilee.<sup>22</sup> The station, situated in the very heart of the metropolis, was the most prominent building of the large-scale railway project, the so-called *Jonction Nord-Midi*, open to public in 1952.

*La Jonction* was intended to alleviate the railway traffic connectivity of *Gare du Nord* and *Gare du Midi*, the major stations of the Belgian capital. While the first ideas for the connection dated from the beginning of the nineteenth century, work actually started only in 1911 and was interrupted by WWI. After the war, the entire project was set aside, new cost-profit estimates made and doubts cast over its feasibility altogether.<sup>23</sup> The work was resumed only in 1936, after the final trajectory was chosen: passing through the underground of the hilly northern part of the Brussels central

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[...]; l'action des personnages était le thème même du tableau. Pour moi, rien de tel: les personnages deviennent les éléments actifs du lyrisme de l'œuvre, sans autre mission que celle-là."].

20 Virgil Pop, *Istoria conservării* [History of Conservation] (Cluj: U.T.Pres, 2002), 87-89.

21 Delvaux, quoted in Rémon, "Après avoir longtemps cherché," 24. Our translation ["*Je peins les trains de mon enfance et dès lors, mon enfance elle-même. Je l'ai rejointe ainsi, dans une certaine mesure revivant mes goûts d'alors et retrouvant la fraîcheur de ces temps-là. [...] je sais bien que malgré le plaisir de les peindre, chemins de fer, gares sont des sujets quelque peu restrictifs; mais le dépaysement joue en sens contraire et force le sujet à l'universalité.*"]

22 SNCB UCC Communication, *La Jonction Nord-Midi. Un demi-siècle d'existence* (Bruxelles: L. Gillieaux, 2002).

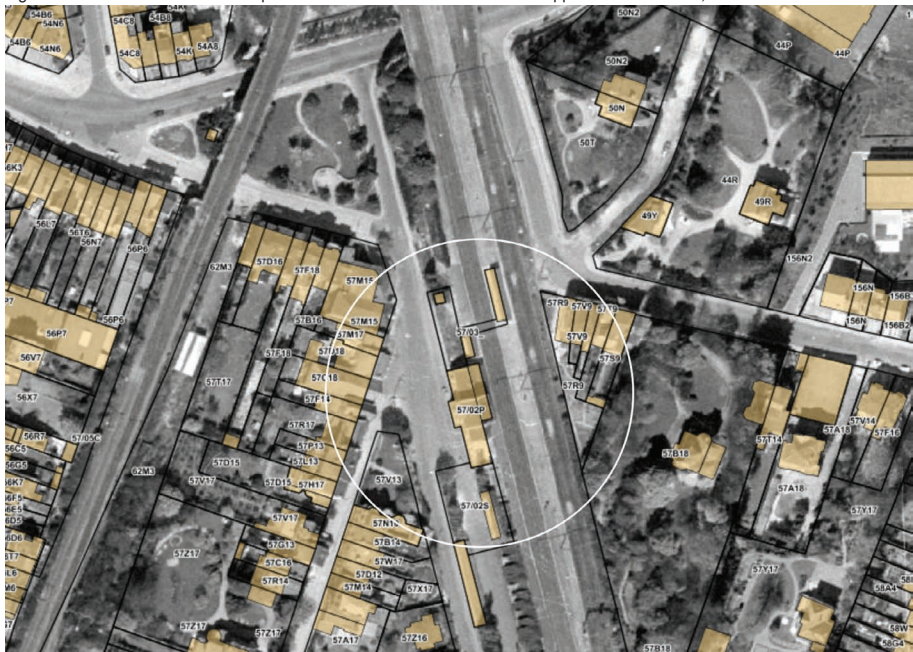
23 SNCB, *La Jonction Nord-Midi*, 7-9.





