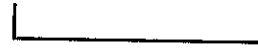


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FILM AND CULTURE SERIES

John Belton, General Editor

Part 1

Visuality, Modernity, and Primitive Passions

The meaning of any linguistic sign is its translation into some
further, alternative sign.

Roman Jakobson, "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation"

Is the passing from literary writing to cinema a manifestation of
extreme modernity, or of regression?

Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Quips on the Cinema"

"One Newsreel Helped to Change Modern Chinese History": An Old Tale Retold *antology*

Among stories told by modern writers about themselves,¹ Lu Xun's account of how he decided to engage in literature is perhaps one of the best known but least understood. During 1904–6, Lu Xun, a poor student from China, was studying medicine at the Sendai Medical School in Japan. He had high hopes that upon graduation he would return home to assist his countrymen with the urgent task of national reform. Lu Xun's plans were drastically changed one day, when he was confronted with a spectacle. This is the way this well-known episode of conversion is described in his writings:

I do not know what advanced methods are now used to teach microbiology, but at that time lantern slides were used to show the microbes; and if the lecture ended early, the instructor might show slides of natural scenery or news to fill up the time. This was during the Russo-Japanese War, so there were many war films, and I had to join in the clapping and cheering in the lecture hall along with the other students. It was a long time since I had seen any compatriots, but one day I saw a film showing some Chinese, one of whom was bound, while many others stood around him. They were all strong fellows but appeared completely apathetic. According to the commentary, the one with his hands bound was a spy working for the Russians, who was to have his head cut off by the Japanese military as a *public demonstration*, while the Chinese beside him had come to *appreciate this spectacular event*.

Before the term was over I had left for Tokyo, because after this film I felt that medical science was not so important after all. The people of a weak and backward country, however strong and healthy they may be, can only serve to be made *materials or onlookers of such meaningless public exposures*; and it doesn't really matter how many of them die of illness. The most important thing, therefore, was to change their spirit, and since at that time I felt that lit-

erature was the best means to this end, I determined to promote a literary movement. . . . I was fortunate enough to find some kindred spirits. . . . Our first step, of course, was to publish a magazine, the title of which denoted that this was a new birth. As we were then classically inclined, we called it *Xin Sheng* [New life].²

Occurring merely a decade after films were first introduced into China—in 1896, by agents of the Lumière Brothers³—and at roughly the same time when Chinese people began making films,⁴ Lu Xun's story is not simply part of a famous writer's autobiography about his writing career but a story about the beginning of a new kind of discourse in the postcolonial "third world." This is the discourse of technologized visuality. I have made modifications in the standard translation (indicated by italics in the preceding passages) in order to highlight the language of visuality that is in the original Chinese,⁵ somewhat at the expense of the idiomatic smoothness of the English. As we can see, this account is about an experience of the power of a spectacle transmitted by the film medium. The lantern slide captures in a vivid manner the horrifying process of a countryman about to be executed by foreign aggressors. But what exactly is horrifying? As is the case of many of Lu Xun's texts, there is a gap between seemingly continuous events, leaving it to the reader to look for connections between what are, upon close reading, discursive fragments.

This episode of an emerging "modernity" that is specifically grounded in visuality would find many parallels elsewhere in the world. Lu Xun's experience anticipated the ways European intellectuals such as Martin Heidegger and Walter Benjamin were to write about modernity. Both Heidegger and Benjamin would associate modernity with the changing conceptualizations of art. In the essay "The Origin of the Work of Art," Heidegger would compare the effect of a work of art on the observer to a thrust or a blow; Benjamin, specifically discussing film in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," would describe it in terms of shock. According to Gianni Vattimo, who alerts us to the fact that these two otherwise very different essays were both published in 1936, Heidegger's and Benjamin's conceptions have at least one feature in common—"their insistence on disorientation". Vattimo goes on to define this disorientation, which for many European

technology → Art → meaning

intellectuals is characteristic of the creativity of art in the age of generalized communication, as "fundamentally . . . nothing but metropolitan man's nervous and intellectual inconstancy and hypersensitivity."⁶

Once outside the European metropolis, however, disorientation would take on a very different set of connotations. The surprise, shock, and oscillation described by Heidegger, Benjamin, and Vattimo were no doubt experienced by Lu Xun at the projectile of the images unexpectedly launched at him in his unassuming perceptual security. And yet this disorientation is not only about the meaning of art and creativity; nor is it only about the gratuitousness of human existence as has been generalized about the modern European metropolis. For the young Lu Xun, what are shocking and disorienting are the destruction that descends upon the victim, the apathy and powerlessness of the onlookers, and the meaning of these for China as a modern nation—this, indeed, is the rational explanation Lu Xun himself offers; it is also the explanation that most readers and critics of modern Chinese literature have accepted. Seldom is it mentioned that what is shocking and disorienting is also the process of magnification and amplification that is made possible by the film medium, which, as it were, makes the spectacle spectacular, the demonstration monstrous, and thus underscores the significance of a technologized visuality. Lu Xun's reaction, we might say, is not simply focused on the victim about to be executed or simply on the passive observers; more important, it is an index to the relationship between visuality and power, a relationship that is critical in the postcolonial non-West and that is made unavoidable by the new medium of film.

Once introduced, visuality enables us to notice that Lu Xun himself is in the position of a spectator and observer.⁷ Further, it enables us to see how this well-known episode could be rewritten in terms of the complex relationships among different groups of spectators—the observers who are there to "appreciate" the execution;⁸ Lu Xun and his classmates, who watch the event of murder and spectatorship on celluloid; Lu Xun the writer watching himself and others watching, and so forth.

In spite of the prominence of visuality and spectatorship in Lu Xun's story, however, critics have always interpreted it from a strictly literary perspective, making it part of the founding narrative of modern Chinese literary history—of how a major writer began writing.⁹ Even when it is recognized that, in the 1920s and 1930s, one alternative adopted by

writers to the increasingly denigrated status of literature was "a redefinition of writing that reorients it as a part of, rather than differentiated from, activity in the socio-material world,"¹⁰ the connection between such "activity in the socio-material world" and visuality is usually not made. The habitual privileging of the literary on the part of scholars (even when dealing with an age in which the literary is in demise) means that the mutual reciprocities between literary and visual modes of representation, together with the questions of power those reciprocities entail, are bypassed if not altogether suppressed. Thinking only in terms of literature, critics uniformly move their attention from Lu Xun's story to the implications it has for literary history alone, leaving unasked questions that are crucial to the interpretation of what in this case is first and foremost a visual encounter. For instance, how does Lu Xun, looking at the screen, know that the Chinese observers *are* apathetic? How do we know that the looks on their faces mean that they are apathetic? (For what we know about the practice of executions around the world, the observers could well have been part of a deliberate setup by the executors to warn the public.) By uncritically accepting Lu Xun's own explanation of his reaction to the lantern slide, literary scholars forget that visual images, because they do not have possibilities of interiorization and abstraction that are typical of the written word, operate differently as a mode of signification. What fails to be considered in the exclusively literary approach is the fact that Lu Xun's explanation is already a retroactive attempt to verbalize and narrativize a mute visual event.

My point in retelling this old story is not to suggest that Lu Xun's account was a fabrication.¹¹ What makes his story interesting is not whether it "really happened" but that it is a filmic experience he uses to explain why he started writing. The story points to the ambiguities involved in the activity of watching, especially as watching is so deeply inscribed in the events of modernity and national strengthening for a "third world" culture.

If this visual encounter caused a major change in Lu Xun, what is clear is the visual encounter and the change, but not *how* the visual encounter caused the change. The central question in all visual encounters boils down to this simple *how*. Because the visual image itself is silent, how do we go about explaining the changes it causes in us? This central question of a silence-to-be-interpreted structures both the "form" and the "content" of Lu Xun's narrative: just as it is impossible to

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know for sure what the spectacle did to the observers, it is equally impossible to know exactly how the spectacle of the execution as watched by the observers affected Lu Xun and his subsequent construction of the event. The various rounds of spectatorship involved point up the same problem with regard to visual experience—the need for interpretation, the need to make up for the lack/silence in the visual image with an act of nonvisual filling. And yet, this problem cannot be solved simply through a resort to literary writing.

Let us return now to the happening of the visual encounter. What exactly is it that Lu Xun *sees*? How does he see it? If we say that he sees the horror of an execution, we must also say that he sees the horror of the activity of watching. This horror of watching is not, as most interpretations of this story (including his own) go, due simply to the apathy on the part of the observers. Would the observers watching the execution have had the same effect on Lu Xun if he himself was not watching them on the screen? This question is, by and large, what is missing from most interpretations of this story. From the viewpoint of Lu Xun himself as a film spectator, we may say that what he “sees” and “discovers” is not only the cruelty of the execution or only the apparent cruelty of the observers but the direct, cruel, and crude power of the film medium itself. In its projectional thrust, film intensifies the shock inherent to cruelty-in-the-form-of-an-attack: similar to the beheading about to be experienced by the victim, the effect of the film images on Lu Xun was that of a blow. What confront Lu Xun, through his own act of watching, are thus: first, the transparent effect of a new medium that seemingly communicates without mediation; second, the affinity between the power of this new medium and the violence of the execution itself.

Further, if the implication of the affinity between film and execution is ultimately—as we learn from the history of the twentieth century subsequent to Lu Xun’s visual encounter in the 1900s—fascism, then part of the shock for Lu Xun is that the reaction of the Chinese bystanders on the screen is part of this fascism also. The way *their* fascism comes across is not simply a matter of apathy but rather immobility vis-à-vis a spectacle of inhuman horror: faced with the monstrous vision of the execution, these other men act as if what is in front of them is some *final* meaning that requires absolute submission. It is as if these men have, in the course of watching, become themselves a spectacle and a film. It is this spectacle, this image of a passive collective mesmerized in

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modernity
spectatorship, that projects itself on the spectator Lu Xun with the effect of shock.

In its quiet, unassuming voice, then, Lu Xun’s little account is already marked by the media-bound disorientation that other theorists are to define as the characteristic of modernity. Clearly, vision and visuality bear for Lu Xun the implications of a menace.¹² This menace, a great force imposing upon him a heavy task against his own will, would henceforth constitute the “beginning” of his writing career, which can be reinterpreted as an attempt to deal with the filmic spectacle and with his own implication as a spectator. Even though Lu Xun’s “solution” is to take up writing, the menacing effects of visuality would always be there to haunt him. The ingredients of his encounter with the unexpected slide show would become the chief concerns of his writings as well as the writings of his fellow intellectuals in the years to come. These concerns would express themselves as a combination of two things: on the one hand, the pathetic contents or “materials” of China’s backwardness, poverty, powerlessness, and general apathy; on the other, the formal demand for an effective “language” of communication that would enable China to catch up with the rest of the modern world.

Retelling Lu Xun’s story as a story about modernist shock is, among other things, a good way of showing how “self-consciousness” is produced in the postcolonial “third world.” This self-consciousness is inextricably linked to the position of being a spectator. To put it simply, Lu Xun discovers what it means to “be Chinese” in the modern world by watching film. Because it is grounded in an apprehension of the aggressiveness of the technological medium of visuality, self-consciousness henceforth could not be separated from a certain violence that splits the self, in the very moment it becomes “conscious,” into seeing and the seen. “Being Chinese” would henceforth carry in it the imagistic memory—the memorable image—of this violence. National self-consciousness is thus not only a matter of watching “China” being represented on the screen; it is, more precisely, watching oneself—as a film, as a spectacle, as something always already watched.

