

Tokyo through the clouds.



My wish to go to Japan comes from my interest in Japanese folding screens. Also, I am a fan of Yasujiro Ozu. In the subjective perspective of the 'tatami shot', slow storytelling with the key scenes often left out, the almost identical story about relations between family members recurring in every film, I notice connections with my own work.

I want to see how fluctuating perspective and fragmentary storytelling is used in folding screens; how the flat image functions in space as a three-dimensional object. The change from the medieval to monocular perspective (thanks to Brunelleschi) didn't happen in Japanese art. Folding screens, with their framed panels, work rather like a comic strip – all action happens simultaneously; it is one picture with several parallel stories. On the screen 'View of Edo' (Edo-Tokyo Museum) one sees the city from above, through the clouds. The clouds help to minimize overcrowding of the images and give them a certain rhythm, so it looks like a collection of separate scenes with gaps to fill to one's fancy. I immediately associate this with the way I hang up my photo's and get a kick from such a reference. The two sorts of perspective – linear and multiple point – can be seen as symbols for tunnel vision versus rhizomatic thinking or, for photography fanatics, as concentration versus distracted, noncommittal multitasking. I am an opportunist, but every medium has its borders, so I use both.

Before my trip I started on an essay about shifts of perception in the dark. The works of Pierre Bonnard, my hero, a painter of Mediterranean light and a Japonist in his early years, made me think about the sensation of things appearing slowly. Helped by a well-timed tip – to read Jun'ichirō Tanizaki's *In praise of shadows* – I will now add a Japanese chapter to my essay. Tanizaki writes about

the cruel flattening effect of electric light and about the typically Japanese preference for (half)darkness. Indirect light and gradations of shadow give the object a chance to postpone its presence; it slows down the process of looking. The lack of light works suggestively; it changes the feeling of depth and gives an object an inner glow (if I may call it that).

I saw the wall paintings of Nijo Castle in Kyoto on a rainy day. It was a revelation to see those panels (used as an inspiration for the film *Inception*) in natural light and in their original habitat, not in a museum. It was as if I had only seen animals in a zoo before, and thought that this was where they lived. I understand, of course, why natural light can be a museum's enemy and that most of contemporary art is meant for white neutral spaces and not for candle-lit churches or taverns. Talking about an animal-friendly zoo: in 2006 the record number of visitors attending an art exhibition in Tokyo was broken during the show of Japanese masterpieces from the Price collection. Joe Price attributed this explosion of visitors to his experiment with the lighting. The lights kept changing every 3 minutes to imitate day- or moonlight – to show 'how art changes if the light changes'. This exhibition also served as a rediscovery of Itō Jakuchū, the star of the Price collection – a masterly versatile, eccentric and strangely enough forgotten painter of the Edo period. Definitely a man to google if you don't know him yet.

Japan, unexpectedly, made me think of Russia, even the Soviet Union. I don't know who should have the Kuril Islands, but we share the ocean, an addiction to dried fish, and the late abolishment of feudalism (Russia 1861, Japan 1868), normally seen as a medieval phenomenon. Japanese toilets we have in my hometown (not the warmed up ones attached to a keyboard); traditional Japanese lacquer has a Russian adaptation, ikra (caviar) is called ikora, wearing fur is obligatory, and the muffled atmosphere of the Tokyo library makes me nostalgic. But also: social pressure, uniformity, men/women relations, the culture of gift-giving, superstitions, double moral standards, and above all the firm belief of being a unique nation that can never be fully understood by a foreigner – the myths of the Russian soul and the mysterious Orient.

Finding similarities gives me something to hold on to and only accentuates the specific character of the country. The kind of landscape I knew from folding screens, and always took for fiction, turned out to actually exist. I came across it in both a tightly cultivated garden and in the wild. It is not the first time I notice that a myth can be true to life, or that paintings can strongly influence one's perception. I saw a strange fat cat with cotton pad fur from the exhibition (the Japanese collection of the Boston Museum) - he walked past me in the park just as I came out; the mini versions of water dragons were sold at the fish market; my little house in the snow looked like the set of a Kabuki play. I knew about the Japonism hype after the World Expositions in Paris and London at the end of 19th century, and about the influence it had on European design and painting. Now that I am here, I begin to understand what it might have meant for the development of modernism. It is a very nice feeling to recognize the facts from European art history in shrine bushes, castle walls and kimono fabrics.

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