

Billboard, Banner, Blackboard - the image of language

Dr. Marco Bohr in conversation with Marina Warner on her photographs of the Cultural Revolution

Introduction: Rut Bles Luxemburg

In 2012 the Royal College of Art hosted an international conference, *The Shadow of Language*¹, which brought together artists and academics to explore the interplay between image, language and translation by focusing on contemporary Chinese art practices.

At the conference Marina Warner, the Anglo-Italian writer of fiction, criticism and history, addressed the question of translation through the shadows in animation in her keynote lecture, 'The Ambiguous Life of Shadows'. It was then that I found out that Marina Warner had a large collection of photographs she had taken in China less than a year before Mao Zedong's death. At the tail end of the Cultural Revolution, the country was starting to open up after decades of determined isolation. New political and economic relationships were being established, and invitations extended to artists and intellectuals in the West, such as Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva. The Italian filmmaker Michelangelo Antonioni was also invited, in 1972, by Premier Zhou Enlai to make the film *Chung Kuo, Cina*, a three and a half hour long document that focuses on the life of the people in China.

Warner's fascination with Chinese culture began in her childhood, and she had already published a biography of the Empress Dowager Tz'u-hsi three years

¹ *The Shadow of Language* was co-convened by Professor Olivier Richon, School of Fine Art, RCA, in collaboration with Birmingham City University, as the 6th Annual Conference of the University's Centre for Chinese Visual Arts.

before her visit to China. The photographs that Marina Warner produced during her time in China were not driven by a journalistic impulse to publish or disclose, but to seek an understanding of a country that she had only encountered through her childhood reading of fairy tales and later through historical research. Her photographs, in colour and in black and white, were driven by the writer's occupation with text and language. The big-character posters (*dazibao*), texts on walls, billboards, banners and blackboards appear repeatedly in the collection. The notion of the shadow that language casts on the image, both literary and visually, gives the collection of Marina Warner's China photographs a significant status as a body of work created by artist and writer as one.

In advance of the book publication of these images, hitherto unseen, Rut Blee Luxemburg invited the photographer and scholar of visual culture Marco Bohr to speak with Marina Warner about her experiences in China in relation to the question of the image. Below is a transcribed excerpt of their conversation from early Spring 2017.

Marco Bohr (MB hereafter):

Your father-in-law² had arranged the first merchant bank agreement with China. Do you think this gave you better access to certain situations or images? Did it make your life easier or more difficult as a journalist, as a photographer?

Marina Warner (MW hereafter):

We didn't do anything unsupervised. I don't think we were ever allowed out on our own. When I look back on it now, I realise they must have put in a huge amount of preparation, because absolutely everywhere we went we were greeted by the Revolutionary Committee, and given these enormous speeches stacked with statistics. Every day we were taken to see a different aspect of the great achievements of the People's Republic, and they were rather fascinating. We went to schools, we went to the *People's Daily* and met the editor. Now I realise it was extraordinary – sometimes youth takes things for granted – it was the most amazing privilege to be given all this access. But at the same time we were fed a lot of lies- and illusions.

MB:

Would you have been given the same privilege as a journalist? If you were working by yourself?

MW:

I very much doubt it. You couldn't have got into these places. You wouldn't get several hours' interview with the *People's Daily* editor – because everything took a long time with the interpreting. And I asked questions all the time, such as 'How many women journalists do you have?' They'd say, 'We have five women journalists, but we are going to improve. Under the Revolutionary Committee, we are always improving.' All the way through they admit to shortcomings.

MB:

Constant improvement.

MW:

I kept a journal so I have detailed notes. In Shanghai, for example, the neighbourhood committee tells us they've managed to clear away all the brothels and there are no illegitimate children any more. I ask, 'What happens if people fall in love and maybe have a baby?'. 'It never happens', they say.

MB:

Of course. Maybe it's my knowledge of China at that time – or maybe this is actually evident in the photographs that you took – but there is a sense that the images are somewhat stage-managed, or somewhat directed by a hidden hand. I'm curious: were there any direct forms of censorship that were superimposed on you? Or maybe was it more indirect, and you imposed it on yourself?

² The barrister and politician Lord (Hartley) Shawcross (1902-2003).

