

Roland Barthes and Italo Calvino: Readers of Japan / Roland Barthes e Italo Calvino: leitores do Japão

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Received: November 22th, 2019. **Approved:** december 22th, 2019

How to cite this article:

FERRAZ, Bruna Fontes. Roland Barthes e Italo Calvino: leitores do Japão. *Revista Letras Raras*, Campina Grande. v. 8, n. 4, dez. 2019, p. Port. 60-69 / Eng. 57-68. ISSN 2317-2347.

ABSTRACT

*This article proposes a reflection on the relationship that can be established between travel, reading and writing from the visit to Japan, undertaken by Roland Barthes and Italo Calvino, during the 1960s and 1970s. Faced with the alterity and a symbolic system disconnected from the West, Barthes and Calvino, as readers of Japan, were placed in a writing position, recognizing in the sign and the letter their own abode. Thus, we seek to understand how Japanese aesthetics allowed both Westerners to practice reading Japan, not in an attempt to decipher it, but to understand it as a trait, a sign whose meaning has been dissipated and become empty. For that, in a comparative study, we will look at Roland Barthes's *The Empire of Signs*, and at the texts from Japan, extracted from Italo Calvino's *Collection of Sand*, analyzing not only the letter, but the relationship established with others signs: the city, the faces, the Japanese habits.*

KEYWORDS: Japan; Empty Sign; Roland Barthes; Italo Calvino.

RESUMO

Este artigo propõe uma reflexão acerca da relação que se pode estabelecer entre a viagem, a leitura e a escrita, a partir da visita ao Japão empreendida por Roland Barthes e Italo Calvino durante as décadas de 1960 e 1970. Diante da alteridade e de um sistema simbólico desligado do ocidental, Barthes e Calvino, como leitores do Japão, foram colocados em situação de escrita, reconhecendo no signo, na letra, sua própria morada. Assim, buscamos compreender como a estética japonesa permitiu aos dois ocidentais praticarem a leitura do Japão, não para decifrá-lo, mas para entendê-lo como traço, como signo, cujo sentido foi dissipado, tornou-se vazio. Para isso, nos debruçaremos sobre a obra *O império dos signos*, de Roland Barthes, e sobre os textos do Japão, extraídos de *Coleção de areia*, de Italo Calvino, num estudo comparativo, analisando não somente a letra, mas a relação firmada com outros signos: a cidade, os rostos, os hábitos japoneses.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Japão; Signo Vazio; Roland Barthes; Italo Calvino.

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 <http://dx.doi.org/10.35572/rlr.v8i4.1576>

[...]to visit a place for the first time is thereby to begin to write it: the address not being written, it must establish its own writing.

Roland Barthes¹

1 Travellings, writing: initials considerations

Returning from a trip to Japan, Jacques Lacan observed from the airplane window, while overflying the Siberian plains, the water flowing through its furrows. From that height, the picture was formed by a single trace, which allowed him to unravel a whole reflection about the materiality of the letter. From the trace, from the writing formed by the water flow, Lacan noticed that, where there is possibility of reading, there is also latures, that is, erasures. Reading would surpass, therefore, what is immediately visible, assuming that what lies beneath it, underneath this veil, would also be read.

The geographic metaphor, a kind of epiphany lived by Lacan, was only possible, as he reaffirms in his text “Lituraterre”, due to the fact that he was returning from Japan, not going there – when he had already experienced Japan and noticed the littoral, the “coastal” condition of the Japanese ideogram:

The only decisive thing is the littoral condition, and this one only played a part on the return journey, in being literally what Japan had no doubt done to me with its letter, this little bit too much which is just what is needed for me to feel it, since after all I had already said that it is that by which its language [langue] is eminently affected. (LACAN, 2013, p. 331).²

Affected by this trip, the analyst then replaced the “Literature” by “Lituraterre”, as only in this land (“terre”) lives the letter - a frame that fits in the emptiness, which is, the littoral. The trip to Japan allowed Lacan to experience the littoral, when the letter becomes literal. The writing, then, is the ravine formation of the meaning, and the letter, the Japanese ideogram, the field of jouissance.

