



“The Mysterious Other”: Carter’s Japanese Reflections

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“In 1969 I was given some money to run away with, and did so. The money was the Somerset Maugham Travel Award and five hundred pounds went further in those days; it took me as far as Japan” (Angela Carter 1982: 28).

Carter’s Japanese experience could be defined as both controversial and productive, contradictory and polysemous at the same time, a maze of interwoven reflections, just like her writing. Speaking of the possibility to divide Carter’s work in pre- and post-Japan Dimovitz interestingly argues: “Japan [...] was the genesis of Carter’s allegorical speculative fiction” (Scott A. Dimovitz 2005: 17). As a matter of fact in Japan Carter first comes across De Sade, the primary source of inspiration for *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History*. This disruptive work, blended with her reflections on Japanese blue comic books leads in fact to the development of her sharp definition of myths as “consolatory nonsenses” (Carter 2001: 5). Moreover she draws for inspiration on the Japanese culture, borrowing many of the symbols which recur in her work and are re-signified over and over and endlessly endowed with new shades of meaning, so that in the end a sort of intertextual web of multi-layered but never worn out references is woven. Such images as the puppet and the marionette, for instance, are taken from the Japanese theatrical traditions of Noh and Bunraku and recur both in Carter’s early fiction (such as the short stories of *Fireworks*, 1974) and in her later work (think of the clockwork maid in one of the fairy tales of the collection *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*, 1979). Carter’s observations and reflections upon Japanese habits and customs as they are described in the articles collected in *Nothing Sacred* (1982) have been criticised as biased – which perhaps is true to some extent – as Japanese people are often looked down on, glanced at from the outside without bothering to convey their first person accounts. Nevertheless, looking at the Japanese culture leaves a significant imprint on Carter’s understanding and representation of



identities as a whole. As a consequence, the hostess in "Poor Butterfly", the Japanese tattooing technique of Irezumi in "People as Pictures" and Japanese erotic comic books in "Once More into the Mangle" offer twofold images, symbols and experiences. On the one hand these images serve to portray Japan in what has been defined as the "imperial way", but on the other they become a reservoir for metaphors, narratives and more or less fictional speculations upon which Carter's critique and overthrowing of disciplined patriarchal assumptions and models represented so far in the Western literary tradition are grounded.

In this paper, therefore, I argue that if one considers Carter's journalism alone, the perspective is that of an imperial Eye – a Western point of view on Japanese cultural practices, which on some occasions conveys a sense of orientalisation. However, if the fiction Carter wrote during and after her Japanese stay is taken into account, it is clear that thanks to the contact with this kind of otherness new themes, images and reflections are developed, which have relentlessly been deepened, sharpened and re-worked throughout her later tales and novels.

Although, as it has been argued, Carter's attitude is similar to that of a Western tourist, her gaze proves to be problematic and productive at the same time, for her being a Western foreigner (the imperial Eye), combines with her being a woman, a subject who speaks from an unprivileged position, the subordinated other in her homeland. Being a foreigner in Japan arouses in Carter a feeling of complete alienation due to the impact with the Japanese language, which results once more in a contradictory outcome. Her inability to learn this odd-sounding language – that is the very substance upon which the Japanese culture is grounded, shapes people's frames of minds and is one of the most important forms of art – hinders her access to Japanese systems of signification, but at the same time also proves to be, once again, extremely fruitful. As Carter herself explains, indeed, the language barrier forced her to observe reality with sharpened senses in order to name everything anew, starting from her self-perception of what it means to be a woman and to act as one. Thus, what the author does – which significantly recalls one of Barthes' enthusiastic reactions to the encounter with the signs of that same culture – is filling in Japanese empty signs with brand new meanings and beginning to build up a new system of signification. In Japan Carter is a foreign woman, but a Western one, her standpoint being thus ambivalent: she is the silenced "mysterious other" who risks being marginalised because of her femininity, but at the same time she also embodies the powerful other, who can legitimately name and define the Japanese culture on account of her being British. Moreover, her in-between position forces Carter to come to terms with exclusion, but also offers the writer the possibility to problematize the notion of female identity through her own experience, and to encode new meanings in order to represent the disruptive performances she – and her characters – enact. Impressions on the Japanese world and the reasoning about gendered identities are mainly



