

TERRE CONTRE CIEL (ESSAY)

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Gargantua is an occasional publishing project by Robin Vanbesien. A series of publications by different artists will be published at irregular intervals.

This essay is intended as an introduction to the publications that will appear in the *Gargantua* series.

It was originally presented as a lecture on February 9th, 2012 at Café Au Daringman, Vlaamsesteenweg/Rue de Flandre 37, Brussels.

Terre contre Ciel

I watch Jean-Luc Godard's *Film Socialisme* (2010). Halfway through the movie, a graphic intertitle appears with the words 'TERRE CONTRE CIEL' written in white and red letters on a black screen. I don't immediately understand the context or the content of the intertitle, as there are no subtitles in the film and the spontaneous documentary sound recording is not always entirely clear. In any case, I leave the cinema in the Galerie de la Reine in Brussels and the image of the intertitle stays with me.

When I get home, I search on Google for '*terre contre ciel*'. Among the images that I get as a result, one is from an image bank made by David Crockett. The description of the photo reads: '*terre contre un ciel sombre*'. What can we make of this Photoshop creation? As a test, let us take this image of science fiction seriously. Let us assume there is actually a second Earth hanging high above our heads, as if a mirror of our own planet.



We can take the image of *'terre contre un ciel sombre'* just as seriously as the Cheshire Cat in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. Alice spots the cat for the first time in the house of the Duchess. When Alice walks into the kitchen she can see the Duchess feeding a baby, while a cook leans over a cauldron full of soup and spreads a cloud of pepper into the air. Everyone starts to sneeze, except for the cook and a large cat near the fireplace that grins from ear to ear. The cat immediately intrigues Alice. When she asks the Duchess why the cat is grinning like that, the Duchess answers: 'It's a Cheshire Cat, and that's why'. She concludes her reply by shouting 'Pig!' Alice is a bit shocked, but quickly understands that the 'pig' was addressed to the baby, and not to her. When the Duchess wants to get ready to play croquet with the Queen, she flings the baby at Alice and asks her to look after it. Alice sees a chance to save the baby from the Duchess. While carrying it out of the house into the open air, she notices how the baby slowly changes into a pig. The moment she lets the little creature trot away into the wood, she sees the Cheshire Cat sitting on the bough of a tree a few yards off. Like all animals in this Wonderland, the cat can speak. After a short conversation, the cat vanishes, but quickly reappears. This happens twice. When the cat disappears for the last time, it does so in a very peculiar way: quite



slowly, starting with the end of the tail and ending with the grin, which remains some time after the rest of the cat has gone. 'Well! I've often seen a cat without a grin, but a grin without a cat! It's the most curious thing I ever saw in all my life!', Alice exclaims.

In 2004, Chris Marker releases *Chats Perchés*. As is also the case in Marker's epic film-essay *Le Fond de l'Air est Rouge* – which focuses on the worldwide political wars of the 60s and 70s – protest and social upheaval are once again the main subjects of his attention.

In *Chats Perchés*, the geographical and historical context is France, directly after 9/11. Marker focuses on the changing political climate and the role of the media. In France, the main political story centres on Jean-Marie Le Pen. As the candidate of the extreme-right Front National, Le Pen beats Lionel Jospin of the Parti Socialiste in the first round of the presidential elections. Consequently, the second round is between Le Pen and Jacques Chirac of the Gaullist right wing. The Left is faced with an ideological and democratic dilemma: vote for Chirac, or don't vote at all.

The main event on the international stage at this time is the war on Iraq and the statements, or more precisely, the lies of Bush and Blair about the presence of nuclear weapons there. Marker shows us the protests against these political events and the ways they are represented and met by propaganda in the media.

The title *Chats Perchés* refers to the special thread that Marker has chosen for his visual essay. He chooses the



perspective of the cats in the city. Apart from Boléro, the resident cat at the metro station of Strasbourg-Saint-Denis, Marker's attention is especially drawn to the yellow grinning cats that appear throughout the city on chimneys and on walls under the name of Monsieur Chat.

