

SPOILER
ALERTTHE TOTAL FILM *Classic*
VANISHING

Renowned for its unforgettable ending – and unwatchable Hollywood remake – this traumatic Dutch chiller was forged in a fire of ego and genius, during a production that mirrored its on-screen intensity. Total Film unearths a tale of mafia money, fist fights and premature burial...

WORDS MATT GLASBY

You start with an idea in your head and you take a step, then a second. Soon you realise you're up to your neck in something intense but that doesn't matter. You keep at it for the sheer pleasure of it. For the satisfaction it might bring you..." These are the words of Raymond Lemorne, family man, science teacher and unrepentant double murderer, but they could refer to any of the firebrands who brought this haunting Hitchcockian drama to the screen. Indeed, as *Total Film* spoke to *The Vanishing's* cast and crew, director/adaptor George Sluizer, novelist/scriptwriter Tim Krabbé and lead actor Bernard-Pierre Donnadiou are all compared to Lemorne, a man who – lest we forget – drugs and kidnaps a young woman, Saskia (Johanna ter Steege), buries her alive, then does the same to her distraught partner, Rex (Gene Bervoets), three years later, just to see if he can.

"Well," says Bervoets of his director, with some affection, "it's a little bit of a harsh word, but he's a maniac." Said the late Sluizer (who died in 2014) of his writer: "I'm not going to say Lemorne has some of Tim Krabbé's character, but he does [*laughs*]... I'm not saying killing, but he also has an extreme way of thinking." Says Bervoets of Donnadiou: "Bernard-Pierre was like a dictator on set." Perhaps the greatest mystery of this methodical puzzle that slots awfully, inexorably, into place was that (almost) no one was hurt during filming. "It was like shooting a documentary of our lives at that moment," recalls Bervoets, the only surviving actor who could bear to be interviewed for this feature. "I needed people who could open the door to hell and not be afraid to step over the line..." Sluizer explained.

"THE BEST PLANS CAN BE WIPED OUT AT ANY MOMENT BY WHAT WE CALL FATE"

Based on Krabbé's 1984 novel *The Golden Egg*, named after an ominous dream of confinement that haunts protagonists Saskia and Rex (not to mention the author, aged five), *Spoorloos* (1988), as it's known in its native Holland, was scripted by Krabbé and Sluizer. "We're both not the easiest persons in the world," explains the author (brother of actor, Jeroen). "I wrote the first version and we had some personal difficulties and he adapted it. I have forgotten what is mine and what is his, which is fine." As Sluizer remembered, "Tim is a very clever writer but he's not an easy person. I did not want to work with someone who was blaming me for having different opinions. He can be very nasty, you know, like wishing you, 'Oh, you're stupid, you should die today, better than tomorrow.'"

Although he missed the premiere, Krabbé was rather more generous when he saw the final film. "That is Tim," said the director, resigned to each other's artistic foibles after 30 years. "He was a monster, I could say, in one way, but he was also an honest gentleman because he dared to say



Stalked prey: Lemorne lays in wait for Saskia.

the movie's better than the book." Certainly Krabbé's narrative skill cannot be overestimated – the movie pulses with metronomic revelations which double and redouble in significance as we, and Rex, establish exactly what has befallen his lost love. After the devastating, it-could-happen-to-you sequence in which Dutch holidaymaker Saskia is snatched by Lemorne at a French service station, the film then flips back and forward in time, contrasting Rex's obsessive hunt for the truth with Lemorne's methodical MO and frighteningly mundane home life. It's not so much a thriller – we already have an idea what's going to happen – as a grim pantomime of chance and premeditation. "You can plan and plan and plan, but things will always happen by themselves," rues the (remarkably affable) author. Turns out this could have been the mantra for the entire shoot.

