

The Neutral View: Roland Barthes' Representations of Japan and China

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Abstract

Roland Barthes visited Japan and China in the 1970s. He recorded his travel experiences in two contrasting books, *Empire of Signs* (1982) and *Travels in China* (2012). The second book is written in notebook form, which, as such, was not prepared by the author for publication. The first book can be seen as a highly polished 'fictional' or aestheticized rendering of Japan and Japanese culture; the latter, on the other hand, is largely unmediated by the same aesthetic and aestheticizing concerns. This essay reads the two texts through the perspective of another of Barthes' texts, *The Neutral* (2005), which deals with the subject of conflict-free or non-judgemental modes of discourse in linguistic and cultural theory. I aim to show how a Neutral take on a region or people can offer a fairer or less prejudicial view than has happened hitherto in travel writing and travel narratives.

Keywords: travel writing, Barthes, representation, Japan, China, the Neutral, blandness

Most representations of others are self-representations, both in the individual sense and the larger cultural one. It is almost a truism of Western travel writing, for example, that the travel writer can never unpack his cultural baggage completely; there will always be a photo of Mum, an Argyle sock or a patented Sheffield Steel toenail clipper left tucked away in a side-pocket of his tote. What the writer sees and writes is compromised at the outset. He may strive to erase traces of cultural bias in his narrative, but will almost certainly fail, if not through the domestication inherent in the organizational impulse (Youngs 184), then through inter-discursive promptings and maskings.¹

Roland Barthes argues that it is impossible to know the other because the writer can never be free of what he calls *doxa*, public opinion, received ideas, the prevailing viewpoint (*Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* 70–71; Herschberg-Pierrot *passim*). He even suggests that such knowledge is undesirable (*Empire* 3): for knowledge of the other demarcates; it reduces and confines, eventually providing the template by which all others may be known (Blanton 109). This can lead to the colonialist tendency, for example, to see Europe as the repository of Civilization, Africa as the scene of the tribal and pre-modern and East Asia as a metaphor for the hypermodern in all its dimensions.

In cultural theory, the standard response to this has been, at least since the 1980s, as follows: if we could see cultures “not as organically unified and stable monoliths but as negotiated present processes” (Clifford 273), then we might avoid generalizing, stereotyping, exoticizing, or simply ‘othering’ what is alien to our world (Clifford and Marcus; Pratt; Taussig; Youngs; Blanton; Thompson). Experiencing and then writing difference could become two-directional and even multi-directional, rather than purely one-way. The writing subject may not only write and be written by the written subject: she and her subject may also be re-written within a larger dynamic of cultural exchanges. Ideally, domestication would give way to the transactional. Such a response to time, place, people and knowledge might not only help to blur the steadfast focus on the truth of a representation but also, by its tentativeness and dialogicality, allow for what seems, in an increasingly inter-meshed global setting, a way of writing that, if not a fair and accurate representation, is at least a more empathetic one.

The crisis of representation will not go away. But it isn’t as serious as it sounds. While I might be unsure that a travel narrative is an accurate, true, just representation of reality, I’ll always be able to see it as an interpretation of that reality. Rather than feeling that a representation is always false and therefore unjust, I should simply be cautious about its claims; I should, in other words, not think of it as innocent and unmotivated. But is that as good as it gets?

Perhaps there is a way out of this sort of representational impasse that doesn’t lead to qualified or hesitant readings. If the writer or reader could stop seeing the whole in the part, and start looking elsewhere, or just glance at the part itself without implying a whole, he or she need not become bogged down in issues of truth to reality or the whole business of truth-claims at all. Why make any claims in the first place? Why not just look askance?

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In what follows, I discuss Roland Barthes’ two travel books on Japan and China, one published in 1970, the other posthumously in 2009. I consider each through the medium of Barthes’ own thoughts on what (following Structuralist thought generally) he calls the Neutral (*Le Neutre*).

¹ The reference is not just to Foucauldian discourse but also to Jean-François Lyotard’s argument that no testimony, and implicitly, no representation, can ever do justice to the original experience or subject. See *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, translated by Georges Van Den Abbeele, Minneapolis, University of Minneapolis Press, 2011.

The book on this subject was first published in 2002 but formed the body of a series of lectures at the Collège de France from 1977 to 1978.

