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Around your nose, between your two eyes…

Chris Marker’s Le mystère Koumiko and the Secrets of Mimesis

Robin Weichert

Filmed in Tokyo during the 1964 Olympic Games and completed in 1965, Le mystère Koumiko retains several major themes of Chris Marker’s earlier career as filmmaker, photographer and writer, while at the same time anticipating some of his later works. Conceived as a sequel to his previous film about the Games in Helsinki (Olympia 52), Le mystère Koumiko forms a logical extension of his earlier travels in the Far East which had resulted in two films (Lettre de Sibérie, Dimanche à Pekin) and a photo album (Coréennes). But the film also set off Marker’s lasting involvement with Japan, a country he would return to in a series of later films, including Sans Soleil (1982) and Level 5 (1996). In contrast to Olympia 52, Le mystère Koumiko shifts from a depiction of an international sports event to the portrayal of a young Japanese woman, Kumiko Muraoka. While conventionally classified as a documentary, the film’s title already hints at the difficulty of conceiving it as a transparent record of factual reality. Thus, one of several English-language monographs devoted to Marker’s cinematographic oeuvre concludes its summary of the film with the remark that “something in the depiction of Koumiko remains opaque,” while another author comments that “Koumiko escapes capture…leaving her enigmatic grace intact.” Yet a third writer fails to appreciate the title in surmising that “the film is ostensibly about Koumiko, who is really not that much of a mystery.”

The French mystère may signify that which is inaccessible to human reason even though it might also indicate a riddle that can be solved or a secret known only to an
Inscrutable and opaque it may be, a mystery might still be discovered and exposed or hidden and shared. Hence, the film possibly presents something inconceivable or shows something that can be uncovered and grasped, poses or solves a puzzle, hides a secret or introduces us to one. Rather than presupposing the mystery of *Le mystère Koumiko* to signify self-evident opacity, in my reading of the film I assume this apparent duplicity and complexity (re mystery) to be both obstacle and source of comprehension or revelation and concealment at once. Instead of trying to detect the mystery as such, I therefore propose, one might rather find a thread leading to it by departing from the opposite direction, thereby looking for the effect that mystery creates, namely, puzzlement and confusion. In other words, anyone who witnesses a mystery becomes "mystified", i.e. gets duped, fooled, baffled, bewildered, and perplexed.

*Le mystère Koumiko* (the film)

Most of the images in *Le mystère Koumiko* are documentary in origin, consisting of footage shot by Marker during October of 1964. They show the urban landscape of Tokyo, a variety of sites around the city, including the Olympic Stadium and amusement parks, streets in business and popular districts, department stores, temples and train platforms, phone booths and neon-lights at night. In most of these images, Kumiko is present, but we also see passers-by, some animals such as dogs and cats or sculptures of dinosaurs. Cars and planes appear and trains and ships pass by. We look out from the windscreen of a car moving on a road, the window of a train, even a boat. There are images of images, posters pasted on a wall, and the flickering light of a television screen. Still images flash up as the title pages and headlines of newspapers, pictures and photographs taken from magazines or prints of Japanese woodcuts are suddenly interjected into the motion images in color, and black and white photo-portraits of Kumiko and close-ups of her face are juxtaposed in a series of montages.

An array of sounds accompanies these images, traffic noise or cheering,
announcements from a loudspeaker or the voice of a radio commentator, advertising jingles and voices speaking in French and Japanese. Female and male voices read out news reports, some state facts or present statistics, some utter only the date, others seem to refer to places, things, or events occurring in the image. Some are murmuring and barely audible while others seem to engage in conversation. Frequently, orchestral and Japanese music plays along with the images, and there are distorted sounds or the rhythm of a steady beat being produced by a synthesizer. Among this soundscape, we hear the first-person male narrator speaking in a voiceover. He remains anonymous and faceless throughout the film, but his voice, without reverberation, sounds as if he is talking to a confidant. At the beginning, he introduces Kumiko who appears during the first sequence of images when the camera zooms in on her face amidst the spectators at the Olympic stadium. The narrator claims to have met her incidentally, and tells us her name, profession, her approximate age as well as her likes and dislikes. A while later, he interviews her, asking her opinion about beauty or world events, her thoughts, and expectations in life, to which Kumiko responds in French.

Although the conversation is not synchronized, the presence of Kumiko on the screen and the voices which announce the date or read the news reports in-between give the impression that these dialogues are synchronous with the staging of the Olympic Games in Tokyo. After the last dialogue ends with images of Kumiko looking out through the window of a high-rise building at sunset over the city of Tokyo, the voice of a journalist reports on the closing ceremony of the Games. Then, the male commentator explains in the past tense that he has returned to Paris, yet not without leaving Kumiko a questionnaire, and that Kumiko has taped her answers and sent them to him. While we continue to see similar images of her and of Tokyo as in the first half of the film, we see them in the second half as images of the past. With her speech being framed as a taped letter, we listen to her voice talking from a spatial and temporal distance. The narrator’s questions appear as intertitles. Only towards the end does the male voiceover interfere once more by introducing the last question. He concludes the film by repeating Kumiko’s last words, then at the end,
like a verbal zoom-out, he adds the line: “There are 50 million women in Japan, and on the earth, one and a half billion.”

