

**Janez Janša**

*C'était un rendez-vous (déjà vu)*

No differently from a map, the joke shows a condensed version of the techniques which enable us to change a life form. But it shows them *while* it too is using them to do something unexpected.<sup>1</sup>

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The dynamics of a re-enactment depend on the driving force behind it: the accent may be on the fidelity of the remake, on its being situated in a different spatial/temporal context, or on the characteristics of the protagonists.

From this point of view, *C'était un rendez-vous (déjà vu)* is a re-enactment decidedly *sui generis*. As we will see, on one (evident) level the practice of re-enactment has been betrayed at the very moment in which it appears to have been adopted to the letter: the title, location and dynamics of the original are all taken up, but the re-enactment rejects the most distinctive feature of the original, what made it so exceptional (the speed). On another (hidden) level, Janez Janša's project tackles, to the letter, the mythology which sprang up around the original event, tracing its complex dynamics step by step. In this case, as we will see, the main difference once again regards intensity and pace. So to the facts of the matter.

In 1976 the French film maker Claude Lelouch created a short film, only nine minutes long, entitled *C'était un rendez-vous*. The film, which was shot in Paris in the early hours of the morning, is a breakneck spin through the city streets, filmed from a subjective angle by a camera mounted on the front of the car, which we never see. The race starts at Porte Dauphine, from a tunnel on the ring road, and passes in front of well-known sights in the centre of Paris, from the Arc de Triomphe to the Opéra Garnier, from Place de la Concorde to the Champs-Élysées – finishing in Montmartre, by the parapet in front of the Basilique du Sacré-Cœur. At this point the driver gets out of the car just in time to sweep an attractive blonde into his arms. During its mad dash, the car terrifies pedestrians, frightens the pigeons and breaks just about all the rules of the highway code, disregarding traffic lights and one way streets, mounting the pavement and doing some dangerous overtaking. We never see the car, but the roar of the engine is clearly that of a Ferrari.

The movie, which was not cut, and lasts the length of a single roll of film, became an icon of the so-called “cinéma-vérité”, and its introductory statement is an explicit declaration of this: “le film que vous allez voir a été réalisé sans aucun trucage ni accéléré.” The director was accused of taking no

account of the lives of animals and pedestrians, and encouraging viewers to disregard the rules of the highway code and civil life.

In April 2007, the Slovenian artist Janez Janša went to Paris to shoot a remake of *C'était un rendez-vous*. Like the original, the video lasts 9 minutes, has the same soundtrack, is preceded by the same caption and features the same route used by Lelouch. The difference can be seen in the camera's point of view, which is much closer to road level, and at the end of the video, when the vehicle stops and we come face to face with the waiting date: not an attractive blonde this time, but a tortoise. According to Janša, the remake was filmed with the camera mounted on the shell of a "Golden Greek" tortoise, accompanying its "race" through the streets (at a speed which never exceeded 0.32 km/h) and then compressing the film to 9 minutes. Like in the original, "red lights are ignored, one-way streets are violated and centre lines are crossed."

If Janša's work stopped here, we would be looking at a classic case of parody: an original event taken up and reworked in an apparently literal way, but upending the essential elements to comic effect: the thrill of speed reduced to an exasperating crawl, and the legendary aura of *cinéma vérité* debunked in the fictional nature of video, which compressed a couple of months' shooting into a few minutes and "constructs" the impression of speed by using the original soundtrack. Even the breaches of the highway code appear comic, when the perpetrator is a tortoise which has to be directed and protected by a team of crouching helpers, who take on not only the Parisian traffic, but also the comprehensible protests of the police, traditionally insensible to the demands of art.

In actual fact the video only took a few days to shoot, rather than a few months, in view of the fact that in any case compressing the images would have caused the loss of most of the film. And a toy lawnmower was used, rather than a tortoise. These production cheats do not spring purely from the need to simplify things, but represent another side of the story, and were intentionally revealed only recently, almost two years after the re-enactment was filmed. Why is this?

With *C'était un rendez-vous (déjà vu)*, Janez Janša did not just create a remake of a media artefact, namely Claude Lelouch's film. The reinterpretation does not view *C'était un rendez-vous* as a finished artefact, but as an *open* work, which includes the production process and the legends it has generated, and skillfully managed, for more than 30 years. In 1976, a stone was thrown into the pool of western culture, a culture powerfully conditioned by our means of communication. Janša tackles the ripples

produced by this stone, before looking at the actual stone itself. And to understand the work we must look to those very ripples.

After the first showing of the film, Lelouch was arrested, for having filmed without the necessary permits, and throughout the 80s the film circulated mainly in underground channels. In 1992, Pyramid Film and Video distributed a low quality video tape at the record price of 50 dollars, making it one of the most expensive videos in circulation. Little is known of the arrest, and although it is taken as read by various sources, including *Wikipedia*<sup>2</sup>, it could well be another of the many rumours spread to enhance the film's appeal. One of these was that the car used was a Ferrari 275 GTB, driven for the occasion by a Formula 1 driver. Only later did Lelouch reveal that he drove the car himself, and, for the record, it was not a Ferrari, but a Mercedes-Benz 450SEL 6.9, driven at a fairly high speed (140 km/h), but not as fast as Lelouch had previously asserted (230 – 240 km/h). This revelation, accompanied by a photograph showing Lelouch mounting a camera on the bonnet of a Mercedes, came in 2003, when he distributed the film on DVD, relaunching its popularity. The fame of the film has grown over the years, above all thanks to the interest of car buffs (rather than fans of experimental cinema), who adore the film and are intrigued by its contradictions: the evident stability of the camera, for example, would be all but impossible on the declared model of car (the Ferrari 275 GTB), pointing to the use of a different make of car, while when the distance (10.42 km) and the journey time (7:57 minutes) are worked out, the average speed would actually only be 78.64 km/h<sup>3</sup>. The revelations of 2003 aimed to respond to these queries and debates, which had found a natural home on the net, but rather than resolving them, they actually added more fuel to the fire.

