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Roland Barthes, Chris Marker and the pleasure of 'Texte Japon'

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Chapter 6

Taking Signs for What They Are: Roland Barthes, Chris Marker and the Pleasure of ‘*Texte Japon*’

Roland Barthes and Chris Marker discovered Japan roughly at the same time, in the mid-1960s, when the country was fast developing and started to impress the rest of the world for its architectural and technological feats – widely displayed during the 1964 Tokyo Olympics. Incidentally, their respective works dedicated to this object of fascination *par excellence* tend to share a similar approach to Japanese culture, that they both represent from a very personal perspective. In Barthes’s *Empire of signs* (*L’Empire des signes*, 1970), a broad-ranging photo-text meditating in particular on society, art and literature, and Marker’s *Sunless* (*Sans soleil*, 1982), an experimental, unclassifiable documentary film combining images of Iceland, Guinea-Bissau, and Japan to reflect on the nature of memory, the two French authors purposely select and emphasise the ‘features’ of Japanese everyday life, art and culture that captivated them the most, while clearly acknowledging that as ‘outsiders’ not understanding Japanese language they are bound to produce an external and inaccurate representation of this country; their perception of it cannot escape the Western categories which constitute their intellectual and sensual selves. In other words, Japanese people might not recognize ‘their’ Japan, their values and societal background in *Empire of Signs* and *Sunless*. This does not mean however that these two works do not have important things to tell us about several aspects of this culture and its specificity. According to Maurice Pinguet, the former Director of the Franco-Japanese Institute in Tokyo (1963-68) who first invited Barthes to Japan and introduced him to its artistic and social traditions, what makes such works particularly interesting is precisely that they ‘offer a multi-faceted presentation of their object, thanks to a sharp sense of observation and from angles that are usually neglected by specialists’;¹ it is from this perspective that Pinguet analysed in his essay entitled ‘Le texte Japon’² Barthes’s exploration of the pleasure of ‘Japan-as-text’ in *Empire of signs*.

A similar idea was more recently expressed by Philippe Forest, another contemporary French writer fascinated by Japan:

Writing, reading [about Japanese culture], I might have been mistaken. I am certainly still mistaken. But I have always been convinced that my mistakes opened for me a singular and necessary path towards truth. Who could judge somebody else’s dream?³

In *La Beauté du contresens* (2005), this was theorised by Forest as ‘beautiful

¹ Maurice Pinguet, *Le Texte Japon, introuvables et inédits*, ed. by Michaël Ferrier (Paris: Seuil, 2009), p. 31; my translation.

² Pinguet, ‘Le texte Japon’ (1982), in *Le Texte Japon*, pp. 29-43.

³ Philippe Forest, *Haiku, etc. Allaphbed 4* (Nantes: Cécile Defaut, 2008), p. 15; my translation.

misinterpretations' in the context of transcultural relations, in reference to a remark made by Marcel Proust in *Contre Sainte-Beuve*:⁴ 'Beautiful books are written in a sort of foreign language. Beneath each word each one of us puts his own meaning or at least his own image, which is often a misinterpretation. But in beautiful books all our misinterpretations are beautiful.' This approach shouldn't be understood as an excuse used by those who do not make the effort to learn a foreign language and to assimilate another cultural background, but rather as an invitation to take the works analysed in this paper for what they are, i.e. creative travelogues more or less accurately informed, and offering a subjective and intuitive gaze on a perceived reality. If numerous critics often referring to post-colonial theory have rightly pinpointed the orientalist and exoticist stereotypes, essentialisations and misunderstandings in Barthes's essay and – to a lesser extent – Marker's film (e.g. about Zen Buddhism or haiku poems),⁵ one should also keep in mind that one of the central elements of their respective reflections in and on Japan concerns signs, their production and reception, within and outside the realm of meaning and significations; encountering a civilisation whose customs and language they didn't know well, both authors didn't claim to produce specialist discourse and were instead inclined to question the very readability of signs. In this respect, their works address issues related in particular to the difference between 'seeing' and 'reading', i.e. intermedial breaches and stitches, that their singular responses to Japanese signs and their alleged specificities bring to light and interrogate.

Being at the same time one of the world's laboratories for the production of new signs and icons since the end of the Second World War and a universe in which systems of signification and codes are extremely developed and sophisticated, Japan offered to Barthes and Marker a unique opportunity to reflect on the reception of emotional and cognitive stimulations and of material signs and signals. In this context, they were naturally led to detach significations from signifiers, whose visual dimension particularly fascinated them in this country. As we shall see, their works eventually question how we respond to texts and images in general, which raises the issue of the pleasure experienced by the reader/viewer; they also promote another way to apprehend the countless cultural signs that surround us, in Japan and beyond.

Roland Barthes and the Empire of *Signifiance*

Barthes made three stays in Japan between 1966 and 1967. From this experience, he wrote *Empire of Signs* which marked a personal turn in his writing. After the publication of this essay in 1970, his texts are indeed less concerned by the adoption of a rigorous scientific method and tend to use a more personal tone. In this book that opened what is often referred to as his 'post-structuralist' period, and which can be described as a travelogue mainly focusing – like his *Mythologies* (1957) – on various aspects of everyday life (food, houses, gestures, stores, train stations...), he nonetheless addresses an essential question, that of the production of meaning. How does a sign *signify*, and communicate to us its

⁴ See Philippe Forest, *La Beauté du contresens et autres essais sur la littérature japonaise* (Nantes: Cécile Défaud, 2005), pp. 11-29.

