


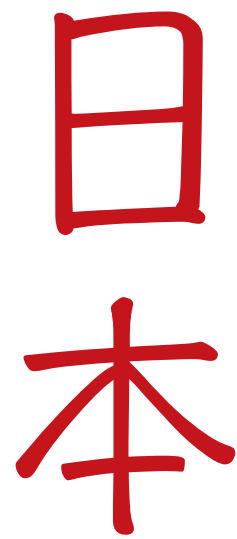
faraway

basili mobile



*If I were to imagine a fictive nation, I can ... isolate somewhere in the world (faraway) a certain number of features, and out of these features deliberately form a system. It is this system which I shall call: Japan.*

*Roland Barthes*



*L'empire des signes*—published in 1970 and translated into English by Richard Howard over a decade later—was the culmination of thoughts about a trip to Japan by Roland Barthes, one of France’s most engaging contemporary philosophers and literary theorists. This compelling, subtle work is composed of a series of “flashes”, insights into aspects of the culture Barthes interacted with and witnessed during his visit and—“in no way claiming to represent or analyze reality itself”—recreated and crafted with his semiotician’s intellect, and some poetic orientalist tendencies, as the Empire of Signs: ‘Japan’.

Forty-five years later I’ve taken Barthes’ text as a starting point for this series of images on ‘Japan’ as an empire of signs. From my own reading of *The Empire of Signs*—both the book and the country—I’ve paired excerpts from his text with my images, these taken around Tokyo while I contemplated the chapter texts that inspired them. As in Barthes’ book, it’s intended that the photos and the selected passages of text exist in a thematic interplay, even if they often do seem to illustrate and gloss each other. My own ‘Japan’ is different from but just as much a construction as his Empire of Signs.

Plus ça change...



## FARAWAY

*I am not lovingly gazing toward an Oriental essence — to me the Orient is a matter of indifference, merely providing a reserve of features whose manipulation — whose invented interplay — allows me to “entertain” the idea of an unheard-of symbolic system, one altogether detached from our own.*





## THE UNKNOWN LANGUAGE

*The dream: to know a foreign (alien) language and yet not to understand it: to perceive the difference in it without that difference ever being recuperated by the superficial sociality of discourse, communication or vulgarity; to know, positively refracted in a new language, the impossibilities of our own.*



## WITHOUT WORDS

*The unknown language, of which I nonetheless grasp the respiration, the emotive aeration, in a word the pure significance, forms around me, as I move, a faint vertigo, sweeping me into its artificial emptiness, which is consummated only for me: I live in the interstice, delivered from any fulfilled meaning.*





## WATER AND FLAKE

*The dinner tray seems a picture of the most delicate order...However, such an order, delicious when it appears, is destined to be undone, recomposed according to the very rhythm of eating; what was a motionless tableau at the start becomes a workbench or chessboard...the painting was actually only a palette, with which you are going to play in the course of your meal.*





## CHOPSTICKS

*In all these functions, in all the gestures they imply, chopsticks are the converse of our knife (and of its predatory substitute, the fork): they are the alimentary instrument which refuses to cut, to pierce, to mutilate, to trip; by chopsticks, food becomes no longer a prey to which one does violence, but a substance harmoniously transferred.*



## FOOD DECENTERED

*Entirely visual (conceived, concerted, manipulated for sight, and even for a painter's eye), food thereby says it is not deep...no Japanese dish is endowed with a center...food is never anything but a collection of fragments, none of which appears privileged by an order of ingestion; to eat is not to respect a menu (an itinerary of dishes), but to select, with a light touch of the chopsticks, sometimes one color, sometimes another, depending on the kind of inspiration which appears in its slowness as the detached, indirect accompaniment of the conversation.*





## THE INTERSTICE

*The freshness which circulates in tempura through the floury lace, tang of the toughest and of the most fragile among foodstuffs, fish and vegetables — this freshness, which is both that of what is intact and that of what is refreshing, is indeed that of oil: tempura restaurants are classified according to the freshness of the oil they use...it is not the food—stuff the diner pays for, or even its freshness, it is the virginity of its cooking.*





## PACHINKO

*The pachinko is a collective and solitary game. The machines are set up in long rows; each player standing in front of his panel plays for himself, without looking at his neighbor, whom he nonetheless brushes with his elbow. You hear only the balls whirring through their channels; the parlor is a hive or a factory — the players seem to be working on an assembly line. The imperious meaning of the scene is that of a deliberate, absorbing labor.*