Fig. 4. Paul Delvaux, *Petite place de gare* [Small station square], 1963. Oil on canvas, 110 x 140 cm

Fig. 5. Brussels. Boitsfort. Cadastre plan of the Watermael station area overlapped with aerial view, 1971



pentagon and resurfacing on a viaduct, as it approached the southern station, Midi. Pursued through the late 1930s as means of countering the economic crisis through investment in large public works and continued during the beginning of WWII, the demolitions and excavations required by the project and supported by its proponents invoking not only transport, but also slum-clearing arguments, deeply affected Brussels' urban fabric, radically changing the morphology of several central historic areas.<sup>24</sup> Officially inaugurated in 1952, the actual reconstruction of the traversed sites lasted until late into the 1980s. For more than a century, *la Jonction* triggered the longest-lasting controversies over a railway project ever.<sup>25</sup> It acquired a heavily "deteriorated social image" and it attracted harsh criticism from both the public and urban historians.<sup>26</sup> As pointed out by M. Nilsen, the Junction and its urban impact were often being described in traumatic and clinic terms, such as "a scar in the body of the city," "bloodletting," "self-mutilation," "a martyr to urbanistic surgery," "the heart of Brussels eviscerated for half a century," etc.<sup>27</sup>

In this light, the railway-and-city relationship in Delvaux's images can be read as reversed contemporary urban reality. Much of the urban scenery of Delvaux's quiet revelations is carefully composed of minor architectures, banal urban fragments, quite similar with the "traditional" urban fabric, or "minor heritage" which was enduring the trauma of the *Jonction*. As counterpart to these idealised images and as proof of Delvaux's concern for the radical urban changes going on stands, for instance, his realistic representation of the Midi station site in 1948, just before its transformation, show the on-going works for the approaching viaduct. Thus, concern and anxiety for change and pictorial construction of an enhancing memorial image of the railway-and-city relationship go hand in hand in Delvaux's late-1940s – 1960s work.

### Heritage and anxiety

For conservation theorist and historian of urbanism, Françoise Choay, the urban heritage is "the fragmented and fragmentary support of the dialectics between history and historicity;" it is "a field of opposed forces, wherein a state of equilibrium, every time unique, must be created," through the agency of the "inhabitant" and her/his "inhabiting."<sup>28</sup> This dialectics between history and historicity generates anxiety since, whenever something is gained through historic change, some of the historicity of what-is-already-there might be irretrievably lost. Thus, as noted by the Belgian art historian and European conservation pioneer, co-author of the 1964 Charter of Venice, Raymond Lemaire:

"It is within a climate of anxiety that the heritage conservation problem is raised: the anxiety of witnessing the disappearance of a possession, revealed as vital to the human community, exactly at the moment when it risks being lost for all time [...]."<sup>29</sup>

The connection between heritage conservation and anxiety pleads for the possibility of a fresh look at Delvaux's painting. Anxiety with regard to the actual city was not alien to Delvaux as, in his later years, he declared he felt exiled from his own city.<sup>30</sup> By sublimating the landscape of the railway periphery into dream-like, poetic images or *capricci*, Delvaux foretells and resonates with the

24 SNCB, *La Jonction Nord-Midi*, 10-13.

25 SNCB, *La Jonction Nord-Midi*, 15.

26 Micheline Nilsen, *Railways and the Western European Capitals: Studies of Implantation in London, Paris, Berlin, and Brussels* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008): 160.

27 Nilsen, *Railways and the Western European Capitals*, 161.

28 Françoise Choay, *L'allégorie du patrimoine* (Paris: Seuil, 1999), 151.

29 Jean Barthélemy and Marie-Jeanne Geerts, eds. *Raymond Lemaire, ICOMOS – Un regard en arrière, un coup d'oeil en avant* (Stavelot: Imprimerie Chauveheid SA, 1999), 91. Text from 1973. Our translation ["C'est dans un climat d'angoisse que se pose le problème de la sauvegarde du patrimoine: celle de voir disparaître un bien dont la présence se révèle indispensable à la communauté humaine au moment même où il risque de disparaître à jamais [...]."]

30 Jean Des Cars, *Dictionnaire amoureux des trains* (Paris: Plon, 2011), unknown page. Our translation. "Je suis un vieux Bruxellois et je me sens comme un exilé; [...] on a détruit ma ville [...]" ["I am an old Bruxellois and I feel as being exiled [...] my city has been destroyed [...]."]



emergence in the 1960s – 1970s of the post-war urban conservation movement, wherein Belgium and Brussels played a key role. Delvaux's positive evaluation of the minor and industrial heritage of the urban fringes acquires new layers of meaning, when seen in the context of several relevant, if only loosely related, contemporary and slightly later developments in the field of conservation.

