

## **Living the scenery**

Jordi Colomer

"Deserts are universal, the Pampa is temporary and specific"; Sergio González. (1)

The theatre is dark, a double projection (2): travelling over virtually infinite theatre stalls full of orange-coloured armchairs that can be glimpsed behind the scene. A young woman collects pieces of clothing dropped over the armchairs and, holding a big bundle in her arms, goes to meet another similarly identical person who is trying on clothes standing opposite a mirror. Meanwhile, the audience takes its place in the stalls, and the rumble of chattering increases. The two young women rapidly start taking off layers and layers of clothes, as successive layers of skin covering their body. They dress and undress with the clothes the audience leave there every night. The twins live in the space between the stage and the stalls, and their actions are invisible to the eyes of the audience that nonchalantly watch the beginning of the show; the camera offers us a privileged view.

We then become spies observing these two worlds that, for centuries, have been divided by a clear boundary. The stage, the realms of actors; the stalls, of the audience. An insight into the theatre room. Action repeating itself *ad infinitum*.

## **Theatres in the desert**

The photograph of a desert. A line on the horizon, rose-coloured land below the sun and the blue sky above. I took this picture in the Atacama Desert, in the north of Chile, considered by many as the most arid desert in the world. Another photograph: the same point of view, the same rose-coloured land, and identically blue sky. A woman appears turning her back on us, she throws a silver-coloured ball into the distance: evidence holding the proof: the desert becomes a stage, the whole stage, the stage design. Can the desert be lived in? Can it be lived in through fiction? This was the exercise I undertook with the project "en la pampa" (2007-2008) (3). I invited a man and a woman who did not know each other, a young couple of non-actors to experience certain situations on that desolate stage. Their main weapon was to forget about the camera and to improvise a dialogue with their actions, for example, by washing a car close to an abandoned cemetery. I must confess that she had acted once before as a tree in a school performance, so she did have some experience living the stage, as a theatrical element with legs. We also had a good HD camera and an exceptional cameraman.

The woman, who we shall call Maria from now on, was born in Maria Elena, a Chilean nitrate town, the only town in a radius of 300km where three generations of people were born, went to school and to the theatre. Maria Elena, a town that is no longer profitable for the company exploiting the nitrate fields, is doomed to disappear in three years. There we shot a first scene – on a hot Sunday when the temperature was near 50 degrees Celsius – in front of the main façade of the theatre, a building reminiscent of the Art-déco style with some reliefs of miners at work. Above the main entrance, which gives onto the square with the market, the school, the church and a bar, is a placard simply reading: theatre. Let's keep this façade in mind. The theatre seen from the outside; we will come back to this theatre later on.

## **Views of the city**

The lights go out again in the theatre stalls. Yet another double projection: (les villes)

(4). On two screens is the foreshortened façade of a building with several storeys and in the back a noisy city changing constantly and quickly. All of a sudden a young woman wearing a pyjama appears, hanging from the cornice. On one of the screens the woman manages to reach up to a window and climb through it. A neighbour watches her. Meanwhile, on the other screen, the same woman, in exactly the same position, is not able to reach the ledge and falls into the void. All this action takes place in a décor revealing its precarious setting and fictional architecture. The city in the background is a frame-by-frame animation set into a chroma; initially giving proof of the opposition between architecture and set design: a “represented” architecture. The situation reminds one of the classic mute cinema setting – remember the famous scene with Harold Lloyd in *Safety Last* (1923) – where an unknown citizen, played by Lloyd, a shy character of the middle classes, is faced with the perils of the large city, a character confronted with the new scale of the metropolis – . In a later version, the great Mexican comic actor Cantinflas finds himself in a very similar situation in the film “*El Bombero Atómico*” (1950). In this case, this character from the more populist neighbourhoods of the Mexican capital, those who are always forgotten, a humble newspaper boy who unexpectedly turns into a fireman acts in good will but clumsily deploying all his limitations as a (fortunately) clumsy yet brave hero. To shoot this scene in Lloyd’s film, the set design used was a false façade, up on the roof of a skyscraper to obtain “real” images of the streets and city below. In the film featuring Cantinflas, the street is clearly a pre-filmed retro-projection. In “*les villes*” the city is composed of different volumes reminiscent of Malevic’s *architectons* – White volumes on a small scale – that become animated as in Hans Richter’s films, which are only there to prove that the likeliness of the situation is achieved through “the gripping of incredulity”. Even if generally it is considered that this role tends to ignore the inconsistencies intervening in the construction of fiction, I would like to develop the possibility of a paradoxical status where we simultaneously are torn between this “gripping incredulity” and a conscience fully aware of the artificial means used in fiction. I will call this status “the paradox of the incredulous”.

