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# Theory and its Double: Ideology and Ideograph in Orientalist Theory

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*Christopher Bush*

One understands more readily why jubilation attended to the theoretical among the Greeks: they had solved the problem until philosophers came along and attempted to ground everything in sense perception, in *aesthesia*, with a theorizing of their own, appropriated from the polis in ways as yet little understood, as the sole mediation.

—Wlad Godzich

## *1. Orientalism and its Discontents*

Orientalism is—and does not simply represent—a considerable dimension of modern political-intellectual culture, and as such has less to do with the Orient than with 'our' world.

—Edward Said

Edward Said's *Orientalism* is widely considered the starting point for all critical discussions of East-West literary relations. In this text Said argues that the Western political domination of the Orient was greatly assisted by a textualization process involving two major stages. First, "the Orient" itself was ordered and catalogued by expeditions, then transcribed into Western museums and historical discourses. As this essentially textual body was established, Said argues, the study of the Orient developed into the refinement of ignorance, a self-perpetuating body of knowledge which increasingly detached itself from its ostensible object of study (Said 62). Because "the Orient" was a set of textual practices, a Westerner could become an expert Orientalist without ever leaving home. James Clifford's break-down of Said's own multi-part definition of Orientalism outlines the fundamental ambiguity of *Orientalism's* approach:

... in the first and third of Said's 'meanings' Orientalism is concerned with something called the Orient, while in the second the Orient exists merely as the construct of a questionable mental operation. This ambivalence, which sometimes becomes a confusion, informs much of Said's argument. ... Said's concept of a 'discourse' vacillates between, on the one hand, the status of an ideological distortion of lives and cultures ... and, on the other, the condition of a persistent structure of signifiers that ... refers solely and endlessly to itself. (260)

Critical responses to *Orientalism* have been extensive and will not be rehearsed here.<sup>1</sup> The two main criticisms which are important to point out in this context are: (1) Said's failure to be consistently textual in his analyses, and (2) his tendency to overgeneralize about the discourses he is critiquing.

In terms of the first point, one could cite, for example, Said's conscious exclusion, based on Germany's relative lack of colonial activity, of the substantial body of German language work on the Orient. This omission is particularly important given the extent to which the German tradition provided the philosophical framework and philological underpinnings for much of the work Said does discuss. It would obviously be unfair to reproach anyone for failing to achieve universal, encyclopedic coverage of Orientalist scholarship, but the lacuna is significant to the extent that, despite gestures towards a textual definition of Orientalism, Said's study ultimately attempts to ground itself in an *experience* of the Orient.

It is no doubt true that, as Said writes, the Orient was orientalized because it could be. But this presupposes that the desire to orientalize pre-existed "the Orient" itself. If the construction of the Orient is in some sense an epiphenomenon, then, following through on the implications of Said's own argument, we must move beyond understanding Orientalist discourse merely as a foreign entity imposed upon the East. Rather, we must understand "the East" as an externalization, for lack of a better word, of tendencies "native" to the structure of certain cultural practices which identify themselves as Western. Thus while Said makes an original and important move away from empiricist models, his own insight calls for a supplementary analysis. It is as if Said has said, "Aha, you are suffering from a hallucination," but then fails to supplement his history of the hallucination with a history of the

illness, much less tackle the problem of how symptoms are or are not related to illnesses. It is not enough to know that the “real” Orient was disfigured—we must consider in greater depth the nature of the figuration, the face which would have been imposed upon it.

Clifford writes that:

the key issue raised by *Orientalism* concerns the status of *all* forms of thought and representation for dealing with the alien. Can one ultimately escape procedures of dichotomizing, restructuring, and textualizing in the making of interpretive statements about foreign cultures and traditions? If so, how? (261)

A further question poses itself: can one ultimately escape procedures of “dichotomizing, restructuring, and textualizing” in the making of interpretive statements about *any* culture or tradition—most especially one’s “own”? If so, how? *Orientalism* fails to relate its critique of orientalizing figures to a broader theory of figural language.

This lack of a broader theory of signification is related to our second criticism, *Orientalism*’s tendency to overgeneralize. One could well argue, for example, that the implicit violence of the “textualization” implied by Said is a basic technique of the human sciences, even one necessarily employed by Said himself. The text fails to make clear whether it is criticizing the politics of scholarly discourse in general, or whether it truly sees these methodologies as being in some sense peculiar to Orientalism. Orientalism is, as Clifford writes, “at times conflated with Western positivism, with general definitions of the primitive, with evolutionism, with racism. One could continue the list” (271).