## CENTER-CITY, EMPTY CENTER

*The city I am talking about (Tokyo) offers this precious paradox: it does possess a center, but this center is empty. The entire city turns around a site both forbidden and indifferent, a residence concealed beneath foliage, protected by moats, inhabited by an emperor who is never seen, which is to say, literally, by no one knows who. Daily, in their rapid, energetic, bullet-like trajectories, the taxis avoid this circle, whose low crest, the visible form of invisibility, hides the sacred “nothing.”*





## NO ADDRESS

*This city can only be known by an activity of an ethnographic kind: you must orient yourself in it not by book, by address, but by walking, by sight, by habit, by experience; here every discovery is intense and fragile, it can be repeated or recovered only by memory of the trace it has left in you: to visit a place for the first time is thereby to begin to write it: the address not being written, it must establish its own writing.*





## THE STATION

*The station, a vast organism which houses the big trains, the urban trains, the subway, a department store, and a whole underground commerce...dedicated to commerce, to transition, to departure, and yet kept in a unique structure, the station (moreover, is that what this new complex should be called?) is stripped of that sacred character which ordinarily qualifies the major landmarks of our cities: cathedrals, town halls, historical monuments.*





## PACKAGES

*For there is in Japan a profusion of what we might call: the instruments of transport; they are of all kinds, of all shapes, of all substances: packages, pouches, sacks, valises, linen wrappings, every citizen in the street has some sort of bundle, an empty sign, energetically protected, vigorously transported, as if the finish, the framing, the hallucinatory outline which establishes the Japanese object destined it to a generalized transport.*



## THE THREE WRITINGS

*Bunraku dolls are from three to five feet high. They are little men or women with movable hands, feet, and mouths; each doll is moved by three quite visible men who surround it, support it, accompany it; the leader works the upper part of the doll and its right arm; his face is apparent, smooth, bright, impassive, cold as “a white onion that has just been washed” (Basho); the two helpers wear black, a piece of cloth conceals their faces; one...holds a huge pair of shears with which he moves the doll’s left arm and hand; the other, crawling, supports the body, and is responsible for the doll’s walking.*





## ANIMATE / INANIMATE

*Bunraku does not aim at “animating” an inanimate object so as to make a piece of the body, a scrap of man, “alive”, while retaining its vocation as a “part”; it is not the simulation of the body that it seeks but, so to speak, its sensuous abstraction. Everything which we attribute to the total body and which is denied to our actors under cover of organic, “living” unity, the little man of Bunraku recuperates and expresses without any deception: fragility, discretion, sumptuousness, unheard-of nuance, the abandonment of all triviality, the melodic phrasing of gestures.*



## INSIDE / OUTSIDE

*With Bunraku, the sources of the theater are exposed in their emptiness. What is expelled from the stage is hysteria, i.e., theater itself; and what is put in its place is the action necessary to the production of the spectacle: work is substituted for inwardness...Bunraku practices neither the occultation nor the emphatic manifestation of its means...In Bunraku, the puppet has no strings. No more strings, hence no more metaphor, no more Fate; since the puppet no longer apes the creature, man is no longer a puppet in the divinity's hands, the inside no longer commands the outside.*





## BOWING

*The other politeness, by the scrupulosity of its codes, the distinct graphism of its gestures, and even what seems to us exaggeratedly respectful (i.e., to our eyes, “humiliating”) because we read it, in our manner, according to a metaphysics of the person — this politeness is a certain exercise of the void (as we might expect within a strong code but one signifying “nothing”)...The Form is Empty, says — and repeats — a Buddhist aphorism. This is what is expressed, through a practice of forms, by the politeness of the salutation, the bowing of two bodies which inscribe but do not prostrate themselves.*





## THE BREACH OF MEANING

*While being quite intelligible, the haiku means nothing, and it is by this double condition that it seems open to meaning in a particularly available, serviceable way — the way of a polite host who lets you make yourself at home with all your preferences, your values, your symbols intact; the haiku's “absence” suggests subornation, a breach, in short the major covetousness, that of meaning...You are entitled, says the haiku, to be trivial, short, ordinary; enclose what you see, what you feel, in a slender horizon of words, and you will be interesting.*





## EXEMPTION FROM MEANING

*The brevity of the haiku is not formal; the haiku is not a rich thought reduced to a brief form, but a brief event which immediately finds its proper form...the haiku has the purity, the sphericity, and the very emptiness of a note of music; perhaps this is why it is spoken twice, in echo; to speak the exquisite language only once would be to attach a meaning to surprise, to effect, to the suddenness of perfection; to speak it many times would postulate that meaning is to be discovered in it, would simulate profundity; between the two, neither singular not profound, the echo merely draws a line under the nullity of meaning.*





