

Looping the Loop

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Introductory essay featured in the publication "Cornford & Cross: Childhood's End".

Published by Film and Video Umbrella, 2000.

Above, the fulminating roar of the military fighter dopplers into a delicate shimmer of smoke that hangs in the air after the noise subsides — two sides of the airwave spectrum that the plane punches through the sky. Now, as the jet jinks and barrel-rolls through a series of ever more dizzying manoeuvres, its fleeting smoke-trails distract attention from the thunder that it carries in its wake. From the ground, as the aircraft climbs steeply, disappearing into the blue, the line it writes begins to resemble an arc of escape; if only into momentary reverie, into childhood dreams of leaving the everyday world far behind. Flights of fancy, whose hold on the imagination is somehow all the stronger for the fact that they last for only as long as the time that it takes for the smoke to disperse.

The gallery installation 'Childhood's End' by Cornford & Cross revolves around a visual document of one such aerobatic manoeuvre, performed by a Hawker Siddeley Gnat jet over England in the Summer of 2000. The flight is captured from a 16mm camera strapped to the front of the plane, in the position of the weapon platform. Despite this conceit, the resulting six-minute film, blown-up to cinematic scale in the gallery, looks nothing like the now-familiar fuzzy video footage looking down the barrel of a missile homing in on its target, but, in its vivid, almost dream-like texture, accentuates the sense of wonder and freedom that is at the heart of our experience of flight. The sequence finds its counterpoint, however, in a shot of the same manoeuvre presented, on the opposite side of the gallery, on a miniature video monitor; this time looking back into the cockpit of the aircraft. This footage of the pilot reverses the temporal order of the other sequence, beginning a series of deftly mirrored oppositions that reverberate throughout the work as a whole: between the euphoric, oceanic vista opened up out of the front of the plane and the cramped, claustrophobic nature of the pilot's physical situation; and, more generally, between images of freedom and the way they are subsumed within an overarching, self-denying and necessarily limiting system.

These oppositions are magnified when it is disclosed that the figure the aircraft traces in smoke is many people's idea of the ultimate image of freedom — the circled 'A' of the anarchy symbol. Although it is an amusing irony having the universal signifier of chaos and uncertainty graffitied in the sky by one of the premier icons of the established order, it is, arguably, not one that can sustain the work over more than one or two repeat viewings. So, rather than sign off the film with the anticipated money-shot of the anarchy-symbol-as-slogan, Cornford & Cross take the seemingly contrary decision to withhold it almost entirely from view. Seen in momentary glimpses, and

pieced together out of fragments, it remains a wholly conceptual figure, at one with its airy insubstantiality: an emblem of turbulence and instability written in, and equally quickly dispersed by, the wind.

Instead, the work is left to uncover its true subject, which is that of the loop: a loop of time registered by an unravelling loop of film, at a particular location on a particular day. As such, the artists might simply be said to have mobilised the medium of film in the service of the site-specific, interventionist aesthetic that has characterised much of their earlier work. What is clear, though, is the extent to which they have brought that spatial sensibility to bear on the way the piece is installed in the gallery. To take one example: the figure-of-eight formed by the two intersecting loops of airplane footage doubles, intriguingly, as ∞ : the symbol of infinity. Locked into a repeating pattern after transfer to digital video disk, each round of skywriting is revealed to exist as part of a larger moebius loop, encircling and enfolding the viewer. In this way, with each successive iteration, the footage of the plane giving the anarchy sign begins to appear as less and less of a rogue event and more as an element in an endless cycle — of order breaking apart and re-establishing itself; chaotic events, like war begetting peace begetting war, that, in the wide pan of time, start to seem more and more like semi-natural phenomena, in the same way a storm emerges out of nowhere before washing the air clear again, which in turn creates the conditions for another storm.

It is here, perhaps, that the artists' decision not show the completed anarchy symbol really comes into its own. Freed from a potential fate as an all-too-superficially assimilable political slogan, it haunts the grain of the film as a free-floating philosophical principle: of the constancy of change and transformation; of the primacy of uncertainty and paradox. Looping the loop between order and chaos and back again, 'Childhood's End' is a work that resists easy closure; open-ended, if not actually anarchic, in its formal ambiguities and its refusal to be pinned down. In short, it could be said to hold true to the spirit rather than the letter of anarchy. Or, to put it another way, even though the 'A' sign itself is never fully visible, what it signifies is clearly present, shaping and directing the work.