Lisa Lowe has similarly criticized Said’s book for overgeneralizing about oppressor, oppressed, and the discourses separating and connecting them. She argues:

for a conception of orientalism as heterogeneous and contradictory . . . it is necessary to revise and render more complex the thesis that an ontology of Occident and Orient appears in a consistent manner throughout all cultural and historical moments, for the operation that leads to any discourse risks

misrepresenting far more heterogeneous conditions and operations. (Lowe 5-6)

Lowe's general point is very important in that a monolithic description of Orientalist discourses is indeed inadequate since it tends to reimpose the very fiction of Western homogeneity which it ought to be critiquing. It is precisely the persistent importance of Orientalism that is the clearest symptom of the West's lack of such a stable identity. Yet Lowe's approach risks making the term "Orientalism" meaningless—or rather involves a misconstruing of how meaning works. The appropriateness of the generalizing term "Orientalist" for describing diverse discourses can be determined not only by measuring it against the object of those discourses, but also by comparing them to each other. It is precisely because "the Orient" has been so many different places, things, and traditions that we can see that the history of the word has and will continue to sustain the history of the "idea." In short, I am suggesting a rhetorical analysis as a way of explaining the functional unity of a group of texts which are, indeed, widely divergent in subject matter and discursive formation. My goal is not to reduce Orientalism to a single trope, but rather open up the relationship between "the Orient" and certain general theoretical problems, preserving the tension between "theoretical" and "social-historical" issues in such a way that we can begin to understand Orientalism in terms which are not monolithic and yet account for the monolithic qualities of the fantasy.

I find Lowe's own remark that "orientalism may well be an apparatus through which a variety of concerns with difference is figured" a suggestive and useful generalization in this context, especially considering the importance of "difference" in recent critical and literary debates (8). It is indeed very often "the Orient" which is represented (or escapes representation) as the site of difference. Although, as Clifford notes:

it is less common today than it once was to speak of 'the East' . . . we still make casual reference to 'the West,' 'Western culture,' and so on. Even theorists of discontinuity and deconstruction such as Foucault and Derrida continue to set their analyses within and against a Western totality. (272)

In short, critical theory and Orientalism are by no means mutually exclusive.

Consider, for example, Kristeva's *Des chinoises* (1974), a now almost infamous example of how *not* to write about other cultures. In this text Kristeva attempts to develop a quasi-psychoanalytic paradigm to describe both the history and structure of Chinese culture, creating "a deliberate confusion and conflation of the paradigms of individual psychology and language acquisition, the history of language and civilization" (Lowe 148-49). Confucius is cast in the role of a Plato-Œdipus figure, whose work inflicted metaphysics upon his culture and, when the time came, brought repression into the lives of its individuals. Yet, according to Kristeva, Confucianism remained a quasi-foreign influence on Chinese culture, one which, unlike Western Platonism, never fully took root. Kristeva's China is both anti-Platonic and anti-Œdipal. It is with good reason therefore that Lowe critically views this construction of China as a displacement of the failed utopian impulses of French '68 politics:

In this sense all three figurations of China—as feminist, psychoanalytic, and leftist utopias—were indirect responses to the events of 1968; they attempted to continue the project of cultural politics begun in 1968, but in choosing to constitute as utopian a revolutionary experience outside Europe, they betrayed their disillusionment at the suppression of the French revolts. (140)

Most relevant in this context, however, are Lowe's remarks about general problems in Kristeva's (and other critics') methodology.<sup>2</sup> Lowe's "ultimate aim is to challenge and resist the binary logic of otherness by historicizing the critical strategy of identifying otherness as a discursive mode of production itself" (29). Regarding the text's two-part structure, Lowe observes that "the structuralist method utilized . . . constitutes the binary oppositions it ostensibly identifies" (142). Lowe reminds us, in short, that critical language is as performative as it is analytic.

Lowe's general conclusion is that the case of Kristeva "cautions us, as contemporary readers, to theorize our own positions and to scrutinize the logic through which we formulate our criticisms" (21). Perhaps no other individual has done this as thoroughly, specifically in the context of East-West literary relations, as

Gayatri Spivak. Spivak's general evaluation of French theory's treatment of non-Western cultures seems particularly pointed in Kristeva's case:

In spite of their occasional interest in touching the *other* of the West, of metaphysics, of capitalism, their repeated question is obsessively self-centered: if we are not what official history and philosophy say we are, who then are we (not), how are we (not)? ("French Feminism" 137)

Contrasting Kristeva's critical writings with the more systematically deconstructive texts of Derrida and Cixous, Spivak writes:

Kristeva's project, however, has been, not to *deconstruct* the origin, but rather to *recuperate*, archeologically and formulaically, what she locates as the potential originary space *before* the sign. Over the years this space has acquired names and inhabitants related to specific ideological sets . . . . ("French Feminism" 146)

As one of these "specific ideological sets," theoretical Orientalism invariably involves a theory of the origin of the sign. In significant contrast to the long-standing European tradition which viewed Egyptian and Chinese writings as related, sacred languages, Kristeva identifies Chinese characters as explicitly *not* hieroglyphic:

