

Elke Marhöfer

No, I Am Not a Toad, I Am a Turtle

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No, I Am Not a Toad, I Am a Turtle

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Table of Contents

p.	9	<i>Preface. No, I Am Not a Toad, I Am a Turtle!</i> Fredrik Svensk
	31	<i>The Ecological Environment of this Film</i> Fredrik Svensk
	45	<i>Difference Indifference Anti-difference</i> Elke Marhöfer
	71	<i>The Misfortune of Pansori and a Story</i> Lee Bo Hyung
	87	<i>Everyone Who Lives in the Province Has Descendants of Aswangs</i> Monica Fernandez and Maebelle Ruth Brines
	97	<i>Marvels of the East</i> Anselm Franke
	121	Acknowledgements
	125	<i>Trade Relations</i> Oh Eunja and Go Eulsaeng





1.

A city in the distance, filmed from a mountain. The sounds from city and forest intermingle. The camera dwells upon this view. Calmly. In the second take we only see the forest. Long shots return throughout the film, creating a meditative yet unresolved tension. Who is the one that is looking? Who is the one that is listening?

9

Preface.

*No, I Am Not a
Toad, I Am a
Turtle!*

The camera is looking through the windshield of a car driving around in a village setting. It is raining; the rhythm of the wipers is accompanied by the hollow voice of a megaphone. The English subtitles reveal a business activity while its diction evokes the impression of a meditative hymn.

Frederik

Svensk

The ironmonger is there. I buy old hardware.
I uninstall old electrical equipment and rusty items and take them along.
I also buy old fans and old washing machines.
I buy straw mats,
pots and pans, silver and copper plates.
Give me the things you don't need no more.

2.

A different time and place, by the river. A pansori song performed by a young woman. The camera traces her body. The break from the previous sequence is brutal—we move from the somnambulistic to the intensive. While the song accompanies the entire sequence without interruption, the image is cut several times as if the editing software itself stuttered in front of the material. If the last sequence was unmodulated and observing, this message is conveyed with intensity and gesture. While the camera in the last sequence is shaken due to the uneven road, this one is evidently steered by a photographer in control. What is remarkable is that the common effect of a hand-held camera as an authentic, documentary experience compared to that of a static one, cannot be applied. The montage and the camera movement induces a different, more obscure effect.

Look at all these different colored textiles. Blue and red silk, very thin silk,
decorated white and black silk, soft silk like moon light, rough cotton,
hemp for shaman costumes, thin soft silk, embroidered silk,
cloth for a soldier's costume, Gyeongsang's famous ramie fabric.

Dealing and trading the high quality silk. Look at all

these silks from numerous towns:

Haegu, Wonju, Gongju, Okgu, Jaju,
Gilju, Myungcheon's hemp,
Gangjin, Naju's finest ramie,
Haemnam's jacket, Jangseong's ramie,
Geonsan and Hansan's fine ramie,
high quality and hand made silk,
blue silk, red silk, white silk, black silk, yellow silk
is gushing out (of the gourd).

10

3.

A deserted beach: the camera is shaking as if affected, almost directed by the windy weather. The sound and the image of streams and rainwater are reinforced by the waves of the ocean breaking towards the shore. A horse on the horizon.

Every sequence in the film sets up its own specific gaze and relation with the world around it. The way this camera gaze is established appears to be as much influenced by the physical environment in which the camera finds itself as by the stories and the rhythm and intonation with which the pansori songs are performed. And in fact, this might be true for all scenes in the film. In other words, even if every sequence sets up its own specific, and what we could call *object oriented gaze*, the subject behind the camera, as well as the lens itself seems to be directed by an infinite number of different forces. It is as if the different parts of this film appear as a sort of archive in motion where the classifications are temporarily established, yet challenged and changed before you get used to them. At the same time, as is the case with all archives, sometimes some things return in other forms.

Today it has become common practice to put together one's own archive of images with a point of departure in different principles and classifications. As a forerunner to this practice, Aby Warburg is often cited and with him his atlas of images, *Mnemosyne*, from the 1920s. Warburg adopted many ways of bringing together and combining images. He did not simply start off from visual resemblance, iconographic history or style. He also combined images to provoke a kind of affinity between them, allowing various types of contracts and biological relationships to be differentiated. Marhöfer's working method is similar. What distinguishes her is not only that she works with film and shoots her own material, however, I think the *she* who is filming changes character from one sequence to the next, letting herself being affected by many different and sometimes incompatible influences at the same time. Considering the variation of the camera movement as well as the montage, the

term “influence” should not only be understood as a reference to this or that representation but also refers to a more affective level, literally affecting the result.

11

4.

Elderly men in a bus wearing caps are observed from behind, as if the camera feels constrained. While in previous sequences the camera seemed to be influenced by the weather conditions, it now feels as if its placement is determined by psychological and ethical considerations.

It is precisely through the means of visual, textual and audible connections that gels the film together, resisting the classical script and plot that can sum up a film. We are exposed to different types of modulations that, above all, conjoin the parts of the film into meaning at the level of perception. The bus sequence suggests a filmmaker who wants to approach his/her object in order to share a temporary feeling towards the world and individuals, an *accidental sympathy* for being together on the road. The camera is simultaneously the prerequisite for this sharing and an annoying obstruction.

In the following sequence, a rapid 360-degree pan from a tripod makes several turns on a narrow business street, evoking the feeling that cameras exist independently of people. That is to say, we do not necessarily need to trace the camera's production of images back to human subjectivity.

The gaze stops at a store called Minerva. Minerva? Minerva, patron goddess of Rome and the Latin name of Pallas Athene, the goddess that sanctified the Parthenon, described by Homer as “the bright-eyed” and portrayed by hundreds of artists. What is she doing here? For the first time a symbolic reading of the film is activated. So far all of the sequences in the film contained trees. Isn't that a manifestation of a divine presence, a medium between heaven, earth and the underground? The discipline of art history has produced an endless amount of books with names like “Symbols and Allegories in Art”, all of which I am sure rarely fit the specific type of work we are concerned with here. All the same, I realize how even the most anachronistic taxonomy can be activated in the presence of the least encyclopedic reference and suddenly encode everything, albeit temporarily. Since if there is anything this film resists, especially considering its fragmentary composition, it is to be encoded.

5.

On a counter. A woman organizes piles of fabrics. Layer upon layer is arranged carefully, sometimes in reverse order. If the silk song at the beginning of the film highlighted pansori as a music









of trade, this sequence becomes a study of gestures, workmanship and the graceful choreography of the trade. While it shows the sensibility towards the material, this is not connected to a face. The face stays outside the image.

In the next sequence a similar airiness returns amidst foliage that is seen from the ground with the sky in the background. Then a mountain becomes visible with foliage in the foreground, as if the camera sort of peeps at the mountain. It is uncertain whether the foreground or the background is essential. Simultaneously, the sound of the forest breaks off for another, more distant sound. It is as if the chant of the businessman at the beginning of the film now resounds, offering his services in the midst of the twittering birds. But it is not before the next sequence that a bird enters the picture. What follows is an image of white sheets hung up to dry outside of a cottage, then the first close-up of a sheet-metal dragon, followed by the camera looking into a house. Someone sits in front of a computer.

“Who are you?” “Who are you?”

“Are you asking my name? I am the tiger that protects the mountain. And who are you?”

The turtle was so scared that he told the truth about himself: “I’m a terrapin turtle.”

Roar! The tiger chases the turtle.

“Great! I’ve always wanted to try the delicacy of the terrapin turtle dish.”

“Please, I’m not a terrapin turtle.”

“Then what are you?”

“I’m a toad.”

“I like toads even better.

If I burn you alive and add some liquor,
it will be the best medicine to cure all illnesses.”

“No, I’m not a toad.

I’m just a little turtle.”

“Turtles are good for intestines.

Little turtles are even better.

It’s also good for skin diseases.

Come here, so I can eat you.”

Rooaaar. The tiger chases after the turtle.

6.

On the ridge of a roof, a bird sits, a bird flies. It is as if we were dealing with a camera gaze that just woke up, not yet grasping the full meaning of the bird’s body while demanding its image nonetheless. The scene is followed by four studies of

birds sitting, watching, singing, listening and flying. What does it mean for a human being to become a film camera or an animal? Is it possible to edit as an animal? Is it possible to watch a film as an animal? An animal that is not the opposite or subordinate to humans. Watching these birds, I get the feeling that these kinds of questions are asked from a false perspective. Instead, these observations makes me feel as if I am always already a camera, an animal or a mountain, looking at something, such as birds, that is independent from me.

In the next sequence there is a person in a white coat who the camera shakily approaches through the foliage. He looks back into the camera. This seems like an invitation since at that very moment his story begins. Wearing trainers and carrying an umbrella, he is walking into the forest as if he was looking for something. At the end of the scene the camera closes in, creating a tension between its own movement and the character of the tiger in the story he is recounting. The tiger protects the mountains, the camera shakes. The man walks cautiously. His story and the way in which he is filmed appear mundane and almost dramatic at the same time. You never see him speak.

I slowly approached the tiger,
pretending to try to bite its neck.
I wanted to fight until one of us was dead.
When I looked at the animal,
it was angry: "... grrr hisss!"... like this.
I clasped my hands and bowed down,
it retreated 15 meters further
over a creek and sat on a holy site called Maitreya.
The tiger watched me while I was bowing.

7.

A close-up of a praying mantis, turning its head. While this scene makes me aware of the changing correlation between sound and image in different sequences, the close-up appears to be just as far away from the living object as the long-distance shots. Maybe all the different shots in this film should best be approached as "destination shots"—destinations to look close at.

Yet another car trip and yet another trader announcing his/her message to the city. The camera is placed on the bed of a truck and the sound comes again from a megaphone. For more than six minutes we follow the journey on board the vehicle while the surroundings turn increasingly urban. The mumbling chant creates a suggestive atmosphere. During the most trance-like part it seems as if thousands of crickets are chirping. It's not only the integration of natural sounds within cultural

phenomena that creates the film's hypnotic aggregation. Recurring sounds and motifs from earlier parts of the film add to this effect too. It makes me feel dizzy, almost paralyzed. The ironmonger from the beginning of the film is back again, now actually selling the peculiar things that the people in the village "no longer need". But this time his message takes on an absurd turn.

Happy glossy song.
 Rough licking tongue.
 Tailored rubber boots splat, splat.
 Circular ruffled military Prada bags.
 Wet sharp lonely women.
 Violet coarse chicken rice roll.
 New spicy chopsticks, grunt, grunt.
 Mixed mashed round rolled slices, glug, glug.
 Melodic centered bubble, bubble.
 Happy glossy song.

8.

A realistic landscape image. Wind and rain. A greenhouse in the background, a vaguely urban sound, wind dominating the soundscape. It is not clear what is grown here... maybe rice? An image of a beautiful tree cultivation. Mountains in the background. The camera slowly observes different forms of simple plastic constructions in the landscape. A field with small houses in a mountain setting. Everything feels very naked. The absence of both people and a voice-over renders the sequence a respite and yet a little uncanny. Who belongs here and why?

9.

A close-up of hands baking. A baking workshop is going on. Women measure, weigh, stir and talk to one another. Some are learning, one is teaching. The camera changes between being in and out of focus, looking for details, gestures, but in an irregular manner, very much in contrast to the clear and pedagogical directions of the teacher in the bakery. How do you produce something the right way?

So, what I'm telling you is,
 the amount of water...
 the amount of water is basically always 200 milliliter
 per kilogram.

However, when you make Dim sum add a little bit
 more water.

That's actually why you should touch the powder with
your fingers,
this is really important.

19 The amount of sugar is also something you should
control carefully.

For example, Sul-ki needs a bit more water and sugar
than this.

It is impossible to make every dish based on the same
recipe, isn't it?

We have different recipes for every dish.

Preparing boiled mackerel and making boiled hairtail are
two different procedures

even though both are being boiled.

And mix it all up just before you put it in here.

10.

The pansori singers from the beginning of the film are back.
Now we can see their faces. The camera sweeps to the singer's
movements, focussing on the head. It pans down towards the
body and the hands again. The song ends and the singers are
seen playing in a mountain brook. There is a behind-the-scenes
feeling to it all and I am waiting for the filmmaker to enter the
image. Soon I realize that this is not going to happen. Even
if it would happen, it would not have a fundamental effect on the
film. The main topic in this film is not the relationship between
the filmmaker as the subject and the objects in front of the lens.
If this is the case, what does it mean to think about the spectator
in the same way? Perhaps we have already left the distinction
between making a film and just being in the world without a
camera; the distinction between watching a film and watching
unmediated reality? Then we should maybe consider film-
making and film watching something we can never leave, such
as a prosthetic sense through that we perceive the world.

Oh, look at the bureaucrat.

He opens the gate and gives Heungbo money.

Heungbo takes the money and says:

"Yes, I'll be back." "Okay, no problem, come back later."

As he passes the gate

he dances with joy and is delighted to have received
some money.

"Money, look at the money I have, money, money, money,
money, money.

