

Across the Morpich Fields: The Art of Mariko Mori

by Paul D. Miller

*I came into the world after Buddha
I leave the world before Miroku
Between the Buddha of the beginning
And the Buddha of the end
I am born, I do not die -Ungo Kiyō, 1659*

I speak to you of the past and its shadows. Beneath the proscenium arches of the satellites, on a planet put in parentheses by man made objects in the sky, images move, information rustles. Left right, left right. Up down, up down. All around this strange sphere information moves in invisible waves carried by electromagnetic pulses. A vast population of phantasmal meanings echo silently through the iron, steel, and concrete corridors of the global village to create a bewildering maze of meanings, a place where past and future slide by each other at terrifying speed. Ghosts? Ciphers? Were they real? Was the information real? The images: were they all like solid holograms, absolutely convincing even to themselves but created entirely within the fractured terrain of the urban present? But what was "real?" Would we know it if we saw it? Problems arise. Meaning migrates, moves, transforms. It never stays the same. Next corner next intersection. Switch. As if we were blind, the street corner emits a series of beeps to tell us its okay to walk. But this time we arrive not inside a dream as much as we witness a series of tableaux that seem too real to be mere fantasies - even though they have to be. If all our memories, our backgrounds, are as false as all the rest, then just who are we? What are we? A shorthand description of the mime play between narrative engines of desire and technology? The urban landscape, sphinx-like, looks back at us, daring us to plumb its secrets. It, however, is not neutral territory. Meanwhile the world encapsulated in its womblike environment, swathed in currents of noise and signals, spins complacently on its orbit through the cosmos.

If you look at the work of Mariko Mori, you'll notice a couple of things straight off. Her photographs, "narrative" briefs of a curriculum vitae of contemporary Japan, take us immediately into a realm of sci-fi high fashion. An incursion into the deeper reality of the world of our ordinary experiences, Mori's photography renders her world a seductive zone of artifice - the surface beneath the surfaces, the place where myths come from. Mori is a Japanese woman conditioned and informed by the distinct mores of her homeland. Mori acts as a filter, a prism lens for the changing cultural landscape not only of Japan, but also of its place in the electronic world culture in which it actively participates. Her explorations into the "everyday" of her immediate surroundings - her performance and photography in public spaces, her portrayal of the theatrical side effects of sci-fi clothing - spell out a strange disjunction of time and place. Are we watching a popular sci-fi show on a channel nobody knows about? Are we seeing fashion from two or three years in the future? (This is a long time as fashion goes.) Mori presents us with a world in which an aura of surrealism pervades everyday life: cause and effect change place; memory and illusion change the shape of the present moment; the most ordinary thoughts and actions result in the most unexpected revelations and events. In short, her work reveals a two-way conditioning between the imagination and its environment. She takes us on a journey that, in her own way, shows the illusions and exclusions created by that "mutuality." This disjunction, this dynamic engagement between the surreal and the real puts reality in a kind of wasteland between perception and identity, magic and meaning. Can you engage the informational rain? Can a single person interface the mythologies of cultural acceleration, the velocity of dreams? Instead you try to blank out the universe and just drift. You realize that regardless of whether the dream has superseded reality, there is no escape from the beautiful but desolate landscape you have summoned with your own vivid imagination. Mori's photography reveals to us a landscape drenched in kanji, the Japanese written alphabet; a semiotic terrain of language reduced to its basic components of glyph structures and the calligraphic renditions of myriad street signs, all interspersed amongst Tokyo's Western-suited commercial culture. Are these still life portraits science fiction? Or are they attempts to render the speed with which the imagination creates new vistas for exploration, new modes to view the present real world? The apotheosis of urban futurism, almost like a vision straight from Philip K. Dick, Mori's work takes us into a place surprisingly similar to *Blade Runner*, the movie adapted from his novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Much of her work reminds me of a *Blade Runner* film set reversed, involuted and squeezed out of a tube to land on the neon-lit

expanses of contemporary Tokyo, and photographed. Captured for posterity. Mori is sending us a message from an imaginary future, but the message carries its own code base, its own logic system. How do we decode it?

Santo is Japanese for "large metropolis," and this is Mori's prime source for ideas. From themigration of Buddhism and Chinese culture to Japan between the third and 8th centuries A.D., through the arrival of Christian missionaries, to the intense urbanization of Edo-period Japan, there has been an almost continuous evolution in Japanese culture that has its parallels in the Shinto religion with its air and land spirits, the Kami. But where the Kami usually reflected local needs and aspirations and combined them with the regional tastes of the worshippers, Buddhism in Japan brought with it an almost cosmopolitan flair for paradox: develop the "spirit" but shut out the world. At the same time, one is expected to somehow still convey a sense of engagement. The two religions have existed side by side, and have, as religions tend to do, borrowed a bit here and there from each other while maintaining their integrity. This was Japan's historic mode of dealing with diversity until Admiral Perry came along, and today, this kind of insular mentality remains - albeit, with modifications. Mori's art takes on the futuristic landscapes of contemporary urban Japan, and in the end, like the Kami, she becomes a syncretic archetypal figure able to engage the mythologies of her environment and flow with the currents of culture. She is the product of the cross-pollinization of many cultures, at home in anyplace in the global village, yet still rooted in the traditions of modern Japan.