Some of these were: in France, the law of the protected sectors, the so-called *loi Malraux*, adopted in 1962;<sup>31</sup> the Charter of Venice in 1964, stating the importance of the ordinary urban fabric, not only of individual monuments; also in 1964, the exhibition "Architecture without architects" at the MoMA, curated by Bernard Rudofsky;<sup>32</sup> the development in the 1960s-1970s of the French school of urban analysis around Philippe Panerai, following the precedents of Saverio Muratori's "operative history" school of the 1950s-1960s in Italy – a specific field of urban studies, aimed

31 Françoise Choay, *L'allégorie du patrimoine* (Paris: Seuil, 1999), 144.

32 MoMA, Press release 10.12.1964. [https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press\\_archives/3348/releases/MOMA\\_1964\\_0135\\_1964-12-10\\_87.pdf?2010,01.06.2016](https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/3348/releases/MOMA_1964_0135_1964-12-10_87.pdf?2010,01.06.2016).



Fig. 6. Paul Delvaux, *Le gardien de nuit II* [The night watchman II], 1963. Oil on canvas

at understanding-for-perpetuating the qualities of the “historic city;”<sup>33</sup> in Belgium proper, the pioneering integrated conservation and restoration of an entire historic urban district – Leuven’s Great Beguinage (1964-1971), under Raymond Lemaire’s supervision; the pioneering Structure Plan for the historic core of Bruges in 1972, under architect Jan Tanghe’s supervision, with Raymond Lemaire as consultant.<sup>34</sup>

At different levels, these and other developments reacted to modern urban planning’s failures and abuses, sought to retrieve more sustainable urban design principles by studying the “traditional” and early-industrial city, using urban analysis and typo-morphological studies as active instruments “in defence of the city.” Moreover, they advocated the need for conserving entire

33 Philippe Panerai *et al.*, *Éléments d’analyse urbaine* [Elements of Urban Analysis] (Bruxelles: AAM, 1980).

34 Johan Mahieu *et al.* *Brugge: structuurplan voor de binnenstad* [Bruges: Structure Plan for the Inner City] (Brugge : Groep planning, 1976).

urban areas through their integration in contemporary life, having realized that the city, without having been created for that aim, has the memorial value of a monument. As discovered by John Ruskin and reminded by Françoise Choay, the city possesses “the double and miraculous power of enrooting its inhabitants in space and in time.”<sup>35</sup> With Delvaux’s work in sight, it is perhaps not too surprising anymore to read words like “the unconscious, the poetic, mystery” in Lemaire’s urban conservation manifestoes: “Well conceived, the city responds equally to the needs of the unconscious, the poetic or lyrical needs, to a certain thirst for mystery [...]”<sup>36</sup>

If the above historic developments relate mostly to pre-industrial urban areas, Delvaux’s art can be considered an early manifesto of a period of taste-formation and awareness raising about the minor and industrial heritage. It is significant that in the early 1960s, the nineteenth-century industrial architecture was largely subject to depreciation and associated with the despised categories of the squalid and the derelict. It was precisely for this kind of anti-qualities that, for example, in 1962, the abandoned Orsay station in Paris was chosen by director Orson Welles as stage set for filming *The Process*, based on Kafka’s novel.<sup>37</sup> The impact of Delvaux on the gradual reversing of this perception during the second half of the twentieth century is however difficult to gauge. It is noteworthy that a systematic inventory of the industrial architecture of the Watermael-Boitsfort area, a major source of Delvaux’s inspiration in the late 1950s – 1960s, only appears in 1980.<sup>38</sup> Also, a first reconnaissance survey of Brussels’ railway stations only appears in 1992, warning about the fragile situation of this “unknown heritage.”<sup>39</sup>

### Competing painterly views on living with the railway

The cultural relevance of Delvaux’s pictorial construction of the railway periphery might be better emphasised when seen in relation to other artistic representations of the railway realm. Briefly reviewing several such examples should shed more light on Delvaux’s specific attitude.<sup>40</sup> In 1872, in order to denounce the harsh living conditions of the working class in Victorian London, Gustave Doré portrayed the association between railways and housing in a renowned engraving, *Over London by Rail* (1872). Therein, the railway is portrayed as a merciless aggressor, an intruder and a nuisance. The image is composed in such a way as to imply the lower status of the residential areas over-crossed by the railway viaducts, both physically and socially. The huge conceptual gap, between this representation and Delvaux’s *Printemps* [Spring] (1961) or *Le viaduc* [The viaduct] (1963) (Fig.2), both depicting housing over crossed by a railway line, is evident.

