

WEST ENDINGS

Paul O’Kane March 2009



When we speak of ‘West Endings’ we speak of ‘endings’, and, before we begin trying to map or define the ‘West’, we might perhaps pause to wonder just what ‘ending’ is?

Is ‘ending’, itself, a Western conceit?, perhaps yet another humanist orientation or rhetorical convenience? Can ‘ending’ take a particularly ‘Western’ form?

A philosopher like Gilles Deleuze, Henri Bergson, or Nietzsche might perhaps always contest any ‘ending’ with an alternative of ‘becoming’, placing change and transformation in place of any finality. Jacques Derrida too would probably take pains to blur the certainty of any finitude.

Even the most unequivocal, apparent ‘endings’- the death of a loved-one for example- might be re-articulated as a change or transformation, so that being *or* not being is replaced with a question of being and not being, or being and *alter*-being/other-being perhaps?

It is certainly wise to comprehend the world in terms of changes and becomings. In fact it is both wise and inevitable. Without some comprehension of the tragic ending of death we surely go mad, and anyone who has grieved over the ending of a loved-one -or indeed any kind of significant loss- may know the inevitable discomfort of ‘carrying-on’ accompanied by a kind of shame and resentment that our life and the surrounding world insists on ‘carrying-on when it seems to us as though it should all shudder to a dumbfounded and respectful halt.

In this ambivalent feeling –common, I suspect- to all who have grieved- we might then perceive the seed of the kind of critiques of ‘ending’ found within the thoughts of the philosophers mentioned above.

Nevertheless, we know that Nietzsche was a kind of ‘anti-philosopher’, scornful and deconstructive of a certain Western tradition of thought, and wary of modernity, while retaining admiration for both Asian and ancient wisdom (and here it is worth also noting the implied meaning that ‘Western’ equals or implicates ‘modern’). It is less easy to describe ergson and Deleuze as Orientalists, but nevertheless, we might suspect, that at

those points where those thinkers most clearly challenge the limits of Western physics and philosophy, they are perhaps on the verge, not of 'going off the map' of the human mind, but of embracing a certain wisdom which has persisted in Asia as a seductive alternative tradition to Western thought.

E.g. whereas 18th century French rationality aspired to the model of the 'encyclopaedia' – a book of books in which, eventually, *all* knowledge would be archived and achieved- the late 20th Century French thinker aspires to post-structuralism's refutation of the entire project of knowledge, and, at this point seems to embrace a more Asian model of, not knowledge, but 'wisdom', something which seats the scientist alongside the mystic, the fact with the myth, solution with enigma, and complements an acquisitive model (collecting all knowledge) with an equal measure of relinquishment and the aim of acceptance.

Before we bring to an end this introduction to 'endings' we should briefly consider two important terms: 'teleology' and 'eschatology'. OED defines eschatology thus: the part of theology concerned with death and final destiny. And, as we have spoken briefly of death, here it is the word 'destiny' that may be most useful in developing our thoughts. To what degree is our experience shaped by an underlying concept of 'destiny'?

The same OED defines teleology as: '1. The explanation of phenomena by the purpose they serve rather than (postulated by) [their] causes. 2. (Theology) The doctrine of design and purpose in the material world.'

Both these terms –teleology and eschatology- look ahead, justifying and explaining present actions and phenomena according to future events. ‘Purpose’ and ‘destiny’ however are here exposed *as* terms, *as* concepts, while teleology and eschatology – merely by looking up their definitions in a common dictionary- are revealed as overarching conceptual guides that frame much of our reasoning.

What is done today is justified according to its purpose, which will be revealed or realised tomorrow. But a post-structuralist might say –as might Nietzsche, or a Zen Buddhist, or the Maharishi whom the Beatles consulted in the 1960s- that, as we cannot know tomorrow we might choose to live in some alternative manner, less mindful of ‘purpose’ and ‘destiny’, teleology and eschatology, no-longer justifying what is done today according to its promised purpose tomorrow.

The post-structuralist thinker might then immediately consider questioning this structure, positing a world, or way of life, stripped of these habits. What would it be like –a Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze or Nietzsche might ask- to live or think without some sense of ‘destiny’, or without taking for granted the ‘purpose’ of our acts and ideas?

And do these questions not also have something to offer the artist who is engaged in the production of objects, events, and images, whose purpose remains necessarily obscure, and whose meaning is necessarily deferred?