My walk today was definitely worth it."

Heungbo enters his house.

"Where are you, wife?

A big man's step brings lots of money.
 Open the door. Money is coming in!"
 Heungbo's wife comes out to open the door.
 "Where is the money? Let me see. Where is it?
 Where did you get the money from?
 Did you borrow this?
 Is this something for which we have to pay a lot
 of interest?"
 "No, nothing like that.
 Why would I borrow money that requires interest
 payments?"
 "What money is this then? Did you find it in the street?"
 "No, it's not like that.
 This money is from the big man's step. This money is
 precious."
 Money, money, money, look at the money.
 Precious money for the poor. Even more precious for
 the rich.
 Money that can help people live or kill other people.
 Money that can bring fame and wealth.
 Money that's like the wheel of a military vehicle.
 Money, money, money, look at the money.

11.

Somebody sits in a corner. It's dark. The voice-over starts in
 English, then changes to Kankana-ey and then to Tagalog. It is
 getting darker and darker. A goodnight story about the mythical
 aswang. A story about transformation; a story about something
 dangerous. It can take the form of any animal. One didactic
 implication of this is unmistakable: when you are looking at some-
 thing you can never be sure what it really is. This story is the
 strongest meta statement about the transformation this film is
 going through, from sequence to sequence, but in retrospect it
 is also a coding of all the images of animals.

Now, Mama will tell you a story.
 One day...
 One night...
 under a full moon.
 The aswang
 was thirsty...
 ...for the blood of a child.

Night turns into day but the story continues.

There are different understandings of what an aswang is.

The aswang changes its appearance.
 It turns into a dog, a cat, it transforms.
 It turns into a snake.
 It turns into a pig.

12.

The outskirts of a village. Two consecutive rotating pan shots. The retake is now established as a significant gesture. The repetition almost seems like a workout by the camera, trying to shake off dead thoughts, while at the same time indicating the actual possibilities of the film camera. It shows what a camera can do by itself and its inability to be self-critical.

In the distance a man walks along a country road. Balloons are hanging on the left side, while trees stand crookedly on the opposite side. A voice-over narration accompanies this scene. The image feels anachronistic like from an old samurai movie. The voice-over recounts a story from the past, about something that happened to the man in the 1970s. The different sequences in the film seem to comprise varying temporalities. You are never only in one place and time and it is always uncertain how you got there, although I still get the impression that this is an attempt to "hold" the present, just for a while.

...when the North Korean spy Kim Shin-Jo crossed the border

I would like to tell the story about my experiences in this year.

When did Kim Shin-Jo cross the border?

In the 1970s.

It happened in 1974 or was it maybe 1971?

During my visit to Jeju Island I climbed a mountain.

When I arrived at the cave

I found it messed up by mountaineers,

...it had been vacant for three days.

While sitting there,

...it had been snowing during the day,

I suddenly felt something leaping.

I thought it might be a hunting dog released to catch the spy Kim Shin-Jo.

But then something started to lick me...

...here.

A dog's tongue is soft

but the tongue of a tiger is rough, so rough that my skin came off.

Then at the other side of me

another tiger appeared and started licking.

It was a pair of tigers.
 With two tigers licking me, there was nothing I could
 do but hold still.

Eventually I felt comfortable.
 I felt kindness and benignity,
 so my breath became normal,
 which made them purr, purr... from both sides
 expressing their contentment.

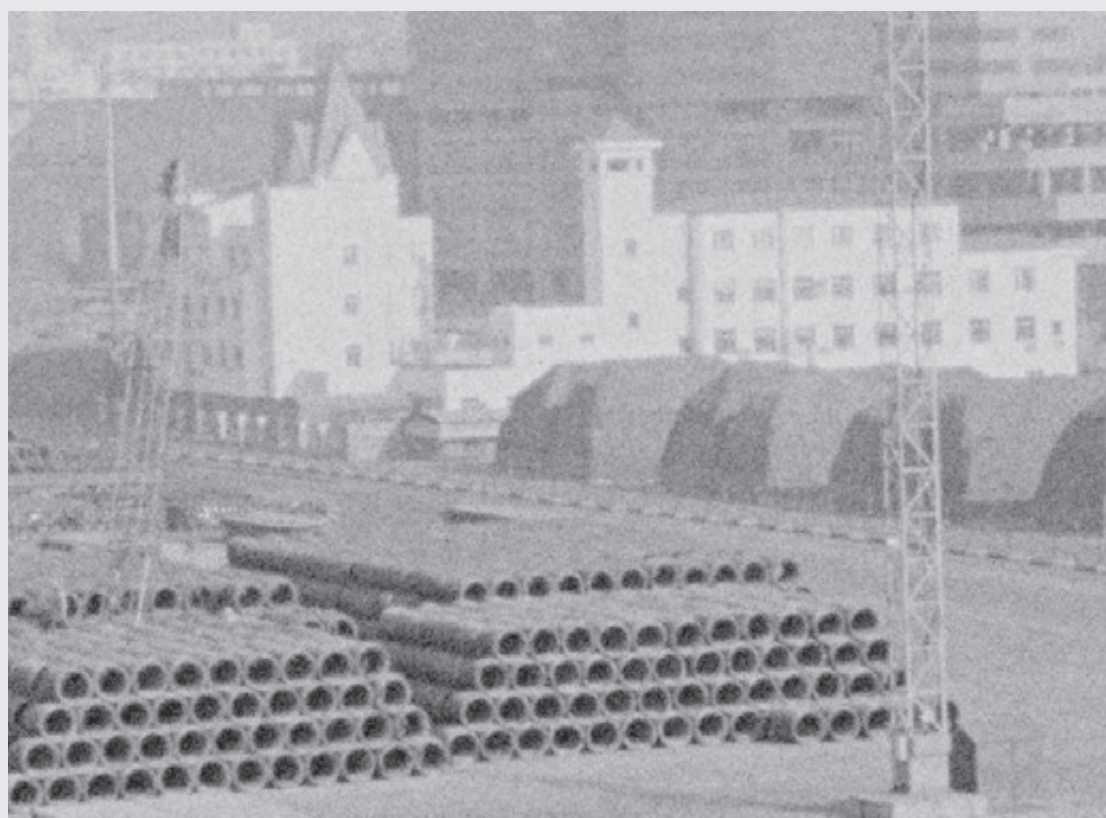
When I wanted to check whether or not they had left,
 I tried to feel my way, first there seemed to be nothing.

But the left one had been female while the right one
 had been male.

When I touched its genitals, slightly, it did not move
 at all.

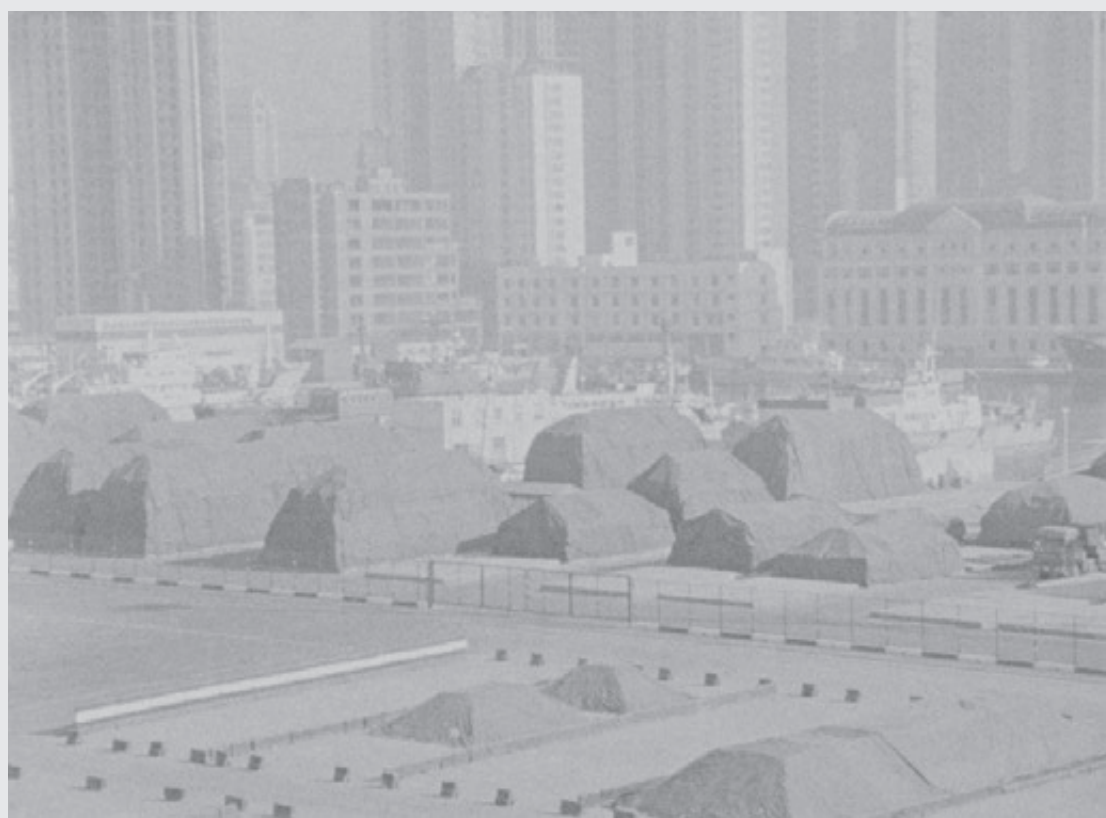
13.

The film ends with a tranquil image of a leafy mountain landscape that changes into an urban waterfront. Suddenly we are in the big city. There is a long distance to the ground, as if the camera is up on a mountain. But just like in the very first sequence of the film, the distance to the motif, this landscape shot, does not come with any feeling of loss, which is normally the case with these kind of images. The camera pans across the huge harbor. Trucks, forklifts and pickups transport goods between storage units covered by tents. No humans on the ground. The film has taken us from the movements and choreography of local business to the movements of international trade. We are left with the observing camera gaze, again and again, trying to track the movements. In the very end it becomes apparent that the camera is positioned on one of the big boats. It is "moved" by the boat while filming a stationary seascape. And in this movement it is trying to hold the present. Smaller boats pass by. It is hazy.















*The Ecological
Environment of
this Film*

Frederik Svensk

It does not at all feel natural to treat this film within a predetermined genre or context. But if we made an attempt anyhow, we could say that the film intervenes in what is sometimes called classical film theory based on the ontological paradigm where formalistic theories, such as those of Sergej Eisenstein, are contrasted with theories oriented towards questions of realism, such as those of André Bazin for example.

The form of this film is too complicated to regard it merely as a realistic, let's say ethnographical film, and I do not see any effort to do pansori tradition justice. While apparently the montage is neither constructed along a linear narrative with a starting point, nor following a predetermined editing principle, it should not be reduced to a representation of pansori's grammar or an unconventional breach of style, even though such a reading would be possible. The distance and relation to the filmed objects vary at all times. In close-ups, medium shots, as well as location and milieu shots it is uncertain which object the camera is focusing on. The camera oscillates between static examinations as seen from a tripod, a groping registration with a shaky hand-held camera and occasionally a more or less cinematic perspective. Switching between a worm's- and a bird's-eye view a warped image is rendered. But I think that if one insists, that this is an ethnographic film, the whole assemblage of the filmmaker, the camera and editing program, as well as the changing environments, climates and objects must be considered co-actors and informants. One thing is certain: The composition of the film is not controlled by the dominating colonial and postcolonial meta-narratives regarding the "problem of the Other". It simply insists on a different, more contingent and changing view.

Approaching the film from a formalistic tradition instead, it would be tempting to regard the narrative structure with its fragmentary composition as fractured. However, this would be misleading, particularly since nothing indicates that there had been only one narrative structure that was then broken up in order to constitute this film. Rather, the impression is created that if you want you can easily find an infinite number of narratives that have been fragmented and then put together. Even though it is always ambiguous what the object of the camera is, I never doubt for a second that what the camera depicts actually does exist, even if this film was not made. And I do not believe that this experience should be reduced to an illusive reality effect. In order to make this speculation meaningful, we might need to understand the camera and its context—the entire ecology—as something more than just a reproductive technology. The perspective of the classic film theory is not productive because of its focus on the question of the relation between film

and reality. This perspective is of course important when we are dealing with the ethics of representation, with the question: who has the right to represent how and why etcetera? However, this perspective excludes another aspect that I believe is more important for this film: the relation between film, thoughts and affects.

