Margin of Utility

"Unless suffering is the direct and immediate object of life, our existence must entirely fall of its aim. It is absurd to look upon the enormous amount of pain that abounds everywhere in the world, and originates in needs and necessities inseparable from life itself, as serving no purpose at all and the result of mere chance. Each separate misfortune, as it come, seems, no doubt, to be a misfortune; but the sum of all and the result of mere chance. The general public now draws its notion of art from diverting MTV videos, video games, and Hollywood blockbusters. In the contemporary context of media-generated taste, the call to abandon and dismantle the mass media as an institution has necessarily taken on an entirely different meaning than when it was voiced during the avant-garde era. When people today speak of 'real life,' what they usually mean is the global media market. And that means: the current protest against the museum is no longer part of a struggle being waged against normative taste in the name of aesthetic equality but is, inversely, aimed at stabilizing and entrenching currently prevailing tastes.

The abandonment of the 'musealized' past is also often celebrated as a radical opening up to the present. But opening up to the big world outside the closed spaces that the system produces, on the contrary, a certain blindness to what is contemporary and present. The global media market lacks in particular the historical memory that would enable the spectator to compare the past with the present and thereby determine what is truly new and genuinely contemporary about the present. The product range in the media market is constantly being replaced by new merchandise, barring any possibility of comparing what is on offer today with what used to be available in the past. As a result, the new and the present are discussed in terms of what is in fashion...

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Cai Guo-Qiang has slowly risen up the chain of artists critics love to hate. His work is bombastic; his ideology is opportunistic; he designed the fireworks display of the Beijing Olympics, for Christ’s sake. But sometimes in spite of the artist the work shines through. Consider his piece, *Bringing to Venice What Marco Polo Forgot* (1995), made on the 700th anniversary of Polo’s return from the court of the Great Khan. “What Marco Polo Forgot,” according to Cai, is the “Eastern spirit,” which some traditional herbs placed on a canal boat were meant to represent in the work.

If it is critical fashion to mock pop art, then it is certainly also fashionable to mock pop spirituality as well. Slavoj Žižek has, for example, taken to condemning what he calls “Western Buddhism,” and “Western Taoism,” which he says form the perfect ideological counterpart to contemporary capitalism. Laissez faire economics, in other words, go hand in hand with a “just let it be,” live in the present attitude.

Žižek’s understanding of Buddhism and Taoism and their complicated cultural transmission is poor at best, but his point that certain forms of spirituality lack a critical edge is merited. As, indeed, are many critics’ feelings that Cai’s work is opportunistic and that it participates in an art world gone overboard. But perhaps in the context of Cai’s work, two wrongs do make a right. At first glance, the Marco Polo piece can even be seen to carry within it Žižek’s message: Western capitalism and imperialism (the dominance of commerce represented by Polo’s voyage) can only function with a spiritual attitude to accompany these means of production, an attitude which has moved from Protestantism to Taoism as Žižek thinks Max Weber would now claim.

More than this, however, the piece calls into question the very categories of such an analysis. It is not just a question of “what Marco Polo forgot.” It is also a question of scales. First, the scale of comparison between the huge system of global capitalism and the few traditional herbs on the ship which renders any thought that the herbs could cure one living in exploitative conditions risible. Second, the scale of Western understanding of Eastern religions, and what should be a slightly mocking idea that “the Eastern spirit” – a vague notion which erases any number of heterogeneous philosophical and religious practices – can be contained within a few plants.

Rather than Žižek’s simplistic notion that “Eastern” attitudes are maintaining the status quo, Cai’s projects point to the incommensurability between the scales of the spiritual and the material which, more than any critique in language, questions the assumption that spiritual calm can be fully achieved in a chaotic and unjust world. As well, and perhaps even against the artist’s intentions, the work once again stages the difficulty of inter-cultural hermeneutics, and reminds us that the world becoming more closely connected does not mean it becomes more readily understandable as well.

I write “against the artist’s own intentions,” because for Cai the piece does not seem tongue in cheek at all. When I imagined him making this reply, is a mistake, since it fails to grasp the ways in which the whole of “Eastern philosophy” (his phrase) is encapsulated in Chinese medicine. As he put it in an interview with the Brooklyn Rail responding to how he incorporated “Eastern” ideas in his work: “The example of Chinese medicine as a discipline, from the philosophy to the methodology to the execution, is a good one. Everything is within one system.” This may be the case. I would want to reply, but the will to know and the actual knowledge of something (the totality in this case) are not the same thing.

Should one visit Philadelphia’s Fabric Workshop before March 1st to see Cai’s *Fallen Blossoms*, a collaborative project between the Workshop and the PMA, it might be useful to keep such things in mind. As one watches five weavers “from the ethnical Tuja clan” live at work, or reads about “Chinese adages” (I can only assume they mean Mandarin), or learns about the “proverbs” of “Eastern philosophy,” the way that all such contained works do their own unworking – that is to say, refuse, by their very nature, any attempt to contain them – might be the show’s saving grace.

-Avi Alpert

### Noir After God:

**Werner Herzog’s The Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call New Orleans**

“I think there are specific times where film noir is a natural concomitant of the mood. When there’s insecurity, collapse of financial systems—that’s where film noir always hits fertile ground.”

-Werner Herzog

The ingredients are simple: an overlong, unnecessarily awkward title that manages to make itself unfamiliar while at the same time announcing the film’s uneasy status as a remake of some sort; a mediocre script, filled with leaden dialogue and unlikely coincidences, upon which unrestrained and irresponsible improvisations are unleashed; an actor of unhinged genius surrounded by B-movie character actors and interesting non-professionals; a freshly devastated landscape that provides a politically charged setting without requiring any overt political references at all; a seeming willful indifference to plot, genre conventions and cinematic style in general. From all this, Werner Herzog, the most proudly film-iliterate of contemporary masters, as well as the most politically unsophisticated, has crafted the most politically potent and entertainingly unpredictable American genre film in years.

It may at first seem surprising to find the usually jumble-bound director dabbling in noir, the most urban of genres, but Herzog manages to update the B-noir tradition with a blunt sincerity that would be impossible for almost any other contemporary director. Because he doesn’t need to bury his sincerity in layers of irony and winking pastiche, he can shrug off the over-aestheticized contemporary approach to noir and return the genre to a time in which tonal unevenness and apparent lapses in good taste were inseparable from thematic and aesthetic complexity and philosophic reach. With *The Bad Lieutenant*, Herzog has made a genre film in the true sense: genre not as a historically frozen mode bestowed with a natural concomitant of the mood. When there’s insecurity, collapse of financial systems—that’s where film noir always hits fertile ground.”

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