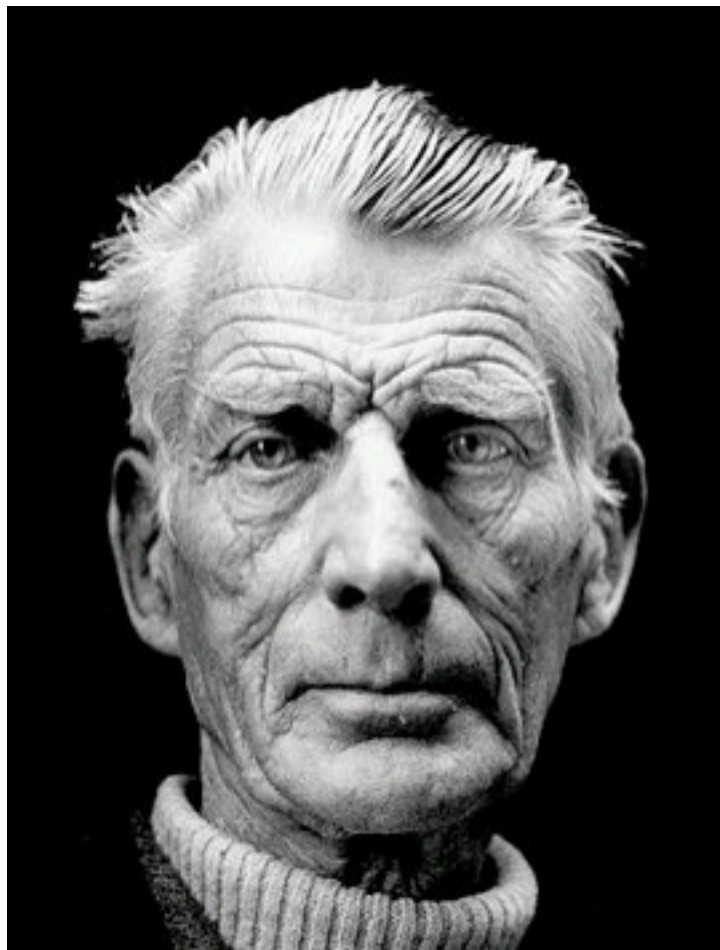
We could say that the artist who has thought and worked beyond the confines of a particular medium, to engage –rather- with ‘principles’ of art (i.e. at a philosophical level), is someone who not only produces objects, images, or events of uncertain purpose and of deferred meaning, but someone who’s very life has *become* art, and consequently, a life who’s own purpose and meaning is necessarily, consequently, deferred and uncertain. This person may also thereby surpass and forego the need for philosophy, becoming an anti-philosopher, post-philosopher, or *alter*-philosopher no-longer acknowledging any hierarchical distinction between ‘lay’ thought and academically cultivated knowledge, to persist, rather, via the facility of wisdom.

Whenever Western thought becomes most rigorous in deconstructing its own foundations, it often seems to reveal, not an abyss of unknowing, but an alternative (*alter*) tradition previously accomplished by the East, wherein an idea such as ‘life-lived-without-regard-to-purpose-or-destiny’ might simply be embraced as a more enlightened, healthier, and happier proposition

Not only Nietzsche, but also his close-reader Martin Heidegger allowed their Western thought to open-out onto Asian considerations, and in the late 1960s heyday of post-structuralism, Jacques Derrida –in turn influenced by both Nietzsche and Heidegger- championed a hesitant approach (akin to the uncertainties and deferrals we have described) to that language which might appear (to the structuralists who preceded him) to offer a systematic and objective understanding of our experience.

Meanwhile Michel Foucault famously introduced his major work 'The Order of Things' with (Borgesian) allusions to China as a pseudo-mythic realm in which a Western, spatial distribution of knowledge could be challenged. And in Jean Luc-Godard's film *La Chinoise* or Roland Barthes' *Empire of Signs*, we can also see French art and thought deferring to a kind of superior wisdom of the East.

Now, let's look a little further and wider in the Western tradition to locate some nuances, challenges, or alternatives to this possibly orientalist tendency.



Samuel Beckett, the apparently unassailable artist and explicator of the limits of a Western tradition, seems to operate successfully at the very limits (and perhaps beyond) of Western art, thought, and language, without, however –as far as I am aware- lapsing into the kind of Asian embrace that I have described as a kind of default strategy use dby some of the thinkers above.