As in the case of all conversion narratives, Lu Xun’s story is marked by suppressed ambivalence. Ostensibly, we remember, this story is about Lu Xun’s change from being a medical student to being a writer, with the message that the urgent task of national reform lies in changing people’s attitudes and habits of thinking rather than in simply

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improving their physical health. But what kind of *professional* realization precedes this turn to literature? With the shock of self-consciousness comes the realization that the visual medium is an extremely efficient mode of communication. Here we arrive at *the second major meaning of the menace of vision and visuality*: if the first feeling of shock for Lu Xun is national consciousness—that is, the realization of his and his countrymen's existence as a spectacle in the eyes of the world—the second feeling of shock has, I think, to do with his realization that he is in the presence of a powerful medium that, in due course, might usurp and supplant the role traditionally enjoyed by literature and writing.¹³ At the same time that the spectacle of the execution makes Lu Xun realize the plight of China in the era of transnational imperialism, it also shows him the *enviable* effects of a clear, direct, and seemingly transparent new "language" that is, precisely, the representational goal toward which the generation of modern Chinese writers in the 1920s and 1930s aspired.

The aggressivity of the film medium signifies the immediacy and efficacy of a form of communication that is beyond words and beyond the linearity of verbal writing. Lu Xun's story, placed at the crossroads of an ancient, word-centered culture's entry into the twentieth century, thus carries with it the foreboding of the soon-to-be-realized, all-encompassing force of the visual image in modern and postmodern culture, when entire nations, histories, and peoples are to be exposed, revealed, captured on the screen, made visible as images; when visuality is to become the law of knowledge and the universal form of epistemological coercion.

△ The second meaning of *menace* here is therefore not national consciousness through spectatorship as such but intellectual consciousness in an age when intellectuals are about to lose their traditional hold on culture through their mastery of the written word. Revealingly, Lu Xun's subsequent response to this menace is not an explicit rejection of the visual but a return, via the predicament of visuality, to literature. If this story is indeed the foundational story about the "origins" of modern Chinese literature—about how the "father of modern Chinese literature" began writing—then these origins are illuminatingly self-contradictory. Like the intellectual narrator in his story "Zhufu" ("The New Year's Sacrifice"), who, greatly disturbed by his encounter with a beggar woman, withdraws into the study,¹⁴ Lu Xun's resolve to heal China's "mind" rather than "body" through writing is, we might say, a kind of

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withdrawal as well. Literary critics, for their part, have only perpetuated the belief that this resolve, even though it does not save China, is nonetheless salutarily radical. And when they do point to the traditional nature of Lu Xun's actions, they tend to fail to point out the way this traditionalism takes the form of a privileging of the written word over other types of representation.¹⁵ What they repress in their literary readings is that Lu Xun's "radical" move is the *neurotic* attempt to resurrect as "new life" a traditional practice that has, by the very event that prompted it, been shattered in its foundations.¹⁶ The consistent literary-historical misreading of Lu Xun's story attests to the kind of critical blindness described in this manner by Paul de Man:

aberrant from what orbit?
 In the history as well as in the historiography of literature, this blindness can take on the form of a recurrently aberrant pattern of interpretation with regard to a particular writer. . . . The more ambivalent the original utterance, the more uniform and universal the pattern of consistent error in the followers and commentators. Despite the apparent alacrity with which one is willing to assent in principle to the notion that all literary and some philosophical language is essentially ambivalent, the implied function of most critical commentaries and some literary influences is still to do away at all costs with these ambivalences; by reducing them to contradictions, blotting out the disturbing parts of the work or, more subtly, by manipulating the systems of valorization that are operating within the texts.¹⁷

not cut apart < liter & film
 In Lu Xun's case, this "blindness" is doubly ironic because what the critics fail to see is the image itself: instead of registering the manner in which literary writing is permanently disturbed and disabled by the filmic image, they seek tirelessly to unsee this image as image by rewriting it into literary history. Only by invoking film could Lu Xun talk about the "origins" of his literary writing: literary writing's self-sufficiency and effectiveness are thus denied by the very gesture that inaugurates it in modernity—this is the basic ambivalence of Lu Xun's story, an ambivalence that is inscribed in the historical changes in mediated representation. But literary critics would continue to read it as merely a personal account of motivation, as autobiographical detail.¹⁸

Decentering the Sign of Literature

In an essay called "The Scopic Regimes of Modernity," Martin Jay writes: "We confront again and again the ubiquity of vision as the master sense of the modern era," but "what precisely constitutes the visual culture of this era is not so readily apparent."¹⁹ In the contemporary studies of the non-West that derive their ethical impetus from Edward Said's *Orientalism*, the visual culture of postcoloniality is usually associated with European cultural hegemony—a hegemony, moreover, that is defined as Europe's dominating, exploitative gaze.²⁰ In his work on Egypt, for instance, Timothy Mitchell writes that the West is characterized since the nineteenth century by an "ordering up of the world itself as an endless exhibition": "Everything seemed to be set up as though it were the model or the picture of something, arranged before an observing subject into a system of signification, declaring itself to be a mere object, a mere 'signifier' of something further."²¹

In arguments that recall the definition of modernity made by Heidegger in pieces such as "The Turning" and "The Age of the World Picture"²² as well as "The Origin of the Work of Art," critics who share Mitchell's view mobilize criticism of the West's scopophilia and of the passive, objectified, fetishized status in which non-Western peoples and cultures have been cast. The assumption about visuality here is usually a simple one. For the European photographer or writer, it is thought, the problem was "to create a distance between oneself and the world, and thus to constitute it as something picture-like—as an object of exhibit."²³ Because it clearly establishes seeing as a form of power and being-seen as a form of powerlessness, this view of visuality, even though it is greatly reductive, has become the basis for much antiorientalist criticism. Ironically, however, such a view of visuality also leads antiorientalist critics to focus their attention excessively on the details of the European "gaze"—a gaze exemplified by film, ethnography, and tourism alike²⁴—and thus unwittingly to help further knowledge about Europe rather than the non-West, in a manner that is quite opposite to their moral intentions.

Although they undoubtedly expose the fine turns of the European "gaze," the arguments that set up "West" and "East" in terms of spectator and exhibit inevitably dwarf the fact that "the East," too, is a spectator

who is equally caught up in the dialectic of seeing. As we read in the works of media theoreticians such as Guy Debord, Friedrich Kittler, Paul Virilio, Gianni Vattimo, and others, visuality is part of the speed technology that is rapidly homogenizing the world toward a state of transparency.²⁵ Though "the West" might have been the "origin" of such technology, the materiality as well as the politics of spectatorship are equally crucial to the non-West. When critics concentrate their analyses overwhelmingly on the complexities of the "dominant" Western gaze in the process of deconstructing it, what they in effect accomplish is a superimposition upon "West" and "East" the great divide between seer and seen, active eyes and passive spectacle—a great divide that can as easily perpetuate as disable orientalism.

What is needed, after the ethical polemic of Said's *Orientalism* is understood, is the much more difficult task of investigating how visuality operates in the postcolonial politics of non-Western cultures besides the subjection to passive spectacle that critics of orientalism argue. How do we deal with the fact that non-Westerners also gaze, are voyeurs and spectators? What does it mean for non-Western intellectuals to live as "subjects" and "agents" in the age of "the world as exhibition"? After demonstrating the bloodiness of the Western instruments of vision and visuality, how do we discuss what happens when "the East" uses these instruments to fantasize itself and the world?

The first step toward answering such questions, it seems to me, is by showing that the contempt for visuality, a contempt that leads to the repudiation of visual objects as examples of mere subjugation and passivity in contemporary antiorientalist discourses, is fully shared by non-Western modern intellectuals. In a discussion of Chinese films from the 1920s, 1930s, and 1980s, Paul G. Pickowicz refers to this contempt for visuality in the following manner: "Most May Fourth literary intellectuals simply refused to take the film medium seriously. In spite of their professed interest in bringing about a democratization of culture, a modern culture for the masses, they expressed nothing but contempt for the cinema and made no effort whatsoever in the teens and early twenties to 'bring' the May Fourth movement to the film studios of Shanghai."²⁶

If modern self-consciousness in China as well as elsewhere in the "third world" cannot be severed from ethnicity ("being Chinese" and its equivalent) and a sense of collective victimization ("the Chinese have

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been trampled upon" and its equivalent), the "solution" of the literary turn that Lu Xun adopts is, as already noted, a continual privileging of the age-old signification of words. In a way that reminds us of much of our contemporary antiorientalist criticism, in Lu Xun's response to his shock at being forced to sit and watch the slide show, the image is regarded as a graphic record of violence in such a way as to associate being-seen with passivity; whereas the written word is reinvested with the meaning of an active agent that can mobilize cultural transformation. If the image is linked with victimization, the written word is imagined to be a form of empowerment. Besides the radical conversion from medicine to literature, therefore, the other conversion in Lu Xun's story is a reconversion to tradition, a reaffirmation of culture as literary culture, which is to be centered in writing and reading, in opposition to the technology that includes film as well as medicine.

This return, however, would henceforth never be free from anxiety, guilt, and an increasing sense of impotence. If the lantern slide convinced Lu Xun of the need to revitalize national culture through writing, this return to writing—the "original" practice of the Chinese tradition—would henceforth be haunted by the implications of an erasure. What is erased is precisely the violence experienced through the technologized decentering of "China" into a screen image. The written text, in which the erudite male intellectual seeks refuge, thus becomes a cover-up that veils the vulgar and brutal exhibition of Chinese men being slaughtered in the midst of transnational imperialism, an exhibition that, unlike cultivated writing, comes across without subtlety or reserve. Lu Xun himself is not unlike the mythic hero Yi he satirizes in the story "Ben yue" ("The Flight to the Moon"). In this "old tale retold," Yi, once the hero who shot down nine of ten suns in order to protect the earth, is reduced to the unglamorous chore of shooting for daily food. As Yi keeps bringing home nothing but old black crows for their meals, his wife Chang E escapes to the moon.²⁷ Just as Yi's big arrows now serve only to remind him of his impotence, so the pen, which Lu Xun picks up in order to save China, is now but a symbol of the contrast between its past glory and its present futility.

Meanwhile, if literature is a way to evade the shock of the visual, that shock would come to inhabit and transform literature by other means. Aside from a recognizable sensitivity to eyes and gazes²⁸ and a perceptive use of cinematic techniques in his fiction,²⁹ the most interesting

That is the correspondence between the nature of narrative

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aspects of Lu Xun are that he became a writer primarily of short literary forms such as short stories and essays, and that his writings are strongly ironic. Unlike the traditional chatty novel of the previous dynasties, short literary forms are verbal texts that deliver condensed, pointed messages. If the classical Chinese novel is like a scroll painting that unrolls in leisure, the short story is like a snapshot, a quick capturing of life with minimal background detail within a frozen span of time. In Lu Xun's fiction, the effectiveness of such snapshots is further enhanced by irony, which resembles the camera eye in that it simply displays and juxtaposes without comment.³⁰

In other words, visuality would be repressed only to return to change the conception of writing and reading from within, even though, in modern Chinese literary history, such changes are often mechanical-ly attributed to outside forces such as "influences" of the Western short story or of the terse *wenyan* style of classical Chinese prose.³¹ Short, ironic forms are, we might say, a way to write and read visually, a way to write and read an earlier medium (the verbal text) with the technology of later ones (photography and film), thus making it clear that literature, in becoming modern, is itself inextricably bound to the perceptual changes brought by visuality. It is less a matter of the picture becoming text (as is often assumed nowadays in poststructuralist readings of visuality) than one of the verbal text becoming a picture. Long before the study of visual forms was institutionalized and thus textualized, the visual image was already inscribed in the modernist reorganization of literary writing itself.

