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Review of Homay King, *Lost in Translation*: Orientalism, Cinema, and the Enigmatic Signifier.

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Homay King, *Lost in Translation: Orientalism, Cinema, and the Enigmatic Signifier*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010. 205 pp. ISBN 9780822347590.

Reviewed by Ana Salzberg, PhD

In the introduction to *Lost in Translation: Orientalism, Cinema, and the Enigmatic Signifier*, Homay King presents an artful reading of the significance of the legendary Grauman's Chinese Theatre. Writing of its heyday in the golden age of Hollywood, she describes a nearly carnivalesque space in which the conventions of a contemporary Western aesthetic give way to the opulence of a time-less Orient: an uncanny milieu in which wax automata of Chinese people mingle with usherettes dressed in East Asian-inspired costumes, and a crystal chandelier illuminates the faux pagodas and lacquered pillars of the décor. King notes that the Chinese Theatre offers moviegoers "a false . . . replica of the Orient"; yet she further declares that the site stands as "a hall of mirrors where orientalist décor becomes intertwined with, and to some extent inseparable from, the illusionistic lure of cinema itself" (2). King goes on to frame this interplay between style and seduction, East Asia and film culture's fantastic appropriation thereof, within the context of Jean Laplanche's psychoanalytic theory of the enigmatic signifier—in this way tracing the West's preoccupation with the Orient to a fundamental psychic dialogue between the self and an enigmatic other both fascinating and bewildering. With insight and precision, King analyzes various depictions of East Asia across a spectrum of visual texts—from art installations to European and experimental cinema, as well as classic Hollywood film—and so reveals a defining alterity that lies not beyond, but within, these works.

Indeed, King implicitly resists the notion of "mythical thought" as defined by Claude Lévi-Strauss in *Structural Anthropology*, that approach which "always progresses from the awareness of oppositions toward their resolution" (224). Though certainly aware of the predominant perception of East and West as "oppositions," King does not seek the suspension of this binary but instead reveals its very falsity; she reveals, that is, the interconnectedness of a Western "self" and an Eastern, enigmatic "other" in the formation of a cultural psyche. As King proposes, dispelling the myth of these worlds as dichotomous, each complete in itself, and instead asserting the productive instability of their mutual engagement, she allows for "one [to] come to understand the trappings of the imaginary East not simply as what must be excluded from a Western psyche in order to ensure its coherence but rather as a foreignness that is irrevocably inscribed within it" (11). First exploring the stakes of Hollywood depictions of the Orient through discussions of *mise en scène* and overdetermined objects, riddles, and metaphors, then shifting to European and experimental works that explicitly address the notion of cross-cultural representation, King elegantly maps an East and West in which psychic territories are not isolated, but intersecting.

While citing the importance of Edward Said's seminal work on historical and literary discourse in *Orientalism*, and the studies of ethnic characterizations in the cinema published by film scholars Robert G. Lee and Lisa Lowe, King herself establishes a critical perspective concerned with "the signifying dances" (4) wrought by the intersubjective dialogues between East and West, various visual media, and spectator and film. Diverging from the early psychoanalytic paradigm of cinematic identification and representation (one that crafts a gendered binary placing male/female, active/passive, and subject/object in opposition), King explores the

formation of cultural subjectivity through Laplanche's nexus of psychoanalysis and phenomenology.

According to Laplanche, from birth an individual encounters entities conveying myriad gestures and utterances, the meanings of which are vague and incomprehensible. These, then, are enigmatic signifiers: the expressions of another subjectivity that defies understanding, thus instilling a sense of uncertainty within the psyche of the baffled recipient. Lingering within the unconscious, the traces of these puzzling interludes produce an internal irresolution—an alterity born of, as King relates, the formative and unsettling "experience of actual contact with concrete other human beings" (4). Indeed, Laplanche insists upon the unique and context-dependent nature of each enigmatic signifier and its recipient. Rather than impose the absolute abstraction of Lacan's Other, Laplanche privileges the existential particularity of "the circumstances and individuals involved in each address" (20); for the enigmatic signifier is an audible, visual, and/or tactile "sensory message" (29) as complex as the beings who alternately convey and (attempt to) decode it.