conveyed through the powerful, omnipresent image of the mirror, which will become one of Carter's most powerful tropes. In Carter's words mirrors and reflections convey images that are able to provide disruptive and original models and performances and effective ways to represent them at the same time. Likewise, it is through the reflection/projection of the Japanese culture into the Western one and through the mirroring of the female subject in the other's eyes, that female subjectivity is endowed with a new subversive potential. The definition of identity through the mirroring in the other is not really a startling concept, since it is exactly what Europe in particular, and the economically powerful Western countries in general have been doing during and after colonisations: grounding their culture and their identification in their hegemonic power, in their being masters of other, subdued cultures. However, if the "heavy dependency" of European power upon the other is compared to the Hegelian master-slave discourse, a subversive potential emerges (Natsumi Ikawa Miyasaka 2002). Once "the unexpected dependency of the master on the slave in order to establish his own identity through reflection (Judith Butler 1999: 44)' is revealed [...] the ruling of the master can be disrupted by the rebellious performance of the slave", since "the identity of the master is not a fixed one and requires repetitious affirmation" (*ibid.*: 14), as does the identity of the slave, forged throughout its relation to the master. Such a contention holds true both for women's oppression and for colonised peoples, who must "not seek for a universal identity outside power, but [...] find disruption from within" (*ibid.*) and could open up new perspectives on Carter's supposedly imperialistic writings.

Thus, in Japan Carter develops a new point of view on social power relationships, whereby a new stance on female identity is elaborated and an even more reasoned idea of history and historicity is given shape thanks to the encounter with a difference that is partly assimilated and appropriated and partly dismissed and taken at a distance. In other words, the process which takes shape and is developed in her Japanese narratives would result in what Carter herself refers to as her deeper self-awareness and radicalisation, that is: "In Japan, I learnt what it is to be a woman and became radicalised" (Carter 1982: 28).

NOTHING SACRED: SOUVENIRS OF JAPAN

Before introducing the analysis of Carter's journalism – i.e. the collection *Nothing Sacred. Selected Writings* (1982) – in the light of the concepts of "orientalism", "colonialism" and "imperialism", a short prelude is due to clarify the meaning and implications of the notions referred to here. The term "imperialism" alludes to the definition given by Edward Said, who suggested that "imperialism involves the practice, the theory and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a



distant territory”, and that it is different from “colonialism”, in that the last would entail the “implanting of settlements on a distant territory” (Said 1993: 9). Of course, neither was Japan a colony of the British Empire or of other Western Countries, nor was it directly under the cultural hegemony of London. Nonetheless, Japan did undergo a similar process to that of both colonisation and imperialism after World War II, namely while enduring the American occupation. Even if Japan has never been colonised, the occupation could be perceived as an imperialistic practice in that it involves the assumption of authority by a state over another territory, which is expressed both in military and in symbolic power (Miyasaka 2002). The American occupation of Japan is to be understood as a “textual practice”¹ that had “a long lasting effect” in that it imposed two texts on the Japanese society: “the text of imperialism in order to control Japan and to transform it into a version or copy of the West” and that of Orientalism (Miyasaka 2002: 7-8). The dominance exercised by the American Army over the Japanese people and territory seems to fit the definition of “orientalism” given by Said just as it suited that of “imperialism”. Furthermore, what stands out here is the “third meaning of orientalism” suggested by Said in the introduction to *Orientalism* (1977) as “the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient [...] Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the orient”, that is a discourse in the foucauldian sense “by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, military, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively” (Said 1977: 3). One interesting point of intersection between this conceptualisation and Carter’s journalistic accounts of her Japanese journey is to be found if issues of orientalism and postmodernism are drawn together, as postmodern strategies by refuting any previous category (including history, race, gender) could be used to create new narratives of the colonial/imperial experience (Robbie B. Goh 1999). In particular magical realism, a term often ascribed to Carter’s narratives, is one of the more politically powerful manifestations of postmodern narratives:

It is not surprising that for many scholars, the exemplary manifestation of postmodern magic (or magical) realism, which – in the powerfully subversive literature which emerged in South America and the West Indies in the 1960s and 1970s – became a narrative form dedicated to ‘resistance toward the imperial centre and to its totalizing systems of generic classification’ (Slemon 408)” (Goh 1999: 66).

¹Here Miyasaka refers to the definition of Empire given by Elleke Boehmer: “Empire was itself, at least in part, a textual exercise” through which Japanese society had to be transformed into a “manageable form” (Miyasaka 2002: 6-7).



Of course the meaning of the term has broadened until it has come to encompass “literatures with similar narrative strategies, but which have very different socio-political contexts and motivation” (*ibid.*, 67). Although Carter’s work belongs to this category, her writings seem to lack the political agenda implied in the South American and West-Indian versions (*ibid.*). Nevertheless, Carter’s work is to be linked with a *feminist* political agenda, even if at times it definitely disregards imperialistic codes, showing on the contrary Eurocentrism together with an “ideological blind spot of national space and identity”:

While she [Carter] is often alert of gender codes, to their artifice and arbitrary power, she is much less aware of the imperialist codes which place the West in the centre of her consciousness and efface all other regions and cultures into an indistinct and irrealist mass. Her comments on culture in the interview² are pointedly [...] Eurocentric (*ibid.*: 70).