⁵ See for instance the critical essays listed by Charles Forsdick in his article "'(In)connaissance de l'Asie": Barthes and Bouvier, China and Japan', which analyse *L'Empire des signes* in the light of a post-colonial critique of Orientalism (in *Modern & Contemporary France*, vol. 14, n°1 (2006), pp. 63-77 (p. 69)).

meaning or message? His answer to this question has remained the same since his first essays published in the 1950s: signs are cultural products, their meaning is arbitrary and depends on the context of their production and reception. In other words, the meaning of a sign is not natural, and can change and evolve over time. But in *Empire of signs*, Barthes goes one step further and expresses for the first time his desire to escape what he calls ‘Western semiocracy’, i.e. the tyranny of meaning and dominance of the ‘full’ sign;⁶ he more specifically criticises the Western obsession to give or find meaning in everything, and the process of *making sense* – to use his own words, ‘the West moistens everything with meaning.’⁷ In his view, Japan provides an ideal framework to develop this critic given its idiosyncratic approach to signs and to meaning: ‘in this country (Japan) the empire of signifiers is so immense, so in excess of speech, that the exchange of signs remains of a fascinating richness, mobility, and subtlety, despite the opacity of the language, sometimes even as a consequence of that opacity.’⁸

Barthes’s creative method and ethos in *Empire of Signs* is quite simple: it consists in (re)writing what he calls ‘his Japan’.⁹ This is why he claims in the opening section of the book that ‘the author has never, in any sense, photographed Japan.’¹⁰ By this Barthes means that his essay is in no way a tourist guidebook aiming to (re)present the ‘real’ Japan as accurately as possible – which does not mean of course it is not anchored in the reality of Japan, in its everyday life as the French semiologist was able to experience it during his few visits to the country. The key point Barthes is trying to convey is that his book is that of a writer, an artist, and not a collection of postcard-like clichés. It is in this sense that the following statement from *The Preparation of the Novel*, his Lecture Courses at the Collège de France in 1978-1979 and 1979-1980, should be understood, in relation to the method of writing he used in *Empire of signs* and other books: “‘My’ doesn’t refer, or doesn’t ultimately refer, to an egotism, a narcissism [...] but to a Method: method of exposition, method of speech.”¹¹

Writing on ‘his Japan’, Barthes focused on a number of features of Japanese culture that particularly fascinated him, approaching them not only with his intellect, but also and perhaps primarily with his body – ‘corps’ is a recurring word in *Empire of signs*, used dozens of times.¹² He thus turned his singular situation – not being familiar with Japanese language and cultural codes – into an opportunity, which allowed him to concentrate on the materiality of signs. This is epitomised by the following remark made in the second section of the book, ‘The Unknown Language’:

⁶ Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, back cover.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

⁹ As Maurice Pinguet puts it, ‘Japan, that Japan, his Japan – was the utopia of desirable for Roland Barthes’ (*Le Texte Japon*, p. 20; my translation).

¹⁰ Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, p. 4. In the same section of the text, Barthes also writes in relation to Japan: ‘I, in no way, claim to represent or to analyse reality itself’ (*ibid.*, p. 3).

¹¹ Roland Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel: Lecture Courses and Seminars at the Collège de France, 1978-1979 and 1979-1980*, trans. by Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 23. In these lectures, which were completed just weeks before his death in 1980, Barthes evokes for the first time his desire to write a novel.

¹² In *The Pleasure of the Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), Barthes goes as far as claiming that ‘The pleasure of the text is that moment when my body pursues its own ideas – for my body does not have the same ideas I do’ (p. 17).

The dream: to know a foreign (alien) language and yet not to understand it: to perceive the difference in it without that difference ever being recuperated by the superficial sociality of discourse [...]; in a word, to descend into the untranslatable, to experience its shock without ever muffling it, until everything Occidental in us totters and the rights of the 'father tongue' vacillate [...]. The murmuring mass of an unknown language constitutes a delicious protection, envelops the foreigner (provided the country is not hostile to him) in an auditory film which halts at his ears all the alienations of the mother tongue.¹³

As indicated by the title of his essay, Barthes perceived Japan as an 'empire of signs', i.e. a very complex assemblage of images and texts that he could 'read', but only if 'reading' is understood here as a kind of writing – or even rewriting. To illustrate this with a telling example, let us consider what he writes about the Japanese art of flower arrangement (*ikebana*) in the section of the book entitled 'Packages':

the Japanese bouquet has a volume; unknown masterpiece [...], you can move your body into the interstice of its branches, into the space of its stature, not in order to *read* it (to read its symbolism) but to follow the trajectory of the hand which has written it: a true writing, since it produces a volume and since, forbidding our reading to be the simple decoding of a message [...], it permits this reading to repeat the course of the writing's labour.¹⁴