¹ “[...] visitar um lugar pela primeira vez é, assim, começar a escrever: como o endereço não está escrito, é preciso que ele funde sua própria escritura” (Roland Barthes). We have chosen to consult the official English translation for all quotations in this article, except that of Barthes apud Quintais, whose translation is ours.

² “Decisiva é somente a condição litoral, e esta só funcionou na volta, por ser, literalmente, que o Japão decerto fizera de sua letra o tantinho de excesso que era a conta certa para que eu o sentisse, uma vez que, afinal, eu já tinha dito que é disso que sua língua eminentemente se afeta.” (LACAN, 2003, p. 20).

Lacan's experience was only possible because he had managed to turn the tyranny of the meanings off, even if for a brief moment, as he was unsettled by the letter as an imagistic line without the obligation of a meaning. As the eastern symbolic system is completely different from the western's, for a western tourist in Japan, for example, not to understand its language and culture, it would be like to deprive himself from the mastery of the signified.

Thereby, the eastern culture, the Japanese more specifically, induces a reflection about the writing itself by the "possibility of a difference, of a mutation, of a revolution" (BARTHES, 1992, p. 3),³ which is embedded in the Japanese ideogram, the one that concentrates its form, its trace, in the emptiness. Thus, there is a collision between the eastern and the western. There is also a meeting, a possible convergence between two westerners, Roland Barthes and Italo Calvino, who, after visiting the Japanese region, were placed into a writing situation to try to read Japan with a certain number of lines and words.

Barthes and Calvino's reading position, although contaminated by the western practice, starts from emptying the meaning, trying to read Japan as empty signs; reading it as those who read the course of a text: by the letters curvilinear movements, dancing/erasing through the page, such as Lacan's experience. This article, thereby, is proposed with the intention of making a reflection about the capacity of the letter to condense its own emptiness, becoming immune of any attempt of meaningfulness. For this purpose, in a comparative study we lean over Barthes' text about Japan, *Empire of Signs*, and Calvino's *Collection of Sand*, analyzing not only the letter, but the established relationship with other signs, like the city, the faces and the Japanese habits.

2 The interstice of the letter

Between 1966 and 1967, Barthes visits Japan three times. There, he accomplishes the dream "to know a foreign (alien) language and yet not to understand it" (BARTHES, 1992, p. 6).⁴ The contact with the extreme otherness allows him to dissolve his own real self, descending to the untranslatable to make the vices and alienation of the native language tremble. Without understanding the Japanese language, Barthes experiences a noisy tranquility, as even while listening to the rumor of the unknown language, those sounds – pure, that means nothing to his western ears – protect him from the everyday chatter:

³ "possibilidade de uma diferença, de uma mutação, de uma revolução" (BARTHES, 2007, p. 8).

⁴ "conhecer uma língua estrangeira (estranha) e, contudo, não a compreender" (BARTHES, 2007, p. 11).

Hence, in foreign countries, what a respite! Here I am protected against stupidity, vulgarity, vanity, worldliness, nationality, normality. The unknown language, of which I nonetheless grasp the respiration, the emotive aeration, in a word the pure significance, forms around me, as I move, a faint vertigo, sweeping me into its artificial emptiness, which is consummated only for me: I live in the interstice, delivered from any fulfilled meaning. (BARTHES, 1992, p. 9).⁵

Free from the tyranny of the full meaning, Barthes goes through Tokyo and the Japanese day by day in a reading attitude. However, he does not read Japan to unravel meanings and signification in everything he sees and experiences. On the contrary, he notices that Japan really is the empire of signs, “if it is understood that these signs are empty and that the ritual is without a god” (BARTHES, 1992, p. 108).⁶ Without metaphysical references, then, Barthes reads Japan as a text, as writing, through the traces left by the black letters on a white blank sheet of paper. It is the trace that interests him, as well as it was the trace formed by the water flow in the plains furrows that interested Lacan, the image that contains the emptiness, since “the sign does away with itself before any particular signified has had the time to ‘take’.” (BARTHES, 1992, p. 108).⁷

Hence, the French writer explores Japan driven by desire, not by the need of understanding or signification, as he himself confesses in an interview to the *Le Magazine Littéraire*, published in February 1975, by comparing himself to an ethnologist:

I have always lived very well during my stays in Japan. I have always had, if I may say so, a life of an ethnologist, but without the malice of the western ethnologist who will watch over the foreign attitudes. [...] As for the things that interested me in Japan – that is why I speak of ethnologist – I was always waiting for all the information I could receive, and I gave importance to all of them. If I was told about a place that might interest me, even if vaguely, I would not rest until I found it. It is the attitude of the ethnologist: exploration driven by desire. (BARTHES *apud* QUINTAIS, 2017, p. 115).⁸

⁵ “Assim, no estrangeiro, que repouso! Estou ali protegido contra a tolice, a vulgaridade, a vaidade, a mundanidade, a nacionalidade, a normalidade. A língua desconhecida, da qual capto no entanto a respiração, a aeração emotiva, numa palavra, a significância pura, forma à minha volta, à medida que me desloco, uma leve vertigem, arrasta-me em seu vazio artificial, que só se realiza para mim: vivo no interstício, livre de todo sentido pleno.” (BARTHES, 2007, p. 17-18).

⁶ “se entendermos que esses signos são vazios e que o ritual é sem deus” (BARTHES, 2007, p. 146).

⁷ “signo se abole antes de qualquer significado ter tido o tempo de ‘pegar’” (BARTHES, 2007, p. 146).

⁸ Translated from Portuguese: “Sempre vivi muito bem durante as estadias que fiz no Japão; tive sempre, se me é permitido dizê-lo, uma vida de etnólogo, mas sem a má fé do etnólogo ocidental que vai vigiar as atitudes estrangeiras. [...]. No que diz respeito às coisas que me interessavam no Japão – é por isso que falo de etnólogo –, estava sempre à espera de todas as informações que podia receber, e dava importância a todas. Se me falavam de um lugar que me podia interessar, mesmo que fosse vagamente, não descansava antes de o ter encontrado. É a atitude do etnólogo: a exploração impulsionada pelo desejo.” (BARTHES *apud* QUINTAIS, 2017, p. 115).

Also imbued by the ethnologist view, Italo Calvino, when he visits Japan in 1976, reactivates the use of his eyes, capturing scenes and images, giving them their own value. For the Italian writer, “seeing means perceiving differences” (CALVINO, 2014, s/p),⁹ in a way that, if the look passes through a surface without stopping, it is because the mystery of the first look was lost by the regularity that standardizes even the most different and strange things.

In the far east, the eyes, already used to the western habits, are stimulated by the trip, by the Japanese signs; they are encouraged to take “the visual reading of the world” (CALVINO, 2014, s/p),¹⁰ and such reading results in writing: essays, travel reports, short stories. Calvino publishes his texts, initially, in the Italian journal and then republishes them as short stories in Palomar, and essays which composes “The Shape of Time”, from “The Shape Collection”.

In the first days in Tokyo, the Italian writer is still avid to derive meaning from everything he sees. On the train bound for Kyoto, he is hooked by a scene in which two women, a lady and a young girl, sit in front of each other in the wagon, so the young girl can serve the lady. Against this picture, Calvino feels distressed as “when one does not know how to define what one sees, the gestures and behaviors, when one is not able to tell what is usual and what is individual in them, what is normal and what is unusual” (CALVINO, 2014, s/p).¹¹

The first impressions are still marked by the western reason: the Italian wants that the signs have a signified, he wants to decipher their secret. However, as he reflects more about the scene he sees in the train, he questions himself: “What do I know of life in this country?” (CALVINO, 2014, s/p).¹² He undresses himself, then, of the western morality so he can observe Japan again with the look of those who see the world for the first time.

Between desire and derangement, these two westerners, on travels that are almost a decade apart, visit Japan intending to read it. The Japanese signs settle them in their cracks, retaining them at their own interstice. Within the language’s limits and its understanding, Barthes and Calvino recognize the need to find their own writing, as “the sign is a fracture which only ever opens onto the face of another sign” (BARTHES, 2007, p. 72).¹³

Japan has placed, then, both Barthes and Calvino into writing situation, noticing the sign as an immediate consequence of each place they visit and each thing they get to know and

⁹ “ver quer dizer perceber diferenças” (CALVINO, 2010, p. 166).

¹⁰ “leitura visual do mundo” (CALVINO, 2010, p. 166).

