

News in brief

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(catalogue FUEGOGRATIS)

Listening to or reading miscellaneous news in brief, news so often devoted to crime, and for which some members of the audience or readership have an unhealthy appetite, one is astonished by the ordinariness of the violence that is publicly meted out. Recounted without rhetorical style or hedging, in a laconic, even bloodless style, the information slips into our daily lives as a simple everyday fact like the meals it frequently accompanies. When a crime plumbs the “depths of horror” the press gives it special treatment because such events are “out of the ordinary.” Apparently, therefore, there is a negative scale of criminal value, with some news items being more horrible, more difficult to bear than others, occurring in their thousands around the world as part of its routine violence. But surely any crime involving the spilling of blood is out of the ordinary? The deliberate killing of another human being may of course include factors we call “aggravating circumstances,” but still, the cold-blooded killing of any person should not be placed in the category of “news in brief,” accorded the same small importance as a multitude of other minor occurrences.

In his video *A crime*, Jordi Colomer plays on the ambivalence of a routine event reported in a manner that is exceptional, unexpected, even incongruous: as a performance. Twelve participants—who also appear as representatives, both literal and figurative, of the town of Cherbourg, where the action takes place—walk along holding large cardboard letters of the alphabet that make up sentences leading us progressively into the concise recounting of a crime. They thus move through a concrete urban geography, from a train station to a ferry terminal, where this story meets its “tragic” end, as is only to be expected. Their forward progress, more or less swift, more or less chaotic, takes place both in space and in time. According to the number of letters and the time required to read them correctly, the group contracts or extends and seems to follow—or in some cases, contradict—the temporality of the statements. Our reading of the text is sometimes literally distanced, sometimes slowed by their onward march. We are not reading a text on a screen, but a text that is literally moving; each individual plays the role of substrate for a sign, holding a letter, a punctuation mark or a blank for the space between words, making the reading easier and, by the same token, adhering to the rules of language and grammar. The spectator can hardly avoid personifying these signs since men and women of all ages are holding them, standing behind them like guardians of language, like the Greek chorus to this sordid story.

The path travelled by the storytellers/letter-holders flows parallel to that of the investigation, “flow” being exactly the right word for this silent march—we hear no more than the sound of footsteps, varying between fast and slow. A march both homage to the victim and forward progression of the journalistic narrative. Its style is highly conventional, typical of this kind of factual story where only the

events count. The language is stilted, somewhat old-fashioned, although difficult to date. To be more precise, an increasingly uneasy atmosphere is created between, one might say, signifier and signified, with the first certainly easier to date on the basis of the turns of phrase used, whereas the second, the content, is timeless. Murder has been with the human race since time immemorial. The malaise thus created is all the stronger because human beings are the literal vehicles for the form and content of this murder's narrative—here the living carry, concretely and symbolically, the death of one of their fellows.

We learn that a trunk found in a train station's left luggage office contained the decomposing body of a man. We also learn that the police succeeded in swiftly charging the suspects—a couple—the man confessing that he killed a friend with an axe in order to steal from him a plasma TV worth 1,500 euros. The least one can say is that this irreversible act is extraordinarily out of proportion to the motive for its commission. But it is still an event that is not out of the ordinary. Actions just as absurd and ill-considered occur regularly for the most trivial of reasons, for things devoid of moral or material value. The enormous mismatch between the criminal act and its motive stands out strikingly in Colomer's video in a form worthy of a detective novel (the kind one buys to read on the train, of course), or a novel reminiscent of Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, while at the same time being almost comical. This is most certainly black humour, because the crime is sordid, not far from an act of madness.

At certain moments, the participants lift their letters rapidly from waist height, where they are initially held, as if to underscore more sharply the horror of the facts recounted. We can also interpret this choreography as movement out of proportion to the story's content, to inevitably humorous effect. For example, when we read that it was the murderer's intention to go on to throw the body into the sea, the participants let go of their letters, which fly off behind them into the waves. Similarly, in the epilogue, the formulaic expression so familiar to us in English and in French: "Unattended baggage will be removed and may be destroyed..." adds another mismatch in tone to what is a kind of video-novel in which the literary, journalistic and filmic genres blend, giving us the impression of watching a kind of Punch & Judy show. Should we laugh or should we cry at the final twist in which the picturesque, almost touristic, aspect of this stroll along the seafront is at odds with the brutal reality of the facts? Such news in brief might perhaps be defined not in terms of the content it communicates to us but more by the fact that we are able to treat it lightly.