

Orientalism, Occidentalism and other myths of origin

By Marcela Quiroz Luna

After listening to the speech given by famous French ethnographer, Claude Lévi-Strauss, on June 27th of 1974 at the Séance Publique in Paris, Roger Caillois responded: "Strange destiny, strange preference that of ethnography, if not of the anthropologist, that takes more interest in the men of the antipodes than in fellow countrymen, in superstitions and customs that are more disconcerting than in its own[...]. It is the only science that contributes to the destruction of its object, since it sends the better equipped with enviable material and the most prepared investigators, to the last refuges in which man still subsists in a natural state, and so a wild population is studied in a state of innocence as opposed to the technical universe only once. The presence of the most pre-cautious ethnographer pre-announces or seals the contamination with no return of the tribe which he lives with. "In these intense speech lines in a live voice, Caillois, humanistic critic addresses the conditions that tie the foundation of colonialism with sarcastic clarity.

The search for the origin of life, the civilizations and the entire universe has been a pulsating vein common between man and his history. The answers that have been summoned to face those questions about origin have derived in the development of thought and science, but also, and perhaps with special richness, literature and the arts. The various mythological narrations that have accompanied the development of humanity have given foundation to the beliefs and to the identity substance of towns and nations. Above all of them, the question for the *otherness* like that that is different and distant and is founded essentially on remoteness. And so, the stories of journeys, the journals and expedition memoirs, will set the bases of the imaginary built in the world being lived in front of the "other". That other surrounded by exoticism and strange customs before the one that man has historically assumed one of two possible intentions and stance: spellbound scholar or justified conqueror.

Let's think on it in the process of the "discovery" of the East of the Western point of view. Let's talk about 'orientalism' which has been talked about, with sensitive intelligence, in the speeches given by the Palestinian thinker (*Orientalism*, 1978) as that mythological construction which gives origin to the unknown and foreign world before the one that is established and defined as the Western world to designate that which is and that which distinguishes the civilized world.

Bibliography:

- Lévi-Strauss, Claude (2006) *A World on the Wane* (Barcelona: Paidós) (*Tristes tropiques*. Paris. 1955)
Said, Edward (1990) *Orientalismo* (Madrid: Libertarias) (*Orientalism*. New York. 1978)

Specifying, as the author does, on the first including mythology that the 'orientalism' does in the inexistent contextual and geographical precise defining between the Middle East (Arabic world) and the Eastern end (China, Japan) in the same way as the 'intellectual' cultural and political considerations in which the occidental world establishes its oriental criteria on *otherness*. For purposes of this brief essay we must limit ourselves to the mythical terrain of the Eastern End pointing out, in the work of Tamiko Thiel (artist with a Japanese-German background who was born in The United States) the reverse of the mythical journey of discovery and colonization (political and intellectual) of the view and the occidental speech on the East.

If we were to establish a kind of minimal 'chronology' of the contact and the building of mythical relations between the West and the East we would be able to trace its path back to Marco Polo and his journeys with stories on the "Oriental Indies" in the XIII century and his description of the city Catay (matched by some with China); stories that would satisfy the European thirst because of the richness and exoticism of oriental products; we would go through the religious European colonizing attempts in the XVI century and the spreading of their stories –which became a foundation for the later colonizing raids during the XVII and the XVIII centuries, fevering the illustrated century and the growing commercial-aesthetic interest for what was 'Chinese' (*chinoiserie*); to orientalism of the XIX century as an academic and economic enterprise; until all the Maoist rage in the seventies of the XX century – 'culminating' with the journey to China guided by the group of French intellectuals, Tel Quel (Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes, among others); getting to the present day– that could be exemplified with the studies of the two most important contemporary sinologists, François Jullien and Jean François Billeter.

Going though this synthetic oriental history we are able to link the 'rescuing' of something 'non present' in the view and way of occidental life. The desire to rediscover that human essence in origin the answer of which is looked in distant and exotic societies with the yearning of a harmonious relationship between man, his natural environment and spiritual experience, the history of art would cover an interesting path of the building of its own imaginary among different costs and mythifying mirages. Venturing in the orientalist spectrum that would make the European imaginary between the XIX and XX centuries, let's think about Eugène Delacroix and his ventures into the Arabic world bound to immortalize the harem of women in Algeria that belonged to a wealthy Moroccan merchant in 1832; or in the diary of the Aristocrat Eugène Fromentin in 1852 after visiting an Algeria devastated by a civil war (*Chronique de l'Absent*). Or, the Polynesian journeys of Paul Gauguin in the last decade of the XIX century and its idyllic scenes of women among voluptuous landscapes; adding the fascination of Picasso for the masks of African deities. The visual mythology that Europe builds about the confines of its culture, whether the Middle East, Africa or Oceania, it participates with the same expeditionary spirit on what is strange and forbidden. The seizing of new, idealized, incorrupt worlds that are closer to the idea of the 'original paradise' (lustful worlds though barbaric and always close to the perversion before the civilized occidental standards) offers a rich imaginary potential for art and literature. "Barbarism as a way of rejuvenating" stated Gauguin in his post-impressionist struggle. But, what would happen if we made this imaginary journey exercise 'the other way around'? as suggested by artist Tamiko Thiel in one of his virtual reality interactive installations *The Travels of Mariko Horo*, 2006. Which myths, vices and virtues would we find thinking about the history of the discoveries in strive of the origin of humanity if we made the journey from East to West?