In Barthes' book,² the Neutral displaces the neither/nor, either/or type of opposition that Saussurian linguistics finds at the heart of meaning-production in Western discourse (7–11). If I say one thing, it will only be because I didn't say another. While this sort of approach has been shoved to one side in recent years, in favour of more flexible sets of relational distinctions, Barthes' argument for a Neutral that “dodges”, “baffles” or “outplays” (*déjoue*) the contrastive machinery of meaning-production, which he calls “unshakeable” (41), still seems pertinent.

Barthes stresses the conflictual nature of meaning-production (7). One term will always lose out. The Neutral does not seek to recover that term; it does not aim at an equality of terms; it is not even an area of greyness between terms (9–11). The Neutral is an attempt to step outside the play of power and hierarchy intrinsic to any form of oppositionality; it is an evasion, bodily and affective, that thwarts the game, displacing conflict and the supervention of one term or set of terms over another by, for example, the writer/speaker/observer oscillating, retreating, being indifferent, remaining silent, or simply falling asleep. The Neutral way of writing offers signs-in-themselves or “twinklings” (*scintillations*), as Barthes calls them (10), shimmers on the surface—fictions that by their refusal to assert one thing over another escape the snap and crush of judgement.³

In *Empire of Signs*, Barthes constructs a system, which he calls ‘Japan’, that seeks not to represent or analyse any cultural or historical reality—the “major gestures of Western discourse” (4). His Japan, he claims, is an invention, created out of a reserve of real cultural and historical features, to be sure, but without using them as veridical indices of the reality elsewhere. For Barthes, reading these features leads to something like the Zen notion of *satori*, a moment of awareness or vision that causes the subject and knowledge itself to vacillate. He takes certain cultural elements that recur in Western discourse's perception of Japan in the 1970s (or, indeed, today)—tea ceremonies, chopsticks, sukiyaki, bowing, pachinko, packages, bunraku, haiku, sumo—and treats them as phenomena stripped of history. Suki-yaki, for example, becomes a spectacle rather than a meal (19–20), pachinko is both a voluptuous exercise and a type of diarrhoea (29), sumo is “a certain hefting, not the erethism of conflict”, heaving rather than struggling (40). In this treatment, surface supervenes over depth, the object of discourse is not transparent, not a glass behind which meanings are discoverable. Shimmerings are what the eye (or the sensate body) enjoys. The haiku does not encode anything. It is an impression, a surface without depth, an “apprehension of the thing as event and not as substance” (78); it does not accumulate significations. Where Western discourse must mean something, or is read, necessarily, for its meaning, the haiku, all surface and immediacy, baffles meaning. To make his point, Barthes gives several examples of haikus and the way Western discourse might strive to dig meaning out of them.

This is his example from Joko:

How many people
have crossed the Seta bridge
through the Autumn rain? (71)

Typically, in the West this will be read as an image of “fleeting time” (71). Autumn precedes winter; it presages a landscape of death; its rain stands for tears; it is a metaphor for aging and

² Unattributed page numbers throughout this paper refer to this work.

³ I am indebted to Rudolphus Teeuwen's “An Epoch of Rest: Roland Barthes's ‘Neutral and the Utopia of Weariness’”, *Cultural Critique*, 80, Winter 2012, 1–26, for much of this summary.

sadness. The Seta bridge becomes a symbol for the passing of humanity. For the Westerner, all such words entail “symbol and reasoning, metaphor and syllogism” (71).

The syllogistic, Barthes says, is often applied to Basho’s famous:

The old pond:
a frog jumps in:
Oh! the sound of the water. (71)

In a Western reading, the last line concludes the other two, which effectively reduces this haiku to an exercise in logic. For Barthes, the haiku should suspend language, not provoke it, which is the Way of the Neutral. This Neutral might better be understood by thinking of it as *nuance*, that which lies to one side of an assertion, inarticulate but there, whose ultimate effect is to disturb and preclude logic and conclusiveness. The sound of the old pond’s water can be heard even now, concluding nothing.

Yet, far from suspending language, Barthes’ use of Japan-the-faraway-place only seems to amplify it, provoking more and more words. In fact, his whole book is a lingual provocation, a proliferation of nuances, often in line with Western discursive procedures. It is also, despite its disavowals, a representation of Japan. He writes:

In the West, the mirror is essentially a narcissistic object: a man conceives a mirror only in order to look at himself in it; but in the Orient, apparently, the mirror is empty; it is a symbol of the very emptiness of symbols.... [T]he mirror intercepts only other mirrors, and this infinite reflection is emptiness itself.... Hence the haiku reminds us of what has never happened to us; in it we recognize a repetition without origin, an event without a cause, a memory without person, a language without moorings. (79)

Barthes clearly wants to turn this faraway place into a play of surfaces whose effect is to free him from the near-compulsive search for meaning and plenitude.

I want to look at this passage more closely. First, Barthes is talking about a Western need for enlightenment, for knowledge; second, he is talking about Japan (which he conflates with ‘the Orient’) and its system of signs without meaning (note the delicacy of that qualifier ‘apparently’, which remembers the earlier disavowals, even as it enables the locutions, the assertions, to follow), gestures without depth. But third, he is ultimately not doing either of these things: he is talking about the Neutral, that which escapes the implicit opposition of the previous two. I take him at his word. While I could dismiss the first two approaches as oppositional and imposed, the third seems transactional and dialogic to the extent that it escapes the sorts of cultural codifications that conventionally, in the West at least, impose themselves on the nation known as Japan.

For this is how he wants to view his ‘Japan’—as a sort of pretext for a Neutral view of things as he encounters them on his travels. This Neutral, this vagrancy in the streets of meaning-production, is a pretext, in turn, for “the possibility of a difference, of a mutation, of a revolution in the propriety of symbolic systems” (3). I take the Neutral, then, as Barthes subtly works it through his own texts,⁴ as an enabling strategy for responding to other cultures, communities and people with as little judgement, assertion, generalization or reductionism as possible. Accordingly, I will look at his own account of his 1974 visit to China, recently published as *Travels in China*. The book is made up of Barthes’ notebooks; it is neither a finished account, in the sense that Barthes’ might have understood it, nor a redaction. It has not been overly domesticated, or twisted into shape by discursive constraints. As such, it affords me the opportunity to recover a Neutral view of China.

⁴ See particularly *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1977) and *The Neutral* (2005), passim.

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Travels to China is unfinished in that it is composed of the three diary notebooks Barthes compiled during his visit, which he had intended to use for a book (195–6). The visit lasted from 11 April to 4 May, a matter of just over three weeks.

At around this time, French intellectuals were galvanized by China's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. The radical journal *Tel Quel* had broken from the French Communist Party to declare its support for Maoism. The editorial team, which included Barthes, Philippe Sollers, Julia Kristeva, François Wahl and Marcelin Pleynet, visited China as guests of the Chinese state travel bureau. The odds were stacked against free and open reportage from the start. The tour was tightly organized, with almost no opportunity for unsupervised interaction with the people or country.

Barthes' notes are terse, impressionistic and yet heavily annotated with second thoughts or bracketed asides, and often accompanied by pencil sketches. The style is dry and tart, almost immediately so as boredom and disillusion kicks in. In Beijing, he writes: "Smells. Cabbages on the Square. Palace Museum. Wet dog, cheesy manure, sour milk" (11). Eighty pages later, in Luoyang, he notes with no change of tone or pace: "Stifling. Waited for the others outside the tomb, as well as a hundred and fifty people [*sic*]. Lovely weather. Peonies" (96). When his plane takes off for home, he writes "Phew!" and draws a square round the word (193).

Near the beginning, at a printing works in Beijing, an aside states: "It's always the same: the proles are good-looking—heart-melting, needing help—but as soon as they become Cadres, their faces change (our guides, the Official). It's insoluble" (17). Insolubility is thematic. Barthes cannot get beyond doxa—or party-line, if you like—which he says, in a key image, is spread over China like a tablecloth with no folds in it (43).

The text lacks the rapture of *Empire of Signs*. It is busy with assertions of the author's boredom, weariness, discomfort (he suffers insomnia and migraines) and his constant irritation at not being able to interact with the people. The places he visits are uniform, policed by government minders, and there is no surprise and no interruption to the daily itinerary. One of the works on China that had excited him before his departure was Michelangelo Antonioni's film *Chung Kuo, Cina* (1972), which was criticised by the Chinese for focusing on busy street scenes and casual activities (kids running, old men exercising, women chatting, wind blowing leaves along the Great Wall's walkway and grainy close-ups of faces and heads turning in tea shops), rather than the State's industrial developments. The very elements that the Chinese authorities objected to were the ones that caught Barthes' eye. He laments that he wouldn't be able to produce a finished book without offending China's sensibilities in the same way as Antonioni had done (29). He also means that he wouldn't be able to produce a book like the one that had come out of his earlier Japan trip.

The best he can do, he says, is to write a book about 'us'—meaning the West of his time: "Any book on China cannot help but be exoscopic" (81). And indeed *Travels in China* is studded with comparisons—to the West, particularly to France, French cuisine, French landscape and French people. In Shanghai, an emaciated writer reminds him of Michel Foucault (26). On the way to Nanjing, the flat countryside and fields of rape are French (57). In Xian, peasant paintings evoke those by Henri Rousseau (125). This China offers little in the way of nuance. It becomes a place where French intellectuals and emblems of French culture spring up from fields and cities like jack-in-a-boxes.

Barthes says that there are two conventional ways of looking at China: "a gaze coming from the inside" is from the point of view of China; the second comes "from the point of view of the West". Both gazes are wrong: "The right gaze is the sideways gaze" (177). Towards the end, as he re-reads his notes, in order, he says, to make an index, he observes that if he were to turn his notes into a finished book, he would have to write either on the 'in' side, which is

“approving”, or ‘out’, which is “criticizing” (195) Both are impossible. He is left with the Antonioni approach: phenomenological (195)—which the Chinese hosts will, he jokes, condemn as “Criminal!”

So what is involved in a sideways gaze, in a phenomenological or criminal look? How does it anticipate or coincide with a neutral view? The first way of writing China is through what Barthes calls the “double-glazed window” of 1970s Chinese doxa, which is in turn composed of “bricks” (*briques*) or blocks, thick, impenetrable, sound-proofed, opaque (19). His approval will forever be implicit. But on the Huang-po River, under a rough sketch of a sampan, Barthes writes:

Boats, all sorts of boats.

And now the naval dockyard where we were yesterday (on the right).

Very beautiful: the big boats, at anchor, halted in the middle of the river, sometimes two by two, for kilometre after kilometre. And always sampans, sails with Brechtian colours.

After an hour and a half (at 3 p.m.) we reach the confluence with the Yangzi (after 28 kilometres, practically, of port, and boats of every kind). It widens out until the continuous line of real Ocean: blue grey, boat in the distance placed against this immensity. (45)

This is the second way of writing China, from the outside, though here its criticism is tacit. It is a view that first drew Barthes to China: land of sampans, Brechtian sails, the impressionistic, an aesthete’s idyll, the sort of panoramic ‘vision’ of the Huang Po that Antonioni had offered in *Chung Kuo, Cina*.

Barthes again refers several times to the haiku, which he equates with the incident, or fold or crease, to return to the earlier metaphor of the tablecloth, and which surprises. Doxa can be taken by surprise: an incident that ‘falls’, that intervenes, like a leaf (because it is fragile and tenuous) between the viewer and the doxical spectacle, re-focussing vision—much like haiku (205). An open-air cinema in Luoyang has that effect: a Romanian movie, which is showing, seems incongruous, the weather is mild, the place doesn’t feel artificial, street boys playing cards smile (96–97). Normally this sort of scene is blocked by prevailing doxa. It is a criminal view.

Doxa can be self-imposed. Barthes’ sexual interest in Chinese males is an area of folding or creasing (or criminality) within the tablecloth of his own doxa. For it is certain that had he published the Notebooks as they stand, he would have censored such references.⁵ He was fastidious in keeping his homosexuality closeted throughout his life. At the beginning of *Travels in China* he mentions his male lover whose hand he kissed “furtively” at Paris-Orly Airport. Barthes faithfully records the episode. The friend wonders if he’s scared of being seen. Barthes gives his reply: he’s only afraid someone might see how “old-fashioned” the gesture is and that the friend would be “embarrassed” (5). The reader cannot know if Barthes was being disingenuous, but the unedited claims elicit a frisson of transgression intermixed with perplexity and the incommunicable. That the lover should wonder if Barthes is scared of being seen draws us back into a harsher time, a world of homophobic judgements, while the furtiveness of Barthes’ kiss (as a result of fear that the gesture might seem dated to his lover and that the lover would be embarrassed by it) seems to draw attention to the act, rather than conceal it. This works to grant his observations both a sideways engagement with sexual otherness and a certain edgy neutrality in his reading of China.

