“Reading the Visual Text: Tawada Yōko’s *Tabi wo suru hadaka no me*”

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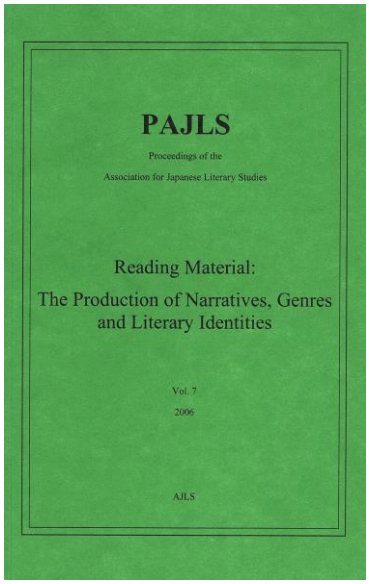

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Reading the Visual Text:

Tawada Yōko's *Tabi wo suru hadaka no me*

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Subjectivity and identity, especially as filtered through travel and language, are among the primary issues in Tawada Yōko's fiction. Her most recent novel (2004), *Tabi wo suru hadaka no me*, marks a different spin on her literary experiments in the way that visuality is foregrounded, apparent in the title as well as the structure of the work. The title, which I translate as "the traveling, naked eye" directs our attention toward the eye: the eye of the camera and the eye of the narrator. Eyes and vision are central. They are, at times, disembodied while at other times stubbornly embodied; the primary eyes are those of the narrator, a young Vietnamese woman traveling through Europe, but primarily Paris. Tawada's texts have often been concerned with travel and crossings of borders, be they national, linguistic, or cultural. I want to suggest that *Tabi wo suru* extends these concerns and that the travel undertaken here is also of a text reaching from the terrain of print and across to the realm of the optic. Border crossings take place at multiple levels. For one, this novel was published, simultaneously, in two languages—not, ostensibly, as a translation from German or Japanese into Japanese or German. At this level, it is a continuation of concerns of Tawada's, that of border crossings, of language. This novel also explores representations of the visual in the language of the textual. But also, and this is the focus of this paper, I am suggesting that this is a novel that desires (to be a) film. In result, Tawada becomes (as Peggy Phelan has said of Samuel Beckett) "both bilingual and biocular."[1]

What might it mean to suggest that a print text is structured as visual? I am prompted to ask this question for a number of reasons. In the context of this text that presents a spectral vision, it negotiates the landscape in ways neither like the traditional textual novel nor the spectral film, hence, "biocular." Mary Ann Caws instructs us to read texts visually (and Mieke Bal points to ways that we can read images literarily). Should we read a text differently if it is presented as a film? The related questions, and these are part of a larger project, concerns the reading of texts in a visual/spectral mode. It is one thing to read the city as a text (a la Barthes/Ai/ Komori); it is another to read a text visually (as Bal does of Proust). The material of this text is its desire to be visual. This novel provides a new lens for visualizing the written text, and brings a different focus to questions of subjectivity.

I am prompted to raise such questions in response to this novel because the narrator wishes to be a film actress; to that end, she processes the world like a camera. And so, the

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[1] Peggy Phelan, "Lessons in Blindness from Samuel Beckett," *PMLA*. 119, 2004: 1285.

information that we receive, as readers, is also processed visually, filmicly. Also, as the novel progresses, the eyes in her head that are viewing film on cinema screens begin to function as the camera lens that records images. She comes to feel like a camera, a housing for a viewing lens, and a temporary storage device for images. (These hints at a cyborg, machinic experience are intentional. There is something cyber-punk about this novel and its articulation for the borders of body, information, and identity.) Further, this narrator's identity comes to depend on film characters. She grows into, or from, an amalgam of roles performed on the movie screen by Catherine Deneuve across her career. In this way, the material body of Catherine Deneuve is also emptied of its specificity and emerges as a housing, perhaps, or a placeholder, a cipher, a database, for identities associated with the actions of an actress named Catherine Deneuve. The narrator of the novel eventually speaks to Catherine Deneuve, albeit on screen; speaks, that is, to the amalgam of characters played by the actress. Thus, how identity is produced is of central concern to this work, even as it questions the possibility of identity; stated another way, a central question here may be how far can identity be deferred. Which may also be to say, the narrator pulls possibilities for subjectivity from the web of possibilities around her. The potentiality of the world spreads out before her like a web, like the fissures in crack-glazed pottery, which is to say on the order of a rhizome or a database.

