

BULLA AUREA: MATERIALITY AND SPIRITUALITY IN MICHEL TOURNIER'S/ LA GOUTTE D'OR

Regina Bergholz

Abstrak:

Tema perjalanan mewarnai sebagian besar tulisan Michel Tournier. Tournier merupakan salah seorang pengarang dan filsuf Perancis yang lahir pada tahun 1924. Novelnya *La Goutte d'Or* yang dipublikasi pada tahun 1986 mengisahkan perjalanan Idriss dari kampung halamannya Afrika menuju Eropa. Perjalanan juga berarti sebuah proses berinteraksi dengan bangsa, negara, situasi, tempat, orang-orang dan adat-istiadat yang serba asing. Pada saat yang sama, orang yang melakukan perjalanan juga berhadapan dengan gambaran-gambaran, praduga dan prasangka yang dibangun oleh orang lain terhadap dirinya sebagai pendatang. Foto-foto, gambar, dan film-film Barat yang berhubungan dengan perjalanan, merupakan media yang biasanya menampilkan hal-hal yang dianggap luar biasa dan aneh. Novel Michel Tournier mengkritik hal itu. Kalung berbentuk tetesan, sebagai "bulla aurea" simbol kebebasan dalam budaya Arab orientalis yang dikenakan oleh Idriss, merupakan simbol budaya Timur yang sangat berbeda dengan fotografi budaya Barat. Kalung tersebut menjadi simbol yang memuat makna budaya tulis dan literature Timur. Novel tersebut menampilkan makna kontras antara budaya Timur dan Barat. Penulis mengidentifikasi budaya Barat sebagai budaya "penampakan", sedangkan Budaya Timur digambarkan sebagai budaya "keberadaan". Novel *La Goutte d'Or* merupakan sebuah pengungkapan makna dan nilai budaya serta filsafat Timur di tengah budaya dan filsafat Barat Modern.

Keywords:

Teori-teori-foto, teori-teori media, teori-teori identitas dan alteritas, literatur perjalanan, postmodernisme, museum, semiophores, *double ganger*.

1. Introduction

Fifteen-year-old Idriss is an Algerian shepherd living in the Saharan Desert. One day, a blonde tourist from Paris takes a photo of him in the desert. She promises to send him a copy but the picture never arrives. Idriss, believing that the photograph exercises harmful magic over him and needs to be retrieved, leaves his oasis and travels to Europe to find the woman and the photograph. During his journey, Idriss encounters challenge after challenge, mostly due to the deceptive and illusory gaze of other people depriving him of his personality

and reducing him to an esthetic object. A golden pendant in the shape of a droplet, which Idriss carries around his neck, gets lost during his journey. The boy never finds his photograph but the golden droplet turns up again at the end of the novel in a jewelers display.

Most of the novels written by Tournier deal with a travelling protagonist being threatened by disappearance, loss of identity and eventually even self-liquidation. In the novel *The golden droplet* (*La Goutte d'Or*), the glances and looks of others at Idriss and the occidental culture of images mark a constant and very realistic threat to his physical as well as emotional identity on his initiation journey from Africa to Europe. The French philosopher Jean Baudrillard understands the disappearance of an object during its representation (photography, other image-making media) as an intended one: "Si quelque chose veut devenir image, ce n'est pas pour durer, c'est pour mieux disparaître."¹ The relatedness of photographic or other representations or reproductions and the loss of identity – a 'micro-experience of death'² (Roland Barthes), is firstly and mainly connected to the distorting gazes of other people. The town wish of disappearance, as cousin Achour expresses it, goes along with the wish of the spectators not to see him: while carrying a full-body-advertisement, Achour himself, behind this poster, stays invisible for all those people only interested in the advertisement itself.

The disappearance of the subject in the novel of Tournier is not only connected to the distorting views of other people but also to different objects surrounding Idriss. In the novel *The golden droplet*, two different objects play a major role: the photograph states and underlines the absence of the object represented in the picture, as Jean-Paul Sartre puts it.³ Also belonging to this category of items in the novel are all different kinds of advertisements, furthermore film and display dummies.

The one item that is diametrically opposed to the various objects already mentioned is a golden pendant in the shape of a droplet. Whereas a picture or photo only resembles the object, the specific materiality of the golden droplet exists independently from any other object; it can thus easily become a sign for something else:

Dans toute image, même dans celle qui ne pose pas son objet comme existant, il y a une détermination positionnelle. Dans le signe en tant que tel cette détermination manque. A partir d'un objet qui fonctionne comme signe, une certaine nature est visée; mais sur cette nature, on n'affirme rien, on se borne à la viser. Naturellement, cette nature ne se manifeste pas à travers la matière signifiante: elle est bien au-delà.⁴

The polish philosopher and historian Krzysztof Pomian (*Origin of the museum*) divides the objects of the visible world in either things or *semiophores*

(sign-bearers). Things are useful and get damaged while in use, whereas *semiophores* are not useful but meaningful. The latter represent the invisible and do not get spoiled or damaged. They are very often being displayed in museums to attract attention: „In ihrer Eigenschaft als Semiophoren werden sie aus dem ökonomischen Kreislauf herausgehalten denn nur so können sie ihre Bedeutung voll und ganz realisieren.“⁵ The golden droplet in the novel of Tournier is a *semiophore*, a sign-bearer which is (mostly) kept out of the economic circulation, whose value derives not so much from the material but for Idriss mainly from its specific meaning or signification and therefore its hidden connection to the invisible. The photograph, on the other hand, is a constant part of the economic circulation. The posters and advertisements want to sell holidays, the dummies clothes, and the film of Monsieur Mage lemonade.