. . . si l'écriture a trait à la magie, elle est loin de s'arroger une sainteté, d'obtenir une valeur sacrée, au contraire, l'écriture est le *synonyme* du *pouvoir politique et gouvernemental* et se confond avec la fonction politique. (*Le langage* 84)

Chinese writing, unlike ideological Western discourse, explicitly displays its secular origin and function. Moreover, Kristeva understands ideographs as interstitial traces ("*le tracé*," *Le langage* 79), aligning Chinese writing with her general valorization of the syntactical and "horizontal" against the semantic and "vertical"—the former said to be conducive to materialism and desire, the latter to metaphysics and theology.

Thus while Kristeva's treatment of the Chinese language may ultimately be as mystifying as those of, say, early translations of Egyptian hieroglyphics, its Marxist and Freudian claims should

prevent us from immediately dismissing it as an "orientalist fantasy about the other." The privileged status of the hieroglyphic in Freud's theory of dreams and in Marx's theory of the commodity should be enough to remind us, again, that we cannot simply oppose Orientalism and theory, particularly if our objection to the latter is based on its being imperialist fantasy. While several critics have treated "Orientalism" in Tel Quel theory, to my knowledge none has yet considered Orientalism as theory. Given the central importance of "writing" in modern theory, we might begin by taking a look at the role of Oriental languages in the most influential theory of writing to have emerged from the proximity of the Tel Quel group, Derrida's *De la grammatologie*.

## *II. Ideographs and ideology in logocentrism*

According to Derrida, the Western philosophical tradition's treatment of language is fundamentally "logocentric." The logos, according to one definition, is the conjunction of *ratio* and *oratio*, reason and speech.<sup>3</sup> This conjunction, Derrida argues, almost invariably leads to a hierarchical relationship between thought, speech, and writing. According to this schema, thought, in its outward movement, becomes increasingly constrained by the growing materiality of that in which it finds form. Common sense and Western metaphysics tell us that written words are material, culturally specific things which precede any given instance of their use. Spoken words are a little different, born out of the specificity of the "living" situation in which they are produced; speech is more production than repetition, and we generally distinguish between reading aloud and speaking. Thought would then be a kind of pure production, virtually devoid of any element of repetition, materiality or, therefore, cultural specificity.

Derrida argues that "la secondarité qu'on croyait pouvoir réserver à l'écriture affecte tout signifié en général" (*Grammatologie* 16). No primal experience of sensory data ever takes place prior to being made intelligible. And intelligibility involves the imposition of identity, ideality, in short, an element of repetition. Even the most "primary" experience comes to us as a kind of writing ("arché-écriture"). Derrida's point is therefore not to prioritize empirical writing over speech, but rather to suspend the way of thinking that always valorizes what comes "first." Both writing and speech are



secondary, but in such way that their belatedness is not merely an alibi for the primacy of something else.

Because it is so easy to argue that the materiality of its signifiers is secondary to its "signifieds," alphabetic writing supports logocentrism. "Logocentrism" (or "phonologocentrism") therefore requires the effacement of writing in the logos.<sup>4</sup> Strategies for this effacement of course vary among different "Western" philosophers, yet each is ultimately compelled to reduce writing to a moment in the development of speech:

Cette téléologie conduit à interpréter comme crise passagère et accident de parcours toute irruption du non-phonétique dans l'écriture, et l'on serait en droit de la considérer comme un ethnocentrisme occidental, un primitivisme pré-mathématique et un intuitionnisme préformaliste. (*Grammatologie* 59)

This alphabetic teleology appears not only in such explicitly teleological theories as Hegel's, but acts as a normative guideline in many modern writings on the "development" of languages. Erik Iversen, for example, in a book explicitly devoted to tracing Western misunderstandings of Ancient Egyptian, writes:

... the Egyptians had actually created the theoretical background for the abolition of all other graphic elements, phonetical as well as ideographical ... Strangely enough they never took this natural consequence of their own discoveries, but retained all the complexities of the original system throughout their history. (19)

If metaphysics confirms the primacy of thought by denigrating the materiality of the signifier, an undoing of this hierarchy by ideographic script is perhaps possible. Following the logic of Derrida's own arguments, it should be impossible for ideograms to *represent* the nature of language more truly than alphabetically-represented words; at best they could allegorize the extent to which language is always "writing." Nevertheless, Derrida describes ideographs as having made possible "un puissant mouvement de civilisation se développant hors de tout logocentrisme" (*Grammatologie* 138). This theoretically suspect "hors de tout logocentrisme" is also, as Zhang Longxi has demonstrated in *The*