① Apart from Lu Xun, there exist many other examples of modern Chinese literature that, even if they do not seem to have anything to do with film and photography, are clearly embedded in the larger epistemological problems of technologized visuality. One can point, for instance, to the abrupt sentences and compressed descriptions in the writings of Xiao Hong; the experiments with objective-observation-as-social-analysis in the panoramic narratives of Mao Dun; the close-up penetration of characters' inner emotions in the essays and novels of Ba Jin; the voyeuristic, confessional tales of Yu Dafu; or the documentary details of local color in the travelogues of Shen Congwen. Be these new literary attempts autobiographical, feminine, or centering on the lower classes or minority groups, they all bear within them traces of filmic visuality in terms of the technologies of abbreviation, cutting, and focalization. Chief of all, writ-

ers such as Ding Ling, Bing Xin, Lu Yin, Ling Shuhua, Xu Zhimo, and others seem to have discovered a primal inwardness that propels writing in a new direction. These writers' explorations of what can be called subjective vision, together with their new narrative techniques for sustaining and managing the attention created by such vision, constitute a new intellectual discipline. The close affinity between modern Chinese literature and film is what leads Jay Leyda to describe authors such as Lu Xun, Xiao Hong, and Shen Congwen as offering lessons, through their writing, to a "word-bound cinema."³²

At this point, it is possible to reverse the conventional way of thinking about the "evolution" of cultural production—the thinking that would insist, for instance, that literature exists "prior" to film. Preoccupied with chronological continuity, this way of thinking usually considers it acceptable to use an earlier mode of discourse as the criterion for judging a later one but not vice versa.³³ Instead, I would suggest, in the twentieth century it is the power of visuality brought along by new media such as photography and film that transforms the ways writers think of literature itself. Whether conscious or unconscious, the new literary forms are, arguably, thoroughly mediatized, containing within them a response to technologized visuality. Like other traditional modes of discourses, including visual ones such as painting and architecture, literature must devise ways of dealing with the emerging predominance of visuality as a general technology of communication.

But the impact of visuality on writing goes far beyond the effects of pointedness, brevity, immediacy, and focalization. As I already mentioned, part of the shock implied in Lu Xun's account has to do with how overwhelmingly effective the visual mode of communication is. It must therefore be added that, as the visual medium insinuates itself in the new literary forms, its capacity for transmitting messages with transparency also leads to what must in retrospect be seen, as I stated, as a neurotic view of language and literature. On the one hand, as all those who are familiar with modern Chinese literature and, for that matter, any literature of the "third world" know, there is the moral imperative, imposed by the oppressive circumstances of postcolonial poverty and degeneration, that literature should realistically contain and convey the dense and heavy subject matter of history. (For instance, literature must reveal the sufferings of the downtrodden classes and the injustice of society.³⁴) On the other hand, as the pas-

sionate instigators of the new language and literature in the 1910s and 1920s such as Hu Shi proclaim, language and literature must also be cleansed of the burdens of the past. Language and literature must, it is said, resemble the people's vernacular and communicate their messages simply and directly.³⁵ Put the historical nation-saving agenda side by side with the agenda for changing the forms of language and literature, and you have the impossible task of transmitting the messy burden of history via an up-to-date medium that is clean, fast, and weightless—of being truthful to the impoverished conditions of China's masses while subjecting them to a brand-new, efficient language that would put China on a par with the rest of the industrially successful world.³⁶

Instead of being simply a "culturally specific" instance of modernity, therefore, Lu Xun's story in fact illustrates a global movement in media technology that is, as Michel Foucault describes in *Discipline and Punish*, intimately tied to the evolving conceptions of social education and control. In the kinds of physical torture practiced by premodern societies, Foucault writes, "the example was based on terror: physical fear, collective horror, images that must be engraved of the memories of the spectators."³⁷ While the execution of the Chinese "spy" could be described in these premodern terms, the fact that for Lu Xun, it came as a film—as a projection with an invitation for introjection—indicates the significant change that conceptions of discipline and punishment go through in modern times. Discipline and punishment are now internalized phenomena, and the social effects they have on individuals are effects of *subject-ion*—to a gaze that can only be felt but not clearly seen. The crucial thing about such subjection, as Foucault's argument also shows, is that it does not work by physical force; rather it relies on civil and gentle coercion: "The example is now based on the lesson, the discourse, the decipherable sign, the representation of public morality."³⁸ Rather than punish the body, such subjection specializes in reforming the heart and the mind. In Lu Xun's case, therefore, the means of confronting the modern social gaze—of dealing with it—was literature and writing.

There is, furthermore, a double movement involved in the modern Chinese intellectual's "conversion." First, it is a movement in which an elite class tries, in the emergence of technologized visuality, to return to literary culture as the way of salvation. Second, it is a movement in

which an elite class of a "third world" nation, in response to the pressure of modernity and imperialism, converts an older, premodern notion of discipline and punishment by physical torture and visual spectacle to a "progressive," because more efficient, notion of discipline and punishment by education. In both movements the (re)introduction of literature and writing has to do with a kind of circumvention of visuality—in the first case, by suppression and rejection of visuality as "modern," foreign, and thus vulgar; in the second case, by an incorporation, in the very return to literature and writing, of visuality as efficiency, progress, rapid communication, collective penalization—in short, as a new form of social discipline and control. In both cases, "Chinese modernity" can be seen to involve movements between sign systems, between the competing politics of old and new semiological subject formations.

It should be emphasized once again, however, that although the search by modern Chinese writers for an effective language has been discussed with great sensitivity in linguistic and literary terms, scholars tend to restrict their focus entirely to the literary realm and do not connect the implications of this search to the development of a new medium such as film. What is significantly missing is a consideration of the mutual implications between literature and film as different kinds of social discourses participating in that condition that is generally recognized as Chinese modernity. For Chinese intellectuals in the early twentieth century, the entry of film represents a moment of an epochal dislocation of the linguistic and literary sign. This dislocation has been more than a straightforward movement from verbal language to visual medium. As we realize through Lu Xun's story, even when visuality is not discussed or responded to explicitly as such, its impact as new technology, as transformative agent, is inevitably present. In fact, it is precisely when visuality is not focused on as such, when we seem to be reading the story of how "the father of modern Chinese literature" began his career as a writer, that its indomitable effects, amplified by film, can be most clearly, if paradoxically, felt. And finally, unlike the case of photography and painting, in film what is visible also moves in time. This narrative-in-motion that is the hallmark of film means that film can, in a way unmatched by other modes of visuality, compete fully with that traditional holder of the monopoly to narrative, the verbal text.

The Emergence of Primitive Passions

The dislocation of the literary sign is also the point where history enters. As Chinese literary production can no longer merely "be itself"—that is, can no longer pretend it is the only kind of signification that matters—literature is inevitably historicized. The dislocation of the linguistic and literary sign leads to a new way of looking at China by Chinese intellectuals themselves *as if it were a foreign culture peopled with unfamiliar others*. This look would involve the systematic reexamination of China's literary past, as for instance Lu Xun's *Zhongguo xiaoshuo shi lüe* (*A Brief History of Chinese Fiction*).³⁹ Increasingly also, the old literary culture would be decentered by a new focus on anthropological and sociological issues. To paraphrase Roman Jakobson, the meaning of the sign "Chinese" is, as modern Chinese intellectuals discover, its translation into some further, alternative sign.⁴⁰ If one side of this translation has to do with the appearance of the technologized visual image in and outside the traditional verbal text, the other has to do with the increasing prominence, in representation, of "the people."

Indeed, "modernity" arrives with this fundamental question: how to deal with "the people"? If the centrality of the literary sign is (re)moved by the increasing omnipresence of the visual sign, and reading and writing decentered by the coming of the film medium, the literary sign is also (re)moved democratically, from being the agent of record of life among the elite classes to being the agent of record of life among the masses.⁴¹ Reflection on "China" would increasingly mean coming to terms with China's people, in particular the oppressed classes. As we will see, this process of democratization—both in the sense of an emancipation from literary language and in the sense of the introduction of the masses into literature—is structured by what I will term "primitive passions."

In the liberal West, it is well known that what is now termed "high" modernist art, such as is associated with the painters Picasso, Cézanne, Gauguin, Matisse, Modigliani, and so forth, is inseparable from a certain fascination with the primitive. Scholars such as Sally Price, Marianna Turgovnick, and the contributors to anthologies such as *Modernist Anthropology* have demonstrated how the artistic aspirations of modernism and the disciplinary underpinnings of anthropology reinforce

each other, and how the global renown enjoyed by Western modernists is the result of a massive appropriation of the works of peoples in the non-West, who remain unrecognized and nameless. Most important, these scholars argue, the formal innovations of Western modernism, when read historically, are simply the other side of a continual *primitivization* of non-Western lands and peoples.⁴² In what is perhaps the most obvious example in Anglo-American literature, consider the liberation and sanctification of sexuality that takes place in the famous works of high modernist "rebels" such as James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, and Henry Miller. Following the norm of high modernist thinking, these works are often taught in schools and universities as creative attempts to debunk the pretentiousness of Western bourgeois society and to return humanity to its basic instincts. As such, the languages of creative writing, by giving "frank" and "honest" portrayals of sexual practices that are, in turn, suggestively associated with "exotic" cultures, constitute part of the process in which Western signification systems become modernized and high-tech'd by primitivizing others.⁴³

In the relations between the West and China in modern times, similar processes of primitivizing "China" can be traced not only in art and literature but also in politics, and in the deliberate fabrications of such primitivism for diplomatic ends. In his book *Dragon Lady*, for instance, Sterling Seagrave demonstrates with remarkable evidence the fantastical constructions of the Manchurian empress Cixi that were circulated around the world at the turn of the twentieth century as part of the steamy "reality" about late imperial China. Western discourses, including those of journalism, personal diaries, correspondence, and diplomacy, as well as scholarly investigations under the rubric of sinology, were more than happy to collaborate in the creation, in Cixi, of a horrific female figure with insatiable sexual appetite, hunger for power, and capacity for murder. For British sinologists such as Sir Edmund Backhouse, Cixi, who was already a "barbarian" in Han Chinese eyes, became the consummate primitive who served as a means to denigrate female sexuality and oriental civilization at once. Even though Backhouse's descriptions were based on Victorian pornography about male homosexual activity, his lies about Cixi continue to be repeated by China scholars—Chinese and non-Chinese—whenever they refer to the empress.⁴⁴

For me, the lesson from such eye-opening works on the question of primitivism in East-West relations is not only the exploitation of the non-

West by the West but how this dialectic between formal innovation and primitivism characterizes the hierarchical relations of cultural production in the "third world" as well. In the "third world," there is a similar movement to primitivize: the primitive materials that are seized upon here are the socially oppressed classes—women, in particular—who then become the predominant components of a new literature.⁴⁵ It would not be far-fetched to say that modern Chinese literature turns "modern" precisely by seizing upon the primitive that is the subaltern, the woman, and the child. We would therefore need, once again, to reverse the conventional way literary history is written: not that modern Chinese intellectuals become "enlightened" and choose to revolutionize their writing by turning their attention to the oppressed classes; rather, like elite, cultured intellectuals everywhere in the world, they find in the underprivileged a source of fascination that helps to renew, rejuvenate, and "modernize" their own cultural production in terms both of subject matter and of form.

