

*Marvels of the East*

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 subjectposition 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 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 metaphysically 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.