Furthermore, Carter’s collection *Fireworks* could be criticized for its universalization of social conditions, that risks becoming the “underlying justification for the touristic and imperial gaze which runs through Carter’s writings” (*ibid.*: 73). As a matter of fact Carter often refers to Japanese people in a prejudiced and stereotypical way, frequently commenting on cultural customs with irony and haughtiness. It should be noted nonetheless that this kind of descriptions are usually aimed at critiquing the sexism of Japanese society, being therefore addressed (as Goh himself has to admit) to the subservient role to which women are relegated. So, for example in the first account included in *Fireworks*, “Tokyo Pastoral”, Carter remarks: “If the Japanese aesthetic ideal is a subfusc, harmonious austerity, the cultural norm is a homey, cheerful clutter. One must cultivate cosiness; cosiness makes overcrowding tolerable” (Carter 1982: 30). Of course, those who are in charge of guaranteeing the cosiness of these houses in the bourgeois district where Carter is living are unfailingly women. Another stereotyped reference to a Japanese cultural practice is the description of the client-hostess relationship in bars, where the obsession of Japanese people with keeping up appearances of respectability is addressed:

Clearly, though, the hostess do not really need to speak and no doubt soon will cease to do so. They are not selling their charms; they do not usually sell their flesh. If they do, it is strictly a private arrangement; and since, at all costs, the pretence must be maintained that they are not de facto prostitutes, they rarely get honest cash paid down for the transaction, but only something useless, like a kimono (*ibid.*: 36).

² He is referring to John Haffenden interviewing Angela Carter.



Finally (even though there could be many more examples), in the piece “Once more into the Mingle” about Japanese comics Carter observes: “a culture that prefers to keep women at home is extremely hard on the men. But human relations either have the stark anonymity of rape or are essentially tragic [...] the Japanese, it would seem, cannot bring themselves to borrow that simplistic, European formula: ‘then they lived happily ever after’” (*ibid.*: 43). These few instances alone could endorse Goh’s point about Carter’s Eurocentrism and universalising drive, while also enacting what Said identifies as part of an orientalising process, whereby the Orient has been defined as a place of otherness, as the “contrasting image” of the West (Said 1977: 3) – as a kind of distorted mirror image, it could be added. Yet, most likely unaware of the implicit imperialist gaze underlying her writings, Carter’s aim is probably to be looked for in a political agenda, where the priority is not to uncover power imbalances in the relation between the European self and the colonised oriental other, but rather those shaping uneven gender roles and relationships in the West – which she problematizes and becomes even more aware of when experiencing their exacerbation in Japanese society. Despite contradictory contentions on Carter’s part about the topic, her work is surely politically committed, at least in that it highlights the need for writers to be aware of their historical and social standpoint, which invariably shapes their narratives and textual practices. Most notably, when asked by Haffenden in an interview whether she puts her fiction to the service of an idea of feminism, Carter answers:

I write about the conditions of my life, as everyone does. You write from your history. Being female or being black means that once you become conscious, your position – however many there are of you – isn’t the standard one: you have to bear that in mind when are writing, you have to keep on defining the ground on which you’re standing, because you are in fact setting yourself up in opposition to the generality. (John Haffenden 1985: 93)

A second set of critical stances on Carter’s imperialist gaze would come from an analysis of the colonial and post-colonial experience, which tries to give a record of complex forms of marginalisation (mainly those of women, who are doubly colonised if both the categories of race and gender are considered together) and to discuss the possibility that these subjects actually have to make their voices be heard, and speak directly on behalf of themselves (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak 1995). Also in this case, as a matter of fact, Carter does not allow Japanese women to speak, ‘wording’ them instead, even more so since one of the grounding conditions of being able to speak is that the heterogeneity of the silenced other should be acknowledged (Spivak 1995).

Another perspective could be adopted, however, when trying to account for Carter’s articles about Japanese society. This alternative perspective entails acknowledging her imperialistic viewpoint while at the same time conceding the emergence of a new understanding of gender roles and female identity in the process



of experiencing and observing alterity. Abdul J. JanMohamed (JanMohamed 1995) offers a new approach to the analysis of colonialist literature by making a distinction between “imaginary” versus “symbolic” texts. The starting point of this approach is the analysis of Europeans’ responses to otherness, which have basically been limited to two simple reactions that prevent authentic and complete comprehension of otherness, namely identification or differentiation:

If he [the European] assumes that he and the Other are essentially identical, then he would tend to ignore the significant divergences and to judge the Other according to his own cultural values. If, on the other hand, he assumes that the Other is irremediably different, then he would have to turn to the security of his own cultural perspective” (JanMohamed 1995: 18).