### **The paradox of the incredulous**

Walter Benjamin once said that architecture and cinema are the paradigms of a modern reception, a “reception in a state of distraction” (5). “The paradox of the incredulous” involves a viewer who is aware of their own “distracted state” who is struggling between a sort of awareness state, to remain critical, but at the same time suspending incredulity in a state of alertness, under permanent stress.

Just as when one dreams they are dreaming what they are dreaming, or dreams they have woken up from that same dream...once they wake up they are dubious that they have actually woken up, since they believed they had actually woken up while dreaming. The “Paradox of the incredulous” tends to extend this state to all reception, to something similar to a person who can dream and at the same time produce an analytical account of that dream.

In this sense, the concern that master Georges Méliès expresses in his article published in 1907 (*les vues cinématographiques*) (6) is relevant, given that he made popular “the ignored side of confecting cinematographic views, and especially its difficulties, unnoticed by the audience, which are found in each step when performing plays that seem very simple and natural” and the reason being of this detailed and comprehensive effort to disseminate touches the moral sphere “... to quench their curiosity which is quite legitimate of course, especially in intelligent people, who

always strive to know what the reason is behind what they are watching". As is known by all, Méliès is the creator of a branch of cinema which he himself calls "fantasy views" using and developing all cinema means to achieve special effects – In this same way, but working for the producer Pathé, it is relevant to mention his contemporary colleague Segundo de Chomón – conscientiously opposing the branch of "documental" cinema launched by the Lumière brothers which Méliès himself refers to as "open-air views" or "animated documental photography", consistent of "reproducing in cinema the scenes of everyday life ". A third branch – always according to Méliès, is that of "composed subjects" where "action is prepared as in a theatre play and is represented by actors in front of a camera". (meaning that all non-fantasy fiction cinema would be included here).

Going back to the example of "les villes", it seems to be clear that we are closer to "special effects" and "composed subjects" than to the documental branch. And in this sense we have, as proof, the soundtrack, which was entirely created in a studio and later synchronized with the images. However, there is something strange in "les villes" which makes it very difficult for us to strictly place it into one of those categories. In this whole universe of false façades, animated cities and recreated sound – sound, we must add, should be considered as just another tool of set design- where the characters are the only real thing, or better said, the "effort" of actors, their physical actions is the only persistently "documental" aspect. According to Erik Rohmer, "The *filmic space* is a virtual space rebuilt by spectators using an operation of imaginary stitches. Breaking it down into sequences and shots and the décor set the duration and the space for the film. This space, even if it does not correspond to any objectively real space is made inhabitable through spectators' imagination. The space of films is always a product: the result of a technique, but also of spectators' minds" (7).

"Les villes" is ultimately a creation of a set of highly fictionalized elements presented in a fixed shot, setting the framework with which the "actor" has to confront physically, just like in an exercise to probe the possibility of temporarily inhabiting this fictional space, not only in the spectator's mind, but in the actor's "real" experience. The architectural space, which is objectively pre-existent as a pre-filming space, is what maintains "les villes" in that fixed shot and double projection simultaneously. If the what is enshrined in architecture in opposition to set design- using a definition that should therefore be seen as obsolete – is susceptible of being inhabited, "les villes" would then be an allegorical test of the possibility to inhabit a fictional space, literally speaking. The actress is not acting, the images with which she manages to access into de décor and cross the boundary marked by the façade – marking the traditional border between the public and private sphere – are then simply the objective document of the only occasion where – with 7 actors and actresses who tried doing this on several occasions – it is possible to cross this threshold. The parallel screen shows a summary of the failed attempts. The spectator who tends to maintain their "suspension of credulity" in the two solutions proposed for the same situation cannot avoid feeling a slight tension moving closer to the "paradox of the incredulous".