This turn to the "primitive" must be seen in conjunction with the changes in the technologies of "writing" and "communication," with the democratization of the media, and with the emergence of a predominant form of visuality such as film. This is most obvious in the wide-ranging interests in women's issues at the turn of the twentieth century. Women's issues occupy an attention-catching place in the cultural production of modern China because they are, in many respects, *obscene*. The lurid sentimentality of the Mandarin Duck and Butterfly literature of the 1910s and 1920s, for instance, provided a kind of material that was readily comprehensible and thus suitable for mass consumption. The sensationalism, superficiality, indeed repeatable because hackneyed qualities of Butterfly novels, judged not against the old literature but against the new medium of film, would suggest that Butterfly novels were themselves already visual, filmic events. Similarly, when May Fourth writers needed to rejuvenate literature, they turned to the miseries and frustrations of the lower classes for their inspiration. Just as the high modernist novelists and painters used pornographic explorations of "primitive" sexuality to articulate what they believed to be the basic humanity in us all, so modern Chinese writers, Butterfly or May Fourth, would write about women and subalterns in such a manner as to primitivize them. This "primitivism" then becomes a way to point the moral of the humanity that is consciously ethnicized and nationalized, the humanity that is "Chinese."

In the medium of film, Chinese intellectuals find a wonderful means

of elaborating these dialectical meanings of primitivism. This is in part because, just as the problematic of "the primitive" seems inexhaustible in its relation to modernity, the filmic image in its crude, silent modes, in its allegorical appearance of lack (requiring interpretation) and fullness (having a meaning all its own) at once, allows the paradoxes of origin and primitivism that are such a fundamental obsession of modernity to play out much more pertinently than words. The peculiar affinity between film and primitivism is, I think, one reason why Chinese cinema, together with Indian and Japanese cinemas, has been perceived as a major place for the negotiation of cultural identity.⁴⁶

Before I elaborate further upon this affinity between film and primitivism, I would like to formulate in more precise terms what I am calling "primitive passions."⁴⁷ The following points seem to me to be essential:

1. The interest in the primitive emerges at a moment of *cultural crisis*—at a time when, to use the terms of this discussion, the predominant sign of traditional culture, such as the written word, is being dislocated amid vast changes in technologies of signification.

2. As the predominant sign of traditional culture can no longer monopolize signification—that is, as democratization is forced upon it—fantasies of an origin arise. These fantasies are played out through a *generic* realm of associations, typically having to do with the animal, the savage, the countryside, the indigenous, the people, and so forth, which *stand in* for that "original" something that has been lost.

3. This origin is now "democratically" (re)constructed as a common place and a commonplace, a point of common knowledge and reference that was there prior to our present existence. The primitive, as the figure for this irretrievable *common/place*, is thus always an invention after the fact—a fabrication of a *pre* that occurs in the time of the *post*.

4. The primitive defined in these terms provides a way for thinking about the *unthinkable*—as that which is at once basic, universal, and transparent to us all, *and* that which is outside time and language.

5. Because it is only in this imaginary space that the primitive is located, the primitive is phantasmagoric and, literally, ex-otic.

This *exoticizing* of what is at the same time thought to be generic and commonplace characterizes the writing of history *within a culture* as much as the writing between cultures such as the practices of orientalism.

6. In a culture caught between the forces of "first world" imperialism and "third world" nationalism, such as that of twentieth-century China, the primitive is the precise *paradox*, the amalgamation of the two modes of signification known as "culture" and "nature." If Chinese culture is "primitive" in the pejorative sense of being "backward" (being stuck in an earlier stage of "culture" and thus closer to "nature") when compared to the West, it is also "primitive" in the meliorative sense of being an ancient culture (it was there first, before many Western nations). A strong sense of primordial, rural rootedness thus goes hand in hand with an equally compelling conviction of China's primariness, of China's potential primacy as a modern nation with a glorious civilization. This paradox of a *primitivism that sees China as simultaneously victim and empire* is what leads modern Chinese intellectuals to their so-called obsession with China.⁴⁸

7. Although there may be nothing new about reinterpreting the past as a way to conceive of the present and the future—and this is definitely one possible way of understanding primitivism—my proposal is that this "structure of feeling"⁴⁹ finds its most appropriate material expression in film.

In the following sections, I continue my discussion by focusing on various moments of filmic visuality in twentieth-century China. I will begin with an early example of Chinese film, in order to show how the multiple strands of primitive passions are brought together in the representation of that predominant primitive in modern Chinese culture, woman.

Goddess

Goddess (Lianhua Film Company, 1934) is a silent film directed by Wu Yonggang (1907–82). The title is a Chinese euphemism, *shennü*, for a

Some Contemporary Chinese Films

The Germans are beginning to love their own cinema because it has been endorsed, confirmed, and benevolently looked at by someone else: for the German cinema to exist, it first had to be seen by non-Germans. It enacts, as a national cinema, now in explicitly economic and cultural terms, yet another form of self-estranged exhibitionism.⁷⁶

If we substitute the word *Chinese* for the word *German*, these passages could become precise descriptions of the fates of Zhang's films in mainland China as well. If their glossy surfaces are the "myths" that commodify and betray China, Zhang's films nonetheless achieve for modern Chinese culture the attention and status that many sophisticated others fail to bring. Most important, they do this with a force of defiance that challenges us to abandon our most deeply cultivated—and most deeply cherished—intellectual habits.

Part 3

*Film as Ethnography; or, Translation between Cultures in
the Postcolonial World*

How can one write/think/talk the non-West in the academy
without in some sense anthropologising it?

Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Marx After Marxism"

Anthropological "scientific method" is the decay of dialogue, the sustained, cultivated, and epistemologically enforced atrophy of dialogue. . . . As psychiatry has been the modern West's monologue about madness and unreason, so anthropology has been the modern West's monologue about "alien cultures"

Bernard McGrane, *Beyond Anthropology*

Ethnography is still very much a one-way street.

James Clifford, introduction to *Writing Culture*

For if the sentence is the wall before the language of the original, literalness is the arcade. (Denn der Satz ist die Mauer vor der Sprache des Originals, Wörtlichkeit die Arkade.)

Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator"

. . . a novel anthropology not of the Third and Other worlds, but of the West itself as mirrored in the eyes and handiwork of its Others.

Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*

The Deadlock of the Anthropological Situation

Throughout this book I have been using the term *ethnography* to describe some of the outstanding features of contemporary Chinese cinema, but a more systematic theoretical articulation of what I mean by "ethnography" is still in order, in particular of how this new ethnography may be conceived through *visuality*. Already, in discussing Zhang Yimou, we see the surfacing of a major problem of cross-cultural politics—the problem of the "foreign devil." The critics who accuse the Chinese directors of pandering to a "foreign" audience rather than to a "Chinese" audience—are they not prioritizing some "original essence" of the Chinese culture? Some readers will object: But wait, do such "nativist" critics not in fact alert us to the ongoing reality of Western cultural imperialism? Is their distrust of the "foreign" (meaning the West) not after all a justifiable reaction to the long history of Western hegemony, in which "exchange" between East and West has always meant the demand on non-Western peoples to conform to Western standards and models but not vice versa? As Kwai-cheung Lo writes in a different context, "When the concept of modernity still implies 'progress' and 'westernization,' any translation or introduction of modern texts is by no means free from cultural imperialism."¹ The incensed reaction of nativist critics, the same readers might continue, only demonstrates the point Mary Louise Pratt makes about the artistic activities of "autoethnography" in metropolitan areas—that such activities are bound to be very differently received (by metropolitan audiences) and by the literate sectors of the artists' own social groups.² As Jane Ying Zha writes: "All my American friends love Zhang's movies, all my Chinese friends hate them. . . . Why? What offended the Chinese in these movies? . . . It could all be summed up in one thing: selling oriental exoticism to a Western audience."³

[What these observations about cross-cultural "exchange" indicate is what may be called the deadlock of the anthropological situation as created by Western imperialism and colonialism of the past few centuries. We can describe this deadlock by going back to the most basic anthropological scenario—that of the Western anthropologist traveling abroad to study the "primitive" cultures around the world. In order to perform

his task, the Western anthropologist must insert himself and his social practices (such as "scientific" observation and recording) into these "primitive" contexts. In spite of the grandiose salvational motives of his profession, the very presence of the Western anthropologist means, effectively, that these "other" cultures are changed and displaced forever from their "origins." Subsequently, in order to find out authoritatively about their cultures, members of such culture often have to look up Western source books. In many cases, the methods and practices of anthropology and ethnography have simply served to reinforce and empower colonial administration, and thus to bring about the systematic destruction of these "other" cultures.⁴

The deadlock of the anthropological situation in the postcolonial world is summarized in the epigraphs by Chakrabarty, McGrane, and Clifford that appear at the beginning of this section of the book:⁵ we cannot write/think/talk the non-West in the academy without in some sense anthropologizing it, and yet anthropology and ethnography, atrophied in their epistemological foundations, remain "very much still a one-way street." By their remarks, Chakrabarty, McGrane, and Clifford refer to the inequality inherent to the binary structure of observer/observed that is classical anthropology's operating premise and that has become the way we approach the West's "others." For non-Western peoples, the most obvious consequence of this classical operating premise is the continual privileging of Western models of language, philosophy, and historiography as "standard knowledge," and the continual marginalization of the equivalents from the non-West.⁶ Because of such fundamental disparity in the classical anthropological and ethnographic situation, any process of cultural translation between West and East will, as Talal Asad writes, likely continue to be marked by an asymmetry of privileges.

The process of "cultural translation" is inevitably enmeshed in conditions of power—professional, national, international. And among these conditions is the authority of ethnographers to uncover the implicit meanings of subordinate societies. Given that that is so, the interesting question for enquiry is . . . how power enters into the process of "cultural translation," seen both as a discursive and as a non-discursive practice.⁷

Anthropology is . . . rooted in an unequal power encounter between the West and Third World which goes back to the emergence of bourgeois Europe, an encounter in which colonialism is merely one historical moment. It is this encounter that gives the West access to cultural and historical information about the societies it has progressively dominated, and thus not only generates a kind of universal understanding, but also re-enforces the inequalities in capacity between the European and the non-European worlds (and derivatively, between the Europeanized elites and the "traditional" masses in the Third World). We are today becoming increasingly aware of the fact that information and understanding produced by bourgeois disciplines like anthropology are acquired and used most readily by those with the greatest capacity for exploitation.⁸

To put it crudely: because the languages of Third World societies—including, of course, the societies that social anthropologists have traditionally studied—are "weaker" in relation to Western languages (and today, especially to English), they are more likely to submit to forcible transformation in the translation process than the other way around. The reason for this is, first, that in their political-economic relations with Third World countries, Western nations have the greater ability to manipulate the latter. And, second, Western languages produce and deploy desired knowledge more readily than Third World languages do.⁹

Understandably, therefore, it is in response to this fundamentally unequal and unfair situation of knowledge organization and distribution in the postcolonial world that criticisms of contemporary Chinese films' "betrayal" of "China" have been made. [The moral question behind such criticisms is this: because the exoticizing of the East is part of the agenda of Western imperialism, how could we support directors such as Zhang, who make images that seemingly further this agenda? As I argued in the previous chapter, however, charges of "betrayal" or "infidelity" are themselves far from being innocent; they are part of a defensive/nativism that, in the case of Chinese film, is itself deeply rooted in the hierarchical criteria of traditional aesthetics. What such zealous charges accomplish is not exactly the preservation of the ethnic culture as such but often an unwitting complicity in perpetuating the deadlock of the anthropologi-

cal situation. The Euro-American homogenization of the world is then steadily polarized against an equally overwhelming attempt on the part of some "natives" and nativists to hold on to "tradition" even as tradition is disintegrating. Instead of enabling alternatives to the deadlock, nativist demands of cultural "fidelity" have great potential of becoming prohibitive deterrents against cultural translation altogether.