Montage as an Intelligent Machine

Jean Epstein has pointed out that film has its own form of intelligence. Already in the 1920s he emphasized the ability of film to exceed the spectator's individuality and established self-image. For him, the most peculiar characteristics of the cinematographic eye was its capacity to escape "the tyrannical egocentrism in our personal vision [...] The lens is itself!"¹ One way to understand this statement today, without being anthropocentric or a technological determinist, is simply to regard the camera as a prosthesis that one does not control properly. There might be a good reason to be reminded of Epstein here, since he thinks that different types of images activate different subjectifying processes. This is something one really feels exposed to in Marhöfer's film, maybe because the established ways in which we are subjectified through different image types become such uncertain experiences. The camera approaches a bird in the same way as it approaches a mountain or a human being, which possibly contradicts generally accepted customs of how for example we appreciate suspense and mystique in relation to the depicted objects. The effect of a close-up, a long-distance shot or a pan, a hand-held camera appears anything other than obvious. Also the montage in Marhöfer's film evokes what Epstein says about the lens. With Epstein in mind we could say that the most peculiar characteristic of the montage is its capacity to escape the tyrannical egocentrism of our traditional urge to narrate and represent. In short, a central part of Marhöfer's film is about how the montage and what is actually filmed in which way, affects individuation.

Pleasure and the Observer as Connectors

To be confronted with this aspect of the film involves enjoyment. While traditionally sublime pleasure is regarded a way how reason reconfirms its place in the world, the pleasure of watching the film arises from the ability to handle contradictory optical and audible relationships. The viewer senses connections, yet abstains from the impulse to demand coherence, and thereby a safe place from where to observe the world. This experience is related to what we might call the logic of the sublime; of getting

a better understanding of myself and my site-specific knowledge through the confrontation with something frightening, uncontrollable or incomprehensible. Maybe one could say that another kind of self-awareness appeared, demanding coherence the most threatening one. I think the entire composition of the film brought about this emotional effect, which forces me to question all my conventional postcolonial understandings and premature conclusions about what it means to travel today as a European artist to a country such as South Korea with a film camera to deal with a tradition like pansori.

The material is filmed on 16 millimeter film, developed and digitized to be edited on an intelligent machine, the computer. A type of machine that is associated with a democratization of the access to knowledge; as well as with advanced ways of governing and regulating lives through different types of protocol. That is to say, the totalizing governing organs guide the technical and political formation of everything, from computer networks to biological systems. Today of course, there is not only the optical gaze that is employed to supervise and to regulate the possibilities of our bodies, but also computers, log files, databases and cell phones. They create a new form of visibility beyond the human eye. Sometimes this new area is called panspectron, within which broad spectra of analogous signals can be digitized, and thereby made visible in a much more extensive way than before.

Based on the encounter with Marhöfer's film, we could formulate the following methodological point of departure that can be applied to film in general: the greatest quality of film today is the fact that we instantly treat it as a "mobile archive". We carry it along with us, we rearrange sequences, we turn off the sound. We remember earlier versions and we not only recombine the internal material of the film, but also its external context, that is to say the environment for the viewing, the adaptation of the film as material. We exist in-between the film and its environment. To think with the film has not involved an uncovering or analytical practice. Nor has it implicated a fictionalization of the world outside the film. Perhaps the emerging practice should rather be understood as a sort of constructive speculation about our present reality.

At the same time, temporary dislocation lies at the core of our presence. This schizophrenia of the presence makes it hard to handle the fact that we cannot be in place and time. To me, it is as if the film suggests a way to "think with" this situation, rather than taking a step back to an illusionary safe space to mourn this loss. Therefore, there is no point in longing for a meta-narrative or an external reference that can make sense of everything.

Epistemological Trouble

34

Theoreticians of science such as Isabelle Stengers, and postcolonial thinkers such as Gayatri Spivak have repeatedly argued that researchers within the natural sciences, humanities and social sciences are affected by their object of study, how knowledge is inscribed in different types of power structures, and how the researcher him-/herself is always affected by his/her own practice. To them, the point is not to abandon science as a consequence, nor to regard it in terms of a cultural relativism that lacks objective validity. The problem is not the positive statements of science, but rather its claim of universality; when science presents itself as objectively true and stigmatizes all other discourses as irrational and superstitious, based solely on faith. Or, as Isabelle Stengers puts it, it is a question of not letting science mobilize into a war machine that is only able to make positive statements about the world by the destruction of all other discourses.

There is no reason to reject this or that scientific discipline of research. It is however problematic to believe that the truth about human nature is to be found in, for example, the genome or sociological analysis. Some sort of transcendental critique that determines the limits of reason is necessary to prevent certain ideas about rationality from denouncing practices that are based on different claims and expressions.

Even though it is risky to compare scientific meta-narratives with conventions that govern our understanding of cinematic narration, Elke Marhöfer's film actually appears to be nothing less than an attempt to deal with this problem. It is approached not only by letting the camera and the editing operations be influenced by an infinite number of external factors, but also by letting the viewer think it through with the help of the sequences she has chosen for the film. This has possibly to do with the fact that the form of the film appears to be its own claim. Thus, it becomes something far removed from an illustration of both an established theory about film, and a theory about the Other.

Within anthropology the faith in Culture with a capital C is long gone and with that the option to study life from a secure, scientific distance has vanished too. Yet, probably more common today is the idea that "scientific research" is naturally created and constructed in a situation where communication and mutual influence between the researching subject and the object of research is self-evident, as is the attitude that every claim regarding truth must be essentially polemical and temporary. The same loss of faith we also find, albeit to a lesser degree, in popular conceptions of the relationship between documentary filmmakers and their objects. This has not brought about the

death of these disciplines, but amongst those who once really believed in anthropology's and the documentary film's abilities to neutrally represent the world, we will today surely find those who, in the worst case, lead a life of total hopelessness, as well as people who think this has made the field become even more "scientific". In some cases they are more or less stuck in the "linguistic turn", and have allowed it to dictate their view of how science and documentary film should relate to their respective topic. A similar development can be observed regarding the so-called ethnographic turn within art and the critical discussion following exhibitions such as *Primitivism* at MoMA in New York in 1984, and *Magiciens de la Terre* at Pompidou in Paris in 1989.

Remarkably, the encounter with Elke Marhöfer's film evokes none of these affective reactions concerning representation. Certainly, you can ask questions about misrepresentation or the entitlement to cinematically gather and use material you do not own the rights to. But if you allow such questions to rule your encounter with the film, you will probably leave it to an external judge to determine the meaning of the film. The film's passion simply seems to call for another kind of ethics that neither rejects nor affirms an external judge. Yet, it impels the viewer to question what and how he/she/it really sees, hears and feels, and above all, from where. Since just as it is unclear what the film actually represents, the same goes for what the filmmaker and the viewer represent.

The film simply cannot be understood within this thinking that establishes a dialogue between having or losing faith, and the ability to represent a truth. This kind of thinking has nurtured the distinction between the fictitious and the documentary, and thus also promoted notions of docu-fiction and the fictional status of everything. Therefore, one could even say that Marhöfer's film sets up a contract with the viewer that actually occurs beyond, above, during or indeed before the conflicts and problems this way of thinking about cinematic representation has caused. Since this film does not allow itself to be narrowed to neither fiction, documentary nor docu-fiction (including its self-mirroring version, the film essay), maybe we should view it the context of all the panspectric and panoptic operations, that aim to inform state and private interests? These activities are of course based on specific ideas about knowledge, which also requires a personal belief and interest. And even if the making of documentary films as a discipline and a passion, just as an academic field such as anthropology, is likely to play a relatively small part among these activities, I would still suggest that the composition of Marhöfer's film establishes another kind of faith by eluding the dominant ways of determining knowledge and ignorance.

The Life of Filmmaking

36

During the last 15 years, the concept of “life” had a pronounced return within art as well as within philosophy. We have seen it both in aspects of what is sometimes called the biopolitical, new vitalism, and the concept of images and objects as living things. In brief, this interest can be regarded a turn away from an increasingly language-oriented perspective that, within the humanities, can be defined as the linguistic turn, and within art, for the sake of simplicity, can be called the breakthrough of conceptual art. The turn towards life consequently could be summarized, in part, as a turn away from language, towards the biological, the real and the material. At the same time it is no longer possible to make a discriminatory distinction between “the civilized” as representatives of knowledge, and “primitives” as representatives of faith. The power-knowledge regimes operating and controlling life today are working on what some might call a pre-representational, neuro-political or affective level.

What has Marhöfer's film about pansori to do with this? On the one hand, it appears to approach the phenomenon almost ethnographically. On the other hand, it obviously does not seek to cinematically represent pansori culture. From this perspective you can look at it as a way to liberate life from ethnic, family- and individualizing normalization, always based on myths about purity, native country etcetera. The theoretical debates about the biopolitical used to take nazism and fascism as their starting point, however today it is equally important to consider all the ways in which life is regulated by other forces: biochemistry, genetics, neuroscience, genetic engineering, etcetera—all of these fields have changed our basic understanding of the meaning of “life”, along with the way how governments and companies try to handle and restrict this. Companies like Google and Facebook develop increasingly sophisticated techniques for identification and control, while in political decisions profitability analyses tend to receive superior status.

Along with the intensified interest in life as a category, the expansion of an economic thinking regarding all forms of human and nonhuman life has accelerated. These are probably the largest ideological displacements to take place simultaneously. In light of this development, a work that takes a complex phenomenon such as contemporary pansori culture as its starting point, has to consider questions regarding exoticism and the politics of identity, as well as how the form of the film relates to the rationality we can simply call “economics”. Marhöfer's film does neither analyze, explain, reveal, nor does it describe the pansori tradition in terms of a classical documentary. Instead,

the filmmaker appears to be organizing “relationships” with the help of the camera and editing tools, both regarding the pansori tradition, the places she films, and regarding the conventions of filmmaking.

It has been pointed out repeatedly that in *Man with a Movie Camera* from 1929 Dziga Vertov bases his montage technique on the new industrial society in an attempt to create an authentic, international film language—an absolute cinematography. Film theorist Trond Lundemo suggested, for example, that Vertov’s film explores the biopolitical aspects of the compound of man and machine. I believe that, if we read Marhöfer’s montage in the context of current relations of production we have to consider both Fordist and post-Fordist conditions of production, which dominate the world today, however we also have to consider new methods to monitor and classify life by means of supervision, research, and by identifying the politics of cultural protectionism.

In any case, this is one of the effects of the uncertainty regarding whether there is any life behind the camera or not. Marhöfer’s film often seems to be disconnected from a subjective feeling or perception. It might be possible to divide the sensual and affective experience of the film into a subjective element and an element, not contingent on a subject who made or watches the film: something like a description of affects and percepts that Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari are referring to in *What is Philosophy?*. Could one even talk about a montage of affects and percepts?

The deconstruction and disavowal of all kinds of sociological variables have been intensely debated over the last forty years or so. Gender, sexuality, race, class—it has become common knowledge how to undo and tear down all these categories. However, despite all the poststructuralist critique of humanism as an ideology, even the most radical social constructivist still hesitates when it comes to the centrality of the human. In art, we see a similarly easy way to avoid this issue. When, for example, creative processes are outsourced or decentralized from the individual artist, the end product still bears the artist’s name. It might not be enough, however, to be pleased by this dialectical logic: when (hu)man dies, he/she returns as a brand. What would it mean to make and watch a film from a post-anthropocentric vantage point? To be able to answer such questions, we might have to come up with all the possible support systems that make filmmaking and watching possible. Both the camera as well as the screen, and the artist as well as the spectator are indeed dependant on an infinite number of human and non-human relations. In short, modes of relations with human and non-human others are fundamental for the existence of the film. I would propose that one aspect of various sequences in

