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Pariahs Exposure and Concealment: The Outsider's Gaze On Contemporary Chinese Society

Rubén de la Nuez

*Mirrors reflect a flower on either side.
Her face and the blossom illuminate each other.
On her freshly embroidered silk jacket are golden partridges flying wing to wing.*

Wen T'ing-yun, *Beautiful Barbarian*

*Tho' the river is clear and shallow
They cannot cross it;
Nor their pulse beat, come into words*

Anonymous, Han Dynasty, *The Beautiful Toilet*

There is a condition I share with Kristiina Koskentola, the Finnish artist who inspired this text: we both have recently lived and worked in China for some months. The following text is still somehow ensnared under the effects of the 'Marco Polo syndrome'.¹ The sense of discovery, the celebratory minute, has not fully vanished. The prospect of this text is not immune to the fascination for *différance*, understood in the original Derridian way. On the one hand, it is unavoidable to find the value of objects and events in their oppositional qualities with respect to Western equivalents. On the other hand, there is an inevitable gap between the geo-cultural context referred to in this text and my distant language created to define a highly different reality. The traditional loss in translation between the East and the West tends to produce a sort of inverted tokenism in today's approach to Chinese culture. This consists of seeing the extraordinariness of a selected number of items that are regarded as ordinary by a population of more than 1.3 billions. In this respect, the following thoughts on the otherizing eye underline a certain form of self-criticism.

During the last years, Koskentola has developed a body of works devoted to cultural objects and symptoms that exist on the margin of

what Lacan called the 'symbolic order'. Well-informed about critical theory, Koskentola has implemented Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection (indebted to Bataille) as a conceptual tool.² In previous works, Koskentola developed a short-distanced and sometimes intimate approach to objects containing certain biographical significance. She does this to an extent of intimacy where her own body became a sort of territory to explore a liminal state between her physical and social persona.

In a new stage of her work, this liminality has expanded to an opposite extreme. It has embarked on Mongolia and China for a type of experience that overcomes the horizon of the vital circumstance. The new territory has no borders. It is neither limited by the body of the artist nor by the burden of her cultural and social history. Now, it is no longer the artist confronted with herself and her psychosocial legacy. The sense of intimacy and immediacy of her work remains the same, as a result of an unaltered *modus operandi*. Yet, what Koskentola called 'internal landscapes' in her early works, has become an expanded and unlimited dialogue between the legacy the artist carries in her suitcase, her poetics and her mind, and a 'real' and physical geography; a vast cultural geography existing before and beyond her psychological persona.

Earlier on, the two sides of Koskentola's liminal encounter with the abject were the subject and the object of abjection within a same symbolic order. Now, the issue at stake is the anthropological abject. In Koskentola's recent work, abjection is directly connected with otherness. The evil is always *the other*. What moves Koskentola's art is no longer the object that is regarded as pariah within its own social system but that considered as such by a geo-cultural alterity.

In this regards, one of the aspects that strike the Western eye in contemporary China is the public presence of a number of instances that, from the Western viewpoint, could be regarded as objects of social marginalisation. Furthermore, the quite opposite circumstance is also striking for the Western conception: the absence, or disguise of cultural and social objects that could be considered ordinary or indispensable in Western society.

What, in Koskentola's poetics, was previously a fine and a fragile line between memory and oblivion, body organs and bodily waste, the object and its representation... has become as determined and immeasurable as the Gobi desert. This immense territory could be seen as an allegory for the new space in between (now between the Self and the

Other) for the latest anthropological scale in Koskentola's work. This space is defined by travelling cultural symptoms that exist half-way between northwest influences and the heart of China. After his expedition to the Gobi desert in 1927 the Swedish geopolitician Sven Anders Hedin wrote:

From the legendary land of the Seres in the East the longest caravan route on earth, the Silk Route, carried to the polite world and the imperial court of Rome the noble silk sung by Virgil. [...] Here, influences from China, India, Greece, Persia and the midst-wrapped country of the Scythians have left their marks upon the arts. [...] By their caravans, merchants, pilgrims, couriers and travelers with deathless names have maintained the connection between East and West.³

The Gobi desert is the metaphorical 'arena' where objects face their decisive task to gain access to the Far East. The desert decides what enters and what remains drying out in the sand. The same is true for the objects travelling in the opposite direction; looking westward.

