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VISUALITY AND FICTIONALITY OF JAPAN AND
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FOUNDED BY

AUORE YAMAGATA-MONTOYA, MAXIME DANESIN & MARCO PELLITTERI

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VISUALITY AND FICTIONALITY OF JAPAN AND
EUROPE IN CROSS-CULTURAL FRAMEWORK

EDITED BY

MARCO PELLITTERI & MATTEO FABBRETTI

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Telling stories about the “Land of the Rising Sun”: Contemporary Italian literature re-inventing Japan

Fabio Domenico PALUMBO | University of Messina, Italy

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ABSTRACT

*Eco's A Theory of Semiotics (1975) points out that cultural units are organised networks of meanings, so that semantic fields pertain to a specific culture's world view. Narrative processes participating in sensemaking take place within a cultural context, and can be studied via a diatextual approach to the discursive structures and the tools of Greimasian narrative semiotics. Contextualisation in narrative enunciations means not only using elements of actorialisation, spatialisation and temporalisation, but also 'dramatising' the relationship between Self and Other through «cultural metaphors» (Gannon 2011). This paper explores three authors' texts from post-WWII Italian literature, showing three different representations or 'narrative uses' of Japan: *Il re dei Giapponesi (1949)*, an unfinished novel by Pier Paolo Pasolini; *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler (1979)*, *Palomar (1983)* and *Collection of Sand (1984)* by Italo Calvino; *Silk (1996)*, a short novel by Alessandro Baricco. In these texts, I examine the distinct meaning of Japan's metaphors, highlighting the different levels of exoticism in Japan's description, and the different degrees of the subject's involvement in terms of their relationship with otherness (*embrayage* or *débrayage*). Japan can be used in literary fiction as a 'pretext' (Pasolini), as a setting (Baricco), or as a context (Calvino). In any case, it serves as a cultural metaphor: a rhetorical apparatus conveying portrayals of Japan to Italian contemporary culture with different degrees of verisimilitude, ranging from an almost fable-like scenery to a vague historical background and a peculiar biographical frame.*

KEYWORDS

Italian Literature; Japan; Pasolini; Calvino; Baricco; Semiotics; Greimas.

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Introduction: A diatextual approach to narratives

The main path of this investigation can be summarised in few words: tracing back different representations of Japan and the Japanese in post-WWII Italian literature, highlighting some peculiar narrative uses of a Japanese setting or background in fictional stories. The theoretical frame of this research can be situated in discourse analysis (Mantovani and Spagnolli 2003), including psychosemiotics, narrative psychology (Bruner 2002, 63-87), narrative semiotics or *sémantique structurale* (Greimas 1983, 49-

66) and diatextual¹ analysis (Minnini 1992, 63). Umberto Eco’s *A Theory of Semiotics* (first published in Italy in 1975) points out that cultural units are organised networks of meanings, so that semantic fields pertain to a specific culture’s world view. Accordingly, narrative processes participating in sensemaking and the generation of meanings take place within a cultural context — keeping in mind that meaning refers to sociality and is based upon conventional relationships between signs (Eco 1962).

Contextualisation in narrative enunciations means not only using elements of actorialisation, spatialisation and temporalisation, but also “dramatising” the relationship between Self and Other through “cultural metaphors” (Gannon 2011). Texts can then be conceived as places of intersubjective sensemaking, where generation of sense and organisation of meanings involve discovering the value system and latent rhetorics embedded in a text behind its surface structure (Titscher, Meyer, Wodak and Vetter 2000, 125). Regarding the rhetorical dimension in diatextual approach, a crucial role is played by the analysis of metaphors as analogical portrayals casting light over a discursive representation of a shared world view or social construction of reality, as in the case of “archetypal metaphor” (Gill and Whedbee 1997, 174). Actually, metaphorical analysis links diatextual perspective to critic discourse analysis and social constructivism (Parker 1998, 1-9).

Clearly, Japan can be used in literary fiction as a cultural metaphor, and that is the case of a rhetorical apparatus conveying more or less extended portrayals of Japan to Italian contemporary culture in narrative form, through the work of three paramount Italian writers. The above mentioned theoretical framework can be applied to this text *corpus* using a syncretic approach. More specifically, a fruitful interaction between the different texts can be achieved by combining the methodological premises of diatextual analysis, narrative semiotics and their broader background.

As it has just been underlined, narrative processes and their rhetorical apparatus can be studied via a diatextual approach to discursive structures, unfolding a creative examination of discourse (Wood and Kroger 2000, 96). In this framework Algirdas Julien Greimas’s model of narrative semiotics² has been freely used as a paradigm offering a structural

¹ «Diatextual approach is a specific methodological orientation within critical discourse analysis specifically aimed at capturing the dynamics between interlocutors, text, and context which characterise any kind of human interaction». See Manuti, A., Traversa, R., Mininni, G. (2012) The dynamics of sense making: a diatextual approach to the intersubjectivity of discourse. *Text & Talk*. Vol. 32 (1), 39.

² Greimas’s narrative semiotics, consisting in a semiotic approach to the study of narrative, was strongly influenced by Saussure’s structural linguistics as well as Levi Strauss’s structural anthropology. For an introduction to semiotics in its intellectual context see Schleifer 2016.

perspective on narrativity. This model, whose narrative component stems from Russian formalism (mainly Roman Jakobson 1963), inherits most of the tenants of Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (1958), and still includes psychoanalytic facets in its deep core. Narrative semiotics considers texts as systems of signs consisting of surface structure and deep structure or underlying meanings (Titscher, Meyer, Wodak and Vetter 2000, 125). Specifically, Greimas's system consists of three levels, since, apart from the semio-narrative structures (deep structure and surface structure), there is a place for discursive structures: Greimas conceives the path from semio-narrative structures to discourses and textual structures as the generative trajectory of signification (Greimas and Courtés 1979).