First Sluizer and Donnadiou clashed during rehearsals in France ("Colleagues told me you won't finish the film without a broken nose," remembered Sluizer of his demanding lead), which resulted in Donnadiou being sent to stand in the corner "like a stupid schoolboy" for bullying ter Steege. Then financing from the film's Dutch distributor fell through. "For five days we had zero money, not even enough to buy sandwiches," recalled the director, whose solution was characteristically extreme. "I went to Nice, to the mafia clubs to try to get money from thieves and gangsters," he explained. "You might get shot, but at least they have the guts to



CLOSE UP
The Vanishing, The Remake (1993)

Neutered beyond all recognition by studio mandate, Sluizer's US remake has become a byword for Hollywood butchery. Starring Jeff Bridges in the Lemorne role and Kiefer Sutherland as his victim, it cost 10 times the Dutch version, but played out like *Breakdown*, complete with a happy ending in which Kiefer escapes and Bridges is killed. "Fox wanted the bad guy punished by the police or by having a car accident," said Sluizer, who removed a scene showing Lemorne caught by police from the original. "He was not allowed to live having committed a crime. That's not part of American cinema. There has to be an upbeat ending." Krabbé is a little more succinct. "It's trash. It's not an adaptation of the book – they could have had the ingredients they kept for free: the kidnap and the burial of the girl [Sandra Bullock]. But the real idea I can claim any originality for is that the hero dies just to know what happened to his love, and that's what they did not use. They just kept the wrapping and they threw out the contents. They raped the story, they raped the whole idea."

go against the system." Then he cut back on film stock, negatives, shooting days – even crew members. "There [*were*] no concessions made on story or acting, but on everything else there were compromises," he said. "I told everybody, as the producer, if I catch anyone driving less than 80mph in town they're going to get fired. This was a joke, but it meant we had not a fucking second to lose."

"I WANT YOU TO KNOW, FOR ME KILLING IS NOT THE WORST THING"

With a breakneck schedule, a belligerent star and a director/producer/writer/location scout with a holistic approach to his work, the shoot soon took its toll on cast and crew. "There were moments when I thought, 'I have to get out of here, this is not normal!'" recalls Bervoets, who barely had a handful of film credits to his name at that point. "One day I just ran away. We were shooting in France, George had a little house there, and I was so fed up I got out of the car and started walking until I was all alone, in the middle of nowhere. They had to come and look for me. At that moment I just thought, 'I don't care anymore, they can do whatever they want.'"

It wasn't the only time Bervoets found himself out in the cold. An early scene in which the protagonists' car runs out of petrol and breaks

down in a tunnel while oncoming vehicles scream past them (the glowing lights evoking the Golden Egg dream; the tunnel, their later entombment), saw the actors braving temperatures of -10 degrees in their summer clothes. "It was freezing," recalls Bervoets. "But when we saw the rushes, the whole scene was blurred like pea soup. Bernard-Pierre shouted at the cameraman, Toni Kuhn, 'There's two young people in the car for hours in -10 degrees and you let them do those things without getting the shot?' Toni laughed a bit and then Bernard-Pierre just hit him, he fought him, and Toni's ear was pierced inside so he couldn't hear anymore. From that moment on all the shots of Bernard-Pierre were shot by the assistant, because Toni didn't want to shoot with him anymore."

Although it seethes with implied violence, the film only erupts into action once, when Lemorne's Faustian offer to Rex – follow me and find out what happened to Saskia – is met with a flurry of impotent blows. "At that moment George said, 'Just attack him!'" recalls Bervoets. "I said, 'I can't do that, let's rehearse.' Normally you rehearse a scene like that. I just can't beat a guy, especially because Bernard-Pierre was very strong. Then Bernard-Pierre said, 'Come on, boy, why don't you attack me? Attack me! Come on, attack me! Oh you're a sissy, you can't do it!' He got me so mad that I just kicked him and >>

Love story: The original re-unites the lovers in an alternative way to the Hollywood formula.