In the times when I trained as an architect in the middle of the eighties I personally experienced this type of paradox in a very intense way, to the extent that I believe it marked my later interests in life. During those years I was a student during the daytime I used to often be at the school of architecture and at night I would go to theatres in Barcelona. At the school one clearly felt the post-modernist criticism that

was so typical of the times, but one could also sense a flare of wise “humanization” of modernist ethics in the air. Not long after the death of the dictator Franco, historically speaking the tradition that was interrupted by the civil war in the 1930’s was recovered that undoubtedly corresponded to that modernistic boost. Only a few lucid masters saw in that modernism a set designing component that had been quieted officially by “ethics”, essentially constructive ethics revisited from the local tradition. The word “set designer” was often used as an insult and an analysis of the role played by façades in any project was essential in this regard. We travelled to Vicenza to see the Olympic theatre and the Palladian villas. There this whole issue wasn’t as clear; upon our return, at night I would visit the stages even more regularly so the issue became more and more complex; a highly-respected author as Joan Brossa – a theatrical playwright, a poet and the author of many assemblages and objects – whose foresight and engagement went unquestioned, set designs were sometimes assembled using curtains painted by the great Wagnerian set designer Mestres Cabanes. Paper, cardboard and precarious pieces of wood set the framework for pieces that had never been shown during the dictatorship which experimented with the theatrical language and codes. For anyone who is not accustomed to observe the back side of a theatrical artifact they know that their precariousness is especially deceiving; for those who think in terms of constructive ethics deception is inversely proportional to the effectiveness of fiction.

### **Deserting the theatre**

This unease, this difficulty in accepting one and other code, the impossibility to certify a clear division between what is architectonic and what is of the realms of set design, this tension is therefore there basically to deal with any stance regarding the status of fiction, the issue of the role played by the audience and, then, to decide on any of the elements that are part of an artefact that could potentially be staged, from a structure to a building, a film, penetrable, habitable, temporary, ephemeral or monumental. It is then time to say that the space where these moving images are exhibited cannot be an innocent one and that the tension I refer to when constructing fictions, seen from the other side of the screen must also adopt a status in the space of reception. The “paradox of incredulity” status also means having a spectator who is aware of their own “state of distraction” in the space in which they move, where the images that are shown are just another element. The set designer should also try to give the stalls an order, should rebuild the theatre building and think of the street. A set designer should then become an urban planner, testing the perception on cities with a simple cardboard box (Anarchitekton) (8), visiting the desert and forgetting that the theatre actually exists and burn all the scenery (Fuegogratias) (9).

A projection. Opposite the theatre in Maria Elena. Maria turns her back to us, says goodbye to a group of closely-standing women who enthusiastically waive their arms and handkerchiefs shouting out loud CIAO !!!, CIAO !!!, CIAO !!!...Maria walks away, penetrating into the desert, that is by now a Pampa, or theatre...etc.

Jordi Colomer.  
Paris, Tel Aviv, Barcelona, 2008.

1. Sergio Gonzalez. Habitar la pampa en la palabra; revista de ciencias sociales n. 13; 2003. universidad arturo prat; Iquique; Chile.
2. Jordi Colomer. Les jumelles. Video et salle avec double projection. 2001.

3. Jordi Colomer. En la pampa. 4 Videos et salle de projection. 2008.
4. Jordi colomer. Les villes. 2 videos en monitor y sala de proyeccion. 2001.
5. Walter Benjamin. illuminations. Quoted in: Jonathan Crary. Suspensions de la perception. Atencion, espectáculo y cultura moderna. Akal estudios visuales. Madrid, 2008/ suspensions of perception. MIT 1999.
6. Georges Méliès. les vues cinématographiques- Causerie par Geo. Méliès. in Annuaire général et international de la Photographie, Plon, 1907. p-362-392. Quoted in le cinéma: naissance d'un art 1895-1920.Flammarion, Paris. 2008.
7. ROHMER, Eric: *L'organisation de l'espace dans le "Faust" de Murnau*. Union Générale d'Editions. Paris, 1977. Quoted in: VILA, Santiago: *La escenografía: cine y arquitectura*. Cátedra. Madrid, 1997, pp. 21-26.
8. Jordi Colomer. Anarchitekton (Barcelona, Bucarest, Brasilia, Osaka) 2002-2004. 4 videos et salle de multiprojection.
9. Jordi Colomer. fuegogratis. Video et salle de projection. 2002.