Tamiko Thiel, *The Journeys of Mariko Horo: Avogadori in the Opal Palace*, 2006, virtual reality interactive installation, courtesy of the artist.

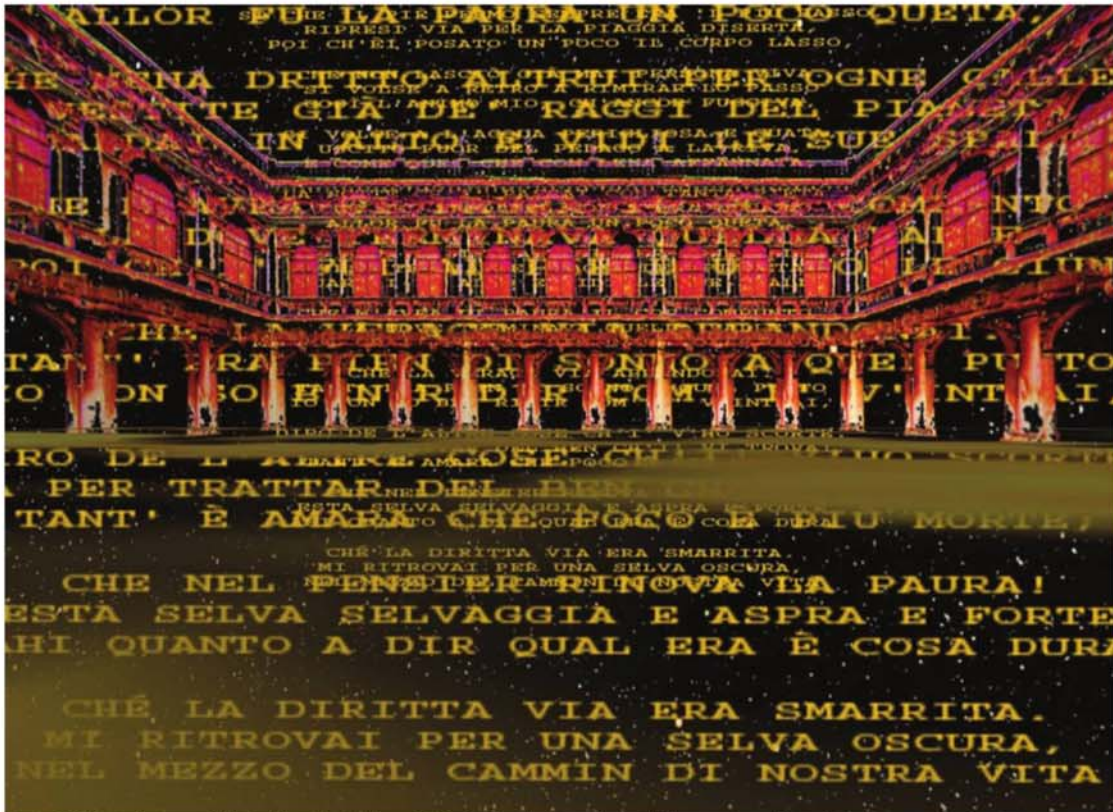
The Travels of Mariko Horo makes the user an active spectator, by accompanying its main character, Mariko—a young Japanese sailor in the imaginary of who, we exist. Just like in other pieces by Thiel, the programmatic virtual installation designed and programmed in Virtual Reality Modeling Language (VRML) uses a complete wall as a projection; in front of it a lever-cursor allows the spectator to make the journey its own. Nothing more is said to us about Mariko Horo except the fact that she knew the contemporary maps in the time of the Italian sailor, Marco Polo, of his native Venice in the late XII century. In them, only the stone buildings of the romantic and byzantine churches were highlighted, and so the land in which these buildings were built seemed to be inhabited to the foreign eye. Mariko, aware of these conditions, begins her journey from her small Japanese home on a boat shaped like a stylized gondola lead by the torsos of two horses that gallop over the waters as the user's hand manipulates the lever. After crossing the seas, alone in her impossible boat, Mariko Horo finds other small inhabited islands, Marco Polo's, in which only historical ecclesiastical constructions can be seen. The traveler in our hands enters them finding, sometimes, symbiotic Catholic-Hindu virgins between golden sparkles, a mix of colonist-native iconographies. Thiel refers to the historic imaginary of those converted Japanese who, after Imperial banishment of the Jesuit missionaries, were forced to hide their newly acquired faith; as announced by the religious syncretism that the missionaries accepted in relation with the budhist goddess of mercy, Kannon, fused with the cult to the Virgin. Other times, the buildings serve as an entrance to the world of the final judgement, in which souls will be trialed. When this happens and the soul descends to the hells, in Mariko Horo's world it can be reborn even if it is from world stained by its actions. This is one of the most visually impressive moments of Thiel's piece retorting Callois destructive warning after the ethnographic journey through a territory unexposed to civilizing judgment.