To intervene in this deadlock, I will in the following pages argue for a redefinition of ethnography by explicitly linking ethnography with translation. Before doing that, I will explain how a focus on visuality as such is really the first step toward a dismantling of the classic epistemological foundations of anthropology and ethnography.)

The Primacy of To-Be-Looked-At-ness

In an essay on representation and anthropological knowledge, Kirsten Hastrup writes: "For the non-anthropologist, all films dealing with exotic cultures may look equally anthropological, while to professional anthropologists it is much more a question of method and theory than of subject-matter."¹⁰

Contrary to Hastrup's suggestion, the increasingly blurred distinction between "theory and method" on the one hand and "subject matter" on the other is, I think, precisely the new object of ethnographic work in the postcolonial world. Rethought rigorously, ethnography can no longer be the "science" that its practitioners once imagined it to be, nor is it simply a "documentation" of "other" ways of life. Despite its traditional claims to objectivity, ethnography is a kind of representation with subjective origins. But how do we come to terms with such subjective origins? *Whose* subjective origins should concern us? Instead of simply arguing for the necessity of discursive self-reflexivity on the part of *Western* practitioners, with the politically correct admonition that we must watch what we say more carefully,¹¹ I think it is by focusing on visuality that we can come to terms with the subjective origins of ethnography most productively. In other words, I do not think that an ethnography alternative to the one we have been criticizing can materialize simply through a call for "self-consciousness"—"let's look at ourselves, our language, and our assumptions more carefully"—since such a call only con-

Western Man
non-Western

firms, once again, what was long ago established by Hegel as the distinguishing trait of Western Man, his capacity for being aware of himself. Rather, I believe that a new ethnography is possible only when we turn our attention to the subjective origins of ethnography as it is practiced by those who were previously ethnographized and who have, in the postcolonial age, taken up the active task of ethnographizing their own cultures.

This, however, does not mean exploring subjectivity in the verbal realm only. How are the "subjective origins" of the previously ethnographized communicated in *visual terms*? They are, I think, communicated not so much through the act of looking as through what may be called "to-be-looked-at-ness"—the visuality that once defined the "object" status of the ethnographized culture and that now becomes a predominant aspect of that culture's self-representation. We remember that in her famous article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey alerts us to "to-be-looked-at-ness" as what constitutes not only the spectacle but the very way vision is organized; the state of being looked at, she argues, is built into the way we look. Because in our culture, looking and being looked at are commonly assigned respectively to men and women, vision bears the origins of gender inequality.¹² Supplementing Mulvey's argument with the anthropological situation, we may argue, in parallel, that vision bears the origins of ethnographic inequality. But we must go one step further: the state of being looked at not only is built into the way non-Western cultures are viewed by Western ones; more significantly it is part of the active manner in which such cultures represent—ethnographize—themselves.

What this means is that in the vision of the formerly ethnographized, the subjective origins of ethnography are displayed in amplified form but at the same time significantly redefined: what are "subjective" origins now include a memory of past objecthood—the experience of being looked at—which lives on in the subjective act of ethnographizing like an other, an optical unconscious.¹³ If ethnography is indeed autoethnography—ethnography of the self and the subject—then the perspective of the formerly ethnographized supplements it irrevocably with the understanding that being-looked-at-ness, rather than the act of looking, constitutes the primary event in cross-cultural representation.

With visuality as its focus, this reformulation of ethnography destroys the operational premises—of a world divided in the form of us and them, of viewing subject and viewed object—of classical anthropology. "Us" and "them" are no longer safely distinguishable; "viewed—China

object" is now looking at "viewing subject" looking. Moreover, through the reading of films that are not documentary and hence not ethnographic in the conventional sense, this reformulated ethnography challenges as well the factualism that typifies anthropology's hold on representation. These lines from Dai Vaughan on the documentary may be used as a critique of such factualism—if we substitute the words *ethnographers* and *ethnography* for *documentarists* and *documentary*: "Documentarists . . . like to believe that documentary is the 'natural' form of cinema. But fiction film, like painting and literature, rests no special claims upon the provenance of its linguistic elements. It must surely be clear that it is documentary which is the paradoxical, even aberrant form."¹⁴ In studying contemporary Chinese films as ethnography and autoethnography, I am thus advocating nothing less than a radical deprofessionalization of anthropology and ethnography as "intellectual disciplines." Once these disciplines are deprofessionalized—their boundaries between "us" and "them" destabilized; their claims to documentary objectivity deconstructed—how do we begin to reconceive the massive cultural information that has for so long been collected under their rubric? It is at this juncture that I think our discussion about ethnography must be supplemented by a theory of translation. first of all

A similar observation is made by Thomas Elsaesser in his study of the New German cinema of the 1970s. Concluding that German cinema was the consequence of "a vast transcription process," Elsaesser introduces the notion of translation as a way to understand it:

[The New German cinema] was an attempt to gather, record and report the images, sounds and stories—including those that the cinema itself produced—which make up the memory of a generation, a nation and a culture, and to translate them, from their many perishable supports in people's minds to the one medium that, after all, promises paradoxically to be the most permanent: the cinema. Literature, popular culture, architecture, fashion, memorabilia and the contents of junk shops have all been enlisted in a vast effort to preserve the traces of lives lived for oblivion. This hastily accumulated visual wealth has not yet been tapped or even properly inspected for its meanings or uses. As a source of understanding the changes from a culture living mainly by the written text to one dominated by the image, the New German Cinema still awaits to be discovered.¹⁵

SMY is applicable to general

Contemporary Chinese cinema, insofar as it collects images not only of rural but of modern urban China, not only of ancient emperors and scholars but also of women, children, lower classes, and minority cultures, can, like the New German cinema, be thought of in the sense of a "vast transcription process." But of much greater relevance is Elsaesser's notion of translation. [Elsaesser's rich passage suggests, crucially, that there are at least two types of translation at work in cinema. (First, translation as inscription: a generation, a nation, and a culture are being translated or permuted into the medium of film; and second, translation as transformation of tradition and change between media: a culture oriented around the written text is in the process of transition and of being translated into one dominated by the image.)] Elsaesser's words are equally applicable to other "national" cinemas such as the Chinese, because these "national" cinemas are, in themselves, at the crossroads of different types and stages of cultural translation. The bulk of this book, then, has in effect been dealing with the filmic transcriptions of Chinese modernity as processes of cultural translation.

In accordance with the movement of the epigraphs at the beginning of this section of the book, what I will attempt in the remaining pages is a focused discussion of translation in the sense of translation between cultures. (Although contemporary Chinese film will serve as a major point of reference, various theories of translation will also be introduced in order to highlight the problems of cross-cultural exchange—especially in regard to the commodified, technologized image—in the postcolonial, postmodern age.

Translation and the Problem of Origins

Etymologically, the word *translation* is linked, among other things, to "tradition" on the one hand and to "betrayal" on the other.¹⁶ The Italian expression *Traduttore, traditore*—"Translator, traitor"—allows us to grasp the pejorative implication of infidelity that is often associated with the task of translating. Because faithfulness is such a crucial issue here, the analogy between translation and a human convention such as matrimony is, as Barbara Johnson writes, far-reaching: "It might seem . . . that the translator ought, despite or perhaps because of his or her oath of

fidelity, to be considered not as a duteous spouse but as a faithful bigamist, with loyalties split between a native language and a foreign tongue."¹⁷ To complicate things further, the matrimony that is translation is seldom established on the basis of the equality of the partners. In the classical thinking about translation, Johnson goes on, it is the signified, not the signifier, that is given priority: "Faithfulness to the text has meant faithfulness to the semantic tenor with as little interference as possible from the constraints of the vehicle. Translation, in other words, has always been the translation of meaning."¹⁸

Given these deeply entrenched assumptions about translation, it is hardly surprising that the rendering of "China" into film, even at a time when the literary bases of Chinese society are increasingly being transformed by the new media culture, is bedeviled by suspicion and replete with accusations of betrayal. While these suspicions and accusations may express themselves in myriad forms, they are always implicitly inscribed within the ideology of fidelity. For instance, to return to our main concern in the previous chapter, is not the distrust of "surfaces"—the criticism of Zhang Yimou's lack of depth—a way of saying that surfaces are "traitors" to the historical depth that is "traditional China"? And yet the word *tradition* itself, linked in its roots to translation and betrayal, has to do with handing over. Tradition itself is nothing if it is not a transmission. How is tradition to be transmitted, to be passed on, if not through translation?

The common assumption about translation is that it is a rendering of one language into another language. Even though what is involved is actually the traffic between two languages, we tend to suppress our awareness of this by prioritizing one language over the other, by pretending that the traffic goes in one direction only. How does this happen? Consider the terminology we use, which reveals the epistemological uncertainties involved and hence the ideological need to prioritize: we call one language the "original" and the other the "translation" (meaning "unoriginal" and "derivative"). This terminology suppresses the fact that the "unoriginal" language may well be the "native tongue"—that is, the original language—of the translator, whose translating may involve turning the "original" which is actually *not* her native/original language into her "native"/"original" language. (A simple explanation like this already suffices to illustrate the vertiginous nature of any attempt to theorize translation.)

Precisely because translation is an activity that immediately problematizes the ontological hierarchy of languages—"which is primary and which is secondary?"—it is also the place where the oldest prejudices about origins and derivations come into play most forcefully. For instance, what does it mean to make a translation sound "natural"? Must the translation sound more like the "original," which is not the language into which it is translated—meaning that it is by resemblance to the "original" that it becomes "natural"? Or, must it sound more like the language into which it is translated, in which case sounding "natural" would mean forgetting the "origin"? When we say, derogatorily, "This reads like a translation," what we mean is that even though we understand what the "original" meaning might be, we cannot but notice its translatedness—and yet is that not precisely what a translation is supposed to be—*translated* rather than "original"? As in all bifurcated processes of signification, translation is a process in which the notion of the "original," the relationship between the "original" and its "derivations," and the demand for what is "natural" must be thoroughly reexamined.

Using contemporary Chinese cinema as a case in point, I think the criticism (by some Chinese audiences) that Zhang and his contemporaries "pander to the tastes of the foreign devil" can itself be recast by way of our conventional assumptions about translation. The "original" here is not a language in the strict linguistic sense but rather "China"—"China" as the sum total of the history and culture of a people; "China" as a content, a core meaning that exists "prior to" film. When critics say that Zhang's films lack depth, what they mean is that the language/vehicle in which he renders "China" is a poor translation, a translation that does not give the truth about "China." For such critics, the film medium, precisely because it is so "superficial"—that is, organized around surfaces—mystifies and thus distorts China's authenticity. What is implicitly assumed in their judgment is not simply the untranslatability of the "original" but that translation is a unidirectional, one-way process. It is assumed that translation means a movement from the "original" to the language of "translation" but not vice versa; it is assumed that the value of translation is derived solely from the "original," which is the authenticator of itself and of its subsequent versions. Of the "translation," a tyrannical demand is made: the translation must perform its task of conveying the "original" without leaving its own traces; the "originality of translation" must lie "in self-effacement, a vanishing act."¹⁹

Our discussion here can be facilitated by turning to the work of Walter Benjamin, not least because Benjamin himself was writing at the crossroads of cultural transformation. Though Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" may seem most immediately relevant to our topic in that it deals with the transformation of traditional art (which possesses "aura") to mass-produced images such as those of photography and film,²⁰ I find his essay "The Task of the Translator" to be more useful in helping me think through the problem of translation between cultures.²¹ In this latter essay, Benjamin offers a theory of translation that is distinctively different from most theories.