The present work uses Greimas's theorisation of deep structure to build a semiotic square³ of the representation of Japan in a distant — Western, in this case Italian — cultural tradition. Again, Greimasian surface structure (involving actants, their moods, relationships and narrative programs), as well as discursive structure isotopes⁴ (particularly time and space), is relevant for this textual analysis.

Concerning the set of texts chosen, they are not selected according to any statistical parameter (Titscher, Meyer, Wodak and Vetter 2000); they are rather considered representative in terms of eminence. The three authors — Pier Paolo Pasolini, Italo Calvino and Alessandro Baricco — produced their works during the second half of the twentieth century, and their diachronic succession follows the post-war history of Italian literature. Even though Pasolini, Calvino and Baricco are stylistically and ideologically very different from one another, they all belong to the tradition of literary prose. Therefore, the present analysis applies to a fundamentally homogeneous type of texts — even if literary critics often debate about Baricco's belonging to a “glossy” or “flowery” literature (Ferroni, Onofri, La Porta and Berardinelli 2006, 9-31).

Presentation of the cases

Pasolini's 'savage Japan'

The first reference to Japan in Pier Paolo Pasolini's *corpus* can be found in his graduation thesis, *Antologia della lirica pascoliana* (1945), where he mentions the *haikai*, a genre of

³ The semiotic square, developed by Greimas and Rastier, is a tool used in structural analysis of the relationships between semiotic signs through the opposition of concepts (e.g. feminine-masculine or spiritual-carnal).

⁴ In a story, an isotopy is a repetition of a basic meaning trait (see Greimas 1966, 69).

Japanese poetry that developed during the sixteenth century out of the earlier *renga*. In relationship to Pascoli's *Myricae*, Pasolini associates the taste for details and incomplete beauty with the conciseness in *haikai* poetry, alluding to “*brevità haikaistica*” or “*sfera haikaistica*” (Doi 2011, 182). Around 1945 Pasolini translates two samples of Japanese poetry into Friulian language: four fragments over seasons from Sei Shōnagon's *Makura no sōshi* (996-1008) and Shioi Ukō's *Iso no fuetake* (included in *Hanamomiji*, Shioi's anthology of prose and poems published in 1896). Pasolini utilises Pacifico Arcangeli's Italian translation of both poems as a support version for his Friulian one (Doi 2011, 187)⁵. *Il re dei Giapponesi* (“*The King of the Japanese*”), written in 1949, is actually incomplete, counting only four chapters instead of the seven planned by the author. The short novel's incompleteness hints to a sort of external context which needs to be reconstructed (Oevermann 1996). Indeed, the main character's journey seems to be a “mental journey” (Martellini 2003, 27). He is likely to be an envoy from Western countries who has to travel through the territories of Mainland China and Korea, in a vaguely determined scenario, flanked by a mysterious Viceroy of a Chinese area, supposedly a province or a colony. The Viceroy's entourage guides the Western visitor to the field of operations, a camp built by the Chinese army, set in a mountain area in the northern part of Korea. In the mountains, a Japanese army is awaiting in hectic activity. *Il re dei Giapponesi* is permeated with Pasolini's love for Emilio Salgari's novels. Salgari was a nineteenth century Italian novelist, author of very popular adventure tales with an exotic setting (his most famous character is undoubtedly Sandokan, hero of best-sellers as *The Tigers of Mompracem* and *The Pirates of Malaysia*). Pasolini seems to borrow Salgari's taste for Far Eastern exoticism, admiring with inner torment “the brutality of azure Oceans and of Eastern skies” (Pasolini 1999, 268)⁶. As Doi points out, there is something alike to a “tropical Japan” in Pasolini's unfinished novel, akin to many works by late nineteenth century's writers or popularisers of Japanese culture. A “sonorously savage Japan” returns in Pasolini's movies from the late Sixties, *Edipo re* (1967) and *Medea* (1969), which respectively adopt traditional *bugaku* (ninth century) and *sōkyoku* (sixteenth century) music (Doi 2001, 194). Assuming Salgari's influence as valid, the Japanese soldiers' almost spectral presence in *Il re dei Giapponesi*

⁵ Sei Shōnagon's *Makura no sōshi* are translated into *Alba di primavera, Not di estat, Sera di autun* and *Di di unvier*; Shioi Ukō's *Iso no fuetake* into *Il zovin pescadour*. Pasolini transliterates Shioi's name into Shivoi Uko. In the first half of the twentieth century Hepburn standard had not yet been adopted in Italy.

⁶ When the source text of the translated version is not indicated, the translation is by the author of the present study.

resembles another version of Oriental exoticism in Italian literature: the military menace from a mysterious army standing out in the distance recalls Dino Buzzati's *Il deserto dei Tartari*, first published in 1940.