While a mystery may or may not be found in the film’s images and sounds or the conversation between Kumiko and the narrator, the first instance of “mystification” in the film can easily be identified. It may be found in the sequence in which Le mystère Koumiko introduces its own title, that is, in the title sequence.

Jean Cocteau and La Famille Fenouillard (the matrix)

In contrast to the title itself, which represents and stands for the film, the title sequence (générique) is already part of it. The sequence creates a separation of the inside from the outside, the cinematic narrative from film commentary, intradiegetic from extradiegetic information, and at the same time constitutes a threshold, providing a focus that allows for transition into the movie. It constitutes the beginning of the film it simultaneously represents. It may, therefore, as Georg Stanitzek points out, be read as a peritext, close to the text to which it refers and entering into view with it. Often, the title sequence offers a “matrix of imagination”, it doubles the movie, anticipating albeit compressed in a configuring manner the elements of the film to come (Stanitzek 45, 52–54).

The sequence preceding or introducing Le mystère Koumiko begins with a quote from Jean Cocteau’s Mon premier voyage, the travelogue of Cocteau’s tour around the world which he undertook in 1936 in imitation of Jules Verne’s Around the World in 80 Days. The quote refers to two pictures in an episode of La Famille Fenouillard, the classic cartoon strip about the bourgeois Fenouillard family’s involuntary journey around the world.

True Japan, that’s Madame Fenouillard and her daughters, making the guards drunk in order to free their husband and father by bursting through the paper wall. (6)

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The white letters on black ground fade out and the screen turns black. Zooming in from the center of the image, a television monitor emerges which then shows a sequence of animated slides, five pictures from an episode of the Fenouillards’ adventure in Japan, while a voiceover reads the original captions. On the first slide, Monsieur Fenouillard, donning Japanese clothes, sandals and hat, is seen teaching his family—equally dressed “Japanese”—how to properly behave in Japan, in order to “impose themselves on the savage, uncivilized population.” Yet, on the second picture, the family sees two Japanese gentlemen in Western dress, greeting each other by lifting their hats in a perfectly European manner, with Madame Fenouillard commenting rather ironically that “for ‘savage peoples’ they appear singularly civilized.” On the next slide, M. Fenouillard observes a Japanese samurai in traditional dress, “even more Japanese than himself,” entering a house guarded by an armored soldier and he regains his self-assurance. But the spectacle repeats itself. Soldiers in Western uniforms, with guns on shoulders, march by and penetrate the same house on the fourth slide before Japanese officials in courtly dress appear and follow the soldiers through the gate on the fifth. On the last slide, M. Fenouillard drops both straw-hat and umbrella. “Madame ceases to be ironic, and M. Fenouillard doesn’t feel ashamed to explain to himself that he doesn’t understand a bit of it.”

The short sequence drawn from *La Famille Fenouillard* thus ends with M. Fenouillard’s puzzlement and his admission of incomprehension. This marvel results from a sight, a spectacle which renders the distinction between savage and civilized, the foreign and the familiar, original and imitation impossible. The Japanese that Fenouillard observes are both perfectly Western and authentically Japanese at the same time. Fenouillard is neither able to distance himself and gain mastery over the Other by dressing up Japanese and “imposing” himself through his own mimetic behavior, nor is he able to keep an ironic distance by seeing through and exposing the imperfect mimetic behavior of the Other. The Japanese thus cancel out Fenouillard’s superior observing position, thereby rendering the distinction between Self and Other, identity and alterity obsolete. M. Fenouillard falls into a state of confusion. The only possible reaction remaining is bafflement and surprise, let alone exclaiming...
that he is dealing with something incomprehensible.

Wonderment about the simultaneity of things perfectly Western and perfectly Japanese repeats itself throughout the film. The Japanese dressed in Western uniform appear as well as any ‘samurai’ in golden armor. We see an Olympic boxing match and later practitioners of Kendō, the Olympic fire at the beginning and burning incense in a Japanese temple at the end. Traditional Japanese music accompanies a view of the city’s dazzling neon signs and the French commentary is echoed by Japanese voices. Rather than reading *Le mystère Koumiko* as a ‘doubling’ of the title sequence, I however suggest that one may conceive of the film as a ‘sequel’ to the title sequence and read it as a variation of the original cartoon strip.³⁹

With the last slide, the camera zooms into the picture as its outlines dissolve (Figure 1).³⁹ Just as the viewer thus traverses the TV monitor and is introduced into the movie, in the original picture story M. Fenouillard continues his “quest to understand” by penetrating the building in the background which contains the Japanese emperor’s audience hall.³⁹ Disatisfied with what he takes for an actor’s mediocre stage performance, however, Fenouillard disrupts the “comedy”, is violently restrained by several guards, accused of *lèse-majesté* and sentenced to death. In his prison cell he broods over his strange fate, but eventually “faces the situation with calm and arrives at the conviction that practice engenders habit which is a second nature”.³⁹ He then starts to practice “harakiri” with his umbrella.³⁹