The Japanese bouquet is presented here like a sign, a kind of written text. Barthes does not attempt to grasp its potential meaning, its symbolism; instead, he reads and 'rewrites' it at the same time, 'repeating the course of the writing's labour' as he puts it. In other words, he invests it physically, sensuously. This is, according to him, a Westerner, one of the specificities of Japanese signs: their reading does not imply the decoding of a message, but a process of (re)writing, of physical investment. In this respect, his detour via Japan allowed Barthes to express this essential motto that defined the later phase of his career, and in the light of which one can better understand some of the comments in *Empire of Signs* which seem to contradict the author's earlier work on semiology; for instance, although it has often been argued that one of the key messages of this book is that 'Meaning is secondary. It is halted by the emptiness of signs, their inability to stand outside of a conventional – and therefore arbitrary – system of representation that has produced them according to its own cultural logic',¹⁵ what matters most for Barthes is rather the erotics of writerly¹⁶ signs he is aiming to develop through his encounter with Japan – literally his *pre-text* in this situation.

¹³ Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, pp. 6-9. As Charles Forsdick rightly noted, 'Language (or the traveller's ignorance of it) plays a key role in *L'Empire des signes*, with untranslatability, both practical and metaphorical, transformed into a source of pleasure' (Forsdick, '(In)connaissance de l'Asie', pp. 72-73).

¹⁴ Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, p. 45.

¹⁵ Peter Pericles Trifonas, *Barthes and the Empire of Signs* (Cambridge: Icon Books, 2001), p. 15.

¹⁶ In *S/Z*, Barthes suggests that the goal of a 'writerly' (or '*scriptible*') text is 'to make the reader no longer a consumer but a producer of the text' (*S/Z*, trans. by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974, p. 4). In this perspective, reading becomes 'not a parasitical act, the reactive complement of a writing', but rather a 'form of work' (*ibid.*, p. 10).

As we have seen, a section of *Empire of signs* focuses on Japanese packages, which are representative of all the signs encountered in this culture according to Barthes. Referring in particular to decorative sake barrels, he suggests in this respect that

one can already see a true semantic meditation in the merest Japanese package. [...] The box acts the sign: as envelope, screen, mask, it is worth what it conceals, protects, and yet designates. [...] from envelope to envelope, the signified flees, and when you finally have it (there is always a little *something* in the package), it appears insignificant, laughable, vile: the pleasure, field of the signifier, has been taken: the package is not empty, but emptied.¹⁷

This suggests that the reception of Japanese signs differs in Barthes's mind from the traditional structure of the sign, combining a signifier and a signified to produce a message – and meaning. The package is more important than its content – what it conceals, and if we follow Barthes's logic, Japanese signifiers are, generally speaking, at least as important as their signifieds (their literal signification), which are described as 'insignificant, laughable, vile'. Although the overgeneralisation and simplification on which this claim relies is problematic, the short apologue in which it is presented by Barthes allows him to draw here some key, wide-ranging lessons about the pleasure of the text; these can be related once more to the emblematic example of foreign languages (*for him*): 'The unknown language, of which I nonetheless grasp the respiration, the emotive aeration, in a word the pure significance, forms around me, as I move, a faint vertigo, sweeping me into its artificial emptiness, which is consummated only for me: I live in the interstice, delivered from any fulfilled meaning.'¹⁸

This implies that when Barthes uses the paradoxical and often misleading expression 'empty signs' in his essay, he actually refers to signs whose significations have naturally not disappeared, but rather been suspended – a process he calls 'exemption from meaning' in the title of a section dedicated to haiku writing and Zen Buddhism. In this context, Japanese signs are not empty but *emptied* (for Barthes); they can be defined as signifiers whose signifieds have been dismissed because they are not fully accessible to the Western reader/viewer.¹⁹ But these signifiers never cease to express something, despite the neutralisation of the search for meaning – which can be obsessional and distracting; they remain pleasurable and appealing: Barthes evokes 'a shock of meaning lacerated, extenuated to the point of its irreplaceable void, without the object's ever ceasing to be significant, desirable';²⁰ 'the pleasure, field of the signifier, has been taken: the package is not empty, but emptied.'²¹ 'Empire of signifiers' rather than 'signs' would therefore be a more accurate and less ambiguous title for this work. Barthes's 'Japan-as-text' is not really, or not primarily, 'a text whose surface phenomena operate as signs to be deciphered',²² but

¹⁷ Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, pp. 45-46.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁹ Kōjin Karatani has rightly defined this exemption or 'bracketing' process as an example of 'aestheticcentricism', particularly well-spread among post-war French intellectuals and artists. He criticised this attitude for its orientalist and exoticist overtones. See Karatani's article 'Uses of Aesthetics: After Orientalism', *Boundary Two*, vol. 25, n°2 (1998), pp. 145-60.