Calvino's retelling of Japan: more than a traveller's diary

Calvino visited Japan in 1976, and this experience informed his literary and essayistic production, giving him a new perspective upon topics crucial to his thinking, as the problem of the world's decadence and corruption or the enigma of vision. In this paper we are considering three different expressions of Calvino's retelling of Japan. First, a biographical account, under the guise of a travel journal, published in the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera* and put together in *Collection of Sand*, first published in 1984. This work is just useful to define the context of Calvino's fictional portraits of Japan. The section *La forma del tempo* includes nine essays, describing Calvino's relationship with Japanese arts, culture and society. Calvino encounters Japanese aesthetics during his visits to the imperial villas of Kyōto and their gardens, from Sento Imperial Palace to Katsura Imperial Villa. Calvino's intuitions about Japanese aesthetics can be summarised through brief flashes. In *The Obverse of Sublime*, Calvino finds a similitude between poems and gardens: "The garden becomes an indecipherable calligram" (Calvino 1984, 176; Eng. tr. 2013, n.p.)⁷. This is a first metaphorical image of Japan, the coincidence of places and signs: the obvious reference is to Roland Barthes's *Empire of signs* (1970), written after Barthes's journey to Japan. Calvino learns something essential from Japanese gardens: in Japan nature is arranged in order to be mastered by the mind, and this represents the opposite of Kantian dynamic sublime. The admiration is not generated by the terrific spectacles of hurricanes or falls, but it is rather inspired by the minimalistic display of "the simplest means", with "no seeking after sensational effects" (Calvino 1984, 173).

In *The Thousand Gardens* (1984), Calvino describes further traits he distinguishes in Japanese aesthetics: multiplicity and the metamorphosis of nature displayed by seasonal changes based on cyclicity in spatial-temporal becoming: "With its recurring moments time removes the idea of the infinite" (Calvino 1984, 182). Recurring seasonal elements,

⁷ The source text of the English translations of Calvino's *Collection of Sand*, *Palomar* and *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* is from the corresponding digital editions (n.p.). Page numbers for the original Italian version refer to the first edition of "Oscar Opere di Italo Calvino", published in 1994 by Arnoldo Mondadori Editore in Milan.

described in *haiku* poems through the *kigo*, mark Japanese ideas of beauty with the reassuring concept of finiteness. Japanese aesthetic model, according to Calvino in *The Wooden Temple* (1984), is not separated from the material elements it is made of. Temples, palaces, gardens, villas, all is made of wood: antiquity is not made of stone. “As the centuries go”, all the buildings destroyed by the flames of fire or reduced to dust by wood-worms are “continually remade” (Calvino 1984, 179), yet always remain the same. Eternity is entrusted to form and structure, and is gained through its opposite: the ephemerality of materials and the disposition to be replaced. Western idea of being and becoming is of no use, Calvino recognises. Finally, Calvino reckons that Japanese houses, including the royal palace, are “a series of empty rooms and corridors”, like a “theatre stage” (Calvino 1984, 175), where every trace of life seems to have been removed. Calvino wonders how this aesthetic ideal could be possible. Certainly because of other houses “full of people and tools and junk and rubbish” (Calvino 1984, 175). Finally, the Japanese ideal of beauty is interpreted by the Italian writer as aristocratic.

For the purpose of the present study, it is also useful to consider his peculiar novel, *Palomar*, published in 1983, whose main character, Mr Palomar, is just an *alter ego* of Calvino himself. During his journeys, Palomar happens to visit Ryōan-ji Zen temple in Kyōto, as recounted in *L'aiola di sabbia (The sand garden)*, included in the section *The silences of Palomar* (1983). Mr Palomar experiences the distress of trying to contemplate the absolute, “according to the teaching of the Zen monks”, being “crammed on the platform in the midst of hundreds of visitors” (Calvino 1983, 83-84; Eng. tr. 1999, n.p.). How can he see the absolute, since he is excluded from the detached Zen solitude? Nevertheless, Mr Palomar tries “to grasp what the Zen garden can give him” in the only circumstances available nowadays, “craning his neck among other necks” (Calvino 1983, 85). The Zen detachment makes way for another interpretation of the Ryōan-ji garden, seeing the harmony of opposites between the human race, whose individualities are represented by the sea of grains of sand, and the world, indifferent to the fate of mankind, represented by the boulder. Mr Palomar replaces the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness he identifies in the ego’s dissolving into a pure gaze with categories akin to the Western philosophical tradition: the harmonious struggle between History and Nature (Gasparro 2011, 2).

Finally, in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, first published in 1979, Calvino imagines to write the beginning of ten different novels, which are supposed to belong to ten

imaginary authors. *On the carpet of leaves illuminated by the moon*, included in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, is the erotic-perverse novel Calvino writes, by his own admission, inspired by Kawabata and Tanizaki (Calvino 2000, 1406). Indeed, Segre finds resonance with Tanizaki Jun'ichirō's *Kagi (The Key)* and Kawabata Yasunari's *Yama no Oto (The Sound of the Mountain)* (Segre 1984, 171). We have to consider accurately the plot of *On the carpet of leaves illuminated by the moon*, supposed to have been written by the imaginary Japanese author Takakumi Ikoka. In the beginning the main character finds himself watching ginkgo leaves, trying "to distinguish the sensation of each single ginkgo leaf from the sensation of all the others" (Calvino 1979, 233; Eng. tr. 1998, n.p.), which appears like a spiritual activity, whilst he ends up having sexual intercourse with Madame Miyagi, being watched by her daughter, Makiko, and by his master, Mr Okeda, who is Madame Miyagi's husband. Calvino considers the metaphor of vision and space essential to his view of Japanese culture: his encounter with the Japanese humanity and environment is mediated by a visuospatial wonder. Going back to *Collection of Sand* and its *The Old Woman in the Purple Kimono* (1984), we can see Calvino is aware that when one gets used to the country, he "starts not to find anything worthy of note, not to see any more what I am seeing" (Calvino 1984, 164). The stranger becomes predictable or is taken for granted.