The legend of *C'était un rendez-vous* also includes the scandalized reactions of those who objected that Lelouch had endangered the lives of others and his own. *Wikipedia* explains: "Comments attributed to Lelouch indicate that he acknowledges the moral outrage over his method of shooting this film as valid. He also states that he was prepared to take the risks in making the film, but that he however was also ready to drop it in case he would have come across any inconsiderate risk (pedestrian, hurdle, etc.)."

What is evident today is that the legends that the film's success drew on – speed and *cinéma vérité* – were exactly that: the speed reached by the car (and therefore the sense of danger) should be considerably scaled down, and is the result of an artfully constructed soundtrack which is not by any means authentic. In other words, the statement at the start of the film is a lie, and one of the pilasters of *cinéma vérité* is actually a masterpiece of cinematographic pretence.

Janez Janša's re-enactment tackles this legend and the dynamics involved in its construction. His *Rendez-vous* is not a simple remake of the previous version, but a tribute to the way it has been constructed. On one level (the creation of the film), there is a vast difference between what is declared and what actually happens: the use of Lelouch's soundtrack (applied to the progress of a tortoise) and video compression, makes the declaration of authenticity that opens the remake a purely decorative detail, but a detail which is capable of casting the same aura of falsity over the original. On another level (the construction of the legend), Janša's work is even more interesting, as it tackles largely unpredictable dynamics (what makes a cultural product into a cult object?), having abandoned what gave rise to them in the first place. If the success of Lelouch's film, as we have seen, is linked to nigh on 30 years of secrecy, and to the ambiguity between fact and fiction, and to car enthusiasts, how can we replicate it if we deliberately eliminate these three elements? In actual fact Janša is not interested in achieving the same result, just recreating the mechanism. His reconstruction does not have to have the same impact as the original, but springs from the desire to analyse that impact – to expose its workings as dispassionately as an instruction manual or flow chart.

Thus, before filming his tribute, Janša applied for the necessary permits, which were obviously not granted. He decided to go ahead anyway, generating turmoil in Paris, provoking scandalized reactions among environmentalists and getting stopped several times by the police. The official press release reads: "If the movie was indeed filmed as Janša claims, it might indicate a criminally reckless disregard for the life and safety of the tortoise. Comments attributed to the artist indicate that he acknowledges the moral outrage over his method of shooting this movie as valid. He also states that he was prepared to take the risks in making the movie. During the shooting process Janša was opposed by activists of BBF for the Welfare and Protection of Animals, objecting to the author's disregard for animals' rights, and stopped by police officers. He was given a large fine, the amount of which he refused to disclose."<sup>4</sup>

When this statement was released, the net swung into action. The debate focused on one hand on the ethics of the operation – was it right to risk the life of a living being in the name of art? On the other hand, enthusiasts began to ponder how many days it would take to travel almost 11 km at a speed of 0.32 km/h, and look for external documentation confirming the existence of the experiment: photos taken by curious tourists, amateur videos on Youtube.

Two years later, Janša resolved the enigma, producing the photo that shows him with the toy car he

used to shoot the video, in place of the tortoise. The shell of the latter, complete with film camera and GPS transmitter, appears in the work that tells the story of *C'était un rendez-vous (déjà vu)* in exhibition form: a plexiglass case containing the video playing, synchronized with a list of the streets covered by the lead character and a satellite map of the route. This high tech fetish object is an emblem for a story that shifts, like the original that inspired it, between reality and media representation, where reality looks like a fabrication, and fabrications look real.

## **Domenico Quaranta**

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Translated from Italian by Anna Carruthers

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<sup>1</sup> Paolo Virno, *Motto di spirito e azione innovativa*, Milan, Bollati Boringhieri, 2005, pp. 93-94

<sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Claude\\_Lelouch](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Claude_Lelouch). For more information on the film, see also [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/C%27%C3%A9tait\\_un\\_rendez-vous](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/C%27%C3%A9tait_un_rendez-vous)

<sup>3</sup> In this case the source is the page dedicated to the film on the site *Internet Movie Database (IMDB)*: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0169173/trivia>. A detailed study of the speed reached by the car can be found in the article by Belgrave, et al., "Speed of a Car: C'était un rendez-vous", in *The Physics Factbook*, 2005, online at <http://hypertextbook.com/facts/2005/Rendezvous.shtml>; as for the two models of car mentioned thus far, see the article "Most Radical Car Movie of All Time", in *Dark Roasted Blend*, 14 November 2007, online at <http://www.darkroastedblend.com/2007/11/most-radical-car-movie-of-all-time.html>.

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.reakt.org/rendezvous/index.html>