Questions about the body and its relation to subjectivity and the world at large have been consistent concerns through Tawada's writing, which tend to the non-representational, fantastic, and surreal. The parameters of identity formation, highlighted in the crossing of linguistic and political borders, are recurring themes in her work. Disturbances to bodies, how or where a subject exists, when the subject travels, how borders are encountered and preserved, are significant parts of this fictional world. Her 2002 novel 容疑者の夜行列車, (*The Fugitive's Night-Time Railway*), for example, is entirely about travel yet not at all about destinations. All the traveling takes one nowhere, and the subject morphs into others. The movement is the point. These are all experiments in subjectivity.

Tabi wo suru hadaka no me follows a Vietnamese woman invited to the former East Germany to speak "from experience, of those sacrificed to US imperialism." A number of twists take this young woman from East Germany to West Germany and then to Paris (without any of the proper papers, all via long-distance trains that travel long distances at night, peopled with spectral characters). But the real traveler in *Hadaka no me* is the wandering eye, conflated with the movie camera, understood as the eye of the Vietnamese woman. Each chapter of this novel is rooted in a Catherine Deneuve film, and the materially-absent Catherine Deneuve is a central character in the narrative, and the characters that she plays across decades of film form a web, a database, for possibilities concerning that character. Visuality in print: as the title suggests, the novel is less about the traveler and more about the eye of that traveler. We are led to expect that the narrator is not so much traveling as housing the eye that travels, a disembodied eye, a mechanized camera eye, for seeing the world. The resulting identity is formed from the haphazard possibilities spread across place and time. How is subjectivity constituted? This work is attentive to the ways this question is answered visually which here means technologically.

Hadaka no me is a work in which imagery of the body and metaphors of eyes abound, in particular, of the eye as camera. But vision is blinkered and impeded throughout. Further, given the amorphous nature of the narrator, her tentative place in the world, and the insubstantiality of her body, other questions related to visuality and visual fields come to the forefront. "The Naked

Eye that Travels": the focus is clearly on the optics, and film is an immediate referent. Eyes and cameras, but the conflation of narrated subject with film roles that are seen is also constitutive, (and seen only, for they are projected in a language the narrator does not know. That is, the Vietnamese woman watches French films in France, with little access to the language of the dialogue.) In result, one of the stories that we, as readers, get is the one she constructs entirely from these visual forms. That the narrative is filtered through vision is always before us. This prompts another set of questions: "Is the eye the mechanism that brings information into the body?" "Is the body a housing, a mechanic home for the eye/camera?" the visual information is the topic, and the raw material, for the novel. At what point is the eye "simply" a technology for seeing, a lens that happens to be mounted on a flesh and blood body? Or, perhaps relatedly, at what point is film a machine that makes us see, or view, in a certain way—so many frames per second, for example, in a parallel to the way the book is a machine for reading, that makes us read, as Kōno Kensuke has suggested? And these questions move beyond those of visuality and seeing, and guide us towards thinking about the body/machine, and on to the body without organs of Deleuze, and also, via Deleuze, to thinking about the rhizomatic web-like organization of reality.