Idriss can further be classified as one of those Tournieran protagonists, who, like Tiffauges (*Le Roi des Aulnes*) or Hector (*Les suaires de Véronique*) becomes a sign-bearer himself, a living *semiophore*. Even photography, in the early days, was able to be a representative of the invisible: it only needed the right *aura* (Walter Benjamin) or a distinctive *punctum* (Roland Barthes). But the connection between photography and the invisible has always been a rather difficult one, because the only real purpose of photography seemed to be the exact representation of the visible world. In Tournier's novel, there is no *aura* and no *punctum* within photography. All the pictures in the novel tend to make the visible invisible, not vice versa. The contemplator of these pictures remains a prisoner in Plato's cave, not even a shadow of the real world can be detected, they put the spectator completely on the wrong track, they are nothing else than an illusion, a *simulacrum*.

Different traces of disappearance of the main character Idriss will be analysed and asked what kind of role photography as a *simulacrum* plays in this context (2). The importance of the only mentioned object, the golden droplet, which is carried on the journey by Idriss, will then being analyzed and contrasted with photography (3). After this, a conclusion will be drawn (4).

2. *Simulacra*

Like most of the novels of Tournier, *The golden droplet* is a hybrid text, which contains aspects of the genre of migration novel, *Bildungsroman*, historic novel, initiation novel, travel account, photographic or culture theory and even fairy tale (style Voltaire or Saint-Exupéry). The novel is about the life of a young boy called Idriss, who grew up in a remote area of the Saharan Desert in Northern Africa and who eventually leaves his home to travel via Béni Abbès, Bécharr, Oran and Marseille to Paris, France. Release of this journey in the truest

sense of the word is a meeting with two tourists, a man and a woman, in the desert. During this meeting, the woman is taking a photograph of Idriss: “Elle avait plusieurs fois réarmé, et visait à nouveau Idriss et ses moutons”⁶. The semantic field reveals a strong affinity towards hunting vocabulary: the camera is used like a weapon and the object (Idriss) is focused upon like a prey. Scientific scholars in the field of photography like Susan Sontag, Vilém Flusser or Walter Benjamin stress the fact that photography and hunting are two things related to each other: “In der Tat ist der heimkehrende Amateur mit seiner Unzahl künstlerischer Originalaufnahmen nicht erfreulicher als ein Jäger, der vom Anstand mit Massen von Wild zurückkommt, die nur für den Händler verwertbar sind.”⁷ In the exposition of the novel, the act of photographing replaces and sublimates the act of collecting various objects to prove one has successfully undertaken and finished a journey.

The photo taken, captured in the device, goes back to Paris and the two tourists promise they would send Idriss a copy. This copy never reaches Idriss and after having waited for some time, he decides to leave his oasis and search for the photo himself.

Idriss doesn't carry along a camera. That implies that on his journey north, he will never be in the position of the subject focusing an object, like tourists usually do. Instead, he will always, directly or indirectly, be reduced to the status of an object in the eyes and the cameras of others.⁸ In Mustapha's photo studio, the camera even adopts human traits. Its passivity in the hand of the photographer is only a pretended one: „Mais oui, mon appareil participe à la création, il faut qu'il ait du talent lui aussi, qu'est ce que vous croyez! Alors je lui montre un paysage en couleurs. Il le voit, il l'aime, et quand il le reproduit, et bien quelque chose des couleurs transparaît dans le noir et blanc.”⁹ In doing so, the camera is accredited with human features such as decision making ability and capacity to judge.

Confronted with various images and pseudo-identities of himself, whose unreal and illusional character is obvious for the reader as well as for the traveller himself, Idriss seems to lose his identity in the turmoil of the occidental culture of the image. In the eyes and in front of the camera of others, Idriss turns successively into a donkey, an indigene or exotic, a tourist, a dead man, a bearded stranger, a street sweeper, the little prince of Saint-Exupéry, a cameleer, a criminal and in a double ganger. The images of Idriss are occupying his place, they blur his real identity instead of representing him correctly.¹⁰ In doing so, they prevent Idriss from being seen as the person. The image more and more becomes a *mirage*, an illusion, a distorting mirror of the traveller and the journey itself. The illusive character of the photograph is not only a passive one but gains more and more in activity and productivity, because

the real person behind the image tries to adjust himself to his copies and in the end loses his identity and disappears as the individual he has formerly been. Finally, there is the strong wish of Idriss to protect himself from this illusionary world of pictures and to withdraw completely into his shell, to find back his lost identity and self-assurance. Within the many different images of the protagonist, the author Michel Tournier tracks down different traces of metamorphosis and disappearance. I will follow three of these traces.

2.1 The indigene

To perceive Idriss as an indigene, one needs the focus of the notion of an alterity. The metaphor and word: 'indigene' can only be used by someone who himself is no indigene. The first scene, that makes Idriss an indigene, is the encounter with the two tourists in the desert. At the same time, this is a key scene of the novel. The magical universe of identity¹¹ is transgressed; a border-crossing takes place, in an absolute as well as metaphoric sense:

[J]e mehr der einzelne an Raum (und damit auch an Bewegung) gewinnt, desto mehr büßt er an Halt in der Gemeinschaft ein. Das System, das die dörfliche Lokalgruppe bildet, wird in seinem Grenzbereich zwangsläufig instabil. Wer sich dort aufhält, hat Mühe, sich verlässlich zu orientieren, fürchtet, den Weg zu verlieren, fühlt sich allen möglichen Gefahren ausgesetzt, glaubt sich von böswilligen Zwergen, Hexen und Riesen bedroht.¹²