About his piece, Thiel has explained that the journey that the spectator-traveler decides to go on, faces them in a karmic way with their destiny, and so they can decide to enter one of the temples in which, instead of finding the comfort and glory of the virginal images, they will be

faced with horrific scenes taken from the circles of hell in the *Divine Comedy* by Dante mixed with terrifying images from the world history of the XX century. Thiel envisions, for his invisible traveling character, such an apparently unconnected, misunderstood and mixed encounter like those of the members of the expedition to the East. Mariko can not only travel through space but also through time, and so occidental history is spliced among phantasmagoric scenes over Saint Marks Square in Venice which is where Horo arrives as the destiny of her journey of discovery of the *other*, this *other* being the occidental imaginary cultural universe.

The game that Tamiko Thiel plays on the back of the path of the occidental civilizing "discovery" seems like a relatively simple and essentially educational strategy because of the correlative environment that he offers the public. However, the ideological, historical and cultural substance that make up the information in his piece reveals, in a synthetic way, the condemnation and oriental vices with which Said transformed the critical perception of the studies and aspirations of the occidental thoughts on that both mythical and diffuse "East".

The interpretation of the outlines typical of that which is different and uncontrollable to us is the cause of Mariko Horo's approach; seeing that the traveler comes from an island, Japan, it assumes that the *other* world is constituted geographical in the same insular way. And so she decides that Venice is an archipelago representing the mythical western islands prefigured in Buddhist mythology as the Islands of Blest. The empty space in which the cartographies of Marco Polo places the churches confirm that they are inhabited by floating spirits as some Japanese sagas have narrated.



Tamiko Thiel, *The Journeys of Mariko Horo: Poets Library*, 2006, virtual reality interactive installation, courtesy of the artist

In the first pages of *Orientalism*, Said quotes a phrase by the writer Benjamin Disraeli: "The East is a career." (1990, p 23.) The definitive nature of this short sentence limits many of the conformation and consumption senses in the imaginary of the East as dichotomy cultural generalization (opposite at times and some other times complementary of the West); geographical placement of imprecise limits; denomination of an 'other' origin always a bit foreign—for better and for worse—to the West. Rescuing the image stated by Disraeli as both a mental and literally a physical career draws the outline for a number of nuances linked to the ethnographical critique by Caillois the words of whom we started this journey with. The confrontation between expectations and resources in the building of an imaginary necessitated in many ways and demanded by the passive look of the investigative culture, is declared with disenchantment by Lévi-Strauss in prelude to his *A World on the Wane* (1955): "Today, being an explorer is an occupation that does not only consist, as some might think, of discovering, through years of studying, facts that remained unknown, but of covering an elevated number of kilometers and accumulating projections, fixed or animated, in color if possible, thanks to which a hall will be, for many days, packed with a crowd of listeners to whom vulgarities and trivialities will appear miraculously transmuted into revelations, for the sole reason, that the author sanctified them through a 20,000 kilometer journey instead of plagiarizing them in his own element." (2006. p 24)

Seeing as in Thiel's piece the spectator never gets to 'see' the traveler but rather shares her place in the ship before the world, in, one becomes Mariko Horo, assuming, without questioning, her preconceptions and her imposed discoveries informed by a previous and founding cultural imagery. This operative and apparently harmless resource ends up assigning the critical nature of his work, establishing, with clarity, the conditions that our sharpened look holds behind prisms prefigured before the unknown. That 'career' to the East stated by Disraeli is not only the career of a ghost traveler, it is our own career in our disembodied journey. In it, floating on the fly of time over a equine ship, we face our own conventions. How do we build our imaginary of the unknown? What substance inhabits, in a mythological way, in our look and thoughts about the *otherness*? Where do we analyze and define the origin of the outlines that state our own cultural origins from? What tools do we have to this date to liberate our possibilities of understanding what we are not, from the fog?

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