Reading Chinese Painting: Antonello Trombadori's China and the Limits of the Contemporary

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> "La Cina ci cade addosso a valanga con un odore amaro di radici che viene dagli orti lungo la stradale, centinaia e centinaia d'uomini che vanno su e giù come formiche, i suoi cieli (poiché non c'è un solo cielo, ma due o tre che si sovrappongono e si fondono) di fumo, di velo e di minerale, che non sai se volino via o siano astratti ed immobili, con le sue strade di polvere, con le sue grida acute e smorzate dentro un felpato silenzio. E' tanta la Cina! Lì per lì per farti coraggio dici tra te e te e gli altri: è come l'Italia, sembra l'Emilia, sembra Napoli. Non è affatto vero, è assai diversa, difficile a comprendere, a penetrare." Antonello Trombadori

> "The contemporary is the one whose eyes are struck by the beam of darkness that comes from his own time." Giorgio Agamben

Antonello Trombadori (1917-1993) was the son of a well-known artist, a young partisan of the Italian Resistance, as well as an accomplished expert in the fields of art, cinema, and literature. Moreover, he was the trustworthy art-adviser and collaborator of Palmiro Togliatti. In 1955, he took part in the first official visit of Italian intellectuals to the recently founded People's Republic of China, which was still to obtain full recognition from several countries, including Italy.

Trombadori's involvement in this trip reveals his double nature of intellectual and political militant. The diary he kept is not only meant as a memorandum for the party, but also as an attempt to answer his own personal questions. The result, his *Quaderno cinese 1955* (*Chinese notebook 1955*), can therefore be seen as a mediation, typical of the organic intellectual, between himself and the world, and as an attempt to direct the political debate towards the desired direction.

In this article, we wish to discuss the *Chinese Notebook*. However, our objective is not to offer a full account of Trombadori's diary. Rather, we wish to use specific passages as a starting point for a wider discussion on Orientalism and the limits of the intellectual vis-à-vis the dominant ideology. We therefore offer a rather free and personal interpretation of this work. As a consequence, this essay should not be read as a mere criticism of Trombadori's views. On the contrary, we wish to highlight the complexity of his thought which cannot be reduced to a mere expression of Orientalism.

In order to do so, we will first briefly outline the historical background against which Trombadori's diary must be read. We will then take a closer look at one particular passage of the diary in which Trombadori expresses, in more explicit terms, his views on Chinese culture and art. We will draw on the theoretical framework of Chinese calligraphy and painting in order to bring to light the epistemological conflict which shapes his reading of Chinese culture. In conclusion, we will discuss in what ways this conflict constitutes a fundamental component of the condition of the contemporary thinker. We are interested in this aspect and in the conflict between the individual voice and the environment, the single person and the ideology that surrounds him or her, and in the dialectical relationship between established knowledge and direct experience.

Trombadori's China[1]

Between 1954 and 1955, a large number of European intellectuals, artists, and political personalities visited China. The delegation of which Trombadori was a member, organized by

[1] This short historical introduction is thoroughly based on the recent article *Pechino 1955. Intellettuali e politici europei alla scoperta della cina di Mao (2010)*, by Luca Polese Remaggi. The essay is a detailed account of European attitudes, Italian and French in particular, towards Maoist China.

the *Centro per le Relazioni Economiche e Culturali con la Cina*, was led by Pietro Calamandrei in 1955. Several important Italian personalities took part in the trip, such as Norberto Bobbio, Cesare Musatti, Carlo Cassola, and Franco Fortini. The Italian delegation observed a strict schedule, visiting, over a few weeks, numerous official institutions.

> For many of them, the trip to China had the taste of the discovery of a far-away country, largely unknown, a country that at last awakened, rescuing hundreds of millions of men from a destiny of misery and backwardness. A peaceful wind was blowing from the Orient, and infused in the visitors the hope that the world, worn out from the tensions of the Cold War, would finally concern itself with social politics, and with the national independence of the peoples (Polese Remaggi 2010: 56).

