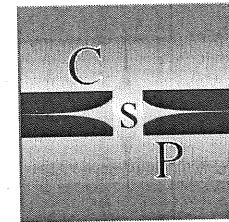


The Avant-Garde and the Margin:
New Territories of Modernism

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CHAPTER FOUR

EAST MEETS WEST MEETS EAST: DREAMING
JAPANESE BUTOH

CLARK LUNBERRY

If I want to imagine a fictive nation, I can give it an invented name, treat it declaratively as a novelistic object, create a new Garabagne, so as to compromise no real country by my fantasy (...) I can also—though in no way claiming to represent or to analyze reality itself (...)—isolate somewhere in the world (*faraway*) a certain number of features (...), and out of these features deliberately form a system. It is this system which I shall call: Japan.

Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*

No one in Europe knows how to scream any more.

Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*

The dancer through the Butoh spirit confronts the origin of his fears. A dance which crawls towards the bowels of the earth (...). I don't believe this is possible with European dance.

Tatsumi Hijikata

Preface

I came to Butoh by videotape. Or, rather, my earliest real awareness of this contemporary dance/theater movement from Japan came by way of a videotaped documentary about it entitled *Dance of Darkness* that a friend showed me one evening, several years ago, while sitting in his living room in Hiroshima, Japan.¹ The scenes, images and interviews that I encountered in that film were so

¹ *Dance of Darkness*, prod. Ethel Velez and Eden Velez; dir. Eden Velez, 54 min., La Sept and New Television WNET/WGBH, 1989, videocassette.

immediately striking and strange that my fascination with Butoh was instantly engaged. I watched—spellbound by what I saw—as the writhing, erotically-charged bodies of the Butoh performers rolled and crawled “toward the bowels of the earth,” the contorted, painted faces nightmarishly grimaced, and the extended limbs violently gestured down to the ground.² I learnt—fascinated by the story told on the videotape—of Butoh's Post-World War II emergence out of the ashes of a devastated nation and of its own gravity-laden bond to darkness and death, of a dance that, as Tatsumi Hijikata (one of Butoh's founding members) described it, “...would never jump or leave the ground; [for] it is on the ground that I dance.”³ Seduced by the extravagant spectacle seen in the documentary, I wondered what on earth it was that I was witnessing on the television screen that evening. And why did it look so unlike anything else that I had seen before, while still nonetheless reminding me of gestures, of images encountered elsewhere?

What I saw that night—mediated as it obviously was by the clarifying narrative of the documentary—presented to me some radically unfamiliar, yet inexplicably beautiful form of dance/theater. At the same time, however, the videotape offered a belated affirmation of an exoticism, an otherness, that I had initially sought when I first traveled from the U.S. in order to live in Japan. These inchoate, internalized images of Japan that—like baggage—I carried with me when I moved there, were, no doubt, the equivalent of cultural “stock footage” or secondhand stereotypes, dubiously derived from old Japanese photographs and Hokusai's woodblock prints, Kurosawa and Ozu films, and the ghostly tales of Lafcadio Hearn. Loosely linking myself with these kaleidoscopic images of Japan, in Butoh it seemed that I had found—via videotape—something of what I had always hoped to find (but had only rarely found) in that “*faraway*” country. At last, *there* on the TV screen, I was encountering the Japan of my dreams, the Japan of my fantasy. It seemed that my Japan was—through the images of Butoh—now coming more sharply into focus as well, recalling something of Roland Barthes' own “fictive nation.”⁴ After all, as the Butoh dancer Amagatsu Ushio once commented (and as I was to confirm), “Creating unerasable impressions is our business.”⁵

I had already been living in Hiroshima for a couple of years by the time I discovered Butoh, trying quietly since my arrival to reconcile my transported

² *Butoh: Piercing the Mask*, prod. and dir. Richard Moore, 49 min., AKA Productions, 1991, videocassette.

³ Mark Holborn, *Butoh: Dance of the Dark Soul* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 1987), 8.

⁴ Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs* (New York: Noonday Press, 1982), 3.

