

Flipside(s), a user's manual

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FATHER CHRISTMAS has shed his gloves. Yet, clad in his red and white garb, he had an important mission. Inveterate traveller that he is, he first had to incarnate the resurrection of the utopian myth about the horn of plenty –the cornucopia.

It then fell to him to pay, and pour, it into the account of a mercantile morality earmarked for training children in the ecstasies of consumerism. In *Père Coco*, a 5-minute looped video made by Jordi Colomer, for which the city of Saint-Nazaire provides the multifaceted backdrop, if we follow the wanderings of this famous character, it is still not without some difficulty that we recognize him. For here is our great purveyor forced to wield the pickaxe, glean this and that from here and there, from the very sidewalk, in public gardens, in carparks, in bars, slapbang in the middle of a beach, on deserted quaysides –things to fill his sack. Without reckoning that this latter, an albeit essential work tool and necessary emblem, turns out, at the start of the itinerary, to be the fruit of a find. The remainder of his traditional props is in keeping. Without a sleigh, yet obliged to sleigh things around, he borrows the modest means of transport provided by providence on his route: a bicycle (which he will nevertheless, as a good citizen, turn in to the Lost Property Office), roller skates, and so on. His red hat is turned into a vermilion helmet, as used on motorbikes, and he will only be able to put on his famous boots, now made of paraffin-blue plastic, when he comes to the end of a march that is already a lengthy one. This, in words of one syllable, so to speak, is our Father Christmas turned into a pauper and a homeless person of no fixed address. He does not spend any money any more, he is on the lookout. He does not hand things out any more, he collects. He no longer brings out, by magic, objects that are desired and desirable, rather he pilfers, in a gesture involving the gathering up of debris, what has been left behind, lost, and forgotten about. He is no longer on a direct line to Heaven; rather he vainly awaits his instructions from a cellphone abandoned in the night. And the toys, gadgets, knick-knacks, clothes are other potential presents which fall due to him as he wanders about are futilely piled up in a sack which you might think was locked, as a result of the set of keys which significantly marks the point where the film's loop starts round all over again. This key which, in a thoroughly logical way, opens up a promise, and what the language of stories calls a treasure trove, here closes over the identical repetition of this derisory harvest. This is probably why the only child who appears is about to leave, prisoner of the gesture of farewell between the window of a train bearing her elsewhere at very high speed. Father Christmas in reverse, childhood in exodus, objects with no use: the lesson is an easy one to learn. It rings out with Pasolini-like tones: consumerism is bankrupt, and its meagre hopes referred to the rigour of asphalt.

There is nothing difficult about following this same critical thread in Jordi Colomer's other works. *Fuegogratias*, *Simo*, *Eldorado*, *Le Dortoir* and so on all in

their own way deal with this world where the presence of objects has changed meaning to the point of reversing the nature of their use. In the work of Claes Oldenburg objects are wonderfully inflated until they take on an intimidating size in space, and are then immediately deflated and lose their bearing; in Jordi Colomer's work, however, magic is still present, but the manifestation of it is more random. The fact is that what involved the fantastic (disproportion, fantastic projection, etc) in Oldenburg's work passed by way of the use of traditional sculptural resources: spread and unfolding of the volume, nature of materials.

For Colomer, the use of film offered him an elasticity of data which combines the memory of performances and their theatricality, temporal fluidity, and a heightened plastic flexibility, in a nutshell, a tool that picks up the stake because it takes into account the occupation of a space and its various "inhabitants".