![Figure 1](image)

**Harakiri with umbrella (the vicious circle of mimesis)**

The film begins with an image of a newspaper headline: “The Great day is here!” Just as Fenouillard follows the crowd into the audience hall, we follow crowds of

“Around your nose, between your two eyes...”
spectators into the Olympic stadium where the Japanese Emperor presides over the opening ceremony of the Games. A commentator announces: “The eighteenth Olympic Games have started with an act of reverence, that of Emperor Hirohito…. Japan waited for the Olympic Games since 1940, —but it wasn’t the same Japan. In 1940 the Japanese didn’t produce transistor radios, and the Emperors didn’t bow to anyone.” From the beginning, Le mystère Koumiko introduces a difference, suggesting that Japan is not the “same,” that it might be different from the pre-1940 Japan, the time of Cocteau’s journey and the Fenouillards in Japan. The Fenouillard adventure is only reenacted with a historical difference, consisting of an ironic inflection. By 1964, the Japanese Emperor has truly become an actor in a play being staged for an international audience, the spectacle of the Olympic Games. We discover Western-looking soldiers perfectly miming the Queen’s Guard, but they are actors employed in an amusement park named ‘Dreamland’, and the samurai we see later wear spectacles and ride public buses to join the festival.

In the sequence following the images of the Olympic stadium and an interlude introducing Kumiko, the film further develops M. Fenouillard’s theme of incomprehension and imitation with this sense of historic irony over a montage of shots of the amusement park and scenes of Tokyo’s streets. Just like Fenouillard looking to one side then the other, the image jumps back and forth between people watching or taking pictures and the objects of their gaze. In the stadium, the spectators’ eyes move from right to left, from left to right, pursuing the movement of the runners on the track; they all react simultaneously, laughing at the same time. But it is not only the people in the stadium who are caught up with the spectacle, imitating unconsciously. The camera repeatedly moves back and forth between amateur photographers on the street and the objects of their gaze. The photographers include a young man taking a picture of a sculpture, a person shooting a picture of a school class, and an elderly man photographing an airplane. Other images depict people pressing their ears against the red receivers of the public phone booths. We see images of a flickering television screen and workers squatting in front of public television sets. The sequence thus shows the mimetic machines, cameras, TVs and phones, and people
being captivated by these machines as they use them. A voiceover commentary evinces attempts at understanding, reporting about studies on telephone and camera use or reading out statistics, while failing to provide any meaningful information, one report concluding: "For 21 percent, no life merits to be lived." Finally, a shot shows people lying on benches in front of a public television, seemingly exhausted.

The series of shots conveys a sense of dizziness and distraction caused by an infinite circulation of imitation and mechanical mimesis. The whole of Tokyo has turned into ‘Dreamland,’ and the “outside” has become invisible. The sequence evokes this ‘outside’ through a flash of black and white images, depicting scenes of protest and one mutilated naked torso. The film immediately returns to images of the public benches and television with a male voice reading another news report. Several students have been arrested during protests against the docking of American submarines armed with atomic weapons. “The Mainichi News writes that on the whole the demonstration was conducted quietly and has not much attracted the attention of the citizens of Tokyo, who were occupied with watching the Olympic Games on television.” In the last line, the image track cuts from the image of people assembled around a public television booth to a shot of the Olympic stadium's scoreboard displaying the Olympic message: “The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win, but to take part, just as the most important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle.” In the next shot, we have already returned from the stadium to the street. We see a man hitting a punching ball in imitation of an Olympic boxer. A different voice reads another news report: “The Japanese wrestler Sunichi Kawano… has been chased out of the Olympic village for having lost his match… Kawano’s manager accuses him of having lacked fighting spirit, adding that a similar attitude risked demoralizing the entire Japanese team.”

Through the montages of images, voiceover commentary and writing, the sequence connects the space of the stadium and the street. It shows the circularity of spectatorship, mechanical reproduction, and mimetic behavior as it reveals the ironical function of the Olympic Games. The people are indifferent about their struggle in life because they are watching the Games, and what is valued at the Olympics is

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not to take part but triumph. The man on the street, imitating the Olympic athlete, can neither win at the Olympics, nor is he able to struggle or live his own life.

Through its exploration of Tokyo, *Le mystère Koumiko*—like M. Fenouillard—fails to retrieve any Japanese original except a confusing series of imitation and imitating practices and technologies. It finally discovers that the spectacle is "for real", that it has entered a closed circuit of mimesis. But just like Fenouillard who has dressed up Japanese just as he wants to observe, the film as film, through its reproduction of images, is also already part of the mimetic circle.