Allowing mutual comprehension and exchange between cultures would entail for the self to bracket its “values, assumptions and ideology”. JanMohamed further discusses how the subtext of colonial (and post-colonial) literatures is usually the superiority of European cultures, which surfaces by means of a specular reflection: “such literature [...] instead of seeing the native as a bridge toward syncretic possibilities uses him as a mirror that reflects the colonialist’s self-image”. This mirroring brings about the emergence of two categories to which the majority of colonial literary texts could be ascribed: the “imaginary” and the “symbolic”. The narratives belonging to the first category objectify and attack the natives, so that they become self-alienated projections of the imperialist self. As a result, in imaginary representations otherness becomes synonymous with “evil” and inferior, a clear-cut “nondialectical” opposition self-native is established and then loaded with all the subsequent binary divisions and associations aimed at legitimizing the confinement and subordination of the other (*ibid.*: 19). In addition, the European reacts to this opposition by looking for shelter in a purpose-built homogeneous group, thus pushing farther the already well-established division. As to symbolic texts instead, they seem to be “more aware of the inevitable necessity of using the native as a mediator of European desire”. In this case the opposition between self and other is not fixed once and for all. On the contrary, it is open to negotiation based on the specificity of individual and cultural experiences of Europeans and natives, and it questions European values, habits and assumptions in relation to those of the natives (*ibid.*). Carter’s texts fall into this second category in that they often describe Japanese society and culture with the purpose of comparing them to British ones, in order to underline the deleterious features they share. Obviously enough this holds even more true as far as gender disciplined roles and power relations are concerned. Therefore, even if Carter does turn to the mirroring with the Oriental other as a strategy to construct and elaborate her notion of – Western and female – identity, this specular image does not result in the stabilization or even strengthening of the self-other



opposition. By contrast, a deeper understanding of the self – but in part also of the other – is achieved, which will be the starting point for a far-reaching political agenda. Of course, Carter's already mentioned famous statement "In Japan, I learnt what it is to be a woman and become radicalised" (Carter 1982: 28) could be referred as well to the familiar mirroring mechanism triggered by the contact between the coloniser and the colonised discussed by intellectuals like Said. However, if the distinction between imaginary and symbolic representations – and Carter's ascription to the latter – is agreed upon, this very specular dynamic would also perform a positive function and allow disruptive discourses to crawl in.

THE LANGUAGE OF JAPANESE SIGNS

An interesting parallel between Carter's Japanese writings and Roland Barthes' *Empire des signes* (1994) could be established (Goh 1999; Mayako Murai 2005), as both writers treat Japanese cultural signs as blank surfaces on which new meanings can be inscribed. Despite their unquestionably different aims, Carter and Barthes experience the same feeling of total fascination and estrangement as they – helplessly – try to tackle with the Japanese language. As to Barthes, he de-realizes Japan and regards it as a system of simulacra "such that any dimension of the real can only be the 'real' as it is constructed by signs" (Goh 1999: 79). Furthermore:

Barthes begins his *Empire of Signs* (1970) by declaring that his Japan is a 'symbolic system' formed out of his 'fantasy' and that he is concerned not with 'an Oriental essence' but with 'an emptiness of language' which he finds in Zen. His encounter with a culture apparently exempt from the metaphysical dilemma of the west afforded him what he calls 'a situation of writing' (Murai 2005: 1-2).

Barthes' development of Saussure and early linguistics' analysis of signs and of how their signification and interpretation over time generates unstable and negotiable cultural meanings – which Carter most likely is aware of – sheds light on the possible reactions to the encounter with an incomprehensible otherness. In Carter as well as in Barthes' case this startling encounter triggers the attempt of filling in the gaps with new convenient meanings. Obviously enough, this convenience depends on the writers' purposes, and particular meanings are conveyed according to how the role of language is understood. In both cases, language is identified with the tool for the arbitrary construction of meanings through the signification of signs, which are arranged in different ways by different cultures in order to be shared – i.e. communicable and mutually understandable. Indeed: "Language is the privileged medium in which cultural meanings are formed and communicated" and "signs are commonly organized into a sequence that generates meaning through the cultural



conventions of their usage within a particular context” so that “to understand culture is to explore how meaning is produced symbolically through the signifying practices of language” (Chris Barker 2008: 75-77). Barthes’ fascination with Japanese empty signs therefore seems to result from its being a reserve of “traits dont la mise en batterie, le jeu inventé me permettent de ‘flatter’ l’idée d’un système symbolique inouï, entièrement dépris du notre” (Barthes 1994: 747) that can be broken down and rearranged. Most notably, the Japanese language also gives Barthes the occasion of reasoning about his own mother tongue. When he first hears the language, indeed, he is confronted with a deep feeling of estrangement which adds new intuitions to his already well-established understanding of how signification systems work: “ces exercices d’une grammaire aberrante auraient au moins l’avantage de porter le soupçon sur l’idéologie même de notre parole” (*ibid.*)³. His first impressions on the Japanese language are given in a chapter significantly entitled “La langue inconnue”. Here the linguist describes Japanese as a “langue étrangère (étrange)” which he cannot understand, but which enables him to