Headed by Claude Monet’s famous 1877 series of depictions of the Gare Saint-Lazare in Paris, early modern painters like Camille Pissarro, Norbert Goeneutte or Gustave Caillebotte, celebrated modern life and the dynamism of the modern metropolis through their depictions of this railway site. In contrast to both Doré and Delvaux, Monet’s images are concerned with the representation of light, transience, dematerialisation and the railway station is seen – unlike Delvaux’s almost domestic representations – as the very epitome of homelessness. Conversely, in Edouard Manet’s 1873 masterpiece *Le chemin de fer* [The railway], a subtle questioning of the railway’s impact on modern urban life, particularly on living near the railway, can be read. As explained more extensively elsewhere, the opposing positions of woman and girl may be read as a kind of *mise en*

35 Choay, *L’allégorie du patrimoine*, 135.

36 Barthélemy et al., eds., *Raymond Lemaire*, 56. Our translation of Lemaire’s text “*La ville, bien conçue, répond tout autant aux besoins de l’inconscient, aux besoins poétique, voire lyriques, à une certaine soif de mystère [...]*”.

37 Thanks are due to Virgil Pop for suggesting this reference.

38 Maurice Culot et al., eds., *Inventaire visuel de l’architecture industrielle à Bruxelles* (Bruxelles: Archives d’architecture moderne, 1980).

39 Thierry Demey, *Les gares bruxelloises, un patrimoine méconnu* (Bruxelles: Ministère de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale, Service des monuments et sites, 1994).

40 In this section are being summed up ideas that we have discussed more extensively in Cristina Purcar, “At Home by the Tracks. Domesticity in Proximity of Railway Space in (Early) Modern Art,” *Acta Tehnica Napocensis: Civil Engineering & Architecture. Special issue* in Agachi M.I., ed. (vol. 58, nr.4 / 2015): 67-79.

*abyrne* of the disrupted domestic-industrial, public-private, front-back hierarchies caused by the insertion of the railway in the built fabric.<sup>41</sup> The motive of the girl seen from the back, watching the railway, strangely anticipates Delvaux's leitmotiv – a possible reference of the latter to this seminal critique of the railway space by Manet?

As for Delvaux, for German expressionist Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, the railway is a central motive. In the latter's art, however, the condition of living close to the railway is translated into a spiritual struggle of coming to terms with both one's own troubled psyche and the disturbing social environment of the metropolis. Unlike Delvaux's serene atmospheres, in Kirchner's vision of the railway-in-the-city (e.g. *Railway overcrossing*, 1914) buildings seem mere leftovers by the chaotic crisscrossing of railways and thoroughfares. If in Delvaux the intimacy of the domestic sphere seems to suffuse the public space, including the railway, in Kirchner's, conversely, homes are brutally exposed to the aggressive external environment dominated by the railway and seem almost deprived of their sheltering function.

While clearly different, the above-mentioned artists share nevertheless a straightforward relationship with the historic time, namely a vision centred on the present. This is perhaps the major aspect that differentiates Delvaux's art: his are imagined places, where memory and desire, invented past and possible future merge into a kind of timeless vision. Within the superficial seamlessness of Delvaux's canvases, detours of the visible and discontinuities of the temporal are silently pulsating and troubling. There is tension between the apparently rational representation of places and figures and the impossibility of narrating any action; tension between the precise delineation of time-periods through buildings, objects, clothing, details and their incongruous association; tension between the apparent detachment and coldness of the pictorial rendering and the intensely psychological effects of the images.