## THE INCIDENT

*What I am saying here about the haiku I might also say about everything which happens when one travels in that country I am calling Japan. For there, in the street, in a bar, in a shop, in a train, something always happens. This something — which is etymologically an adventure — is of an infinitesimal order: it is an incongruity of clothing, an anachronism of culture, a freedom of behavior, an illogicality of itinerary, etc. To count up those events would be a Sisyphean enterprise, for they glisten only at the moment when one reads them, in the lively writing of the street.*





SO

*Neither describing nor defining, the haiku (as I shall finally name any discontinuous feature, any event of Japanese life as it offers itself to my reading), the haiku diminishes to the point of pure and sole designation. It's that, it's thus, says the haiku, it's so. Or better still: so! it says, with a touch so instantaneous and so brief that even the copula would seem excessive, a kind of remorse for a forbidden, permanently alienated definition. Here meaning is only a flash, a slash of light...but the haiku's flash illumines, reveals nothing; it is the flash of a photograph one takes very carefully but having neglected to load the camera with film.*





## STATIONERY STORE

*The object of the Japanese stationery store is the ideographic writing which to our eyes seems to derive from painting, whereas quite simply it is painting's inspiration...Everything, in the instrumentation, is directed toward the paradox of an irreversible and fragile writing, which is simultaneously, contradictorily, incision and glissade; papers of a thousand kinds, many of which hint, in their texture powdered with pale straws, with crushed stems, at their fibrous origin...As for the brush, it has its gestures, as if it were the finger...the brush can slide, twist, lift off, the stroke being made, so to speak, in the volume of air; it has the carnal, lubricated flexibility of the hand.*





## THE WRITTEN FACE

*The theatrical face is not painted (made-up), it is written...This theatrical face (masked in No, drawn in Kabuki, artificial in Bunraku) consists of two substances: the white of the paper, the black of the inscription (reserved for the eyes)...The face is drawn like a sheet of cloth toward the black pit of the eyes. Reduced to the elementary signifiers of writing, the face dismisses any signified, i.e., any expressivity: this writing writes nothing (or writes: nothing); not only does it not “lend” itself to any emotion, to any meaning, but it actually copies no character whatsoever.*





## MILLIONS OF BODIES

*The Japanese body achieves the limit of its individuality, but this individuality cannot be understood in the Western sense; it is pure of all hysteria, does not aim at making the individual into an original body, distinguished from other bodies...Here individuality is not closure, theater, outstripping, victory; it is simply difference, refracted, without privilege, from body to body. That is why beauty is not defined here, as in the Western manner, by an inaccessible singularity: it is resumed here and there, it runs from difference to difference, arranged in the great syntagm of bodies.*





## THE EYELID

*The several features which compose an ideographic character are drawn in a certain order, arbitrary but regular; the line, beginning with a full brush, ends with a brief point, inflected, turned away at the last moment of its direction. It is this same tracing of a pressure which we rediscover in the Japanese eye. As if the anatomist-calligrapher set his full brush on the inner corner of the eye and, turning it slightly, with a single line, as it must be in painting alla prima, opens the face with an elliptical slit which he closes toward the temple with a rapid turn of his hand.*





## THE WRITING OF VIOLENCE

*When one says that the Zengakuren riots are organized, one refers not only to a group of tactical precautions but to a writing of actions which expurgates violence from its Occidental being: spontaneity. In our mythology, violence is caught up in the same prejudice as literature or art: we can attribute to it no other function than that of expressing a content, an inwardness, a nature, of which it is the primary, savage, asystematic language...The violence of the Zengakuren does not precede its own regulation, but is born simultaneously with it: it is immediately a sign: expressing nothing, it does away with itself all the more surely in a transitive goal.*





## THE CABINET OF SIGNS

*From the slope of the mountains to the neighborhood intersection, here everything is habitat...It is no longer the great continuous wall which defines space but the very abstraction of the fragments of view which frame me; the wall is destroyed beneath the inscription; the garden is a mineral tapestry of tiny volumes, the public space is a series of instantaneous events which accede to the notable in a flash so vivid, so tenuous that the sign does away with itself before any particular signified had time to "take." One might say that an age-old technique permits the landscape or the spectacle to produce itself, to occur in a pure significance, abrupt, empty, like a fracture.*



The photos in this book are titled after — and presented in the same sequence as — the chapters in the English translation of Roland Barthes' book *Empire of Signs* and the accompanying passages are extracts from those same chapters. All *quoted texts* in this book are from *Empire of Signs* by Roland Barthes, translated by Richard Howard, Hill and Wang, NY, 1982.

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