connaître, réfractées positivement dans une langue nouvelle, les impossibilités de la nôtre ; apprendre la systématique de l’inconcevable; défaire notre “réel” sous l’effet d’autres découpages, d’autres syntaxes, découvrir des positions inouïes de sujet dans l’énonciation, [...] en un mot, descendre dans l’intraduisible, en éprouver la secousse sans jamais l’amortir, jusqu’à ce qu’en nous tout l’Occident s’ébranle et que vacillent les droits de la langue paternelle” (*ibid.*: 748).

Threatening the language of the father perhaps is the major purpose Barthes and Carter share, which surfaces when the mirroring with the other, who sends back a completely different image, strikes the subject with a sense of estrangement, from which reflection develops. In other words, looking at themselves in the mirror of the others’ experiences and cultural codes makes both Barthes and Carter compare the Western way with the Japanese one. The “empty signs” to be filled with new meanings borrowed from the Japanese language are then used to reflect upon, or even re-write and re-signify the Western cultural background. With regard to Carter, her first description of the Japanese language already implies that the usual – Western – way of looking at things is cast away in favour of a new, sensory approach: “Since I kept on trying to learn Japanese, and kept on failing to do so, I started trying to understand things by simply looking at them very, very carefully, an involuntary apprenticeship in the interpretation of signs” (Carter 1982: 28).

³ Barthes too seems to treat Japanese culture, and in particular its language, as a specular image of the West, as a magnifying lens which allows him to analyze his cultural background under a different perspective.



Meaningfully, the fresh start entails interpreting signs in a new perspective. This way Western patriarchal discourse is dismissed inasmuch as its norms fail to account for an oriental context that does not follow the same rules. Furthermore, Carter's remarks about signs and language question the Western power-knowledge interaction and reveal its culture-specific features. As a cultural construct it is inextricably bound to the language of its articulation and transmission, therefore it must give up its claims for universality. In addition, given the functional, temporary and contextual nature of language, that very discourse could be easily reversed if new meanings are attached to its signs. Like Barthes, Carter becomes aware of the need for decoding signs anew – and actually encodes original ones – thanks to the sudden mirroring with otherness. In Japan not only does Carter have the occasion to re-think her cultural background and create new meanings, metaphors and symbols but she is also allowed to overthrow some basic patriarchal assumptions by showing their flimsiness outside a language produced by the power-knowledge relation the Western tradition has established:

The Japanese language itself poses – or rather annihilates – many problems for the European. For example, there is no Japanese word which roughly corresponds to the great contemporary European supernotion, “identity”; and there is hardly an adequate equivalent for the verb “to be”. Further, in a language without plurals, the time-honoured European intellectual division between the one and the many cannot exist except in a kind of intuitive meta-language, the existence of which I very much doubt (Carter 1998: 204).

The impact of the Japanese language with its lack of a correspondence for the term “identity” is perhaps the most suitable starting point for Carter to reflect upon this and other *supernotions* through the newly encoded metaphor of the mirror, which is instead one of the most widespread and evocative images she comes across in Japan and subsequently articulates in her fictional writings.

FIREWORKS: MIRRORWORKS

As to the semi-autobiographical short stories collected in *Fireworks* that Carter wrote while she was living in Japan, they are perhaps the most suitable example of a complex and multi-layered way of dealing with otherness, for they encapsulate the inherent ambivalences and ambiguities both of embodying and of representing what it means to be the other. These tales give an account of the troublesome process of identification female subjects face when being forced to re-think themselves in the light of new social roles and positions. In Japan, indeed, Carter – and her protagonists with her – become aware of the need to re-think their self-identity as a response to the