²⁰ Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, p. 4.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

²² Forsdick, '(In)connaissance de l'Asie', p. 70.

rather savoured and enjoyed; in this empire, everything is considered as writing (faces, gardens, flower arrangements, bunraku puppets, violence, etc.) that should be appreciated for its material qualities, its ‘layering of significance’ –²³ that is, ‘meaning, *insofar* as it is *sensually produced*’ to borrow the definition of ‘*significance*’ in *The Pleasure of the Text*.²⁴ We remember here that reading such signs implies re-writing them for Barthes, following the model of calligraphy that fascinated him because of its proximity with painting. As he asks in *Empire of signs* in relation to a calligraphed haiku accompanied by a drawing: ‘Where does the writing begin? Where does the painting begin?’²⁵ Barthes distances himself from a utilitarian or scientific approach to signs and suggests that signifiers, be they verbal, visual or of a different type, should be first and foremost tasted and enjoyed for what they are (i.e. the *significance* of the signifier to use his terms), which is an end in itself to his mind: ‘Text and image, interlacing, seek to ensure the circulation and exchange of these signifiers: body, face, writing; and in them to read the retreat of signs’, that is to say the retreat of signification, of meaning.²⁶ As his friend and mentor Maurice Pinguet pointed out, ‘this tendency to ignore the central function of the signifier can be found throughout the Western history, in the form of a denial’.²⁷

All the signs that Barthes mentions in his essay could be described as ‘fleshy’ signs: food, packages, paintings, calligraphies, photographs, maps... He considers them as textual bodies defined by their colours, textures, tastes, sounds, and the words that he uses most frequently to characterise them are volume, substance, surface, space and density. This forms the basis of his erotics of signs referred to earlier, this dimension being already pointed at by the very title of the book; the term ‘empire’ does not only designate Japan and its political regime, or by extension a space of utopia, ‘faraway’, but also alludes to the territory of the senses, to ‘empirism’ and carnal attraction, desire – the empiric power of signs. Once more, this helps us understand why Barthes reinstates the importance of the body (including his own) for his new ethics and aesthetics of signs theorised at the occasion of his encounter with Japan, and in response to its art and culture:

in Japan the body exists, acts, shows itself, gives itself, without hysteria, without narcissism, but according to a pure – though subtly discontinuous – erotic project. [...]. To make a date (by gestures, drawings on paper, proper names) may take an hour, but during that hour, for a message which would be abolished in an instant if it were to be spoken (simultaneously quite essential and quite insignificant), it is the other’s entire body which has been known, savoured, received, and which has displayed (to no real purpose) its own narrative, its own text.²⁸

It is also in this perspective that the French semiologist compared his encounter with Japan with ‘certain modern texts’ (e.g. by Philippe Sollers, quoted in *Empire of signs*), which ‘open up the whole fictive realm’ and ‘permit us to perceive a landscape which our speech

²³ Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, p. 12.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 61. Elsewhere in the text, Barthes also notes: ‘The text is language without its image-reservoir [...] significance, bliss – that is precisely what withdraws the text from the image-systems of language’ (*ibid.*, p. 33).

²⁵ Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, p. 21.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. xi.

²⁷ Pinguet, *Le Texte Japon*, p. 33; my translation.

²⁸ Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, pp. 9-10.

(the speech we own) could under no circumstances either discover or divine' as he puts it.²⁹ In these 'texts of bliss', as Barthes calls them in *The Pleasure of the Text*, like in Japan-as-text, signifiers are detached from their signifieds;³⁰ meaning is not immediately accessible to the reader, and not the primary purpose – the text is conceived as a discontinuous, fragmented and flexible chain of signifiers, and 'the very arcanum of signification, that is, the paradigm, is rendered impossible.'³¹ As we can see here, the 'empire of signs' understood as the power of the pleasure of the text has an emancipatory function, a liberating effect for the reader, dissolving the myth of the unity of the self and the moral grip of ideology and prescriptive institutions:

Imagine someone [...] who abolishes within himself all barriers, all classes, all exclusions, not by syncretism but by simple discard of that old spectre: logical contradiction; who mixes every language, even those said to be incompatible; who silently accepts every charge of illogicality, of incongruity; [...] this anti-hero exists: he is the reader of the text at the moment he takes his pleasure. Thus the Biblical myth is reversed, the confusion of tongues is no longer a punishment, the subject gains access to bliss by the cohabitation of languages *working side by side*.³²

One of the constant features of Japanese signs described by Barthes is that they are always exposed as such, presenting themselves plainly as signs, without initiating a paradigm between surface and depth, obvious and hidden significations. Bunraku puppet theatre, in which puppeteers can be seen by the audience, is a good example of this. But this characteristic is also emblematically shared by haiku poems as they are defined by Barthes:

the haiku has the purity, the sphericity, and the very emptiness of a note of music; perhaps that is why it is spoken twice, in echo; [...] to speak it many times would postulate that meaning is to be discovered in it, would simulate profundity; between the two, neither singular nor profound, the echo merely draws a line under the nullity of meaning.³³

Like all other Japanese signs analysed by Barthes, haiku writing is therefore exempted from meaning; it triggers but at the same time resists interpretation: 'The haiku wakens desire [...]. While being quite intelligible, the haiku means nothing, and it is by this double condition that it seems open to meaning in a particularly available, serviceable way.'³⁴ It is worth noting of course that Japanese amateurs or specialists of haikus would probably not agree with Barthes's definition of this type of poems, that he associates with Zen Buddhism and more specifically with the notion of 'satori'. In fact, as he acknowledges himself, *his* haiku – i.e. what he refers to when he uses this term – does not only designate the

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

³⁰ Here is how Barthes defines texts of pleasure and of bliss in *The Pleasure of the Text* (p. 14): 'Text of pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a comfortable practice of reading. Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language'.