Among these intellectuals, the predominant judgement towards the Chinese regime focused on its peacefulness and progressiveness.[2] The main reason why so many European intellectuals were in favour of the regime, with the important exception of the British, was that they largely shared an anti-fascist perspective and a conviction that anticommunism was essentially an excuse to marginalize the worker's movement. They were in search of a "third way," between the "democracy without revolution of the West and the revolution without democracy of Middle-Eastern Europe" (2010: 57). After the Bandung Conference, China was going through a process of decolonization, which seemed to offer the opportunity for a new chapter, for a political struggle that

> did not extinguish itself in the conflict between democracy and dictatorship, but that would instead recover progressive forces against backwardness and conservativeness. In sum, it appeared as if democracy and revolution could stand again side by side (2010: 58).

The Bandung Conference inaugurated a period of renewed national security and strengthened national sovereignty. The European intellectuals, therefore, visited China at a time of relative stability:

> The years between 1953 and 1955 were in fact a sort of parenthesis between two sequences characterized by a strong display of state violence: those that Alain Roux called the years of the 'red terror' (49-52) and those of the Great Leap Forward, which caused the death of millions by starvation (2010: 60).

Once they returned home, many of the visitors wrote books, essays, and articles on their experience of China[3]. Most analyses of these accounts, however, have focused on a standard understanding of politics and ideology, thus overlooking the Orientalist perspective. Although Orientalism is a political issue, we would like to observe that these intellectuals brought to China a set of beliefs, images, and expectations that only partially derived from their political ideas. They certainly arrived in China with a baggage of established knowledge coming from

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[2] Polese Remaggi argues that the process of reform and collectivization went hand in hand with a campaign of repression. European intellectuals were more or less distrustful of Chinese techniques of hospitality, based on a combination of cordiality and secrecy. Numerous intellectuals were aware of the fact that appearance did not necessarily correspond to reality and that, for instance, the institutions they visited were not randomly chosen: "This tension between 'the country of the fake facades' and land of utopia is substantially one of the most interesting characteristics of the accounts left to us by the visitors of China of the mid-fifties" (2010: 64).

[3] For example : Jean Paul Sartre, "La Chine que j'ai vue," *France-Observateur*, December 1-8 1955; Simone de Beauvoir, *La longue marche: Essai sur la Chine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957); articles of Paul Ricoeur and Rene Dumont in the magazine *Esprit*, 1956; Carlo Cassola, *Viaggio in Cina* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1956).

European traditions of sinology and from centuries of European discourses about the Orient. What is not so obvious is how they reacted once they came in contact with this complex and relatively unknown culture. Although they were constantly referring what they saw to what they knew, and to an already existing political framework, they also were temporarily unsettled by direct experience.

We wish to analyse Trombadori`s short article *La voce dell' uomo* (*The Man's Voice*) published as appendix to the *Quaderno cinese*[4]. The short essay includes two passages that, in our opinion, are of particular interest, as they concisely and eloquently express Trombadori's views on China, as well as Chinese culture and art. The first excerpt focuses on Chinese painting. The reading of this passage generated numerous reflections that constitute the main body of this paper. The second passage will provide us with the opportunity for some concluding remarks.

Reading Chinese Painting

> Un mio amico pittore stenta a ritrovarsi nel profondo e complicato groviglio della pittura cinese. Egli è portato a paragonare le grandi imprese di Michelangelo con quei sottili meandri di segni, e quei colori resi impalpabili come il filo del baco da seta e conclude "Questa non è pittura, è decorazione, calligrafia." Non ha tutti i torti, ma uno sì: di non disporsi a intendere che anche quella è pittura. E' la pittura del popolo cinese nelle condizioni della lunga feudalita' e, come tale, un aspetto, un momento della storia universale della pittura che noi abbiamo il torto di identificare sempre e soltanto con quella Europea. Bisogna avere il coraggio di ammettere che anche questo è un residuo razzista (Trombadori 1956: 101).