It is often assumed, writes Benjamin, that the point of translation is to impart information or convey the meaning of the original; this is, however, not so. Instead, what needs to be translated is an "intention" ("intentio") in the "original" that Benjamin calls "the great longing for linguistic complementation" (p. 79). His mystical language notwithstanding, Benjamin is arguing for a materialist though elusive fact about translation—that translation is primarily a process of *putting together*. This process demonstrates that the "original," too, is something that has been put together. But this "putting together" is not, as I will go on to argue, simply a deconstructive production of differences.²² It is also a process of "literalness" that displays the way the "original" itself was put together—that is, in its violence.

Before elaborating this last point, we need to examine closely the way Benjamin discusses the "putting together" that is linguistic translation. What needs to be translated from the original, he writes, is not a kind of truth or meaning but the way in which "the original" is put together in the basic elements of human language—(words). Hence it is words—in their wordness, their literality—rather than sentences, that matter the most in translation. A real translation, Benjamin writes, "may be achieved, above all, by a literal rendering of the syntax which proves words rather than sentences to be the primary element of the translator. For if the sentence is the wall before the language of the original, literalness is the arcade" (p. 79).

The German "original" of this passage indicates that where Benjamin's English translator, Harry Zohn, uses the words *literal* and *literalness*, Benjamin has used the word *Wörtlichkeit*. But even though the English translation does not exactly reproduce Benjamin's word, a verbatim translation of which would be something like "word-by-word-ness," it

nonetheless supplements Benjamin's text in an unexpected, perhaps fateful, manner. To be "literal" in the English language is to be "verbatim," to follow the word strictly. At the same time, "literal" can also connote a certain *lack*—in the sense of that which is matter-of-fact, without imagination, without metaphor, without depth; that which is superficial, crude, or naive. It is this second notion of literalness—this supplement that exists in the translation but not in the original—that brings out, I think, the precise sense of Benjamin's *Wörtlichkeit*: a real translation is not only that which translates word by word but also that which translates literally, depthlessly, naively.

It is obvious that here I depart significantly from the view of literalness held by deconstructionist critics. For Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man, for instance, *literal* is a problematic word that designates "proper," in a way that is opposed to (their preferred) "metaphoric" or "figural." De Man's reading of Rousseau, for instance, is that Rousseau's language tells the story of "the necessary degradation . . . of metaphor into literal meaning," and that a "literal world" is one "in which appearance and nature coincide" whereas a "figural world" is one "in which this correspondence is no longer a priori posited."²³ For me, however, literalness is not simply "proper," but it is not simply "figural"/"metaphorical," either. Rather, I use the term to refer to a third area that is defined by neither of the two categories—the area we may loosely describe as the obvious, the superficial, and what immediately presents itself in signification. This "literal" area is what lacks and/or exceeds the clear boundary implied by Derrida and de Man between the categories of the "proper" and the "figural"/"metaphorical."

Zohn's translation-cum-supplement, then, makes explicit something that was merely lurking in the original in the form of what Benjamin himself calls the original's "intention." Remarkably, the "original" intention is what can only be grasped as a supplement, as what is added (because translated): "In all language and linguistic creations there remains *in addition to* what can be conveyed something that cannot be communicated; depending on the context in which it appears, it is something that symbolizes or something symbolized" (p. 79; my emphasis). For Benjamin, the task of the translator consists in communicating this additional something that nonetheless could come across as a lack and a deprivation. (I will return to this point once again toward the end.)

The elusiveness of his approach to the "original" makes it seem that Benjamin is saying with "translation" what deconstructionists are saying with "language," namely, that the original is self-différance. Examples of the deconstructionist definition of language include statements such as these: "Language . . . can only exist in the space of its own foreignness to itself," "the original text is always already an impossible translation that renders translation impossible,"²⁴ and so forth. However, even though a deconstructionist reading of Benjamin is useful and necessary,²⁵ it is inadequate. In the preceding passage by Benjamin, if we take the word *symbol* to mean not a full and complete representation of something but a sign that stands for something else, then what Benjamin is saying would suggest that the "original" intention is not only a *self-différance*, but also a process of *standing-for-something-else*, something other than the "self." For Benjamin, the act of translation is less a confirmation of language's "own" impossibility than it is a *liberation*, in a second language, of the "intention" of standing-for-something-else that is already put together but imprisoned—"symbolized"—in the original; hence "it is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language which is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work" (p. 80).

Because Benjamin's notion of the "original" intention comprises *both* self-différance and the act of symbolizing (standing for an other), it is important to emphasize that his theory is not simply that translation is the original's deconstruction, which is the reading proposed, for instance, by de Man. De Man's reading is a persuasive one, but it does not do justice to Benjamin's theory. In his typical manner, de Man zeroes in on the inherent *negativity* of writing: hence he elaborates on the notion of "failure" inscribed in the German title of Benjamin's piece, proving thus that translation is ultimately a failure—a failure, moreover, that is already present in the "original." Comparing the activity of translation to those of critical philosophy, literary theory, and history, de Man writes that all such *intra-lingual* activities have in common a disarticulation of the original: "They reveal that their failure, which seems to be due to the fact that they are secondary in relation to the original, reveals an *essential* failure, an *essential* disarticulation which was already there in the original."²⁶

Because its rigor is a negative one, de Man's deconstructive reading is eminently useful in desacralizing and decanonizing the original. But

deconstruction as such nonetheless does *not* depart from the view that there is some original—even if that should prove to be an illusion—to begin with. By concentrating its efforts on the disarticulated and unstable “essence” of the “original,” the deconstructive reading in fact makes it unnecessary for one to move outside or down from the realm of the original. Translation would thus remain one-way in the sense that it is intralingual, with all the differences/misreadings it produces moving back to (deconstruct the self that is) the original. This is demonstrated, best of all, by de Man’s own reading, in which he repeatedly shows Benjamin’s translators up for missing Benjamin’s points. In spite of his sacrilegious intentions, therefore, de Man returns a kind of sacredness—now defined as intralingual instability—to the original that is Benjamin’s text. De Man’s deconstructive reading does not in the end deviate significantly from the conventional, dogmatic belief in the purity or untranslatability of any original. Were a “translation” of culture to be based on de Man’s reading, it would be, as he says, a failure: such a translation would be little more than the vicious circle of a search for a complete freedom from the “origin” that is the past, which nonetheless would keep haunting us like the indelible memory of a nightmare.

For Benjamin, on the other hand, translation is not simply deconstructive but, even more important, a “liberation” that is mutual and reciprocal *between* the “original” and the “translation.” In Benjamin’s text, the nihilistic rigor of deconstruction is combined with a messianic utopianism, a sense of openness that is absent in de Man. For Benjamin, both “original” and “translation,” as languages rendering each other, share the “longing for linguistic complementarity” and gesture together toward something larger: “A translation, instead of resembling the meaning of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original’s mode of signification, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel” (p. 78).²⁷ The quotation that Benjamin takes from Rudolf Pannwitz illustrates a similar point of complementarity, mutuality, and letting the foreign affect the self:

Pannwitz writes: “Our translations, even the best ones, proceed into German instead of turning German into Hindi, Greek, English. Our translators have a far greater reverence for the usage of

their own language than for the spirit of the foreign works. . . . The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue. Particularly when translating from a language very remote from his own he must go back to the primal elements of language itself and penetrate to the point where work, image, and tone converge. He must expand and deepen his language by means of the foreign language.” (pp. 80–81)

In these preceding passages, the relationship between the “original” and the “translation” is problematized by the fact that the “original” does not only refer to the original language in which something is written but can also refer to the (different) native/original language of the native speaker/translator; similarly, “translation” can mean not only the language into which something is translated but also a language foreign to the translator’s mother tongue. But the gist of Benjamin’s argument remains the same: most work of translation is done in the wish to make the “foreign” sound more like the “native,” with the assumption that the “native” is the “original” point of reference; whereas translation is a process in which the “native” should let the foreign affect, or infect, itself, and vice versa. This radical notion of translation is what leads Jean Laplanche to describe Benjamin’s theory as an “anti-ethnocentric” one: “Benjamin participates in the great ‘anti-ethnocentric’ movement . . . or what I call the ‘anti-auto- or self-centred’ movement of translation (*le mouvement anti-autocentrique de la traduction*): a movement that doesn’t want translation to be self-enclosed and reduce the other to the terms of that self, but rather a movement out towards the other.”²⁸ The question then is, How is this “movement out towards the other” to be conceived and theorized?

Translation as “Cultural Resistance”

In a recent work, *Siting Translation*, Tejaswini Niranjana takes up the formidable task of rethinking translation in the context of postcolonial

postmodernity. Basing her arguments on poststructuralist theories of language, signification, and representation, Niranjana deconstructs the humanistic, binary oppositional assumptions underlying traditional notions of translation. Moreover, she proposes that both the theory and the practice of translation must be seen in the context of Western imperialism and colonialism, in which the European/Europeanist notions of knowledge reproduce themselves in Europe's encounter with and "translation" of its "others."²⁹ Readers must turn to Niranjana's book to see for themselves the extensive implications of her thoughtful and well-researched arguments. If my critique of her book below is a strong one, it is also offered in full appreciation of the significance of her intervention in a context where "cultural translation" is still by and large dominated by Western discourse. This critique will, I hope, be read as an interaction in alliance with that intervention rather than as its opposition.

If, in the hands of deconstructionists such as de Man, translation is that originary intralingual self-différance, in Niranjana's analysis, translation is an interlingual practice—the exchange of ideas, beliefs, and information between different languages (and thus cultures). Because Niranjana's goal is to rescue the term *translation* for "cultural resistance" even while she criticizes its use by the culturally dominant, the status of "translation" in her analysis is an ambivalent, empty, and ultimately idealist one: translation is fundamentally a "philosopheme" (pp. 2, 31). The idealist status of the term is what allows Niranjana implicitly to think of translation by differentiating between the good and the bad.

The bad: this is the European translation of its "others" that is otherwise known as "orientalism." Situating translation in the postcolonial context, Niranjana criticizes such orientalist texts for being imperialist and ethnocentric, for simply reinscribing in the "others" the orientalist's own preferences and prejudices. *The good:* on the other hand, Niranjana also wants to turn translation into something that Europe's colonized peoples can use. Translation is here given many analogies, chief of which is that it is an "act of resistance" when practiced by "natives" doing their own ethnography (pp. 84–85). Translation is, alternately, a "problematic" and a "field" (p. 8), a "transactional reading" (p. 42), a "hybrid" act (p. 46), a kind of citation and rewriting (p. 172). Finally, translation is what must be "put under erasure" (p. 48, n. 4).