¹¹ “não saber definir aquilo que se vê, os gestos e o comportamento, não saber o que há neles de usual ou de peculiar, o que é normal e o que é insólito” (CALVINO, 2010, p. 167).

¹² “O que eu sei da vida deste país?” (CALVINO, 2010, p. 171).

¹³ “o signo é uma fratura que jamais se abre senão sobre o rosto de outro signo” (BARTHES, 2007, p. 72).

observe. Their texts resemble each other, thus, by their fragmentary character; by the proper tone of the one who is facing the unknown, reactivating the eyes usage to read the world as if it were for the first time.

However, while Barthes reads the Japanese signs giving them a written trace, Calvino, in his turn, shows us a gradually westernized Japan, especially Tokyo. Pachinko, a kind of slot machine, is maybe the greatest example of that. As notices Calvino in “Crowded Solitude”, this lonely game, which since the end of World War II has been luring men and women, spread massively through the streets of Tokyo

You can find pachinkos nearly everywhere, in the various centres of the polycentric city that is Tokyo as well as in its different suburbs, but above all in the nightlife districts. In the midst of night-clubs, pizzerias with their Italian colours, strip-clubs, bars, poruno-shops (the word “porno” is adapted to conform to Japanese pronunciation), surrounded by the smell of eel that is either raw or fried in soya-oil, in the midst of this noisy world the pachinkos open up like metallic gardens offering a haven for the individual wanting to do something that will fully absorb his attention. (CALVINO, 2014, s/p).¹⁴

The Italian’s view lingers on the western remains, which were all over Tokyo streets without dwelling only at the game itself – unlike Barthes, who watches the performance of a Japanese player, the accurate movement when he propels the ball, comparing his hand to an artist’s hand, “for whom the (graphic) feature is a ‘controlled accident’.” (BARTHES, 1992, p. 28):¹⁵

Pachinko reproduces, in short, on the mechanical level, precisely the principle of painting *alla prima*, which insists that the line be drawn in a single movement, once and for all, and that by reason of the very quality of the paper and the ink, it can never be corrected; in the same way the ball, once propelled, cannot be deviated (it would be an outrageous piece of boorishness to shake the machine, as our Western sports do): its path is predetermined by the sole flash of its impetus. (BARTHES, 1992, p. 28).¹⁶

¹⁴ “Os pachinkos estão quase em todos os lugares, nos diversos centros da policêntrica Tóquio assim como nas várias periferias, mas especialmente nos bairros da vida noturna. Em meio aos nightclubs, às pizzarias de cores italianas, aos stripteases, aos bares, aos poruno-shop (a palavra pornô é adaptada à pronúncia japonesa), ao cheiro de enguia crua ou frita no óleo de soja, no coração deste mundo barulhento os pachinkos se abrem como jardins metálicos de uma absorta concentração de indivíduos.” (CALVINO, 2010, p. 192).

¹⁵ “o traço (gráfico) é um ‘acidente controlado’.” (BARTHES, 2007, p. 41).

¹⁶ “O Pachinko reproduz, em suma, na ordem mecânica, o próprio princípio da pintura *alla prima*, que exige executar o traço com um único movimento, uma vez por todas, e que, em razão da própria qualidade do papel e da tinta, nunca pode ser corrigido; da mesma maneira, a bolinha lançada não pode ser desviada (seria de uma grosseria indigna maltratar o aparelho, como fazem nossos trapaceiros ocidentais): seu caminho é determinado pelo único relâmpago de seu disparo.” (BARTHES, 2007, p. 41-42).

Barthes is not fooled by the bright signs that cover the pachinko houses: his eyes stare the gesture, the movement that admits no mistakes, the player's countenance. For him, walking across the city "is to travel from the top of Japan to the bottom, to superimpose on its topography the writing of its faces" (BARTHES, 1992, p. 39-42).¹⁷ Therefore, despite the opacity of the language but at the same time thanks to it, the exchange of signs is of a richness that surpasses the linguistic ignorance. Without any words, the French writer is able to read the body:

It is not the voice (with which we identify the "rights" of the person) which communicates (communicates what? Our necessarily beautiful-soul? our sincerity? our prestige?), but the whole body (eyes, smile, hair, gestures, clothing) which sustains with you a sort of babble that the perfect domination of the codes strips of all regressive, infantile character. To make a date (by gestures, drawings on paper, proper names) may take an hour, but during that hour, for a message which would be abolished in an instant if it were to be spoken (simultaneously quite essential and quite insignificant), it is the other's entire body which has been known, savored, received, and which has displayed (to no real purpose) its own narrative, its own text. (BARTHES, 1992, p. 10).¹⁸

For Barthes, the whole city is an ideogram, and the text goes on through the city: in the monuments, the gambling, the bodies and the faces. In "The Written Face", the French writer observes that the theatrical face consists of two elements: the white of the paper and the black of the writing. "The white of the face seems to have as its function to erase all anterior trace of the features" (BARTHES, 1992, p. 88),¹⁹ while the eyes, deprived of dark circles, would be "the black and empty source of the writing" (BARTHES, 1992, p. 89).²⁰ The face is, therefore, only "the thing to write" (BARTHES, 1992, p. 88).²¹ That is why it undresses itself of all expressiveness, like a blank sheet of paper, but the inscription written on it means nothing, no emotion, no meaning, so that the face, when undressed of all meaning, writes nothing, invalidating its own self.

While Barthes recognized the empty face, stripped of its own self, at the theater (at the No, the Nobuki, the Bunraku), Calvino, still stuck to his role of reader who wants to decipher the

¹⁷ "é viajar no Japão de alto a baixo, superpor à topografia a escrita dos rostos" (BARTHES, 2007, p. 56).

¹⁸ Não é a voz (com a qual identificamos os "direitos" da pessoa) que comunica (comunica o quê? nossa alma – forçosamente bela – nossa sinceridade, nosso prestígio?), é o corpo todo (os olhos, o sorriso, a mecha, o gesto, a roupa) que mantém conosco uma espécie de balbúcio, ao qual o perfeito domínio dos códigos tira todo caráter regressivo, infantil. Marcar um encontro (por gestos, desenhos, nomes próprios) leva de fato uma hora, mas durante essa hora, para uma mensagem que se teria abolido num instante se tivesse sido falada (ao mesmo tempo essencial e insignificante), é o corpo todo do outro que é conhecido, degustado, recebido, e que desenvolveu (sem verdadeira finalidade) sua própria narrativa, seu próprio texto. (BARTHES, 2007, p. 18).

¹⁹ "O branco do rosto teria por função apagar o rasto anterior dos traços" (BARTHES, 2007, p. 121).

²⁰ "o fundo negro e vazio da escrita" (BARTHES, 2007, p. 123).

²¹ "a coisa para ser escrita" (BARTHES, 2007, p. 122).

mysteries of Japan, starts to change his attitude when, at the Tokyo National Museum, he visits an armors and weapons exposition from the old Japan. His first impression, still bound by the domain of the signified, is to interpret the purpose to incite fear in the enemy in those threatening war masks. Facing those signs, his first reaction is to give a meaning to what he sees.

However, the art of the sword is a spiritual discipline, which makes Calvino remember that “the perfect Samurai must never concentrate his attention on his enemy’s blade, nor on his own, nor on striking his opponent, nor on defending himself, but must only annihilate his own ego” (CALVINO, 2014, s/p).²² To go through the empire of signs, Calvino must also learn how to invalidate his own self, the one who guides himself through the territory of meaning, judging with his western reason. For that, it is necessary to keep oneself at the pure signifier, disconnecting from all signified given by an arbitrary convention.

The Italian writer, in his trip to Japan, may only be able to completely untangle from the supremacy of the signified when he contemplates the Japanese gardens. This framed art, whose elements respect a strict position, is the signifier itself, its image, its shape, which imposes itself majestically to the eye through its skilled and unreadable figuration.