new, problematic role they play within a society where their otherness is engendered by their being female as well as foreigners. Their position is even more complex in that they are from Western countries, thus being considered – by the Japanese but significantly also by themselves – empowered others, who are subordinated, but nonetheless wield economic and symbolic power. As a result, these semi-autobiographical characters-narrators articulate new, multifaceted understandings of female identity and try to figure out new strategies to enact disruptive and undisciplined performances in order to free themselves from already encoded and disciplined ones. Carter's tales reflect all these and many other complexities arising from the difficult negotiation with the estranged self in relation to the other through the powerful and polysemous metaphor of the looking glass. Carter's mirrors are reflective surfaces that show what has been previously hidden, or was unknown to the subject. In this case, they reveal to the female self a split between the body and self-identity: "the mirror successfully reveals the body [...] transformed into something unknown to its owner" (Miyasaka 2002: 100). The looking glass mediates between the subject and what lies beyond its self-perception, it is the narcissistic medium which shows the self as other. As the protagonist of "Flesh and the Mirror" explains: "The magic mirror presented me with a hitherto unconsidered notion of myself as I. Without any intention of mine, I had been defined by the action reflected in the mirror" (Carter 1996: 70). This almost accidental encounter with a hidden part of her-self is even more powerful in its revelations since the protagonist looks at her reflection while making love, gazing at her body not only from the double perspective of self-identity versus materiality of the body, but also becoming aware of being an object of desire. As a matter of fact the flashing glimpses at her naked body during the sexual act characterise the body as flesh, awakening the narrator to knowledge: "Without any intention of mine, I had been defined by the action reflected in the mirror. I beset me. I was the subject of the sentence written on the mirror. [...] Nothing kept me from the fact, the act; I had been precipitated into knowledge of the real conditions of living" (*ibid.*). After this first step entailing self-consciousness, the woman must come to terms with her flesh, with her being the speaking subject and the object of the gaze/of desire at the same time. Her reaction is that of deciding to disguise, to put on a suitable mask in order to comply with the expectations her new realizations inevitably involve: "I saw the flesh and the mirror but I could not come to terms with the sight. My immediate response to it was, to feel I'd acted out of character. The fancy-dress disguise I'd put on to suit the city had betrayed me" (*ibid.*: 71).

On a second layer then, mirroring becomes evidence of self-styling, of playing a role in order to comply with the other's expectations, roused by the awareness of being an object of the gaze. This performative notion of identity, which will be characterised and problematized by Butler (Butler 1999), takes shape thanks to the



metaphor of acting⁴: “Was I in character when I felt guilty or in character when I did not? I was perplexed. I no longer understood the logic of my own performance. My script had been scrambled behind my back [...]. All this had taken place when I was looking at the mirror” (Carter 1996: 73). For the protagonist – as well as for the writer – being in Japan thus means having to comply with disciplined female conducts and behaviours like she was expected to do at home, since Japan too is “a man’s country” (*ibid.*: 30). This new displacing place, however, whose habits and language she cannot understand nor get used to, requires a different kind of disguise, of performance, as here she also is other in the sense of “foreigner”, of “Western”, thereby enjoying a new empowered position to some extent.

On the whole, on a first level the mirror is a means for narcissistic embodying, it represents the narrator’s self-reflexivity in that it shows her what she does not know yet about herself, what is concealed behind the surface, the breach between self-identity and the image others have of herself, which she as an individual believes to capture while looking at her reflection in the mirror. To this dimension a second one follows like a consequence: the self-awareness implies a new approach to reality, a more extensive understanding of it which, in turn, means for the narrator an even deeper insight into her behaviours and relations to what is perceived to be the real, that is the foreign world surrounding her. By means of the metaphors of looking glasses and reflections, therefore, Carter’s *Fireworks* raises issues about gender identity, about the way it is perceived by the female subject and constructed in her social interactions, which are always conditioned by the need to comply with social expectations in order not to be marginalised. Nevertheless Carter and the protagonist of the two stories referred to so far –i.e. “Flesh and the Mirror” and “A Souvenir of Japan”- refuse to comply with patriarchal discursive norms, and are thus living abroad, in a country where they expect to find none of the cultural assumptions informing their social relationships in their homeland: “Why Japan, though? I wanted to live for a while in a culture that is not nor has ever been a Judeo-Christian one, to see what it was like”(Carter 1982: 28) to which I would add “...to be a woman there”. This is precisely what happens to Carter and is represented in her fictional writings: a coming to terms with re-inventing female identity and alternative ways of reasoning on it, which perhaps has proved more problematic and intricate than expected. Once more, the mirror is the symbol of another set of reflections concerning identification through reciprocity, namely picturing the implications of being other – both as a foreigner and as a woman – by looking at one’s reflection into the other’s eyes. As to Carter’s

⁴ Even if the theme will not be discussed extensively here, an interesting point in dealing with Carter, otherness and acting would be that of analyzing the figure of the puppet and the relation between the puppet and its puppeteer, who pulls its strings but is not always fully in control of the situation (see “The Loves of Lady Purple” in Carter 1982).