> My friend, a painter, has difficulty orienting himself in the deep and complex labyrinth of Chinese art. He tends to compare the great works by Michelangelo with those subtle twists and turns of signs, with those colours as intangible as silk, and concludes: "this is not painting, but decoration, calligraphy." He is not completely wrong, except for one aspect: he cannot conceive that in fact, this too is painting. It is the painting of the Chinese people under the conditions of long feudality and, as such, an aspect or stage of the universal history of painting, which we mistakenly and invariably identify with that of Europe. We must have the courage of admitting that this too is a residue of racism (Trombadori 1956: 101). [5]

In these thoughts on Chinese art, the conflict between Trombadori's personal reading and the ideological one is particularly visible. On the one hand, he reveals a strong independent voice, realizing that European aesthetics cannot be universally applicable in every context. In taking distance from his friend's opinion, he wishes to detach himself from the contemporary view, from a purely Orientalist perspective. Therefore, Trombadori tries to transcend the Western categories according to which calligraphy belongs to decorative art and "real" art lies somewhere else.

However, he does not remain with this first intuition, but uses an "objective" grid which prevents him from understanding Chinese painting a little more in depth. He cannot but insert his personal interpretation into the wider framework of Marxist ideology. By treating Chinese painting as a stage within the universal history of artistic development, he inscribes it in an

[4] The article was originally published in the supplement of the literary magazine "Il Ponte" in April 1956.

[5] The translation of all passages and quotes from the *Diario cinese* are ours.

eminently European historical and cultural perspective, fixing it both in time and space, and ultimately reducing its meaning to an artifact of feudalism within the meta-narrative of world history. As a consequence, Chinese paintings, however advanced in their technique, become an instance of historical backwardness.[6]

At this point, we would like to take a detour and see how a better understanding of Chinese visual arts, or at least one view of it, may help us (and might have helped Trombadori) clarify the dynamics behind the very tension underlying Trombadori's double reading of Chinese art. We wish to argue that by taking a closer look at the theoretical and cosmological frameworks of Chinese art, we might be able to better understand how Trombadori attempted to transcend the limitations of his time and of the Orientalist discourse, but ultimately did not manage to do so entirely.

To start on common grounds, we may argue that all representation of reality, however abstract it may be, partakes in a reenactment of cosmogony. But in China, the creation of the universe is perceived as an internal process of differentiation rather than an external act of creation.[7] In this context, to draw a line is to recreate the universe by dividing the harmonized One of the origins (the blank sheet), thus recreating the diversity of all things (*wanwu* 萬物).[8]

Interestingly enough, not only does the written/drawn stroke reenacts this process of creation, but Chinese characters – which combine strokes into meaning – may be seen as dividing agents in themselves; they reproduce the categories (*lei* 類) of things by following their internal lines or structures (*li* 理). Within this framework, one manages to "understand" or "interpret" (*jie* 解) by "dissecting" or "dismantling" (connotations also included in the meaning of *jie*).[9] Considering this, it is not surprising that, according to John Lagerway, Chinese characters "do not represent something outside of themselves; they are disclosures of patterns (*wen* 文), revelations of structures (*li*)" (1985: 304).[10]

At this point, the discrimination between writing and drawing appears vague at best. That is to say, all visual representation (*tu* 圖) having the line or stroke as basic unit – whether it is called painting, calligraphy, writing, map, cosmological diagram, etc. – partakes in the reenactment of cosmogony. Therefore, to draw a line, whether it is within the context of writing, drawing or painting, is to delimitate, separate and thus create.

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[6] According to Trombadori, Chinese painting is a "technically superior painting," "a subtle and intense painting, but always and only reproductive" (1999: 29). In the above thoughts on Chinese art, although Trombadori acknowledges the aesthetic accomplishment of Chinese painting, he equates its alleged reproductive character with backwardness, applying the stages of the development of European painting (from reproductive to abstract) to the Chinese tradition.

[7] Laozi (老子) summarized this process in the following terms: "The Dao produced One; One produced Two; Two produced Three; Three produced All things" (Legge 1959: 85).

[8] "For Chinese painters, the brushstroke truly represents the process whereby man partakes of the act of creation. It is the link between man and the universe. It is a line that seeks to capture the breath of things" (Cheng and Tadjadod 1990: 24).

[9] In Chinese, the graph *jie* (解) bears a resemblance to the English verb "to dissect" in meaning both "to dismantle" and "to understand," "to interpret." Its original meaning, as recorded in the *Shuowen Jiezi* (說文解字), is "to dismantle; to use a blade to separate ox and horn" (Xu and Tang 2002: 611). Our translation.

