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Patty Chang

MARY BOONE GALLERY

Would Walter Benjamin be repulsed to find his corpulence represented on-screen? Would he be put off by the portrayal of his flaccid penis, of his own emasculation, as an actor playing him is directed to gingerly delight in a woman's supple foot? Would the man who penned "The Task of the Translator" be giddy or contemptuous over his depiction, in a work ostensibly *about* translation, as an Orientalist horndog? Such questions, which venture the most crude psychologism, are surely irrelevant, but they are ones you *know* Patty Chang herself entertained while making her latest video, the forty-two-minute intellectual skin flick *The Product Love*, 2009, which recently had its New York premiere at Mary Boone Gallery.

Chang also certainly wondered what the legendary Los Angeles-born actress Anna May Wong thought of having her name compared to "blossoms in a cup of tea," or of being contextualized—twice, and somewhat randomly—with aphorisms from a Ming dynasty-era novel, as she was in the brief and obscure 1928 article Benjamin wrote describing his meeting with Wong for the German magazine *Die Literarische Welt*. Such pigeonholing must have been particularly vexing given that the text, a "conversation" titled "A Chinoiserie out of

the Old West," was published the same year that the Asian-American film star fled to Berlin to escape the tedious stereotyping of the Hollywood studio system.

Chang's video, which is divided into two distinct, consecutive parts, takes as its subject this encounter between Benjamin and Wong, with special attention given to a particularly peculiar interaction. "Which means of expression would you turn to if film were not available?" Benjamin asks in his text. Wong's response—the only words printed in English in the original—is enigmatic and conditional: "touch would."

The simple, homonymous slippage is a rhetorician's dream, and it becomes the seed from which Chang's transvaluations pullulate. Did Benjamin *know* the expression "touch wood"? Highlighting the ever-thorny "problem of translation," the first section of *The Product Love* is given over to real-time footage of three linguists' individual attempts to translate Benjamin's euphuistic text into English. A cat leaps on a table and parades around the manuscript; a gust of wind briefly interrupts: genuinely compelling scholarship *vérité*. The translators' commentary is itself re-presented in German subtitles, a metalayer of translation that lends the film an uncanny "artiness" that at times feels beside the point.

The second part consists of Chang's imaginative reconstitution of Wong and Benjamin's encounter, which takes the ambiguous "touch would" to its erotic fulfillment. Chang fetishizes the trappings of the staging itself—cameras, boom mics, assistants, and filmic accoutrements all become protagonists in the visual field. We watch two Chinese actors being made up to resemble the historical personages. Cut to a director, speaking in Mandarin, rendered in subtitles as: "He just want to flirt or want to touch the parts of the woman's body that make May Wang feel good. . . . How to call that in English? G-point. G-spot." Mistranslations and caricatures accrue; everyone's projecting. A stilted, kitschy, but sensuously filmed soft-porn scene commences, complete with a bored-looking "Wong" and a voluptuous "Benjamin" posing on the bed like some sort of reclining odalisque.

Chang is at her cheekily erudite best during such "irreverent" moments as when a makeup artist does up the actor playing Benjamin according to the iconic cover (with the visage of the genius stuck in profiled "Thinker" pose) of the first Schocken paperback edition of *Reflections* (1969). (One would have thought the more obvious choice for prime undergrad recognition would have been *Illuminations*, but the catoptric play of *Reflections* no doubt proved too tempting.) Such lighthearted moments, which suffuse the whole video, leaven the conspicuous "criticality" and prevent the work from growing unctuous or didactic. *The Product Love* becomes, simply, an object lesson in misunderstanding; caricature is destiny.

—David Velasco



Patty Chang, *The Product Love*, 2009, still from a two-channel color video, 42 minutes.