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Homay King

Bryn Mawr College, hking@brynmawr.edu

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Sign in the Void: Ulrike Ottinger's *Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia*

Homay King

Ulrike Ottinger's films teeter between fiction and documentary, and between an attitude of knowing critical distance and seeming sincerity. At first glance this tension appears to map neatly onto her career, with the ironic pastiches of the early *Madame X: An Absolute Ruler* (1978), *Ticket of No Return* (1979) and *The Image of Dorian Gray in the Yellow Press* (1984), followed by the experimental ethnographic styles of such films as *China: The Arts – Everyday Life* (1986), *Taiga* (1992) and *Exile Shanghai* (1997). In his text 'My Last Interview with Ulrike Ottinger: On *Southeast Passage* and Beyond', Laurence Rickels notes that shortly after the release of *Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia* (1989) critics hastened to mark a 'before' and 'after' point in Ottinger's career. But as Rickels implies, this gesture to some extent belies Ottinger's 'dual – and in every film moment double – investment in fictional art cinema and documentary film'.¹

Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia seems to occupy the fulcrum of this binary opposition in Ottinger's oeuvre. Its two-part structure folds over an internal fulcrum, making the film metonymic of the oeuvre as a whole. The film's two sections dramatise a clash not only between cultures, but also between filmmaking styles. The first hour of the film introduces a motley group of European, Russian and American travellers aboard the Trans-Siberian Railway. These characters, like many of their predecessors in Ottinger's work, seem to typify or allegorise particular imagos and worldviews. The film takes a detour when, in a scene reminiscent of Joseph von Sternberg's *The*

Shanghai Express (1932), the train is brought to a halt in the middle of the Gobi desert by a nomadic tribe of Mongolians who have barricaded the tracks with sand. The Mongolians, led by the magnificent Princess Ullun Iga (played by Xu Re Huar), take the women as hostages, and for the bulk of the film's duration the travellers remain with them to witness a peace accord with a warring tribe, followed by a celebratory summer festival with song and dance, feasting, recitations and an archery competition. During this time, an erotically tinged friendship is sparked between the Princess and Giovanna (Inés Sastre), a young backpacker who is the Johanna of the film's title. The film's short coda returns us to the train, where we learn that the Mongolian Princess in fact resides mainly in Paris. Dressed in a Chanel suit, she explains that she visits Mongolia in the summer months from time to time 'in order to preserve in some measure the illusion of free, nomadic life'. The opening scenes of the film are shot with a high degree of artifice, including carefully composed framings and a *mise-en-scène* so anti-illusionistic that brushstrokes are actually visible on the sets of the train station. The carnivalesque scenes in the desert, by contrast, are filmed in a more 'documentary' style: distant framings that highlight the expansive location, long takes that emphasise observation rather than construction, and moments of silence and stillness.

An obvious point of entry for thinking about *Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia* is the question of how the two halves of the film relate to one another. In her article 'Observing Rituals: Ulrike Ottinger's *Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia*', Julia Knight suggests that the film establishes 'parallels' between its two halves.² Brenda Longfellow, in her text 'Lesbian Phantasy and the Other Woman in Ottinger's *Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia*', in turn suggests that its binary oppositions – 'fiction/documentary; artifice/authentic; west/east' – are not as rigid as they seem.³ In the

ostensibly ‘fictional’ first half of the film, ‘documentary’ appears by proxy in the photographs that adorn the train’s walls, and in the anthropological and historical data recited by Frau Mueller-Vohwinkel (Irm Hermann). ‘Fiction’ appears within the Mongolian scenes in the form of narrated tales and pantomimes, which Ottinger often films in a frontal presentation that emphasises their theatricality. The artifice of the train segments complements rather than contrasts the formal staging of the Mongolian sequences – as Janet Bergstrom says, speaking of *China: The Arts – Everyday Life* in ‘The Theatre of Everyday Life’: ‘What we see is already on display’.⁴ The long takes and slow pans that dominate the second half of the film are reminiscent of Michelangelo Antonioni and other directors of the European New Wave, and invoke a style that, while certainly indebted to Neorealism and *cinéma vérité*, in no way asserts the ontological character or facticity of their referents.⁵

Johanna d’Arc of Mongolia seems to be a film that is ultimately about various modes of signification. Ottinger herself has suggested that the film is about ‘different kinds of narration’.⁶ The binary opposition that Ottinger is deconstructing is not simply that between a cultural West and a natural East, but that between a semiotically rich West and a semiotically primitive East. Like Roland Barthes, Ottinger acknowledges that her Mongolia is an empire of signs, a construction rather than an essence.⁷ Indeed, Knight suggests that the coda reveals that ‘what the film persuaded us was “authentic” is in a sense as artificial as the first part of the film ... the whole film is revealed as an elaborate fiction’.⁸ However, an awareness of its own status as fiction and sign, *Johanna* seems to say, may be a useful first step, but is not in itself sufficient. Ottinger’s film is puzzling, for it seems to insist simultaneously on the signifying distance of what it shows, and on its phenomenological reality. The film finally is about the challenges and

possibilities of a world in which both these concepts of the filmic signifier – seemingly mutually exclusive – are in play at the same time.