[10] The patterns and structures mentioned here are not fixed substances; they transform themselves through time.

Shitao (石濤 1642-1707), a well-known painter of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), clearly understood this specific power of the stroke. His theory of painting revolves around the notion of the "One-Stoke," or *yihua* (一畫). According to this notion, a single stroke possesses the capacity to represent the whole universe: "each [One-Stroke] contains within itself the potential to describe all things" (Shitao 1989: 66); it is "the root of all images" (Shitao 1989: 61).

Shitao's concept of *yihua* relies not only on the complex meaning of *hua* (畫), which signifies both "to delimitate" and "to draw," as well as both "a painting" and "a stroke (in a Chinese character),"[11] but also on the ambivalence of *yi* (一), as meaning both "one" and "Oneness." In the *Shuowen Jiezi* (說文解字), an authoritative dictionary of the second century, *yi* is defined in the following terms: "In the Great Beginning, the *dao* (道) rested upon unity. Thereafter, it separated heaven and earth, and evolved into the ten thousand things" (Xu and Tang 2002: 1). [12] Here, *yi*, defined in cosmogonic terms, is both the smallest and the largest number, both the One of the origins (unity) and the many of creation (the ten thousand things).

In view of this, Shitao's concept of *yihua* can be understood in a rather broad manner. It signifies both the *one-stroke* and the *one-painting* (or calligraphy), as well as both the *holistic-stroke* and the *holistic-painting* (or calligraphy).[13] In the following quote, Shitao clarifies the relationship between the one-stroke and holistic representation, between micro- and macrocosms: "First delineate 'one', then all things can be distinguished. Through the medium of all things, wholeness can be attained" (Shitao 1989: 71). For Shitao, the art of drawing or writing a stroke is both an act of *creation* – the one-stroke represents all things – and *unification* – the holistic stroke merges all things back into their original unity. Thus the one produces the many, and the many are unified back into one.

Moreover, the *process* of writing/drawing a line is itself a form of unification. That is to say, the calligrapher performs an incision on the paper, dividing the One of the origins into all things. Therefore, the stroke left on the paper is not only a record of the process of division and creation, but also a *trait-d'union* between the origins and the present. Thus one who reads calligraphy manages not only to bridge the gap between the calligrapher's time and the contemporary, but also between the origins and now. By writing a single stroke or by reading it, one can partake not only in the act of creation itself, but also in the recovery of the *dao* of the origin.

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[11] See the *Dictionnaire Ricci de caractères chinois*, Paris, Institut Ricci de Paris, 1999, vol. 1, p. 759.

[12] Our translation.

[13] A quick glimpse at the numerous translations of *yihua* into European languages suffice to realise the web of meaning Shitao's concept conveys: the "one-stroke" (Lin Yu-Tang, *The Chinese theory of Art: Translations from the masters of Chinese art*; Jonathan Hay, *Shitao: Painting and Modernity in Early Qing China*); "the single stroke" (Richard Edwards, *The World around the Chinese Artist: Aspects of Realism in Chinese Painting*); the "Holistic Brushstroke" (Richard E. Strassberg, *Enlightening remarks on painting*); the "Oneness of Brushstroke" (Earle Jerome Coleman, *Philosophy of painting by Shih-T'ao: a translation and exposition of his Hua-P'u*); "The Primordial Line" (Chou Ju-hsi, *In Quest of the Primordial Line: the Genesis and Content of Tao-chi's Hua-yu-lu*); "L'unique trait de pinceau" (Pierre Rychmans, *Les propos sur la peinture du moine Citrouille-amère)*; *"Die eine, erste Linie"* (Victoria Contag, *Chinesische Landschaften*); the "single-stroke painting" (Wen Fong, *Returning Home: Tao-Chi's Album of Landscape and Flowers*); "The Great Oneness of Visual Arts" (Wang Hongyin, *Shi Tao: arts of painting and his other works*); and the "All-Inclusive Creative Painting" (Osvald Sirén, *The Chinese on the Art of Painting: Translations and Comments*).

