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Debating China

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THOMAS BOUTONNET

Texte intégral

The spectacle is not a collection of images; it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images.¹

- ¹ In 1967, Guy Debord raised an essential, open question in *The Society of the Spectacle*, that of the mythification of reality and of men's alienating tendency to live through images. Debord also deplored the emptiness of an everyday life that was fundamentally ruled by material criteria (the consumption of goods, social status) which were conveyed through images and dispossessed individuals from their time and their control over it. Forty years later, these questions remain dramatically relevant, since the influence of images, staging and spectacular dynamics on contemporary societies and lives is stronger than ever. However, no image can exist outside of ideologies and systems of thought. Reality is shaped by images and representations, narrations and myths, so many elements that enable us to apprehend the real world but that also at once establish a distance with the reality they are meant to represent; so many elements that unavoidably contribute – directly or not – to constitute and to anchor ideological positions.
- ² Analysing the creation and connotations of representations and images has probably been one of the most stimulating research fields in humanities for the last fifty years. And as one of the most useful tools to better understand what elements and limits modernity and post-modernity involve, the historical and social importance of images should urgently be addressed in the Chinese context, where images have played a significant role. For China has been the

object of Western fantasies since the arrival of the first Jesuit missions, the subject of Orientalism as defined by Edward Said (an Orientalism that China now starts to incorporate into its own national discourse), as well as a site that enacted some major ideologies of the twentieth century which have instrumentalised images and representations, from Maoism to market economy. Chinese history is burdened with layers of contrasting and distorting representations which interact in complex ways, and which have deliberately been polished, standardised and unified by Chinese official discourse in the past fifteen years.

3 China is a multi-faceted signifier which has been at once fantasised, and has often been perceived and represented through codes and reified images that are distant from any form of reality. Of course, China's image – a combination of the image that China seeks to build around itself and of the image that the world (and especially the West) imposes on it – has substantially changed since its emergence as a major economic and diplomatic actor in the 1990s. But from orientalism to condemnation and now “normalisation” (because of its economic strength and attractiveness, China has now come to be seen as a respectable regime that is no longer regarded as fully totalitarian), an essential question still needs to be asked: what is China?

4 *Debating China* is therefore the main topic of this sixth issue of *Transtext(e)s Transcultures*. It is divided into two main parts, the first one of which focuses on the question “what is China” through four original approaches: it includes four articles that address notions of image, imaginary and representation, at the crossroads of different academic disciplines.

5 Pierre-Mong Lim addresses this question through the prism of “Chineseness”. The author studies two recent Hollywood animated films, *Mulan* and *Kungfu Panda*, and deconstructs the orientalist discourse at work in these productions. He examines the ideological and economic mechanisms that structure this staging of Chinese identity, and discusses the films' dynamics of self-orientalism – the Orientalism integrated and reproduced by the object itself (China).

6 The question of the representation of China and of the images and feelings associated with it is also debated in Marilynne Brun's paper on *After China*, one of the major novels of Brian Castro. China is imagined in terms of space and time (the novel involves a time “after” China) and dissociated into two opposed narratives (ancient China, contemporary China): two imagined (and imaginary?) Chinas that serve a critical discourse on the tragedy of the Cultural Revolution, but that also structure a critique of biopower and of the control of bodies that it implies.

7 Jean-Yves Heurtebise approaches discourses on China from the philosophical and political angle of democracy. Moving beyond the simplistic view of the West as the cradle of democracy and the East as supposedly characterised by totalitarian or authoritarian political systems (let us remark that the Chinese government claims to be democratic and that the question of the corruption of democracy is regularly raised in Western countries), the author questions the very definition of this political construction by recalling the historical development of European discourses on the notion of democracy and on the possibility of democracy in China (and in Asia in general). The paper also questions the existence of “Western values” and “Asian values” and examines the creation of these discourses.