After leaving the scene with the amateur boxer, several shots show Kumiko wandering through the streets of Tokyo. As we watch her walking alongside a wall from behind, she turns to look at a movie poster pasted on the wall. The camera pans following her gaze, and for a brief moment the poster remains in the frame. It depicts a young couple embracing under an umbrella in the foreground, while silhouettes of passers-by carrying umbrellas are visible in the background. Next to the image of the couple, the film's title is legible: *Les parapluies de Cherbourg*. In the same instance, the theme-tune of the advertised film, a musical by Jacques Demy from 1964, starts to play. This introduces a long sequence of shots of people carrying umbrellas in the rain on Tokyo's streets, accompanied by the plaintive melody composed by Michel Legrand. Silhouettes of people with umbrellas walk through the frame as in the background of the poster, and in one shot we rediscover the image of the young couple standing together under a single umbrella. However, it is another scene which the sequence seems to particularly dwell on. Repeated twice in succession and a third time at the very end while the last notes of the film tune are being played, the shot shows people slowly walking over a pedestrian crossing (Figure 2).

Not only in the theme of rain and umbrellas, the elevated viewpoint, and
the depiction of people crossing from one side to the other—their faces concealed by the umbrellas they carry, but in the composition of the whole image, the shot of the street-crossing, I suggest, is reminiscent of Hiroshige’s *Sudden Shower over Shin-Ōhashi and Atake.* The *ukiyo-e* print from *One Hundred Views of Edo* depicts a bird’s eye view of a bridge upon which several people are crossing in both directions during a heavy downpour, indicated by slashing lines over the whole picture plane (Figure 3). The bridge in the foreground of Hiroshige’s composition is cropped along the left and right edge of the frame. Similarly, in the shot, the view of the street-crossing is truncated; the two white lines demarcating the crossing cut through the lower and upper edge of the frame and diagonally through the picture plane. In both cases, places that people are supposed to reach, the sidewalk or shore, are located outside the field of view, as is the vantage point, which gives the depicted space an aspect of flatness. In the shot, the contrast of the bright white lines against the asphalt’s dark shades of grey seems to echo the contrast of the light yellow of the bridge against the different shades of deep blue in the background of the print, which may also be felt to reverberate with the mood conveyed by the film’s music. The vertical movement of tilting up the camera during the shot seems to correspond to the vertical format that Hiroshige uses, while the rails of a tramway running through the image and cars intruding from the sides of the frame indicate a horizontal directionality in the shot, just as the timber raft on the river suggests a horizontal directionality in the middle ground of the print.

The whole sequence, titled “Umbrellas of Tokyo” (*Les parapluies de Tokyo*) in the film script, may then, I propose, be read in parallel to M. Fenouillard exercising “harakiri” with his umbrella. Just as Fenouillard surrenders his observational distance and gives up his quest for understanding as well as the possibility of recovering an
"original", the film relinquishes its attempt at grasping Japanese "reality". Like Fenouillard who instead practices a mimetic suicide in order to make the Other into his "second nature", Le mystère Koumiko employs umbrellas in order to imitate and become other. It not only replays another film’s music and reproduces the images on a film poster, but also mirrors the theme and composition of a ukiyo-e, and mimics concurrently thereby Vincent van Gogh’s copy of Sudden Shower over Shin-Ōhashi and Atake, painted in 1887 in oil with a thick, heavy impasto. By imitating a film, a painting, and a print, the film thus risks losing itself in the circle of mimesis and producing images referring to nothing but other images. And yet, the “lyrical” painterly impression that the sequence conveys may stem as well from the room it leaves for contemplation of the images, a scope created by the slow rhythm and solemn timbre of the music, in addition to the slow cuts and repetition of the shots. Le mystère Koumiko makes use of its own cinematographic means in its imitation, just as M. Fenouillard uses his own umbrella in his mimetic effort at practicing "harakiri". Had Fenouillard exchanged his umbrella for a sword, of course, he would be dead.

“I do understand Japanese now!” (Understanding a mystery)

As predicted by Cocteau, M. Fenouillard is saved by his wife from committing a samurai-style ritual suicide. The corresponding cartoon image is reprinted next to Cocteau’s quote in a guidebook on Japan edited by Marker in 1959 for the publishing house Le Seuil. It shows Mme Fenouillard with both hands holding a spear above her head and piercing it into the wall of a house while a guard in samurai armor is lying on the ground sleeping. It is the following image, however, which is alluded to in Marker’s later Sans Soleil. In this 1982 film, the voice of a woman recites letters from a world traveling cameraman named ‘Sandor Krasna’ over stills of television images. She quotes him saying that “for one moment I had the slightly hallucinatory impression that I understood Japanese, —like Monsieur Fenouillard—, but it was a cultural program on NHK about Nerval….” In the cartoon image which the quote refers to, Madame Fenouillard is seen sticking her head through the
Just like Sandor Krasna, who suddenly understands Japanese while watching a program about a French poet and writer on Japanese television, M. Fenouillard perceives his wife and imagines he understands Japanese. The familiar is ‘understood’ as something foreign, the foreign therefore becomes familiar, and the situation is mastered. Through a double misrecognition (i.e. misrecognizing the familiar as something foreign, and then misrecognizing the foreign as something familiar), a comprehension (a paradoxical misunderstanding) of the non-understandable, the mystery, is finally achieved. Yet, what is it exactly that Fenouilllard understands or misunderstands?