Idriss, at the beginning of the novel, is dwelling in such a border region. He is not at home any more, within the confines of his own Oasis village Tabelbala, but on his way to meet a friend, who lives close to the border of the desert. This friend, Ibrahim, is an outsider, a shepherd from the Chaamba tribe, a half-nomad. But this is not the only transgression in space Idriss has to deal with. This place, where Idriss dwells and that is still part of his own world, is now being entered by complete strangers. Not only Idriss comes to foreign territory, but the foreign territory also comes to Idriss. This penetration of the unknown is not only evident through the appearance of a Landrover and the two French tourists, but before all through the presence of a camera. Idriss finds himself completely at the mercy of the 'eye' of the camera. By being photographed, Idriss loses his cultural rootedness. Subversive and hidden first, but in the end more and more tangible: Idriss finds himself confronted with the perception of the villagers that a photograph brings the person who is being photographed bad luck, that it exposes him to various dangers and annoyances, weakens him and in the end could even destroy and kill him. The idea that there is something captured of him in the picture, something he loses, leads to fear and anxiety, the fear of losing his bodily appearance. The 'eye' of the camera is understood to be a prolonged magical eye. Through this magical eye, the photographed can be harmed. A photo in the hands of

others is a sign of imminent danger for Idriss and his family.¹³ Idriss knows that if he doesn't want to lose the power over his picture, he needs to leave his home and get the picture back. That means he himself needs to transgress the bounding between his own culture and the alien culture.

The photograph and the camera that Idriss wants to find, is never present in the course of the novel. Idriss will neither find the promised picture nor the woman who promised it. But the various reproductions of Idriss himself that come into life during his journey are constantly present throughout the novel. This presence doesn't seem to need materialistic appearance any more. The photograph loses its materialistic value because it is possible to reproduce it: „Das Plakat ist wertlos, niemand besitzt es, und zerreißt es der Wind, so bleibt die Macht der Werbeagentur dennoch ungeschmälert – sie kann es reproduzieren.“¹⁴

Even though Idriss knows that the photographed person is not in imminent danger, there is another kind of (metaphorical) danger waiting for him: the loss of identity because of the falsifying and subjective viewpoints of the others. This metaphorical danger slowly but surely turns into a real danger: Idriss weakens steadily, he is irritated, has no interest whatsoever in participating in the everyday life, he is afraid of the others and their attitude and afraid, of course, of the total annihilation of himself. „Il ressentait le besoin de se protéger du monde extérieur, et voulait éviter ses pièges et les mirages qui se dressaient sous ses pas.“¹⁵

Already in Béni Abbès, only 150 km away from his oasis Tabelbala, Idriss is eye witnessing his own disappearance: In a museum about the Sahara he becomes suddenly the alien, the spectator of his own culture. Cultural habits and natural environment of his own people are exhibited behind glass. Items of everyday life, not useful any more, become 'museal', meaningful and therefore an endangered species, in danger of disappearance. A very ironic and anthropocentric passage in the novel shows who is really responsible for the disappearance of the animals of the Sahara: „Comme vous le constatez, le désert n'est pas aussi désert qu'on le dit, puisqu'il est peuplé par tous les animaux empaillés qui vous entourent. Empaillés, oui, car pour ce qui est des animaux vivants, il faut bien dire qu'ils ont tous disparu, victimes non des rigueurs du climat, mais de la méchanceté des hommes.“¹⁶ All the while Idriss is watching the items behind the glass vitrines, he can see his mirroring appearance like a palimpsest behind glass, too. He himself becomes a lifeless object that can be looked upon by others. His own 'disappearance' or death is looked upon. Not only he himself becomes a stranger to himself, but also by the visitors of the museum he is perceived as a stranger and this paradoxically

in a moment, in which he starts to question his own system and thus starting to adapt to his environment.

When Idriss crosses the border between Africa and Europe, the problem becomes even more tangible: Because the others continue to see Idriss and his African background through the treacherous eyes of the camera, advertisements or film, all modern occidental media, he and his social affiliation are objectified in the eyes of the viewers. Less and less, Idriss recognizes himself in those pictures: in Marseille, he is standing in front of a poster that promotes an oasis-winter-holiday in the middle of the Saharan desert. Here, Tournier unveils the well known mirage of a 'french' Africa. The reality is somewhat different:

Idriss regardait médusé l'image offerte d'une oasis saharienne. Un massif de palmes et de fleurs exorbitantes entourait une piscine en forme de haricot. Des filles blondes en minuscule bikini minaudent autour du bassin turquoise, et buvaient dans des hauts verres avec des pailles coudées. Deux gazelles apprivoisées inclinaient leur tête élégante vers une vaste corbeille emplie d'oranges, de pamplemousses et d'ananas. Une oasis saharienne? Et lui, Idriss, n'en était-il pas le pur produit? Il ne se retrouvait pas dans cette image de rêve.¹⁷

Idriss answers more and more to those mirages and he even starts obeying them which can be seen in the scene where he walks with a camel through Paris.¹⁸ This scene is rather absurd: the identification of the berber boy with this camel is clearly ironical and the reader should be able to understand this ironic *clin d'oeil* of the author himself. But for the common Parisian inhabitant in the novel, Idriss and his double ganger-camel illustrate all existent clichés and stereotypes.

2.2 The tourist

Only in foreign countries, the indigene becomes an indigene as well as the Sahara as a word for the home place of Idriss only exists in foreign countries: „Le Sahara“, Idriss says, „j'ai appris ça en France. Chez nous y a pas de mot pour ça“. ¹⁹ That means, that the indigene is at the same time the one who is dwelling far from home, the traveller, or the tourist who is exposed to other people's gaze.