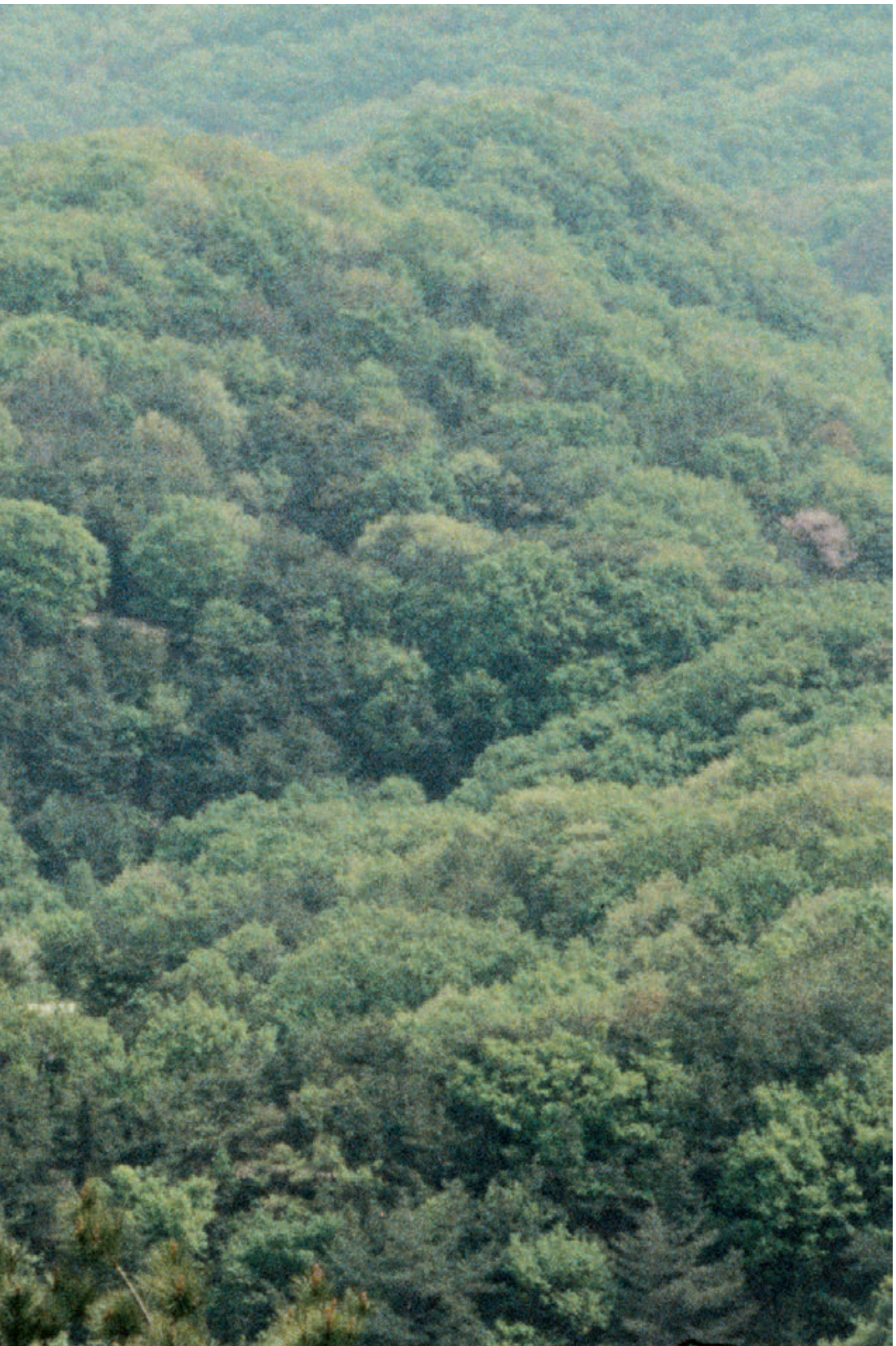
Marhöfer's film could be understood as an attempt to acknowledge this web of relations, and to reconsider the relations with these others, allowing them to influence the form of the film. But humans, animals, plants, climates, myths, are not only returned to the centre of attention. This centre does not really exist anymore, at least not if we think about it as one linear narrative, drama or canon. If this film is also a portrait of the filmmaker, this filmmaker does not appear as an oppositional independent mind, telling us a story about the world. Rather, it is an image of a filmmaker that engages in a present that is moving at many different speeds, transforming the film negative in the process of mapping different relationships that keep the filmmaking alive. The relationship between the filmmaker and the world therefore cannot be oppositional. If capitalism today is making money out of living things, Elke Marhöfer makes art that invites the spectator to think and engage with the present to find out about new relations with "life after man".

1 *L'objectif lui-meme* (1926), in "Écrits sur le cinéma", 1921–1953: édition chronologique en deux volumes. Paris: Seghers, 1974–1975. Tome 1, p. 129.









Not Foreign

45

Difference

Indifference

Anti-difference

Elke Marhöfer

What are the mechanisms and procedures that produce foreignness? What patterns of perception display foreign as foreign? Is it enough to oppose the idea that we could understand the foreign, while keeping foreignness as a concept? What if foreign is a trope itself? How can anything or anyone be foreign, when I/we/you/she/he/it/they/us/them are difficult to maintain as dividing categories?

Rejecting the semiotic system that constitutes foreignness in order to shut up singularities in oppressive segregation is to become close to fearless without being detached from the world.

Written in fragments while traveling between 1914 and 1919 Victor Segalen described exoticism as the opportunity to see from the perspective of a different life form. Exoticism is the “Aesthetics of Diversity, the notion of Difference.”¹ It is free of any idealization or a reduction of the singularities and exceeds the colonial project, “the Colonial is exotic, but Exoticism goes far beyond the Colonial.”² Exoticism is not about “the tropics or coconut trees, the colonies or Negro souls, nor about camels, ships, great waves, scents, spices, or enchanted islands. It cannot be about misunderstandings and native uprisings, nothingness and death, colored tears, oriental thought, and various oddities.”³ In its escapist manner, leaving geography and history behind, exoticism is the “*ability to accept difference*.”⁴ It is the joy of diversity. Something that might be unknown is still accessible and doesn’t need to be excluded. “Everything that so far has been described as foreign, unusual, unexpected, surprising, mysterious, amorous, superhuman, heroic, even as divine, in short, everything that is different.”⁵ One question would be, if it is enough to reduce the colonial project to a mode of self-awareness, when subjectification is also constituted by economical determinations. Nonetheless, Segalen’s concept of exoticism obtains an initiatory significance for the process of singularization and the interconnection of different cosmologies. It is a fundamental aspect of the critical practice in a process of becoming other, here and elsewhere.

Culture is the one that steals souls. Taken as a given it remains unaffected. What if culture is *not* simply “a community of people that has a specific semiotic structure and meaning, and can be read like a text”⁶, but instead: “a way of separating semiotic activities (orientation in the social and cosmic world) into spheres, to which people are referred. These isolated activities are standardized and capitalized to suit the dominant mode of semiotization—they are cut off from their political realities.”⁷ Culture is the modern name for a (bad) spirit. “Culture

is a trick word, a barrier-notion that prevents us from understanding the reality of the processes in question.”⁸ It operates as an ethnocentric spirit and in some cases a multiplication of ethnocentrism, for example when the constant demand for integration into *one* culture or *one* language—be it Sanskrit, Han Chinese or standard German—simply means an exercise of reduction and effacement. “The dialects (the mother tongues!) have been temporally and spatially shifted into the distance: ‘the sons [and daughters] are forced not to speak them any longer, because they live in Turin, Milan or Germany. Wherever they are still in use, they have lost their ingenious virtue.”⁹ Exposed to the spirit of culture objectified, homogenized and de-singularized people remain behind.

“Racism operates by the determination of degrees of deviance in relation to the White-Man face, which endeavors to integrate nonconforming traits into increasingly eccentric and backward waves, sometimes tolerating them at given places under given conditions, in a given ghetto, sometimes erasing them from the wall, *which never abides alterity* (it’s a Jew, it’s an Arab, it’s a Negro, it’s a lunatic ...). From the viewpoint of racism, there is no exterior, there are no people on the outside. *There are only people who should be like us and whose crime it is not to be.*”¹⁰

To be not like us and to stay true to oneself is part of the same thinking: “We are not, or at least I am not, seeking either to become natives (a compromised word in any case) or to mimic them. Only romantics or spies would seem to find point in that.”¹¹ I know he is talking about me! How can one conceptualize the cosmology of a body without being infected? Without desiring to be contagion by alterity and difference? How to have human, animal or plant contact and stay unchanged? Identity is an impossible security anyhow, everywhere.

Gilles Deleuze refers to repetition and difference as alternating processes, where difference overrides identity: “We propose to think difference in itself independently of the forms of representation which reduce it the same and the relation of different to different independently of those forms which make them pass through the negative.”¹² Self-identity and interiority should not be situated to any singularity. Temporality is the substance of subjectivity.

Plant, Animal and Social Becomings

In stratified societies the relationships and boundaries between humans, animals and plants are designed and conceptualized. “[T]hose who now call themselves humans are thinking under the power of what can indeed be called an idea, an idea that

causes them to define themselves as humans.”¹³ Based on ridiculous concepts of evolution and hierarchical filiations the generalizing categories “plants”, “humans”, “animals” imply that life is determined by a certain biological order, where a nonhuman interest is not considered. But what is human in humans is primarily weak: “This attempt to sequence a genome which is defined as specifically human tends to overlook the fact that the overwhelming majority of genetic code at work in the human body is merely passing through or hiding out with a total lack of regard for the organism, which is hosting it. Only some ten percent of the mass of genetic activity in the human body is specifically human at all.”¹⁴

The conception of “standard human”, which corresponds with Deleuze and Guattaris description of “racism” (white, male, middle class, husband, father, citizen), has boosted a giant level of systematic violence against countless animals, humans and plants that is beyond compare. “Speciesism, the logic of humanism and rights is everywhere, and the substance of moral action is denunciation, prohibition, and rescue, such that inside instrumental relations, animals can only be victims.”¹⁵

Within the ancient Asian concept of rebirth a loss of biodiversity is impossible, since everything is reborn perpetually. If too much pressure is caused due to too much fishing, hunting and logging beings come back to life as scary ghosts or bestial animals. But the idea of human exceptionalism is also present, since only humans can reach enlightenment. How to develop a non-religious awareness of finitude and mortality of all animals, plants, humans and things? Is it possible to create a responsibility toward plants and animals by eradicating signification and distinction? If we were able to feel and think, to be engaged beyond our own species, we might gain a similar understanding as that of Spinoza’s famous dictum about the body: we don’t know what kind of relation we are able to entertain with our surrounding.

Some singularities have internalized ecology into the social. Leaving out the concept of humanity, all animated beings are placed on an equal footing and treated as persons, while plants are subject to the spiritual.

Plants, humans, animals—whatever singularities—are influenced by and infused with immaterial fluctuations such as migration, mutation and ghosts. There are animal and plant modes of becoming, plants that become animals and animals that become plants. The aswang splits itself in two parts, transforms into a vampire, into a pig, a dog, a snake, into a manananggal, a tik-tik or a wak-wak. “We believe in the existence of very special types of becoming-animal, that penetrate and carry the human away, and which concerns the animal

as well the human.”¹⁶ The orchid becomes the gender of a female wasp to attract a male wasp who then, as pollinator becomes orchid. How can a plant know what the wasp looks like? How can it possibly store all this information? In order to co-exist within a community recognition must be present. Plant perception and “communication involves nucleic acids, oligo-nucleotides, proteins and peptides, minerals, oxidative signals, gases, hydraulic and other mechanical signals, electrical signals, lipids, wall fragments (oligosaccharides), growth regulators, some amino acids, secondary products of many kinds, minerals and simple sugars.”¹⁷

The subsurface truffle produces a scent that attracts pigs to search and eat it. When excreted after digesting the seeds get spread over large distances with fecal matter as fertilizer. African Acacia Tortilis trees that belong to the mimosa family are able to warn each other with a messenger substance as soon as an animal is approaching that might want to eat the leaves. As a result the trees release toxic tannin that renders the foliage inedible, thereby repelling the animal. This in-betweenness of animal and plant, human and animal, plant and human is where everything happens.

Landscape Face Landscape

Who does the earth think it is? It is a body without organs.

There is a struggle of the earth against over-codification and landscapification. The forest retreats, the despotic formation of the city spreads endlessly in all directions and earth stops being earth. How to decolonize the earth? There is certainly something positive within these territorializations, such as chaotic oases, ceaseless fissions and revolts, ranging from sex-worker to mad-cow-meat-mob uprisings: a new potential that is constantly under pressure through regulations and reterritorialisations by churches, army bases, police, paramilitary units and real estate investments.

If the earth were a body without organs, the landscape would be its face. “When does the abstract machine of faciality enter into play? When is it triggered? Take some simple examples: the maternal power operating through the face during nursing; the passional power operating through the face of the loved one, even in caresses; the political power operating through the face of the leader (streamers, icons, and photographs), even in mass actions; the power of film operating through the face of the star and the close-up; the power of television. It is not the individuality of the face that counts but the efficacy of the ciphering it makes possible, and in what cases it makes it possible. [...] If we consider primitive societies, we see that

there is very little that operates through the face: *their semiotic is nonsignifying, nonsubjective, essentially collective, polyvocal, and corporeal, playing on very diverse forms and substances. This polyvocality operates through bodies, their volumes, their internal cavities, their variable exterior connections and coordinates (territorialities).*"¹⁸ How to decolonize the face? Viveiros de Castro in his introduction to Pierre Clusters claims that "primitive societies do not recognize the 'abstract machine of faciality', producers of subjects, of faces that express a subjective interiority."¹⁹

Does filming a landscape produce a face of the earth? Just like culture, the landscape—both the reality as well as the notion—is tied to a very specific semiotic system and very particular apparatuses of power. To decolonize a landscape might be an exploration of the world, in as much as it is an interrogation of style.

In *Too Soon, Too Late* from 1981 Jean Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet filmed different landscapes in France and Egypt. The shots in France are accompanied by Huillet's recitation of a text by Friedrich Engels, describing rural poverty before the French revolution. With the images being devoid of people the text strangely politicizes the French landscape. The visual organisation of the colors and lines resemble the semiotic system of early modern landscape painting (similar to that of Camille Corot). The second part of the film is twice as long and depicts rural areas in Egypt. For a while a voice-over cites a contemporary text by Mahmoud Hussein on the anti-colonial struggle of Egyptian peasants against the British rule. The images of the densely populated countryside in Egypt reveal the ethical and aesthetical search of the filmmakers for an appropriate camera angle. Whether intentionally or not, the camera follows the colonial path, and is mostly positioned wayside, along train tracks, rivers or roads, sometimes on the top of a hill or a truck to allow for a wider view. During a shot outside a factory leaving workers timidly exchange a few glances with the filmmakers/the camera. In a suburban area the virtue of the children tilts over and the national security guards help to restrain their excitement in the distance, so that the filmmakers can complete their pan shot. But most of the time the camera is mysteriously rendered invisible.