These multiple analogies demonstrate the moves typical of a certain

kind of poststructuralist discourse which may be paraphrased as follows: deconstruct the danger and pitfalls of a term in its conventional usage; rescue that term for its inherent "heterogeneity" and "difference"; affirm this "heterogeneity" and "difference" when it is used by certain groups of people. By implicitly distinguishing between an incorrect and a correct practice of translation, what this type of poststructuralist rendering accomplishes is a *rationalist* understanding of "translation." This rendering returns "translation" to an *idea* (hence translation is first and foremost a "philosopheme"), debunks the dirty practice of the West, and reinstates the cleaner practice of the West's "others" as the alternative. Apart from idealism, this poststructuralist discourse also tends to invest heavily in the form of attentiveness that is a vigilance to words. Reading the *verbal text* meticulously becomes the fundamental way to "resist" the pitfalls of corrupt translation. In this regard, Niranjana's argument about translation does not add anything to the complex, nuanced arguments of writing, supplementarity, and *différance* that we already find in Derrida's work. "History" is here rewritten as a careful reading, with the verbal text as its primary and predominant frame of reference.

The idealism and verbalism of her parameters mean that Niranjana must leave unasked the entire question of translation from verbal language into other sign systems and, more important, of *the translation of ethnic cultures from their previous literary and philosophical bases into the forms of contemporary mass culture*, a translation that is, arguably, European colonialism's foremost legacy in the non-European world. The privileging of verbal texts prevents the poststructuralist critic from coming to terms with significations whose value does not necessarily reside in their linguistic profundity and complexity—that is, their hermeneutic depth. Since "to make complicated" remains poststructuralist textualism's primary strategy of resisting domination, surfaces, simplicities, and transparencies can only be distrusted as false. If Niranjana's point is that we need to bring "history" into "legibility," it is a legibility in the sense of a dense text. The decoding of this dense text, however, could mean exactly a perpetuation of the existing institutional practice of scholarly close reading.

On the other hand, does cross-cultural "translation" not challenge precisely the scholarly mode of privileging the verbal text? If translation is "transactional reading," must the emphasis fall on "reading"? What if the emphasis is to fall on "transaction," and what if the transaction is one

between the verbal text and the visual image? It would seem that no consideration of cultural translation can afford to ignore these questions, simply because the translation between cultures is never West translating East or East translating West in terms of verbal languages alone but rather a process that encompasses an entire range of activities, including the change from tradition to modernity, from literature to visuality, from elite scholastic culture to mass culture, from the native to the foreign and back, and so forth.

If de Man's notion of translation ultimately revalorizes the "original" that is the untranslatability of the (original) text, there is a way in which contemporary cultural studies, in the attempt to vindicate the cultures of the West's "others," end up revalorizing the "original" that is the authentic history, culture, and language of such "others." In spite of its politically astute intentions, what a work such as Niranjana's accomplishes in reversing are the asymmetrical, hierarchical power relations between West and East but *not* the asymmetrical, hierarchical power relations between "original" and "translation." In an attempt to do justice to the East, Niranjana, like many antiorientalist critics, deconstruct/destabilize the West by turning the West into an *unfaithful translator/translation* that has, as it were, betrayed, corrupted, and contaminated the "original" that is the East. When this revalorization of the "original" is done through a concentration on the depths and nuances of verbal texts, what continues to be obliterated is the fact that such texts are traditionally the loci of literate and literary culture, the culture through which *class hierarchy is established not only in Western but also in Eastern societies.*

The "Third Term"

My concerns about cultural translation up to this point can be summarized as follows: First, can we theorize translation between cultures without somehow valorizing some "original"? And second, can we theorize translation between cultures in a manner that does not implicitly turn translation into an *interpretation* toward depth, toward "profound meaning"?

To answer such questions, we would need to move beyond the intralingual and interlingual dimensions of translation that we have seen

in de Man and Niranjana, and include within "translation" the notion of intersemiotic practices, of translating from one sign system to another.³⁰ Specifically, translation would need to encompass the translation, as Elsaesser suggests, of a "culture" into a medium such as film. Such translation, however, is not to be confused with "expression," "articulation," or even "representation," simply because these terms would too easily mislead us back into the comfortable notion that some pure "original" was there to be expressed, articulated, or represented. Instead, the notion of translation highlights the fact that it is an activity, a transportation between two "media," two kinds of already-mediated data, and that the "translation" is often what we must work with because, for one reason or another, the "original" as such is unavailable—lost, cryptic, already heavily mediated, already heavily translated. On the other hand, as I clarify in my discussion of de Man, I do not think that intersemiotic translation is simply "deconstruction," either, because the negative momentum of deconstruction, while effectively demystifying the spontaneism and mimeticism of terms such as expression, articulation, and representation, remains incapable of conveying a sense of the new medium into which the "original" is being transported.

What is useful from deconstruction, as is always the case, is the lesson about the "original"—a lesson I am pushing to the extreme here by asking that even in translation, where it usually goes without saying (even for deconstructionists) that the "original" is valued over the translated, we take absolutely seriously the deconstructionist insistence that the "first" and "original" as such is always already *différance*—always already translated. There are two possible paths from this lesson: one leads, as in the case of de Man, back to the painstaking study of the "original" as an original failure; the other leads to the work of translations and the values arising from them without privileging the "original" simply because it was there first. The choice of either path constitutes a major political decision.

And it is here, rather than in the opposition between "language" and "history" as Niranjana argues, that Benjamin's essay on translation, together with Benjamin's interest in mass culture, is most useful for a theory of cultural translation.³¹

There are multiple reasons why a consideration of mass culture is crucial to cultural translation, but the predominant one, for me, is precisely that asymmetry of power relations between the "first" and the "third"

worlds. Precisely because of the deadlock of the more or less complete Europeanization of the world, which has led not only to the technocratic homogenization of world cultures but also to an organization of these cultures by way of European languages, philosophies, and sciences, the recourse to the archaic, authentic *past* of other cultures, in the assumption that somehow such past is closer to the original essence of humanity than Western culture, is a futile one. Critiquing the great disparity between Europe and the rest of the world means not simply a deconstruction of Europe as origin or simply a restitution of the origin that is Europe's others but a thorough dismantling of *both* the notion of origin and the notion of alterity as we know them today. This dismantling would be possible only if we acknowledge what Johannes Fabian speaks of as the *coevalness* of cultures³² and consider the intersemiotic transformations that have happened as much to non-Western societies as to Western ones. The mass culture of our media, into which even the most "primitive" societies have been thrown, makes this coevalness ineluctable. The "primitive" is not "of another time" but is our contemporary.

The necessity of accepting the coevalness of cultures is what Laplanche, speaking in the context of translation, refers to as the necessity of "the third term":

The difference between two terms and three terms seems important to me. Two terms don't allow for an orientation. Two terms—the translated and the translator—are either surrendered to a centring on the translator which we've called somewhat narrowly "ethnocentrism"; or they are surrendered to a centring on what's to be translated, which can in the extreme lead to a refusal to translate. . . . There must be a third term so that translation (and interpretation) exit from [the first two terms'] subjectivity.

Every interpretative trajectory which links two terms is doomed to be arbitrary if it doesn't relate to a third term, and if it doesn't postulate something which is unconscious.³³

Besides acknowledging the co-temporality of cultures through our media, the "third term" would also mean acknowledging that the West's

"primitive others" are equally caught up in the generalized atmosphere of unequal power distribution and are actively (re)producing *within themselves* the structures of domination and hierarchy that are as typical of non-European cultural histories as they are of European imperialism. As Dipesh Chakrabarty writes in regard to India, the project of "provincializing Europe"—a project that is essential to deconstructing European history's hegemony over other ethnic histories—"cannot be a nationalist, nativist, or atavistic project. . . . One cannot but problematize 'India' at the same time as one dismantles 'Europe.'"³⁴ In other words, genuine cultural translation is possible only when we move beyond the seemingly infinite but actually reductive permutations of the two terms—East and West, original and translation—and instead see both as full, materialist, and most likely equally corrupt, equally decadent participants in contemporary world culture. This would mean, ultimately, a thorough disassembling of the visualist epistemological bases of disciplines such as anthropology and ethnography as we know them to date.

Weakness, Fluidity, and the Fabling of the World

To elaborate my argument further, I will turn briefly to the work of Gianni Vattimo.³⁵ Basing his philosophy primarily on readings of Nietzsche and Heidegger, Vattimo's concern is that of figuring out possibilities of survival that are *practically* available in the deadlock of the European domination, homogenization, and standardization of the world. Among the most compelling ideas in Vattimo's writings is that of a weakening Western metaphysics, which he theorizes by drawing upon Nietzsche's idea of the death of God and Heidegger's notions of *Andenken* (recollection) and *Verwindung* (the overcoming that is not a transcendence but an acceptance and that carries with it the meaning of a cure, a convalescence).³⁶ For Vattimo, weakening—in the sense of a gradual decline, an ability to die—signals not a new, radical beginning but rather a turning and twisting of tradition away from its metaphysical foundations, a movement that makes way for the hybrid cultures of contemporary society.

Reading specifically for a tactics of translation between cultures, I find Vattimo's writings useful in several ways. First, he takes as his point

of departure, realistically, the deadlock of the anthropological situation that has resulted from Western hegemony and that has led to the disappearance of alterity. Second, he refuses to think through this deadlock by constructing a brand-new beginning that is typical of the heroic radicalism of modernist narratives. Third, he attempts an alternative way of conceiving of the coevalness of cultures that is neither cynical and negative (in its criticism of the West) nor idealist and idealistic (by valorizing the East). Most important, Vattimo urges that we need to recognize the fact that these "other" cultures, rather than being lost or disappearing, are themselves transforming and translating into the present. He cites from Remo Guidieri:

Those who have lamented the deaths of cultures have neither known how to see, nor wanted to see, that these same cultures—which are as obsessed as we are with the myth of abundance—have nevertheless produced their own specific way of entering into the Western universe. Although they may be paradoxical, irrational, or even caricatural, these modalities are just as authentic as the ancient ways, tributary as they are to the cultural forms from which they derive their condition of possibility. The non-Western contemporary world is an immense construction site of traces and residues, in conditions which have still to be analysed.³⁷

This notion of the other—not as the idealized lost origin to be rediscovered or resurrected but as our contemporary—allows for a context of cultural translation in which these "other" cultures are equally engaged in the contradictions of modernity, such as the primitivization of the underprivileged, the quest for new foundations and new monuments, and so forth, that have been blatantly exhibited by Western nations. The coevalness of cultures, in other words, is not simply a peaceful co-existence among plural societies but the co-temporality of power structures—what Mary Louise Pratt calls the "contact zones"³⁸—that mutually support and reinforce the exploitation of underprivileged social groups, nonhuman life forms, and ecological resources *throughout the world*.