Let us pass some of his works through the sieve. *Fuegogratis*: this is the complete furniture of an ideal house which a young couple is saving from fire, or throwing into it, depending—since the scene actually unfolds the wrong way round. For this sequence produced for the space in the Gallery at Noisy-le-Sec, to wit, an old middle-class residence, a building rich in history, where the kitsch element is duplicated and preserved in an almost zoological way in the midst of a suburb being renovated, can also be deciphered as a merry potlatch of reigning advertising imagery. This, as we well know, sells patterns of behaviour, customs and habits and even complete ranges of feelings, rather than products. Involved here is the destruction-birth-by-enchantment of all this stock of furniture as an "affective reserve" that the couple, pathetic supermarket Ken and Barbie at the wheel of the gilded carriage taking them towards the night of their destiny illuminated by the headlights, is so happy about. *Fuegogratis*? Fire of joy, stake of vanities, hearth henceforth with neither faith nor place ("The corrupted idea of work tallies with the complementary idea of a nature which, in accordance with Dietzgen's formula, "if offered free", as Benjamin wrote at the end of his eleventh thesis *On the Concept of History*)? Or, quite to the contrary, motorway grill sign (the lettering is like that of the "Buffalo Grill" which eerily lights up the night in *Père Coco*), adulterated warmth, new age frisson, promotion of love life? It's impossible to decide here: the principle of reversal (of the filming) does away with all stability. Rather, it imprints all action actually on the wax of a time that does not pass. This technique of negative reversal, whose use has been made systematic as much by the Soviet avant-gardes (Vertov, in particular) as by Leni Riefenstahl (the famous divers of the Gods of the Stadium) in the 1920s and 1930s, was supposed to heal the eye from the effects of speed. What we fail to grasp, so rapid is this in the fire of action, is better understood once it has been seen, or seen again, the other way round. But this odd postulate ill masked the fact that what was in reality involved for these two totalitarian utopias the use of cinematic scrolling running counter to its vocation. As did the fact that it was a matter of stemming the passage of time in favour of rendering it eternal.

Otherwise put, it was less important to precisely break down this or that (a sporting feat, the food chain, the mechanization of labour, etc) than, with infinitely more ambition, to provide modern icons (thus cinematographic ones) with a new reign, this one with the promise of enduring. It is perhaps not incongruous in this

respect to male the comparison between the proposition of *Fuegogratis* and a similar scene in David Lynch's *Lost Highway*. From one work to the next, numerous similarities might incidentally be pointed to: parallelism of lights in chiaroscuro, same effectiveness of the attack, overall slightly emphatic tone, mystery maintained and light-hearted, framed eroticism ("Final Eros" can be deciphered on the clown-like pullover of the male character with his typical hat), allegorical suspicion weighing on each gesture (Jordi Colomer in all probability inherits this from the cinema of his fellow countryman Luis Buñuel, to whom Simo is an explicit tribute), etc. But in a more specific way, we remember that sequence treated by Lynch as a leitmotiv throughout his film, to such a point that it acts as a counterpart to the video passages of the household interior of the beginning—a house is consumed the wrong way round: this is the hidden abode in the middle of the desert of the devilish master. The fact is that the whole of *Lost Highway* is constructed around an enigma which might be put together thus (and which, incidentally, runs through several other works made by the filmmaker): why hasn't the United States left its 1950s behind? Why is this moment of economic euphoria, baby boom, and cold war—otherwise put the moment when American capitalism (the famous American way of life) was put forward like a real utopia and political alternative—still a ghost that is so formidably at work? The reversal of the cremation, just like the whole principle of Lynch's scenario, which prevents time from proceeding by moving forward, that is to say by freeing itself from itself, indicates that History is against the grain—are at least condemned to act in an on-the-spot way around those ground-breaking mythical years. Indicates, too, that that wooden house in *Lost Highway*, just like the cardboard furniture of *Fuegogratis*, appear, or so it would seem, as the re-updating of motifs hailing from the tale for children, a sign that what is involved in both works is the treatment of historical time. For what the tale is busy transmitting is not the resolution of a tension, but the actual exposé of an inconsolable hiatus between synchrony and diachrony, between the fall in time and its sequence of uncontrollable events and the feeling of its duration in experience, in memory, in the very narrative itself.

A contrast, therefore, with a realism by default and a utopian dreamlike factor by excess, which all tales guard against reabsorbing, for in it is seen the chance to bind what is only just beginning (children, addressees and beneficiaries: the promise of time advancing) with what is very ancient (narrative knowhow, those who carry it and what it protects).

Les Villes, for example, plays with a similar painful polarity, arrangement of a twofold projection, impossible for the viewer to embrace simultaneously. Two scenarios, almost identical in their reference to the vein of silent comic films, are put forward. On one screen, a female figure moving dangerously forward on the outer façade of a building loses her hold and plunges to the ground where she is flattened among the traffic that your ear can make out. On the other screen, the same figure, after an identical progression, manages to step through a window and smoothly ventures inside the building, where she vanishes. As a balance between disaster and salvation, co-existence, above all, of each of the decisive hypotheses where it is up to the onlooker to face up to a lack of resolve,

the two characters, the one who falls and the one who is saved, are archaic figures revisited by the contemporary tragedy which is expressed through gags. They are loaded, a load that leaves all possibilities available. As a result, there is nothing fortuitous about the fact that, in the Noisy exhibition, the video next to Fuegogratis is titled Anarchitekton. In it we see a brother in arms of Père Coco (perhaps it is the same actor?) walking through the suburbs, as alone as a demonstrator rallying to a lost cause, brandishing a cardboard model of an unconstructed architecture, echoing Malevich's famous modules, in the middle of existing buildings. Without counting the shared use of cardboard in Anarchitekton and in Fuegogratis, this lowly DIY material also used for the architectural project and the symmetry between the two works nevertheless seems blatant. On the one hand, the dream of edification in front of its reality; on the other, the dream of destruction facing its accomplishment. But the affinity that links the two works is not content with being so formal. As in the logic of the tale, the effect produced in Anarchitekton is many and varied, not to say ambiguous. With the help of perspective and focus, the model appears on several occasions in a size identical to that of the buildings among which it rises up like a manifesto. But a manifesto of what? Criticism? Is it a matter of appreciating the difference between this scaled-down model and the ponderous constructions of our cities? Or on the contrary their similarities? We are aware of Dan Graham's analysis (and the analyses of others, too), according to which the modernist programme and the architectural utopias of avant-gardes have fairly and squarely been realized. So is this poor hero looking like a protester not the sandwichman sadly dispatched to promote what exists? In what way have "new towns" freed themselves from a programme of subjugation against which they were supposed to do battle? Yet there is no ironical denunciation in this video. The "action" which leads on our lonesome demonstrator, Don Quixote and Sancho Panza mixed together presenting the advertisement for windmills to come, retains all its force. It is not selling a project, it is a reminder of the existence of smallness, of the presence of a counterpower which clings, even if it means another passage, to a shift to action other than that of a miniature construction and hands this over to the urban drift, free of all rootedness. Architecture moves to the rank of mobile sculpture, held at arm's length. The fairytale of a land with architecture that is liberated and liberating (anarchic) is only possible on the scale of the model, precisely where the project is limited to define the future without wishing to lend form to it, as the works of Dan Graham had already illustrated.

Simo: here we have a large number of pairs of shoes which a female figure in miniature crams into a room which she only leaves in order to bring into it various foodstuffs which will end up in a pile blocking access to the room. Like the character embodied by Jacques Villeret in Godard's *Keep your right up*, she stuffs herself with a jar of jam indicating a regressive kind of greediness which swallows everything with the same voracious appetite. Consumer goods, space (the white room shrinks beneath a clutter and obstruction that the petty theft of a black character is not, on its own, enough to ventilate), city (the model of an illuminated building in the end surmounts the mountain of useless purchases), and, to end with, everything outside, are thus hoarded in bulk. The ladder,

echoing the stylite column of Buñuel's *Simon of the Desert*, and symbol of spiritual elevation, is brought down at the end of the film, and thrown out of the frame by the little monster. The metaphor of the situation of the capitalist world is tempting enough not to be refused: the female dwarf isolated in her vain and sanitized world—a sterile prison in which knick-knack treasures are piled up—talks about herself.