Real pain: **Donnadiou and Bervoets fought it out for real as Lemorne and Rex.**

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT

GEORGE SLUIZER After a string of Hollywood disasters – lead River Phoenix dying halfway through the apocalyptic *Dark Blood* (released, eventually, in 2012), *The Vanishing US* (see *Close-Up*), and the poorly received *Crimestime* starring Stephen Baldwin and Sadie Frost – and a handful of smaller European films, Sluizer died in 2014 at the age of 82.

TIM KRABBÉ The Dutch author/journalist/chess master still crafts impeccable thrillers of loss and foreboding. Try 1997’s excellent *The Cave*, filmed in 2001 as *De Grot*.

GENE BERVOETS This Belgian character actor continues to work throughout Europe (including a cameo in *De Grot*). “I’m 30 years older, completely different, but directors still call me because they saw me in *The Vanishing*,” he marvels.

JOHANNA TER STEEGE Having won a European Film Award for *The Vanishing*, ter Steege went on to feature in Robert Altman’s *Vincent & Theo* (1990), *Immortal Beloved* (1994) with Jeroen Krabbé, and *Paradise Road* (1997) with Glenn Close.

BERNARD-PIERRE DONNADIEU “He’s become gentler with age,” laughed Sluizer of the prolific French TV/film actor. “He’s always saying, ‘Let’s do another movie together, there are so many fucking stupid directors, I’m fed up!’” Donnadiou worked steadily until his death in 2010, aged 61.

hit him and shouted ‘Action!’, and that’s the scene that’s in the movie. I stopped when I was exhausted, and he was so into his part he said, in character, ‘OK, now get in the car.’ Then we heard George shout, ‘Cut!’ Bernard-Pierre’s body was completely black and blue but he said, ‘Fantastic! That’s how you do a fighting scene.’ I really kicked his ass.”

Despite such heavy-handed tactics, Bervoets retains a great deal of respect for Donnadiou. “He wore me out, he just asked me to do something that maybe at the time I wasn’t able to do, but I still did it. I’m very thankful to him, he taught me things I didn’t know before. He’s an incredible actor who really went to hell to make his character work and to make other people work too.” Sluizer was equally effusive: “He deserves a lot of credit because I think he’s excellent. I would say Lemorne is the best of the worst killers in the last 30 years.”

“YOU CAN FIND ME LISTED IN THE ENCYCLOPEDIA UNDER SOCIOPATH”

With his arrogant, upward-sweeping quiff and science teacher glasses, Donnadiou’s “philosophical killer” (Krabbé’s words) is, indeed, extraordinary. Twice during the film, the camera allies him with stick insects – creatures mixing

the everyday with the alien to appear benign. “Donnadiou knows how to combine something normal with something abnormal, something OK with something not OK, all with a certain sense of humour and something very cruel,” said Sluizer. “It’s a very a big palette of colours which he shows in the film.”

Murder, to Lemorne, is not a crime of passion but a way to test his intellectual and moral mettle, like Leopold and Loeb – two 1920s American students whose attempts to commit the perfect murder were immortalised in Hitchcock’s *Rope*. In an ironic echo of Donnadiou’s method excesses, we see Lemorne wearing a sling (like Ted Bundy and *The Silence Of The Lambs*’ Jame Gumb), learning different languages – even chloroforming himself – to ensure his plan goes smoothly. Though most of his practice runs end near-farcically (one has him sneezing, then blowing his nose on the chloroform-drenched rag, while his victim waits, unaware, in his car), they remind us of the random web of cause and effect binding Saskia and Rex to their fate.

Unusually, the film isn’t shy when it comes to demystifying its killer, preferring to paint him as an amoral anomaly than an enigmatic monster. Explains Krabbé: “Lemorne doesn’t stop where normal people stop. He discovers this when he’s 16 years old and he jumps from a balcony



Buried alive: **The Golden Egg dream completes the terror.**



[breaking his arm and losing two fingers]. Nobody else would do this, everybody would have thought this, but nobody would do it, and he does it. That’s what makes him different.” When Lemorne saves a little girl from drowning, his adoring daughter calls him a hero, so he sets out to prove her hypothesis horribly wrong: “As black cannot exist without white, I logically conceived the most horrible deed that I could envision,” he tells Rex. To this end, he thinks nothing of making his family, in Sluizer’s words, “co-authors of the crime”, wearing his birthday jumper while kidnapping Saskia, practising his chloroform move on his youngest daughter, and burying both his victims in the garden of their holiday home. “Talk about the banality of evil,” said Sluizer. “That’s where he belongs.”