It is not at all clear exactly what these painted Messieurs Chats represent, nor who or what is behind them. They are just as elusive as the Cheshire Cat in Carroll's *Wonderland*. Marker uses the mystery and doubt about the origin of Monsieur Chat as the springboard for his story. The first scene of the film is significant. We see a computer screen with the announcement of an incoming email message (« *Vous avez un message en attente* »). The email is then read aloud by a rather demanding mechanical voice. It's an anonymous call to take part in the 'Parismob', a flash mob on Beaubourg Square. The following scene demonstrates the flash mob and how this message, sent to many people, has led them to come together. They are amused, good sports, willing to play along with a creative project they do not quite understand. In retrospect, this sequence has a chilling undertone. It reveals how easily a crowd can be assembled and manipulated by a mysterious mediated message of unknown origin. In the light of the next sequence, showing the attack on the Twin Towers, the viewer

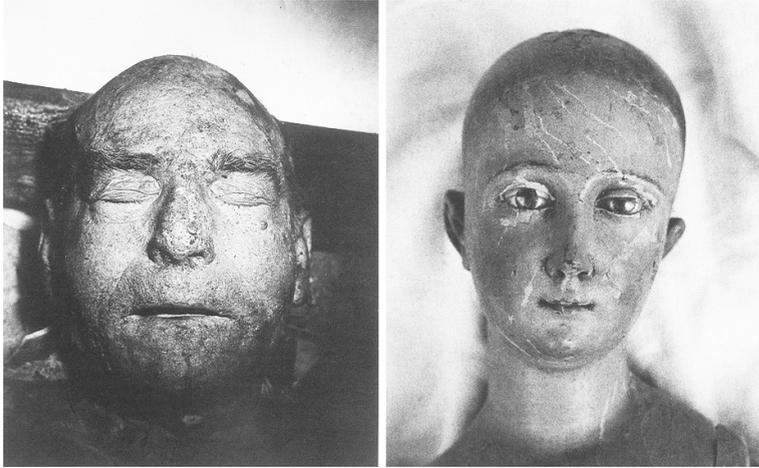
cannot help but wonder what influence similar mediations might have played in the unfolding of the events of September 2001.

Throughout *Chats Perchés*, Marker creates many signals to alert the viewer to pay attention to various forms of mediated representation. Marker replaces the customary voice-over with graphic intertitles (thereby stressing textual mediation). He combines documentary footage with hypnotic new-age soundtracks. He introduces 'The Morpheye', a sequence in which both images and audio from news coverage and the media are digitally distorted through the use of filters and effects. He digitally animates his own documentary footage (making the cats sometimes appear and disappear). This leads to the point at which, when the grinning cats appear in an American street protest march against the war on Iraq, one can no longer be sure if the cats have been digitally added by Marker, or if the banners are actually real. The doubt persists.

Let us remind ourselves how Bush and Blair invented the presence of a nuclear threat in Iraq. In a similar way, the mysterious appearance of Monsieur Chat is the mechanical element of Marker's story that keeps the story going. This mechanical element brings the story into motion, without this element ever being questioned.

The picture on the left is a portrait of the corpse of an old man. The corpse appears to be decomposed; its eyes are permanently closed. On the right is a portrait of a hand-painted antique doll. Its eyes are wide open, making it appear remarkably alive.

The juxtaposition seems to make perfect sense – the pictures represent life and death. But which represents which? The doll is made of inert matter and is further from life than the corpse. Yet on the other hand, the doll is staring at us in a very lively way, whereas the corpse looks as dead as dead can be. The corpse might represent life when compared to the invariable inertness of the doll, but then again the doll is certainly not dead, since it was never actually alive in the first place. Is a dead body ‘more dead’, or ‘less dead’, than dead matter? Is a living fictional person more alive than a ‘real’ dead one?