*Tao and the Logos*, historically inaccurate: “logocentric” discourse is by no means alien to the Chinese philosophical tradition. In a more general vein, Spivak, in her “Translator’s Preface” to *Grammatology*, writes:

The relationship between logocentrism and ethnocentrism is indirectly invoked in the very first sentence of the ‘Exergue.’ Yet, paradoxically, and almost by a reverse ethnocentrism, Derrida insists that logocentrism is a property of the *West* . . . the *East* is never seriously studied or deconstructed in the Derridean text. Why then must it remain, recalling Hegel and Nietzsche in their most cartological humors, as the name of the limits of the text’s knowledge? (lxxxii)

There is a subtle but great theoretical danger in complacently criticizing or even naming “the West” and thereby reinforcing, negatively, the power of Eurocentrism. An ostensibly critical relationship to the other often serves merely to support one’s own identity.

We have seen that what is at stake in the *Tel Quel* vision of Oriental languages is the possibility of a non- or anti-ideological semiotics. The East Asian ideograph has, in the group’s articulation of a critical theory of the sign, the status of a unique example. As such, it ceases to be an *example* and functions, rather, as a pseudo-empirical phantasm, negotiating between theoretical possibility and historical example. This brings us to the utopian Orient of Roland Barthes.

### III. Reading the Empire of Signs

. . . la Chine ne donne à lire que son Texte politique. Ce Texte est partout: aucun domaine ne lui est soustrait; dans tous les discours que nous avons entendus, la Nature (le naturel, l’éternel) ne parle plus . . .

—*Alors la Chine?*

. . . I read Japan as a text . . . while our theater is based, above all, on expressiveness—everything Japanese seems to me to be the fortuitous markings of a text. In Japan, I am constantly reading signs. . . . They are not written in books but traced on the silk of life . . .

—*The Grain of the Voice*

In his best-selling *L'empire des signes* (1970), Roland Barthes insists that he writes "sans prétendre en rien représenter ou analyser la moindre réalité (ce sont les gestes majeurs du discours occidental)" (9). Rather Japan is "simplement" to provide him with "une réserve de traits" with which to explore "l'idée d'un système symbolique inouï," even "la fissure même du symbolique" (10, 11). Barthes maintains that his book is not about Japan, but is essentially an *allegory* (the term is not his) of a culture free from the metaphysics of meaning, a culture consciously aware of the inscriptional nature of language, indeed of "experience."

Yet there are a number of problems with Barthes's claiming *not* to represent the Orient. First, it is ultimately untenable for Barthes to describe his selections of Japanese images as "simplement une réserve de traits." The specificity of his tropes necessarily haunts the text and is, indeed, the basis of its intelligibility. It is not merely that Barthes cannot escape from a net of intertextuality; rather, he faces a problem which inevitably structures all discourses which identify themselves as Western. It is not possible for a Westerner to write *as a Westerner* without the Orient. Barthes is, in effect, writing: "I am not being Western and Orientalist; I make no claims to know about the Orient, that which is not the West, and am, therefore, not like other Westerners, Westerners being those who are not like Orientals." Writing Orientalist texts without reference to the "real" Orient (except as a "reserve of features") is precisely what Orientalism is, by Said's definition, all about.

*L'empire des signes* is part of Barthes's career-long concern with ideology critique. Recalling Spivak's "cartological humors," Barthes writes "il est dérisoire de vouloir contester notre société sans jamais penser *les limites mêmes* de la langue par laquelle (rapport instrumental) nous prétendons la contester" (16-17, my emphasis). Barthes is working with a concept of ideology very similar to that described by de Man as "aesthetic ideology." In the simplest possible terms: one thinks one is seeing, experiencing, when in fact one is reading. Language allows culture to pass itself off as Nature, and is ideological to the extent that it effaces itself as a set of conventions with a material history, and begins to appear as a more-or-less transparent "medium" between reality and a consciousness. An ideological use of language is one in which language's performative qualities are effaced, whose material means of production appear as secondary to the meanings which they

themselves have created, and continue to create. "In the West, in our culture, our languages, we must wage a deadly serious and historic battle with the signified . . . within a nihilistic perspective in an almost Nietzschean sense of the term . . ." (Barthes, *Grain* 85-86). Again "the Orient" functions to delimit "the West" as Barthes's quest for an alternative semiotics takes him to an explicitly utopian Orient: ". . . la Chine est *paisible*. La paix . . . n'est-elle pas cette région, pour nous utopique, où la guerre des sens est abolie?" (*Alors* 10). The East, in short, "c'est la fin de l'herméneutique" (*Alors* 8).