Many interpreters of Ottinger's films argue that their depictions of race are laced with irony, and that they illustrate an openness to alterity that is tied to a feminist and queer appropriation of traditionally patriarchal visual pleasure.⁹ Knight suggests that *Johanna* 'represents difference while obliterating "otherness"'; Roswitha Mueller states that Ottinger's films express 'an insistence on difference based on inclusiveness'.¹⁰ Others have suggested that the film does not so much critique as replicate colonialist narrative patterns of travel, exploration and kidnapping, substituting a fantasy of colonial dominance with one of utopian matriarchy, which is ultimately no less problematic.¹¹ Such readings are persuasive: indeed, Ottinger at times seems to justify the film's narrative premise by insisting on the Mongolian's complicity and agency in the representation, both at the level of production and within film's diegesis, in a way that could be seen as glossing over what is in fact a one-sided history of western imperialism. Still, an interpretation of Ottinger's work that considers the relation between the two differing conceptions of the cinematic sign that inform these readings has the potential to reveal underlooked possibilities for thinking about alterity and representation. The key to such a reading is to consider the film's two sections as in dialogue with one another rather than as antitheses.

In the film's prologue, the four main women on the train are introduced one by one in short scenes that highlight their defining characteristics. Lady Windemere (played by Delphine Seyrig), a British ethnographer, throughout the film serves as a translator of both language and custom for the other women. She provides the opening voice-over, spoken as images of trees in a

snowy tundra stream past a train window. This segment immediately provides a clue that the film will be about signification. Relating a story of early Chinese travellers and merchants who ventured into Mongolia's 'slumbering wilderness', Lady Windemere says:

With ingenious means they placed signs in the land of the void. An initial attempt to tame the wilderness with the aid of cultivated nature. They made clearings in the coniferous forests in the shape of huge written sign, which they then planted with oaks. The written signs altered their colours with the changing seasons and could be seen from a great distance. The attempt to place a sign in the void, a mark.... Here the fears of the travellers whom the wind otherwise carried unchecked across the endless green plains of the taiga, were allayed for a moment.

The voice-over neither approves nor criticises the travellers' signifying activity, it only points to its desired purpose. The oak trees symbolically parallel the function of the voice-over: they both are 'signs placed in the void' that are intended to 'allay fears' by indexing co-ordinates for their recipients. The temporal cues in this voice-over – an 'initial' attempt, the alteration of the signs with the 'changing seasons', the final 'for a moment' – indicate that this process is temporary, and does not divide neatly into a 'before' and 'after' of signification. During the voice-over, Ottinger's camera traces a path across the objects in Lady Windemere's car: a blue-and-white porcelain vase, an open trunk filled with clothing, a painting of the Madonna and child, a mask, a doll in antique Chinese military costume. They are likewise signs placed in a void; soon some of these objects will be activated through exchange. The remainder of the voice-over indicates that

the train is also a sign intended to ensure against the anxiety of disorientation: a line that can be traced 'as easily as you can travel with your finger across the map'. At this point, Ottinger's camera also traces a line, not through the tundra, but back to where the shot began, with a medium close-up of Lady Windemere seated by the train window. This camera movement suggests that the film will partake of a less linear conception of space and time than does the railway.

The next segments introduce Frau Mueller-Vohwinkel, a German teacher armed with a Baedeker's guide; Fanny Ziegfield (Gillian Scalici), an American Broadway musical actress; and Giovanna, a backpacker travelling second class who represents youth culture. Mueller-Vohwinkel reads from her Baedeker's and sighs, 'I know there are relevant facts behind all this greenness'. There are framed photographs depicting the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway on the wall behind her. Her credit appears printed on a card, as do the others, in this case with a book behind it. It now becomes clear that Frau Mueller-Vohwinkel exemplifies the captioning, explanatory voice of the travel guide and of written language; when she looks out the window, she turns the landscape into an interpretable photograph like those on the wall behind her. Each woman, we now understand, is associated with a specific order of the signifier. The next sequence introduces Fanny Ziegfield: her mode of signification is song. She eats a wafer, noting that some printer's ink has transferred onto it from a newspaper wrapping. Her orality, it seems, is no less a part of the symbolic order than the written word. Giovanna appears next, lying in a berth listening to a walkman. The camera pans by the other patrons in her second-class car: Mongolians in fur caps, Chinese soldiers and women in headscarves. Asian string music plays over a garbled radio signal as the passengers sing along and livestock neigh in the background.