While visiting the Japanese gardens, Calvino comes across their harmonically organized elements, which make him compare them to the ordering of words in a poem. The main reason of the garden is the path: “here inner harmony is reached by following the path step by step” (CALVINO, 2014, s/p);²³ the reason of the poem is also the path of the words, always leaving their trails, their marks. In this unceasing interpolation between leaves and ideas, colors and words, syllables and light, “the garden becomes an indecipherable calligram” (CALVINO, 2014, s/p).²⁴

The contemplation of the Japanese garden, thus, presupposes starting from the voids established by the walked path and by its marks, in a constant confrontation between signs and nothingness. Similar observation was made by Mr. Palomar, Calvino’s probable alter ego, while exploring the rock and sand garden of the Ryoanji temple of Kyoto, “a little courtyard covered with a thick-grained white sand” (CALVINO, 1985, s/p);²⁵ overlaid by rocks and rakes marks. The rock and sand garden are, thereby, “the image typical of that contemplation of the absolute to be achieved with the simplest means and without recourse to concepts capable of verbal

²² “o perfeito samurai nunca deve fixar sua atenção na espada do adversário, nem na própria, nem no golpe, nem na defesa, mas deve apenas anular o próprio eu” (CALVINO, 2010, p. 190).

²³ “a harmonia interior se encontra seguindo a senda passo a passo” (CALVINO, 2010, p. 183).

²⁴ “o jardim se torna um caligrama indecifrável” (CALVINO, 2010, p. 178).

²⁵ “um pequeno pátio recoberto de areia branca de grãos grossos” (CALVINO, 1994, p. 85).

expression” (CALVINO, 1985, s/p).²⁶ The zen garden keeps an emptiness, like a letter frames a gap.

Like the poem, built by words that imprint their marks into the blank page, the garden is also a universe that balances presences and absences. However, its image is ephemeral, made every morning by the hands of a monk who smooths the sand in straight and parallel movements or in concentric circles, allowed by the even strokes of the rake. No flower, no life: its shape is its own emptiness. The zen garden has, therefore, a constitutive similarity to the language: it is also the presence of an absence. The sand marks try to stop the time as the word longs to be memory of a world “buried beneath the thick covering of the present” (CALVINO, 2014, s/p).²⁷ In the poem, in the haikai, words are rocks, “a brief event which immediately finds its proper form” (BARTHES, 1992, p. 75).²⁸

Haikai is made of its own absence, its emptiness, as the task related to it consists in the language interruption. Therefore, behind an easy and simple aspect, the haikai reveals itself as unreadable, because it doesn't mean anything: “there is a moment when language ceases [...], and it is this echoless breach which institutes at once the truth of Zen and the form – brief and empty – of the haiku.” (BARTHES, 1992, p. 74).²⁹ Its stone words, propped against the sandpaper, have the reading key in their surface, their shape, their signifier; there is no implicit meaning, there is no overlapping of the meaningful layers. Like the zen garden, this Japanese poetic shape, marked by the cut such the one from a blade, builds a space of pure fragments that change into an apparition, not into signification.

For Barthes, the fracture between the signifier and the signified is dissolved in the haikai's adequacy. The absence of meaning is accomplished through a shape without description or definitions, pure “graphic mode of existing” (BARTHES, 1992, p. 80),³⁰ although it presents a perfectly readable speech. Its simplicity and brevity thus make impossible any paraphrase; there is no other way to explain it other than through its own words.

Haikai is, in that respect, futile, short and ordinary, precisely because it does not want to mean anything. However, its essence is subverted by any western reader who reads it under the deciphering-interpretation-translation authoritarianism. The reading of a poem, as understood by

²⁶ “imagem típica da contemplação do absoluto atingível pelos meios mais simples e sem o recurso a conceitos exprimíveis por palavras” (CALVINO, 1994, p. 85).

²⁷ “sepultado sob o espesso invólucro do presente” (CALVINO, 2010, p. 196).

²⁸ “um acontecimento breve que acha, de golpe, sua forma justa” (BARTHES, 2007, p. 99).

²⁹ “há um momento em que a linguagem cessa [...], e é esse corte sem eco que institui, ao mesmo tempo, a verdade do Zen e a forma, breve e vazia, do haikai” (BARTHES, 2007, p. 97-98).

³⁰ “modo gráfico de existir” (BARTHES, 2007, p. 107).

Calvino when talking about the Japanese garden, must thus presuppose the way, the path, the choice of its own word, a reading free from any signified, immersed in the delightful effect the letter shelters.