In the Orient alienated production is replaced by inscrip-tional work, *because of its language*: "la structure même du japonais ramène ou retient ces êtres dans leurs qualité de *produits*, de signes coupés de l'alibi référentiel par excellence: celui de la chose vivante" (*L'empire* 16).<sup>5</sup> Japanese writing (hand-writing only, presumably) is therefore an allegory or perhaps an example—this, we will see, is a crucial question—of a utopian form of labor. Not only is the Japanese sign not to be read as referring to a living thing, it is not to be read at all: "non point le *lire* (lire son symbolisme) mais refaire le trajet de la main qui l'a écrit: écriture véritable, puisqu'elle . . . permet de refaire le tracé de son travail" (*L'empire* 60). According to the definitions outlined above, Japanese is a non-ideological language.

When "dehumanizing" the voice in this passage on the Bunraku puppet theater, Barthes seems to be trying to paraphrase Derrida's critique of the primacy of the voice:

La voix: enjeu réel de la modernité, substance particulière de langage, que l'on essaye partout de faire triompher. Tout au contraire, le *Bunraku* a une idée *limitée* de la voix . . . ce que la voix extériorise, en fin de compte, ce n'est pas ce qu'elle porte (les « sentiments »), c'est elle-même, sa propre prostitution . . . (*L'empire* 69-71)

In the Bunraku theater "*la substance vocale reste écrite* [my emphasis] . . . [le *Bunraku*] montre le geste, il laisse voir l'acte, il expose à la fois l'art et le travail, réserve à chacun d'eux son écriture" (*L'empire* 71-4). "Tout cela," Barthes notes "rejoint, bien sûr, l'effet de distance recommandé par Brecht" (*L'empire* 74). The ideological implications are, not surprisingly, similar as well:

... si le manipulateur n'est pas caché, pourquoi, comment voulez-vous en faire un Dieu? ... la marionnette ne singeant plus la créature, l'homme n'est plus une marionnette entre les mains de la divinité, le *dedans* ne commande plus le *dehors*. (*L'empire* 84)

Like a Kristevan ideograph, the Bunraku puppet-master represents:

un cachet *civil* (non théâtral), son visage est offert à la lecture des spectateurs; mais ce qui est si soigneusement, si précieusement donné à lire, c'est qu'il n'y a rien à lire; on retrouve ici cette exemption du sens qui illumine véritablement tant d'œuvres de l'Orient. (Barthes, "Leçon" 30)

Yet how can Barthes claim to present us with *examples*, even *illustrations* of inscription? The problem is the same as that identified by Spivak in the case of Kristeva. By definition inscription is prior not only to reading but also to "experience"—it is the very condition of their possibility. To the extent that his own text fails to be allegorical ("I'm using some 'Japanese' tropes to allegorize an alternative symbolic practice"), but is rather symbolic ("My text represents a (perhaps fictional) reality in which there exists an alternate semiotic system"), Barthes has misunderstood Derridean inscription as a phenomenology of the production of meaning.

Furthermore, if all language is structured as the inscription of traces, then alphabetic writing cannot change this as a "fact," but merely impose a sort of false consciousness. How must this tension between linguistic and phenomenological models be read: "The Japanese way is better, because it is explicitly and self-consciously graphic," or "The West should look to Japan, because in Japanese culture productions Westerners can read, as other, the essence of their own?" Although Barthes has instructed his audience to read his text allegorically, the force of his own style causes him to slip into symbolic diction. When, for example, he writes of newspaper photographs as citations—"cette écriture n'écrit rien (ou écrit: rien)" (*L'empire* 122)—, this small stylistic turn substantializes *rien*. The example is extreme: if the word "nothing" is referential, then a phenomenological model of language has scored an absolute, if somehow always temporary, victory over linguistic models of

language. Barthes's text is not really about writing, but about consciousness.

Not only does Barthes see Japanese writing (which is understandable enough), Japan becomes, in his text, the place where language shows itself. While he seeks to dismiss the temporal and causal models which support a historicist concept of Orient as origin, I would argue that the danger here is less that of an ontological Origin, and more Barthes's tendency to make appear things which can't—or aren't supposed to be able to—appear. Barthes's Orient ultimately emerges as a sort of quasi-origin which visibly signifies its own trace-structure: his Orient is where we can witness inscription, the moment, even (against Derrida) the *site* where the hallucination of origin is effected. This Orient is what the Orient has always been: where or when one can see the origin—the theater of theory.

If it is true that Barthes *reads* Japan this is possible only because he *sees* Japanese. This is all well and good except that Barthes interprets the alienation necessary to this reversal as something built into Japanese culture. He understands his experiences as a foreign reader to be those of a native Japanese *consciousness*. In Barthes's view, "Japan" is, even for the Japanese, a kind of living Brechtian theater in which culture never pretends to be nature. This reminds us that Barthes's Oriental theater is not only Oriental, but also theater; the "example" of Bunraku theater is by no means fortuitous. Barthes's interest in the art form goes back at least to 1968, when "Leçon d'écriture" was published in the summer issue of *Tel Quel*, the same issue which published "La Révolution ici maintenant." Nearly all of Barthes's early writings pertain to the theater and its central role in culture.

