

Review: Hoday King (2010) *Lost in Translation: Orientalism, Cinema, and the Enigmatic Signifier*. Durham: Duke University Press. 205 pp.

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East Asia and its diasporas are typically depicted in American films as overwhelmingly labyrinthine worlds densely layered with complex enigmatic signs. In *Lost in Translation*, Hoday King argues Hollywood has used the Orient as a form of (what Jean Laplanche calls an) *enigmatic signifier*: a message that withholds meaning from its recipients whilst signalling itself as a symbol that resists decoding. By considering East Asian imagery in silent, Classical and Independent Hollywood era films alongside Movie Palace architecture, modern art installations and a NASA message sent into space, King shows how the seduction and peril implied by the inscrutable Oriental aesthetic is not limited to cinema. Instead, it formulates a kernel of America's own internal cultural alterity. At times, the book feels somewhat anachronistic, but not on account of King's interrogation of Orientalism in silent classics, film noirs and 1980s neo-noirs. Rather, this emerges via a psychoanalytic engagement with filmic texts that discuss Freud-inflected Oedipal structures underpinning cinematic 'subjects.'

In the 1980s psychiatrists turned film-scholars Krin and Glen Gabbard observed that if 'psychiatry had not existed, the movies would have had to invent it' (1987, xi). The same undoubtedly holds true of film criticism at this time and its use of psychoanalytic discourse. Armed with Lacanian and Freudian tools, the psychoanalysing of cinema reached its apogee in the late 1970s and 1980s with Screen Theory. Postmodern and poststructuralist film-philosophers embracing cognitive and neurological approaches subsequently challenged linguistic conceptions of the unconscious and queried the validity of transplanting studies of human psychology and subject formation to the abstract machine of cinema. If psychoanalysis no longer exists as an unproblematic approach for modern critics, then, part of the work facing cinematic-psychoanalytic practitioners is how to *reinvent* it. King attempts this by appropriating the work of Laplanche, who as a psychoanalytic student of Lacan and a philosophical contemporary of Maurice Merleau-Ponty seems to offer a portal through this impasse.

King initially provides a rich exegesis on Laplanche's work and ideas, extolling their value for understanding Western texts employing

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Oriental images. Significantly, Laplanche attempts to 'correct' Freudian models of a self-centred unconscious or subjectivity, arguing that our identities and interior lives are set in motion by an encounter with the unknown and unintelligible. For Laplanche, every sign is not only a signifier 'of' something, but is also a message 'to' and 'from' someone. His approach is useful therefore as it re-inscribes the importance of the exterior and the *other* in identity formation. Laplanche argues that in early infancy the fledgling subject receives messages - auditory, tactile and visual- that the child is unable to comprehend. The infant understands these messages are intended for him/her, and that they demand a response, but for all intents and purposes their contents remain wholly unintelligible. These misunderstood messages, or enigmatic signifiers, thereafter become the prototype for all future experiences of bewilderment. To compound matters, though, these forms of communication are always already permeated with meanings with which the sender is unaware, and thus become unconscious on the part of sender and receiver.

King tasks herself with rethinking both psychoanalytic and orientalist approaches through an encounter with Laplanche, and strives to create new ways of seeing and understanding Hollywood-Orientalism. King finds the major problem in traditional approaches located in their maintenance of a binary opposition between West and East. Furthermore, the majority of these approaches limit themselves to an examination of Oriental character stereotypes that are contrasted to Occidental subjects. King's approach thus differs in two significant ways. First, through conducting a sustained analysis of *mise-en-scène* and style instead of Asian characters and stereotypes. And secondly, by focusing on forms of representation that 'avoid the paranoid dynamics of enigmatic signification' and actively work to 'deconstruct the long standing binary opposition between monolithic notions of East and West' (10).

Influenced by Roland Barthes's *Empire of Signs* (1982), the East Asia King describes is not a real country or place, but rather a fictive one. In part, this allows King to examine images of East-Asian *mise-en-scène* without falling into the traps that beset previous critical endeavours. Broadly speaking, these sought an antidote to depictions of a 'false Orient' by seeking an 'authentic' one instead. Typically these sought Eastern depictions that would help to replace abstractions with individuals, sketches with psychologically full portraits, and 'lies' with 'truths.' These drives, King argues, always ran up against the problem of taking fictive locations and characters as real, and of suggesting there were more authentic or indigenous modes of representation that would grant viewers unmediated access to the group or place in question. At a fundamental level these enquiries falsely believed that East Asian films could somehow display a more simplistic, truthful or literal correspondence to factual reality, and would not be semiotically complex or 'riven with ideological and physical

conflicts' (9). Instead of trying to usurp the false Orient with an authentic one, then, part of King's agenda is to undermine the monolithic concept of the Orient itself. Laplanche's concept of the *stereotype* offers her a solution to this problem too, by reworking the notion into an internal alterity instead of a representation of an external other.