The historically informed filmmakers know more than the peasants; the title suggests that their revolt is always *too soon* and succeeds *too late*. Historical writing does have effects; it erases differences within the past and forces a continuity of time. There are social formations, which do not assign to a theory of causation and evolution, and which refuse to let (written) history act upon their bodies, while instead favor forgetting as

















their point of departure: “Forgetting is as active as remembering. The Lisu, by refusing to pin themselves down to any account of their past—except for their tradition of autonomy—have no position to modify. Their room for maneuver is virtually limitless. But Lisu historylessness is profoundly radical in a second sense. It all but denies ‘Lisuness’ as a category of identity—except perhaps for outsiders. By denying their history—not carrying the shared history and genealogy that define group identity—the Lisu negate virtually any unit of cultural identity beyond the individual household.”²⁰ Forgetting allows for *discontinuity* as a different perception of time and production that prevents the past to be conquered from the hands to the minds. Nonetheless, the use of the film material, the movement and the time economy of *Too Soon, Too Late* create the impression that through the journey and the connection with another knowledge, something is opened, allowing for a new physical experience in the world, an intensity that goes beyond identifying the context. In Egypt it seems as if Straub/Huillet have difficulties to stop filming. At that point the film dissolves into autonomous aesthetic traits, into a horizontal cosmology, where the landscape is set free rather than being psychologized or objectified by abstraction; and where social relations aren’t moralized any longer. Is this where “peasant-cinema” comes into being?

Looking for hinterland. Hills and mountains—giants—can be spaces of both refuge and resistance. The “maroon societies” of Cuba, Jamaica, Brazil and Surinam, as well the Zomians of Southeast Asia, went to the hills to escape forced labor and slavery, or simply the stratification of organized religion, civilization and culture. “There is a nomadism in the hills”²¹ Jean Michaud once said.

It’s true, I can’t see the face/landscape any longer, the theatrical illusion, the panorama. I see something I am made of, something I am moving through.

Fairy Tales No Myths

Why take an interest in oral history, when I can not even finish a sentence properly, tell a simple joke or recount a story with a natural flow? When every commentary in a film is regarded as an unnecessary hindrance that does not clarify anything. When just the concept of “story” has a taste of decay because of its imbedded anthropocentric dilemma that cuts us off from all kinds of expressions.

Flourishing from a shaman tradition, it is said that Korean pansori came from unemployed men, married to busy shamans. The term pansori consists of *pan*, which stands for public space and *sori* which means sound. Performed only by a singer and

a drummer, it is regarded as a collective, oral entity without single authorship. The performance alternates between chanting and narrating parts. It is believed that in the beginning pansori was performed during rituals of chasing away evil as well as in street entertainment. If we compare the modern order of things where everything is perceived as separate and distinct with the oral tradition of story telling, we realize that the pansori narrator switches between different characters in a pre-modern manner. The *I* and *you* are merged into one single entity that overrules human, animal, gender and age specifiers. Pansori travels beyond the content/form distinction and reaches in extra-linguistic, aesthetical or biological domains, while spreading between an ensemble of heterogeneous, expressive materials. But these expressive, linguistic and non-linguistic substances are installed in the discursive chains of the song. In doing so both the singer and the drummer fuse and establish new virtualities, similar to object/subject fusions known from higher cognitive processes such as trance and hypnosis.

Following two pansori stories we came across other narratives, anonymous tales, which stand outside the control of today's pansori mastership tradition. Anonymous tales can breed without anxiety. Leaving identity behind to escape the master's control. No single person, no distinct version or certain school—anonymous tales that have no real master. They circulate without origin, and no storyteller should care to know where they come from or who invented them.

One such storyteller who wanted to stay as anonymous as the tales told us this: "It is raining now, but when the weather is clear you can see two offshore islands of identical shape. The local people call them Brother Islands. There is a cave between the Brother Islands and it is said that a Imugi, a giant serpent used to live inside that cave. The story goes that when the people in our village went fishing between the islands the Imugi came out of its cave and happily helped the boats to return home safely. One day warplanes from the US Army airfield in Gunsan started dropping bombs on one of the Brother Islands. That island was turned into a bombing practice area with bombardments taking place once or twice a month. Subsequently the middle part of the island was cut out almost completely and the bare red soil was exposed. It is said that the Imugi got killed in the bombing raids during those days. The dead Imugi was pushed into Yeompo, our neighboring village. So the people from both our village and Yeompo felt sorry for it. This story happened 40 years ago. Originally the Imugi was destined to become a dragon and rise to the sky after one thousand years had passed. Once it takes to the air a dragon is said to be able to obtain a magic stone bead called Yeouiju. Then it can trigger rain or wind and

perform miracles, since it can do whatever it desires. This is why Imugis take so long to turn into dragons. But the Imugi that had lived in the cave between the Brother Islands died before it could change into a dragon.”

Contrary to myths, tales follow an external movement with unexpected twists and turns, prophecies and visions.

The visionary man who gave us the story of the *Licking Tigers* came up with another tale predicting the future: “If a non-aggressive agreement with Kim Jung-il can be made within the next 30, 50 or 100 years the scientists of our country are going to figure out a new world, which they will envision during the practices of meditation. Three rockets will be made that will penetrate the earth, ground and rocks—and then open into a new world, which is yet difficult to understand.”

Undoing Surplus

Some singularities follow an economy that doesn’t allow the production of reserves. “The domestic mode of production conceals an anti-surplus principle: adapted to the production of subsistence goods, it tends to immobilize when it reaches this point.”²² Their time devoted to economic activities is measured; the ideal is to produce just enough to satisfy all needs. Labor is not divided by knowledge, but by sex and age. Neither work force, nor resources are exploited; and while there are trade relations, markets do not exist. In exceptional cases kinship can be compromised when individual needs stand opposed to obligations towards distant relatives. “Structurally economy does not exist.”²³ In other words a society that refuses economy or in fact: “a society against economy.”²⁴

Felix Guattari imagined a new mental economy, which is not motivated by surplus but rather relates to the intimate, to micro relations between singularities and their expressions, be they of “social, animal, vegetable, or cosmic nature.”²⁵ *The Three Ecologies* describes a conception of a new mode of life within existing relationships, such as the family, the work and the urban: an economy that relates to the ecological, the mental and the aesthetical/social world. A strategy for singularities on a micro level, an on-going aesthetico-existential process that includes the necessity to create local centers for collective subjectivities in order to become heterogeneous and to re-singularize existences.

This aesthetico-existential process is an experiment. It reminds us that we are equipped with the power of re-arranging and transforming rules according to our own imagination. It is part of a greater ensemble of re-subjectivization processes.

Film (Chaos)

While we do not know what film chaos really is, we can dream and invent it as an aesthetic figure.

61

How can we allow a zone of indistinctness and contradictions, a zone of dependence to operate on our bodies without feeling entirely lost? Is it important to be fully carried away, or is it enough to permit small portions of film chaos to take effect? Similar to a sip of water that can have the same impact on the body as a high-dose drug. But why should chaos be more productive than order in the first place?

Conceptual boundaries, coherent themes and topics, continuity, and a narrative all help to ward off film chaos. Film chaos is viscosity that is too long, or too short for time. Film chaos causes us to constantly loose our train of thoughts. But where to stop, if the dramatic unit of traditional film time is no longer applicable and the potential meaning rests within the jumpy course of fragmentation, as much as in the individual scenes? In what arbitrary moment should a filmic experience be interrupted, according to which criteria should any sequence be shortened or later cut out during the editing, if the entire intensity of an experience is based on an absence of dramaturgy?

Topicality, a montage structure, or the limitation to a certain space ought to save us from film chaos. "A film about what? —A film about Senegal.—But what in Senegal?"²⁶

Film chaos doesn't offer topics; it is a constant diffusing and rediffusing, a dipping into the existing chaos. There will always be references, compositions and forms that enable one to look and to listen. All that matters is to take away opinions: "The struggle with chaos is only the instrument of a more profound struggle against opinion, for the misfortune of people comes from opinion. Science turns against opinion, which lends to it a religious taste for unity or unification."²⁷ Film chaos is an agitation against the disciplining of film, a deliberate cruelty of the film material against both the filmmaker and the viewer, and at the same time a proposition of the possible.

Within film chaos the material uses the filmmaker, as much as the filmmaker uses the material. It functions like a plant, "a plant [that] contemplates by contracting the elements from which it originates—light, carbon, and the salts—and it fills itself with colors and odors that in each case qualify its variety, its composition: it is sensation in itself."²⁸ Film chaos is a negotiation of the sensation of the self with the help of various materials and their ghosts—light, darkness, colors, sounds, shadows, silver halide crystals, silicon, zeroes and ones from different points in time. What was found is placed outside its proper field of practice and mingled within a corequisite

multiplicity. "Chaos is beautiful if you look at all of its components as equally necessary."²⁹ Like in a polyvocal space where languages are used without identification and utterances are detached from the body. Fragments, sequences, blocs, no series. Segments and movements, which dissolve again. Oral sequences, rhythmic sequences without subordination or unification, for intensity to enter. Intensity as an active exteriority. An introjection of exteriority, many kinds of exteriorities.

Film chaos operates in a space where one obsession infringes on another and exceeds it, thereby dipping into even more chaotic moments. A space where the imaginary is not sheer ornament or subordinated otherwise, but a real source. In the end, nothing falls into place of a higher unity. The grammatical order that aims at a final solution can not take hold.

And then the Sea

The absolute movement. Everything is clear now, but it is not the clarity of the microscope, more the clarity of a micro-perception, of the water and the air we breathe in. Everything seems fluent with holes and scratches, amorphous clouds, oceanic chaos, reflections and streams of lines. I think now I have understood everything, and I even have a mission—to become molecular, to be where everything starts to speak with everything else, so that an ever expanding pervasiveness is growing, where we have stories without authors and differential coalitions, where no interiority remains and we intimately involve in things, plants and animals.

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*The Misfortune
of Pansori and
a Story*

Lee Bo Hyung

I was born in Gimje at the western coast of Jeollabuk Province. At the time society was still very traditional. The place was 216 kilometres away from the train station, so the local culture remained rather untouched. I didn't see a train until I was an adult. There were no cars that would come into town. Only airplanes flew overhead sometimes. All the people were farmers. There were no machines, so they worked manually all year round. From time to time they sang songs and played music for various occasions and seasons. When there was a festival they called performers and asked them to perform pansori. I grew up witnessing shaman rituals to exorcise the ghost when someone had died drowning.

In the past there was no recording practice of folk culture in Korea. The scholars were mostly Confucian who chronicled historical facts related to Confucianism or Confucian personalities, but they did not write down much about pansori. That is why we have to search for the facts by visiting the historical sites.

Shamans practiced their trade in different regions. In the eastern coastal areas fishermen often held ceremonies to attain large hauls. Shamanic music was very unique. For my research I visited Busan and all the eastern coastal areas because at the time shamans still existed along the coastal areas. I went to Tongyoung and Jindo for several times. In the past shamans lived even in the Buan region, which is close to our village and I interviewed them repeatedly.

Today however, everyone has died already, there is no one left. In Chungcheong Province there used to be three Sookmos and Lee Yeon Ryeo lived until recently. I investigated shamanism in that region but after she had died there was nobody else left. Lee Youngho lived in Suwon, Gyeonggi Province, he came from a family of three Sookmos. He was also a famous leading performer, which gave me the opportunity to learn how performers used to act in the past. However, after Lee Youngho died there was no one left to give a firsthand account.

I travelled a lot in order to explore folk songs. Until then I had thought that arirangs were all alike but during my research in the Gangwon Province area I found out that originally arirang was used as a working song and disseminated orally, while in other regions arirangs are just sung as popular folk songs.

In the beginning pansori used to be part of larger open-air performances that also included acrobatics and dance. Many ordinary people came to watch them. Later on however, during the Joseon Dynasty, pansori became more artistic. It was performed on a stage independently from other show elements. Its content and accompanying music changed to please upper class society. As a consequence, seven of the twelve original episodes disappeared. The last one to disappear was the story

of Heungbo-ga. More than any other pansori Heungbo-ga portrays the lives and feelings of ordinary people, including their humour and jokes in a rather realistic fashion. In fact, there was a lot of abusive language in the original Heungbo-ga, much closer to the way ordinary people talk than the version known today. Nowadays, as pansori is performed in the theatre most of the swear words have been removed. During open-air performances however, some of it gets used. The Heungbo-ga pansori is based on a folk tale widely known in the eastern region. It recounts that good people will prosper while the bad ones will perish. It tells the story of someone who helps an animal and in return is rewarded with fortune by that animal. And it features things that emerge from a gourd.

The singers who use curses and slang expressions are called aniri performers. Their counterparts are the voice performers who in the late Joseon Dynasty were socially acknowledged while aniri performers were dismissed.

As mentioned earlier, Heungbo-ga targeted ordinary people, while a more educated audience in Joseon society would not have appreciated it. Thus, it was not performed for the upper classes. Popular pansori in the last years of the Joseon period were the Jeokbyeok-ga and the Chunghyang-ga, both stories set in upper class society. Also accepted by those circles was the Simcheong-ga, a story about a filial daughter.

However, as society got modernized and social boundaries became permeable Heungbo-ga revived. While there are other pansori that include abusive language, certain characteristics of Heungbo-ga are unique. [...]

Do you feel like telling the story?

I am not a pansori singer.

[...]

After the villain Nolbo got introduced the story begins with him chasing away his good brother Heungbo. The way in which the song portrays Nolbo's behaviour does not suit upper class etiquette. Nolbo's ill nature is exaggerated to show the audience how mean evil people really can be. You would not find that in other pansori. Heungbo-ga highlights Nolbo's role as the villain through his vicious behaviour, contrasting it with that of Heungbo who has the opposite character and becomes prosperous in the end. Actually, there are no details given about Heungbo's good deeds. It is only mentioned that he cured the broken leg of a swallow.

As the story goes, Heungbo comes to a village of poor people

who accommodate him. A range of comical episodes describes the lives of ordinary people. Originally the parts about the hard times Heungbo has to live through included a lot of coarse language that was later removed. There is one story about him getting whipped, which reflects Heungbo's low social status.

Then the tone of the story changes radically. A monk arrives in the village and a house is being built. With the appearance of the monk lyrics and bright songs replace the crude jokes. The scene is completely different from the earlier ones. After that, not much abusive language is used anymore.

In the following a swallow appears and lays an egg from which a fledgling hatches. The baby swallow drops from the nest, its leg is broken. Heungbo cures it and the recovered swallow leaves for Gangnam [Jiang Nan]. A sad song follows. It is mournful because Heungbo is deeply saddened about the parting of bird he had grown familiar with. So he sings a somber farewell song.

We know that the swallow originates from warmer regions. However, in the past it was established that it came from Gangnam, south of the Yangtze River in China. It was said that it flies there and returns via China. The song of the swallow's journey describes how the bird carries some gourd seeds through China back to Namwon in Korea.

Musically it is very complicated. The original rhythm was: 1-2-3, 1-2-3; 1-2, 1-2; 1-2-3, 1-2-3; 1-2, 1-2. However, there are many changes. [Singing:] *Looking at the mountain through a vain sky*. The rhythm keeps changing. It later... [Singing:] *The leaving boat* changes to: 1-2-3, 1-2-3. So it's very difficult to sing, since originally it had three different beats, but now there are many parts with two beats only. It is a very famous song, but it's very hard to play the drum to it... [Singing:] *The boat that goes to Eocho Dongnam*: 1-2-3, 1-2, 1-2. It's very difficult to sing because the rhythm keeps changing.

The swallow returns and drops the gourd seeds in front of Heungbo.

Heungbo sows the gourd seeds that the swallow had dropped and the growing plant generates three gourds. He uses a saw to open the gourd. The song of *The Sawing Moon* is performed as a working song or folk song, while musically it is very refined and composed elaborately. At first, he saws the gourd slowly like this... [Singing:] *Slowly and by stealth*... When the gourd is open two boxes emerge, one of them contains rice and the other one money.

The song does not simply mention the collection of both money and rice, since that wouldn't be very funny. Instead, the scene is described in a fast rhythm to express how the gourd is being harvested without thinking. Pansori normally cannot

go that fast [Singing:] *Heungbo spins with joy*. However, if it is sung that fast people may consider it realistic. Heungbo who was starved and had neither money nor rice suddenly became a rich man. But first he had to eat all that rice. It would be less hilarious, if the song only described that he ate a whole mountain of rice, so the lyrics state that all the rice pots of the village were filled and piled up as high as a mountain. And instead of saying that his family ate the rice, it depicts how they actually climbed into the pots in order to eat. It's not said that they were satisfied after finishing the rice, since that wouldn't be very funny either. To put it another way, after having been hungry for a long time they are incapable of eating a lot of rice all at once.

In the past the audience would laugh at this point. Today however, the scene has been changed. Since Heungbo had enough to eat now, the next a scene is about clothing. While the first gourd produced rice, the second one generates silk. It would be less amusing if it were just said that some silk came out. Instead, the song goes on about various kinds of silk employing lots of different melodies... [Singing:] *Various silks appear...* In the past there used to be so many kinds of silk with different colours and patterns. The songs list a huge range of silk cloth that emerges from the gourd, making the audience feel excited about the joy of such wealth. To make the scene fun it is described at some length. [Singing:] *The loud silk. The world is chaotic and noisy.*

From the third gourd workmen emerge who then build a large, tile-roofed house. The gourd is opened slowly, the workmen come out and in the next scene the house has been built already. First clouds are still covering it but when they clear a palatial building becomes visible. The accompanying song is performed in a high-spirited tone... [Singing:] *Hill sky...* to stress the grandeur of the house. This is where the description of Heungbo's life comes to an end. Then Nolbo reappears. All the scenes featuring Nolbo are comical. He visits Heungbo, receives a Hwachojang chest and sings a Hwachojang ballad. He then returns to his house where he waits for another swallow to drop from its nest. However, since it's early spring no swallow appears, which is why he asks some people to catch one for him. The song in this scene is a hunting song, performed with the tune of a military march... [Singing:] *I go to catch a swallow!* The song is witty and compellingly realistic.

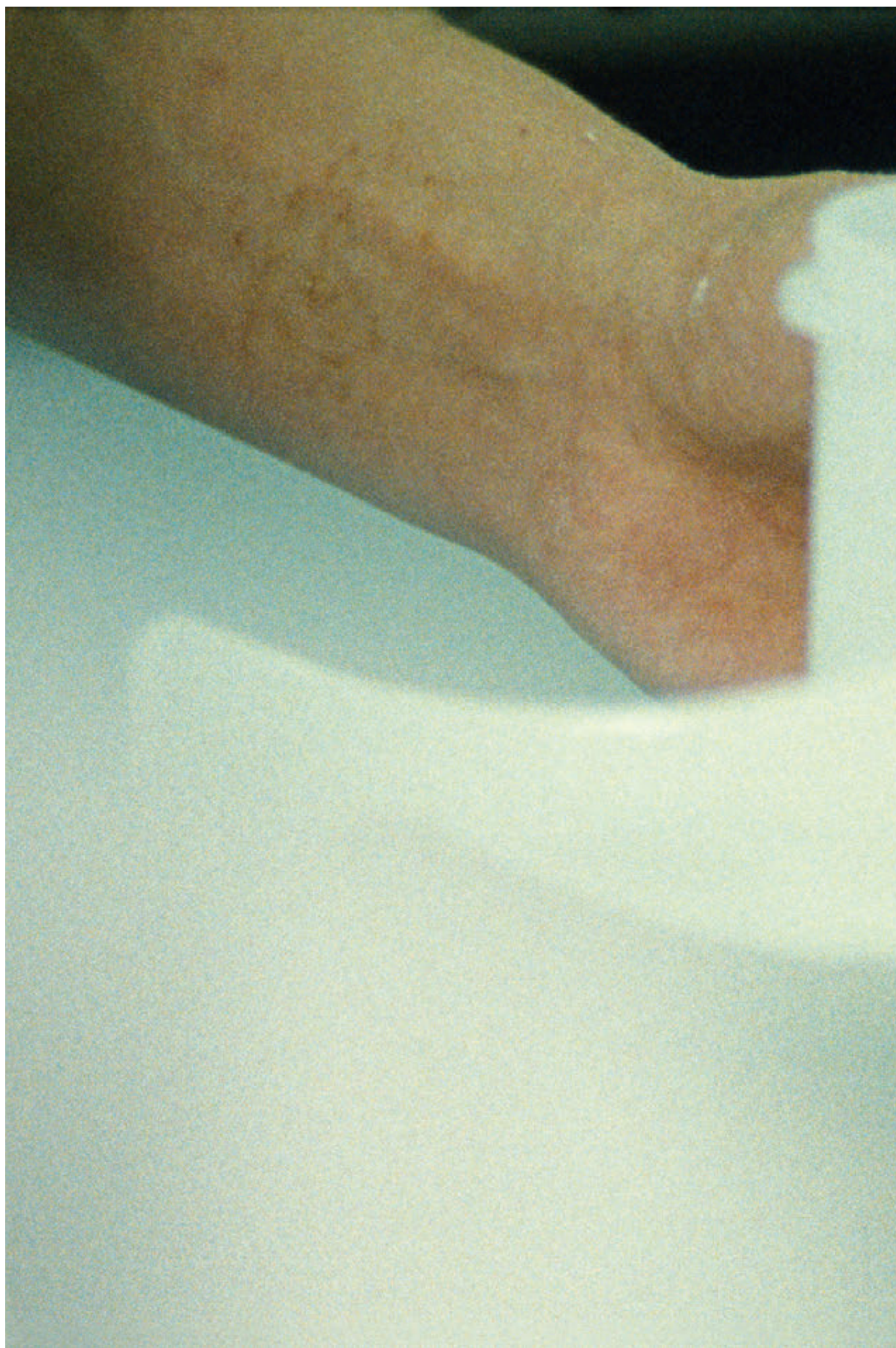
The story goes that Nolbo ends up breaking the leg of a swallow. Upon this a new gourd grows from the seeds the swallow had brought back. However, what emerge from this gourd are disasters. Various groups of people come out of a bag in the gourd such as a travelling theatre company, a group of exorcists dressed in drag for court ceremonies and a band of

singing beggars who insist on staying in Nolbo's house, giving unsolicited performances and then ask to be paid, etcetera. Here the bad feelings and resentments of ordinary people toward upper class society and social inequalities are expressed. They are overcome when Nolbo is being punished by the things that emerge from the gourd. Then Jangbi [Zhang Fei] appears on the scene to demand that Nolbo becomes a good person. In the end Heungbo and Nolbo make up with each other. While it is a simple story, if the scenes were performed realistically, it might have helped to dissipate the pent-up resentments of ordinary people at the bottom of the social ladder. This is why ordinary people perceived Heungbo-ga as a very jaunty pansori.

Lee Bo Hyung talking to Che Choe, Olaf Hochherz,
Lina Persson and Elke Marhöfer, Seoul, 2009.









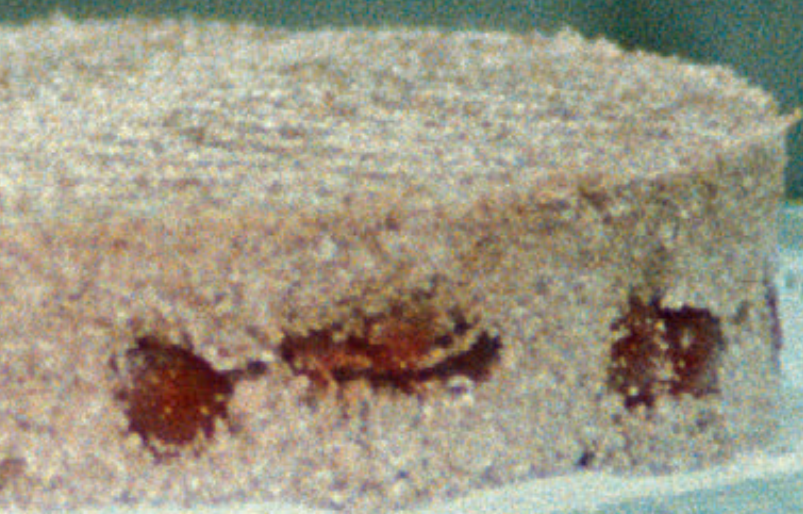












*Everyone Who
Lives in the
Province Has
Descendants
of Aswangs*

Monica
Fernandez and
Maebelle Ruth
Brines

Maebelle: When I was young, I heard about a manananggal. Apparently, there's a province that has lots of them but I have not yet seen one myself. Have you ever seen anything like it?

Monica: No, the story I heard earlier was from comics only.

Something like: "She's a teacher, then she brought her friend in the Visayas part, then..."

Like manananggal, too?

Yeah, seems like it, the family of the teacher are all aswangs,...

It is called both "aswang" and "manananggal", isn't it? There are different perceptions of aswang. Manananggal is the one, which is split in the middle.

It is also an aswang.

Aswang is different. The aswang changes its appearance. It turns into a dog, a cat, it transforms...

It turns into a snake.

It turns into a pig.

But still, they are the same.

No, the manananggal is different, it is split in half. And it eats pregnant women.

It doesn't eat pregnant women.

Right, it doesn't eat pregnant women, it eats the baby. I haven't seen a manananggal yet but apparently manananggals and aswangs really do exist, somewhere in Bicol at Capiz. Then, there's a story in the Philippines about the tiyanak, a ghost that imitates a newborn baby.

No, they are transforming, they turn into humans.

Yes, they turn human and at night they turn into an ugly baby.

Let me finish my story. They went to the province...