It is therefore initially surprising to find Barthes claiming that in "all the great periods of theater, costume had a powerful semantic value; it was not there only to be seen, it was also there to be *read*, it communicated ideas, information, or sentiments" ("Diseases" 46). While early essays such as "The Diseases of Costume" praise the readable costume, Barthes's later treatment of the Bunraku praises precisely the visual qualities of the readable. In the early work Barthes suggests a kind of happy medium:

the good costume must be material enough to signify and transparent enough not to turn its signs into parasites . . . it

must pass unnoticed in itself yet it must also exist . . . it must be both material and transparent: we must see it but not look at it. ("Diseases" 49-50)

We see here the early Barthes's hesitancy to valorize openly the opacity of the signifier; a rhetoric of health guides his argument, rather than one of *jouissance*.

What Barthes likes about the theater of the Orient is precisely that it has eliminated theatricality: "Ce qui est expulsé de la scène, c'est l'hystérie, c'est-à-dire le théâtre lui-même; et ce qui est mis à la place, c'est l'action nécessaire à la production du spectacle: le travail se substitue à l'intériorité" ("Leçon" 30). Barthes later uses the same language which he had used to describe the Bunraku puppet theater to describe the untheatrical theater of Chinese life: "sans théâtre, sans bruit, sans pose, bref sans hystérie" (*Alors* 12). Both ideology and the Orient are, for Barthes, problems of presentation.

#### IV. Theory and Its Double: Artaud's Vision of an Oriental Theater

[Comme l'alchimie,] le théâtre aussi doit être considéré comme le Double non pas de cette réalité quotidienne et directe dont il s'est peu à peu réduit à n'être que l'inerte copie, aussi vaine qu'édulcorée, mais d'une autre réalité dangereuse et typique, où les Principes, comme les dauphins, quand ils ont montré leur tête s'empresment de rentrer dans l'obscurité des eaux.

—Antonin Artaud

In a passage like this it seems that Artaud is advocating something like a Platonic theater in which "les Principes" would manifest themselves directly to mortal eyes. Yet it is characteristic of Artaud's thought that *what* appears is less essential than *how* it appears:

Dans ce théâtre toute création vient de la scène, trouve sa traduction et ses origines même dans une impulsion psychique secrète qui est la Parole d'avant les mots. . . . C'est une sorte de Physique première, d'où l'Esprit ne s'est jamais détaché. (91-92, my emphasis)

Thus what appear in Artaud's ideal theater are not Ideas, for they cannot be said to have an existence outside of or prior to their appearance. What we would have, then, would be a quasi-material theatrical:

langage par signes, par gestes et attitudes ayant une valeur idéographique . . . [dont les gestes] représentent des idées, des attitudes de l'esprit, des aspects de la nature, et cela d'une manière effective, concrète . . . comme ce langage oriental qui représente la nuit par un arbre sur lequel un oiseau qui a déjà fermé un œil commence à fermer l'autre . . . On voit que ces signes constituent de véritables hiéroglyphes, où l'homme, dans la mesure où il contribue à les former, n'est qu'une forme comme une autre . . . (59)

We find here the now-familiar theme of the disruption of humanistic and referential language by the force of an ideograph which presents its own taking-place. Artaud's is a theater of opaque signs which do not claim to refer to the phenomenal world, but rather present the violence of their own inscription. Such an Oriental theater would therefore be a solution to what Artaud understands to be a crisis of modern consciousness: a cleft between signs and the things to which they refer. Because the thing to which the pure theatrical sign refers can only be said to exist in that sign, there is no possibility of dissociation.

Artaud is particularly fond of the Balinese theater, whose "acteurs avec leurs robes géométriques semblent des hiéroglyphes animés" (82-83).<sup>6</sup> Artaud is not intending to be metaphorical when he compares the actors to hieroglyphics, for "on peut dire que l'esprit des plus antiques hiéroglyphes présidera à la création de ce langage théâtral pur" (193). In fact, he attributes to Oriental languages the same powers he attributes to the pure theatrical sign:

Il y a d'autres langages au monde que notre langage occidental qui a opté pour le dépouillement, pour le dessèchement des idées et où les idées nous sont présentées à l'état inerte sans ébranler au passage tout un système d'analogies naturelles comme dans les langages orientaux. (168)



Not only would Artaudian theater be *like* an Oriental language, the two are all but identical; Artaud's theater is a language, Oriental languages are theater.

The dream of such a language is by no means unique to the 20th century avant-garde, as Derrida's citation of Aristotle reminds us:

De même que l'écriture n'est pas le même pour tous les hommes, les mots parlés ne sont pas non plus les mêmes, alors que les états d'âme dont ces expressions sont *immédiatement les signes (semeia protos)* sont identiques chez tous, comme sont identiques aussi les choses dont ces états sont les images. (*Grammatologie* 22)

Ideograph, like Aristotle's *semeia protos*, are somehow both intelligible *and* an unmediated image of the thing to which they refer. Terms such as ideo-graph, ideo-gram, and hiero-glyph (none of which is taken from the language which they are used to describe) indicate in their very form their fantasy-function: to bind, in a sign which takes properties of both realms, the material to the linguistic world.<sup>7</sup>

Barthes's theater allows us to see that, in general terms, both Brecht's and Artaud's theaters are about making appear the basis of appearance. Their theater is the theater of theater, their theory a theory of theory.<sup>8</sup> The crucial difference between Brecht and Artaud is their understanding of the nature of this ordinarily concealed condition of appearance. For Brecht (at least as he is generally read), ordinary theater is made possible by an ideological distortion which conceals the means and modes of production, allowing only product to appear—and that not as product, but as something like Nature. This state of affairs is historically specific and might ultimately be overcome. Artaud's critique of traditional theatrical representation is much more broad-based—it is not bourgeois capitalism which conceals the means of representation, but the entire metaphysical framework of Western culture. For Artaud, the birth of a new theater would signal less the coming of a new period in history than the end of history as Westerners understand it. Both theaters are intended to disrupt our normal process of theatrical reading and force us to see (its workings). Yet neither is a valorization of seeing over reading (after all this is what traditional representation does—pass off our readings of it as “seeing”)—rather one

sees that one is reading. What was read as seeing phenomena is seen as reading a text.

This rather abstract way of comparing two very different dramatic theorists is meant only to indicate the way in which they come together in Barthes's conception of a revolutionary theater. Barthes combines Brechtian and Artaudian theory, creating a tension between an understanding of ideology as an historically specific problem, and an understanding of "ideology" as inherent to Western rationality, or even to language as such. This tension has proven productive for more than one Marxian critic, yet remains haunted by the possibility that language and ideology are all but indistinguishable. Such a conclusion would not mean the end of ideology critique, but does, or should, problematize any attempts to point to *examples* of non-ideological languages.

#### V. Phenomenality and Critique

... it is curious to observe the extent to which the changing aspect on Egyptological and hieroglyphical problems in the various epochs and periods, reflects and illustrates their changing attitude towards artistic, literary and scientific problems in general.

—Erik Iversen

Our summary of Barthes's tourist activities in Japan summarizes the two-fold project of post-structuralism as the whole: to read the world and to see language. This chiasmus is, however, a troubled one: the world can be read *like* a language, language being material *like* the world, etc.<sup>9</sup> If it is true that "chiasmic reversals secure, by the very movement of the inversion of the link that exists between opposite poles (i.e., through a back-stretched connection), the agreement of a thing at variance with itself," it is equally true that "all the chiasm achieves . . . is a substitution of a substitution, by which it prolongs the rhetorical delusion of the text as such" (Gasché xvii-xviii).

The problem of "the Orient" is a kind of working out of the problem of appearance-haunted-by-language, the problem of needing to orient oneself in two worlds at once: the linguistic and the phenomenal.<sup>10</sup> If the relationship between these suns, and the worlds which they let appear, is chiasmic, then neither is a meta-

phor for the other, neither is the origin of the other, neither can be saved from the other. Moreover,

tout ce qui, dans le discours sur la métaphore, passe par le signe *eidos*, avec tout son système, s'articule sur l'analogie entre le regard de *nous* et le regard sensible, entre le soleil intelligible et le soleil visible. . . . La philosophie, comme théorie de la métaphore, aura d'abord été une métaphore de la théorie. (Derrida, "Mythologie" 303)

We find in the critique of Orientalism the problem that exists today in much political critical theory. What is it that Western theorists are trying to save from Orientalism—the Orient? Wouldn't this be akin to saving Uqbar from Borges? How does one rescue a textual effect from the text that effects it? There is something supremely Western about trying to be *not* Orientalist, something fantastically hubristic about the implied possibility of universal subjectivity, an implication which always threatens to turn sour the good will to struggle against racism, ethnocentrism, sexism, logocentrism. While the obvious blind spots and prejudices of Orientalist discourse need to be criticized, it should also be remembered that much of this material was precisely *critical* theory in the sense that it often represented the West's best effort to see beyond itself, to understand its own specificity by coming to know the specificity of an other. To put things a bit baldly: Orientalism is always already critique of Orientalism, and vice versa. In the case of Barthes's *L'empire des signes*, it was ultimately his very disavowal of any claim to represent the Orient as a real place which allows us to read in his pseudo-allegory an allegory of the very essence of the Orient: a figure of Western discourse, one which presents itself as an experience of the Other. And it is not merely one figure among others, but the outside which constitutes our discourse precisely to the extent that it is "ours."