Eldorado presents a blind actor who fences with himself in a bedroom with all its furniture, as if he were exercising with a long and meticulous ransacking, for which Jeff Wall's *Destroyed Room* seems to be the horizon. The land of milk and honey —*pays de Cocagne*— conjured up by its title, that utopia of the original consumer, which boasted of happiness under the auspices of saturation, is deregulated: quantity does not even replace quality any more—it is almost a fight for living space, waged with closed eyes, that is involved.

In *Le Dortoir*, the camera roams through the accommodation of the occupants of an apartment block, occupants whose deep sleep seems to be guarded by the mass of scattered objects surrounding them. Inspired by a chapter from *Life, a User's Manual*, in which Georges Perec forges a renewed link with the extenuating descriptive lists introduced in *Les Choses*, the film, thus following what the novel describes, “might offer the classic images of the day after a party. [...] On the floor, everywhere, the remains of the gathering.” But such a proposition seems to be able to act as a structure for the whole thing. Something has taken pace, something which is now over: relics float by, and the unattainable meaning of them no longer holds back and contains the clutter. In *Pianito*, the exasperated and futile dusting of a piano (that supreme instrument of interpretation and performance) merely underscores the emptiness of its mass. As in a Beckett play, this piano makes a pair with its player who is as something of a loose end, and all the two together manage to do is perform the chaotic concerto of their declared end beneath the dust of time, which is winning the day. Fear not, however. It would be tantamount to reducing to not very much to involve Jordi Colomer's videos in a criticism with no more than sociological import. This clearly forms the inevitable and inconsolable backdrop of it. But if it has been possible to highlight the figure of Father Christmas, to the point of coming across like a generic allegory, this is because it entails other stakes and challenges in its wake. For it is understandable that beneath the gear and clothes of this stripped Father Christmas hides the artist whom Jordi Colomer is forced to play. More a dispenser, but, at best like Kurt Schwitters strolling around Berlin in search of bits for his future Merz works, a gleaner. As with Schwitters, where the collage retains traces of the previous life of its elements, and refuses to drag them into a harmonious composition, obvious and necessary impacts strike Colomer's images. These latter can not be other than disenchanting, summoned to be accomplices of the powerlessness which they bear witness to.

This is why, if Jordi Colomer has decided to opt for filmic material, while he unflaggingly lays claim to being a sculptor (to the point where this sounds almost like a joke), it is never in order to manufacture an imperious consistency, it is never to involve the spectator in the facile hypnosis of a regulated and consumable spectacle. You will have noted that *Père Coco* is formed by a

sequential dissolve of static and at times blurred images, poorly framed and not very effective as a *mise en scène*. The movement of the figure's walk is hampered by its hiccuping presentation. All we have of its itinerary is brief cuts, as difficult to articulate as if an absent-minded or callow investigator had been given responsibility for its spinning. As in Chris Marker's *The Jetty*, the illusoriness of the unfolding in time and space is suspended; the jerkiness of paused images is preferred to it. The photo-novel thus mildly animated refers to the status of a viewpoint which itself becomes a crumbly, uncertain matter, controlled by its object.

So it is important to extend this strategy involving a contradiction of viewpoints and their visual fray to all of Jordi Colomer's work. Between the space, constructed most of the time, closed, theatrical, and the camera movements describing it, there is an exacerbated discomfort that is not soothed by any reconciliation. So the camera rolls in *Eldorado*, for example, only framing the gesticulations of the actor without aiming first, as if it itself were caught by a blind and destructive trance. In *Pianito*, it is sudden inserts which reveal the trickery in which the actor has been tempted to get us to believe, breaking the contract that the playlet had drawn up. The pendulum-like movement of the lateral tracking shot, moving back and forth (a choreographic figure of which Godard was fond) between the bedroom and the outside, in *Simo*, helps to erase this dubious sharing between private and public and adds, furthermore, to the neurotic behaviour of its heroine (do we not hear the famous fearsome bars of *Mr. Accursed* –*M. le Maudit*–briefly whistle? Is not the girl's murderer himself transformed into a fearsome little girl?). After intruding and as the only waking thing (apart from a worker who is climbing a ladder whistling–again) in *Le Dortoir*, the camera is distinct from those drowsy, slumbering bodies that it moves over with a sovereign distance. The freedom of its aerial movements offers it the place of a subjectivity which distinguishes it from those sleeping people swamped in the midst of their objects. The reverse filming of *Fuegogratis*, in spite of its resemblance to an industrial cinematographic product, is part and parcel of this same logic.