M. Fenouillard seems to misapprehend Mme Fenouillard’s words, her name and his own as Japanese. But just as Krasna is watching television, M. Fenouillard—judging from the cartoon image—seems to have at least a glimpse of Madame’s face speaking to him through the hole in the wall. Fenouillard might therefore also recognize or misrecognize his wife’s face, read or misread her lips. Further, only a few pictures earlier, he is shown to be reflecting in his prison cell and a scroll with Japanese writing hangs on the wall, exactly at the spot where his wife’s head later appears (Figure 5). Thus, M. Fenouillard might also have taken her face for the scroll and ‘read’ her face as Japanese calligraphy.

387  (14)  "Around your nose, between your two eyes..."
Cocteau’s quote presents the liberation of M. Fenouillard by Madame Fenouillard at the very beginning of the title sequence as the leitmotiv of the whole film. According to Cocteau, “true Japan” was exactly Mme Fenouillard’s “bursting through the paper wall.” Insofar as in the cartoon the unexpected perforation in the wall entails an “understanding” of Japanese, one might presume that this understanding should also be implicated in *Le mystère Koumiko*. At the same time, Fenouillard’s understanding poses the problem of how voice, image and writing interrelate within the film.

*The unseen voice*

The voice most heard in the film is that of Kumiko, and Kumiko is seen in most of the shots. As one writer comments: “photographic images of Koumiko abound throughout the film and reveal a particular obsession with her face” (Cooper 58). Within *Le mystère Koumiko*, it is Kumiko who disrupts the flow of images and interrupts the mimetic impasse, and it is again Kumiko from whom the narrator requests an understanding of ‘Japan’. While Kumiko is the object of gaze, the male narrator, by contrast, never appears in the image but only speaks as voiceover. In fact, the gaze might at times be directly attributed to this male voice. He not only introduces Kumiko at the beginning from an auctorial position and not without a slightly paternalistic tone, his voice also seems to be to some degree in control of the image track. For example, when he asks Kumiko whether Khrushchev’s resignation had affected her, “worried, amused, moved, interested? Or left cold?”

, a series of photographs with different facial expressions of Kumiko flash up. On the other hand, speaking in the first person and entering into a dialogue with Kumiko, we might expect the narrator to step into the image at any point in time. Building on a Lacanian theory of
subjectivity, Michel Chion has conceptualized this kind of disembodied voiceover which he calls 'acousmêtre' and differentiates it from a commentator who has no personal stake in the image. As the voice is not visualized and cannot be connected to a face or be spatially localized, it appears to be at once inside and outside the image. As not-yet-seen, the acousmêtre is potentially omniscient and omnipotent. According to Chion, complete vocal embodiment or "de-acousmatization" occurs only when the mouth of the speaker is visible.

De-acousmatization, the unveiling of an image and at the same time a place, the human and mortal body where the voice will henceforth be lodged, in certain ways strongly resembles striptease…. In much the same way that the female genitals are the end point revealed by undressing (the point after which the denial of the absence of the penis is no longer possible), there is an end point of de-acousmatization—the mouth from which the voice issues…. as long as the spectator's eye has not "verified" the coincidence of the voice with the mouth… de-acousmatization is incomplete, and the voice retains an aura of invulnerability and magical power. (28)

Commenting on the passage, Kaja Silverman has pointed out that a comparison of the close-up which installs a filmic voice in a filmic body with the unveiling of a woman's genitals implies that both involve a discovery of an absence or lack, anatomical lack in the case of striptease, loss of authoritative knowledge, vision and speech in the case of the unlocalized voice. The comparison therefore seems to suggest that to embody a voice is to feminize it. By thus associating the male subject with knowledge, potency, and transcendence, while identifying the female voice with the female body and thereby conceiving the woman's psyche to be a mere extension of her body, Chion, following Silverman's critique, subscribes to a mode of dominant cinema which situates the female subject on the side of spectacle, locates her speech and vision in an inner diegetic scene, and thereby limits female subjectivity to her body (49–51).

385 (16) "Around your nose, between your two eyes..."
Le mystère Koumiko not only displays an “obsession” with Kumiko’s face, but Kumiko is also “grilled” (Lupton 101) by the male narrator’s questions. Just as the disembodied voiceover begins by asking whether Kumiko is “completely Japanese or not,” the image track’s scanning of her face also seems to express a desire to grasp Kumiko and discover “true Japan” through her. Given the implied distribution of roles between the male narrator and Kumiko in this set-up of voiceover and image-track, one might expect the film to repeat the cinematic mode and the form of “unveiling” which Silverman critiques. However, the liberation of M. Fenouillard through Mme Fenouillard’s bursting through the wall seems to present a completely other mode of “unveiling”, a completely different form of revelatory discovery.

The nose and the lips (gaps of understanding)

The film’s move to capture Kumiko visually and interrogate her Japanese-ness may be seen to culminate in the sequence immediately succeeding the “Umbrellas of Tokyo”.