There is a story, which is like a true story... that there seems to be a real manananggal.

Just describe it properly. What is its appearance?

When I was a child, my mother said that there was a real manananggal who ate a baby from the womb of the mother.

Their tongue elongate, then they go up the ceiling. The manananggals can fly, right? They go up on the ceiling? They will eat the baby. Their tongues get long, they get really thin. Have you heard about it?

I've heard it. But that's nothing compared to what I've heard.

My version is truer.

Their tongue enters the navel.

It's like a thread.

Yeah, it's like a thread. And it's so thin that it can go inside. This way it eats the baby. That's why the baby dies. People say that if you want to kill manananggal, you should look for the one half of the body and put salt on it.

This way the manananggal will die. I heard something different

when I was a child: There were two friends, both of them teachers. Then she takes her best friend back to their place, saying there'll be a feast...

It's like what you said, the feast of the aswangs...[laughs], it's really scary.

It's the aswangs' tradition, it's their main dinner. They would get the inner organs of a human body.

Then, what happens in the story?

They eat her. [laughs] According to my grandmother, it's a true story, but others say it's not. But it's true, I've read about it.

Sometimes, it's scary to go to the province if you don't know... According to them everyone who lives in the province has descendants of aswangs.

According to my grandmother it's passed on to the descendants. Do you know the manananggal's appearance?

It's passed on to the descendants, that's what I know regarding the story of aswangs. They swallow something and pass it on when they die.

It is like a marble.

That's why they swallow it.

Passing it on to the descendants.

They transmit it, for example: I die, but I won't, so I'll transmit it to you so that I can die.

With your last breath. That's it.

That's what I heard about them. That's the story I've heard, it getting transmitted. Your story is nice.

Of course, it's true, true to life.

It was narrated to you.

It was narrated by my grandmother, narrated by my friend.

Then I read about it in comics, then in the newspaper. It

seems to be true, even my teacher when I was in elementary...

I've heard a lot of similar things. Yes, I've heard a lot about manananggal, there are aswangs and even tiyanak.

Tiyanak is not real.

No.

Aswangs, yes, they change appearance.

Aswangs only, and manananggal.

No, it was when my grandmother was young.

They only made up the tiyanak.

They always told me about it. There are still other stories.

These are stories prevalent in the Philippines, it's what people believe, old people, children. Even the children know the stories.

They were narrated by our grandmothers, then our mothers passed them on to us, and then we also spread them to others. Some say it's true, others say, it's not, however we believe in them because it has happened to us. Sometimes,

when you walk you will just see it, especially if you live in a village. You'll see, they suddenly look at you, especially if you are pregnant, his/her eyes are fierce, it means, he/she is a aswang.













For Western writers of both literature and philosophy the “Far East” always played the role of a constitutive outside—not least an outside from which one could *look back* at one’s own society as if from a distance. Think of Borges’ *Chinese Encyclopedia* invoked by Foucault at the beginning of the *Order of Things*. The production of this distance—an ontological distance, a distance that allows for the thinking of wholly different worlds—bears some resemblance to experiences of intoxication, such as referred to by Walter Benjamin in his essay on surrealism where he describes how intoxication “loosens” the self-centered ego “like a tooth”. Suddenly, the distinctions between metaphysically fixed categories become permeable, borders turn into membranes. “East Asian wisdom” provided the West with a foil for a different dialectic: a dialectic of immanence, that is, *without* a transcendence, without an *outside*. Immanence not necessarily in a religious sense, but rather in a systemic one where oppositions penetrate each other dynamically like in the famous Ying and Yang principle, or the dialectics of the full and the empty in the Tao te-Ching. We could think of Benjamin as midway between, as he thinks of surrealism and the coming revolution in terms of such dialectic interpenetration, while at the same time as a redemptive discharge of revolutionary energy: the coming immanence. However, in the “Far East” no one thinks in terms of “redemption”, in terms of those heroic dramas that enforce final decisions structuring the irreversible progress of “history”. Which doesn’t mean that there is no concept of “change”, “transformation”, or modernization. But it never quite enters through the main gate of History with a capital H. Instead, leaving the back door open can assist its arrival.

To think of the “Far East” in such a way is of course an orientalist projection. It means to conceive of “immanence” as “imaginary geography” in Edward Said’s sense: The “Far East” is the screen on which Europeans can project their idea of immanence onto an outside. This is already quite a knotted construction, since “immanence” and “outside” are, if not incommensurable, at least in a state of permanent quarrel. Thus, in the minds of the Westerners the image of the “Far East” becomes a difference-producing machine. This screen lends itself to many projected scenarios, all of which share one major property: they allow to imagine, to conceive of, to think ontological difference. This difference-machine doesn’t need to be grounded in any concrete, lived reality of the people or landscapes or political systems of any particular place, as shown by Foucault’s use of the *Chinese Encyclopedia* or Berthold Brecht’s deliberate use of “China” as a trope. While being based on excellent knowledge of Chinese philosophy, the latter serves its purpose even more effectively the more it is fictionalized. The

everyday lived reality of the people in question and their engagement with this reality matter much less than how the projected difference (which by the way is far from being merely a projection) is capable of mobilizing the everyday certainties “back home”: their capacity to break open, like a loose tooth, the transcendent power that binds sign to the signified, through which signs achieve a new autonomy that is no longer the power of transcendent logos but one of dynamic enactment.

Let us go back to the topography of the orientalist projections in the attempt to get closer to the role that “distance” is playing. In the Self/Other dialectics of the Western imagination that received its full—fully mythological—articulation in the age of colonial modernity, the “Far East” (in example China, Korea, Japan) rather than Southeast Asia indeed holds a special place. It is, as it were, distant beyond distance, situated beyond the vanishing point of a Euro- and self-centric perspective. The vanishing point is the point of collision of the separations, the conceptual distinctions that Westerners make in order to qualify themselves in their own eyes as “modern” and thus as different from anybody else. Just as the construction lines of the central perspective collide at the horizon. The entire construction rests much more on those vanishing points than on the subject-position that looks at the image—in the Western tradition, the autonomous subject: an universalistic specter and divine spectator. This subject sees its mirror image in everything; it is forever a narcissist, caught in the mirror-stage. Therefore, we pay little attention to the vanishing points in the picture, even though it is these points that constitute an image not merely as a picture out there, transmitted as sensory data, but as a mental image, a mental space, something imagined. To say they are “just” points means to overlook the fact that they are also the transition points. They are the tipping points of the dialectics between the seen and the unseen, the here and the beyond, absence and presence—and the limit dividing a here and now from what lies beyond. Defining a horizon, they make, in the words of anthropologist Vincent Crapanzano, “the way in which the irreality of the imaginary constitutes the real of reality and the real of reality constitutes the irreality of the imaginary.”

Imagine a deliriously fantastic history tour moving away from Europe along the Silk Road, and think of how the topography of the orientalist imagination changes. Already the ancient Greeks pictured monsters or monstrous races at the margins of their known world: people without heads or with animal heads, fantastic animals and the like. And as with the Greeks, the orientalist imagination always reached its peak with India: It is here that the imagination doesn't know any more boundaries, nor limits to an unleashed morphology of the marvelous, composed

both of the fantastical and of horrors. Before reaching India, we would witness how the order that binds sign to the signified breaks open gradually: the order begins to crumble with the Arab bazaars as places of an imagined contagion and corruption, but also, after sunset, of sensual pleasures, lures and enchantments. The snake charmer and the flying carpet are quintessential tropes of the animated exoticism that takes place between sign and signified once their transcendental bond is loosened.

As we reach the “Far East”, however, we have in some way already surpassed these distorted optics that grow more and more fantastic and monstrous as the distance increases. If the Western imagination of the “Orient” is that of a limit pushed further and further, and if therefore the imaginative geographies of Orientalism are liminal, then there must be a point where the gap that is opened up by increasing distance tilts. The stormy waters of the liminal imagination calm down again, they appear almost indifferent and pacified. Enchantments and horrors are no longer articulated in the morphology of extremes. However, that doesn’t mean that we operate in a territory beyond the orientalist imagination as we enter the “Far East”. But “difference” no longer operates in the categories of the dramatic and exaggerated. We have now entered an outside. Distance begins to truly play out. And this outside is also the “Middle Kingdom”, a notion that must be placed on equal footing next to that of the “outside”.

The film *No, I am not a toad, I am a turtle!* is neither ethnographic, nor a narrative documentary, nor an essay film. However, it certainly is a film about foreignness, about ontological difference, and narrative power operating in a different syntax. It’s a film shot in Korea, which occupies a specific place in the “Far East”, trapped, as it were, between the Empires of China and Japan. The film comprises a few main topics: A pansori performance—a genre of music and oral narration—, a tiger, an aswang (ghost) story, an ironmonger and the landscape. There is no syntax imposed on the foreignness, no ontological laughter on behalf of the filmmaker but in each of the scenes there is an immanence, especially insofar as they are not subjected to narrative translation or commentary, thereby retaining their sense of mystery. Here “Korea” is not an outside, but rather a “trope”—a place, which is simultaneously real and imaginary. It is turned into a cinematic trope, without an anchor or vanishing point. It is a trope born out of what figures most prominently in the scenes: tales of transformation and metamorphosis. However, this is not a metamorphosis in the context of the fantastical or monstrous, or a transformative becoming for its own sake. The point is that each becoming has













its own outside—that is, an external logic, a force that doesn't derive from what is seen, said or else identified, but from the door that is left open, through which different temporalities and beings can enter the stage of actualization.

The film reminded me of Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* (without it bearing much resemblance, merely as a foil of comparison). Marker, by the way, mentions Koreans only once, as an underclass in Japan that gets drunk on beer and fermented milk, while longing for a bottle of sake, which is poured over the tombs on the day of the dead. For Chris Marker, "Japan" clearly acts as the outside—and he makes deliberate use of this. Towards the end of the film he says: "I took the measure of the unbearable vanity of the West, that has never ceased to privilege being over non-being, what is spoken to what is left unsaid." Bertold Brecht's "China" operates slightly differently: He is less carried away by the vanishing line of enchantments, instead, his interest in immanence is materialistic. "What is left unsaid" in Brecht's work is a matter of social and political relations, it has the status of symptoms, devoid of an aspiration for metaphysical truths. The ironmonger that we follow at the beginning of *No, I am not a toad, I am a turtle!* is perhaps not unlike a character in a Brechtian "Lehrstück", undoing the estrangement effect of alienation. However, he also takes us on a Chris Marker-train: into the inside of the container-carriers that in *Sans Soleil* we merely see moving (such as the Shinkansen), as the narrative of the commentary carries us somewhere else.

Roland Barthes turned Japan into an "Empire of Signs", real and imaginary at once and thus not Japan but a place called "Japan" to discover a different autonomy in its practices of signification; an autonomous "middle ground" of pure, magical signifying gestures, a territory that has abandoned the extremes. What are those extremes from which he seeks to be emancipated? Above all, it's the burden of the self-identical subject, and immediately after that, the burden of all that is not subject: the world of things. In Barthes' enchanted empire of signs there are no shores over which a bridge could be constructed by means of language, symbols or signs—the bridge is always first, and thus the entire relationship gets reversed. In order to allow this autonomy of the middle ground to persist without getting reified, its is being kept empty to form what for us must be a paradox: something in-between, which is a substance at the same time. It is from those empty centers that signs emerge in absolute purity, neither contaminated by a dull positivism nor an overdose of negativity. Instead, they are right there in the middle of things, in an immanent plane of "mediality". Chris Marker asks how we should call this faculty of entering a communion with things, of merging with them, of

being them for a moment, and in reverse allowing them the same with us. The name animism is already taken, he says it belongs to Africa. There it acts as a caricature of animated things, such as fetishes that violently destroy the kingdom of the self-identical individual, the reverse image of the European asymmetry between “people” and “things”. Not naming it would fit the Western gaze on the “Far East” better, for whenever we, as Westerners, have given it a name in our history (such as “animism”), it was to devaluate and denounce it as inferior or “primitive”. This denunciation, however, seems to belong to the tropics. As evidence it needs at least the image of an “untamed nature” that until now (the age of modernity) kept the primitives from reaching the heights of civilization because their “culture” keeps being devoured by their nature like small fishes by a wale. While the orderliness of the “Far Eastern” cultures cannot easily be assimilated within this image of the “primitive”, they have not remained entirely exempt from its matrix.

Perhaps what we are accustomed to call “ghosts” or “spirits” is in fact a faculty of images; images that inhabit the world and to some of which we are hosts. They transform us as much as we transform them. I think Elke Marhöfer’s film is giving a different answer to Marker’s question regarding the communion with “things” by means of cinematic images. Images though are not necessarily identical with what can be seen. On the contrary, the image is a semi-autonomous mimetic capacity, a power to lure and transform, a penetrative node, a being. In this sense images can never be entirely positivized and objectified. Just like the autonomy that Barthes discovered, they can reside in a gesture or a twinkling of the eye, which at times are all that is needed to construct the shores by applying, rather than “building” a bridge.