Within this conception of the art of painting and calligraphy, creation *as separation* is not in itself sufficient; it requires the complementary development of what one would be tempted to call its opposite: harmony *as unification*. But in fact both processes echo and answer one another; none is complete without the other. Thus, the act of creation is part of an interplay of natural polarity: from one to many and from many to one.[14]

The Aesthetic Order

This conceptualization of painting radically differs from the European one, in which the act of creation is *ex nihilo*: the painter reproduces cosmogony by creating something (one) out of nothing (zero).[15] Within this tradition, the painter is regarded as an emulator of God. On the other hand, in the Chinese tradition, painters are not perceived as transcending the world of men, but become painters precisely by inserting themselves within the realm of the living. Painters in China do not start from nothing, but rather convey the one and the many which always precede them.

And in this very process of creation as separation and harmony as unification, one does not convey a revealed truth, but rather progressively learns to bridge the gap between the self and the other, between then and now. In short, painting is an act of learning. It is a "philosophy in action, a sacred activity whose purpose is human fulfilment" (Cheng and Tadjadod 1990: 24).

In the process of becoming an artist, one learns as much from the outside world (never conceived as an object only), as from the inner world (never reduced to a simple subject); as much from the past (never conquered by a contemporary truth), as from the present (never substantialized but always conceived within the spectrum of constant change). Moreover, it is because the line links, because it is a *trait-d'union* between the polarities of both inside/outside and past/present that it can generate knowledge.

We must keep in mind that this particular method of learning through painting and calligraphy is part of a wider range of theories of self-cultivation (修身) within the realm of a broadly-defined Confucianism. In *Thinking through Confucius*, David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames call this method the "aesthetic order," and argue that it is particularly prevalent within the thought of Confucius. Opposed to the aesthetic order is a "rational" or "logical" type of order, more prevalent within the Judeo-Christian tradition of thought.

While the logical order "requires that order be achieved by application to a given situation of an antecedent pattern of relatedness" and may be "realized by the imposition or instantiation of principles derived from the Mind of God, or the transcendent laws of nature, or the positive laws of a given society, or from a categorical imperative resident in one's conscience," the aesthetic order "is achieved by the creation of novel patterns," and "is a consequence of the contribution to a given context of a particular aspect, element, or event which both determines and is determined by the context." Thus the "logical order involves the act of closure; aesthetic order is grounded in disclosure" (Hall and Ames 1987: 16).

To put it simply, in the aesthetic order, one adapts the theoretical pattern to the empirical contingency, whereas in the rational order, one interprets contingency within the framework

[14] We must remember that "one" and "many," as well as "creation" and "harmony," always include one another to some extent: the many is always latent within the one, and the one always latent within the many.

[15] Here, we recognize the dichotomy between being and non-being.

of the theoretical pattern. Although every tradition is a combination of both types of order, Hall and Ames argue that the aesthetic order is particularly prevalent within the Chinese tradition.

We will now see how this might help us *dissect* Trombadori's view on Chinese art. In his first attempt at understanding Chinese art, and especially calligraphy, Trombadori reveals a rather "aesthetic" approach to ordering meaning. That is to say, he is prompt to modify his own understanding of what art is in view of the novelty of Chinese painting. Within this first attempt, we initially perceive a movement from the general (theory) to the particular (empirical reality) which aspires to understand Chinese art with one's own set of judgments, and then again a movement from the particular to the general which aims at reformulating the theory in light of a novelty. This process effectively echoes that of a prominently aesthetic order of understanding such as the one described in our analysis of Chinese painting, and which is characterized by a movement from creation to harmony.

But then again, Trombadori uses the meta-narrative of world history to redefine the artwork as an artifact of feudal China, thus effectively subsuming the artwork under an antecedent pattern, a transcendent truth which by itself enables him to grasp the ultimate meaning of the artwork. Trombadori's interpretation is achieved by the "application to a given situation of an antecedent pattern of relatedness." Hall and Ames argue that this particular type of order, the rational one, is closely related to the European tradition of transcendence. In fact, their definition of transcendence might be of great help in understanding Trombadori's second reading of the art of calligraphy:

> a principle, *A* [the meta-narrative of world history], [which] is transcendent with respect to that, *B* [Chinese art], which it serves as principle if the meaning or import of *B* cannot be fully analyzed and explained without recourse to *A*, but the reverse is not true (Hall and Ames 1987: 13).