Baricco's fictitious Japan in *Silk*

The last Italian writer considered is Alessandro Baricco, author of *Silk*, a short novel first published in 1996. Hervé Joncour, the hero of the story, is a French gentleman married to Hélène. He buys and sells silkworms for a living. Between 1861 and 1865, Hervé Joncour faces perilous journeys to Japan and back to France in order to get the silkworms necessary to the silk mills in Lavilledieu, the village in the south of France where Joncour lives. In Japan he happens to meet Hara Kei, a powerful feudal lord who supplies him with silkworms, then he falls in love with Hara Kei's young lover, a girl whose eyes do not have "an Oriental shape" (Baricco 1996, 25; Eng. tr. 2006, n.p.)⁸. The girl never speaks in Joncour's presence, but she reciprocates Joncour's feelings and manages to let him know. In 1865 Hervé Joncour makes his last journey to Japan, but

⁸ The source text of the English translation of Baricco's *Silk* is from the corresponding digital edition (n.p.). Page numbers for the original Italian version refer to the first edition by BUR La Scala in Milan, published in 1999.

the turmoil in Japan’s political situation overthrows Hara Kei’s power and he misses the chance to see the young lady again or to finally hear her voice. Yet, six months after his return to Europe, Joncour receives a passionate letter written in Japanese which he supposes to have been sent by his young lost love. After H el ene’s death, Joncour understands it had been written by his wife. In his review, Citati mentions that, while writing *Silk*, Baricco “wanted to write ‘a book made of nothingness’” (Citati 1996, n.p.). The concept of nothingness is useful to understand the fictional image of Japan and the Japanese conveyed by *Silk*, as will be clarified below.

Discussion

The Greimasian model and the shifting of the roles

Applying the Greimasian model to the three authors above mentioned, it can be useful to recall the role of the actants in the surface structure of a text. The kinds of actants are designated as follows: the *Destinator*, the force representing the ideology of the text; the *Receiver*, carrying the values of the destinator; the *Subject*, occupying the main role in the narration; the *Object*, representing the goal of the subject; the *Adjuvant*, or the force helping the subject; and the *Traitor*, the force trying to deter the subject from its goal. These actants do not necessarily need to be actors (Titscher, Meyer, Wodak and Vetter 2000). Destinator, receiver and subject can be performed by one character (this is generally true for receiver and subject). In the general sequence of the narrative, the subject goes in quest of the object, supported by adjuvants and opposed by traitors. The destinator motivates the receiver to act as a subject. Greimas interpreted classical Marxism according to the actantial structure: Subject = Communist Party; Object = classless society; Destinator = history; Receiver = mankind; Opponent = bourgeoisie; Adjuvant = working class (Greimas 1966). A visual scheme of the application of the Greimasian model to *Il re dei Giapponesi* by Pasolini, *On the carpet of leaves illuminated by the moon* (from *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*) by Calvino and *Silk* by Baricco is shown below.

0. Actantial structure

Destinator ⇒ Object ⇐ Receiver
 ↑
Adjuvants ⇒ Subject ⇐ Opponents

1. *Il re dei Giapponesi*

Western countries ⇒ military victory ⇐ the envoy
 ↑
Viceroy, Chinese army ⇒ the envoy ⇐ Japanese army

2. *On the carpet of leaves illuminated by the moon (If on a Winter's Night a Traveler)*

Mr Okeda, the disciple ⇒ clarity, Makiko, M^{me} Miyagi ⇐ the disciple
 ↑
Mr Okeda ⇒ the disciple ⇐ Mr Okeda, Makiko, M^{me} Miyagi

3. *Silk*

Baldabiau, Joncour ⇒ silkworms, young lady ⇐ Joncour
 ↑
Hara Kei, a boy, M^{me} Blanche ⇒ Joncour ⇐ Hara Kei

We can notice how the change occurring in the relationships between the characters modify the NP (narrative program) of the stories. In *On the carpet of leaves illuminated by the moon*, at the start the disciple wants to free himself from the constraints of Mr Okeda's tutelage to approach more promising academic circles. Being forced to spend more time at Okeda's home, the disciple starts to like Makiko and, to a lesser extent, Madame Miyagi. He apparently obeys to his own sexual desire, yet he falls in the trap of Mr Okeda, who ties the knot around his student's life more tightly. As for Makiko and Madame Miyagi, they help their guest to fulfil his lust, but can become very dangerous to him because of their jealousy.

A change occurs in *Silk*, too. In the beginning, Hervé Joncour is sent to Japan by both Baldabiau and the people from Lavilledieu to get silkworms, a dangerous journey, and Hara Kei is his powerful helper in business. When Joncour falls in love with the young lady, Hara Kei slowly becomes his enemy, while he receives help by a boy leading him to the young lady's whereabouts and by Madame Blanche. In *Il re dei Giapponesi* there is neither a fully developed plot nor a change of narrative program. Nevertheless, one must consider that, as for the actantial structure in Pasolini's short novel, the Receiver (i.e. the envoy) is the delegate of the Western powers and their political interests in the Far East, whereas in *On the carpet of leaves illuminated by the moon*, Mr Okeda teaches

the disciple about the way to achieve mental clarity, then the disciple himself turns his attention to Makiko and M.me Miyagi, while Mr Okeda surreptitiously facilitates his student’s inclinations. These different scenarios imply a different meaning of the Receiver’s function (Object \leftrightarrow Receiver) in the actantial structure of the two novels. The Receiver’s role in *Silk* poses no particular difficulties.