³¹ Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, p. 73.

³² Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, pp. 3-4.

³³ Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, p. 76.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

traditional poetic genre, but it encapsulates the very essence of Japanese art and aesthetic sensibility: ‘Neither describing nor defining, the haiku (as I shall finally name any discontinuous feature, any event of Japanese life as it offers itself to my reading), the haiku diminishes to the point of pure and sole designation.’³⁵ According to Barthes, the haiku has the property to designate its object without describing nor defining it, that is to say without locking it in the realm of meaning. Naturally, the haiku always has a meaning which can be understood by the reader (i.e. it is and remains ‘intelligible’), but Barthes claims this level of signification is of secondary importance, almost insignificant – and finally ‘emptied’, exempted from or of meaning. In his reading of Japan, all signs are treated as pure designations, like the haiku; the pleasure they give is of an emotional nature, and does not require any interpretation or analysis.

In conclusion, Barthes identified in Japan a specific structure of signification which tends to empty or exempt signs from their meaning – a structure redoubled by his position as a Western traveller not familiar with Japanese culture and not understanding Japanese language. His very personal response to this country offered him a way to escape what he perceived as the Western tyranny of meaning and logic, and considerably helped him in his search for new modes of expression and reception in his late work. As he himself lucidly observes, ‘Japan has starred him with any number of “flashes”; or, better still, Japan has afforded him a situation of writing. This situation is the very one in which a certain disturbance of the person occurs, a subversion of earlier readings’.³⁶

‘Un-countried’ in Japan: Chris Marker’s *Sans Soleil* and *Le Dépayés*

Unlike Barthes who only made in total three relatively short visits to Japan, Chris Marker stayed in the Archipelago for longer periods of time and even considered it to be his *dépayés* (literally, his ‘un-country’), i.e. his second – and yet foreign – home. Although he travelled extensively around the world, this country has been a central and continued inspiration for his work as a film director, writer and photographer since the first stay he made there in 1964 to film the Tokyo Olympic Games, during which he also shot *Le Mystère Koumiko* (*The Koumiko Mystery*, completed in 1965).³⁷ This forty-six minute film portrays Kumiko Muraoka, a young girl in her twenties Marker met while documenting the Olympics, and who speaks to him about Japan, being Japanese and her unique perspective on life. As the narrative voice suggests at the very beginning of the movie, “‘Japan is all around her’”. It pervades every image. Traditional, modern, folkloric, surprising, it is everywhere; it is visible but it resists at the same time any attempt to get closer and to understand it’.³⁸ This mixture of fascination, mystery and opacity is characteristic of Marker’s stance towards Japan, a country he wants to show based on his chance encounters, without explaining or analysing it. The documentary but also very personal feel of *Le Mystère Koumiko* can also be found in *Sunless*, undoubtedly his most important film focusing on Japanese culture and society. However, *Sunless* has a greater fictional dimension and is therefore more difficult to classify in terms of genre. Its main protagonist, Sandor Krasna, can be considered as Marker’s avatar since we learn he is a film director travelling all around the world; his

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³⁷ Chris Marker, *Le Mystère Koumiko*, documentary film, 46 mins (Paris: La Sofra, 1965).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, my translation.

commentaries, reported in the form of letters read by a female narrator, develop a reflection on the nature of recorded images (movies, photos, TV footages...), memory and history. This film is for a large part made up of the images that Krasna is said to have filmed in Japan, Africa and Iceland, but some scenes have also been borrowed from other documentaries and movies such as Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*.

At the beginning of *Sunless*, we are told that in one of his letters the fictional director evoked in relation to Japan 'these simple joys he had never felt: of returning to a country, a house, a family home.'³⁹ Like Barthes, Marker tended to emphasise in his depiction of this faraway, unfamiliar country *par excellence* images of everyday life, banal scenes and ordinary objects encountered randomly. While the author of *Empire of signs* focused on food, packages or city maps, Marker shows in his film pictures of ceremonies in temples and of people travelling – and sleeping – on trains or walking in the bustling streets of Tokyo. These images are merely juxtaposed without apparent logical link, or rather following the principle of free association which is largely driven by the unconscious and also reflects the way memory works. The film commentary regularly underlines this singular structure, announcing for instance a new sequence seemingly unrelated with a rhetorical question: 'by the way, did you know that they are emus in the Ile de France?' As a movie maker, Marker refuses to create a story and to convey clear messages, his only ambition being to show images and to present *his* Japan to the viewers. This is what is implied by the following comment: 'if they don't see happiness in the picture, at least they'll see the black'.

