

Journey to the East

In 1972, when I began to study the arts of memory of the Neapolitan philosopher Giordano Bruno, what impressed me most was his use of geometric diagrams for mnemonic purposes. These are diagrams that represent places -places of memory- that you can use to house images which are especially emotive and, for that very reason, easy to remember. The result of these studies was an edition of Bruno's works, which I published in 1973 under the title: [*Mundo, Magia, Memoria*] *World, Magic, Memory* and, ten years later, a book of my own, entitled: [*El idioma de la imaginación*] *The Language of Imagination* and subtitled: [*Ensayos sobre la memoria, la imaginación y el tiempo*] *Essays on Memory, Imagination and Time*. The interest that Bruno's mnemonic diagrams aroused in me had to do with dedication I had, since 1964, to visual poetry (concrete, spatialist, action poetry...) given that in that poetry, diagrammatic structures, and relationship of the word with geometry, as well as image, are really important and significant.

When I gave classes on Buddhist aesthetics in 1971, when I was a professor of Aesthetics and Composition at the School of Architecture in Madrid, it did not take me long to wonder what relationship Bruno's diagrams might have with Buddhist mandalas. From a historical point of view, was it possible to connect them? It did not seem to be so since Bruno's diagrams date from the second half of the 16th century and the first examples of Buddhist mandalas appear in the 4th century, being already codified in tantric form from the 7th century onwards. So, how to make a leap from the 7th to the 16th century? Or from Tibet to Naples?

In 1983, Eikichi Hayashiya, the Japanese ambassador to Spain, who was a friend and collaborator of Octavio Paz, as well as of the Hispanist Shozo Masuda, invited me to go to Japan as a lecturer at the University of Foreign Studies in Osaka. I went there at the beginning of 1984. A few months later, I had the good fortune to attend a large exhibition on the art of Gandhara -I still have the splendid catalogue-. This was a region situated between Afghanistan and Pakistan. For the Japanese, this exhibition was of enormous interest, as it was there that Buddhist iconography began around the 1st century. This meant a discovery for me since the exhibition brought before my eyes a link between European and East Asian culture, since Gandhara art is an offshoot of Hellenistic and Roman art. Such art began when Alexander the Great conquered vast territories as far as India, in the 3rd century B.C., and which from then on began to be Hellenised.

My trip through most of China in the spring of 1985, after my stay in Japan, and my move there four years later, allowed me to visit some of the most amazing sites I have ever seen. In Wuhan, on 1st May 1985, I boarded the Dongfanhong ('The East is Red'), and a few days later I crossed the fantastic scenery of the Three Gorges of the Yangtze. Another time I climbed the more than 6,600 steps to the summit of one of China's sacred mountains, named Taishan. I also climbed the peaks of Huangshan, another of the venerated mountains. If Taishan reminded me Confucius, Huangshan took me to Taoism and Chinese landscape painting. I also remember that in a temple -maybe it was the Guinyuan of the Five Hundred Buddhas, in Wuhan- I saw a Buddha image which, according to legend, represents Marco Polo, and I photographed it. And what about my trip through the Gobi desert, on the banks of the Taklamakan (the desert of deserts) in Uighur Xinjiang? The cities of Urumchi, Turpan, Alchi, Kasgar..which I passed through and photographed, and so many other places!

These journeys throughout the length and breadth of the former Empire of the Centre are at the origin of a long and intense research, which gave rise to [*El Círculo de la Sabiduría*] *The Circle of Wisdom*, a work of more than 1 300 pages and the first edition of which came out in 1998. In that project, I studied the use of the diagrams, in the context of Mithraism, that in antiquity represented the 12 signs of the Zodiac and the 360 degrees of the ecliptic, which Metrodorus of Scepsis used for mnemonic-encyclopaedic purposes around 80 BC. From there I went on to study, even more exhaustively, how these diagrams were adopted and recreated by different Gnostic schools in the 2nd century, and passed in the 3rd century, from Rome and Alexandria to the Manichaeans, who in the use of diagrams and in many other concepts are heirs of the Gnostics. My research reached its culmination when I demonstrated with abundant and rigorous documentation, in the second part of [*El círculo de la Sabiduría*] *The Circle of Wisdom*, the decisive influence exerted by the Gnostic and Manichaean diagrams in the creation of the Tantric Buddhist mandalas, as it is so clearly seen in the *Bardo thodol* and the Kalachakra mandala.

The photographs I took during my travels, especially in China, but also in Japan, India, and Nepal in 1984, 1985, 1989 and 1990, are intimately connected with these diagrammatic-mandalic investigations. But their origin - it bears repeating - it is not only philosophical-religious. A poetic-avant-garde aspect can also be glimpsed in them. The *Journey to the East* presented in the Aural gallery is therefore, to a large extent, a kind of diagram or mandala in which one can follow, thanks to the photographic images I made in those years, the course of those journeys through the East, without which I would not have undertaken the arduous task of investigating the relationship between mnemonic diagrams and mandalas.

This exhibition, to which Begoña Deltell, director of Aural, has contributed so much, has several dimensions. The first and most obvious one are my journeys in the East. The second one is that they are part of my research into the Gnostic and Manichaean sapiential diagrams, and the mandalas of Tantric Buddhism. And the third is my dedication to visual poetry since I was eighteen years old. Without this dedication I would not have started researching, neither the diagrams nor the mandalas, nor would I have done so much research and investigation in the most unusual and remote places in the East. That is why this exhibition has a lot of science, poetry, and adventure. And thanks to it, the Aural Gallery dawns as an *auroral locus memoriae*. That is, as an auroral place of memory. Also, as a place of play and invention making every day possible.

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