Moving from the semio-narrative structures to the discursive ones, there is a shift from *langue* to *parole*, or from the virtual dimension to the actual one: a whole context is evoked thanks to the procedures of spatialisation, temporalisation and actorialisation, or the dissemination of narrative themes and figures (Floch 1985). Focusing over space and time, these are isotopes, or categorisations of the environment and time axis of the narrated story. Through the isotopic characterisation Japan can be reinvented in literary fiction according to different narratives. We first consider the isotope of spatialisation, or the internal (utopian) and external (heterotopian) representation of space (Titscher, Meyer, Wodak and Vetter 2000). As regards *Il re dei Giapponesi*, Pasolini’s image of the East Asian countries and his evocation of Japan and the Japanese, from the incisive title to the final lines, serve as a “pretext”, being a projection of the young writer’s exotic phantasies over the impressive spaces of Far East (Doi 2011, 194): “Towards the South I saw *a sea of mountains*, a grey sea, violet and ochre, made of crystal and wax [...]” (Pasolini 1949, 21)⁹.

Baricco’s depiction of space in *Silk* is quite essential, so that in this work Japan is a kind of loose setting or figurative “scenario”. The “inner chambers” have Japanese traits: “A rice paper panel slid open [...]. In the evening, they accompanied him into the largest room of the house, which had a stone floor, and where the ritual of bathing was performed” (Baricco 1996, 24, 33). Differently, the external surroundings are rather anonymous: “Hervé Concur began walking again, in the thick of the wood, and when he came out he was on the edge of the lake” (Baricco 1996, 31). As for toponymy, Hervé Joncour’s journey starts from a fictitious Cape Teraya, then moves from west to east, through the real Japanese prefectures of Ishikawa, Toyama, Niigata and Fukushima, ending up in Shirakawa, where Hara Kei’s feudal domain resides. The area of the actual Shirakawa in Fukushima was indeed the centre of the Shirakawa Domain, but in the Edo period it was rather a castle city (Komine-jō) than a proper city. Shirakawa was the location of a famous barrier on the Ōshū Kaidō, and the actual border between the

⁹ Page numbers for the original Italian version refer to the first edition published by Via del Vento in Pistoia in 2003.

regions of “proper Japan” and the northern regions. In the world of *Silk*, Hara Kei’s headquarters are settled east of Shirakawa. More importantly, Fukushima was one of the main centres of Japanese sericulture.

As already explained, Calvino’s *The sand garden* (1983) takes place in Ryōan-ji garden. In a very different way, *On the carpet of leaves illuminated by the moon* is a scenic design for an erotic novel, presenting Mr Okeda’s house and its surroundings as a stage for charming and romantic scenes. The story is, to Calvino’s own admission, inspired to the Japanese novelists of the early twentieth century or else to the Western literary and artistic imaginary upon Japan, and this is reflected by the setting: “The ginkgo leaves fell like fine rain from the boughs and dotted the lawn with yellow. [...] In the centre of the lake, two fleshy flowers of an autumn-blooming water lily had opened [...]” (Calvino 1979, 233-235). Sometimes it seems to assist to a scene taken from *The Tale of Genji* by Murasaki Shikibu (11th century), whom Calvino himself cites in *Collection of sand*, since the atmosphere is permeated with a Heian elegance: “It was a serene autumn. As the November full moon approached, I find myself conversing one afternoon with Makiko about the most suitable place for observing the moon through the branches of the trees. I insisted that on the mat under the ginkgo tree the carpet of fallen leaves would spread the moon’s reflected glow in a suspended luminosity” (Calvino 1979, 240).

In the three authors examined, temporality varies from an almost uchronic scenery (as in Pasolini’s works) to a just outlined historical background (the late Tokugawa period in Baricco’s *Silk*) or to what seems to be a certain year of the early twentieth century, even though it is not specified by Calvino in *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler*. Actually, in Pasolini’s *Il re dei Giapponesi*, exoticism diverts time in a sort of mythical dimension, with mixtures of past and modernity (the raft, the Viceroy’s palace, the fantastic city vs the cars’ parade), of nature and culture (virgin animality vs sentimental education), within Far East Asia’s environment and mankind. One can say Pasolini hints to the winds of war of the late Forties around Korea, while mentioning the northern part of Korea (the novel was written in 1949), still the enemies are the Japanese, as in the just concluded WWII.