Along with the walkman, this soundtrack identifies Giovanna as a figure of listening and receiving. Together, she and Lady Windemere form the two mutually dependent points of focalisation in the film, one the speaker and the other her diegetic addressee.

Lady Windemere, for her part, is identified with two different semiotic registers: verbal speech, as in her voice-over narration, and the language of objects, as indicated by the camera's panning over the items in her train compartment. She proves fluent in the latter, prompting her companions to offer gifts to the Mongolians when the train is stopped. Giovanna gives up her walkman; Frau Mueller-Vohwinkel later cedes her cutlery set. The Mongolian women appropriate the fork and spoon as aesthetic objects, using them as props in a dance: what was once a tool becomes a symbol. Likewise, when Frau Mueller-Vohwinkel later presses bills of currency onto the wall of a Shamanistic temple, the money is taken out of its usual economy and inducted into a different order of value. Such moments can be read in terms of what Gaylyn Studlar calls in her book *In the Realm of Pleasure* a 'masochistic aesthetic': a removal of the phallic term as arbiter or general equivalent of meaning that results in a free play of forms and values, unmoored from their usual rubrics.¹² Longfellow suggests that the film as a whole participates in such an aesthetic with its 'refusal of identification with a paternal order'.¹³ The establishment of this signifying cacophony early in the film, with the introductions of the women, primes us to think through its implications during the Mongolia half of the film.

In one scene on the train, the travellers are treated to a cabaret show by the Kalinka Sisters, a Yiddish singing trio who perform World War II-era standards. These cabaret numbers instruct us in how to read the Mongolian performances later on: as neither more nor less authentic cultural

artefacts. The Kalinka Sisters' rendition of 'Bei Mir Bist Du Schoen' recalls the Andrews Sisters and references the film's own assortment of languages; tenor Mickey Katz's rendition of 'Toot, Toot, Tootsie Goodbye' references Al Jolson's performance in *The Jazz Singer* (1927) and all its concomitant historical and political associations (as well as his namesake's membership in Spike Jones's band). We are meant to understand that the Mongolian epopees and dances have undergone analogous displacements and layerings of meaning, and that they equally are semiotically rich. In turn, the sincerity of Ottinger's camera encourages us to read the cabaret performances as more than pastiche or ironic citation. They have as much ontological and phenomenological weight as the Mongolian songs. We are meant to see each set of performances as neither fully ironic nor fully in earnest, as neither pure pastiche nor pure ethnography.

A similar effect is achieved with Mickey Katz's lavishly aestheticised Zakuska supper, a scene that forms a counterpart to a feast scene in the film's second half that begins with the slaughter of a sheep. The epic similes of Katz's monologue – 'a rosebud wreath of turnips, a silver necklace of miniature onions, butter-lilies on a shimmering black pond of bread, iridescent peacock's tails of leek stems encircling the white, shining tundra' – analogise the meal to ornament, landscape and the work of art. When the food finally appears, its centrepiece is a large taxidermy swan, surrounded by a mosaic of snacks. The sheep-slaughter scene likewise depicts the ritualised display of animal bodies, accompanied by lyrical expression, in this case singing. The two scenes are filmed quite differently: Katz's dinner sequence is shot in medium close-up, inter-cut with reverse shots of the waiter, whereas the Mongolian scene is filmed using a static long shot, with a few cuts to medium close-ups from the same angle. However, these differences are what allow the analogy its full force. The earlier scene instructs us in how the later one is to be read: not as

raw, uncivilised barbarism, but as an equally codified activity. In turn, and as importantly, the slaughter scene retroactively informs its predecessor, reasserting the materiality of flesh and land. The ‘white, shining tundra’ of Katz’s monologue is neither strictly linguistic fiction nor strictly material fact. Like the sign always already placed in the verdant expanse, it is both.

With its layering of fact and fiction, its casting of non-professional actors and its fusion of formal artifice with documentary naturalism, *Johanna d’Arc of Mongolia* could be seen, from a certain angle, to follow in the footsteps Gillo Pontecorvo’s 1966 *The Battle of Algiers*. In a move that corresponds to Gilles Deleuze’s prescription for a new political cinema – ‘the storytelling of a people to come’ – it puts fiction in the mouths of found subjects.¹⁴ This technique has been revived in recent films such as Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000), a film that asks its participants to engage in a game of exquisite corpse, and Claudia Llosa’s *Madeinusa* (2006), a film that shares *Johanna*’s fairytale-like enunciation and feminist concerns. A final binary opposition that such films deconstruct is that between fantasy and reality. These terms do not map neatly, *à la Wizard of Oz*, onto the two halves and regions of *Johanna d’Arc of Mongolia*. If the space of the train is fantastic and virtualised, then so too is the real-world space of the Gobi desert. And if the space of the Mongolia steppe has phenomenological gravity, then so too does the railway. Ottinger’s insistence on this chiasmus makes *Johanna* less a way station on the road from fiction to documentary than a circuit for their endless interchange.