It is convenient to locate a certain limit or end of confidence in the ‘destiny’ and ‘purpose’ of Western thought within that era when Beckett had his heyday –the 1950s, when with the world destroyed by war, existentialism briefly provided a kind of ‘last dance’ for a tradition that had persisted since the 18th Century, before existentialism was itself surpassed as a valid philosophical project by structuralist and post-structuralist thinking which came to play in the ruins of the Enlightenment’s project of knowledge-acquisition.

The fact that one of Beckett’s best-known works from this period is titled *Endgame* is, of course, useful to our argument. Beckett was clearly able to ‘nail’ –as an artist of extraordinary abilities- the core of a fundamental crisis in Western art, culture, society and philosophy, in a moment when all of its modern ‘purpose’ and ‘destiny’ had recently crashed into the disasters of the holocaust, Hiroshima, and other unprecedented failures of humanity that occurred in WW2.



But two other important factors are also worthy of note in consideration of this post-war epoch. The first is that Beckett –as well as other existentialists such as Camus and Sartre, or contemporaries like Dubuffet or Giacometti- might be willing to embrace another important term i.e. ‘the absurd’. The absurd –which the prescient pre-war Dadaists had foreseen as an outcome of, and a response to, modernity’s latent fascism- seems to be a western mechanism which ‘kicks-in’ whenever ‘purpose’ and ‘destiny’ either fail us or are robbed from us by an omnipotent agency -such as fascism or consumerism- under who’s unquestionable command it becomes extremely difficult to forge our own, individually or collectively meaningful response.



Foucault's famous 'Preface' (mentioned above) begins with a burst of irrepressible laughter when the philosopher is confronted with a mythically Asian image that defies the very grounds upon which knowledge is based -and there is also much praise for laughter in Foucault's inspiration Nietzsche. There is absurdity in Beckett's bereft existences, and in Camus' Sisyphean conclusions, but we can trace the absurd back, not only to Dada but all the way back through a history of Western thought to the medieval carnival and 'carnavalesque', where, in a society dominated apparently by Christian ideas of 'purpose' and 'destiny', a pagan alternative to a meaningful or orderly life had to be regularly affirmed and represented as if to always maintain in balance both the achievements and the failings of every human conceit or organisation of belief.



We couldn't call the carnival 'knowledgeable', but we might call it 'wise'. It confronts us with the value of ambivalence opposed to the value of certainty. And a comparison could also be made here with the riddling *Koans* of Zen Buddhist practice wherein what seems to be sought is not solutions to questions but perpetuation of the underlying mystique of experience.

We could assert then –somewhat boldly, and probably simplistically that where the West meets or makes its 'ends' (its limits, its own face, or its foundations) it either breaks open to invite an other, in the form of an alternative Asian tradition, or, I begins to revel in

various modes of absurdity; absurdity which is the other side of its other-wise over-pompous, self-satisfied and sober canon of conclusions.

Now, having set out some philosophical responses to the idea of ‘West-Endings’, we can attempt to move –bringing art and artists along with us- into a more *political* understanding of the same concerns. And we can in fact begin at that same earth-shattering moment of the 1940s and 1950s, the moment of the post WW2 world.



The late 1940s saw an enormous amount of geo-political re-mapping as the state of Israel came into being, shifting the moral fulcrum of a European conflict into the heart of the

middle-East. Meanwhile a United Nations was born in 1945 with the aim of avoiding further global conflict, and meanwhile suggesting one of the first models of globalisation even in its flags and logo. 1947 saw the beginnings of the achievement of Indian independence, and saw the beginnings of many other independence struggles which sought to release the grip of the West upon its numerous Asian and African colonies. The European empire's were rolled back to their homelands' frontiers as nation after nation –with varying degrees of violence – re-asserted its independence from empire.



By the 1960s, America, which had emerged as a new superpower and empire from WW2, had also inherited some of Europe's post-colonial struggles –most notably in the case of Vietnam, which had previously been a French colonial responsibility but was now seen as

embodying America's fear of communism's potential to contest capitalism as a world-wide ideology. In Jean-Luc-Godard's 1967 film *La Chinoise*, a clear description of 1960s French dismay can be seen, amid unease about Europe's relationship with both the west (now embodied by American foreign policy) and the East, in the form of Vietnamese resistance (to same). In the film, we can also see the concurrent debate with Maoist philosophy played out among the disenchantment with Stalinist soviet-isation of Marxist communism and of Lenin's vision of the revolution.