Silk is set in the late Tokugawa period (1603-1868), when Japan is compelled by Western powers to open up its harbours — Commodore Matthew C. Perry is explicitly mentioned. There are some interesting connections between fiction and history in Baricco’s work worth highlighting. Joncour’s travels take place between 1861 and

1865, and they are described as rather dangerous. Indeed, a radical movement, *sonnō jōi* (“Revere the Emperor, expel the barbarians”), aroused in Japan during the late Tokugawa shogunate, led to the killing of Charles Lennox Richardson, an English merchant, in 1862. The Boshin War between the shogunate and the partisans of the Imperial Court was fought in 1868-1869, whilst the fiction seems to backdate its start to 1864: “They say in Japan war has begun, this time for real” (Baricco 1996, 64). During the Boshin War, Shirakawa joined Ōuetsu Reppan Dōmei (‘Northern Alliance’) on behalf of the shogunate; in the same way, in *Silk*, Hara Kei, the feudal lord from Shirakawa, appears to be implicated in the war. Baricco briefly adds up some rather accurate details about the economic history of silk commerce, concerning the legalisation in Japan of silkworms’ export and trading to the West, and the invention of artificial silk by Chardonnet; these pieces of information help to contextualise the story, while linking Japanese relationships with Western powers to the traditional commerce of silk, characterising the trade between Europe and Asia for two millennia.

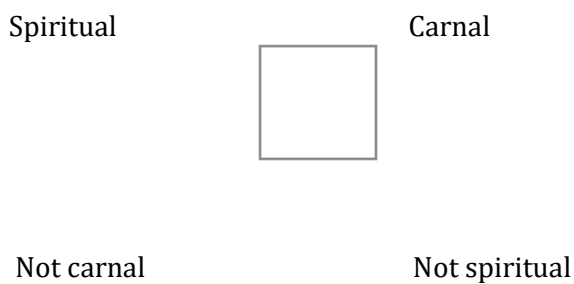
In Calvino’s works so far analysed, the temporal dimension swings between autobiography (*Collection of sand, Palomar*) and the fictionalised time of *On the carpet of leaves illuminated by the moon*. Actually Calvino builds up a story of Chinese boxes on three levels: Calvino, the author of *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler*, who speaks directly to the reader and creates a second-person narrative; Ikoka, the fictional author of *On the carpet of leaves illuminated by the moon* that Calvino “imagines to become”; the main character of *On the carpet of leaves illuminated by the moon*, who makes a first-person narrative. This, as well as temporalisation and spatialisation, is obviously connected to practices of *embrayage* or *débrayage* (Greimas and Courtés 1979), in terms of involvement of the narrator with the other and the world, included the Japanese other.

Building a semiotic square: a spiritual, carnal and exotic Japan

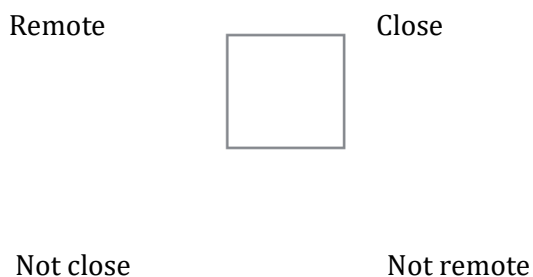
Different narrative structures may stem from a common deep structure (Titscher, Meyer, Wodak and Vetter 2000). In order to represent the text’s deep structure, it is necessary to identify the values hidden behind surface structure. Greimasian model includes the visualisation of key concepts of the deep structure in the shape of a semiotic square, where the horizontal relationship refers to opposites, and the diagonal one to contradictories. Placing the underlying values of the text in the semiotic square is based upon the previous analysis of actants and their relationships or

corresponding narrative programs as well as isotopes of space and time. According to the actants' goals and the related narratives, it is possible to indicate a pertinent semiotic square (See fig. 1 below). Another semiotic square can be built around actorialisation, the isotopes of space and time and their representation in the above mentioned texts (See fig. 2 below). This part of the research requires a disposition to formalisation and conceptual generalisation, and, to a certain extent, can be considered as rule-free. Having considered the discursive structures and surface level of the semio-narrative structures, the following step is exploring the deep level of the texts.

1.



2.



We need to consider the semiotic square connected to the actantial roles subsequently, in relation to a deeper analysis of the narratives. As for the semiotic square related to actorialisation, space and time, it is possible to explicit a relation of implication-complementarity between remote and not close (extraneous) or close and not remote (familiar); furthermore, a relation of contrariety between remote and close (*déjà-vu*) or not close and not remote (acquaintance).

remote	<i>déjà-vu</i>	close
extraneous		familiar
not close	acquaintance	not remote

The semiotic square based on the contraries remote-close can be connected to the objects of the worlds and the isotopes of space and time via two other sets of contraries: exotic-domestic and mythical-historical. Indeed, ‘remote’ refers to exotic-mythical objects and space-time, while ‘close’ refers to domestic-historical ones. The concepts in the semiotic square pertain to a connotative set of meanings or a semantic differential (Osgood, Suci and Tannenbaum 1957).

remote-exotic-mythical \Leftrightarrow close-domestic-historical

Applying the latter semiotic square to the texts, it is possible to reinterpret the representation of Japan and the Japanese at work within them according to the concepts of remote and close and their semantic connotation. In *Il re dei Giapponesi*, Pasolini expresses the feeling of extraneousness and unfamiliarity (remote and not close) in front of the Japanese soldiers, who are connoted as mysterious: “I wanted to drink with one look all the mystery, which was so marvellously soft” (Pasolini 1949, 26). Still, the main character perceives a “childish terror” thinking of them, which has to be related to an inner memory or awareness of the other’s nature. In this sense, the Japanese soldiers represent something remote and yet close (a *déjà-vu*). This is confirmed by the feeling of “envy” their vision inspires in the protagonist-narrator, since envy arouses because of something good perceived in the other, which the other himself denies to the subject. Envy presumes some degree of relationship established with the other (if not too close, at least not too remote). It is remarkable how Pasolini’s literary prose is able to convey such a wide semantic field in a few lines of text.