Thanks to Heather Sias, Kaja Silverman and Patricia White.

- 1 Laurence Rickels, 'My Last Interview with Ulrike Ottinger: On *Southeast Passage* and Beyond', in Atom Egoyan and Ian Balfour (eds.), *Subtitles: On the Foreignness of Film*, Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2004, p.422.
- 2 Julia Knight, 'Observing Rituals: Ulrike Ottinger's *Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia*', in Ingeborg Majer O'Sickey and Ingeborg von Zadow (eds.), *Triangulated Visions: Women in Recent German Film*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1998, p.111.
- 3 Brenda Longfellow, 'Lesbian Phantasy and the Other Woman in Ottinger's *Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia*', *Screen* vol.34 no.2, Summer 1993, p.127.
- 4 Janet Bergstrom, 'The Theatre of Everyday Life: Ulrike Ottinger's *China: The Arts – Everyday Life*', *Camera Obscura*, no.18, September 1988, p.47.
- 5 In a roundtable discussion with Ottinger, Mandy Merck notes stylistic similarities between Ottinger's first China documentary and Antonioni's *Chung Kuo: Cina*. See Annette Kuhn, 'Encounter between Two Cultures: A Discussion with Ulrike Ottinger', *Screen*, vol.28 no.4, Autumn 1987, p.77.
- 6 Janet A. Kaplan, '*Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia*: Interview with Ulrike Ottinger', *Art Journal*, vol.61 no.3, Fall 2002, p.7.
- 7 Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1982, p.3.
- 8 J. Knight, 'Observing Rituals', *op. cit.*, p.110.
- 9 For a reading of *Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia* that situates it in these terms, see Longfellow, *op. cit.* For readings of *Madame X: An Absolute Ruler* that follow similar lines of argument, see Patricia White, 'Madame X of the China Seas', *Screen*, vol.28 no.4, Autumn 1987, pp.80–95; and Sabine Hake, "'And with Favourable Winds They Sailed Away": *Madame X* and Femininity', in Sandra Frieden *et al.* (eds.), *Gender and German Cinema, Volume 1: Gender and*

Representation in New German Cinema, Providence and Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1993, pp.179–88. For readings of *Ticket of No Return* that centre on female subjectivity, see Miriam Hansen, ‘Visual Pleasure, Fetishism and the Problem of Feminine/Feminist Discourse: Ulrike Ottinger’s *Ticket of No Return*’, *New German Critique*, no.31, Winter 1984, pp.95–108; and Kaja Silverman, ‘From the Ideal-Ego to the Active Gift of Love’, *The Threshold of the Visible World*, New York: Routledge, 1996, as well as ‘Narcissism: The Impossible Love’, in I. M. O’Sickey and I. von Zadow (eds.), *Triangulated Visions. Women in Recent German Film*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1998. On *The Image of Dorian Gray in the Yellow Press*, see Roswitha Mueller, ‘The Mirror and the Vamp’, *New German Critique*, no.34, Winter, 1985, pp.176–93. For a reading of *Exile Shanghai* that highlights the significance of a lesbian, feminist perspective, see Amy Villarejo, ‘Archiving the Diaspora: A Lesbian Impression of Ulrike Ottinger’s *Exile Shanghai*’, *New German Critique*, no.87, Autumn 2002, pp.157–91.

10 J. Knight, ‘Observing Rituals’, *op. cit.*, p.111; and Roswitha Mueller, ‘Telling Wander Tales’, <http://www.ulrikeottinger.com/de/tueb-mueller.html>. Last accessed on 11 June 2007.

11 See Katie Trumpener, ‘Johanna d’Arc of Mongolia in the Mirror of Dorian Gray: Ethnographic Recordings and the Aesthetics of the Market in the Recent Films of Ulrike Ottinger’, *New German Critique*, no.60, Autumn 1993, pp.77–99; and Kristen Whissel, ‘Racialized Spectacle, Exchange Relations, and the Western in *Johanna d’Arc of Mongolia*’, *Screen*, vol.37 no.1, Spring 1996, pp.41–67.

12 Gaylyn Studlar, *In the Realm of Pleasure: Von Sternberg, Dietrich, and the Masochistic Aesthetic*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.

13 B. Longfellow, ‘Lesbian Phantasy’, *op. cit.*, p.134.

14 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989, p.223.