This rational method of ordering prevents him from deepening his understanding of both Chinese art and the meta-narrative of world history. Everything is explained before it is problematized. As a consequence, this system of truth cannot but prevent one from learning. One of the aspects of the discourse of Orientalism is precisely such a way of explaining a complex of phenomena which escapes the thinker due to its complexity and remoteness by resorting to an all-encompassing, transcendent, and culturally authorized theory.

According to this perspective, the European experience is abstracted and universalized before it is applied to the *other*: Asia cannot but emulate the different phases of European history (antiquity, feudalism, and modernity). One's empirical experience of the cultures of Asia is accommodated within this universal theory and rarely modifies it. It is precisely this system, which enabled so many intellectuals to create a discourse around the particularities of China without any direct experience of it. This mode of thinking, which reached its apex in nineteenth-century Europe, implies that a direct experience of China and knowledge of its languages and histories are superfluous endeavors in one's attempt to understand it. Experience is cast out of the learning process and ignorance becomes knowledge.

The Contemporary Man's Voice

We wish to conclude this essay with the following passage, as we believe that a highly original reading of the contemporary (and past) attitudes towards China takes place in it.[16] Trombadori is curious and at the same time ashamed of his own reaction at the sight of a man in the streets of Beijing. He is unsettled, the frame of reference, the grid of organized knowledge fails him and his intelligence emerges, offering a reading of his experience of China which is current and insightful:

> Uno dei primi giorni della mia permanenza a Pechino mi colpì ad esempio l'osservazione rivoltami da un giovane studente cinese. Io ascoltavo con stupito interesse le grida d'un venditore ambulante lungo una delle strade meno frequentate della città, osservavo le sue vesti assai semplici e di antica foggia come se ne possono trovare in antiche pitture cinesi e anche italiane del medio evo, osservavo il suo modo di camminare sotto il peso d'un ingegnoso strumento a bilancia per potrare la mercanzia. Soprattutto però mi interessava il suono ad intermittenza di quelle grida. Domandai di che si trattasse. Ma certo dovetti porre la domanda in modo tale che troppo traspariva il mio interesse per la cosa eccezionale, per la cosa in se, considerata come strana e stravagante, come "esotica" manifestazione estranea alla normalità cui ero, cui siamo abituati. Il giovane studente osservò: "Si tratta della voce umana, della voce di un uomo." C'era, non v'ha dubbio, nella risposta la rivelazione d'un complesso d'inferiorità, riflesso d'una lunga abitudine dei cinesi a doversi difendere da chi nel loro paese era abituato a viaggiare come in un serraglio o in un museo di cose e di abitudini sopravvissute alla storia, ma c'era anche l'indicazione di un metodo giusto, il richiamo a non perder di vista la comune radice d'ogni cosa che sta nella società: l'uomo (1956: 101).

> One of the first days of my stay in Beijing, I was moved by the observation of a young Chinese student. I was listening, in rapture, to a street-seller shouting along one of the least crowded streets of the city. I was observing his clothes, extremely simple and old-fashioned, reminiscent of Chinese paintings or even Italian paintings of the Middle Ages. I was observing him walking under the weight of a complex object, a libra, used to carry his merchandise. Above all, I was interested in that intermitting shouting. I asked the student what it was, but I must have asked the question in a way that made all too visible my interest for the thing in itself, to me so strange and bizarre, an "exotic" episode, completely foreign to the reality I was accustomed to; we are accustomed to. The young student observed: "It is a human voice, the voice of a man." That answer revealed, without a doubt, an inferiority complex, due to the long-exercised habit Chinese people have of defending themselves from those who travel in their country the way they would in a circus, or in a museum of things and customs that survived history. There was, however, also an admonition not to lose sight of the common root of everything in society: man (1956: 101).