supposedly imperialist gaze, it is mainly marked by two attitudes. First of all, in her accounts, both fictional and journalistic, she describes Japan as the “exact mirror of the West” (Murai 2005: 9), establishing a categorical contrast that corresponds more to an idealized image of Japan and of its people as an exotic, distant place (which echoes European orientalism) than to an actual snapshot of them. On the one hand this conveys a sense of exoticism, of daydreaming fantasy, as if the descriptions were rendered through looking at their reflections on rippling water. Accordingly, Japan and the Japanese people become projections of the narrator’s self, which echo Barthes’ description of Japanese empty signs as blank surfaces to be filled in with meanings⁵. This is the way the female narrator of “Flesh and the Mirror” describes her Japanese lover: “So I suppose I do not know how he really looked and, in fact, I suppose I shall never know, now, for he was plainly an object created in the mode of fantasy. His image was already present somewhere in my head and I was seeking to discover it in actuality. [...] I created him solely in relation to myself” (Carter 1982: 72). On the other hand, the inherent imperialism of Carter’s fiction⁶ has been variously addressed by some critics (for example Goh 1999 and Murai 2005) in the light of the narrative structure of the tales, which often reminds one of Nineteenth-Century European travel writings. These narratives usually feature “love between a male traveller and an exotic lover, which becomes a source of inspiration for his artistic creation” and “always seem to send the hero back to his homeland with conscious, imperial masculine self all the more reinforced by embracing, and then exorcising, his lost-pre-symbolic other” (Murai 2005: 4). In Carter’s oriental romances however, a significant change in perspectives undermines the most recurrent prevalently “Eurocentric and male-oriented stereotypes” (*ibid.*) of such writings. In traditional travel narratives indeed, the subject of the gaze is usually a man who looks at a female exotic-object in order to define it according to his own cultural parameters, to frame it in conveniently disciplined roles and relationships. Establishing clear-cut role positions legitimises the male power to “look and word” as he observes the female-other submission to his dominance. Once having grounded his empowerment on submission and compliance on the part of the female-other, he turns to his object of desire for inspiration, and then abandons it. In Carter’s stories, conversely, the speaking – and looking – subject is female, and this completely turns the narrative

⁵Obviously enough, this is a signification strategy that reminds of colonialist imposition of meanings onto colonised peoples without bothering to decode the already-existent ones.

⁶It should be noted that as Aidan Day points out in the introduction to *Angela Carter – The Rational Glass* (1998), in Carter’s fiction a sharp critique of the reason of the Enlightenment is foreground starting from its conception of history, as “complicit in the power politics and the will to domination of imperialism and male sexism” (Day 1998: 92). Therefore, since Carter’s feminist project is that of subverting the basic “anthropocentric, egoistic, possessive and domineering” (*ibid.*: 93) assumptions of Enlightenment thought, imperialism itself is one of the first concepts to be questioned and undermined.



over not only as the role reversal changes the point of view, the subject of the gaze, but also because of the different outcomes the changed perspective brings forth. Encountering the Oriental other means for Carter's narrators gradually or suddenly coming to terms with their subjectivity rather than endorsing their previously established identities. As a result, facing otherness becomes more synonymous with negotiation and difference, than with reinforced sameness. With regards to "A Souvenir of Japan", as the feminisation of the male lover and the masculinisation of the female narrator suggest, the impression of a specular reflection of traditional male travel writing is conveyed by the fact that the typical structuring of gender roles is reversed:

He, too, had the inhuman sweetness of a child born from something other than a mother, a passive, cruel sweetness I did not immediately understand, for it was that of the repressed masochism which, in my country, is usually confined to women. [...] his elegant body which has such curious, androgynous grace with [...] unusually well-developed pectorals. There was a subtle lack of alignment between face and body and he seemed almost goblin, as if he might have borrowed another person's head, as Japanese goblins do, in order to perform some devious trick (Carter 1996: 30).

From this short sample, in addition to the feminisation of the lover, the exoticism of the description clearly surfaces, as the man is compared with a supernatural, magical being coming from oriental folklore. Both the role reversals and the projection of oriental female images onto the male are thus stressed. With regard to the female protagonist, her maleness is expressed at first in physical terms; while doing shopping in a department store she notices some female dresses and remarks: "When I looked at them, I felt as gross as Glumdalclitch. I wore men's sandals because they were the only kind that fitted me and, even so, I had to take the largest size" (*ibid.*: 31). Most notably this observation is also aimed at distancing the narrator from Japanese women, as if to make it clear that she should not be treated like one. Accordingly, later on she confirms her empowered femininity by complaining: "once I was at home, however, it was as if I occupied the inner room and he did not expect me to go out of it, although it was I who paid the rent" (*ibid.*). These words also highlight the – economical – power she can actually exercise, which would have been startling in her own country, but is not in Japan in as much as she is a Westerner.