### “[C]ontemplating the shapes of the periphery”<sup>42</sup>

As pointed out by G. Parkinson, these tensions were recognized early on and highly valued by several literary personalities, notable representatives of the *nouveau roman* trend, such as James Graham Ballard, Julio Cortázar, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Michel Butor, Claude Simon.<sup>43</sup> The esteem of these non-conformist authors for Delvaux's apparently conservative, anti-modernist style stems, according to Parkinson, from their recognizing in Delvaux's images their own refusal of rational deduction and univocal meaning construction. The resistance and opacity of paintings by Delvaux to any kind of “explanatory grasp” appealed to these avant-garde writers, each of them either engaging Delvaux in collaborative projects, or writing seminal texts inspired by and evoking his visual universe of poetic marginal places.<sup>44</sup>

During the first post-war decades, the railway ceases being considered the epitome of modern technology and falls into relative oblivion, leaving the forestage to individual mobility made possible by the automobile. In visual and literary culture, the associations of railway space with the extraordinary, the novel and the exciting during its nineteenth- and early twentieth-century heydays are gradually replaced by a poetic of the everyday and of melancholy; Jules Verne's *Voyages extraordinaires*, published between 1860s and WWI, find a counterpart in George Perec's one-century-later invitation to question banality in *L'infra-ordinaire*.<sup>45</sup>

41 Purcar, “At Home by the Tracks,” 67-79.

42 Francois Maspero, *Les passagers du Roissy-Express* (Paris: Seuil, 1990): 13-14. *Apud* Alexandre E. Dauge-Roth, “Perec et Maspero: lectures de la banlieue comme lectures du quotidien” [Perec and Maspero: reading the periphery as a way of reading the everyday], <http://www.remue.net/cont/perec06maspero.html>, last visited at 23.05.2016.

43 Gavin Parkinson, “The Delvaux Mystery: Painting, the Nouveau Roman, and Art History,” *Nottingham French Studies* 51.3 (2012): 298–313.

44 Parkinson, “The Delvaux Mystery,” 300-03.

45 Georges Perec, *L'Infra-ordinaire* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1989).

“How to talk of ‘common things’ [...], how to give them a meaning, a language: to make them finally speak of what exists, of what we are [...] To question what seems so evident that we have forgotten its origin... To question what seems to have irrevocably ceased to amaze us.”<sup>46</sup>

It is perhaps not accidental that for the French writer François Maspero, the very banality of the daily ritual of train commuting occasions a discovery:

“And it was during that return grey, rain, abandon, in the empty train car of empty hours, that he suddenly got, as a self-evidence, the idea of this journey, as he was contemplating the shapes of the periphery, through the window of the RER [...]. Enough of those great intercontinental journeys [...]. The secret spaces to be discovered, they were right there, under his very eyes, unknown even to those who passed them daily by, and often even to those who inhabited them [...]”<sup>47</sup>

It is remarkable too that in 1992, advocating the need of protecting the minor urban heritage, Françoise Choay evokes precisely Perec’s notion of the infra-ordinary: “we should nowadays save [...] the banal fabrics, built at the end of the nineteenth century and even at the beginning of the twentieth, those which G. Perec called ‘infra-ordinary’: fabrics which are neither valuable for art, nor for history but which, through their modesty, scale and formal qualities, invite the non-privileged urban populations, stimulate conviviality and constitute a barrier against delinquency and other forms of social sideslip.”<sup>48</sup>

The similarity of mood between these texts and Delvaux’s images is striking. Both painter and writers want to see the everyday with astonished eyes. However, while Maspero’s or Perec’s Paris is rendered realistically, through discontinuity, fragments and collage, Delvaux’s images of Brussels’ peripheries are selective sublimations of the actual city, infused by childhood memory. Delvaux’s paintings anticipate, inspire but also profoundly resonate with the contemporary interest of the literary avant-gardes in the poetry of banality, wherein the railway often becomes the site of revelation and the railway journey a return (to the self and the familiar) rather than a departure. The painter’s idealized depictions of ordinary and marginal urban scenes are, despite Perec’s apparent detachment and refusal to idealize reality, subtly similar. Perec’s written “*espèces d’espaces*” – “species of spaces” are, like Delvaux’s images, exercises in re-reading the everyday with fresh eyes, widely opening the memory channels, devoting time and attention so that *ennui* metamorphoses into revelation:

“Observe the street, from time to time, with some concern for system perhaps.

Apply yourself. Take time. [...]

Note down what you can see. Anything worthy of note going on. Do you know how to see what’s noteworthy? Is there anything that strikes you?