The rule of this sort of contradictory dialectic or alternate circulation is possibly offered in *Les Jumelles*. Here again, a lateral tracking shot moves over the set of a theatre (the beautiful room with its red armchairs in the *Villa Arson*), facing the audience's seats. What do we see? Deserted seats on which, as in an intermission, are lying clothes which an usherette collects–with an effectiveness more evident than *Père Coco's*, all the same. Then, sliding on its tracks, the camera shows us two young girls (actresses?), hidden from the room by a mirror, which they face. As they check their reflections in the mirror, the girls put on the clothes thus gathered, one layer upon another. And this while the tiers gradually fill up with spectators and the hubbub of their conversations. With one thing pursuing another, during this animation the girls reverse their action and gradually take off their layered costumes.

The to-and-fro of the tracking shot makes it possible to link within one and the same impetus something, nonetheless, which is exchanged on another axis – between room and stage. The camera slides to the borderline between two

distinct spaces, underlining this separation, and we know how much it underpins all spectacular rhetoric which goes by the name of representation. Duplication – and this is the rule–must protect itself from its model, because of the risk of becoming unreadable in its regard. This camera seems like an eye coming from the wings (in the foreground you can glimpse hangers, and props), as in the famous ascent in *Citizen Kane* up to the electric machinery in the opera scene. But just when it insists on the division of spaces, what the camera shows is rather the circulation between the room and the stage, here made by clothes that have suddenly become stage costumes, a transformation that nobody other than she is in a position to discern since the mirror prohibits the reciprocal gaze. Who are the twins? At first glance: the two girls who actually look very alike, even if their successive getups help to tell them apart. Are they usherettes playing at being actresses? Are they actresses caught without costumes? Or are not the twins rather the room and the stage, endlessly swapping their position, “feeding” off one another? In an interview, Jordi Colomer refers to the “precarious situation of the spectator” and, moreover, mentions Cassavetes’ *Opening Night*, where, in the name of art, an actress-and the film with her –ceases to make the distinction between the feigned and the experienced. It would be wrong, however, to believe in some Stanislavskian manifesto. Because what here becomes the object of the spectacle is not so much the swapping of parts or an unknown complicity, as the precariousness which joins representation and represented together, beyond “the cold mirror of the screen”, the way Debord may risk it, commenting on this image from a frozen attendance in his *In Giron Imus Nocte*. In *Pianito* as in *The Rehearsal*, *La Répétition* it is indeed the disarray of the actor that is at stake. A disarray that has nothing to do with the success or failure of his undertaking (thus in *Les Jumelles* we do not know anything about the possible spectacle for which the audience has turned out), but rather something to do with the simple decision to be exposed. This is why the sets and the scenographic constructions shored up by bright colours and specific proportions, with which Colomer surrounds his projections, are not earmarked so much for redoubling the theatricality of the whole, and blurring the distribution of the images, but rather for protecting these latter. The specifically sculptural element remains present like a memory seconded to the protection of dreams which no longer have the strength to be realized. Except in the form of a bric-à-brac of cardboard toys, for which nobody has the instructions for use any more. What remains to be done is to manufacture, as well as possible, sentences that are more or less tangible with the material offered by the *Alfabet*, in order to substitute them, as Perec writes at the end of the chapter, for this “fragile papyrus which will probably never recover from it.”