How then do the Chinese twinkle, how do they become neutral, nuanced, eluding truth, depth and the doxical arrangements of both themselves and the Western visitor? How do the

⁵ And there are many. He claims, not unreasonably, that no one can know a people without knowing their sex (100). Writing, he says, is dry and sterile, without joy, *jouissance* (75). *Jouissance* underwrites his travels both to China and Japan, indeed, but not in the same way. A satisfied erotic interest seems to account for the successful completion of *Empire of Signs* and a frustrated one the failure, or silence, of *Travels in China*.

people and the place become not just paradoxical but also sidelong? How does Barthes create a just representation? Precisely, it seems, by not finding the folds, surprises and haiku-like incidents he seeks. By annotating the different doxas (Chinese, Western and his own) instead, and the stranglehold they have on his perceptions, and in so doing, experiencing frustration and weariness, he finds the very conditions of non-judgement, or, at least, a dodging of judgement, that marks the Neutral.

Barthes' sideways gaze is as an invitation. Traditional Chinese aesthetics, which Barthes' own thought tends towards, is hospitable to this. In his Collège de France lectures, Barthes equates the Neutral with the Taoist *wu-wei*, inaction, non-choice or abstention: it is "structurally, a Neutral, what baffles the paradigm" (176). *Wu-wei* abstains from belief, or a position; it is philosophical abstinence (180). Its most strenuous modality, indeed its highpoint, consists in sitting, which, for Barthes, recalls the standard Zen (*zazen*) position in meditation: to be sitting (184). If this *wu-wei* were applied to poetry or painting it would suggest *dan*, or blandness.

For François Julien, blandness is the "embodiment of neutrality" and "lies at the point of origin of all things possible" (23). In another text, "Alors la Chine?", written and published on his return from China,⁶ Barthes mentions his sense of a suspension (of meaning, sense, ardour), and notes that what was revealed to him was a "delicacy, or, better yet (I venture using [*sic*] this word, at the risk of having to take it up again later) blandness" (28). Barthes teeters on the verge of the negative connotation of the word but rescues the observation from judgement with the parenthetical qualifiers. Julien, whose quoting of this passage I am merely repeating, suggests that here Barthes writes two discourses at the same time, and that the secondary one struggles to put into words what the first would obliterate: a sense that blandness really is the right word (29).

Blandness represents nothing. In Julien's reading it actually "de-represents" connoting a "beyond" that is not symbolic (116). In traditional Chinese poetics, blandness is the ideal the poet must aim for: too much flavour and the poem overwhelms its subject; too little and there is no subject. The poet should strive for balance and harmony, which, once accomplished, lead the reader or auditor away from the sorts of polarizing oppositionality or conflicting viewpoints that Barthes had striven to avoid in his travel texts. The bland sign does not indicate another meaning, or suggest a hermeneutics of discovery; it is not interested in depth, fullness, or truth. On the contrary, blandness "invites us to free ourselves from the differentiating nature of meaning"; it "creates ease" (122). There are no messages, only silence (123).⁷

Barthes travels to the hot springs of Huaqingshi. The others, Sollers, Kristeva, Wahl and Pleynet, climb the mound above the tomb of Qin Shi Huang Di, Emperor of the Legalists. Barthes scribbles a note:

I stay by myself and sit on the ground in an orchard, above the wheat field, in front of the vast, floating, green horizon. A few brick buildings in a powdery pink-beige, distant music. A brown beige field, with wide undulating furrows. Trees here and there, in the background. Noise of an invisible motorbike. (135)

Wonderfully bland! Barthes sits in an orchard. He does not stand surveying the landscape from a vantage-point, like the colonialists of earlier travel narratives, or, indeed, like the others in his party. He sits apart, detached, in the manner of *wu-wei*, in front of a vast floating green horizon, registering colours, shapes, music, the sound of a motorbike, little else. There is no imposition, not even a hint of judgement. Barthes is at ease. In traditional Chinese thought,

⁶ Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1975.

⁷ Traditional Chinese poetics is traceable back to Confucius and early Daoist thought. While Confucius does not develop a theory of representation, he does caution against the transformative power of language; the Daoist foundational text *Laozi* advises the sage to adopt an attitude of 'lucid non-action' (Julien 157–9).

blandness “is this experience of transcendence reconciled with nature —and divested of faith” (Julien 144). And this, I think, is what Barthes has achieved.

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