In Empty Dream Mori once again takes us to a narrative terrain of paradox. To me, it represents the psychic residua of an enquiry into the relationship of empathy, form and space - how desire warps and folds them all together. Empty Dream puts us on an artificial shore, replete with simulated waves and sun. The ocean never looked so good. While the Surrealists were inspired by Lautremont's well known phrase "beautiful like the chance meeting of an umbrella and a sewing machine on a dissecting table S," today, this same phrase characterizes life in the late 20th century. From advertising to the packaging of commodities, the mutation and consolidation of multiple narratives into hypercommodified dream-fueled dramas of psychogenic, psychotropic representation flows into contemporary life. Inscription and reinscriptionS a dervish dance between the "real" and its myriad representations. Okay? So next thing we know, we are able to look nonchalantly at a mermaid on a beach and not blink an eye. We look and see a cyborg checking the time on a crowded train in Tokyo, and it's no surprise. Mori's blend of sci-fi pop themes and fashion reminds me of Walter Benjamin's concerns with John Heartfield, the early 20th century Dada collagist, who critiqued Germany's martial compression with his "picture poem" collages of German militarists combined with animals to create hybrid, fearsome creatures who evoked feelings of terror in the viewer . But Japan had its input in the area of visual and electronic collage, in some cases outstripping by far what has gone on in the West. This is what Mori tells us in her own way.

She gives us a planar-perspective picture of post everything Japan: Mori dressed as chic cyborg checking its input systems on the subway in crowded Tokyo; Mori as cybernetic sprite offering advice and succor to passerby in the business districts; Mori as a Japanese update on Lautremont's infamous mating of a shark and a human being from his Les Chants de maldoror. A concrete sensual symbol, she exists in a landscape defined by the former terrain of the fine arts as whose task is to reveal or expose the illusory character of cultural perspective. Boo! She is word become flesh, flesh become illusion, illusion become timecode. The atmospheric shimmer of the subtle displacement of life by art suffuses her work. Mori draws analogies between what is articulated in fiction, language, and visibility, and points to a tug of war between her identity as a Japanese woman and her entrance into a milieu of global culture and electronic, urban multiplicity. These are short stories, excerpts from a roman-*clef where the clues have been scattered throughout real-time, a mirage of science fiction themes that would make Philip K. Dick smile. A situationist position of camera studies replacing activity, her imagery acts as a exercises in self portraiture to replace an engagement with the "objective" world of modernist art. Mori as virtual subject or a narrative that never was, a phenomenological locale that situates the human and the technological as codependent and mutually defining.

She takes the viewer on an odyssey that traces the "postmodern" subject to a new kind of self-recognition. In the end, though, she arrives at new frontiers. I look at her as a cybernetic update or, at any rate, a remix, of the Buddhist myth of the Bodhisvatta, who upon attaining transcendent awareness of the spiritual unity of the material, spiritual, and technological worlds refuses to become one with the great meta-program, and serves humanity instead, providing a propitious launching point for further inquiries into the relationship of electronic technology and culture.

"I've seen things you people wouldn't dream of," the last replicant in Blade Runner tells us before he says, "time to die .." He let's go of a white dove that sails into a clear blue sky, momentarily freed of the humid smog that mars the heavens throughout the movie. You look at Mori's pictures and see displaced time. Minimum plausible alteration. You look out into the world and feel displaced time. Containment versus flow. Migration versus stagnation. At this point in the information economy, is there any difference? Was there ever? It has been said by some people who would try to describe our present image saturated world that the text of the natural has been displaced by its human interpretations . Then what? For that matter, what if we flip that equation, adjust the

variables so that the whole deal, the whole movement of values, is reduced to some zero sum game? $X \text{ equals } Y \text{ equals } Z \text{ equals } X$. Then what? Let's say that human beings are an extension of nature. Let's say, like McLuhan and his gang, the things that human beings make are an extension of themselves. Let's say that there is no barrier between the natural and the artificial, but that they are obverse sides of the same coin, a currency, I might add, that has been flipped, for better or worse, by human hands. So tell me, then what?