The personal nature of the above comment is an exception to the general tone of the diary, which today presents itself as a strongly connoted work, both politically and ideologically. Trombadori was undoubtedly a man of his time, an intellectual who visited China "on a mission," and brought to it a defined set of ideas and clear expectations. He also proves to

[16] We wish to take this opportunity to remind the reader who might not be familiar with Trombadori's life and work that he was one of the founders, together with Romano Bilenchi and Carlo Salinari, of the weekly political and literary publication "Il Contemporaneo," a highly prestigious and influential publication (1958-1964).

On a more personal note, we would like to thank Francesca Pierini`s father for introducing her to this diary several years ago. Vanni Pierini and Duccio Trombadori, Antonello's son, have been friends for a long time. We were particularly touched when we came across Duccio Trombadori's dedication on the first page of the diary: "A Vanni, un diario strano e molto *inattuale*" ("To Vanni, a very unusual and *untimely* diary").

possess remarkable sensitivity, intuition, and personality. The dialectical relationship that the contemporary thinker has with his or her own time, and the possibility of his or her emancipation from it, constitutes the focus of this last short discussion.

In his introduction to *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said points out that he does not intend to analyze the European hegemonic political and cultural paradigms to show their hidden weakness and inconsistency. On the contrary, he wishes to do so in reason of their strength and persistence:

> One ought never to assume that the structure of Orientalism is nothing more than a structure of lies or of myths which, were the truth about them to be told, would simply blow away. […W]hat we must respect and try to grasp is the sheer knitted-together strength of Orientalist discourse, its very close ties to the enabling socio-economic and political institutions, and its redoubtable durability (1978: 6).

Moreover, this "sheer knitted-together" system cannot be reduced to a merely subjugating power: "My whole point is to say that we can better understand the persistence and the durability of saturating hegemonic systems like culture when we realize that their internal constraints upon writers *were productive*, not unilaterally inhibiting" (1978: 14).

This concept has been an inspiring one throughout this essay. We did not intend to show what was and what was not Orientalist in Trombadori's thought. On the contrary, we meant to discuss his work as the peculiar result of a unique conjuncture. Trombadori's insights are sometimes in harmony with his own expectations, sometimes in collision with them, but they are always productive.

The productivity of the external limits on the subject, as it is well-known, has been recognized and explained, among others, by Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben. Foucault sees the forming of the subject as a process of self-constitution, not in a context of unconditioned freedom, but in one of possible negotiations with power. Individual choices, therefore, imply a move away from conventions and consensus. Within the context of power relationships one has to practice freedom constantly reflecting on its very limits.

We find that this condition of constant struggle substantially resonates with what Agamben says about the relationship between the intellectual and his or her own time:

> Those who are truly contemporary, who truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands. They are thus in this sense irrelevant [*inattuale*]. But precisely because of this condition, precisely through this disconnection and this anachronism, they are more capable than others of perceiving and grasping their own time (2009: 40).

We find particularly striking the fact that Agamben formulates a definition of the present that bears a very strong resemblance to the function of the stroke, indeed interpretable, as we have just seen, as a *caesura*, capable of establishing a new relationship with the past and the future through an act, in the present, which is as disrupting as it is unifying: "following the same gesture by which the present divides time according to a 'no more' and a 'not yet,' it also establishes a peculiar relationship with these 'other times'" (Agamben 2009: 49).

Later in the essay, Agamben gives the following definition of the contemporary:

> …the contemporary is not only the one who, perceiving the darkness of the present, grasps a light that can never reach its destiny; he is also the one who, dividing and interpolating time, is capable of transforming it and putting it in relation with other times. He is able to read history in unforeseen ways, to "cite it" according to a necessity that does not arise in any way from his will, but from an exigency to which he cannot not respond (2009: 53).

Trombadori's elaboration of his Chinese experience reveals a genuine aspiration at learning from and through China. In rejecting what he calls "residues of racism," he demonstrates an ability at "perceiving the darkness of the present." However, it is in the very nature of the contemporary condition to be ultimately incapable of transcending one's own political, social, and cultural milieu.

In this essay, we attempted to show this contradiction at work. The epistemological conflict mentioned in the introduction is precisely this conflict between theory and practice, between ideology and the man's voice, as well as between tradition and its reinvention. In trying to build on Trombadori's insights rather than going against them, we argued that the conceptual foundation of Chinese painting might provide new approaches to working within and against the limits of the contemporary.

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