Eighty years after Hedin's expedition, Koskentola added her epigrammatic signature to the list of countless names and events registered in the sand of Gobi and in Hedin's detailed travelogue. On the Mongolian side of the desert, Koskentola realised a diptych consisting of a performance, an environmental intervention and a video documentation. In the first part, entitled *To See One's Own Face*, the artist sketches an anonymous portrait in the sand with a barber's razor. She continues cutting on the image until the face is deformed and eventually disappears with the help of the wind. The fade in and fade out of this nameless figure is indeed a metonymical gesture of the history described by Hedin. In a broader sense, it is a monument to every nomadic soul that has lived and vanished in the vastness of this or any other in-between geography. Nonetheless, as the title indicates, Koskentola used the desert as a mirror to portrait human being's ontological predicament: the impossibility of any living creature to prolong his/her existence, to avoid the immediate return to the dusty nothingness.⁴

In the second part, entitled *Ambiguity*, the same procedure depicts instead a swastika. The fact that, nowadays, the Western eye is attracted by the common use of the swastika in the East entails an interesting semiological paradox. The use of this graphic sign by the Nazi Party as symbol of the Aryans (Indo-Europeans), caused the worst linguistic

loss in history of modern visual communication. This basic geometrical solution, which has accompanied mankind since its prehistory, has been obliterated in most of the Western world, and has thus become a semiotic pariah. The Nazi transgression of reasonability has produced a long-lasting effect in a wide range of the human praxis. Fortunately, the symbol that was borrowed from the East to be shamefully re-semantised in the West did not return its shame to its original source. This shame faded away in the desert – like Koskentola’s action – before reaching the Hindu and Buddhist temples from which the swastika was quoted.⁵

Western attraction on contemporary China is very much related to a certain eager for ‘realness’. The ‘matrix syndrome’, the sense of unreality in contemporary society, seems to find a balance in a territory where everything looks still all too real.⁶ If Baudrillard defines the real as a desert – a surface that loses its meaningful depth in a world of simulacra – Gobi seems to be a paradoxical ‘desert hall of the real’ for the Western traveller.

Among the objects and symptoms of this inventory of realness, Koskentola’s lens was prompted by the customary images of animal corpses hanging in public places, waiting to be served as food. They appear in the series of black and white photographs *About Food / Loathing*, 2008. The title refers to Julia Kristeva’s concern on food disgust, which she considers as ‘the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection’.⁷ Nevertheless, unlike Kristeva’s psychoanalytical approach, the everyday life pictures taken by Koskentola in a street market in Beijing speak about another sort of abjection.

China has embraced Western-style patterns and the aesthetics of the consumer society. However, precisely because of strong identity factors of Chinese cuisine and handling with food, a Western-like process of ‘abstraction’ of the living animal and the commodification of its meat does not take place in most of the cases. Even at the dining table, it is not unusual to be welcomed with an entire, well-shaped animal body. Therefore, under these circumstances, abjection is the result of a confrontation with the *realness* of the Other; its non-abstractionism produces what could be considered the ultimate object: that resulting from the identification of food with death.

The animal corpse, a Western pariah, has full credentials, not only in suburban markets but also in luxurious restaurants and hotels. Koskentola overexposes what has been naturally exposed, naming it

under the discourse of abjection. This gesture shifts the attention from the object of the photographs to what is left outside: the photographer, the viewer, the hermeneutic of the image, and the assumption of its abhorrence.⁸

The endless situations of exposure, like those analysed in this text, are equalised by situations of concealment in Chinese society. The most evident is perhaps the absence of sexually explicit representations. Following Koskentola's anthropological enquiry, this is quite a relevant case because such an absence is, to some extent, due to the effect of a foreign shame that managed to cross to the Eastern side of the Gobi desert. Western modernity globalised its sense of obscenity. Puritanism covered – with fig leaves – the ancestral tradition of natural representation of sexuality in most of Asia, without exception for the well-known Chinese erotic art from the Ming and Ching dynasties.

I will conclude these observations by mentioning a recent case related to concealment in the new media. A debate in China has uncovered what appears to be today's most obvious global pariah: ugliness. When *Ugly Wudi*, the Chinese version of the TV series *Ugly Betty*, went on air, it was followed by criticism. The main character was considered not ugly enough, and was thus seen as a humiliation for the 'real' ugly.⁹ The controversy sparked back to the widely known American version, as well as to the original Colombian version, whose protagonists were then considered not ugly either.