The mixture of remote and close elements is what Calvino makes explicit in *The Old Woman in the Purple* from *Collection of Sand*. The old lady at the station platform in Tōkyō, dressed up in a “rich, pale-purple kimono”, bears “few Western or rather American elements — glasses with a silver frame, the blush perm straight from the hairdresser’s — which sit on top of the traditional costume” providing “a clear snapshot of modern Japan” (Calvino 1984, 163-165). This feeling of *déjà-vu* is not a

juxtaposition; it is rather an inner feeling of extraneous yet familiar. Calvino, watching the cheerful young lady serving devoutly the apparently arrogant old woman, makes an unconscious comparison with the condition of the elders in Western societies:

Don't you know, you fool, that where we come from, in the West, it will never again be possible for anyone to be waited on as you have been? Don't you know that in the West no old person will ever be treated with so much devotion by the young?
(Calvino 1984, 169)

When some notions about specific traits of Japanese culture become conscious, Japan itself can be seen by the foreigner as not close but not remote. Mr Palomar has rather precise expectations about what Zen asks to his adepts, "contemplation of the absolute" (Calvino 1983, 83). Furthermore, the familiarity with the twentieth-century Japanese novelists' works in their Western translations allows Calvino to identify himself with the Japanese fictitious novelist Takakumi Ikoka and to introduce in *On the carpet of leaves illuminated by the moon* a collection of *topoi* from Japanese narrative: the falling of the (ginkgo) leaves, the flowers of water lily, the reflection of the moon on the water of a lake. Still, Mr Okeda's silent or laconic remarks to his disciple's theories, warn him not to let himself "go in hasty conjectures" (Calvino 1979, 234), for example when he tries to compare the reading of a novel with the sensation of naturalistic elements: the equation signs-nature does not seem to be straightforward. Okeda's disciple somehow incarnates the point of view of the novice who has not fully grasped (and maybe will not ever grasp) Japanese culture's deep spirit (actually the story does not say whether Mr Okeda's student is Japanese or not, but his attitude towards the "deepest secrets" of the Japanese culture is that of a novice). To the novice, Japan, as the young lady of *The Old Woman in the Purple*, maintains its remote-exotic-mythical connotation: "This girl has nothing Western about her; she is an apparition from another age (who knows which?) [...]" (Calvino 1984, 164-165).

The idea of remoteness is largely present in *Silk*, mainly at a metaphorical level: "Tiny circular waves deposited the lake water on the shore, as if they had been sent there, from afar" (Baricco 1996, 32). That which is remote and not close is the extraneous, and the corresponding feeling is the estrangement when facing the other. Japan is described according to the metaphor of "the end of the world": "And where, exactly, might it be, this Japan? [...] 'Straight that way'. He said. 'At the end of the world'" (Baricco 1996, 16). Again: "The world seemed centuries away" (Baricco 1996, 33). In

other passages of the book, the Japanese element is connoted with a feeling of relative closeness. For example, Hervé Concur seems to have some knowledge of the Oriental traditions: “He recalled having read in a book that it was costume for Oriental men to honour the faithfulness of their lovers by giving them not jewels but the most beautiful, elegant birds” (Baricco 1996, 37). The young lady herself is a bridge between the European world and the Japanese one: she has Western looks, and still her language is Japanese, therefore she is the hybrid element of the story. In the end, through the mediation of the young lady’s love, Hervé Joncour becomes to some extent “familiar” to Japan, so that people from Lavilledieu see him changed and admire his way of life, even though they do not ascribe that to the Japanese experience: “They said that he had been like that even as a young man, before Japan” (Baricco 1996, 93).

A diatextual analysis applies to rhetoric procedures of sensemaking. It investigates texts as events charged with meaning. A narrative program situated at a superficial level can be traced back to its deep structure, exploring the way of sensemaking. When connecting the texts in a virtuous interaction, it is possible to clarify the latent narratives at work behind the curtain of the surface discourse. Considering Pasolini’s, Calvino’s and Baricco’s works above mentioned, at least three narratives can be detected.

The “Sensuality” narrative: this is connected to the semiotic square (See fig. 1 above) and to the actants’ narrative programs related to the lust for a young and graceful lady. Japanese eroticism as depicted in the texts considered has complex and multifaceted traits (as affirmed in *Eros and Discontinuity* from *Collection of Sand*). Sexuality is even akin to spiritualism, even though it often assumes perverse shades (Calvino defines *On the carpet of leaves illuminated by the moon* as the perverse novel of the series). Sexuality can pass through a mediated and indirect contact, being a sort of short or long distance eroticism. The role of sight is essential, for example in *Silk*: “[...] those eyes [...] were fixed with disconcerting intensity, on him: as if from the start, from under the eyelids, they had done nothing else” (Baricco 1996, 25). Sight can be associated to a perverted eroticism, as in the voyeurism of Mr Okeda in *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler*: “He was staring hard, not at his wife and me but at his daughter watching us. In his cold pupil, in the firm twist of his lips, was reflected Madame Miyagi’s orgasm reflected in her daughter’s gaze” (Calvino 1979, 244). Touch is as much important for the definition of sensuality. A character can touch the other through a third one:

She approached, took one hand, brought it to her face, touched it with her lips, and then, holding it tight, place it on the hand of the girl who was beside her, and held it there, so that it couldn't escape (Baricco 1996, 55).