Interestingly enough, beyond the surface role-reversal a profound struggle is hidden: that of the quest for a way to articulate identity by looking at one's reflection in the eyes of the other. In this last sense, the mirror metaphor stands for "the mechanism of producing identities by supplying selves with images with which to identify". The specular gaze, does not encapsulate the self "in the immanence of a perfect, self-reflexive act", but "severs the self from itself, thereby initiating the endless



journey of self-searching" (Mydia 2008: 63). This is no more a truth-telling mirror, a surface that reflects one's true appearances, what was not yet known by the subject. Rather, looking in the other's mirror-like eyes entails searching for themselves inside the other, trying to find some traces of one's identity in the relation with the other, only to find out a different kind of alienation. The female protagonist, indeed, is invariably taken by surprise by the fact that she cannot find an essence of herself in such a reflection, but on the contrary discovers ever more fragments, at times impossible to match, by which her complex and dynamic self is composed: "But the most moving of these images were the intangible reflections of ourselves we saw in one another's eyes, reflections of nothing but appearances, in a city dedicated to seeming, and, try as we might to possess the essence of each other's otherness, we would inevitably fail" (Carter 1982: 34)⁷. In Japan the European woman feels "absolutely the mysterious other", "a kind of phoenix, a fabulous beast", an "outlandish jewel", being found by her lover "inexpressibly exotic" for her physical appearance and unusual behaviour. At the same time though she must admit that she has been pretending all along: "But I often felt like a female impersonator" (*ibid.*: 31). Looking at her reflection into the other's eyes she seems to wonder whether either her idea of herself is wrong, or that of her Japanese lover is. The answer would be: neither. Her pretending is actually a staging of identities that she wears from time to time, trying on different ones in order to choose the most suitable. The already referred to purposeful enactment of female performances culminates in "Flesh and the Mirror", where the narrator admits in a rather solipsistic fashion that she is in fact the creator of what surrounds her, not to mention of her identity: "As I moved [...] as though I was the creator of all and of myself, too, [...] walking through the city in the third person singular, my own heroine, as though the world stretched out of my eye" (*ibid.*: 68). Yet, as she is confronted with the foreign city landscape, she contradicts herself: "The stranger, the foreigner, thinks he is in control; but he has been precipitated into somebody else's dream" (*ibid.*). The foreign city, a looking glass itself, splits the narrator's self with a huge pair of alien eyes, and she must re-gain control by carefully "pulling the strings" of her puppet. Wandering through the unknown city streets the woman experiences the same estrangement of mirroring into her lover's eyes, because "corpi e luoghi si istituiscono come identità speculari, e attraverso le medesime interazioni con lo spazio fisico e sociale" (Nicoletta Vallorani 2003: 41). Identity is thus constrained within the boundaries of bodies and places, always trying to find a surface

⁷The metaphor of seeking one's own identity in the eyes of the other is even literalised in "Flesh and the Mirror", where the narrator fantasises about dissecting her lover's body in order to discover something unknown inside him. Unfortunately, the outcome is rather unsatisfying, since she must admit that "I only discovered what I was able to recognise already, from past experience, inside him" (Carter 1982: 72).



which would reflect something new, something different where to start in order to begin a further stage of its endless journey.

Hence the revelation that emerges from Carter's Japanese writings, regardless of the imperialist gaze she often, unwittingly casts on Japanese culture, is the performative, ever changing nature of identity. The self is compelled to decide whether to be part of the established order, thus being confined in and constricted by its rigid social rules, or to question it, thus becoming aware of such plurality and potential for change that it is impossible to come back to one's homeland pretending that the encounter with the other has not occurred at all. What Carter returns home with is not simply an exotic account of her journey, nor is it a fascinating literary product inspired by some exotic beauty seduced and then abandoned and forgotten. She brings home a brand new set of images that help her characterise and problematize female identity representations, a whole new way of looking at cultural phenomena and otherness, as otherness has become a looking glass projecting a *mediated* reflection, adding to the simple reflection of physical appearances the impressions conveyed by having been in a relationship of reciprocity with the other.

Ultimately, Carter's representation of the specular gaze becomes a true "cognitive act". The mirror, indeed, be it the looking glass or the other's gaze, becomes "a means of acquiring self-knowledge", of "building up a sense of identity" (Mydia 2008: 60). However, when one is made to face cultural difference it also turns into the medium whereby the subject is forced to acknowledge that otherness is to be accepted as part of the self and must be reconciled with it. "Cultural mediation brings an element of otherness, which infringes upon the sameness of the specular gaze [...] We come to ourselves only [...] by claiming otherness as part of who we are" (*ibid.*: 61). This is precisely what Carter's narrators become aware of at the end of their journey, and perhaps experiencing alienation through mirroring one's self into otherness is the *essence* of endlessly re-inventing the self and finally being able to "experience[...] experience as experience".

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