3 Framing the emptiness: final considerations

The letter, the Japanese ideogram, is the picture of the trace that envelops the emptiness. Not by chance that “every object, every gesture, even the freest, the most mobile, seems ‘framed’” (BARTHES, 1992, p. 43).³¹ Everything is a trace, the faces, the gardens, the texts, outlined by a skillful hand, which after an agile and accurate movement, draws a frame with a single brush stroke. Barthes recognizes in the Japanese people a kind of package lust, provided by the satisfaction instituted by the covering, the frame, by magnificent packages used to wrap insignificant objects like the void itself.

The frame itself becomes the object in appreciation: the package perfection detains the eagerness to find out the object it contains, which, Barthes alerts us, is usually insignificant. The magnificent package detains the interest of its owner, bewitched by its appearance, by the apparition of the box in his hands. The package is, therefore, a metaphor for the linguistic sign itself: its picture (signifier) overlaps what it retains (signified):

Thus the box acts the sign: as envelope, screen, mask, it is worth what it conceals, protects, and yet designates: it puts off, if we can take this expression in French – *donner le change* – in its double meaning, monetary and psychological; but the very thing it encloses and signifies is for a very long time put off until later, as if the package's function were not to protect in space but to postpone in time; it is in the envelope that the labor of the confection (of the making) seems to be invested, but thereby the object loses its existence, becomes a mirage: from envelope to envelope, the signified flees, and when you finally have it (there is always a little something in the package), it appears insignificant, laughable, vile: the pleasure, field of the signifier, has been taken: the package is not empty, but emptied: to find the object which is in the package or the signified which is in the sign is to discard it: what the Japanese carry, with a formicant energy, are actually empty signs. (BARTHES, 1992, p. 46).³²

³¹ “todo objeto, todo gesto, mesmo o mais livre, o mais móvel, parece *emoldurado*” (BARTHES, 2007, p. 57).

³² Assim, a caixa brinca de signo: como invólucro, écran, máscara, ela vale por aquilo que esconde, protege e contudo designa: ela trapaceia, no duplo sentido, monetário e psicológico; mas aquilo mesmo que ela contém e significa é, por muito tempo, remetido para mais tarde, como se a função do pacote não fosse a de proteger no espaço, mas a de adiar no tempo; é no invólucro que parece investido o trabalho da confecção (do fazer), mas exatamente por isso o objeto perde algo de sua existência, torna-se miragem: de invólucro a invólucro, o significado foge, e, quando finalmente o temos (há sempre qualquer coisinha no pacote), ele parece insignificante, irrisório, vil: o prazer, campo do significante, foi experimentado: o pacote não é vazio, mas esvaziado: encontrar o objeto que

Barthes' thesis in *The Empire of Signs* highlights the very fissure of symbolic: the box does not open completely or, when it does, it shows another box, another package, like those small boxes inside each other, up to the emptiness. In the same way, the sign never opens, it always has its meaning postponed, lodged infinitely inside other signs: thus, there is no center.

In Japan, everything is trace, but empty trace adorned by sheer significance, without any intention of carrying a message. The rest of the meaning, of the expression, was found in Japan by Barthes and Calvino, through the ignorance of the language, through the state of being wordless, which allowed them to take only the signifier, saving its appearance, freeing it, in its artificial emptiness, from all full meaning.

The West stains all things with the imposition of meaning. There is an exaggerated intention to grasp meanings, even in a violent way, in a break-in that transgresses the signifier itself. Barthes and Calvino, thus stripping themselves of the tyranny of interpretation, walked around Japan reading it like an ideogram, running through its signs, going forward to the interstice of its edges, walking by the trails of its outlines, remaking, thus, the path of the hand who wrote that “there is nothing to grasp” (BARTHES, 1992, p. 110).³³

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está no pacote, ou o significado que está no signo, é jogá-lo fora: o que os japoneses transportam, com uma energia formigante, são afinal signos vazios. (BARTHES, 2007, p. 61-62).

³³ “não há [mais] nada para ser *agarrado*” (BARTHES, 2007, p. 148).

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QUINTAIS, Luís. Vazio e semioclasmo. Roland Barthes no Japão. *elyra – Revista da Rede Internacional Lyra Compoetics*, v. 9, jun. 2017, p. 111-123. Available at: <https://estudogeral.uc.pt/bitstream/10316/48248/1/Vazio%20e%20semioclasmo.pdf>. Accessed on September 19, 2019.