La Danse Macabre is an artistic genre presenting late-medieval allegory on the universality of death: no matter what one's station in life, the Dance of Death unites us all. The dance consists of Death personified summoning representatives from all walks of life (be they popes, emperors, kings, children and workmen) to dance their way to the grave. The Dance of Death reminded people of the fragility and vanity of their earthly lives. But more importantly, it was also a reminder, that after death, everyone is cleansed of his or her social identity.

It is no coincidence that Dostoyevsky described his short story 'Bobok' (1873) as 'the notes of a certain person'. As early as the first sentence of the story, the mental health of the narrator is cast in doubt. He is accused of constant drunkenness, his appearance is made fun of, and his literary style is criticised. Fleeing from this hostile 'contemporary' context, the narrator looks for some diversion and decides to visit a funeral. At the cemetery, he realises he is tired and lies down 'on a long stone like a marble coffin'. He suddenly hears a multitude of voices that seem to come from beneath the surface of the earth.

The corpses who speak from below come from all walks of life. The community of speakers is continuously in a state of flux, with new voices and perspectives being added, and others dying or fading



away. The period during which the body is revived in its new state lasts for a few months. Thereafter, the dead body expresses a single sound, 'bobok', in order to indicate that a vital spark remains. This creates an extraordinary situation: the final life of the consciousness freed from all conditions, positions, obligations and laws of ordinary life, as if it were a life 'outside of life'.

What unfolds is a carnivalesque world in which a group of corpses engage in a free and unfettered dialogue, without constraints, censorship or shame. They have nothing more to lose.

'It's not possible to live on earth without lying, because life and lies are synonymous; well, here we'll tell the truth for fun. Damn it, the grave means something, you know! We'll all tell the stories of our lives and not be ashamed of anything ... Let's strip ourselves naked!'. 1

The power of Dostoyevsky's novels emerges from the relationships he sets up. It is not about a particular character's specific point of view, but the way that he or she shapes this point of view in light of his or her differences with the other characters. The truly interesting aspect of a dialogic interaction is not the perspective of one speaker or another, but the way

their dialogue produces unexpected expressions, ideas and notions that are not typical of either speaker. A conversation is creatively constructed according to the circumstances: no speaker can see what the other sees. This situation of dialogue is not only something that occurs in the text. There is also an interaction that is unique to the particular context within which the text is read. The position of the narrator in 'Bobok' as he hears the exchanges of dialogue between the buried corpses resembles the position of the reader. There is an interaction, a transference, or even a mimetic relationship between the two interrelated worlds.

I prefer to read Dostoyevsky's books on public transport, or in public spaces. Why should that be? Time and space in Dostoyevsky's novels continuously refer to the crises and breaks in life; they always reflect the being-on-the-border-of-things. The staircase, the front hall, the corridor, the street, the bridge: these are the main places of action in his works; places where critical events occur, the falls, the resurrections, the renewals, the epiphanies, the decisions that determine a man's whole life.

This concept of dialogue rejects any initiative aimed at isolating a certain text or discursive practice. Speeches or texts are acts that stand in relation to specific circumstances and in which material is

forever being used from earlier speeches and previous speakers. The dead corpses in 'Bobok' are confronted with a situation that is similar to our contemporary context, which is based more than ever on methods of appropriation, quotation, and (re)contextualisation.

The late-medieval stories of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1532–1553) by the French writer François Rabelais deal with that special connection between a human and all his actions, between every event of his or her life and the spatial-temporal world. This means that everything of value must achieve its full potential in temporal and spatial terms. Provided with the power to expand both spatially and temporally, it must spread out as far and as wide as possible. Likewise, everything evaluated negatively is small and feeble and must be destroyed – and is also helpless to resist this destruction. Everything that is good grows: it grows in all respects and in all directions. It cannot help but grow, because growth is inherent in its very nature. The bad, on the other hand, degenerates, thins out and perishes.