From this perspective, Hollywood depictions of the Orient are seen as internal kernels of Western psychical alterity, and function as part of a larger structure of paranoid defence. King links this to a trope she calls 'the Shanghai gesture,' whereby the enigmatic is projected eastward. This is a double abduction that echoes the verb 'to shanghai' (at once meaning to drug or render insensible, to abduct or ship away, to compel or render insensible). For King, oriental *mise-en-scène* reifies this Shanghai gesture and provides fertile ground for staging an examination into the paranoid encounter. In her historical analysis of Hollywood-Orientalism she concedes that many filmed objects and sets appear somewhat gratuitous, and are merely tacked on to conjure a paranoid mood or provide visual atmosphere. In films like *Broken Blossoms* (dir D. W. Griffith, 1919) and *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, 1941), however, the Asian set dressing is load-bearing and holds meaning. When exploring noir texts, for instance, King observes how oriental props and décor become entangled with the film's larger meanings. Significantly, in a genre concerned with the circulation of knowledge, the use of enigmatic objects often communicate what the hero cannot utter. Overdetermined objects here appear to know the answer to unsolvable puzzles, to contain secrets to the mystery, and to embody an enigma key to the hero's own subjectivity. These objects are not simply quest objects, nor Hitchcockian MacGuffins used as pretexts to drive a plot forward. Rather, they are enigmas and forever un-decode-able objects that prevent the riddle being fully solved.

Space also becomes an important area of enquiry, with noir crime scenes typically being 'peppered with oriental curios' that taunt detective and viewer alike with questions of their significance (59). This *mise-en-scène* becomes even more enigmatically overdetermined in King's explorations into what she calls 'The Chinatown Syndrome' in chapter three. Here the *mise-en-scène* of East Asian diasporas within neo-noirs bear the burden of explanation and unload a multitude of 'cryptic enigmas' that the films cannot resolve. In Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974), for example, this explicitly becomes 'A place where you have no idea what is going on.' King also expands this analysis to the world of *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982), an American city-space full of Asian characters, origami props, flashing neon Eastern symbols, and 'replicants' with Asian creators. These are frightening and threatening places, wherein knowledge always eludes the grasp of the white male protagonist. The heroes become lost and othered within these spaces while the 'others' always seems to know something about them but chooses to withhold it. The neo-noir hero is

also mocked by this other's knowledge. In this genre, King argues the tables are turned on Orientalism itself, as it 'is no longer the white, Western subject who... purports to have exclusive knowledge about the Orient. Rather, the white, Western subject imputes this epistemological imbalance back the other way, and worries about the consequences' (83).

A film like *Blade Runner* is also found reworking and redirecting contemporary socio-political issues. The film is thus partially about a cultural anxiety over trans-Pacific commerce, and the East's counterfeiting or imitation of Western products and lifestyles. The fears of Asian goods mimicking and outperforming Western ones is built into the human-replicant storyline, but also touches on US Asian immigrant issues. Asian immigrants King explains, are viewed as the great assimilators, providing a 'model minority who copies white America so completely that she surpasses or displaces it' (94). Linking these ideas back to Laplanche's concept of the enigmatic signifier, what the main protagonist Deckard seeks to destroy, then, is ultimately an internal other within himself. These issues bleed over into what I consider to be the most original and insightful chapter in the book, which attempts to surpass binary distinctions and concepts of an authentic or false Orient. In a chapter called 'The Great Wall,' King seeks 'images, objects, and property that do not unequivocally 'belong'' to one culture or another' (103). Here King explores films that are not involved in a search for authentic essence nor attempt to rob what they film of its reality.

An engagement with Michelangelo Antonioni's documentary *Chung Kuo: Cina* (1972) provides some of the most insightful and original work within the book. Describing how Antonioni was restricted in what he could film by the Chinese government, King sees his resulting documentary as participating in a Laplanchean mode of address: wherein messages from the Chinese government are intended to be seen by foreign audiences. However, Antonioni was only allowed to film things that were already on display or otherwise deemed interesting by the Party. Accordingly, the film surfaces as 'a carefully composed Chinese self portrait' (105), and as such the national identity seen in it is already a performative one and not a true essence. Antonioni's images therefore become enigmatic signifiers that represent the self to an external other. In an insightful section King reads part of the film that illuminates how the Western filmmakers found themselves being internally othered by their experience. Here, scenes recording Venetian-like canals lined with Chinese people eating 'fettuccini-style noodles' illuminate how Antonioni and his crew were not only strangers in China, but Italy too became foreign to itself: 'since some of the things that are most quintessentially Italian have come from elsewhere' (108).

In King's final chapter she explores the antithesis of the male noir heroes by focusing on 'The Lost Girls' of Sophie Calle's 2003 multimedia installation *La Douleur Exquise* (Exquisite Pain), and Sofia Coppola's *Lost*

in Translation (2003). Unlike the noir heroes, these girls understand from the start that they will not unearth secrets about the world, so attempt to better understand themselves. In these works East Asia becomes a carnivalesque space where the Westerner gets lost. The audio-visual representations deal with issues of colonialism and imperialism whilst entering into a dialogue with the literary genres of the travelogue and sentimental novel. Together, they also explore female coping strategies in the face of bewildering and overwhelming experiences with otherness. In both cases the women burry themselves in relationships with older Western males. Here, in an encounter between Freud and Laplanche – that at times feels beyond the book's remit - King engages with issues of why the female subject embarks on the road to normative heterosexuality. Beyond this, the Oedipal desires enacted by the girls are outlined as psychic shields that protect them from all forms of alterity.

Throughout the book King's exploration into Hollywood-Orientalism convincingly demonstrates that it may now be 'impossible to speak of authentic or pure national cinema' (170). *Lost in Translation* also offers a broad historical guide to the changing politics and depictions of East Asia in Hollywood films and American culture more generally. It further offers readers a new range of psychoanalytic tools to help see where the traces of internal alterity are effaced and made manifest. Through their representations and representatives, King ultimately demonstrates, East and West can be seen to create 'an infinite *mise-en-abyme* of mirror reflections,' wherein each becomes the 'inextricable internal alterity of the other.' (74)

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