MW: Our guides and minders didn't conceal that they were stage-managing our experience. They weren't ashamed of that at all. There were some shocking moments, actually. For example, we were taken to a bookshop, and of course we were very interested and very excited. But it became very clear that the bookshop was entirely a showcase for foreigners, that no Chinese were allowed in this bookshop and certainly not allowed the books that were in the bookshop. Because of my interest in Chinese poetry – in the poets, the very famous poets, like Tu Fu [Du Fu], and so forth – I was shown the books, but I was told 'No Chinese can ever have these.'

We had brought books with us. I had an old guidebook to China, and this caused passionate curiosity because they had never seen pictures like those in this book. The fact that their own country was being recounted in this book in ways they had not seen was totally fascinating to them. Then there were special shops for foreigners where you could buy antiques, but they were also closed to locals. That was made very clear: nobody pretended. 'We're going to take you to a very special shop, just for you.'

But I was never stopped from taking a photograph, possibly because our visit was so carefully supervised.

MB:

Let's talk about this attention that you were subjected to. I think we should briefly talk about that, because it does come out in some of your pictures. You're a Western woman photographing in China in 1975, when the country was virtually closed off to the outside world. To what extent were you the subject of curiosity – you specifically? How did that impact the way you interacted with people? How did it impact the photographs that you took?

MW:

I couldn't really engage with people. It wasn't just not having the language. Distance was imposed by the formalities around us. Again and again in my diary I write, 'It was terrible', because would go to the museum in the Forbidden City, for example, and the guide would whack aside the people in front of an exhibit. He would literally hit them. We'd say, 'Please don't do that.' And he'd say, 'But you are the visitors from England.' So people would look at us, you can imagine, but they were very quiet and very controlled. There was never any anger. But it was simply shocking.

I think you can see in the photographs that there was a kind of miasma around us – a force-field, sometimes a negative force-field – which everyone had to get out of the way of. In my diary I'm constantly saying, 'Incredibly uncomfortable day today'.

MB:

I want to now return to the frequent depictions of Mao that appear in your photographic work. There are framed images of him we can see in factories, in classrooms, and so forth. In this context, photography is used to promote Mao as icon. Indeed, one could argue that photography and iconography are almost interchangeable in this context. Similar photographic strategies were used in Communist Eastern Europe. I can think of photographic depictions of Enver Hoxha or Nicolae Ceaușescu in Romania. Can you tell us how the people you photographed reacted and interacted with the iconic depictions of Mao? Do you think their relationship with the photographic depictions of Mao might have had an impact on how they related to the medium of photography in general?

MW:

You are right about icons. There weren't many 'souvenirs' you could buy, no postcards or such, but we did bring back fabric images printed with photographs of the world leaders who were admired in China: Mao, of course, Marx, Lenin – and Hoxha.

Certainly photography was mostly present as a political discourse. There was very little photography outside that. I don't think that the *People's Daily* had many photographs. On billboards the photography was in bright colours or painted in photorealist style – often very cheerful, with wonderful harvests, and marvellous young women striding across landscapes. This kind of graphic use of photography almost turns into illustration. Lots of photographs and revolutionary songs and revolutionary ballets everywhere. That was the main circulation of images.

As far as I remember there were no private cameras. I'm trying to remember if there were any other pictures. If I had seen any other pictures I would have taken them, because I was interested. One of my main interests is religious iconography. Certainly Mao's presence was the central focus and his image hung in classrooms where the crucifix or the statue of the Virgin Mary would be in a convent, as I experienced as a schoolgirl. There were also relics. When we went to Yan'an, he was still alive, but the museum in Yan'an had relics of the Long March. The horse that he had ridden had been stuffed and put on display. So, there was a real sense of his aura. His aura as a saint. The saint-hero. Still alive, but only just.

MB:

Which is partially created through the medium of photography.

MW:

There was also in Yan'an a very beautiful photograph of him as a young man with one of his sons. I took that poster. He was very tall, very imposing. It's interesting that in this respect he was like Nelson Mandela, also unusually tall. The sort of sense of these graceful, tall men – and when he was young and thin, Mao was a very impressive figure – and he remained so.

MB:

What I find fascinating is that not only is photography a purely political tool, but it's a political tool wholly owned by the state. The state has absolute power over how images are produced, reproduced, disseminated, consumed, and so forth. Here you are as journalist and photographer and you're clearly piercing that dominance, as a photographer working there yourself.