Paradoxically, a TV series seemingly critical to the appearance-based social function in contemporary life unveils the incapacity of new media to deal with ugliness. The extent of the paradox includes the fact that outcast ugliness is the result of a notion of beauty produced, distributed and installed in the common consciousness by new media themselves. Codified beauty includes its own anti-values. Betty and Wudi are not ugly but only *appear* ugly as they wear glasses and braces, which have been baselessly codified as signs of unattractiveness. The aesthetical contribution to the commodification of the human body is the dialectic of beautification/uglification of physical attributes.

Therefore, what is expelled from new media is, again, a sense of realness. Natural ugliness, understood as a perception of the discontinuity, deviation, or corruption of natural patterns, is not more disregarded than 'natural beauty' itself. 'Natural beauty', Adorno posited, 'is, in the age of total mediatization, transformed into a caricature of itself; not the least of the causes for this is the awe felt for natural beauty, which

imposes asceticism on its contemplation for as long as it is overlaid with images of being a commodity.¹⁰ Denaturalised beauty backed by new media, bio-aesthetics, genetic and other contemporary means threatens the feeling of being in touch with reality by which contemporary China seduces the Western eye. Today, Betty's and Wudi's beauty equally affect the Eastern and the Western side of the Gobi desert.

Notes

- ¹ During the 2nd Havana Biennial, 1986, the Cuban artist Flavio Garcíandía exhibited his installation *The Marco Polo Syndrome*, that inspired Gerardo Mosquera's well-known homonymous essay on intercultural (mis)communication. Gerardo Mosquera, in: 'The Marco Polo Syndrome', *The 'Third Text' Reader on Art, Culture and Theory*, Continuum Intl Pub Group, London/New York, 2002.
- ² This analysis is a follow-up of my texts 'Leftovers: On Abjection (Or On Kristeva in Koskentola)', in: *Kristiina Koskentola*, Dutch Art Institute, Enschede, 2007, and 'Lo abyecto: Enunciación y renunciación', in: *Art Notes*, N° 17, 2007.
- ³ Sven Anders Hedin, *Riddles of the Gobi Desert*, Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, 2002, p. 4-5.
- ⁴ This 'deconstructive' portrait is in continuity with a series of Koskentola's early paintings which I have described as 'suicidal portraits' (Rubén de la Nuez, 'Leftovers...', op.cit). Now, the desert replaces the canvas and the wind substitutes the capricious course of the oil paint. One of the prime cases of abjection, in a Kristevian sense, is the confrontation with death; the reminder of our insignificance. 'There, I am at the border of my condition as living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit—*cadere*, cadaver. [...] The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection.' Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1982, p. 3.
- ⁵ As a Finnish, Koskentola may have experienced the semantic 'ambiguity' created by the '(in)appropriation' of the swastika by the Nazis. For centuries, this figure has been part of the official heraldry and a sign of good luck for

the Finns. For that reason, it is still employed. That makes Finland a rather unusual case in the Western world, where even Native Americans renounced its use although it was traditionally part of their graphic repertoire.

⁶ I have referred the 'matrix syndrome' as the assumption of truth of a number of conceptual proposals that during the eighties, helped cultural theorists to foresee the direction to which contemporary society was heading. Those concepts were related to the global expansion of the sense of virtuality resulted from the development and massive access to the new media. Rubén de la Nuez, 'Pasaporte a la matriz', in: *Art Notes*, 11/ 2006.

⁷ Julia Kristeva, op. cit., p. 2.

⁸ The image of publicly exposed carcasses has been part of the historical Western imagery on China. In order to illustrate the analysis that paved the way to Kristeva's notion of abjection, George Bataille included snapshots of a young Chinese in the moment of his public torture and execution by means of the *Leng-tch'e* method (cutting in pieces) in 1905 in his book *The Tears of Eros* (1961).

⁹ During the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympic Games (2008), the girl who appeared singing the *Hymn to the Motherland* was lip-syncing. The original singer was replaced, as her face was considered aesthetically unsuitable for such an event.

¹⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, Continuum, London/ New York, 2004, p. 88. Within *critical theory*, while Bataille scrutinised the psychosocial infrastructure of residual practices and the institutional inability to assimilate them, the Frankfurt School identified aesthetic instances adrift from the cultural industry.