In recent decades global capitalism and the rapid modernization of East Asian countries have leveled much of the grand differences. Now the West is fascinated by the “supermodernity” of Asian metropolises and the more we can subsume under the concept of exchange rates, the more the distance appears to be shrinking. Aren’t the stock markets, too, an empire of signs? A performative enactment in which signification is invocatory and affective? The deconstruction of the orientalist imagination has done its share to render the old orientalist game increasingly difficult, if not entirely defunct. What also helped to undo “distance” is the massive popular demand in the “West” regarding both the search for spirituality, and Asian “technologies of the self” either to achieve some sort of self-perfection, to look for “fulfillments”, or simply as “wellness-escape”. Today, the pictures in hotel lounges worldwide show the same images: oceanic images of flows and exchange, of dialogue, cooperation

and corporations. “Difference” in this matrix is little more than a touristic resource. Capital has become the common cartography and it no longer operates along grand tectonic lines of divisions but in networks, enclosures and archipelagos. Capitalism celebrates (or should we rather use the past tense: celebrated) its own global immanence.

Thus, one thing of the old imaginative geography ceases to function: the role of the “outside”. There is no outside any longer: What once used to be news to the West, “Asian wisdom”, seems to have been stated long ago. Without an outside to refer to, however, Westerners are increasingly deprived of the meta-physically secured substance, that is, the extremes. But for Western modernity oppositions were the stuff on which the whole game rested: an objectifiable nature on the one hand and a transcendent subject on the other. All that is in between had been emptied of all reality—that is, of an acknowledged reality in its own right, which is to say as much as that it has had no “official” representation. It is an abyss that must be bridged by language and signs. Since the modern West had emptied its own middle ground by granting only the extremes a right to be called “real”, it developed such a fascination with cultures that appear both to conform and to contradict their own ontological operation: conform, because they, too, appear to keep this middle ground empty, and contradict because they do so without resorting to the extremes!

The French philosopher Bruno Latour described what this unacknowledged middle ground looks like in the West when he turned the anthropologist’s gaze onto Western modernity itself, studying the practices and networks that no anthropologist had studied before: those of science. Far from confirming the image that science had turned nature into an empire of discrete facts, he found practices of mediation and translation everywhere; constructed webs of actors and actants, hybrid entities instead of discretely isolated facts and chains of association created by multiple practices. Moreover, he claims that it is not only we humans who freely construct our truths by means of our semiotic systems, but that “objects”, too, have their share in the world: they do act, if only through the designs they have on things around them (like us). This middle ground is not merely an “in-between”, made of more or less random, accurate or operational connections between separate entities, rather it is the realm in which those entities receive their form in the first place: the scientist is just as much “made” by her discovery in the laboratory as she constructs what is “discovered”. Neither exists prior to the discovery as such, as a thing or subject in itself.

While Latour was not the first author to “discover” this middle ground, he first described how in Western practice it

has been systematically hollowed out by withdrawing it from the officially sanctioned modes of representation. He showed how incredibly effective this mechanism was, for it allowed the scientific mobilization of nature (and introduction of technology) on an unprecedented scale. Yet, while everything takes place there in the middle, it simultaneously “has no place”. What enters into language and “representation” is nothing but the already stabilized “entity”, always carefully isolated and objectified, as if it could exist without the milieu and the relations that made and shaped it in the first place. Latour calls this the practice of purification: Only what can be purified in the categories of either “nature” or “culture” qualifies for representation, and thus for “reality”. Nature/culture hybrids have no right to be viewed as “real” on their own terms. Everything needs to be divided into the categories of either “subject” or “object”, while the connection between them is merely an addition, nothing that concerns their being as such. Everything that cannot be divided and purified will hence belong to either the pre-modern primitives, to a pathological imagination, or will be relegated to a new special zone of exceptions: art. This zone of exceptions is an island of “official representability”, of mediation and hybridity in the otherwise “emptied” middle ground. The museum, if it were, is a zone that purifies the impure, by elevating it to the realm of a “substance”. In Asian ontologies, the difference between “art” and “Art” with the capital A that signifies this zone of exception, has never been enforced in the same way as in the West. The difference between the applied and fine arts has never been turned into an ontological difference, a difference of essence, which lies at the root of “modern” secular Art. Outside of this “modern” exceptionalism of art, art is always just that: the creation and reflection on associations, of entering into and exiting the communion with things, images and whatever else there may be.

Latour’s new claim to an anti-reductionist treatment of the middle kingdom and the constitutive primacy of mediation over fixed categories is part of a larger move away from the rigid categories and binary oppositions that have characterized the standard dualistic Western metaphysics ever since Descartes. The thinking in fixed categories is increasingly replaced by a relational, positional, and processual approach. This paradigmatic shift can be observed everywhere. It concerns notions of the self (inter- or transsubjectivity) as well as the notion of “objectivity”. In the realm of the middle, structural semiotics have claimed the territory of mediation, and information theory has already taught us a new way of thinking, giving primacy to communication over any of its substrates. Cybernetics and ecological thought have made us accustomed to think anew in terms of systemic

immanence. Step by step we are learning not to think in terms of metaphysically stable categories that precede any relation, but to turn this familiar model on its head. The price of this shift is, precisely, the loss of the imaginary “outside” and thus also of a traditional position from which to utter “critique”. From now on, critique must be voiced from within the relations of the middle kingdom. Since we have paid little attention to neither the ordinary, nor extraordinary practices that hold this middle kingdom together, since we have neither words, nor grammar for its ecology of practices, the toolbox at hand presents us mainly with bold metaphors and unfeasible imaginary tropes. This is a silence that cannot be turned into a sublimated enchantment anymore. Instead, it is a clinical silence.

By confronting and overlaying the two middle kingdoms, however, we will realize that there is at least one neuralgic point where this clinical silence, qua mobilizing ontological difference, can still be addressed. To me this point appears to play the lead role in Elke Marhöfer’s film. This is the realm of “spirituality”, “ritual” and “religion”. I am referring to these terms in parenthesis, since just like “nature” and “culture”, “subject” and “object”, they are schemes that bear the mark of their origin in Western metaphysics, rather than being universally applicable categories. I am also referring to them in parenthesis because it is not of interest what content we may find after their deconstruction, but rather the fact that within them lies the question of mediality as a question of both transformation and stability.

No matter how well we may have internalized the anti-dualist lessons of deconstructive critique and a non-reductive approach to networks, when it comes to facing spiritual questions and religion we return to the approach of purification, of categorical divisions, which we owe to “our” modernity. We divide those practices into “knowledge” versus “belief”, thus cutting through them with a knife that separates fact from fiction, reality from the imaginary. Or else we grant them, in good old ethnographic fashion, a holistic existence in the middle as social/symbolic practices. That middle, however, is simultaneously purified of everything else at the sides. It has nothing to do with how matters of nature really are. Actual communication with a tiger and even more so transfiguration or metamorphosis across the borders between species cannot be anything else but merely imaginary or symbolic efficacy. *No, I am not a toad, I am a turtle!* Those who take these things for real continue to fall out of the recognized scheme of modernity. To qualify as modern we still have to explain such stuff in another language, translate it into another order, etcetera. We must train hard to sublimate those practices by elevating them, for instance, to “pure” technologies of the self or, according to a better-rehearsed scheme, into the realm

of mythology... We know that our mode of mobilizing nature, of relating with it (through science and technology), is the only real one, while everything else is mere belief, even though it may display remarkable technical skills. Our “reality principle” thus has seamlessly survived the grand paradigmatic shift from categories to processes. The only difference is that we have learned that what we previously took to be “objective facts” is actually the outcome of communication processes. We merely have to replace those “objective facts” by the notion of “code”.

Buddhism has always claimed not to be a religion. We may take the cue from this claim to confront, as does Elke Marhöfer's film, those practices as nothing but practices, each of which produces its own immanence. The notion of “code” can and must be expanded in radical ways, as much as there is a sense that under the reductionist regime of capitalist valuation such “practice” remains acutely endangered, insofar it reaches out to a rather different outside: the multiple non-human agents with whom we share our collective worlds.















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120

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1.

125

Initially we just swam and played together with friends before we started to learn how to dive when I was 16 years old. I could do it properly when I was 18 or 19. There was nobody who taught us. We just enjoyed swimming, playing with friends. We went diving as an entertainment, as a habit.

Trade Relations

Oh Eunja and
Go Eulsaeng

Whenever I caught turban shells, they were sent to a canning factory. At that time they were very cheap, even after being processed at the factory. When I caught some fish they were cheap too, since there was no one who wanted to buy them, whereas today they are really expensive. Back then I couldn't make any money because there were so many fishes there. Ear shells also just got thrown away. Even the biggest ones, which were heavier than one kilogram. It was so cheap at that time.

Only young women can reach deep down into the sea. My legs and my hands are too slow now, like this. We have to work while holding our breath. That's why only young people can reach deep into the sea.

Sometimes I'm short of breath and when I dive deep down into the sea the pressure on the eardrums gets high, which is painful. That is why all women divers take medicines. All kinds of sedatives. Our ears only don't ache because we take medicines before diving. If we use flippers we can dive fast and if we wear a diving suit it's not cold. We take a lot of medicine so that our bodies don't hurt.

The people at city hall say that women divers are diving too often, which is why they tend to suffer from certain diseases. So we dive 18 days per month, and we do not go for more than 11 days in a row. They stopped us from diving more frequently. The woman divers are examined and X-rayed etcetera, for free. In the past woman divers used to sell [their goods] individually. But eventually the local government built houses for us and asked us to take a break for a few days because the work was so hard. The fishing village association divided us into ten groups and suggested to do joined work once every ten days and to divide the profits equally. For each village the provincial government set up a group. Originally each group had about 15 or 16 members but many people have died since then, so today there are only eight to ten members left. From a total of 150 people in the past only around 80 people remained. They do not go diving very often because they are old now. Many people have died.

Sometimes women divers might be amazed by big fishes they come across, however usually they are not frightened. If a woman dives down to a certain depth, she knows where she is. So we are not really scared, except when we meet baby

whales. Other fishes are not as big. Occasionally divers further away shout out to give us a warning sign. There are places where you find dry walleye pollack, brown seaweed etcetera. They can be found in both deep and shallow places, just like here.

If we go there, there is a lot of seaweed. It's growing thickly at the bottom of the sea. There are also places with turban shells, so sometimes we catch turban shells and sea cucumbers.

Women divers are diving not because they don't have any money. They have enough to live. They dive in the sea and they do earn some [extra] money by eagerly collecting things from the sea. However, nobody asks us to make money. In fact, people only tell us not to go. We do it for our own pleasure since the water is free. We only do it because we want to, otherwise we wouldn't do it.

Have you ever seen a rabbit in the water?

How could there possibly be a rabbit in the water? [...]

What is your name?

My family name is Oh, meaning a country.

Then what's your name?

Oh. At that time, my name was Boksun, but now it's Eunja.

My name is Eunja, but at that time [of the Japanese occupation] my name was Toyota Hukjung.

2.

When I reached the bottom of the sea for the first time, I could see this and that and I was afraid that some fish might appear. When I got into the water wearing diving goggles the turban shells suddenly looked bigger than usually, and ear shells that are actually small also looked bigger than usually, and even my own hands looked bigger when I looked at them with diving goggles on. That's what scared me.

Now we can sell goods, but in the past there weren't so many people who would buy anything. So we just took them home to eat, while nowadays we have to sell goods to make a living. It's been a long time since we made money from farming and cultivated [our own] vegetables to eat. In the past both water and tap water used to be free. Sanitation was free too, so much less money was required back then. Children only finished elementary school and didn't carry on studying. Nowadays it takes a lot of money to educate a grandson, a son or a daughter all the way up to university. I have to pay transportation fees for the siblings and give them some pocket money. In the past I hardly ever went to hospital but these days I have to go there because of minor ailments, which costs money too. So I do need money while there are only few opportunities to earn anything. Old people like us don't have many opportunities to make money.

Nowadays I am happy if I catch a sea urchin or an octopus. If there are no waves we go into the sea from this point. Normally I get on a boat and go far out. These days I take a break for one day in July and August. I go diving for nine days and then take a break for ten days each month because it's said that women divers get diseases. Some of us dive deeply into the sea, some as deep as ten meters. However, we don't go deeper than two or three meters, otherwise I get out of breath. In the past we didn't wear any clothes but now we do, so we can stay in the water even when it is cold. The diving suit for women divers allows us to stay in the water for about four hours during which we collect turban shells etcetera. When I can collect many turban shells I am happy. And if I manage to collect some turban shells and ear shells, and an octopus I can make some money. Even if I find just a few turban shells it earns me some money. Nowadays ear shells have become rare. While collecting them we are afraid that whales or sharks might turn up. My daughter-in-law is a manager. She used to be an office worker but eventually started trading. When the trading business went bankrupt however, she worked as an office clerk again. During the IMF economical crisis she lost her job and came here to become our manager.

What is your name?

Go Eulsaeng.

Oh Eunja and Go Eulsang talking to Che Choe, Olaf
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