

# UC Berkeley

## TRANSIT

**Title**

BOOK REVIEW: The Naked Eye, by Yoko Tawada

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3823n7jn>

**Journal**

TRANSIT, 5(1)

**Author**

Manthripragada, Ashwin

**Publication Date**

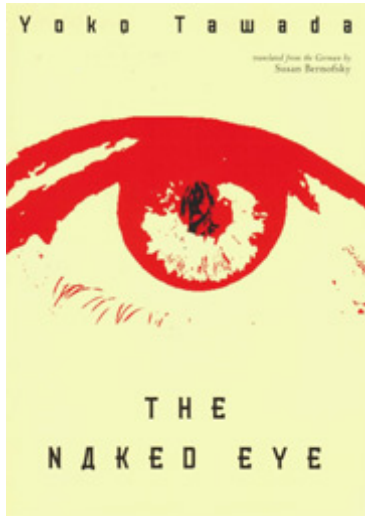
2009

**DOI**

10.5070/T751009747

Peer reviewed

Yōko Tawada, *The Naked Eye*. Trans. Susan Bernofsky. New York, NY: New Directions, 2009. Pp. 256. Paper, \$13.95.



“The gaze of the nameless lens licks the floor like a detective without grammar.” (1)

The first paragraph of Yōko Tawada’s *The Naked Eye* is a blueprint for the novel’s itinerancy, mapping out the difficulties of constructing a story that is caught in flux, between countries, between media, between languages, between political systems, between adolescence and adulthood, and between sexualities. The result of this persistent indeterminacy is a first-person narrator with whom the reader may only strain to empathize, for her assessments of and reactions to both the injustices and kindnesses done to her force a rethinking of moralities. The narrator’s true name is never certain, and her unsettled identity is equally molded and erased by all the various turns of her journey, including being kidnapped and raped, living with unfamiliar acquaintances, signing on as a guinea pig for dermatological experiments, forging her passport, and rummaging through trashcans for food. Even the part of her identity that is fixed, her Vietnamese childhood, is conquered by the luridly described new existence in Europe as a young woman torn away from her past. As the novel progresses, whatever occasional interruptions of life in Vietnam might emerge – the musings of her uncle, of Ho Chin Minh, and of Confucius – are completely replaced by descriptions of film clips from the movies of actress Catherine Deneuve, to whom the protagonist addresses her story. A result of the first-person narrator dissolving into her second-person addressee is a shift of focus away from the sensational events of the plot and towards the rhetorical devices used to create and obscure identity.

Translator Susan Bernofsky's note to the novel illuminates its most transfixing aspect, namely its testing of the limits and conditions of language: "[Tawada] started the novel in German, but then parts of the story began occurring to her in Japanese, and so she continued writing sections of the book now in one language, now in the other, later translating in both directions until she arrived simultaneously at two complete manuscripts. The linguistic indeterminacy of this process beautifully reflects the situation of the novel's narrator..." The narrator has trouble with words, conjuring them, using them, translating them, and understanding them. Reflective less of ineptitude than of *Unheimlichkeit*, these frustrations with language, with its ties to place and politics, give way to a concern with the difference between word and image. In the dream and dreamlike sequences, as well as the descriptions of magazine photographs and of movie scenes, the narrator's voice gradually slips into a visual grammar in which syntax mimics image: the story becomes at moments a screenplay. At the same time, however, as words approach becoming image, images are understood by rules of grammar: "I knew that the film was trying to end with a period, a bit of punctuation with some finality about it, not wanting to let us down with a comma" (220). This kind of bi-directionality in the attitude toward language is also applicable to the narrator's attitude toward place. She states, "I tried to get away from the idea that there were separate places called 'here' and 'there.' Despite the distance between them, 'here' and 'there' had to be connected" (30). To best connect them, then, is to depart from both sides at once, leaving her at all times on unstable ground, neither here nor there.

As words like "home" sound like a "lie" (13), and as fears of forever being bound to a place give her reason *not* to learn new languages (31), the narrator herself begins to directly question her identity. She first asks, "But what was I, who no longer spoke at all?" (25), and then states, "There was no longer any woman whose name was 'I.' As far as I was concerned, the

only woman in the world was you, and so I did not exist” (59). Because of such assertions, and because every chapter title is the title of a Catherine Deneuve film, one begins to read, from one angle, the narrator as Catherine Deneuve – not merely as the actress, but as the numerous roles she plays in the different films. The narrator finds refuge in the theaters of Paris, and as she habitually escapes the noise of the streets, once-wispy ties between the narrator’s experiences and Catherine’s on-screen experiences become more pronounced. Filmic reality and personal life are conflated. Thus, the reader is suspended between reflecting upon the narrator’s many roles and upon her complete lack of one.

The whole story is set amidst decades of political upheaval and turmoil, which the protagonist barely renders, captures with her lens. Rarely expressing opinions of her own, except those concerning language, the narrator seems to exist on a plane that she has created completely for herself: “In the movie theaters there were sometimes men who spoke to me. I would say a word that didn’t exist in any language and walk away. This one word was meant to signify: ‘I am unable to speak.’ It was a noun in the singular signifying ‘speechless subject’; or else it was a verb that could be used only in the first person singular and meant the opposite of ‘to speak’” (86). Perhaps in defense, perhaps in amusement, one is never certain about the reasons for her actions and decisions. It is as if the screen has over time robbed her of her self, leaving her less and less concerned about anything but continuing. Arguably the embodiment of “our twenty-first century nightmares and dreams” as the back cover blurb touts, the ultramodern experience appears to be one that is devoid of goals, whose closest semblance to a home is in ephemeral screen images, is mere flux. When paused, life cannot be comprehended: “I picked up the remote and pressed the pause button.... In a movie theater I was never able to stop the images, and so you were always racing into my retina. Now I had the power to stop your movements. I was

shocked and ran out of the room without knowing what I meant to do” (157). In this paused moment, the uncanny doubling of herself, which up to this point has been mesmerizing, is at once discombobulating. Thus her immediate reaction is to keep moving, to run.

This story about persistent motion, about languages and silences above national boundaries, about fragmentation and conflation, is successfully neither here nor there. Yōko Tawada writes a novel with gems of passages that will catch any reader’s eye, not just that of the scholar interested in language, identity, and transition. Furthermore, because of Tawada’s bilingual approach to writing *The Naked Eye*, reading this sound English translation of her work would open a new forum for translation theorists. If the Japanese manuscript were also to be translated into English, it would be a fascinating endeavor, at the least, to compare the two translations of the two equally “original” texts.

ASHWIN MANTHRIPRAGADA, University of California, Berkeley