Based on these guiding principles, Marker does not attempt to control or influence the reception of images in the narrator's commentary. This is in line with Barthes's foreword in *Empire of signs*, which states that 'The text does not "gloss" the images, which do not "illustrate" the text. [...] Text and image, interlacing, seek to ensure the circulation of these signifiers: body, face, writing; and in them, the retreat of signs.'⁴⁰ Marker concurs with Barthes's refusal to impose a meaning to the Japanese signifiers he has chosen to show, which is confirmed by the incipit of *Le Dépays*, a largely unknown photo-text on Japan he published in 1982, one year before *Sunless* was released:⁴¹

The text doesn't comment on the images any more than the images illustrate the text. They are two sequences that clearly cross and signal to each other, but which it would be pointlessly exhausting to collate. One should therefore accept them in their disorder, simplicity and division in two, as with everything else in Japan.⁴²

This foreword obviously reads like a rewriting of – and tribute to – the opening page of *Empire of signs*, with respect to the image-text relation in particular.⁴³ Following in Barthes's footsteps in his response to Japan, it is not surprising that Marker tends to

³⁹ Chris Marker, *Sunless*, documentary film, 100 mins (Paris: Argos Film, 1983); the text of the film commentary can be found on the following website: <https://www.markertext.com/sans_soleil.htm>.

⁴⁰ Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, p. xi.

⁴¹ Chris Marker, *Le Dépays* (Paris: Herscher, 1982).

⁴² Translated by Catherine Lupton in *Chris Marker: Memories of the Future* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005), p. 62. Lupton adds that 'Marker's advice to the reader of *Le Dépays* could equally apply to the book's relationship to *Sunless*' (*ibid.*).

⁴³ In *Le Dépays*, Marker presents *Empire of signs* as one of the three major essays written to date on Japan, along with Kenji Tokitsu's *La Voie du karaté* (1979) and Satoshi Kamata's *Japon, l'envers du miracle* (1982).

emphasise the banality, simplicity and fragility of the scenes he shot and assembled. In this respect, the commentary of the film suggests with reference to Sandor Krasna: ‘He liked the fragility of those moments suspended in time. Those memories whose only function had been to leave behind nothing but memories. He wrote: I’ve been round the world several times and now only banality still interests me.’

By evoking memories ‘whose only function is to leave memories’, Marker does not only emulate Barthes here in his attempt to escape the Western obsession to give meaning to everything and to go beyond literal and factual content; he also praises features that he perceives as pertaining to the essence of Japanese sensibility, and which guide his selection of images and commentary. Indeed, a few minutes later in the film, the narrator refers to Sei Shōnagon, the author of *Makura no Sōshi* (*The Pillow Book*), a collection of daily observations, short stories and poetry that constitutes one of Marker’s key sources of inspiration on Japan. Sei Shōnagon was a lady in waiting to Princess Sadako at the beginning of the 11th century, in the Heian period, during which – as one of Sandor Krasna’s letters explains:

the emperor’s court had become nothing more than a place of intrigues and intellectual games. But by learning to draw a sort of melancholy comfort from the contemplation of the tiniest things this small group of idlers left a mark on Japanese sensibility much deeper than the mediocre thundering of the politicians. Shōnagon had a passion for lists: the list of ‘elegant things’, ‘distressing things’, or even of ‘things not worth doing’. One day she got the idea of drawing up a list of ‘things that quicken the heart’. Not a bad criterion I realise when I’m filming; I bow to the economic miracle, but what I want to show you are the neighbourhood celebrations.⁴⁴

These remarks clearly have a self-referential dimension and are key to understand Marker’s aesthetic project and choice of images in *Sunless*. On the one hand, Shōnagon’s meticulous style of observation, paying attention to seemingly insignificant details and at times voyeuristic, appears to have influenced his approach as a filmmaker in the movie. But perhaps more importantly, this reference to a monument of Japanese traditional literature and culture explains Marker’s anti-touristic enterprise and focus on trivial, everyday matters off the beaten tracks. His subjective take on *his* Japan is thus justified and anchored in Japanese artistic tradition and sensibility.

This is later confirmed in the film by another allusion to *The Pillow Book*, again in one of Krasna’s letters read by the narrator:

I thought of Shōnagon’s list, of all those signs one has only to name to quicken the heart, just name. To us, a sun is not quite a sun unless it’s radiant, and a spring not quite a spring unless it is limpid. Here to place adjectives would be so rude as leaving price tags on purchases. Japanese poetry never modifies [qualifies]. There is a way of saying boat, rock, mist, frog, crow, hail, heron, chrysanthemum, that includes them all.⁴⁵

The essentialising dichotomy between Japan (‘here’) and the West (‘us’) is here reminiscent of Barthes’s approach throughout *Empire of signs*. But these comments are also close to his

⁴⁴ Marker, *Sunless*.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

definition of the haiku, that Krasna's 'moments suspended in time' evoked earlier were already alluding to. As we have seen, the haiku tends for Barthes to resist adjectivisation and commentary, and to produce a form of plain poetic expression that reaches a kind of absolute, without the need to qualify the objects or feelings being described:

The haiku's task is to achieve exemption from meaning within a perfectly readerly discourse (a contradiction denied to Western art, which can contest meaning only by rendering its discourse incomprehensible) [...]; insignificant nonetheless, it resists us, finally loses the adjectives which a moment before we had bestowed upon it, and enters into that suspension of meaning which to us is the strangest thing of all, since it makes impossible the most ordinary exercise of our language, which is commentary.⁴⁶