Idriss is not a tourist. A tourist, who, according to Michel Tournier is somebody who makes a 'tour' and comes back to the place he started from (usually completely unchanged), is the opposite of the real traveller who suffers a kind of an initiation and who never returns to the same place, who sometimes even doesn't return at all from his journey, and if he does, he is profoundly changed. We can even imagine a symbolic (or sometimes real) death that awaits the neophyte traveller in distant countries. The end of the novel (like most of Tourniers novels) leaves it open whether Idriss survives

or not. Even though Idriss is not travelling as a tourist, he starts to be one, in the eyes of the Others, before he leaves Africa for Europe. In Mustapha's photo-studio, he poses in front of a canvas that displays the Eiffel-Tower by night: „C'était Paris la nuit, un panorama assez fantaisiste puisqu'il réussissait à rassembler la tour Eiffel, l'Étoile et le Moulin-Rouge avec en plus la Seine et Notre Dame.“²⁰ Instead of a camera, there is a mirror in which Idriss, dressed in Blue jeans, military slippers, shirt and *djellaba*, appears small and greyish. He lacks the money to pay one of those photographs. With only 15 Dinar, says Mustapha, Idriss could save a lot of time and money and could go home again with his photo and stay in Africa instead of sailing over the ocean to Marseille and Paris. Regarding its “technical reproducibility” (Walter Benjamin) not only the original value of the artwork but obviously also the purpose of the journey is reduced to nothing. What is left is the conclusion that travelling becomes unnecessary in every aspect. The postmodern traveller – in Tourniers novel incarnated in a tourist couple that is photographed by Mustapha in his studio – consumes its journey in absence. Like those living in the platonic cave who never come to see the real light, the postmodern traveller uses a two-dimensional screen instead of a three-dimensional map and suggests by the help of technical pictures a presence and authenticity, in short an *aura*, that the postmodern society does not claim to need any more. Not the one who has travelled far is of any interest to the spectator, but the one who can prove (by photograph) that he has been in those places of interest. Strategies of legitimation like bringing back souvenirs or all sorts of objects related to the journey become obsolete with the new medium of photography.

Idriss himself avoids this ignoble form of touristic non-travelling, but witnesses, in the studio of Mustapha, a reproduction of a journey that, even though it had a real journey as precursor, leads this former real journey *ad absurdum*: He observes the touristic couple while they are being photographed by Mustapha in his studio in front of a screen representing the Saharan Desert. The man asks the woman why they hadn't had the idea of taking a photo *in natura* but had to go in a studio in downtown to have a fake photo, instead: „C'est tout de même un peu fort d'aller au Sahara pour se faire photographier en studio devant un décor peint représentant le Sahara!“²¹ Mustapha names this process the „*accession à la dimension artistique*“.²² Here it can be seen, that the photograph wrongly claims to be 'true' and objective. Not only the position of the spectator constantly shifts, the photograph is even able to lie explicitly during its pseudo-materialization and pseudo-objectivization. Idriss in front of the Eiffel Tower never existed, as can be said of the tourist couple in the desert. The lens of the camera proves to be highly subjective and a release of strong subjectivity and many possible illusions and false pretences.

2.3 The double ganger

The function of the double ganger, a motif well known from the times of German early Romanticism, is inherent of photography and in close contact with magic, enchantment and death. The hidden power of the copy or image over the 'original' can be perceived in the only apparently naive words of Idriss concerning a photograph of himself that does not at all resemble him and figures prominently in his passport: „Et puis tout de même, ce n'est pas à moi à ressembler à ma photo. C'est ma photo qui doit me ressembler, non?“²³ Idriss asks for something that photography, according to Vilém Flusser, was never able to accomplish. Only for the naive spectator do photos represent the real world. „Ein solcher Betrachter nimmt stillschweigend an, dass er durch die Fotos hindurch die Welt dort draußen erkennt und dass daher das Universum der Fotografie sich mit der Welt dort draußen deckt.“²⁴ Idriss seemingly succumbs to this naive view when he asks for resemblance of the photograph with the photographed, to *be* the photographed. If the photograph stops resembling the original and openly starts unveiling its illusive character, the common reaction of the photographed should be des-illusion, disappointment. The awareness of being disappointed by a photograph leads at best to a critique and discovery of its illusive potential. But Idriss does not behave like the ideal Flusserian critique: When photography stops resembling the original, then the original is forced to become similar to the image taken, at least, if the original wants to avoid difficulties at the customs. According to Roland Barthes, the person who is being photographed is constantly forced to imitate himself, is constantly shifting between object status and subject status and eventually becomes a phantom. In this context, he speaks of photography as a micro-experience of death.²⁵

Between photography and the photographed object or person there always exists an only *relative* resemblance. This leads to a (mostly self-directed) reflect of materialization of the photographed person in the eyes of the others, who themselves become judges of the more or less obvious similarity of the picture and the original. The wrong (in the case of Idriss) photograph exercises power over the photographed, a power the photographed is not able to abscond from because the society stipulates a relation of similarity between original and image. The original is more and more approaching the copy, a process which in early German Romanticism has a very negative connotation: „L'image est douée d'une force mauvaise. Elle n'est pas la servante dévouée et fidèle que tu voudrais. Elle prend toutes les apparences d'une servante, oui, mais en vérité elle est sournoise, menteuse et impérieuse. Elle aspire de toute sa mauvaiseté à te réduire en esclavage.“²⁶

The better the copy of the subject, the better works this enslavement of the original. A photograph has its natural limits. It is two-dimensional, small and immobile. This does not hold true for the dummies behind a display screen. In the novel of Tournier, dummy and photography are united in the surrealistic works of the photographer Etienne Milan. But his sur-realisme becomes more of a clearly intended sur-realisme, because the dummies do not gain reality through the photography but the landscape behind the dummies changes into an unreal, artificial landscape and hence lacks the authenticity it formerly had:

[Je photographie les mannequins] avec un morceau de paysage, du vrai paysage, des vrais arbres, des vrais rochers. [...] [M]es mannequins jettent le doute sur le paysage. Grâce à eux, les arbres sont un peu – pas complètement, un peu seulement – en papier, les rochers en carton, le ciel n'est en partie qu'une toile de fond. Quant aux mannequins, étant eux-mêmes déjà des images, leur photo est une image d'image, ce qui a pour effet de doubler leur pouvoir dissolvant. Il en résulte une impression de rêve éveillé, d'hallucination vraie. C'est absolument la réalité sapée à la base par l'image.²⁷

Here we witness a second-degree mortification: „Der Fotografie wird qua Medium ein der Puppe vergleichbares Potential simultaner Verlebendigung und Mortifizierung, des Changierens zwischen engem Realitätsbezug und ihrer technisch-künstlerischen Transformation zugeschrieben.“²⁸ The unlimited reproducibility of the dummies is multiplied by the unlimited reproducibility of the photography (if unlimited reproducibility can be multiplied). At the same time, the photograph of a dummy is for the first time no 'rape' of an individual: „Seuls les objets n'ont pas d'aura sexuelle ou sentimentale. Il n'y a donc pas à les violer de sang froid pour les photographier. N'ayant pas de problèmes de ressemblance, ils [die Objekte, here: the dummies] sont merveilleusement identiques à eux-mêmes.“²⁹

Idriss as a subject with a sentimental and also sexual 'aura' does not escape this kind of 'rape'. While looking for adequate work clothes in the Parisian store Tati he is being recruited by the owner of the store as a life model for polyester dummies. For this purpose he is being lowered into a basin filled with liquid plastic that hardens slowly around his body. Right before the plastic becomes too rigid he is being pulled out of the basin by the help of a trapeze barre. This procedure reminds the reader of an initiation ritual. The pulling-out of the original from the plastic mould not only reminds the reader of the act of giving birth, but also of the narrow surroundings of a grave. A symbolic death takes place at the end of which stands the unlimited reproduction of the former original. And once again, the original adapts to his freshly made copies and not vice versa: Idriss is explicitly being asked to pose amidst the dummies in the display window and to stand erect and adopt

the same mechanic position they hold so that the difference between original and copy blurs. The only difficulty would be the training of the eye not to wink. Not only in his form-giving character as an original, but before all in his later adjustment and assimilation to his product, mankind is being ruled by objects, here by a dummy as a double ganger and is being forced to exert special mechanical movements like a puppet would. Amidst his copies, Idriss becomes more and more a copy himself, an exhibit: „Je voudrais en somme que mon image mobile, cahotée entre milles photos changeantes, au gré des situations, des âges, coïncide toujours avec mon ‘moi’ (profond comme on le sait); mais c’est le contraire qu’il faut dire: c’est ‘moi’ qui ne coïncide jamais avec mon image.“³⁰

His journey from Tabelbala via Béni Abbès, Béchar, Oran, Marseille and finally to Paris led Idriss into a radical dissolution of his identity as well as deep into materialization and therefore into ‘disappearance’. He becoming an object in front of the camera (film as well as photograph) underlines the radical subjectivity of the alien viewpoint. His journey into the occidental world of the images ends in trauma and loss of identity. Both can only be overcome by the help of a meaningful item, a sign-bearer, which, compared to the photograph, never lost its specific and valuable materiality. This item is opposed to the photograph’s illusive character and symbolizes the universal validity and authenticity of literature and written culture in the novel of Tournier.

3. The golden droplet

The reader of the novel knows about one important object that Idriss takes with him on his journey: a golden pendant in the shape of a droplet. This amulet of a black female singer that Idriss finds in the desert sand before he leaves is becoming a symbol (sign-bearer) for the written culture to which Idriss belongs and which is diametrically opposed to the occidental culture of the image. „A l’opposé des pendeloques qui imitent le ciel, la terre, les animaux du désert et les poissons de la mer, la bulle dorée ne veut rien dire qu’elle-même. C’est le signe pur, la forme absolue.“³¹ Because the amulet does not refer to any reality outside its own reality, but is auto-referential and therefore cannot misinterpreted, the author Michel Tournier construes it as the ‘antidote’ of photography and the image in general. „Elle était là, indiscutablement, la bulla aurea vue pour la première fois au cou de Zett Zobeida, perdue dans la rue chaude de Marseille, ovale, légèrement renflée à sa base, d’un éclat et d’un profil si admirables, qu’elle paraissait faire le vide autour d’elle, symbole de libération, antidote de l’asservissement par l’image.“³² Photography and its products like advertisement and film seem in comparison to the droplet more vulnerable for misinterpretations. The imagination of the pictures is opposed to

the spirituality of the amulet: „En vérité, l'image est bien l'opium de l'Occident. Le signe est esprit, l'image est matière."³³ Whereas photography in the novel is only present through absence or through copies as a pseudo-item, and is owned by nobody but misappropriated by everybody³⁴, the amulet of the female dancer is a very concrete but also precious object, an original that can be possessed and therefore also be taken away forcefully from the owner:

„Elle avait aperçu la goutte d'or au cou d'Idriss. Malgré un faible geste de défense d'Idriss, elle défit le collier avec une adresse de guenon, et l'éleva vers la lumière. – Fichtre, c'est beau ça! On dirait de l'or massif. Je voudrais bien savoir où t'as volé ça, toi [...]. Il avança la main vers son cou pour reprendre sa goutte d'or. La fille écarta cette main timide. Puis, tout en lui souriant, elle déboutonna son chemisier et lui dévoila ses seins."³⁵