The other big political tool appearing in your photographs are the propaganda signs. There appear quite a large number of them in your photographs. It almost appears as if you're slightly obsessed with them, even though I presume you couldn't read them. Can you explain your fascination with these political propaganda signs?

MW:

I think that one of the reasons for my first passion for Chinese culture was the calligraphy. And when I was there, I was awestruck that there was so much public writing of the dense and difficult kind. Actually it *is* astonishing. This was a country in which people lived in quite serious poverty, where the night soil was carried out every morning by people on bicycles, and huge cities – Shanghai – did not have main drainage. They did not have a sewage system. The night soil was treated to become manure for agriculture. So it was then fairly primitive in social organization, and yet it was a culture where many many people could read and write to a very high level. They were able to use these political blackboards to promulgate policy and people would be poring over them. In terms of literacy and literate culture, China is probably unparalleled. Some scholars, such as James Simpson, have argued that the translation of the Bible was not an emancipatory act because before the Bible was translated you could do what you wanted with the stories. You received them orally and therefore, when you transmitted them, you were likely to reshape them. Once printing was established, control from the centre began. You begin getting imprimaturs and a very strong ability to determine the correct text. So the two go together, as it were state control or official control and print literacy – in a way that doesn't happen in an oral culture. I heard an oral storyteller perform the other day – Sherine al-Ansari – and she opened her session by saying that her parents had been terribly strict and oppressive, and she began telling stories because it was somewhere where she could be completely free, as they left no material trace.

There's a relationship between lack of print culture and variety of opinion and narrative. Of course one of the reasons the Chinese are all reading the blackboards is that is where they would discover the current script for correct behaviour. That is where the regulations are proclaimed. It was the tail end of the Cultural Revolution and they had been through so many extremely dangerous times, in which suddenly the doctrine would change and suddenly 'you shouldn't have been like this' and 'you should be like this'. People who had served their lives for other people – teachers, engineers – suddenly were degraded as being exploiters of the poor. You had to find out where you would be safe and this is where the blackboards came in: they told you what was the current party line. It was then in a state of

volatility because we were there when the anti-Confucius, anti-Lin Biao movement was in full swing. Lin Biao had been riding really high, as Mao's second in command, and suddenly he fell. With him fell a whole raft of ideas and policies and forms of behaviour. We were taken to meet some of the intellectuals they were re-educating in the countryside, and they told us they were very happy looking after pigs. You can imagine how survival must have been very difficult.

MB:

You talk about the fact that you were photographing China at the tail end of Cultural Revolution and that's evident in the work. Your work generally depicts a country that is in a depression economically, socially, and most certainly culturally. The historical context of your work is important because you photograph China in the dying days of the Cultural Revolution. Mao passed away just a year after you took your photos, and he left behind a country that was generally perceived as impoverished and isolated. We are aware of this today in hindsight but when you took your photographs at the time, did you get a sense that this was a system on the verge of collapse? Was there a general feeling amongst the people that you photographed or the minders that you had that something needed to change?

MW:

No. They were very, very confident and very happy and committed to the system as it was unfolding. They admitted their shortcomings in the Revolution, that they needed to improve certain things. They would say, 'We have to have more women' in certain professions, for example. But basically they believed that intellectuals would continue to be re-educated in the countryside and they would be happy with the process. The statistics they gave us were mostly just torrents of success stories. I didn't get the impression they thought they were deceiving themselves or anyone else. I had gone to China filled with idealism about Maoism, and these encounters and conversations plunged me into a tremendous disillusionment.

My account [in my diary] is quite mixed, in the sense that I kept on hoping that China really had changed human nature. I know that sounds naive but I thought they might have actually managed, that they had found a way of being equal. But it became very clear there were intense hierarchies of privilege and freedom, and that everybody had to be in the system – you could not be marginal if you were going to survive. The people who did survive were the top cadres, so the people who rose... (whispers: *It's happening here now...* It's very different here because we're allowed to speak, but the same thing's happening.) Highly privileged cadres were served different food, with people unable to get on unless they conform. You can be the most brilliant, maverick philosopher, recognised all over the world, but no academic now can survive if he or she does not contribute to the REF (Research Excellence Framework), for example, in the UK. That's very Chinese, as China was then and even before, in imperial times when the mandarins ruled and stifled expression.

