

Readings
Gender in Southeast Asian Art Histories Masterclass

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In the first place I'd like to confess, and if possible turn to our advantage, my trepidation in approaching what we are calling, in shorthand, 'gender in Southeast Asian art (histories)': I feel there are trap doors under each of these words. Falling for or through a word may not be the worst thing in the world, and I'm sure we'll tap in course at some of these traps in due course. But there are so many possible, and well documented misunderstandings in these parts that I'd like to begin with a rapid and partial intellectual-political autobiography.

I was young and on the run. And I discovered the two things that are at the root of what I have to talk with you about today at pretty much the same time: I started attending H Cixous's seminar on – well on 'writing', but with her that word encompasses everything, or quite a lot of things, like thinking and living, certainly art in the broadest sense. Cixous is a Jew from Algeria, of mixed Ashkenazi and Sephardic parentage, who lost her French nationality for a time under Vichy. She is best known no doubt as a 'French feminist writer.' It was for her signature *écriture féminine* that I sought her guidance. Before long I was watching her modernclassical play on Cambodia, on the Cambodian tragedy. I learned Khmer very quickly and ended up working for 'good', so I thought, in a Cambodian refugee camp, and then eventually at Phnom Penh's Royal University of Fine Arts and for Vann Molyvann, the architect of Cambodia's Independence as it were, who had returned from exile after the war to spearhead efforts to preserve Angkor. I was one of many 'foreigners' working for Angkor at that time, but the only one working as part of a Cambodian institution; my foreignness dissipated in some ways, even as that of many of my colleagues having returned from the diaspora remained in question. Vann Molyvann was Minister of State for Culture, Urban Planning and Territorial Management in the post-UNTAC government; as a member of his cabinet over the heady 1990s when, despite the terrible challenges there was little question that democracy would win the day, I completed my early education in the contradictions and complications involved in the 'postcolonial' situation. Drawing from his formative experience working under Sihanouk in the Independence period, along with a dose of more-or-less self-willed naiveté, Vann Molyvann sought to harness the ambiguous ambitions of both the international community and the nascent national government to 'save' Angkor. He was incorruptible and on the side of love. As for me, working at the nexus of the competing and often complicit phallogocratic systems at work in Cambodia's reconstruction by way of Angkor, *écriture féminine* was a long way off but became my enduring guide.

Now, a few notes to help otherwise frame our readings, which focus by and large on *reading*:

1/ The formalisation and instrumentalisation of 'theory' – which, I realise, are two rather different things, even if they have very much the same effect or outcome: by 'formalisation' I

mean a kind of theorisation of theory whereby it is reduced to an arid algorithm; by 'instrumentalisation' I mean the extraction from theory of an arid algorithm to be applied to 'other things.' We have come some way in gauging the difficulties of 'translating' Western theory into non-Western contexts, with some of the most critically cosmopolitan work developed through the foregrounding of local Southeast Asian materials harnessed to a gesture reminiscent of the 'selective adaptation' with which postcolonial scholars have credited Southeast Asian cultures: picking and choosing what one wishes from 'foreign' thought for its applicability to local contexts has become a Southeast Asian(ist) hallmark. In the interest of something like full disclosure, I should say that I believe strongly that ideas, or structures, are *both* completely abstract, and thus in a real, important way universal, *and* very slippery slopes, because for one thing, an idea never happens all by itself, but to a person, with a history, in a context, etc. In this context, I think that if we are to engage with so-called Western theory at all (and I'm not certain one could avoid engaging with it) we must return again and again to the real radicality of this theory, so often glossed over in the rush to move on to other things: it is fundamentally alienated and alienating with regard to itself, it is not at home in its home, and thus in an essential way it cannot be said to be simply Western, however implausible that may seem. It is necessary, I think, to remind ourselves of the truly radical potential of certain pages, at least, of 'Western' theory: it is a vital exercise in humility on both sides. Reading Derrida reading Cixous reading (in 'Fourmis' – see below) therefore works otherwise towards de-domesticating theory, by undoing the bounded forms of concepts to be applied to this or that material, and in so doing to engage with that which escapes our grasp.

2/ Historicization. The issues here are twofold. First, we will consider oft-forgotten readings of 'sexual difference,' remaining attentive to the work of the double genitive here. We will read others reading sexual difference and we will read readings *by* sexual difference, simultaneously. I'm referring to a particular school or train of thought on gender and sexuality, the most poetico-philosophical-and-psychoanalytical one, yet however you look at it from this perspective, reading is at the heart of the term or the thing – whatever it is. This reading of sexual difference responds to and challenges any claim to essential or primordial status, of women or men or feminine or masculine to be sure, but also of the subject him or herself as to the practice of interpretation. All the while we will keep in mind another, related anamnesis underpinning the common if oft-unwitting projection of pre-modern pure states, as if not only phallocentrism but also reading itself were a secondary phenomenon introduced only by foreign powers.

3/ Opposition between the sociological and the theoretical. On one level and at certain times and places, the feminist struggle must, no doubt, shun the complexity of thought in the name of action. On another level, and at all times and places, such segregation is an impossible task insofar as the sociological is irrevocably harnessed to the theoretical: again, the primordial status of the real is also, always already, a projection.

Readings

J. Derrida, 'Ants,' trans. by E. Prenowitz, *The Oxford Literary Review*, 24, 2002 : 17-42. [Currently available at : http://english.columbia.edu/files/english/content/Derrida_Ants.pdf] [Original: 'Fourmis,' in M : Negron, ed, *Lectures de la Différence Sexuelle* (Paris : *des femmes*), 1994.]

A. Berger, 'The Ends of an Idiom, or Sexual Difference in Translation,' in *The Queer Turn in Feminism: Identities, Sexualities and the Theater of Gender*, trans. by C. Porter (New York: Fordham University Press), 2013: 107-125. [Original: 'Les fins d'un idiome ou la différence sexuelle en traduction,' *Le Grand Théâtre du Genre : Identités, Sexualités et Féminismes en 'Amérique'* (Paris : Belin), 2013.]

Recommended

J Derrida, 'Geschlecht: Sexual Difference, Ontological Difference,' *Research in Phenomenology*, XIII.1, 1983: 65-83. [Currently available online at: <http://english.columbia.edu/files/english/content/geschlecht1.pdf>] [Original: *Geschlecht. Différence sexuelle, difference ontologique,*' in M. Haar, ed., *Martin Heidegger* (Paris : Cahiers de l'Herne) 1983: 419-30 ; reprinted in *Psyché : Invention de l'Autre*, 1987: 395-414.

J Derrida and C. McDonald, 'Choreographies' (interview), in N. Holland, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Jacques Derrida*, (University Parks, PA: Pennsylvania State University) 1997: 23-42. [Currently available as google book online, with exception of final page of notes.]

Introduction and Excerpts from *Therigatha: Poems of the First Buddhist Women*, trans. by C. Hallisey, Harvard University Press, 2015: vii-xxxv; select poems. [Scan attached]

K. Crosby, Chapters 9, 'Women in Monasticism,' 10, 'Women in Theravada Literature and Society, and 11, 'Feminist Readings of Gender-Related Symbols,' in *Theravada Buddhism: Continuity, Diversity and Identity*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2014: 218-61.

Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o5VX6OAda3M>
(especially 18:14 to 30:54)