Urban identity in flux, personality crises - the tides of culture move silently. Japanese sci-fi themes, like the comic strips that eventually turned into Marvel Comics, developed into a tapestry of mythic forces that would have made Marvel universe creator Jack Kirby happy. Mori offers us a strata of cross referenced super heroes born in a fractal stew, a meta continuity that leaves the smooth, linear, soothing logical world far behind. Is she creating characters for her own comic strip, a new kind of manga (a Japanese serial comic strip that never ends, but evolves over and over)? Is she a sequence of icons, gaps, and discontinuous relationships? Like the seismic drift of our little globe that show it's all, one way or another, linked beneath the surface of the water, Mori offers us a tale of surfaces while subtly detailing a loss of corporeality, a flight into metropolitan zones of imaginary flux. We move across a surface that's oceanic, but definitely not an ocean. The only way to know for sure is to dive in and see for ourselves. Condensations? Discontinuous arrangements? The structure becomes its own dynamic system, a place where rules are broken and contradictory realities are juxtaposed. Move into the frame, ladies and gents, and the picture slides right by into the mix. Mori's wordless images remind me of cartoons where the dialog, like a thought balloon in one of those narratives that used to be two dimensional glyphs on paper until they took over and became reality, just isn't necessary. We already know all the words. Life as a comic strip isn't so bad is it? You just have to look in every direction at once. Like the non-linear comic strips they remind me of so much, Mori's micro narratives posit the multiple endings, the freeze frame expansions, the stop-gap, save-the-hero-at-the-end-of-the-story-by-changing-the-whole-plot type of narrative that never really finishes. Permutations arise. Complications abound. The story just goes on and on. Maybe that's what her body capsule pieces are all about. But on another level, the body capsule acts as a way of preserving the body against the ravages of time: it is Mori's update on the tradition of the *jisei* or farewell poem to life. But for Mori, the act of death doesn't spell an end to life. Death, like the Buddhist *enso* circular figure that symbolizes eternal recurrence, is a continuous transformation of self. The body capsule prolongs, contains, acts as a seed. On this level, life and death are nothing but illusions of the imagination. The spark of life rests in the mind.

Mori's art leads us to a reconceptualized version of simultaneous dispersed space, a place all now, gone tomorrow; a place we all carry in our heads as we move out onto the fractal geometries of the electronic, information laden urban landscape. Street curves, kanji drenched signs, neon lit expanses of concrete and steel - this picture lacks only real time flow. So what. Mori has other plans. Like Haruhiko Shono's *Inside Out With Gadget*, Toni Dove's *Virtual Reality* art, Cindy Sherman's inquiries into self-representation, or Osamu Tezuka's androgynous *Astro Boy* (or "*Tetsuwan Atomu*," as the Japanese call him), Mori creates her worlds and couldn't give a damn whether or not they fit exactly into whatever cultural paradigm is reigning at the moment. This is what gives her art the kind of immediacy that the manga possess. This is what gives her art the same kind of longevity. Today fashion, graphic design, raves, sci-fi scenarios of futures past - all of these things point to a place where the late 20th century finds itself at a crossroads. Turbulence, narrative dissonance - flow. The informational rain of cultural velocity is a paroxysm, a kind of zero point entropy - a crystalline surface of zonal aberration, a kind of magnetic susceptibility to cultural drift.

Narrative engines? In Mori's work, single stories became connected to one another through cross over plots, shared characters, locations and themes. The linearity of their plotlines is sacrificed to interconnectivity: a comic universe that takes on the qualities of a chaotic system, a new (but basically incredibly old) self-similarity, an emergent antipolarizing theme. She takes us through strange loops to a place where dualities are false, and accelerated evolution is the driving force of a nature supplanted by the information economy. What then? Is her work a kind of *samizdat*, an underground magazine whose contents focus on narratives encoded with the flotsam and jetsam of outsider culture, or manga, that contain pop culture answers to societal problems? Recycling the components of the body - it's sinewy muscle, its textual body - has become an underlying premise of a large majority of sci-fi since the 1980's. Will the body go? Will we all move into the conceptualized bodiless space of the electromagnetic now? Hariko Murakami's *The Hard Boiled Wonderland and The End of the World*? Maybe. William Gibson's *Johnny Mnemonic*? Forget it. *Frankenstein*? Maybe. *The Mechanical Bride* of E.T.A. Hoffman? Maybe. The artificial androids of Karel Capek's *R.U.R*? Definitely maybe. In the end though, Mori's work acts as a kind of visual cue leading us into the sensuous fractal spaces of language itself. It is a time line that meanders, refusing to follow a straight path. Each style leads to a different set of vocabularies, techniques and influences - a new set of teleological possibilities. After all, she has style. Mori's work directs us to realms of experience in this "new" information economy while coyly reminding us that there is nothing new under the sun.