In her analyses of various visual media, King preserves this attention to the singularity of both the Western subjectivity—whether represented by a classic *film noir* or a text-and-photograph installation—and, moreover, the East Asian people and aesthetic it objectifies. She notes that, in Laplanchean terms, racist acts of "assimilation, appropriation, [and] aggression" derive from an individual or society's "desire to eradicate or bind an *internal* otherness" (32); and the impact of King's work as a whole derives in part from her ability to reveal these machinations even as she explores the dimensionality of their expressions. At the close of this first chapter, however, King briefly shifts from cinematic analysis to provide an illuminating reading of another genre: film theory.

Demonstrating the invalidity of the perceived dichotomy between Western and Eastern communication systems (placing, respectively, symbolic language in opposition to "primitive" ideography), King examines two of Sergei Eisenstein's essays on cinema and Japanese hieroglyphs. She traces a line of thought through which the theorist actively *dissociates* the conventional correlation between Japan and "primitive naturalism," exalting instead the complexity of a representative process in which "what is conceptually or affectively noteworthy" takes precedence over constraints of verisimilitude (39). As King remarks, Eisenstein's writings on Eastern semiotic sophistication both evoke "a series of productive collapses" between traditional binaries and, moreover, reveal a Japanese influence on cinematic techniques (close-ups, associative editing) traditionally considered Western in origin. In so exploring a new facet of Eisenstein's theoretical work, King gestures here toward an internal alterity within film theory itself: a fissure of the unknown that opens the canon of criticism, like cinematic representations of the Orient, to possibilities of re-vision.

In the following chapter, an analysis of classical Hollywood's *film noir* treatment of the Orient, King traces a cinematic trope that she calls "the Shanghai gesture." She explores the expressions and implications of this trope through the framework of three emblematic *noirs*: *The Shanghai Gesture* (Joseph von Sternberg, 1942), *The Big Sleep* (Howard Hawks, 1946), and *The Lady from Shanghai* (Orson Welles, 1947). Derived from the verb "to shanghai," a colloquial phrase meaning to "render insensible" and "abduct," King's term refers to the dual appropriative acts set

in motion by this technique of representation: first, Hollywood's adoption of a kitsch oriental aesthetic; and secondly, the capacity of that aesthetic, as King describes it, "to invade and take over the logic of the film" (51). In this valuable contribution to criticism on *film noir*, King proposes that the orientalist objects suffusing the *mise en scène* stand as material traces of the protagonist's thwarted desire to work out a troubling mystery, or epistemological challenge, and so achieve a sense of psychic resolution. They are, then, enigmatic signifiers; and as such, King argues, these overdetermined objects awaken the characters' longing to decode their meaning, however impossible to fathom.

The evaluations of Hawks' and Welles' works are incisive: King suggests that the baffling oriental objects of a pivotal scene in *The Big Sleep* speak to the film's greater project as an allegory of a subjectivity's engagement with the enigmatic itself (thus providing a clarifying interpretation of a famously labyrinthine narrative); and she discusses the vertiginous topography of an intertwined East and West that Welles designs, as embodied by *femme fatale* Elsa Bannister and spectacularly depicted in the mirror-maze sequence. The highlight of the chapter, however, is the section on *The Shanghai Gesture*, a film about debauchery within the casino culture of the Asian city. Uniting close textual readings with source material from studio archives, King explores a cine-historical episode in golden age filmmaking that conveys, almost metonymically, Hollywood's attempts to transform—that is, "shanghai"—the cultural subjectivity of East Asia into a fantastic object cathected by alternately paranoiac and romantic desires. The lure of the enigmatic haunted both the production and direction of the film: King cites years-long negotiations between studios that wanted to produce (and preserve the decadence of) the picture and the strictures of a wary Production Code Administration; and she perceives a parallel sense of instability in von Sternberg's directorial vision. As an *auteur* who insisted upon the audience's awareness of film as iconic representation, von Sternberg here crafts a *mise en scène* in which enigmatic objects function as what King calls "visual metaphors for . . . wild fluctuations of value" (63)—both in the economic terms of the narrative's casino setting and the greater extra-diegetic question of exchange between cinematic illusion and pro-filmic reality.