In Rabelais' stories the human body becomes a concrete measuring rod for the world, the measure of the world's weight and value for the individual. The human body is portrayed in a variety of different aspects, various first of all in its anatomical and physiological aspect. What then follows is a clownesque and cynical, then fantastic and grotesque allegorisation. Let us take a look, for instance, at Gargantua's birth:



‘Gargantua’s mother, who had eaten too much

tripe, suffers a prolapsus of the rectum resulting in severe diarrhea. Thanks to this unfortunate accident there took place a weakening of the uterus, the child leapt up through the Fallopian tubes to hollow vein and, scrambling across the diaphragm to the upper arm where this vein divides in two, the child took the left fork and crawled out through the left ear.' 2

The grotesque, parodied and clownish images of the human body serve to expose the body's structure and life. On the other hand these images drag into the body-matrix a heterogeneous world of things that were, in the medieval picture of the world, infinitely far from the body, and were included in completely different series of words and objects. The contact that these objects and phenomena had with the body was brought about via a verbal matrix. All these word-linkages are aimed primarily at destroying the established set of values. But Rabelais is simultaneously accomplishing a more positive task, one that gives all these word-linkages and grotesque images a definite direction: to 'embody' the world, to materialise it, to measure everything on the scale of the human body.

The grotesque body is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, it outgrows itself, it transgresses its

own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the potbelly, the nose. The body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits only in copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, or defecation. This is the always unfinished, the continually creating body.

Let us return to our initial question: How can we interpret the science fiction meets Photoshop creation of an Earth hanging in the middle of a grey and cloudy sky as if it were a repetition or a mirror of our own planet?

Perhaps there are two possible ways to answer such a question in the context of this essay. The first would be to consider how the appearance of a second Earth has taken us on a path, has brought our story into motion; perhaps it is only about how we are in debt to its very own fiction.

A second way to answer could be found in another short story by Dostoyevsky, 'The Dream of a Ridiculous Man'. In this story a man is unhappy because everybody considers him to be a fool. It makes him even sadder to know he is a fool and yet to know that nobody knows that he knows. It depresses him and he has the feeling that nothing makes any difference anymore. He eventually decides to commit suicide. That night sees him sitting in his chair with a revolver on the table next to him. Something distracts him, however, and stops him from committing the act. Eventually he falls asleep. In his dream he flies through space to somewhere far away from our own galaxy and to his own surprise he is suddenly confronted with a planet similar to Earth. The main difference with respect to our Earth is that



the humans in this second version are full of love for everything on their planet. Unfortunately, our man's impure presence rapidly corrupts this second Earth and eventually brings it into a state of debauchery, corruption and lies. Then our 'ridiculous man' wakes up. It is as if he has seen the light and realised the possibility of an earthly life with love. He starts to preach his message to all around him. 'If only everyone would want it, it could all be arranged at once!', he exclaims. Despite his profound epiphany, however, everybody still believes that he is ridiculous. In fact, they are more convinced of this than ever.

Notes

1

Fyodor Dostoyevsky, 'Bobok' in: *The Gambler and Other Stories*, 2010, Penguin Classics, p. 289

2

Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel' in: *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, University of Texas, 1981, pp. 84 – 258

Illustrations

Ciel

David Crockett – 123RF Banque d'images (http://fr.123rf.com/photo_593869_terre-contre-un-ciel-sombre.html)

Illustration by John Teniel in: Martin Gardner (Ed.), *Lewis Carroll, The Annotated Alice*, Penguin Books, 1970, p. 91

Photo by anonymous, 'Monsieur Chat', Paris protests 2002, second round of the presidential elections with Jacques Chirac and Jean-Marie Le Pen

Terre

Matt Mullican, *Untitled (Doll and Dead Man)*, 1973.

Two gelatin silver prints, 25 x 20 cm each

Totentanz by Michael Wolgemut (1493) from the *Liber Chronicarum* (Nuremberg Chronicles), 1493

Illustration by Gustave Doré for *Gargantua* by François Rabelais, published in *Œuvres de Rabelais* (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1873), Book I, vol. 1, ch. XXXVIII, opposite page 116.

Terre contre ciel

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