As a way to establish some background, I have come to these concerns through the work of the thinkers such as Jonathan Crary and his writings about the Camera Obscura and the development of visual technologies, and Rosalind Krauss' writing on a Modernist vision, and the work of Martin Jay. Among the points they make is that the manner in which seeing, the act of seeing, has been disassociated from the eye over the last centuries. Sight has been taken from the eye. That is, it is possible to "see" things without that information being processed through our eyes. An eye is not requisite for sight, for one can "see" with the brain only, as when the eyes are closed in sleep, or when properly placed electrodes, or drugs, can induce visions. Paul Virilio ties the connection to technology even tighter when he maps "eyeless vision" in the context of military applications, referring to the military technology that allows for on-board vision, a sight machine, that can guide a missile remotely, far from an actual location.[2] The importance of this for the histories of sight is the corresponding sense of dissolution of the subject, the ever-increasing loss of coherence of the subject. This is a related question that is asked with some insistence by this novel: do I need a body to exist, to be a subject; further, do I even need an identity or a subjectivity?

These musings about sight--what do we see when we see?--also provide an off-ramp to discussions of the Figure and the figural. The concept of the "figure" is an immensely complicated one, for the figure may be the object of representation, the thing being described or represented; it can also refer to the networks and systems that make representation possible, as D.N. Rodowick, reading Lyotard, suggests. A sentence in Rodowick, marks a way to think about this: "The scandal of the figure is that it is both inside and outside of discourse."[3] This sentence makes me think of Klein bottles and Escher drawings, where inside transforms into outside, a seamless union. Sight seems to work this way in this novel of Tawada's, as does subjectivity in both this and the one previous: a mobius strip where end circles back to seamlessly be beginning,

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[2] Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: the Logistics of Vision* (New York: Verso, 1989), p. 2.

[3] David Norman Rodowick, *Reading the Figural, or, Philosophy After The New Media* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), p. 9.

where a material person named Catherine Deneuve circles back to be nothing more than the sum of the characters that that person (named Catherine Deneuve) has performed on the screen; and that circle constitutes a character for the narrator who, watching Deneuve as a character in a series of films comes to be watching herself as a character in a film narrative. The narrator herself is, at the end, the narrated character of a particular film. Thus, continues Rodowick, "Language is no longer a homogeneous space marked by linguistic unities." Inside is outside simultaneously (and vice versa); the contours of action are visualized as a film and acted in as that film, simultaneously. A twist in the plot reveals that the characters have doubled back on themselves.

Which suggests questions of method, of competing, perhaps, or simply tandem discursive systems. It bumps against issues that we find in Deleuze writing on Francis Bacon, in *The Logic of Sense*. Deleuze has written much about visual art, for example, but wrote as a philosopher, in the realm of concepts (the creation or invention of which was a definition of philosophy that Deleuze and Guattari suggested.) As Daniel Smith, the translator of *The Logic of Sensation* states it, Deleuze's "approach reflects the tension between percept and concept: how does one talk in one medium (concepts) about the practices of another (precepts)?"[4] In these concepts, Smith paraphrases from Deleuze, philosophers think in terms of concepts whereas artists are creating "sensible aggregates" and are working with percepts and affects rather than concepts. Thus, as Smith phrases it "Painters think in terms of lines and colors, just as musicians think in sounds, filmmakers think in images, writers think in words, and so on."[5] Or Deleuze, in the Preface to the French edition of *Cinema 1: the Movement-Image*: "The great directors of the cinema may be compared, in our view, not merely with painters, architects and musicians, but also with thinkers. They think with movement-images and time-images instead of concepts" which I take to point to, among other things, ways of articulation in different language systems.[6] The issue before us remains the same: how to talk in one language or discourse about a figure or an object that has been articulated/visualized in another.

There is a commonsensical question at this point: If one were writing philosophy in the language of visual arts, why not paint a picture? Or, if writing a novel that wants to be a film, why not make a movie? Issues of intentionality aside, the partial answer supplied by Deleuze is that there are concepts specific to one discourse—i.e. philosophy—that provide the tools to analyze the work being done by another—in Deleuze's case, the visual art of Francis Bacon, or the concepts of movement in time as articulated by cinema. [7]

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[4] Daniel W. Smith, "Translator's introduction," in *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, ed. Gilles Deleuze (Minneapolis: the University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. xi.

[5] Ibid, p. viii.

[6] Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), p. xiv.