And also the surveillance. They were very proud of their systems of surveillance, very proud that they

had eradicated crime. I was very impressed by that too. I felt it was fantastic that they had got rid of prostitution, of the stewpots that they used to have during the Nationalist period when Shanghai was a kind of wild brothel and opium was widely smoked. I thought it was wonderful that they had made this selfless society in which people had increased the food and were now feeding themselves. The Yellow River had been dammed, the Yangtze River had been controlled and people weren't being flooded out of their homes and fields, and dying in their thousands the way they did before. Or so we were told.

But even then it became clear that the cost of this in human terms was incredibly high. The system of surveillance was very, very tight. They described it to us with pride. In Shanghai when we met the Neighbourhood Watch Committee, they described the system of cells that were spread out through the area so that nobody ever would be able to have any kind of love affair without it being known. (I have two photographs of them. They're the family with the clock, and obviously doing very well, as they had a clock, and their own picture of Mao in their sitting room, also a sign of their comfortable circumstances.) Total surveillance operated.

But we did see lovers sometimes - I write in my diary how pleased I was to see some lovers, hiding under open umbrellas.

[...]

MB:

Knowing what we know today - that your photographs depict the final months of Mao's reign – how do you yourself view your own photographs? Do you see them as a personal archive or do you see them more like a historical record?

MW:

I knew first of all that many images were of blackboards, so they weren't even printed, that they were ephemeral, and I sensed they would become historic documents.

The encounter with China then was very lowering for me chiefly because of the hierarchy and privileges enforced by surveillance and obedience, rigid obedience, but above all because the regime was deliberately setting out to forget. Ai Weiwei has created so much work on the theme of this erasure, and recently László Krasznahorkai, the Hungarian writer who won the international Man Booker in 2015, has published *Destruction and Sorrow beneath the Heavens*, ferociously lamenting this wilful amnesia – and wreckage – of the ancient culture of China. With the photographs I was taking I suppose I was trying to act as a keeper of memories for the future, to add a piece to the historical record.

Contributors Details

Dame Marina Warner

Marina Warner is a writer of fiction and cultural history, whose books include *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (1976), *Joan of Arc: The Image of Female Heroism* (1982) and *Monuments & Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form* (1988). In 1994 she gave the BBC Reith Lectures on the theme of *Six Myths of Our Time*. She has explored the fairytale tradition *in from the Beast to the Blonde* (1994) and *Stranger Magic: Charmed States and The Arabian Nights* (2011). She has curated exhibitions, including *The Inner Eye* (1996), *Metamorphing* (2002-3), and *Only Make-Believe: Ways of Playing* (2005); her essays on art will be collected in *Art & Enchantment* (forthcoming Thames & Hudson). [CUT:Her third novel, *The Lost Father*, was short-listed for the Booker prize in 1988; it was followed by *Indigo*, a retelling of *The Tempest*, and, in 2000, by *The Leto Bundle*, a novel about a refugee travelling in time.] Her most recent book is *Once Upon a Time: A Short History of Fairy Tale*. A third collection of short stories, *Fly Away Home*, was published in 2015. In 2015 she was made DBE and given the Holberg Prize in the Arts and Humanities. She is Professor of English and Creative Writing at Birkbeck College, a Fellow of the British Academy and President-Elect of the Royal Society of Literature.

Dr Marco Bohr

Marco Bohr is the Postgraduate Programme Director for the Arts at Loughborough University. He has contributed to a number of edited volumes such as *The Contemporary Visual Studies Reader*, *Frontiers of Screen History*, *On Perfection*, *Films on Ice: Cinemas of the Arctic* as well as the book series *Directory of World Cinema* and the book series *World Film Locations*. Marco has also contributed to the *Dandelion Journal*, the exhibition catalogue for *Modernity Stripped Bare* held at the University of Maryland and the artist book *Kim Jong Il Looking at Things* published by Jean Boîte Éditions. Marco is on the editorial board for the journal *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture*.

Rut Blees Luxemburg

Rut Blees Luxemburg is an artist whose work explores the phenomenon of the urban, ranging from large-scale photographic works to public art installations. Her recent public work *Silver Forest* is a monumental photographic phantasmagoria rendered in concrete for the façade of Westminster City Hall depicting urban silver birch forests from Beijing to London.

Rut Blees Luxemburg is a reader in urban aesthetics at The Royal College of Art where she teaches in the photography programme. She has edited with her students an acclaimed series of photobooks produced by Black Dog Publishing that chart new directions in photography in relation to contemporary writing.

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