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EDITORIAL

GREGORY B. LEE

A city whose streets resound with the languages of Europe and Asia, a city where people are glad to talk to you in either English or French, a city where the local language reigns over the national in the schools, on the market place, on the street signs, and in the television studio. It is obvious that I am talking about no place in France. Even before the Jacobin-inflected French revolution, linguistic homogenization was inherent in the centralizing impulse of the dominant tendency that monopolized the French revolution. But it was not only France that was touched by this standardizing desire which in the ferocity and the single-mindedness of its application recalls the uniformity imposed by that unifier of disparate principalities into a single monolithic state, the totalitarian and totalizing first “emperor” of what is now called China, Qin Shi Huang Di.

The “universal” values of France's revolution were always meant to be transferable. What was good for France was good for the world. No alternatives were imaginable and non-European contributions to knowledge disappeared in the mists of an instituted collective amnesia. Forgotten the Arab mathematicians and philosophers to which modern scientific thought was indebted, forgotten the Saracen poet-finders, mentors of the troubadours, without whom no lyric poetry would have existed in Europe. Disparaged the diversity and finesse of Chinese philosophy.

But then revolutionary France had championed the Rights of Man! Yes, but of which men? And what about the rights of women? The French revolutionary

Olympe de Gouges, a great French revolutionist, abolitionist and feminist whose “Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen” (*Déclaration des Droits de la Femme et de la Citoyenne*) would be cast into the basket of history along with her head. Olympe de Gouges was a woman from Montalban (Montauban) in south-western France where the local language forms part of an organic unregulated group of idioms known today as Occitan which can boast a literary wealth longer than that which we would come to know as French, in other words the language of Paris and Versailles, its government and its surroundings, the New Latin.

Today in France the linguistic richness of the local varieties of the language that evolved after the collapse of the Roman Empire, has been reduced to standard French plus a scattering of colourful bilingual street signs in some of France's Southern cities. The laudable project of reinventing Occitan-based culture as a repository of plurality and dissent, despite the brave efforts of its promoters, of Felix Castan, of Claude Sicre and of many more, remains ambitious while not yet victorious.

However, Occitan's cousin, Catalan is thriving in the cityscape and its hinterlands to which I alluded in the opening sentence: Barcelona, where an American tourist gazing up at a signboard was recently overheard to say: 'Isn't that the weirdest Spanish you ever saw.'

Catalonia is utopian, Catalonia has autonomy, and wants more – but don't we all, and is “national” autonomy the path to the individual's? Perhaps for the few, not for the many. Barcelona, just as the rest of Spain, is no paradise, yet it is living proof that what passes for near certainty is not finally inevitable: in this case linguistic homogenization, the imposition of the language of the capital, which is no more than the socio-linguistic expression of a will to subject us all to a monologic message, to the word expressed by a unitary centre. The Word become the Word of the Nation.

Even forty years of the most authoritarian, primordial fascism was unable to suppress the will to survive, to re-emerge and to re-invent. Today, Spain's regions enjoy wide-ranging autonomy of which the maintenance of local languages represents merely the superface. But would the diversity represented by the cosmopolitan Barcelona exist beyond the Spanishness of which it is currently a constituent? Is Raphael Alberti's reminder, now seven decades old, of the necessary interdependence of the national and the local still pertinent: “Defensa de Madrid,

Defensa de Cataluña”?

However, Spain today, like the rest of the world, is subject to the contradictions of the form of power that now dominates our globe. In homage to British radical writer Orwell, there is now in Barcelona a Plaça George Orwell, partly inhabited by down-and-outs, it is watched over by a large fraternal surveillance camera.* Where in the world today are these globalized procedures absent? What in the world is the point in producing a TV series in Catalan or Cantonese or Breton if it is merely to glocalize American soap? There is something initially gratifying about a Chinese traveller in an international airport who asks you in impeccable Castillian Spanish rather than International English, if this is the right gate for Florence. No, it is not. But what does it matter? Aren't we all in the same airport, as Marc Augé pointed out, and are our destinations not all converging into one?

This issue of *Transtext(e)sTranscultures* is consecrated to diverse reflections on ways of seeing and interrogating homogenizing and totalizing practices and ideologies of our world. Jean Chesneaux poses directly the question of renovating universal principles, a re-inventing that would challenge ethnocentric certainties that cannot but bring into question dominant shibboleths of the past and present. Albert Chen's contribution reflects both on past appropriations of French political philosophy in China, and what may be new ways forward. Martha Huang examines how the Westernized pictorial gaze was, at times painfully, assumed by China's cultural producers in the first half of the twentieth century. Evelyn Ch'ien writes of the recent work of the extraordinary Chinese artist Xu Bing whose oeuvre poignantly interrogates both the linguistic and visual dominant codes by which we live, as do the Taiwanese exponents of visual, concrete poetry discussed here by Marie Laureillard. As Geneviève Azam, reminds us, what prevents a real universalisation of shared possibilities is the ideology of the “universal” that is constituted by, and imbricated in, the ideology of economics, for in a “society constructed according to the so-called 'universal' principles of the formal economy, anonymity and massification inhibit the constitution of free and equal individuals, and the unending quest for the production of material wealth to satisfy unlimited needs only makes sense (but what sense?) for a minority of Humanity and destroys the concrete and material possibility of universalizing basic human rights.”

*I am grateful to Sean Golden for revealing this, yet further, example of the agony of irony in a world that long ago rendered the ridiculous immune to ridicule.