[7] Perhaps these questions are ill-formed: another project could trace the history of the two terms, to show that the division of the visual from the textual is false. e.g. Mieke Bal: "It is not the novel that is obsolete but the idea that narrative and imagery are essentially different cultural expressions." Bal, Mieke, "Figuration," PMLA (119:5) 2004, p. 1291.

As I ask the questions via the language of sight and vision, and of issues such as the bilingual or biocular, what does this do for a text? How is visuality (here film) represented in a textual medium (here fiction). If asking the questions in the context of Tawada's writing, an imagery of a contact zone between languages seems among the most fruitful. Much of Tawada's writing has been, arguably, focused on language and language use, or, the ramifications for and tensions on a subjectivity living in the space between. This has often been, in the early writings, the space between languages, but also between gender identities and embodied/disembodied identities. She has suggested multi-faceted porous imaginings. For example, as she writes in *Exophony*, "I seem to be searching for the poetic ravine that opens between languages; that is where I want to go."[8] I find that Tawada has moved away from the strict binaries that are necessary for such an image, yet the sense of a subjectivity and identity being worked out in undefined spaces remains strong in her writing. Thus, these recent novels are much less concerned with language navigation and much more about navigating discourses, and here that of a print medium—the novel—in a visual world—film.

The opening paragraphs *Tabi wo suru Hadaka no me* assert these associations, taking its imagery from the 1965 Roman Polanski film "Repulsion." The film opens with a staring eye in close-up, which itself seems something of an homage to Man Ray's modernist photographs. I quote from the novel:

> The eye projected on the screen is part of a body now unconscious. Nothing is visible. All power of vision has been taken over by the camera. The line of vision of the nameless camera laps up the floor like a detective whose grammar has disappeared. A doll, then another doll, a stuffed animal, a flower vase, a cactus, a television, an electric cord, a basket, the corner of a sofa, the corner of the carpet, cookie crumbs, sugar cubes, an old family picture. In the picture is a young girl staring angrily at nothing, off at an angle, into space. The eyes of that girl are gradually displayed on the screen with greater and greater detail until they become like a stain on the paper.[9]

We do not yet have a character, only an eye—an eye that becomes textual to the extent that it is like an ink stain on paper, multiple eyes, some mechanical. And a detective picking up bits and pieces, but none unified by a grammar. Here is the database, the images from a film.

This is the eye searching to unify elements, the work of the detective, but here, a detective without grammar. The spaces delimited by these eyes introduce a space, a transcendental space that is not a virtual reality—a representation mediated by technology—but one that parallels the reality of the virtual, from rhizomes to webs to databases. I turn for help in Zizek writing about Deleuze:

> The proper transcendental space is the virtual space of the multiple singular

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[8] Yoko Tawada, *Ekusophoni: bogo no soto e deru tabi* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2003), p. 32.

[9] Yoko Tawada, *Tabi wo suru hadaka no me* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 2004), p. 8.

> potentialities, of "pure" impersonal singular gestures, affects, and perceptions that are not yet the gestures-affects-perceptions of a preexisting, stable, and self-identical object. This is why, for example, Deleuze celebrates the art of cinema: it "liberates" gaze, images, movements, and, ultimately, time itself from their attribution to a given subject. When we watch a movie, we see the flow of images from the perspective of the "mechanical" camera, a perspective that does not belong to any subject; through the art of montage, movement is also abstracted or liberated from its attribution to a given subject or object—it is an impersonal movement that is only secondary, afterward, attributed to some positive entities.[10]

Liberation is a key concept in Zizek's reading: the rift between the eye and the corporeal subject. As these first lines suggest, the flow of time, the organization of material objects, the flow of the "real," etc., are not organized by a human protagonist. Rather, it is all organized "from the perspective of the mechanical camera," like this narrator, a human subject like the machine. There is a line explicit later in the work where the narrator reports the sense that she sees all like a camera, and feels like a camera, turned on but with no film loaded.