⁵ Susan Blakeley Klein, *Ankoku Buto: The Premodern and Postmodern Influences on the Dance of Utter Darkness* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University East Asia Program, 1988), 1.

imaginings of Japan with that often very different country. However, from the moment of my first encounter with Butoh in the late 1980s, it seemed that something of my Japanese fantasy, and the more mundane, material Japanese reality surrounding me (that so often diverged from my mental picture of the place), had abruptly converged upon the performing bodies of Butoh. As a result of this fortuitous convergence, I immediately began seeking out all possible information about Butoh, as well as looking for those rare opportunities to see Butoh “live” performances. From my home in Hiroshima, I scoured newspapers and magazines, corresponded with knowledgeable friends, looking for announcements of Butoh events, hoping to hear of upcoming performances.

However, much to my regret, I was gradually to discover that in my seeking out of Butoh, I was perhaps too late, and that Butoh—at least the image, or fantasy of Butoh presented so vividly in the videotape—had apparently ceased to exist by the time I began looking for it. What remained instead were mostly only the remnants and vestiges of the “original” Butoh (its “heyday” lasting from the late 1950s until—tentatively—Hijikata’s untimely death in 1985). The links to its earliest, “purest” incarnations were increasingly uncertain and perhaps unlocatable. As a result, and at this belated date of Butoh’s story, I was suddenly left with the replaced questions of what Butoh *had* been, *where* it had been, and *why*.

Recognizing that the Butoh of the documentary was no longer really available, it seemed that I was also now obliged to acknowledge something of the cultural fantasy that had initially fueled my fascination with Butoh—like a watery mirage on a distant horizon that could only vanish once it was approached—and to see the ways in which my desires for Butoh (and, by extension, my desires for Japan) had taken on an impossible life of their own. Still, in spite of Butoh’s disappearance and my own personal investment in its absence, I recalled—hopefully—what Tatsumi Hijikata had noted of Butoh, when he said, “That thing which is form emerges as it disappears; form becomes vivid in disappearing.”⁶ Perhaps now that the original Butoh had largely vanished, something of its enduring “form” might still vividly emerge *through* its very vanishing.

I relate here my own introduction to Butoh at such length because, in its own odd way, such a circuitous discovery of this important avant-garde movement from Japan might now be seen as somehow mirroring an important aspect of Butoh’s larger story, and how that story came to be known beyond Japan, beyond itself. For my own uneven and fantasy-laden encounters with Butoh may be seen to reflect something of the strange geographic migrations that had occurred years before in the intercultural avant-garde of which Butoh was a part,

and how (as, for example, in the case of the videotaped performance) those migrations later manifested themselves in the contemporary, postmodern world.

In my callow fascination with Butoh, there might be seen as well a familiar desiring gesture on my part that reveals something of the manner in which a representative of the West—myself—was (once again) looking to the East, *dreaming* of the “exotic” East as other (a staple of modernist discourse from its very beginnings), but also how the East—in the form of Butoh—can be seen as looking and dreaming of the West. An examination of this dual dynamic may also reveal how these collective, often conflicting, dreams of difference and identity, of desire and disappointment, had come to constitute, in a peculiarly hybrid fashion, something of the recognizable world that—shaping into a kind of durable dream, a videotaped fantasy—was once Butoh.

Lineage

Of course, as Freud diligently taught us, the understanding of a dream requires a careful and sustained analysis, a kind of a detached dream-work of its own. Such analysis disentangles and rearranges what, after the (dreamed) fact, might initially appear to the awakened dreamer as merely scattered visual fragments. A similar type of analysis of such fragments may now benefit us (in the face of such fragments) might now benefit us in our attempt to understand more fully Butoh. For like a particularly puzzling dream (or perhaps more appropriately for Butoh, a dark and dazzling nightmare), a retrospective focus upon Butoh can present a peculiar array of images and ideas that point in various directions at once, as well as to reveal the curious and conflicting genealogy that led to Butoh. The analysis that follows, however, is not likely to involve a resolution of Butoh’s cultural conflicts, or a lessening of its many dispersed signs of origin and development, but instead a recognition that it is *in* and *through* these cultural conflicts and their geographic dispersals that Butoh is best imagined and most richly recovered.

In the mid-1950s, the two Japanese dancers, Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno, were working together in Tokyo as the still-unformed and unnamed movement of Butoh was emerging in the underground theaters and small performance spaces of Japan’s rapidly rebuilding metropolis. Though principally born of the creations and collaborations of these two performers, Butoh can be traced back even further along various intersecting lines of development that are both geographic and cultural, historically implicated and yet profoundly, intimately existential. For Butoh had in large part been formed as a hybrid mix of dance and theater that emerged in the ruinous aftermath of the Second World War, but a mix that was intricately composed of overlapping,

⁶ Tatsumi Hijikata, “Wind Daruma,” *The Drama Review* 44/1 (Spring 2000): 76.

intercultural strands of influence and tradition, individual resistance and cultural revolt.

As many other young artists from distant and isolated northern provinces of Japan migrating to the cosmopolitan, cultural center of post-war Tokyo, both Hijikata and Ohno began by studying and participating primarily in various forms of contemporary Western dance. Throughout much of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in Japan, it was precisely the Western styles of dance and theater—from flamenco, ballroom and ballet, to filtered variations of the avant-garde dance from Europe and America—that seemed to offer the most enticing directions for contemporary expression and innovation. For many of the indigenous, traditional dance and theater forms of Japan, such as Kabuki and Noh, had come to be seen as stylistically and spiritually moribund: they had been transformed from their rustic and ritual-based origins into an often rarefied, elitist state of high art—expensive events found only in the finest of Tokyo's theaters. Emerging performers were thus likely to pass over these more traditional, “high art” Japanese practices with either indifference or disdain (or simply for the lack of funds to attend). Instead, they would look abroad for the aesthetic manifestations of the imported “modern,” seeking out Western methods to render the new content of their experience. These foreign articulations seemed to address more directly and with greater immediacy the emerging concerns of the local avant-garde.

In addition to the dance and theater lineage outlined above, Western literary and theoretical sources contributed to the formation of Butoh. For various types of contemporary Western literature and philosophy were also being discovered and rapidly assimilated, as new (or first-time) translations found their way into the eager hands of young artists in the accelerating post-war transformations of Japan. For instance, in Tatsumi Hijikata's writings in the late 1950s and the early 1960s, one may find prominent references to the works of such literary figures as Marquis de Sade, Arthur Rimbaud, Comte de Lautréamont, and Jean Genet (especially his autobiography, *The Thief's Journal*), as well as to the philosophical writings of Herbert Marcuse, Jean-Paul Sartre, Friedrich Nietzsche and Georges Bataille.⁷ In 1965, the French playwright, theorist and actor Antonin Artaud's widely influential work, *The Theater and Its Double*, was finally translated into Japanese. This particular work by Artaud, which had already had an explosive impact on theater and performance in many other parts of the world, importantly and abruptly entered the Japanese literary and theatrical scene and helped to intensify and theoretically frame many of Butoh's developing concerns.

⁷ Kurihara Nanako, “Hijikata Tatsumi: The Words of Butoh,” *The Drama Review* 44/1 (Spring 2000): 18-20.

I will return to Artaud in the pages that follow, for Artaud's important impact upon Butoh usefully reveals the often “funhouse-mirroring” effect that the Eastern and Western aesthetics have had upon each other. Artaud is a revealing example of a Western artist looking—however distortedly—to Asia for innovations of artistic form, only to redirect many of the same ideas, now transformed through a “Western eye,” back to Asia decades later. But before outlining Artaud's links to the East, let us look at Butoh's specific links to the West.

The details of Kazuo Ohno's development as a performer vividly reveal some of the hybrid transnational interactions that shaped an important branch of Butoh. One of the more direct and more compelling connections of the Western avant-garde and the merging Eastern avant-garde occurred in 1930s when Ohno studied dance with the Japanese dancer and teacher Takaya Eguchi (as would Hijikata some years later). In the 1920s Eguchi had lived in Dresden, Germany, studying contemporary dance. It was there that Eguchi worked and practiced with the renowned and influential German expressionist dancer, Mary Wigman, the inaugurator of the German *Die Neue Tanz* and one of the preeminent figures of the European avant-garde. Wigman was known for radical innovations in dance performance that involved spontaneous, expressive gestures, repetitive “tribal” rhythms, themes of darkness and death in “ecstatic” manifestations of the body. Wigman was also—like many others working at this period—fascinated with the East, noting that she was looking “toward the Orient for a mystic answer to a wordless riddle.”⁸

This first-hand encounter with Wigman and the modernist Western dance had a profound and long-lasting impact upon Eguchi. It also had significant implications for the development of Japanese modernist performance itself. For Eguchi returned to Tokyo in 1930s and transported with him many of Wigman's enduring lessons. In Japan, he opened his own school of dance and quickly became a widely influential teacher to many of that country's next generation of experimental dancers, most notably, Kazuo Ohno. Consequently, if one charts the migration pattern of Butoh through these determinative maneuvers from Japan to Germany, and then back again—from Mary Wigman (and her fantasies of “the primitive” and “the Orient”) to Takaya Eguchi (and his fantasies of “the modern” and “the West”), and from there on to Kazuo Ohno—one may perceive in Ohno's primary Butoh performances the direct lineage of Wigman's German expressionism fantastically transplanted and transformed halfway around the globe. This cultural and pedagogical bond between a modernizing Japan and the

⁸ Mary Wigman, “The Philosophy of Modern Dance,” in *The Twentieth Century Performance Reader*, ed. Michael Huxley and Noel Witts (London: Routledge, 1996), 404.

more widely established modernism of the European avant-garde was to prove a vital and enduring force in Butoh's complex development.

However, the valuable lessons that Takaya Eguchi had expeditiously delivered from Europe would be, in Ohno's own development of Butoh, quickly integrated into an even larger hybrid form of performance. Indeed, a Butoh dance by Ohno was soon to incorporate multiple, overlapping strains of cultural contact and influence, such as the enduring "foreign" gestures encountered through his decisive studies with Eguchi (who had earlier studied with Mary Wigman), combined with Ohno's own amalgam of Western interests, as well as the more indigenously "local" traditions of his native country. For instance, in his renowned collaboration with Hijikata entitled *Admiring La Argentina* (1977), Ohno performs—made up as a woman and in a flowing, full-length gown—his striking, poignant tribute to the Spanish dancer, Antonia Mercé, whom he had seen perform in Tokyo fifty years before. But more than just an homage to a legendary Western dancer, this piece also communicates the powerful, yet unsettling sense of the dancer's own communing with a distant personal memory, and his own desire to connect with the dead in a dance of rediscovery and rebirth. For in Ohno's compelling performance (and as vividly captured on film and photographs of the event), one sees the anguished and contorted gestures of German expressionism, alongside erratic, stretching movements of a Kabuki dancer. Added to this, however, are the attenuated timings of Noh theater that are incongruously enlisted alongside the flowing, exuberant passions of Argentinean flamenco. All of Ohno's incorporated movements appear then finally to culminate in the personal, cultural transmutation of this strangely elegant, extravagantly transgendered dancer alone upon the stage.

Artaud/Butoh

One of the more important figures responsible for Tatsumi Hijikata's apprenticeship of resistance and revolt was the French theorist Antonin Artaud. However, like so many other aspects contributing to Butoh's emergence, Artaud's impact is far from straightforward or unilateral. Indeed, Artaud's strong reception in Japan upon the 1965 translation of *The Theater and Its Double* can be seen as a reverse migration between the cultures in which elements of the West and the East are revealed to be vividly mirroring and enabling the cultural myths of one another. For as Japan had so frequently looked to the West for models and methods of its own modernization, the modernizing West, as I have already noted with respect to the work of Mary Wigman, had also a very long history of looking to the East, of incorporating

that distant and (from the Western perspective) marginalized part of the world into its own usefully determined fabrications.

Indeed, in the 1920s and the 1930s, Artaud had conceived of Asia, broadly and vaguely understood, as a cultural resource for European theater's possible regeneration and redemption. Asia, or the more exotically labeled "Orient," was for Artaud a mythical, unvisited world (known largely by him through the Balinese performance at the 1931 Colonial Exhibition in Paris), a place of enduring traditions and obscure legends, and the site where the perceived "decadence" of Western theater might find hope for an alternative, expanded range of form and content.⁹ "Artaud's Asia" was, no doubt, largely a fantasy, but an enabling fantasy nonetheless. For such an apparitional Asia had permitted the French writer a theoretical orientation that was to contribute importantly to the development of his hugely influential writings on theater.

For Artaud, much of Western theater had long since degenerated into "psychological" and humanistic narratives of the isolated ego, confining and tedious displays of self-affirming representation in which the body was forgotten and language had assumed unchallenged preeminence. There was, for Artaud, too much language, too much dialogic melodrama in what was diagnosed by him as a diseased, if not deadened European theater, one that, in its worship of the word, had long since forgotten the performer's muscles, glands, saliva, and the blooded bond to its Dionysian soul (pace Nietzsche). In the *Theater and Its Double*, Artaud thus writes about the European theater's deterioration and loss, linking it vividly to the body's own loss of contact with corporeal passion and hieratic immediacy:

No one in Europe knows how to scream any more.... Since they do nothing but talk and have forgotten that they ever had a body in the theater, they have naturally also *forgotten the use of their windpipes*. Abnormally shrunk, the windpipe is not even an organ but *a monstrous abstraction that talks*: performers... no longer know how to do anything but talk.¹⁰

Artaud imagined the East, and specifically the theatrical and dance traditions of Bali (a tiny island nation of Indonesia that was, for Artaud, to stand in for all of "the Orient"), as a form of "pure theater" which, he believed, had preserved links to the material reality and had rendered "our modern Occidental theater

⁹ Stephen Barber, *Artaud: Blows and Bombs* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 58-60. In fact, Artaud's report on the moribund nature of the post-First World War theater often sounds strikingly similar to the description of the post-Second World War theater, as rendered by Hijikata and other Butoh performers.

¹⁰ Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, trans. Mary C. Richards (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 141.

unspeakably gross and childish.”¹¹ Indeed, Artaud perceived the Balinese performances as a type of theater that had never—unlike that in Europe—lost its essential link to the soul, to ritual enactment, sacrifice and spiritual exploration, a magical theater of pre-lingual gesture, and the hieroglyphic display of the body. “At least,” as Artaud concluded from what he had seen, “that is the way they appear to us.”¹²

However, for all their lofty appearances, and for all the grace and generosity found in Artaud’s hyperbolic descriptions of the Balinese dance, it is no doubt important to remember the exported, contrived context from which these performances were first seen in 1931. For it was there—far from Bali, and as a part of France’s aptly named Colonial Exhibition—that (however well intended) Artaud’s important encounter with his Eastern “other” was finally materialized and where this cultural bond was magically conjured for Artaud’s own useful application. Hence, one cannot help recognizing in Artaud’s admiring gesture toward the traveling Balinese a variation of the West’s on-going colonizing embrace of Asia. Indeed, such an embrace was, in Artaud’s case, to involve yet another example of a wide-eyed infatuation with the Oriental “other.” However, such an infatuation—like most infatuations—often says more about the one doing the loving than it does about the one being loved, as we learn far more about Artaud through these impassioned writings than we do about the Balinese.

Perhaps such intercultural, historical fantasies are not, however, strange or surprising; nor should they necessarily be criticized or condemned by us as we dispassionately examine them many decades later. As suggested earlier, just as Artaud had looked to the East in the development of his own theories about the future of theater, it was the East—and Japan in particular—that was suddenly to look to Artaud in the development of Butoh. For, by the mid-1960s, Artaud had “assumed a cult status in the Tokyo underground,”¹³ where Hijikata and many others were enthusiastically reading of the dynamic, corporeal theater that Artaud was proposing in such powerful proclamations as the following:

I propose a theater in which violent physical images crush and hypnotize the sensibility of the spectator seized by the theater as by a whirlwind of higher forces. A theater which, abandoning psychology, recounts the extraordinary, stages natural conflicts, natural and subtle forces, and presents itself of all as an exceptional power of redirection. A theater that induces trance, as the dances of Dervishes induce trance, and that addresses itself to the organism by precise

¹¹ Artaud, 65.

¹² Artaud, 61.

¹³ Alexandra Munroe, *Revolt of the Flesh: Ankoku Butoh and Obsessional Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1994), 189.

instruments, by the same means as those of certain tribal musical cures which we admire on records but are incapable of originating among ourselves.”¹⁴

With such an exhilarating vision of the theater, Hijikata perhaps saw in Artaud’s writings the fervent demand that theater no longer present itself simply as a staged space for passive observation and casual entertainment, but, instead, as the site of trance-inducing, ritual impact of “a whirlwind of higher forces,” of the devolution of language back into the glandular body, and of a frequently violent spectacle of cruelty constituted by a grotesque, monstrous kind of beauty. Though such an ambitious image of theater may not be capable of “originating among ourselves,” as Artaud concluded, Hijikata may have imagined that something central to Artaud’s proposed theater could still originate elsewhere, far from the corrupting “centers” of either East or West, back in the untouched provinces, in the distant home of Japan’s northern province of Tōhoku.

Indeed, Artaud’s mythologized images of the East may have finally found their most vivid embodiment by ricocheting back upon the *real* East itself, back into the Japanese performances of Butoh. For it seems that something of what Artaud had seen in the traveling exhibition by the Balinese in 1931, Hijikata was to see by traveling back home to Tōhoku in the mid 1960s. Finally, if Butoh can now be understood as offering a kind of delayed manifestation of Artaudian theater, Artaud can be understood as having been a vital instigator of Butoh’s eventual development. It is as if Artaud had trans-generationally, trans-culturally planted seeds that could only later, and elsewhere—“*faraway*”—come to fruition.

Remigrations

During the transitional period of Japanese post-war history, from the late 1950s and on into 1960s, it seemed that much of the nation was wholeheartedly embracing the speedy social, cultural, and economic transformations, and in particular the “Americanizations” that were sweeping this recently defeated and newly compliant nation. However, already by the early 1960s there developed a specific cultural and aesthetic reaction against these widespread transformations, evinced in the heated and often violent confrontations regarding the 1960 military treaty with the U.S. A radical underground cultural and political movement emerged, a movement which combined an avant-garde artistic orientation that had been in large part inherited from the West, with a reexamination and reawakening of Japanese traditions and cultural definitions.

¹⁴ Artaud, 83.

This movement presented a curious merger of internationalism and the newly formed “nativism.” For instance, many leading Butoh performers—and Hijikata in particular—were eventually to embrace as a central motif the notion of reemergence into traditional Japanese culture and identity. This shift of focus inwards, and this realigning towards these more mythical allegiances of self and nationhood, was to appear at the very moment when much of Japanese culture and identity had either already been destroyed or was beginning to disappear. Interestingly, however, this desired reemergence freely borrowed from the Western avant-garde in order to frame its own investigations and creations, and to articulate its own complex and often conflicting image of itself.

By the middle to late 1960s, Hijikata began his own move away from the strictly Western training that he had been pursuing in Tokyo and toward a renewed concern for Japan’s more native traditions and the marginalized manifestations of form and expression. For Hijikata, this move specifically meant a return to the rural northern region of Japan from which he had come, the region known as Tōhoku. Hijikata’s re-migration, from Tokyo and then back to his own distant and isolated province, was motivated in part by the growing personal conviction that the further away from Tokyo one might get, the more immediate access one would have to the ardently longed for *non*-Western and pre-modern aspects of Japanese culture, to an indigenous cultural core. Tokyo, once the enticing, cosmopolitan center of events, had come to be seen by many as both corrupted and corrupting, a site of modernization that diluted or entirely expunged what was imagined as the uniquely Japanese.

Yet, it is important to acknowledge that, prior to his leaving Tokyo and his return to Tōhoku, Hijikata had remained *in* that corrupted/corrupting “center,” absorbing Tokyo’s mixture of cultural influences long enough to have learned many valuable lessons of the avant-garde. It was only after he had completed his avant-garde apprenticeship that Hijikata was in a position finally to apply both the formal and theoretical content of those revolutionary lessons towards his own sustained resistance to that which he had just learned. Perhaps it was developmentally necessary for Hijikata to go to the multicultural center of Japanese aesthetic activity in order to learn how finally to leave it; or, stated in another manner, Hijikata had to move far away from his provincial home of Tōhoku so as to put himself in a position where he would be able to see that distant region’s particular charms, its particular power. Separated from the familiar, Hijikata was thus disposed to see Tōhoku—or re-see it—as “a foreign country,” as he often described it.¹⁵

Having thus returned home to this newly discovered Tōhoku, Hijikata would find there many of the sources for his expanding range of Butoh performance

among the gestures, postures, and movements of peasant farmers, the elderly, the poor, the mentally and physically handicapped. It was among these often forlorn and forgotten people of the faraway provinces, from this cold and marginalized region of the country, that he attempted to resurrect the more authentic, and more enduring cultural memories of Japan—those linked to local tradition, rustic beliefs, and what was seen as the still-enchanted world of spirits, demons, shamans and magic. In her important early study of Butoh, Susan Blakely Klein has written that the rural, peasant body was imagined by Hijikata as “a repository for unconscious collective memory.” She claims that, “by recreating (or reliving) certain postures those memories will be reactivated in the viewer as well as the dancer by means of a direct preverbal channel of communal identity.”¹⁶

However, along with the “unconscious collective memory” of the individual Butoh performer, might we now also see such a collective memory informing the variegated development of Butoh as a cultural, avant-garde movement? From Hijikata’s migrations from Tōhoku to Tokyo and back, and from the specific mixture of cultural influences these moves exerted on his work, it quickly becomes clear that in relation to Butoh any fixed understanding of “centers” and “peripheries,” the “insides” and the “outsides,” is increasingly difficult to uphold. For the words shift their meanings in relation to context, orientation, and the relative perspective of the user. One person’s center is another person’s periphery; what is cosmopolitan for one is provincial for another. In Japan’s own cultural “center” of Tokyo, it had been the faraway international “center” of the Western avant-garde that had penetrated itself upon the war-ravaged and “marginalized” Japan. Butoh, materializing from this confabulation of intersecting forces, had emerged as a hybridized amalgam of East and West, of the “provincial” and the “cosmopolitan.” Indeed, the conceptual location of “centers” and “margins” could never be really disentangled (for it was this very *entanglement* that had largely created and constituted Butoh). The knot of enabling complications was simply wound too tight.

If, as I acknowledged at the beginning of this essay, the constituent parts of my own innocent dream of Japan came through a myopic looking from abroad, from sharing Roland Barthes’s position of “*faraway*,” Hijikata’s cultural imaginings of Japan—no doubt more organically bound yet still containing certain myopic interferences—seem to have come from within the country, as if dreaming *within* the nation’s dream. In fact, in his dramatic and now legendary return to his distant home of Tōhoku, Hijikata may have found “the other” within that which had been always already profoundly known, but which had

¹⁵ Nanako, 9.

¹⁶ Klein, 53.

been forgotten, repressed, or simply overlooked. Thus seeing and re-creating, Hijikata alienated, or even exoticized, both the familiar and the familial into the magically different, the usefully estranged.

Traces Remaining

From its emergence in the late 1950s to the tenuous transformations still seen today, Butoh has appeared and disappeared, as if upon a stage, as if within a dream. Now there are images and documents—photographs, written statements, spoken accounts and, yes, videotapes—to remind us of what a powerful cultural and historical aesthetic moment Butoh once was. But, in looking closely at Butoh's rich development, we are also reminded of the strangely circuitous channels of modern cultural influences, hybridization and transformation that vitally contribute to the shaping of so many "marginal" aesthetic movements. In Butoh performance, the East and the West clearly communicate (however imperfectly) across cultural and historical boundaries. This determinative communication between cultures that helped to constitute Butoh was also, however, undoubtedly being shaped by the enabling myths and fabrications of what one culture believed, or *desired* to believe, about the other. For such desires initiate the often impossible dreams of difference and identity, of distance and proximity, the dreams that, indeed, manifested themselves as a kind of dream residue upon the awakened body of the Butoh performer.

My own dreams of Japan and Butoh were also, as I acknowledged earlier, largely shaped by such enabling fantasies, by my own desires for an immediate contact with living mythology. Yet, my studies of Butoh have shown me that I was not alone in my dreams of difference and desired contact. Indeed, it was often the very force of such dreams by many of Butoh's own performers that shaped the waking reality that was Butoh. And though my dreams and fantasies of Japan and Butoh have, with time and experience, certainly enlarged and transformed, they have also nonetheless remained largely intact; these complex and shadowy traces have only continued to diversify and deepen into the very stuff that dreams are made of.

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