Over a shot of escalators in a department store, a ‘radio voice’ (voix radio) echoed by a Japanese voice summarizes a news article about mannequins in department stores. According to the report, visitors from abroad are struck that the mannequins in Japan all have European faces, blonde hair and short noses. While the author of the article denies that an “Occidental complex” (un complexe occidentale) is involved, he does not find any satisfactory answer to the problem so that an explanation of the fact remains to be given. With the report’s conclusion, a montage of photographs and motion images show mannequins in a shop and Kumiko looking at them. In the voiceover, Kumiko explains that she has not much of an opinion about the problem and that the mannequins simply serve to show off the clothes. The narrator insists that an ideal other than the Japanese is being emulated, and further mentions advertisements for aesthetic surgery promoting enlarged eyes or remodeled noses while a series of photographs from magazines, articles and ads for plastic surgery flash up to prove his point. Kumiko replies that it is the fashion of the day, her
face being rather appropriate for the Heian period. The camera then zooms in on her face seen in profile, moves up following her look and with a whip pan comes to rest on the image of a woman’s face on a Heian period picture scroll. Again, the film cuts back to images of a shop selling lingerie and the close-up of a mannequin showing off a bra, as Kumiko explains—referring to Western-looking faces—“funny faces” are popular in Japan. The camera repeats its zoom on another photograph of Kumiko sporting a helmet with an Olympic logo, and the narrator suggests her face to be funny as well. Two black and white photographs show Kumiko smoking a cigarette in the style of Audrey Hepburn, then the camera zooms in on her nose and eyes in two pictures showing alternately her right and left half-profile, while Kumiko repeats that her face is very Japanese. Over an extreme close-up shot of her eyes and nose, the male voice continues:

Je ne sais pas si tu as remarqué, mais… quand tu ris, il y a tout ça qui se plisse, là, autour de ton nez, entre tes deux yeux… Tout se plisse à la fois. Tu sais?
—Ça plie?
—Ça se plis-se! Ça fait des plis.
—Des pris?
—Des jolis plis. Des plis, là… (Marker 20)

I don’t know if you have noticed, but… when you laugh, there is all that which folds, there, around your nose, between your two eyes… Everything is folding at the same time. You know?
—It fold [plie]?
—It folds [plisse]! It makes folds. [plis]
—Takes? [pris]
—Pretty folds. Folds, there…

While the narrator is speaking, the image shows Kumiko laughing, yet only her eyes and nose are visible in the frame. The shot visually proves the existence of “all that
which folds, there” around her nose and between her eyes (Figure 6). The film then successively cuts to three other pictures, a brush-drawing of a pair of eyes, a calligraphy with the Chinese character for ‘face’ (Figure 7), and a photograph of Kumiko holding a sheet of paper with the French word “PLIS” in front of her face with only her eyes visible (Figure 8), before the sequence concludes with a shot of her face while she is walking down the street.

The sequence then not only shows Kumiko’s face, but repeatedly zooms in on her face both on photographs and motion images. But rather than being simply ‘obsessed’ with Kumiko’s face, the sequence is obsessed with only a part of her face. Her mouth is not visible as the camera moves in on her face. Especially in the last shot when Kumiko is supposed to be laughing, her mouth, the essential physical organ and visual attribute for laughter, is outside the
frame. Concurrent with the interrogation by the male voiceover, the image track zooms in towards the center of Kumiko's face in order to find the Archimedean point of Japanese-ness, a point of origin beyond the simultaneity of Western and Japanese attributes, authenticity and imitation. What *Le mystère Koumiko* there discovers is Kumiko's nose and the folds “around her nose and between her eyes.” The nose, Adorno writes, is the "physiognomic principium individuationis, similar to a Schriftzeichen [letter, ideograph] which writes the particular character on the individual’s face” (193). As if to make an exercise out of Adorno’s point, the sequence ends with the character (kanji) for “face” and a photograph of Kumiko holding a piece of paper with the word “PLIS”. The film thus writes the particular characteristic of Kumiko, the Japanese equivalent to the Western “funny face,” within the image of her face. Yet, what has disappeared behind the French word is precisely Kumiko’s Japanese nose.

As Adorno notes, the nose is also the preferred object of false projection, the counter image (Widerspiel) to true mimesis (196). In his essay on fetishism, Freud relates a famous case history of such a projection. The man’s fetish was a 'shine on the nose'. According to Freud, the fetish had to be understood in English, as the patient had been brought up in an English nursery. The ‘shine on the nose’ [in German Glanz auf der Nase] was in reality a ‘glance at the nose’. “The nose was thus the fetish, which, incidentally, he endowed at will with the luminous shine which was not perceptible to others” (311). The fetish is thus understood through a form of misreading, by reading the same text in another language. Through an exchange of one’s native and foreign tongue, Freud shifts the focus back from the object to the subject, from the spectacle to the look, wherein he uncovers that the nose lights up with a ‘luminous shine’ only as a mirror image of the gaze that imparts it.