As King goes on to argue in the following chapter, however, post-studio-era Hollywood approaches the Orient less as a mine of overdetermined objects than as a site from which specters of trauma and uncanny imitation derive. In her analyses of neo-noirs *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974) and *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982), King examines their respective relationships to the East Asia of the classic Hollywood imaginary, as well as, in the case of Scott's film, contemporary economic concerns about piracy. Whereas golden-age enigmatic signifiers remain mostly within the confines of the *mise en scène*, in Polanski's and Scott's works the materiality of cryptic otherness exceeds the frame to form entire spatial dimensions: the titular *Chinatown* surrounding Los Angeles and *Blade Runner's* dystopic vision of the same city in 2019. In the reflexive process of setting the narratives within the parameters of Los Angeles, the films suggest that the threat of alterity is no longer isolated within a distant Orient but resides within Hollywood history itself. To apply King's remarks on *Chinatown* to the landscapes of both films, traumas of unknowing now "seep . . . into the psyches of the ostensible enforcer[s] of law and order, . . . the surrounding city (Los Angeles), and the national culture industry (Hollywood)" (76).

In her discussion of both movies, King crafts a critical nexus between this psycho-spatial suffusion of the enigmatic and diegetic questions of doubling and authenticity. Tracing the motifs of repetition and coded/accented speech faced by detective Jake Giddes in Polanski's film, King claims that a crucial misperception shapes the protagonist's relationship to these puzzles: "the mistaking of sameness for difference and difference for sameness" (85). He ascribes to Chinatown, that is, the vices of the unknown, while failing to see the corruption inscribed within the familiarity of Western society—a "projective reversal" (87) revealed through the plot-twist of incest between father and daughter. In *Blade Runner*, the interplay of sameness and difference bears more explicitly racial implications, as the diegetic lack of distinction between human and replicant (in a city virtually colonized by Asian corporate interests) speaks to a greater, paranoid desire to establish difference between self and other. As King argues, this obsession with distinguishing the original from the simulacrum presages today's concerns over East Asia and the piracy of property; the fear that an other may appropriate elements of a cultural subjectivity and, in so doing, render the false indistinguishable from the authentic. Noting the postmodern aesthetic of the work, one that intertwines Hollywood's past with a futuristic sensibility, King relates this to the film's overarching "awareness . . . that the value of the original in some ways depends upon the presence of the copy" (100).

She goes on to further examine this dialogue between original and copy in the subsequent chapter, a study of European and experimental films that explore the stakes of cross-cultural representation. A series of four films by Michelangelo Antonioni, Ulrike Ottinger, Leslie Thornton, and Wim Wenders turns from classic Hollywood's objectification of the Orient to determine the possibility of depicting East Asia's cultural subjectivity. Using narrative and formal techniques that shift between realism and fiction, these works reject traditional cinematic conventions that present a fantastic copy of the Orient—yet they also discover that the pursuit of authenticity is sometimes as problematic as the production of an illusion. In King's words, the films seek a balance of representation "that does not presume to uncover an authentic essence, but that also does not rob [the] other of reality" (102).

Antonioni's 1972 documentary, *Chung Kuo: Cina*, and Wenders' *Notebooks on Cities and Clothes* (1989) are especially striking in their respective negotiations of these registers of representation. Commissioned by the government of Communist China, Antonioni's film records episodes of daily life that appear realist but bear underlying elements of the staged; they are, in fact, spectacular enigmatic signifiers designed by a government attempting to define itself to a Western other. As King terms it, these interludes disclose a "performative," rather than essential, "national identity" (105). In the equally incisive section on Wenders' film, the vexed question of originality and performance turns to a discussion of materiality in the construction of identity. A series of vignettes in which Wenders encounters Yohji Yamamoto, a Japanese fashion designer and hero to the director, the essay film considers the aesthetic traditions of cinema and fashion as they evolve in an era of technological innovation. Though Wenders remarks upon the indexical instability of the electronic image that allows for a proliferation of copies without an absolute original, he nonetheless goes on to craft a kind of equilibrium between various photographic media through split screens and the incorporation of different film stocks.