Or again in *On the carpet of leaves illuminated by the moon*: “[...] with Makiko's apparition in my eyes and Madame Miyagi's contact on my skin I was about to be overcome by voluptuousness” (Calvino 1979, 243). Characters can kiss each other indirectly: “Slowly, she rotated it [the cup] until she had her lips at the exact point where he had drunk” (Baricco 1996, 27). Their touch can be light: “The last thing was a hand that opened his and placed something in a palm” (Baricco 1996, 38); or furtive: “I realized that through a rare and sweet chance, I had been grazed at the same moment by the left nipple of the daughter and there might nipple of the mother [...]” (Calvino 1979, 236).

The combination of sight and touch takes the form of synaesthesia in *Silk*: “A wet cloth was laid over his eyes. [...] And the hands of a woman [...] dried him, caressing his skin, everywhere: those hands, and that fabric woven of nothing” (Baricco 1996, 38). A woman writes to Hervé Joncour a letter where she imagines that he caresses himself thinking of her: “[...] don't open your eyes if you can, and caress yourself, your hands are beautiful” (Baricco 1996, 89). Hélène's sensuality takes on a Japanese nuance.

Seeing with the mind's eyes or being able to “perceive the distance between one leaf and another, the empty” (Calvino 1979, 237) links sensation and sensibility to spirituality: “How is the end of the world?” asked Baldabiau. ‘Invisible’” (Baricco 1996, 29). Both sensuality and spirituality stress the importance of going beyond the mere perception: this leads us to the “Zen” narrative. It is the theme of *Palomar*: the contemplation of absolute. There is a shift in the actantial roles. The object is no more a woman but rather clarity of mind, concentration, refinement of perception and a new grace in gestures: “[...] an absence of sensations over a broad part of the perceptive field is the condition necessary for our sensitivity to concentrate locally and temporally” (Calvino 1979, 237); “Makiko, the youngest Okeda daughter, came to serve the tea, with her self-possessed movements and her still slightly childish grace” (Calvino 1979, 234); “That man [...] always moved within a bubble of emptiness” (Baricco 1996, 35). The grace and precision in movements is associated in *Silk* to the Japanese culture's rituals: “They said that that island produced the most beautiful silk in the world. It had been

doing so for more than a thousand years, following rites and secrets that had achieved a mystic precision” (Baricco 1996, 19).

The environment turns into a Chinese shadow play, a “floating world” made of nothingness, as the feeling evoked by the Japanese silk: “If you held it between your fingers, it was like grasping nothing” (Baricco 1996, 19). Again:

The dwelling of Hara Kei seemed to be drowning in a lake of silence. [...] There were no doors, and on the paper walls shadows appeared and disappeared without a sound. It did not seem like life: if there was a name for all that, it was: theatre (Baricco 1996, 37).

The third narrative refers to the Japanese as put in the actantial role of opponents. They are perceived as a rival force (“They were the Japanese! The enemies! That was the enemy’s field!”), in the role of the exotic enemy *par excellence*. They are “crumbling and full of fascination” (Pasolini 1949, 26). Elsewhere, the Japanese move with “a cunning languor, like a hunted animal in its den” (Baricco 1996, 33). Their plans are sly: “I realized that it was he, Mr Okeda, who kept tightening, strand by strand, the net that held me” (Calvino 1979, 240). The “Enemy” narrative is less extensively represented than the “Sensuality” and the “Zen” narratives, yet it is as much present in the subtext of the *corpus* we have considered.

Conclusion

We can finally try to outline the possible connections or relationships among the above mentioned narratives. It can be argued that there is a tendency from remoteness to closeness starting from the Enemy narrative and ending with the “Sensuality” and “Zen” narrative. What is meant here is that whilst the depiction of the Japanese “Enemy” is connoted in terms of extraneousness, the “Sensuality” narrative implies some sort of relationship with the Japanese Other, and the “Zen” narrative, for its part, refers to a set of expectations about the Japanese concept of mental clarity or enlightenment. Nevertheless, one must not forget that the Japanese “Enemy”, as portrayed in Pasolini’s novel, preserves its fascinating traits, while the sensual attraction towards the Japanese women in both *On the carpet of leaves illuminated by the moon* and *Silk* is not exempt from envy or conflict as unavoidable consequences of approaching the Other. Moreover, while the dimension of “Sensuality” seems to refer to the concepts of remote and not close (*déjà-vu*), or to an unconscious short circuit in perception, the “Zen” experience

implies something like an extended state of consciousness. This concept is not too distant, at least in Calvino's novels, from the Western idea of contemplation, so that Japanese tradition appears to the traveller or to the disciple as not too remote, if not too close.

In the set of texts examined, one can easily notice a shift from the spiritual to the carnal dimension, moving from the "Sensuality" narrative to the "Enemy" and "Zen" ones, even if the Japanese enemies are surrounded by a halo of ghostly mystery (they can be mistaken for phantoms!) and the Japanese women are often enveloped in an aura of ethereal sensuality. There is time for a final consideration about the differences between the two semantic axes that guided our analysis of the deep structure and of the latent narratives of the three authors' texts. If it can be said that, as for the continuum remote-close, the text *corpus* considered in this study is unbalanced towards remoteness and exoticism, even if there is no lack of examples of relationship and "hybridisation" with the Japanese Other. Differently, about the continuum spiritual-carnal, the three authors stress the co-implication and intertwining between corporeal and incorporeal elements.

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