The dialogue between the narrator and Kumiko may then be read as a variation on Freud’s account. Kumiko substitutes ‘**prise**’ (taken) for ‘**plis**’ (fold). What is ‘taken’, in fact, is the photograph or the film (‘c’est le photo qui est prise’). Through her miscomprehension, mishearing or mispronunciation of "plis", Kumiko shifts attention somewhere else; she diverts the gaze on the ‘plis’ of her nose and returns it to the

813 (20)  "Around your nose, between your two eyes..."
viewer, who has 'taken' her picture. What Kumiko thereby leads us to understand is not the 'folds' of her face where a supposed original Japanese-ness resides, but the gap that is essential to the cinematic situation. As if the fetish had turned into the analyst, Kumiko, like Freud, shifts the attention back from the object to the subject, from the spectacle to the viewer. The viewer resembles the fetishist in the Freudian case. The fetishist imparts the object with a "luminous shine"; he needs the fetish as a spectacle prior to any tactile convergence. He is, first of all, a voyeur. The viewer, however, is a voyeur by definition, as the cinema is founded on the absence of the object. There is no tactile convergence. The gap between the viewer and spectacle remains irreducible.

Yet, when Kumiko is covering half of her face with a sheet of paper on which the word "PLIS" is written, she is exposing yet another second gap. The narrator hints at it in his introduction to the conversation with Kumiko: "Between the takes we talk, Kumiko and I."

There is then a "between" the "take" (prise) and the "talk" (nous parlons). They are separate. The physical nature of film makes an incision or cut between the body and the voice. Kumiko's voice cannot be localized at the symbolic place of vocal production, which is the mouth. 'PLIS', in fact, might be read as an anagram for the link that is missing: LIPS. Even when Kumiko's mouth is visible, we do not see her talking. Even though we hear her voice, her lips do not move. Kumiko is mute in the image, and at the same time she is talking to us from somewhere. The temporal co-incidence of voice and body cannot be verified. This fissure between Kumiko’s voiceless body and her bodiless voice (which is highlighted by her unmoving lips and her voice saying 'pris') displays the dualism that is essential to sound film. It is the unbridgeable gap which exists even if image and sound are recorded synchronously, as the recording apparatuses are divided. It exists at the site of reproduction as well, even if the projection of the image and the playing of sound are synchronized, because the reproduction of both is conducted by two unrelated machines.

As the title sequence and the film script explicitly distinguish between Kumiko and Koumiko, the mystery which Le mystère Koumiko eventually reveals is not the
mystery of a person called Kumiko Muraoka, but the mystery of a film called *The Koumiko Mystery*. What Kumiko’s face and voice uncover is not an original Japanese essence, but a twofold gap. It is a split which is essential not to Japan, but to the cinematic experience. It is the incision between object (*plis*) and gaze (*pris*), body (*lips*) and voice (“*pris*”). The understanding that *Le mystère Koumiko* provides, one might conclude, is similar to that of M. Fenouillard who grasps Japanese by substituting his own for a foreign language, and by disconnecting voice and face. Misunderstanding Japan leads to an understanding of film. The “true Japan” of Jean Cocteau’s quote is nothing but cinema. *Le mystère Koumiko* is a film. And its mystery is film.

Notes


(2) See Lupton 102; Cooper 60; Alter 38. There is a growing literature on Marker’s oeuvre going beyond the scope of these three introductory overviews. Concise analyses on individual films, however, usually focus on the widely acknowledged *La Jetée*, Sans Soleil, or *Level 5*. While Marker’s “fascination” with Japan is frequently mentioned, a close reading of *Le mystère Koumiko* has so far not been tried.

(3) Compare *LE GRAND ROBERT* (1985) Tome VI. 668–669. *Le mystère Koumiko* was distributed in the USA and Germany in 1967. The title was rendered *The Koumiko Mystery* in English, while it was translated into German as *Das Geheimnis Koumiko*, which re-translates as “secret” rather than “mystery.”

(4) “Le vrai Japon, c’est Madame Fenouillard et ses filles, grisant les gardes pour délivrer leur époux et père en crevant la cloison de papier.” See Cocteau 151, also Marker 9.

(5) “…donner quelques conseils sur la façon dont on doit se tenir pour avoir l’air tout à fait japonais et par cela même en imposer à ces peuplades sauvages et… peu civilisées.” See Christophe (no page numbers).

(6) “Alors, madame cesse d’être ironique et Monsieur Fenouillard n’éprouve aucune honte à se déclarer à lui-même qu’il n’y comprend plus rien…”

379 (22) "Around your nose, between your two eyes..."
(7) La Famille Fenouillard, whose original, complete comic strip is included in Marker’s interactive CD-ROM based work Immemory (1997), is a recurring point of reference in the filmmaker’s oeuvre. Considered one of the first bandes dessinées in France, the cartoon has been cited among others by Jacques Lacan. See his Écrits. Paris: Le Seuil, 1966, 480.