- 8 Images of, discourses on, and representations of democracy in China are also the main topic of Huang Yu's paper, the last paper in this issue's first part. Huang Yu studies a debate not *on* China but *in* China, as she analyses a virulent argument held in 2005 in China about the television show *Chaoji Nusheng* 超级女声 (Super Girl Voice Contest). This very popular show (a singing contest inspired from an American show) was the occasion for Chinese intellectuals to engage in a fierce debate on the practice of democracy, on the relation between popular culture and consumer society, but also on the role of intellectuals in a contemporary China caught between free market economy and political conservatism.
- 9 Xu Kefei also addresses the crucial question of the role of intellectuals in the narration of the past and the transformation of the present-time. He argues that the infatuation of the editors of French journal *Tel Quel* (1960-1982) for Maoist thought and Cultural Revolution during the 1970s was just another utterance of a very French way of approaching China – as a *mirror*.
- 10 The second part of the sixth issue of *Transtext(e)s Transcultures* is centred around one of the major aims of the journal: offering a forum for transdisciplinary works that go beyond the rigidity of academic categories and explore original research fields with a transcultural approach. This second part therefore offers three original contributions gathered in a *Varia*, three transnational approaches that study, through three major thinkers of the twentieth century, the essential question of identity.
- 11 In the first paper, Liu Huiming examines the work of Paul Ricoeur on identity and the self, and discusses his major contribution to the question: the notion of narrative identity, a dialectic combination of selfhood identity and sameness identity.
- 12 In the second paper, Le Min Sook studies the work of Korean writer Kim Dong-ri with particular focus on his representation of shamanism. Korean shamanism seems to be a response to modernity and to the disruption that it implies, and the paper examines this corpus of ideas that could, in spite of its conservative discourse, be considered as a third humanism (after Ancient Greece and the Renaissance).
- 13 In the last paper of this *Varia*, Ma Jin discusses Jean Baudrillard's approach to signs and meaning. Although mostly studied for his work on consumer society, Baudrillard also contributed to a critical approach of semiology, an approach that this paper attempts to introduce, while also questioning the notion of simulation.
- 14 At a time when men are becoming more and more inhibited by economic stakes and productivist logics, and when "the real world is replaced by a selection of images which are projected above it", it becomes crucial, more than ever, to deconstruct systems of thought and representation in order to free imaginaries from the political and ideological rigidity that often constrain them.² *Transtext(e)s Transcultures* seeks to offer opportunities to decompartmentalise minds, an essential step to reformulate and rethink the world and its representation in unconstricted terms.

Notes

1 Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. by Ken Knabb, London, Rebel Press, 1983, p.7 ("le spectacle n'est pas un ensemble d'images, mais un rapport social entre des

personnes, médiatisé par des images”).

2 Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. by Ken Knabb, London, Rebel Press, 1983, p.18 (“le monde sensible se trouve remplacé par une sélection d’images qui existe au-dessus de lui”).

Pour citer cet article

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Thomas BOUTONNET est docteur en études chinoises et transculturelles, et a été directeur de l’Institut Confucius de Lyon (2009-2010). Chercheur au sein de l’Institut d’Études Transtextuelles et Transculturelles (www.iett.eu), il enseigne actuellement la langue et la société contemporaine chinoises à l’université de Lyon – Jean Moulin. Sa thèse, intitulée « Vers une “société harmonieuse” de consommation ? Discours et spectacle de l’harmonie sociale dans la construction d’une Chine “civilisée” (1978-2008) », aborde le processus de civilisation des populations paupérisées durant le passage à une économie de marché en Chine. Son travail de recherche actuel porte sur la déconstruction des discours idéologiques en Chine contemporaine, sur l’étude des mots du pouvoir chinois et sur une analyse approfondie du concept de civilisation. Thomas BOUTONNET has a PhD in Chinese and Transcultural Studies and was the executive director of the Lyon Confucius Institute in 2009-2010. He currently lectures in the Chinese department of the University of Lyon - Jean Moulin and is an active member of the Institute for Transtextual and Transcultural Studies (www.iett.eu). His main research interests include ideology and discourse in contemporary China, Chinese official and political language, technologies of power, and the discourses surrounding the idea of “civilisation”. His PhD thesis, entitled “Towards a ‘Harmonious’ Consumer Society? The Discourse and Spectacle of Social Harmony in the Construction of a ‘Civilized’ China (1978-2008)”, focused on Hu Jintao’s concept of a “harmonious society” and its relation to the development of consumerism.

Articles du même auteur

La Chine en débat [Texte intégral]

Paru dans *Transtext(e)s Transcultures* 跨文本跨文化, 6 | 2011

Traitement moral de la question sociale dans la « société harmonieuse » de Hu Jintao [Texte intégral]

Paru dans *Transtext(e)s Transcultures* 跨文本跨文化, 5 | 2009

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