Idriss exchanges hard currency for 'soft' service, 'material' against 'information'. The blond girl, a prostitute, who recognizes the value of the golden droplet, seduces Idriss with her bodily features, that is, her physical appearance. But this is also an illusion and her bodily attraction is ephemeral. Idriss starts to realize this during the following morning. The amulet only reappears at the end of the novel, in a display window of a jeweler. This underlines the precious character of the object. For Idriss, who understands the droplet to be a *semiophor*, an antidote against the illusive character of the occidental imagery, the droplet is priceless. But the display of the golden droplet behind glass also reminds the reader of the 'museal' objects from Béni Abbès, that were kept out of the economic cycle and therefore were exposed to their own disappearance. Following this logic, displaying the golden droplet would metaphorically mean displaying the written culture itself, which would finally mean its musealisation and disappearance, as e.g. Vilém Flusser states it radically enough for the postmodern era.³⁶

Until the very end, it remains unclear, whether Idriss, who himself is not the proper owner of the droplet, retrieves it back or not. But this is maybe not even the main question the novel raises. It is much more important to state that Idriss, in front of the display window, for the first time ever during his travels becomes an individual that has learned to liberate himself from his copies: with his wild, erotic dance with a jackhammer in front of a jeweler's shop in downtown Paris, in one of the most expensive areas of Paris, Idriss is definitely not going to conform with what people see in him, any more. This is why, for the first time ever, he can be really *seen* by others. The breaking of the vitrine, caused by the jackhammer, can be metaphorically interpreted against Flusser as a 'demusealisation' of the written culture that has already been declared dead. The broken glass then symbolizes not only the annulment of illegitimate ownership but before all the rescue of the written culture and her re-entry back into a postmodern present.

Michel Tourniers backdoor in *The golden droplet*, his way out of the earlier construed aporia of the traditional as well as technical image as a *simulacrum* is the following: the inscription in its purest form as Arabic calligraphy has to accompany the image to disarm it in its intention to deceive, its illusive character, its magical power over mankind. In doing so, the French author revives one of the functions of History that Flusser in his definition of History reckons obsolete in the postmodern era. According to Tournier, in the fight against the aporia of the image only historic behavior, only time and linearity provides an antidote. There is only one remedy, a continuous, linear transcoding of images into written culture, into terms:

„La calligraphie est l’algèbre de l’âme tracée par l’organe le plus spiritualisé du corps, sa main droite. Elle est la célébration de l’invisible par le visible. L’arabesque manifeste la présence du désert dans la mosquée. Par elle, l’infini se déploie dans le fini. [...] Le calligraphe, qui dans la solitude de sa cellule prend possession du désert en le peuplant de signes, échappe à la misère du passé, à l’angoisse de l’avenir et à la tyrannie des autres hommes. Il dialogue seul avec Dieu dans un climat d’éternité.“³⁷

The artist in Tourniers novel is able to escape his historic conditionality by the help of his art, and to experience a moment of eternity. Within the novel, this transcoding of images into terms is presented in a *mise-en-abyme*-technique in the fairy tale of the painting of the blonde queen. It’s the account of a portrait which is full of negative magical power over its spectators. It is also the story of the disarming of the portrait with the aid of calligraphy. The painting is decoded like a palimpsest. Through various layers, it is converted into a written text. The artist-calligraph translates the lines of the portrait back or forth into written signs. The portrait, in gaining a new readability, loses its negative magical impact over the spectator.³⁸ The portrait, at the same time, is snatched away from the magical-circular thinking of eternal recurrence (this recurrence is very concrete in the fairy tale, because the portrait recurs at different times and places) and brought back into historical linearity. According to Michel Tournier, the art of calligraphy is expression of highest perfection and therefore fitting this task best, because its specific imaginative character (calligraphy is text and drawing at the same time) is not denied but nevertheless sublimated. As this, it is conquered in its negative and falsifying effects.

4. Conclusion

Starting point of the analysis of the novel *La Goutte d’Or* written by Michel Tournier was the question whether photography can be understood as a *simulacrum* and whether postmodern travelling is one, too. Not only the photography’s intention to deceive but also the simulacric character of the

protagonist as well as of the journey itself came into view. Photography is understood as a paradoxical form of presence in absence, therefore it remains to a certain degree unreal and immaterialistic. Photography is not perceived as an object anymore and is to be contrasted with the golden droplet that is a precious sign-bearer, whose specific materiality doesn't become obsolete and doesn't make possession obsolete. All the other items and objects, that play a role throughout the novel, like paper photographs, posters and advertisements, video films and dummies are characterized by replication and thus become rubbish products in our postmodern information society, they lead to partial and even to substantial loss of identity of the traveller and more so to a shift in the paradigm of the postmodern travelling itself.

Pomian classifies the language as being part of the invisible, whereas the sight or view is bound to the visible world. Slightly different, in replacing the word 'language' by the word 'text' or 'scripture', we can draw a conclusion for the novel of Tournier:

„Die [Schrift] bringt also das Unsichtbare hervor, weil sie in einer Welt, in der Phantasmen auftauchen, in der gestorben wird und Veränderungen vor sich gehen, einfach dadurch schon, daß sie [geschrieben] wird, die Überzeugung nahe legt, daß das, was man sieht, nur ein Teil von dem ist, was es gibt. Der Gegensatz zwischen Unsichtbarem und Sichtbarem ist zunächst ein Gegensatz zwischen dem, wovon man spricht, und dem, was man wahrnimmt, zwischen dem Universum der Rede und der Welt des Blicks.“³⁹

The universe of the speech, here closely linked to the universe of the scripture, becomes in the novel of Tournier a medium that bears a special meaning. Only congenially, that is, only if picture and scripture work together, semiophores come into existence – objects, that are able to become meaningful and therefore transcend their pure materiality. Lettering pictures is fundamental in *The golden droplet*. Unlike the culturally revolutionary concept of Vilém Flusser about the disappearance of the objects⁴⁰ and the linear scripture, in Tourniers novel, an object works as a metaphor for the written culture and gains in importance while everywhere around us, materiality is on the retreat. It is given a renew value and becomes an antipode to photography and photographic mnemonic forms, which are mostly not linked with materiality anymore. In calligraphy, the border between image and scripture is blurred and gives way to new perspectives concerning a possible, postmodern mediality in which the scripture, because it is inextricably entangled with the image, keeps its specific value and can even expand it.