Once the coevalness of cultures is acknowledged in this manner, cultural translation can no longer be thought of simply in linguistic terms,

as the translation between Western and Eastern verbal languages alone. Instead, cultural translation needs to be rethought as the co-temporal exchange and contention between different social groups deploying different sign systems that may not be synthesizable to one particular model of language or representation. Considerations of the translation of or between cultures would thus have to move beyond verbal and literary languages to include events of the media such as radio, film, television, video, pop music, and so forth, without writing such events off as mere examples of mass indoctrination. Conversely, the media, as the loci of cultural translation, can now be seen as what helps to weaken the (literary, philosophical, and epistemological) foundations of Western domination and what makes the encounter between cultures a fluid and open-ended experience:

Contrary to what critical sociology has long believed (with good reason, unfortunately), standardization, uniformity, the manipulation of consensus and the errors of totalitarianism *are not* the only possible outcome of the advent of generalized communication, the mass media and reproduction. Alongside these possibilities—which are objects of political choice—there opens an alternative possible outcome. The advent of the media enhances the inconstancy and superficiality of experience. In so doing, it runs counter to the generalization of domination, insofar as it allows a kind of "weakening" of the very notion of reality, and thus a weakening of its persuasive force. The society of the spectacle spoken of by the situationists is not simply a society of appearance manipulated by power: it is also the society in which reality presents itself as softer and more fluid, and in which experience can again acquire the characteristics of oscillation, disorientation and play.³⁹

What the fluidity of the co-presence of cultures signifies is not the harmony but—to use a word from Vattimo—the thorough "contamination" of the world, so thorough that it has made the world become "soft" and tender. If the Western domination of the world has been the result of rationalistic progress, a progress that moves the world toward the general transparency that is evidenced by our media, this transparency

is also a recovery, a convalescence from rationalistic progress in that it shows the world to be, finally, a fable:

Instead of moving toward self-transparency, the society of the human sciences and generalized communication has moved towards what could, in general, be called the "fabling of the world." The images of the world we receive from the media and the human sciences, albeit on different levels, are not simply different interpretations of a "reality" that is "given" regardless, but rather constitute the very objectivity of the world. "There are no facts, only interpretations," in the words of Nietzsche, who also wrote that "the true world has in the end become a fable."⁴⁰

In the transcultural world market, contemporary Chinese films can be understood by way of this transparency becoming fable. In order to see this, we need to return once again to the problem of translation and to Walter Benjamin's essay.

The Light of the Arcade

We come to what is perhaps the most difficult point in Benjamin's discussion: besides the "longing for linguistic complementarity," what exactly is that "active force in life" (p. 79) that Benjamin describes as being imprisoned in the original and that the translation should liberate? How is this "active force" related to the "longing for linguistic complementarity"? Much as Benjamin's phrase carries with it a kind of organicist baggage, I propose that we think of it in terms other than organicism. By way of contemporary Chinese film, I would suggest that, *first*, the "active force of life" refers to the cultural violence that is made evident or apparent by the act of translation. In its rendering of the prohibitions, the oppressive customs, and the dehumanizing rituals of feudal China, for instance, the translation that is film enables us to see how a culture is "originally" put together, in all its *cruelty*. This putting together constitutes the violent active force to which the culture's members continue to be subjugated. For anyone whose identity is sutured with

this culture, filmic representation thus makes it possible to see (with discomfort) one's "native origins" as foreign bodies.

Second, the "active force of life" refers also to the act of transmission. While the callousness and viciousness of "tradition" is clearly visible on the screen, what makes it possible for Chinese audiences to become not simply inheritors of but also foreigners to their "tradition" is the act of transmission—the fact that whatever they experience, they experience as a passing-on. Writing in another context, Benjamin has defined transmission as what distinguishes Franz Kafka's work from that of his contemporaries. A work's transmissibility, Benjamin writes, is in opposition to its "truth":

The things that want to be caught as they rush by are not meant for anyone's ears. This implies a state of affairs which negatively characterizes Kafka's works with great precision. . . . Kafka's work presents a *sickness of tradition*. . . . [The haggadic] consistency of truth . . . has been lost. Kafka was far from being the first to face this situation. Many had accommodated themselves to it, clinging to truth or whatever they happened to regard as truth and, with a more or less heavy heart, [forsaking] its transmissibility. Kafka's real genius was that he tried something entirely new: he sacrificed truth for the sake of *clinging to its transmissibility*, its haggadic element.⁴¹

Following Benjamin, we may argue that transmissibility is what *intensifies* in direct proportion to the sickness, the weakening of tradition. Ironically, then, it is indeed "tradition" that is the condition of possibility for transmission, but it is tradition in a debilitated and exhausted state.

Furthermore, in the age of multimedia communication, transmissibility is that aspect of a work which, unlike the weight of philosophical depth and interiority, is literal, transparent, and thus capable of offering itself to a popular or naive *handling*. What is transmissible is that which, *in addition to having meaning or "sense,"* is accessible. This last point, incidentally, is quite the opposite of the manner in which we usually think of accessibility, which is typically regarded as a *deprivation*, a *lack* of depth and meaning. For Benjamin, however, transmissibility and

accessibility are not pejorative or negligible qualities; instead they are what enable movement—that is, translation—from language to language, from medium to medium. Transmissibility and accessibility are what give a work its afterlife.

Once we see these implications of transmission, the “literalness” or *Wörtlichkeit* in Benjamin’s essay that I have already discussed can be further defined as a transmissibility oriented toward a here and now—that is, a simultaneity rather than an alterity in place and time. Rather than a properly anchored “truth,” “literalness” signifies mobility, proximity, approximation. Thus “literalness” is, as Benjamin writes, an arcade, a passageway.

Juxtaposing “The Task of the Translator” with Benjamin’s interest in mass culture, we can now say that the “literalness” of popular and mass culture is not “simplistic” or “lacking” as is commonly thought. Rather, in its naive, crude, and literal modes, popular and mass culture is a supplement to truth, a tactic of passing something on. In the language of visibility, what is “literal” is what acquires a light *in addition to* the original that is its content; it is this light, this transparency, that allows the original/content to be transmitted and translated: “A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully” (p. 79).

For most interpreters, Benjamin’s notion of “light” and “transparency” in this passage corroborates that of “literalness” and “arcade” in the sense of “letting light through.” Derrida, for instance, writes that “whereas the wall braces while concealing (it is *in front of* the original), the arcade supports while letting light pass and the original show.”⁴² John Fletcher, commenting on Laplanche’s reading of Benjamin’s text, defines “Benjamin’s *Wörtlichkeit*” as “the arcade that gives access and circulation rather than blocks out.”⁴³ According to these interpretations, the arcade casts a light on the original in such a way as to make the original shine more brilliantly. *But what about the arcade itself—the “word-for-word-ness,” the translation?*

By putting the emphasis on the arcade as a letting-light-through, critics such as Derrida and Fletcher alert us correctly to the “passageway” that is the *conventional* meaning of the arcade. Insofar as it understands the relationship between “original” and “translation” in terms of clarity and obscurity, this is a familiar move, which Derrida himself has

described and critiqued in the following terms: “The appeal to the criteria of clarity and obscurity would suffice to confirm . . . [that the] entire philosophical delimitation of metaphor already lends itself to being constructed and worked by ‘metaphors.’ How could a piece of knowledge or a language be properly clear or obscure?”⁴⁴

We may borrow Derrida’s passage to critique the way *translation* is often evaluated (even by himself) in terms of clarity and obscurity, light and blockage. “Light” in this common philosophical tradition is assumed to be transparent in the sense of a *nonexisting* medium—and the arcade, which is equated with light, implicitly becomes a *mere* passageway. Since the “arcade” also corresponds in this context to translation, we are back once again in the classical situation in which “translation” is a mere vehicle, disposable once it completes its task.

And yet, does light not have another kind of transparency, the transparency of our media and consumer society? Such transparency moves us, it seems to me, not back to the “original” but rather to the *fabulous constructedness* of the world as spoken of by Nietzsche and Vattimo. Rather than some original text, it is the brilliance of this “fabling of the world” to which Benjamin’s “arcade” leads us.

What is forgotten, when critics think of translation only in terms of literary and philosophical texts, is that the arcade, especially in the work of Benjamin, is never simply a linguistic passageway; it is also a commercial passageway, a passageway with shop fronts for the display of merchandise.⁴⁵ I would therefore emphasize this *mass culture aspect of the arcade* in order to show that the light and transparency allowed by “translation” is also the light and transparency of commodification. This is a profane, rather than pure and sacred, light, to which non-Western cultures are subjected if they want a place in the contemporary world. In “literal,” “superficial” ways, this arcade is furnished with exhibits of modernity’s “primitives” such as the women in contemporary Chinese film, who stand like mannequins in the passageways between cultures. The fabulous, brilliant forms of these primitives are what we must go through in order to arrive—not at the new destination of the truth of an “other” culture but at the weakened foundations of Western metaphysics as well as the disintegrated bases of Eastern traditions. In the display windows of the world market, such “primitives” are the toys, the fabricated play forms with which the less powerful (cultures) negotiate the imposition of the agenda of the powerful.⁴⁶ They are the “fables” that

cast light on the "original" that is our world's violence, and they mark the passages that head not toward the "original" that is the West or the East but toward survival in the postcolonial world.⁴⁷

Contemporary Chinese films are cultural "translations" in these multiple senses of the term. By consciously exoticizing China and revealing China's "dirty secrets" to the outside world, contemporary Chinese directors are translators of the violence with which the Chinese culture is "originally" put together. In the dazzling colors of their screen, the primitive that is woman, who at once unveils the corrupt Chinese tradition and parodies the orientalism of the West, stands as the naive symbol, the brilliant arcade, through which "China" travels across cultures to unfamiliar audiences. Meanwhile, the "original" that is film, the canonically Western medium, becomes destabilized and permanently infected with the unforgettable "ethnic" (and foreign) images imprinted on it by the Chinese translators. To borrow Michael Taussig's words, contemporary Chinese films constitute that "novel anthropology" in which the "object" recorded is no longer simply the "third world" but "the West itself as mirrored in the eyes and handiwork of its others." This novel anthropology is, we may add, translation in the sense of the "interlinear version" and "plurality of languages" as described by Benjamin (p. 82).

Like Benjamin's collector, the Chinese filmmakers' relation to "China" is that of the heirs to a great collection of treasures, the most distinguished trait of which, writes Benjamin, "will always be its transmissibility."⁴⁸ If translation is a form of betrayal, then the translators pay their debt by bringing fame to the ethnic culture, a fame that is evident in recent years from the major awards won by Chinese films at international film festivals in Manila, Tokyo, Nantes, Locarno, London, Honolulu, Montréal, Berlin, Venice, and Cannes.⁴⁹ Another name for fame is afterlife. It is in translation's faithlessness that "China" survives and thrives. A faithlessness that gives the beloved life—is that not . . . faithfulness itself?

Notes

Preface

1. "Film studies," for instance, "are currently polarizing between those who work from within a strict disciplinary sense of the field and those . . . who bring an interdisciplinary perspective to it. Unfortunately, this polarization frequently leads each side to virtually dismiss or disparage the work of the other." Peter Lehman, *Film Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (Fall 1993): 55–56 (book review).

Part 1: *Visuality, Modernity, and Primitive Passions*

1. The quotation in the title of this section is taken from Jay Leyda, *Dianying: An Account of Films and the Film Audience in China* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1972), p. 13.

2. Lu Xun, "Preface to the First Collection of Short Stories, 'Call to Arms,'" *Selected Stories of Lu Hsun*, trans. Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1960), pp. 2–3; translation modified. This episode is cited in Leyda, *Dianying*, pp. 13–14. Leyda includes a picture (p. 421, plate 3a) that is supposed to be "the newsreel that determined the career of Lu Hsun" and "helped to change modern Chinese history." In Leyda's picture, however, the execution has already taken place (with a severed human head on the ground), whereas in Lu Xun's account it is about to take place.

3. See, for instance, the allusions to this event in the following sources: Lin Niantong, *Zhongguo dianying meixue* [The aesthetics of Chinese film] (Taipei: