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Ghosts of Premodernity:

Butoh and the Avant-Garde

Introduction

Japan was in a state of ideological crisis following the Second World War. Japan's political structure radically altered and newly forming concepts of "democracy" and "freedom" were on the rise. One difficult question in this environment was the question of identity; how could one be "Japanese" without evoking the baggage of nationalism? While the majority of Japanese promoted Western technological advances promising to bring Japan out of economic despair, scholars and artists worried that such progress would come at a terrible cost. Studying the impact of Japan's first experience of modernisation in the Meiji era, they wondered what would be left behind, suppressed and forgotten in the changing postwar landscape.

Concerned with the effects of mass production and 'cookie-cutter' conformity, many artists and writers sought alternative visions for postwar modernity. This led some to a reexamination of Japanese premodernity, traces of which were buried during the Meiji period of Westernisation, and were examples of Japanese subjectivity unspoiled by wartime militarism. It is argued, that artists and thinkers believed these traces lingered like ghosts in the modern day, hidden under polite surfaces, within the margins of society, and in the dreams and nightmares of Japanese people. Like modern-day shamans reviving their community by embodying spirits, it was up to the artists to confront the demons haunting postwar Japan. One of the most famous of such 'shamans' was *butoh* founder Hijikata Tatsumi.

David Goodman described the theatre, art and literature to emerge from Japan at this time as a 'return of the gods' (Goodman, 1988: 23). This was a vigorous attempt to reclaim what Tanizaki (1977: 61) called 'this world of shadows' that was becoming lost to modernity. For Mori Joji (1973: 23-27) these traces were 'ghosts' found haunting the creative fictions of modern Japan. Hijikata Tatsumi and his dance theatre *ankoku butoh* sought to invoke these ghosts—this resurfacing abjected past—in flesh form.

After the war, Japan was devastated physically, economically and morally. A Western reporter described the destruction of Yokohama as 'a man-made desert, ugly, desolate and hazy in the dust that rose from crushed brick and mortar' (Duus, 1998: 254). Art critic Toro Yoshiaki writes about some of the anti-art (*han-geijutsu*) artists of the group Neo-Dada Organizers: 'The blasted city had been their playground: their first toys had been bottles melted into distortion from fire bombs, pieces of roof-beams found in the ashes. Now, their shows were full of these junk flowers' (Cited in Munroe, 1994: 157).

In 1960, the US-Japan Mutual Security Treaty, or *Ampo*, was up for renewal giving way in the 1960s to 'the most creative outburst of anarchistic, subversive and riotous tendencies in the history of modern Japan' (Munroe, 1994: 149). Underground theatre (*angura*), new wave (*noberu bagu*) cinema, avant-garde photography and transgressive literature all resonated with a sense of violent exploration, grim introspection, aggressive, erotic action and a desperate search for identity and cultural continuity. Hijikata's presence expressed a 'return of the primitive.' Finding inspiration in both the native premodern and the European avant-garde arts, he helped create an art form that would reconnect with and unleash the power of a 'premodern' body.

Hijikata Tatsumi

Hijikata was born in 1928 in the rural village of Akita. He was the youngest of a large family and grew up being told tales of demons and magic. He also experienced the physical hardship of agrarian labour. He experienced a certain level of abuse as a child. The shock of this caused a sense of disassociation...he began to see his home life as a dark theatre where he would be forced to play a role. Rather than be a victim he would transfer his experience to dance: 'life is dance, dance must be as real as life' (Kurihara, 1996: 25). When asked about whether or not his dance was influenced by traditional art forms such as *kabuki* or *noh*, he discussed how as a child he would listen to his father recite *gidayu*, and make violent advances upon his mother, as if 'measuring his steps.' He would witness his mother run out of the house, the neighbours commenting on the pattern of her kimono. All this, he explained, was theatre (in Shibusawa, 2000: 54).

Hijikata was exposed to modern dance in Akita and studied with Matsumoto Katsuko, the disciple of Eguchi Takaya who had studied with Mary Wigman (one of the key figures in the development of German expressionist dance). Eguchi and his wife were Ôno Kazuo's teachers and their work was considered orthodox *neue tanz* (German expressionist dance). The German expressionist dance of Mary Wigman consisted of: 'dancing barefoot, exploring primitive rhythms and motifs, and experimenting with costumes, props and masks. Largely abstract, frequently dark and angst-ridden, focused on fundamental forms and essential emotions' (Kostelanetz, 1993: 235).

Discontented and unable to commit to touring villages with Matsumoto, Hijikata moved to Tokyo to study Western dance. Dabbling in ballet, modern dance, jazz dance and flamenco, he soon learned that certain physical limitations would bar him from serious study. One teacher described him as being 'clumsy but eager' and mentioned

that students would avoid him when he was practicing spins because he would 'violently crash into them' (Kurihara, 1996: 17). Hijikata also experienced alienation—his *inaka* (or 'country-bumpkin') upbringing clashing with hip, cosmopolitan Tokyo.

Kurihara writes of how Hijikata fell-in with a disaffected crowd and began living a 'bohemian' life. Working odd jobs and sleeping in flophouses, he had befriended artists On Kawara and Ushio Shinohara. They exchanged ideas about art, philosophy and literature and were exposed to the translated works of many European writers of the avant-garde. Hijikata spent his time living on the edge, mingling with people whose lifestyles involved art, crime and drugs. He was fascinated with the marginal lives of male prostitutes and, though heterosexual himself, he found personal relevance in their passionate and estranged lifestyle. As alienated as Hijikata felt in Tokyo, he did not return to Akita; he 'literally clung to the margins of urban Japan' (Kurihara, 1996: 17).

Hijikata drank heavily, was nocturnal and would wear his hair in a wild manner. Despite one leg being shorter than the other, he was filled with the need to dance and to create a physical reality mirroring the one in his mind. And with this desire he created *butoh*, a 'dance of ritualistic quality that would transform body and mind' (Kurihara, 1996: 2). He felt a 'compulsive desire to alter reality, to create an imaginary world out of reality' (Kurihara, 1996: 25). Munroe writes that the performances 'aimed to uncage a primal energy at the core of man's (*sic*) physical being, an energy long suppressed and forgotten he believed, in modern society' (Munroe, 1994: 190). Hijikata sought to use the body as an agent of transformation, invoking the memories and trauma of the Japanese psyche. He used the body and the face to articulate what could not seem to be spoken. He and his dancers created a new language by which to unleash the hidden, taboo sides of Japanese consciousness: what some avant-garde Japanese artists felt was the 'real' Japan, and what critic Ishikawa Miyabi called 'the body that has been robbed' (in Stein, 1988: 69).

Performances

Hijikata's first piece in 1959 was based on the Mishima Yukio novel *Kinjiki* (*Forbidden Colours*). His debut was a tremendous shock to audiences that were more accustomed to the reserved stylisation of *kabuki*, *noh* or ballet. In this performance, a young man (Ôno Yoshito) feigned intercourse with a chicken by attempting to smother it between his thighs. He was then threatened by an older man's sexual advances (Hijikata). There was no music and the piece concluded in darkness. *Kinjiki* aroused anger among the audience and Hijikata was exiled from the Association for Contemporary Performing Arts. *Butoh* has since enjoyed a reputation of being considered dangerous and marginal.

Widely recognised as Hijikata's masterpiece was his 1968's performance *Revolt of the Flesh* (or *Hijikata Tatsumi and the Japanese*). In the first act, Hijikata emerged wearing a white bridal kimono (worn backwards). He was carried in a wooden container supported by several men who were followed by two noisy terrified animals: a pig in

a baby crib and a rabbit on a metal platter held precariously on the end of a pole. This surreal train weaved its way through the audience, thus symbolically throwing the viewer into Hijikata's universe of confusion. This transgression of the boundary separating the spectator and the performer exemplified the violent and aesthetically invasive quality found in all of Hijikata's *butoh*. It also brings to mind the environment of a native Shinto ritual. One cannot be a passive observer, unaffected by such a performance.

Once on stage he disrobed to reveal that he was wearing nothing but a golden phallus. This references fertility rituals where performers would wear or carry a giant phallus, while at the same time Hijikata was mocking the Victorian propriety of modern Japan. He danced spasmodically and savagely, his body emaciated from fasting, his hair long and wild and his face unshaven. Again, parallels can be drawn to many native shamanic rites such as fertility rites and acts of fasting, exorcism and possession. He then jumped onto suspended metal plates that reflect light in such a manner that it intensified the implied violence of the chaotic performance. The final act climaxed with Hijikata tearing off a rooster's head with his bare hands. Overall, the act was very primal, sexual and fierce. It used a reversal of accepted social imagery (a woman's bridal gown on backwards and on a man; a pig stands in for a baby). Dressed in a ball gown he derisively 'danced' around, mocking Western forms and aesthetics. His body contorted, his face grimaced, he dragged the dress around, thrashing it, lifting it off the ground in a Flamenco manner, fighting with it. As Mark Holborn describes: 'he writhed like a possessed Shaman—it was a dance from neither East nor West' (Holborn, 1991:101).

Revolt of the Flesh concluded with Hijikata's form being pulled and raised, spread out in the form of a crucifix, stretched over the audience by ropes in a manner suggesting the Ascension, sexual bondage, and that of a body being torn in two. With these violent, confusing, contradictory symbols he helped capture the ideological and emotional environment of Japan as expressed by the young artists and students in Tokyo.

In addition to his performance works on stage and in the streets, Hijikata collaborated with other artists such as photographer Hosoe Eikô. Hosoe was only twelve in 1945 when he returned to Tokyo after spending the war at a remote northern town. He acquired his own camera two years later. As a student in the 1950s, Hosoe—like Hijikata—was drawn to capturing the 'underbelly' of Tokyo. Upon witnessing *Kinjiki*, he persuaded Hijikata to work with him on a film. The resulting *Navel and the Atomic Bomb* (1960) was a dance-drama set along the seashore and filled with mythic and demonic elements.

Later Hijikata and Hosoe travelled to Hijikata's northern home. Here they worked on a work based upon the myth of the *kamaitachi*: 'a weasel-like demon who haunted the rice fields and would slash you if you encountered him' (Holborn, 1999: 8). An encyclopaedia defines *kamaitachi* as 'a lacerated wound caused by a state of vacuum

which is produced partially in the air, owing to a great whirlwind' (Holborn, 1999: 8). Mark Holborn who has written on both Hosoe and Hijikata's work interprets the *kamaitachi* as the 'breeze of the nuclear age' (Holborn, 1999: 8). In this series of images, Hosoe captures Hijikata as the 'fool,' possessed, dangerous but innocent. Poet and critic Takiguchi Shuzo writes of this collaboration:

The villagers are the witnesses of the strange visitor, finding in him a lost image of the magician-priest forgotten in a remote past, wearing an innocent and broad smile at the visit of a 'fool' (*oko* in the old term) quite lost too. This is the very smile to be worn on the footpath of the rice fields, often enough of a smile next to terror. (Takeguchi, in Munroe, 1994: 190)

This combination of amusement, awe and fear, as well as the dual identity within the travelling stranger of both magician-priest and 'fool,' can be seen in the premodern, itinerant performers whose heritage played a key role in Hijikata's philosophy. Yoshida Teigo writes of these migratory strangers as representative not only of the mystical "other world", but as 'marginal "liminal" figure(s) ... (who) mediate between the world of *uchi* (inside) and the world of *yoso* (outside), between man and gods, between the *ke* (secular) and the *hare* (sacred), or between "this world" and the "other world"' (Yoshida, 1981: 96).

Transgressive European Influence

Through Hijikata's friendships with writers including Shibusawa Tastuhiko and Mishima Yukio, he became familiar with the European literary works of de Sade, Rimbaud, Lautremont, Bataille, Genet and Artaud. These writers informed Hijikata's evolving and transgressive exploration of the conceptual boundaries of notions of beauty, gender and sexuality. Hijikata was especially struck by the writings of Antonin Artaud who 'imagined a western theatre that would neglect realism and narrative for kinetic images, ritual and even magic. Such theatre could surround the audience, even enticing it to participate' (Kostelanetz, 1993: 11). The idea of this ritual mode for a theatre, that would engulf spectators, eliminating the separation between spectator and performer, came to Artaud after witnessing Balinese theatre at the Paris Colonial Exposition in 1931.

Hijikata explored these notions in *ankoku butoh*. His *butoh* represents a modern synthesis of native, premodern roots and twentieth century confrontations with modernity through the avant-garde. It is this confrontation that Artaud described as 'cruelty': he advocated an 'attack' on the audience's sensibilities. Kurihara writes that Hijikata's dance had just such a palpable physical effect on the audience (1996: 3). Both Artaud and Hijikata, worked to create a theatre motivated by the inner workings of the unconscious, of dream states and mythology. Yet they wanted to avoid expression that would be easily analysed psychologically. Like the surrealists, they sought liberation from the confines of analytical logic and rationality. *Butoh* wanted to

dig up repressed memories, traumas, images of deformity and insanity. *Butoh* critic Goda Nario writes of this liberation of the 'darker side, connected with the vulgar and possibly orgiastic growth processes in the depths' as a move towards the integration of both 'high' and 'low,' bringing humanity back into balance with nature (in Klein, 1988: 79). To Hijikata, *butoh* gets its energy from resurrecting that which is lost at birth and he believed the 'body was overly domesticated and only by de-domesticating it—could one attain a state of latent chaos' (Kurihara, 1996: 3).

'The concealed world'—Shamanism and the roots of Japanese theatre

The postwar strategy in the arts of drawing upon Japan's premodern culture included a process Susan Klein describes as the appropriation of marginality (Klein 1988). Avant-garde artists did not look to the formal, fully developed traditions of *noh* or *kabuki*, but rather took inspiration from rural folk dances, popular theatre and agricultural ritual dances known as *kagura*, often performed by 'sacred outcasts.'

Kagura comes from the word *kamigakari* or divine inspiration/divine possession and are part of a larger genre of rituals called *minzoku geino* consisting of magico-religious dances, semi-dramatic pieces, puppet shows, festivals and parades. Benito Ortolani defines the purpose of *kagura* as 'to pray for an infusion of life-force, for the prolongation or revitalization of life' (Ortolani, 1990: 15). But, *kagura* is also seen as performance, it is literally a performance for the gods. This performance became one of the sources for Japanese folk dances, later infusing the theatres of *noh* and *kabuki*.

Japanese anthropologists such as Amino Yoshihiko conducted research into historically marginal classes of magico-religious practitioners and performers. Such groups were divided according to their levels of 'pollution' (*kegare*), a notion associated with Shinto. Postwar artists, like Hijikata, began reading the works of folk theorists and took inspiration from their descriptions of underclass mediums (*miko/itako*), prostitutes, itinerant monks, acrobats and actors. These people would wander from village to village, performing rituals, musical performances and magical rites and were seen as mediators between this world and the 'other' world of the gods.

Gradually, as Japanese society became more urbanised, the value and focus of these arts shifted from religion to entertainment. Early *kabuki* performers consisted of beggars and prostitutes (*kawaramono*) who both lived and performed in riverbeds and on the edges of town. Writing about the connections between theatre, ritual arts and marginality, Yamaguchi Masao observes that these early *kabuki* performers, like itinerant monks, 'were gods and sacrificial victims, sacred and polluted, visitors from a greater world and at the same time bearers of the sins of the community' (Yamaguchi, 1977: 173). With the emergent wealth of the merchant class in Edo, *kabuki* became housed in halls built for the purpose of theatre. The postwar prevalence of street theatre in the 1960's shows an attempt to return to the time before these physical theatre halls. Postwar street theatre expressed a desire to go back to an age when performances were held in the streets, open spaces and shrines. These postwar performers sought to

reawaken the ritualistic energy and purpose of those early *minzoku geinō* within their own works.

Mary Douglas writes about the dangers and powers posed by boundaries and margins in her work *Purity and Danger*. This marginality, she writes, 'may be interpreted as having sacred power or negative power of pollution, or both, but in either case is found disturbing' (Douglas, 1970: 37). *Hinin* (outcasts or 'non-humans') not only purified death pollution, but also pollution from crimes, and were involved in knocking down buildings and dealing with afterbirth. They were a diverse group involved in begging and performance arts, and were employed for funerary services. While crucial to the spiritual maintenance of the community *hinin* were discriminated against and excluded from any position of real status. As both an outsider and a performer drawn to the mystical and 'criminal' depths of Tokyo's underground, Hijikata felt an imaginary kinship to the *kawara kōjiki*. He began to appropriate this tradition and explored a sense of premodern abjection within his dance troupe.

Premodern imagination

As noted above, Goodman chronicles the exploration of the premodern in the postwar avant-garde theatre, discussing the 'shared need to re-inject the gods into modern Japanese theatre' (Goodman, 1988: 15). What Goodman calls the post-shingeki movement broke with the socialist realism of shingeki in order to return to the irrationality found in Japan's premodern folkloric imagination. Post-shingeki proposes a 'dialectical return to the Japanese popular imagination,' and the 'resurgence of interest in Tokugawa folk culture' (Goodman, 1988: 16). The post-shingeki helped revive certain late Edo theatre traditions of manipulating and utilising folklore to voice political critique, and resistance. Performers wanted to return to the mythical roots of Japanese theatre, 'the noh and kabuki which grew out of the magical carnival chaos of folk art' (Tsuno, 1969: 68). As critic Ozasa Yoshio wrote, post-shingeki calls on 'grotesque abstractions of the subliminal impulses of the modern Japanese imagination' (in Goodman, 1988: 15).

Eguchi reads *butoh* in a postmodern light that also relates to Goodman's model and utilises what Jameson calls the 'nostalgia mode,' longing to return to a 'world of darkness that our modern age has lost, where the gap between words and things disappears and where existence unfolds before us' (in Klein, 1988: 89-91). Klein develops this analysis in Freudian terms as the 'postmodern nostalgia for the 'privileged lost object of desire': a desire to regress to the period of pre-oedipal childhood' (Klein, 1988: 22). She sees within *butoh* three forms of nostalgia: the carnivalesque popular culture, kitsch vulgarity and longings for primal childhood (Klein, 1988: 23). She sees *butoh* as utilising strategies of metamorphosis and grotesque imagery in this process. To relate this to Goodman, such 'grotesque abstractions of subliminal impulses' resemble what Freud termed the uncanny; what was once familiar, but which has become unfamiliar through alienation.

Conclusion

Following Japan's defeat many Japanese artists and intellectuals longed for cultural definition and identity that would not be deemed 'nationalistic.' This led many to re-explore Meiji folklore and the work of Yanagita Kunio, whose theories offered ideological alternatives offering new visions of Japanese subjectivity. Hijikata Tatsumi found importance and meaning in the culture and folklore of rural and marginal traces of premodern Japan. He delved into a world beyond the rational. In this essay, I have argued that avant-garde artists, including Hijikata, believed that there was a power in premodern culture that was suppressed during the Meiji period. Hijikata sought to explore spaces in postwar Japan where such a memory remained; spaces deemed eccentric, magical, sexualised and ambiguous. Hijikata and his avant-garde peers were interested in how marginality and the premodern uncanny stood in contrast to manufactured, idealised, clean and official images of Japan. The resurfacing of ghosts in postwar avant-garde arts helped to retrieve Japan's prewar and premodern cultural identity. This reclamation and reintegration made possible an articulation of Japanese subjectivity and identity that went beyond wartime rhetoric. This was a critique of modernity and a return to the premodern world that was something more than nostalgia. Postwar avant-garde art such as Hijikata's *butoh* helped establish a new point of reference for expressing Japanese authenticity.

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Editorial Note

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