Indeed, in examining the sensory impact of these techniques, King perceives the material expression of an "enfolding" of Western and Eastern subjectivities (129). Unlike Welles' magic

mirror maze, in which self and other are fatally intertwined, Wenders proposes a mutual engagement that allows East and West, original and simulacrum to co-exist. In the multi-dimensionality of *Notebooks*' material and psychic considerations, the golden-age "Shanghai gesture" evolves into an intercultural dialogue. In the next and final chapter, King engages with two key figures in this dialogue: the "lost girls" caught between East and West in Sophie Calle's multimedia installation *Exquisite Pain* (2003) and Sofia Coppola's film *Lost in Translation* (2003). Following the heroines' psychic trajectories—Calle documenting the end of a love affair while in Japan, Coppola's Charlotte adrift in Tokyo and developing a relationship with an older man—King finds that they diverge from that of the *film noir* detective. For rather than pursue subjective cohesion through the objectification and interrogation of an other, the lost girls "actively seek . . . new meaning and look . . . to be undone by something unfamiliar" (166).

King frames this capacity to embrace internal (and external) alterity within a dual conceptual context, referencing both Freud's notion of feminine sexuality and Laplanche's theory of de-translation. In the former, the girl's desultory path through the Oedipus complex and the formation of heterosexual desire instills a sense of "discontinuity" and "subjective undoing" within her psyche (147); and in the latter, the drive to translate (apply an absolute correlation between one system of meaning to another) shifts to a recognition of the fact that, as each utterance is already a message conveyed for an other's interpretation, "there is no original to uncover" (116). De-translating functions, then, as a kind of "arcade" (with Laplanche borrowing this term from Walter Benjamin) through which conventional associations are dismantled in favor of discovering "a conduit between the foreign and the familiar" (154). King reads Calle's and Coppola's lost girls as embodiments of the arcade process, encountering the enigmatic signifiers of the East with a reciprocal awareness of the enigmas inscribed within their own subjectivities. Yet, as King remarks, a preoccupation with the familiar ultimately prevails over a fascination with the unknown: Calle remains obsessed with the exquisite pain of losing her lover, and Charlotte holds to the stabilizing gravitas of her older male companion. With this in mind, King points out that though certainly not a great wall, the intercultural arcade bears its own limitations.

Throughout *Lost in Translation*, however, King's own arcade of analysis remains a formidable structure. With critical equanimity, she interweaves a variety of discourses—between psychoanalysis and phenomenology; film theory and cultural history; even classical Hollywood and experimental works—to undo the notion of their opposition and instead reveal their mutual investment. This book is a foundational work for future studies of not only the West's cultural interplay with East Asia, but broader concerns of alterity and the enigmatic in Hollywood itself. As such, *Lost* contains aspects that could be further interrogated—namely the phenomenological elements of the discussions. King gestures throughout to the significance of the embodied experience as it relates to both filmic and human form (giving it insightful consideration in the section on Wenders' work, for example), but tends not to explore in depth the sensory resonance of the enigmatic signifier. Yet in so comprehensively developing the psychoanalytic angle of Laplanche's theory, King introduces a new model for identification into an area of film theory traditionally associated with questions of sexual difference. Further, her nuanced conceptualization of cinematic tropes like the Shanghai gesture and the lost girl invite reinvigorated critical attention to the heavily analyzed fields of *film noir* and feminist studies.

In the conclusion to *Lost in Translation*, King describes Hollywood itself as "the structuring internal alterity in world cinema, the biggest and most omnipresent foreigner" (170). She goes on to remark that the suffusion of digital technology introduces a new era of exchange between East and West, with America inhabiting the global mediascape as a corporate and cultural presence whose otherness is inescapable. Historically the agent of an objectifying "Shanghai gesture," Hollywood now finds its own legacy inscribed in East Asian works that stand as cultural evidence of the instability between the roles of self and other. Always already the senders of enigmatic signifiers and the tentative decoders of their meanings, both Eastern and Western psyches encounter the failures and triumphs of cultural intersubjectivity—a capacious experience that, ultimately, King's book reflects.

Works Cited

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