Nothing strikes you. You don’t know how to look...”<sup>49</sup>

46 Perec, *L’Infra-ordinaire* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1989),

<http://www.remue.net/cont/perecinfraord.html>, last visited at 02.06.2016. Our translation [“*Comment parler de ces ‘choses communes,’ [...] comment leur donner un sens, une langue: qu’elles parlent enfin de ce qui est, de ce que nous sommes [...] Interroger ce qui semble tellement aller de soi que nous en avons oublié l’origine [...] Interroger ce qui semble avoir cessé à jamais de nous étonner.*”]

47 François Maspero, *Les passagers du Roissy-Express* (Paris: Seuil, 1990): 13-14. *Apud* Alexandre

E. Dauge-Roth, “Perec et Maspero: lectures de la banlieue comme lectures du quotidien” [Perec and Maspero: reading the periphery as a way of reading the everyday], <http://www.remue.net/cont/perec06maspero.html>, last visited at 23.05.2016.

Our translation: “*Et c’était pendant ce retour, grisaille, pluie, abandon, dans le wagon vide des heures creuses, qu’il avait eu soudain, comme une évidence, l’idée de ce voyage, parce qu’il regardait par la fenêtre du RER les formes de la banlieue. Assez de grands voyages intercontinentaux [...] Les étendues secrètes à découvrir, elles étaient là, sous ses yeux, inconnues de ceux-là même qui les traversaient quotidiennement et souvent de ceux qui les habitaient [...]*”

48 Françoise Choay, *Alegoria patrimoniului* [The Allegory of Heritage] (Bucharest: Simetria, 1998), 212.

Translated in Romanian by Kázmér Kovács.

49 Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* (London: Penguin, 2008). Translated by John

Sturrock. First published Paris: Éditions Gallilée, 1974.

“The last coach”<sup>50</sup>

The sections above tried to highlight the cultural significance of an important part of Delvaux’s work, dedicated to the construction of a painterly poetic of the urban margins as places of nostalgia and revelation. The railway space, a dear motive, pertains to both the intimacy of his childhood memories and to his mature artistic research. Investigating several disciplinary margins, verging on urban history, conservation history, literature but also looking at other depictions of the railway space within art history, this research discussed how Delvaux’s artistic vision evaluates urban reality, distilling iconographic statements, painterly *partis pris* which, it is argued, are in their turn capable of influencing cultural perceptions of architecture and the city in general, the industrial and minor urban heritage in particular.

Delvaux is an architect of painted places and a painter of architecture.<sup>51</sup> In much of his work, architecture and the city are at the core of the quest for poetic meaning in painting. Like the eighteenth-century *capriccio* painters, it is argued that Delvaux is a keynote exponent of a period of crystallisation and awareness raising about the patrimonial values of the industrial urban peripheries, contributing to the gradual formation of a taste for these hitherto depreciated urban landscapes. Just how important this contribution was – still is – lies beyond the limits of this paper. Like other important painters representing railway space, Delvaux’s art epitomises a specific moment in the dynamics of the multifarious influences between technology, visual culture and the city. Furthermore, the affinity of some vanguard post-war writers with Delvaux’s work reinforces his importance for the emerging aesthetic emancipation of the everyday.

Finally, Delvaux’s work denotes a deep sense of respect and care for the *savoir-faire* that imbues the built environment, for understanding how things are shaped and how they are built, for the multiple layers of meanings they acquired in time. There is a deep sense of respect for the human creativity, for the effort invested in the inert objects represented in the paintings, an affection denoted by the careful rendering of each architectural or constructive detail, just as careful as for the human body. Ultimately, Delvaux pleads pictorially for the minor and industrial urban heritage, inventorying the typo-morphologies of the railway periphery and conveying a sense of their value by making the viewer feel that she or he “*would live there, could live there.*”

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<sup>50</sup> *Le dernier wagon* is the title of a 1975 painting by Delvaux.

<sup>51</sup> After all, he came to be a painter, after first attempting to become an architect. He gave up the architecture studies after the first year, having failed mathematics. Philip Van Bost et al. *Paul Delvaux. Le rêveur éveillé* [Paul Delvaux. The awaken dreamer] (Gent: Snoeck, 2014), 157.



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Fig. 5: <http://ici.brussels>, 20.09.2016.