This helps us to better understand the mode of expression and haiku-like, fragmentary form used in *Sunless*, which is after all nothing other than a filmic list of 'things that quicken the heart', inspired by the spirit of Japanese traditional literature. To borrow the words of Marker's commentary, this film is made up of 'pictures that are less deceptive [...] than those you see on television. At least they proclaim themselves to be what they are: images, not the portable and compact form of an already inaccessible reality.'⁴⁷ As we have seen in Krasna's letters, a memory's only function is to leave memories, images should be received as such, and by extension, Barthes and Marker's respective works on – and inspired by – Japan can be considered first and foremost as an invitation to take signs for what they are, be they texts, images or otherwise; before potentially referring to another reality, they are a reality in themselves and should be enjoyed for their sensual dimension as signifiers. Although the meaning of signs can change depending on contexts, signifiers remain and resist in a form of combined plainness and stubbornness exemplified by what Barthes called an exemption from meaning. This is well illustrated by *Empire of signs* and *Sunless* which detach Japanese signifiers from their usual context of reception, and insert them in complex assemblages of signs. For instance, images from 1960s events such as the violent protests against the construction of Tokyo Narita airport – addressed by both French authors – start to lose their political meaning when they are treated by the synthesiser of Hayao Yamaneko, another avatar of the film director in *Sunless*, who transforms them in digital patches of colour. Marker therefore agrees with the claim Barthes made in his *Mythologies* and later works that history itself is a cultural product, a partly fictional and always evolving discourse, only deceptively naturalised and essentialised.

The peculiar approach to Japan in *Sunless* is enlightened in many ways by Marker's 1982 photo-text *Le Dépays (The Un-country)*, a neologism clearly expressing his dis-orienting experience while in the Archipelago but also his profound attachment to this country. In the short essay that opens the book, he writes in this respect:

If you want to get to know Japan you may just as well invent it. Once received ideas have been left behind, once the received idea to dissipate received ideas has been bypassed, mathematically everyone has the same chance [of getting to know Japan] – and how much time spared!⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Barthes, *Empire of signs*, p. 81.

⁴⁷ Marker, *Sunless*.

⁴⁸ Marker, *Le Dépays*, n.p.; my translation.

In other words, according to Marker, trying to avoid clichés and stereotypes about Japan is a cliché in itself, and just another way to be mistaken about this country – of course, one could read this statement as an unconvincing excuse, but the author’s point here is that his work is of a subjective nature and does not attempt to produce a discourse of knowledge. At the end of the same text, he adds, still referring to Japan – or rather *his* Japan: ‘Such is my imagined country, a country that I totally invented, totally invested, a country that surpasses me so much that it becomes disorientation itself. My un-country.’⁴⁹ This explicitation by Marker of the title of his book can be directly related to what Barthes claims at the beginning of *Empire of signs*: ‘I can also – though in no way claiming to represent or to analyse reality itself [...] – isolate somewhere in the world (faraway) a certain number of features [...], and out of these features deliberately form a system. It is this system which I shall call: Japan.’⁵⁰ Barthes and Marker both adopt the same nonchalant attitude towards Japan and roam the streets of Tokyo and other cities like the Surrealists used to in search for accidental signs and events, for chance encounters; they celebrate the magic of everyday life in Japan, or what they perceive as such, to a large extent because it appears fundamentally mysterious to them. As Catherine Lupton rightly noted in her essay entitled *Chris Marker: Memories of the Future*,

Japan, in Marker’s estimation, is a country that obligingly refuses to make sense, forcing the visitor to accept everything in its ‘disorder, simplicity and division in two’, as he puts it in *Le Dépays*, and basically to make it up as he goes along.⁵¹

Barthes says nothing other when he claims in *Empire of signs* that ‘Japan has starred him with any number of “flashes”’.⁵²

As such, Japan – or the imagined, invented country, the Other *par excellence* – becomes a kind of screen onto which Barthes and Marker can project their obsessions, fantasies and desires.⁵³ But in their case, what is projected is precisely a fantasy of the everyday, of the banal and the insignificant, Japan being traditionally associated in the japoniste and neo-japoniste imaginary with the everyday – often via stereotypical representations found in 19th-century *japonaiseries* and via the diffusion of a simplified Zen culture after the Second World war. In this respect, Michael Sheringham for example claimed that ‘in *L’Empire des signes* the everyday is called Japan’.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, my translation.

⁵⁰ Barthes, *Empire of signs*, p. 3.

⁵¹ Lupton, *Chris Marker*, p. 99.

⁵² Barthes, *Empire of signs*, p. 4.

⁵³ As Olaf Möller rightly noted, ‘Although Westerners attribute a high level of truthfulness to Marker’s Japan (especially as seen in *Sans soleil*), in essence it’s a fictional ghost world, a looking-glass country’ (Olaf Möller, ‘Chris Marker: Ghost World. Japan Through the Looking Glass’, *Film Comment*, July/August 2003, pp. 35-37, (p. 36)). In a recent article, Brian Howell proposed a similar but more nuanced view: ‘the Japan that Marker the filmmaker and person makes available to us is both not completely real in the sense that not every Japanese person will recognise the Japan that she sees in the film as representative of the Japan that she knows. Yet, it is real enough to provide the viewer with insights into the essence of both the Japan of today and of the past’ (Brian Howell, ‘Chris Marker’s Real and Unreal Japan – *Sans Soleil* as Intercultural Document’, *Language, Culture, and Communication*, vol. 9 (2017), pp. 149-59 (p. 159)).