Regina Bergholz:

Lecturer at the STT HKBP in Pematang Siantar, Sumatera Utara; E-mail: Regina.Bergholz@gmx.net

Endnotes:

- 1 J. Baudrillard, *Photographies*, 79. (If something wants to become image, it is not to last, but to disappear easier. All following translations R.B.)
- 2 Cf. R. Barthes, *La chambre claire*, 29f.
- 3 Cf. J.P. Sartre, *L'imaginaire*, 44.
- 4 J.P. Sartre, *L'imaginaire*, 51. (In every picture, even in the one that does not depict the object as existent, there is a positional determination. In the sign as such, the determination is absent. Based on an object that works as a sign, a certain nature is being focused, but concerning this nature, nothing can be said, one has to restrict oneself to focus on it, instead. Of course, this nature doesn't manifest itself through a significant material: it is far beyond.)
- 5 K. Pomian, *Der Ursprung des Museums*, 50. (In their character as semiophores they are kept out of the economic circulation, because only in doing so, they can fully realize their meaning.)
- 6 M. Tournier, *La Goutte d'Or*, 14. (She aimed a couple of times and was again sighting Idriss and his sheep.)
- 7 W. Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, 60. (Indeed, the returning amateur with his myriad of artistic original shots is not more pleasant than the hunter who comes back from his hunting with masses of game animals, that can only be used by merchants.) Also cf. Sontag, 2004: 20f. and W. Flusser, *Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie*, 31.
- 8 Cf. R. Barthes, *La chambre claire*, 28f.
- 9 M. Tournier, *La Goutte d'Or*, 86. (Of course, my camera takes part in the creation, he [the camera; R.B.] also needs talent, what do you think! That's why I present him a colored landscape. He sees it and loves it and when he is finally reproducing it, some of the colors shine through the black-and-white.)
- 10 Cf. V. Flusser, *Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie*, 9.
- 11 Cf. K.E. Müller *Das magische Universum der Identität*.
- 12 K.E. Müller, *Das magische Universum der Identität*, 28. (The more the individual loses in space (and therefore in movement ability), the more he loses connection with his community. The system a local villager group is relying on gets inevitably instable in its border zone. Who is dwelling there, has difficulties in orientating himself properly, fears to lose his way, feels exposed to all sorts of dangers and annoyances, and believes that he is surrounded by malicious dwarfs, witches and giants.)
- 13 This magical belief is far away from being only a characteristic of the so-called 'primitive' cultures. We know from Balzac for instance, that he took care of not being photographed, because he believed that by being photographed, the object loses one or more spectral layers and the photographed experiences a corporeal damage which led Nadar, (*Quand j'étais photographe*, 7) in his autobiography to the following remark: „Cette terreur de Balzac devant le Daguerreotype était-elle sincère ou jouée? Sincère, Balzac n'eût eu là que gagner à perdre, ses ampleurs abdominales et autres lui permettant de prodiguer ses ‚spectres‘ sans compter“. Concerning the irrational structure and magic of the image cf. also J.P. Sartre, *L'imaginaire*, 52f.
- 14 V. Flusser, *Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie*, 47f. (The poster is without value, no one owns it and if the wind tears it down, the power of the advertising agency nevertheless remains the same, because it can be reproduced.)
- 15 M. Tournier, *La Goutte d'Or*, 190. (He felt the urge to protect himself from the outside world and wanted to avoid its traps and mirages which were there right under his feet.)
- 16 M. Tournier, *La Goutte d'Or*, 76. As you can see, the desert is not as deserted as it is supposed to be, because it is populated by all the stuffed animals you can see around you. Stuffed, yes, because as far as the living animals are concerned, one has to admit that they all disappeared, not victims of the climate conditions but of the wickedness of men.
- 17 M. Tournier, *La Goutte d'Or*, 106f. (Idriss looked puzzled upon the picture exposing a Saharan oasis. A massif of palm trees and exorbitant flowers enclosed a swimming pool in the shape of a bean. Blonde girls in minuscule bikinis coquet around the turquoise basin, drinking out of tall glasses with braided straws. Two tamed gazelles bend their elegant head towards a vast basket filled with oranges, grapefruits and pineapples. A Saharan oasis? And he, Idriss, wasn't he its pure product? He didn't recognise himself in this dream of a picture.)