My larger point in this discussion has been to show that Orientalism and critical theory are by no means mutually exclusive—in fact, I would argue that they are in certain important ways the same operation. It is often precisely in delimiting ourselves that we find ourselves; in light of the booming cultural studies business in this country (and whatever else it may be, it is also business), this seems important to remember. If, as Said argues, the Orient has been an essential trope in the self-definition of modern Western

culture, it is, I think, no less true that the very effort to critique this trope, the effort to erase the rhetoric about other cultures and get at the phenomenal truth beneath it, has been equally essential. The history of the linguisticization of reality (which Said sees as the essential operation of Orientalism) is chiasmically related to another history—the dream of a phenomenal language. The (to unreading Western eyes) overtly graphic qualities of its languages made the Orient a perpetual candidate site for the pursuit of this dream.<sup>11</sup> It is revealing that Anatole France's Polyphilos creates "un fragment d'hymne védique" reminiscent of "la vieille mythologie orientale" by *defiguralizing* a philosophical sentence, by reviving, putting "life" back into *and* reliteralizing its previously effaced metaphors. While it is not untrue that "orientalization" might be described as the imposition of Western figure onto Eastern reality, it might be more useful to think of this process as the recovery (in a double sense) of the "reality" beneath Western figure, the "discovery" in the East of a defiguralized reality. Dreams of a language of (sensory or idealist) immediacy have as their necessary corollary the imposition, often violent, of figures onto the world.

Fiction and theory, in short, seem to have a way not of negating each other, but rather of perpetuating each other—or, better, of perpetuating each other by negating each other. Whichever is valorized, each provides an alibi for the other. Truth, it seems, is no stranger to fiction, at least in *theory*. Granted that there is a legitimate urgency to cries for a "return" to culture and politics, it nevertheless seems that the study of relations between East and West, and between discourses and things, may also benefit from the quieter pathos of rhetorical analysis:

At the core of the chiasm one sees either an absence of contact between infinitely distant terms or terms contaminated by each other to such an extent that all attempt to distinguish between them corresponds to an arbitrary decision or act of violence. (Gasché xxvi)

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### Notes

1. See Loeb for bibliographical information.

2. As Lowe also discusses, the French intellectual left's turn toward China no doubt also reflected their disappointment with the Soviet-supported and -supporting PCF.

3. The ratio /oratio formulation is from Zhang Longxi's *The Tao and the Logos*.

4. When opposing a "grammatology" to a "phonology," it must be remembered that what is bad about phonocentrism, if I may put it so bluntly, is not its valorization of the voice *per se* (which is no more or less primary than empirical writing), but rather the fact that "the voice" is merely an alibi for "the mind." Phono-logy is psycho-logy, ideo-logy. A "grammatology" would, therefore, be not an anti-phonetic but an anti-ideological practice. This does not explain away Derrida's text as "Marxist" but does clarify somewhat the otherwise confusingly revolutionary tone of the opening chapter.

5. Kristeva similarly suggests that "les idéogrammes chinois sont non seulement des désignations d'objets, mais des désignations de désignations, c'est-à-dire des dessins de gestes" (*Chinoises* 85). Put in Saussurian terms, Chinese signifiers don't claim to point to referents, instead they know that they point to signifieds. The Chinese are close to nature—not the phenomenal world, but rather that essentially gestural language which is natural to man.

6. His praise of the actors "mechanical" qualities ("Ces roulements mécaniques d'yeux, ces moues des lèvres, ce dosage des crispations musculaires, aux effets méthodiquement calculés et qui enlèvent tout recours à l'improvisation spontanée . . .") would later be echoed by Barthes in his description of the Bunraku (Artaud 84; Barthes, *L'empire* 74-75).

7. Artaud uses "hieroglyphic" and "ideograph" interchangeably, seldom making distinctions between various "Oriental" languages.

8. From the Greek verb *theorein*, to look at, to contemplate, to survey.

9. This is one possible, if necessarily temporary, solution to a fundamental problem: meaning has as a prerequisite the irreducible possibility of the non-coincidence of language and phenomenon. If signs are wholly equal to the things to which they refer, meaning cannot take place. If, on the other hand, the order of words is utterly alien to the world of things, then meaning has nothing to do with that world. See Derrida's "La mythologie blanche."

10. I hope that I have been able to make it apparent that the pun connecting orientation and orientalization is not fortuitous. What links them is a certain conception of truth which seeks to weave together meaning and phenomenal events—as sense, *sens*, *Sinn*.

11. In fact, if “the Orient” is to be understood as the place of visible writings, this provides some explanation for the geo-cultural heterogeneity of the many places described as Oriental.

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