The fact that, despite the unprecedented military assault on Vietnam (the statistics for which still astound us) its impoverished resistance forces are widely perceived as emerging victorious from this war, makes this fact convenient to read as the beginning of the end of America's post-war confidence in its military power; its pragmatic philosophy' and its aim to convert and control the world according to the demands of its

capitalism. We could say that Vietnam mark the beginning of the end of American post WW2 belief in its own 'destiny' and 'purpose'.



Another significant film made at this time is *The Battle Of Algiers* 1966, which describes with intense realism the war against French rule in Algeria between 1953-62. The film is most poignant in emphasising a shift in moral perspectives from the view of the Western imperial force to that of the Algerian underground resistance and their ultimate success.



But to bring these political events, and the artworks that represent them, up to date, the shame and violence, racism and oppression of the Algerian war also provides the haunting pretext for Michael Haneke's 2005 film *Cache* or *Hidden*. Here, a bourgeois media figure (who's TV show uses a backdrop of simulacral bookshelves symbolic of Western enlightenment and the completion of the knowledge project) who is perhaps typical of the post-modern Western affluence and decadence of the past 20-30 years, is made to realise –like the French nation itself (which is always the metaphor in this film) that it is not easy to 'hide' or to forget the guilty Imperial past on which any complacent and wealthy liberalism might be founded. In fact, recent and increasing riots in French suburbs where the population include large numbers of colonial descendents, have

unnerved any white, bourgeois dream depicted by media and enjoyed as a secure bastion in the wealthy *arrondissements* of the famously modern city. All of this suddenly seems an anachronism, the future breaks in to the security of houses built on the sins of the past, the whole Western dream comes under threat from newly emerging historical forces, guided by a new sense of legitimacy, agency, ‘destiny’ and ‘purpose’ –all forces that those presently empowered have been forced to surrender or reduce to mere ironic caricatures of their original value.



Wealth, democracy, and military might, today appear to display the increasing necessity to defend an embattled –perhaps outworn- ideal, in the absence of a clear moral mandate to continue ruling as a dominant force with the support of a genuine cross-section of the populace. We might call this the crisis of democracy which calls for and calls forth an *alterocracy* or *altocracy* to revise and expand democracy’s functions in light of

unprecedented complexities. According to a proposed *alterocracy* the ‘people’ –with all their potential ‘terror’, with the terrible uncertainty of that term’s meaning – would no longer ‘rule’ or ‘reign’, and ‘difference itself, difference, alterity, the other, otherness would reign in the people’s stead.



Haneke’s searching and deep-rooted film seems to be inspired by the post-structuralist Jacques Derrida’s thoughts on liminality, difference, and community. Derrida was himself a mix of French, Jewish and Algerian identities, and it is worth noting here that his generation of thinkers were –during the 1960s, 70s, and 80s – clearly providing the vocabulary for a post-Western world and not a ‘post-Modern’ world but rather a post-post-modern world, and so, if today we are able to confidently frame a conclusion to post-modernity as a gateway to *alter*-modernity -in which other ‘destinies’ and other

purposes (we might say the destiny and purpose of ‘otherness’) have their say and have their day- this would not, I believe, have been possible without the spectacular and speculative *un*-workings of Western, modern thought made much earlier by post-structuralists like Foucault, Levinas, Deleuze etc. amid the hostile environment of a reactionary post-modernism; a post-modernism which, to be fair, has its own notion of experience devoid of destiny and purpose but one which is premised on the disempowering ideology of myopic ‘consumerism’.

Critic, historian and curator Nicholas Bourriaud, who has framed his latest thesis as an *alter*-modern using, but apparently without acknowledging- the legacy of thinkers such as Levinas, Lyotard, Deleuze, Derrida and Foucault, has also used the post-structulaist term ‘alterity’ to explain his position, and he now divides the world, not into ‘East-West’ but into North-South (though he is not the first to do this either). And it is perhaps worthwhile noting here that, while Western thought and power has been, in various ways, confronting its limits, absurdities, and its ends, the East has also, of course, been avidly embracing Western ideas and economic models, so that Bourriaud may be proved right by the image of China or India emerging as Western-style, capitalist superpowers, thus making the Northern hemisphere into a ‘global’ or homogenous realm of relative prosperity, opposed to a far more impoverished South.