- 18 Cf. M. Tournier, *La Goutte d'Or*, 153ff.
- 19 M. Tournier, *La Goutte d'Or*, 129. (The Sahara, Idriss says, I learned that in France. In my home place, we have no name for it.)
- 20 M. Tournier, *La Goutte d'Or*, 87. (That was Paris by night, a quite fantastic panorama because it successfully combined the Eiffel Tower, the Etoile, the Moulin Rouge together with the river Seine and Notre Dame.)
- 21 M. Tournier, *La Goutte d'Or*, 84. (It's admittedly a bit odd to travel through the Saharan Desert only to get photographed in a studio in front of a setting representing the Sahara.)
- 22 M. Tournier, *La Goutte d'Or*, 84.
- 23 M. Tournier, *La Goutte d'Or*, 100. (Oh come on, I do not have to resemble my photo, it is my photo that should resemble me, no?)
- 24 V. Flusser, *Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie*, 38. (Such a spectator implicitly assumes that he is able to recognize, through photography, the world outside and that the universe of photography is congruent with the world outside.)
- 25 Cf. R. Barthes, *La chambre claire*, 29f.
- 26 M. Tournier, *La Goutte d'Or*, 100. (The picture is provided with an evil power. She (the picture) is not the faithful servant you'd like her to be. She behaves like a servant, but in reality she is malicious, dishonest and despotic. She tries as best she might to enslave you.)
- 27 M. Tournier, *La Goutte d'Or*, 181. (I take a picture of the mannequins adding a little bit of natural background, real living background, real trees; real stones [...] my mannequins put the surrounding into question. Thanks to them, the trees are a bit, not completely but just a bit, made out of paper, the rocks out of carton, the sky is in parts only a canvas. As regards the mannequins, because they already are pictures, their photo is a picture of a picture which has the effect of doubling their dissolving power. The result is the impression of a daydream, a true hallucination. That's reality absolutely saped by the image at its roots.)
- 28 K. Sykora, „Eine Schachfigur auf dem Feld der Fotografie oder Die Charaden der Puppe im Surrealismus“, 148. (Photography as a medium is credited with a dummy-like potential of simultaneous vivification and mortification, constantly oscillating between a close reality-context and its technical-artistic transformation.)
- 29 J. Baudrillard, *Photographies*, 86. (Only the objects don't have a sexual or sentimental aura. Therefore they can't be cold-bloodedly violated while taking a picture of them. Having no problems whatsoever with resemblance, they (the dummies) are marvellously self-identical.)
- 30 R. Barthes, *La chambre claire*, 26f. (Altogether, I would like my image, flexible, agitated between a thousand changing photos, according to circumstances, ages being always consistent with my inner self, but it's the contrary that has to be admitted: its 'me' who is never consistent with my image.)
- 31 M. Tournier, *La Goutte d'Or*, 31. Cf. J.P. Sartre, *L'imaginaire*, 51 und 53. (In opposition to the pendants that copy the sky, the earth, the animals of the desert and the fish in the sea, the bulla aurea is absolutely self-referential. It's a pure sign, an absolute form.)
- 32 M. Tournier, *La Goutte d'Or*, 219f. (She was there, indisputably, the bulla aurea, seen for the first time around the neck of Zett Zobeida, lost in the hot streets of Marseille, oval, slightly curved at its base, of a shine and a profile so admirable that she seemed to create a blank around her, symbol of liberation, antidote to the slavery of the image.)
- 33 M. Tournier, *La Goutte d'Or*, 202. (The truth is, that the image is the opium of the Occident. The sign is spirit, the image is material.)
- 34 Cf. V. Flusser, *Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie*, 47f.
- 35 M. Tournier, *La Goutte d'Or*, 111. (She realized the golden pendant around Idriss's neck. Even though Idriss opposed her feebly, she undid the collier with a baboonish air and hold it into the light: that's bloody beautiful it is! One would think its massive gold. I'd really like to know where you stole this! [...] He approached his neck with his hand to recover the golden droplet. The girl brushed his timid hand aside. Then, smiling at him, she opened her blouse and revealed her breasts.
- 36 Cf. V. Flusser, „Das Foto als nachindustrielles Objekt“, 12: „Geschichte, im genauen Sinn, ist ein fortschreitendes Transcodieren von Bildern in Begriffe, eine fortschreitende Erklärung von Vorstellungen, ein fortschreitendes Ent-magisieren, ein fortschreitendes Begreifen. Werden Texte jedoch unvorstellbar,

- dann gibt es nichts mehr zu erklären und die Geschichte ist am Ende.“ (History, in an exact sense, is a continuous transcoding from images into terms, a continuous explanation of concepts, a continuous demagification, a continuous comprehension. If indeed, texts become un-understandable, than there is nothing more to explain and history comes to an end.) The invention of linear scripture is historically determined according to Flusser, whereas the invention of technical pictures is part of a post-historical consciousness.
- 37 M. Tournier, *La Goutte d'Or*, 202. (Calligraphy is the algebra of the soul, written by the most spiritualised organ of the body, the right hand. She is the celebration of the invisible through the visible. The arabesque manifests the presence of the desert in the mosque. Through her, the unlimited is deployed in the limited. [...] The calligrapher, who in the solitude of his cell takes possession of the desert in populating it with signs, escapes from the misery of the past, from the fear of the future and from the tyranny of other people. He is alone while communicating with God, in a climate of eternity.
- 38 M. Tournier, *La Goutte d'Or*, 203ff.
- 39 K. Pomian, *Der Ursprung des Museums*, 46. (The [scripture] generates the invisible, because in a world in which phantasms appear, in which there is death and metamorphosis, the mere fact that it is [written], leads to the conviction that the visible world is only part of what exists. The difference between the invisible and the visible is firstly a difference between what can be talked about and what can be perceived, between the universe of the speech and the universe of the gaze.)
- 40 Cf. V. Flusser, „Das Foto als nachindustrielles Objekt“, 18: „Wenn Kultur als ein Vorrat von Werten definiert wird, wird dieser nicht mehr aus Objekten, sondern aus anderen Formen von Erinnerungen, bestehen.“ (If culture is defined as a stock of values, this stock will not consist of objects anymore, but of other forms of memories.)

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