Likewise, this protagonist is organized according to the technology of the camera. The world she relates to us is mediated by the camera lens. Any hint of a stable identity is taken from the camera lens; this narrator is not one, but is multiple. She is no more stable than the Catherine Deneuve character she comes to know via films—a body seems to link all these film characters, but time figures in, while names, personality characteristics, languages and citizenships change throughout-- the Deneuve of 1965 is not the Deneuve of 1999; the woman of "Repulsion" is worlds, and languages, away from the woman of "Est/Oest." Likewise, names, personality characteristics, languages, and citizenships threaten to change for the narrator as well, whose name remains a mystery, and eventually becomes a mystery to herself, along with identities and passports. In the same manner that her identities come to be conflated, so too do the positions of viewer and viewed. By the end, the narrator has transformed into the character Deneuve plays in Lars Van Trier's film "Dancer in the Dark." As readers we know that this particular film establishes the background for the final chapter, but in the novel, it is the Deneuve character that has become blind rather than the narrator, now known as Selma (played by Björk in Van Trier's film). It seems that the narrator, long desiring to become Deneuve, has in fact done so by the final chapter, and this reverses the anticipated order established by the film itself. In the novel, it is the older woman who is blind, rather than the young woman named Selma, as is the case in the film. The older blind woman then relates:

> The fact is, what we call sight is like a fissure and it's not like we can see the other side via that fissure, but that sight itself is that fissure. Which means that we can't see what is over there. Being sightless is fine.[11]

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[10] Slavoj Zizek, *Organs Without Bodies*: *Deleuze and Consequences* (New York : Routledge, 2004), p. 19-20.

[11] *Tabi wo suru hadaka no me*, pp. 265-266.

In consequence, she goes on, when people find that she is blind, they want to have her listen to their stories. "But," she goes on, "I have no interest in the stories of other people's lives. It is music, no, it is static, that I enjoy."

To conceive of sight as a fissure, a ravine, a space between, resonates with imagery that Tawada has long employed, as noted above, when speaking about living within language. It also resonates with Zizek's suggestion of a rift between the eye and the corporeal subject. But there are a number of ways that this ending turns the novelistic structure on its head, and contravenes the direction of her image system. It is as though the currency in the economy of sight and vision we have been given thus far, in this textual world, has suddenly been reversed. What is now foregrounded is the aural. Sight is discounted for sound. Blindness is substituted for static. Indeed, the above conversation is preceded by comments on the Soviet-era, concrete-block, apartment building where this is staged, a building riddled with holes and gaps that whistles and moans in the wind. Tawada's fiction often ends with abrupt shifts: Tawada enjoys pushing across borders, and does so here as well. The shift occurs here when we find, in a novel that has been constructed on questions of visuality—film vis-a-vis narrative, for example—a sudden insistence on the aural. Stories are now told, and heard, rather than seen on screens, or on pages. Further, the eyes of the narrator that we have come to rely on have been rendered blind, and sound and hearing are offered as the primary sense.

This novel, which has suggested it would like to be a film, suggests by the conclusion that the eyes, the lens, are not requisite for the seeing. "Seeing" the action in a fictional narrative is not at all like "seeing" the action on a screen. Words are necessary for the former, but not the eyes. Vision is a rift, it may even be a hindrance. The question "how is a novel not like a film?" is being rephrased and Tawada seems to suggest that the kind of sight necessary is entirely different. For even though the Vietnamese woman organizing the action is plagued by identity and passport complications, the real issue is the stability/multiplicity of the self in a visual/cinematic world. The narrator possesses a self no more stable, coherent, or material than does a Deneuve known only across a career of film roles. What exists are hints and roles, images and recordings. The eye sees and mediates. Time is stopped. Networks are formed. These are not linear binaries between one language and another, or travel from one city to another, as we have come to expect in Tawada's work. All that remains is the invisible camera functioning inside a woman's head, this individual as camera. The final chapter suggests that the mechanisms of sight and sound—the camera eye, the receptor for sound—can move from person to person. The technology, that is, the activity, gains primacy over the housing—the body in which it is contained. Sight is untrustworthy and even, surprisingly, blinded by the end.

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