The West, which, while colonising and exploiting the wealth of Asia defined itself by the identification of the East as other, of others as others (according to a Levinas-ian thesis of alterity and a Said-ian thesis of orientalism) has, we might say ‘ended’, even if it has

ended –paradoxically- as a result of its own success as much as its own failings. Its very popularity means that it has been emulated and therefore lost its other (a homeopathic model is here invoked wherein the cure for one thing is achieved by the application of the same). The West has lost its other and thereby lost its self, and yet another other –the Southern hemisphere (mainly –it has to be said in the presence of African poverty) – now haunts a new margin, a new limit, a new frontier, perhaps with another, alternative challenge to the limits and habits of thought, motivated and legitimated by yet another ‘destiny’ and yet another ‘purpose’.

Appendices

Flyer, Bibliography, and keyterms.

Modernity lives in hope, suspended in promises, turning the passage of time from a haunting terror into a spirit that is conveniently humanised - i.e. teleology.

The Gothic cathedral covered its Western façade with designs intended to ward off the evil West where the sunset would bring on the horrible uncertainties of night.

But by the time we reach Hegel the dusk has become the moment when wisdom appears, and the end of the day becomes a symbol that all ends might be something to look forward to as a moment of realisation

'West Endings'

Paul O'Kane

"...for the foodstuff never undergoes a pressure greater than is precisely necessary to raise and carry it; in the gesture of chopsticks, further softened by their substance - wood or lacquer - there is something maternal, the same precisely measured care taken in moving a child: a force (in the operative sense of the word), no longer a pulsion; here we have a whole demeanour with regard to food; . . ."
(Roland Barthes, "Chopsticks" -in 'Empire of Signs')

In this lecture I will map growing post-WW2 disorientation regarding the hegemony of the West –its geographies, religions, economies and philosophies. I will use the Michael Haneke film 'Caché' (Hidden) to unearth European unease at the legacies of colonialism, citing also 'The Battle of Algiers' (Gillo Pontecorvo). I will draw attention to the work of Roland Barthes, Gilles Deleuze, Edward Said, Emanuel Levinas and Michel Foucault as prescient voices who have provided us with an ethical vocabulary that we now inherit to negotiate a

21st century in which *alterity* has moved from the margins to the heart of an emerging new modernity.

Hidden [videorecording (DVD)] *Caché* / a film by Michael Haneke.
Published: London: Artificial Eye, 2005.

The Battle of Algiers [videorecording (DVD)] / directed by Gillo Pontecorvo.
Published: [U.K.] : Argent Films, 2003.

La Chinoise [videorecording DVD] / directed by Jean-Luc Godard.
Published: [France] : Studio Canal, c2007.

Empire of Signs / Roland Barthes.
Author: Barthes, Roland
Published: New York: Hill and Wang, 1982.

Modernity and Difference / Stuart Hall and Sarat Maharaj ; foreword by Gilane Tawadros ; edited by Sarah Campbell and Gilane Tawadros. Author: Hall, Stuart
Published: London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 2001.

Orientalism (also use as a Keyword) / Edward W. Said.
Author: Said, Edward W.
Edition: Reprinted with new afterword.
Published: London: Penguin, 1995.

The Order of Things: an archaeology of the human sciences.
Foucault, Michel
Published: London: Routledge, 2002.

***Orientalism** refers to the imitation or depiction of aspects of Eastern cultures in the West by writers, designers and artists, and can also refer to a sympathetic stance towards the region by a writer or other person. An "Orientalist" may be a person engaged in these activities, but is also the traditional term for any scholar of Oriental studies.[1]

These meanings were given a new twist by **Edward Said** in his controversial 1978 book *Orientalism*, where he uses the term to describe a tradition, both academic and artistic, of

hostile and deprecatory views of the East by the West, shaped by the attitudes of the era of European imperialism in the 18th and 19th centuries. When used in this sense, it often implies essentializing and prejudiced outsider interpretations of Eastern cultures and peoples. Said was critical of this scholarly tradition.

***Alterity**

Alterity is a philosophical term meaning "otherness", strictly being in the sense of the other of two (Latin '*alter*').

It is generally now taken as the philosophical principle of exchanging one's own perspective for that of the "other." The concept was established by **Emmanuel Lévinas**. The term is also deployed outside of philosophy, notably in anthropology by scholars such as Nicholas Dirks, Johannes Fabian, **Michael Taussig** and Pauline Turner Strong to refer to the construction of cultural others.