(8) The first two lines of the title credits, projected on the blank screen in simple hand-written letters, read: «Agenor Fenouillard présente». In resuming the role of ‘presenter’, Fenouillard thus promises to accompany us throughout the film.

(9) «Dans le but évident de comprendre, nos amis suivent la foule et pénètrent dans une grande salle…»

(10) «M. Fenouillard envisage la situation avec calme et arrive à cette conviction que l’exercice engendre l’habitude, qui est une seconde nature.»

(11) During the Fenouillards’ journey around the world, M. Fenouillard usually dresses in the local costume of the region he is travelling through, mirroring or photographing the countries with his own body: he successively metamorphoses into a native American, a Papuan chief, a Japanese, Persian, Turk etc., yet he always carries with him and never lets go of his "umbrella of his ancestors" (parapluie de ses ancêtres).


(13) The sequence is appropriately titled “Presentation of Imaginary Japan” (Présentation du Japon imaginaire) in the commentary to the film. See Marker 12.

(14) «Pour 21%, aucune vie ne mérite d’être vécue.» Marker 13.

(15) «Le Mainichi News écrit que dans l’ensemble la démonstration s’est passée calmement et n’a pas attiré grandement l’attention des citoyens de Tokyo, qui étaient occupés à regarder les Jeux Olympiques à la télévision.» Marker 13.

(16) The message is displayed in French and English.

The discovery of similarities between photographs and paintings or pieces of art and the juxtaposition of the two is a method employed by Marker throughout his oeuvre. In the early photo album *Coréennes* (1959), for example, he matches a drawing from an American comic strip about the Korean War with a photograph of a Chinese student by Henri Cartier-Bresson, showing how the graphic artist had imitated Cartier-Bresson’s photo; in the exposition *Passengers* (2011), Marker combined his own portraits of women whom he had photographed in the Paris subway with similar faces of women taken from famous works in the history of art.

The book appeared in Le Seuil’s *Petite Planète* series of alternative travel guides which Marker edited. He also contributed photographs and visual materials to it.


«Tiens ! s’écrie le condamné, je comprends donc le japonais maintenant!»

*Sans Soleil* also seems to play with this link between writing and the face, reading comprehension. While the voiceover mentions Krasna’s sudden “understanding” of Japanese when watching TV, the film reproduces still images from television programs, among others a photo-portrait, subtitled 佐伯祐三. Consequently, only viewers knowing Japanese are able to read the name of the person depicted, the artist Saeki Yūzō (1898–1928). More than a Japanese “Nerval”, Saeki’s name as it appears in *Sans Soleil* also mirrors the Latin letters in his own paintings of the streets of Paris, i.e., writing which is not to be read but to be taken as part of the picture.

«…inquiétée, amusée, émue, intéressée ou laissée de glace?» Marker 22.

See Chion 17–31. Chion distinguishes the complete acousmêtre from the “commentator-acousmêtre” (21).

In the 1970 re-edition of the travel book *Japon* (of the *Petite Planète* series), Kumiko’s face does, in fact, represent Japan, her photograph replacing the image of another woman on the cover. See Yéfime 1970.

The setting and the subject choice itself can, of course, also be referred back to an Orientalist literary predecessor, Pierre Loti’s *Madame Chrysanthème*. Yet, while adopting a similarly ironic, detached tone as Loti’s narrator, Marker’s male narrator seems...


(28) Conversely, one might argue that the film in fact reaches an understanding in discovering Kumiko’s ‘folds’. As the images of Kumiko’s face, Japanese calligraphy, a drawing, a photo of Kumiko holding a sheet of paper fold into each other; it is the movement of the images which is mirrored by the folds on her face. If the “folds” convey an image of “Japan”, it is one that ever refers to further images, possibly ad infinitum, i.e. it is a Japan without essence.

(29) «Entre les prises de vues, nous parlons, Kumiko et moi.» Marker 14.

(30) The recording of sound (*prise de son*) is also a ‘take’, the same as *prise de vue*. The “between” is the irreducible split between these different “takes” rather than a temporal interval.


(32) One could finally ask how M. Fenouillard’s sudden “understanding” relates to his practicing “harakiri” with his umbrella. Fenouillard is interrupted in his exercises when Madame bursts through the wall. Surprised, he gapes at Madame’s face. But he still holds the umbrella in his hands; it is exactly in his line of sight. The “umbrella of his ancestors”, sign of his identity and paternal authority, then could be what obstructs Fenouillard from fully recognizing Mme Fenouillard’s face and voice. At the same time it might be the source of his “understanding”. Peering at the instrument of his “harakiri” exercises, Fenouillard has possibly become aware of his own “second nature”, i.e., the strange and foreign which already resided within the Self.

(33) Just as Adorno’s counter-part to “true mimesis” necessarily points to the “true mime-sis”, the mystery of the film points toward what is beyond the film, what is other to cinema. If *Le mystère Koumiko* thus reveals its mystery, at the same time it uncovers another mystery, a new mystery waiting to be unfolded.
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(ロビン・ヴァイヒャート／博士後期課程)

375（26） "Around your nose, between your two eyes..."