⁵⁴ Michael Sheringham, *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 197. This is how Sheringham analyses this phenomenon: ‘Barthes’s 1966-68 encounter with Japan intensified his fascination with the everyday, hatching a number of notions and

In conclusion, Barthes and Marker both attempted in their respective works to encapsulate what they thought were crucial features of Japanese cultural and artistic sensibility, i.e. an acute awareness of the fragility of meaning and an aesthetic appreciation of everydayness.⁵⁵ Confronted with an unfamiliar culture, unknown codes and signs, they decided to focus on a series of ‘things that quicken the heart’, and abandoned themselves to the pleasure of signifiers – especially visual. However misled they might have been, their reflection on the nature of signs and singular responses to Japanese culture have had a strong and lasting influence on their contemporaries, their emphasis on the pleasure of ‘Texte Japon’ (or Japan-as-text) explaining to a large extent their appeal to readers and viewers over several decades, in the West and beyond. Despite the errors and stereotypes conveyed, they made an important point concerning the reception of artistic and cultural signs, which cannot be reduced to their significations – allowing in themselves a pleasure of deciphering, decoding meaning –, and should be enjoyed first as pleasurable signifiers.

Empire of Signs and *Sunless* both have a positive, euphoric and hedonist approach to their object, but also a more negative, critical dimension. Indeed, Barthes and Marker found in Japan a ‘dépays’, an utopic space and faraway land compared to which they could criticise various aspects and values they disliked in Western civilisation. It is in this perspective that their predilection for the everyday, for insignificant details of daily life in Japan can be understood as a way of countering the dominance of ideological superstructures in French social and artistic circles in the 1960s and 1970s (e.g. Existentialism, Marxism, Structuralism...). The pleasure of signifiers has therefore a neutralising function for them, and serves various strategic goals beyond the mere question of textual or visual enjoyment. As Forsdick puts it, this allows Barthes ‘to decentre and destabilize the sense-making strategies provided by his home culture’ in *Empire of signs*, a fantasy world in which an ‘exemption from meaning’ has been achieved.⁵⁶ This fantasy, largely shared by Marker, is combined in the works considered in this paper with an aestheticcentric tendency to praise Japanese minimalism – as it is perceived in the eyes of Western authors – but also the figure of the neutral *via* Japan and more specifically Zen culture.⁵⁷ Such an approach can be described as reductionist, essentialising and de-historicising, and by extension as neo-japoniste or orientalist, but one should not only emphasise the limits but also the merits of Barthes and Marker’s endeavour; in this respect, the self-reflexive and at times ironical dimension of their photo-text and film should not be overlooked. They precisely use the cognitive and sensitive gap between different media – i.e. still or moving images and spoken or written words – to create distance from their object and spark the critical reflection of their readers/viewers, thus avoiding a primary form of exoticism. Both authors are all too aware of these issues as their forewords indicate, and Barthes in particular had already expressed concerns on this point in his *Mythologies*, in the last footnote of which he confesses: ‘Even here, in these mythologies, I have used

forms that would remain “live” for the rest of his career. In this further evolution and re-evaluation the ethical, existential, and hedonistic dimensions of Barthes’s passion for the processes of signification fully emerge. And from this point the word “vie” will play a significant role in his discourse’ (*ibid.*, p. 197).

⁵⁵ For more on this, see Yuriko Saito’s *Everyday Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) and *Aesthetics of the Familiar: Everyday Life and World-Making* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁵⁶ Forsdick, ‘(In)connaissance de l’Asie’, p. 70.

⁵⁷ See my note 19 referring to Kōjin Karatani’s definition of ‘aestheticcentrism’.

trickery: finding it painful constantly to work on the evaporation of reality, I have started to make it excessively dense, and to discover in it a surprising compactness which I savoured with delight'.⁵⁸ By organising in *Empire of Signs* an 'evaporation of reality' – the 'real' Japan – and savouring 'excessively dense' signifiers of 'a surprising compactness', Barthes eventually assumed a somewhat paradoxical position in and in relation to this country, a position that could be described to use an expression from *The Pleasure of the Text* as 'doubly perverse'; like Marker in *Sunless* and *Le Dépayés*, he enjoys the destruction of the Western values he condemns but relishes at the same time in the pleasure of Japanese signs – seeking thus both pleasure and bliss in *his* Japan:

He [the subject] simultaneously and contradictorily participates in the profound hedonism of all culture (which permeates him quietly under the cover of an *art de vivre* shared by the old books) and in the destruction of that culture: he enjoys the consistency of his selfhood (that is his pleasure) and seeks its loss (that is his bliss). He is a subject split twice over, doubly perverse.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. by Richard Howard and Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 2013), p. 158, note 30.

⁵⁹ Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, p. 14.