Once Saskia has become just another cold case to everyone but Rex, Lemorne taunts him with a series of postcards leading to their final, fatal meeting. “Lemorne likes people with perseverance,” explained the director, “and I’m trying to say in the film that perseverance can lead to obsession and obsession can lead to worse – even murder. The film itself is trying to determine when a quality becomes a defect. Just like purity. My father said, ‘Oh, if you are pure that’s good,’ when I was a little boy. Hitler also liked purity – so he killed everyone who wasn’t pure. So the film tries to balance itself between the pluses and the minuses of obsession.”

“EITHER I LET HER GO ON LIVING AND NEVER KNOW, OR I LET HER DIE AND FIND OUT WHAT HAPPENED. SO... I LET HER DIE”

Although repeated viewings highlight Lemorne’s haunting pathology and the elegance of the film’s chess match-like construction (Krabbé is a keen player, see his website, Chess Curiosities), first-time *Vanishing* viewers remember one thing

alone: the final reveal, which sees Rex, having (knowingly) drunk Lemorne’s drugged coffee, waking in a makeshift coffin in the black bowels of the earth. It’s a true gut-churner of a scene, with Rex’s shrieking laughter suggesting elation and despair doing battle in the same snapped mind.

“I rehearsed it myself,” explained Sluizer. “I was tied in the box with people putting things on top of it. I wanted to see how I could move, so I knew what I could ask of the actor. I’m not claustrophobic so I don’t have any fear of getting into a box even if it’s closed – I’m not saying forever!” As usual, Donnadiou went one step further. Says Bervoets: “Bernard-Pierre asked me to get in the coffin for a shot filmed from afar. I don’t know why I did it actually because it wasn’t necessary, but he was so into his part. I got in and he started putting sand on the coffin, but it wasn’t strong enough, so it started to crack. I remember two guys from the crew jumped into the hole and started digging to free me. If they hadn’t done that then maybe I was dead.”

As Rex screams out his own name into subterranean oblivion, the final shot links Lemorne, his family obliviously watering the holiday home’s garden, and a newspaper with the headline “Mysterious Double Disappearance” over oval-shaped pictures of Saskia and Rex, their Golden Egg dream come true. It’s a perfect, hermetically sealed, ending – the only thing that could ever have happened – and more positive than most people give it credit for. “The strength of the story is that even though both heroes are dead, you know they are both, in some higher way, reunited,” explains Krabbé. “Lemorne doesn’t get caught by the police, but by himself,” says Sluizer. “He has to live with the knowledge that he is capable of the worst murder imaginable. He builds his own invisible glass coffin by being able to do what he does.”

“Rex drinks the coffee because there is this battle between these two men to see who is the strongest, and the strongest is the one who does something that the other expects him not to,” says Bervoets. “Rex wants to be with Saskia. He doesn’t care how he’s going to be with her because he knows in a way he’s going to die, but he wants to undergo the same thing as she did. He thinks, ‘When I do this, I am stronger than Lemorne.’ That’s something in the last image of the movie when you see the two eggs, you see Lemorne sitting there, completely finished, his life is done. He can’t go on. So although he died, Rex won.”

Twenty-eight years on, Bervoets’ memories of *The Vanishing* shoot are similarly bittersweet: “It was a life-lasting experience,” he says. “You can’t describe it as nice, you can’t describe it as horrible, but it was both. I can see why Johanna and Bernard-Pierre would say, ‘No way, I don’t want to talk about it anymore. It was a long time ago. I want to bury this thing.’”

The Vanishing is available on DVD.