

Ugetsu: Revisited

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Abstract

The *Ugetsu Monogatari*¹⁾ [雨月物語] (1776), by UEDA Akinari [上田秋成] and the recent *butoh*, 'Ugetsu: Hell Raising to Heaven' [雨月—昇天する地獄—] (1995), choreographed by MARO Akaji [磨赤児] and performed by *Dai Rakuda Kan*²⁾ [大駱駝艦], with guest artist MORIMURA Yasumasa, [森村泰昌] are described phenomenologically³⁾ to survey formal elements, archetypal themes and philosophy of aesthetics characteristic of this collection of ancient Japanese 'tales of the supernatural' and the radical new dance form of contemporary Japan, *butoh*⁴⁾ [舞踏].

Introduction

What are the sustaining qualities of these nine tales of the supernatural which creative people find worthy of repeated visits? At a minimum, they have been the inspiration for a *Noh* play⁵⁾, at least two films⁶⁾ and this 1995 *butoh* production which the writer counts among the most awesome productions in her experience.

The writer happened upon this inquiry during a series of interviews with the artist, MORIMURA Yasumasa, for a Ph. D. dissertation concerned with cross-cultural issues in self portraiture, self definition and creativity. MARO Akaji⁷⁾ had choreographed 'Ugetsu' sometime earlier. His interest in Morimura's investigations into the question of personal

and cultural 'identity', as well as the numerous *personas*⁸⁾ resulting, led to an invitation to collaborate on a new version of the dance.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima.⁹⁾ As both men are politically aware and active and as the theme of warfare appears in five of the nine tales, it is not surprising that the collaboration moved toward a recognition of this point in history and resulted in the introduction of roles for General Douglas MacArthur and Emperor Hirohito. Portable flats move about with images of the Enola Gay, the Sacred *Matsu* and Fuji *San* being juxtaposed with figures such as the *sarariman*; a *hausfrau*; a comic figure of a 'homeless'; and a *Meiji* Period bureaucrat. In the last grand scene, Maro is wearing a dingy satin ball gown of uncertain

vintage with a huge black wig of tragic color and texture. While balancing above the stage on a chain net, he affects a howling, furious *shi-shi mai*¹⁰⁾ and then seems to ‘explode’ into a mushroom cloud, occupying the entire stage with smoke and fall-out as it goes dark.

At four or five points in the production, Morimura appears as the ‘ghost’¹¹⁾ of Marlene Dietrich. Her image was selected from Morimura’s repertoire because of a rumor that MacArthur and Dietrich enjoyed a romance sometime during the years of the occupation.¹²⁾

Tantalizing, of course, but more compelling for this artist/writer is the overarching question of the creative process. How, possibly, to approach that character of Maro’s creative thought process which can absorb the timeless tales and, leaving them unscathed, call into existence a wholly new form of contemporary expression¹³⁾ with a distinct cultural and aesthetic integrity, even within its inheritance.

Ugetsu Monogatari, 1776

Japanese folktales have roots in the oral traditions of Shinto mythology as well as in the Middle Ages when compilations of ghost tales were brought by Zen priests from China. Themes dealing with the supernatural came strongly to the forefront from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. These nine were written down for the first time by UEDA Akinari in the fast-changing¹⁴⁾ cultural milieu of 18th century Osaka. Nearly all of the tales deal with the theme of ‘the quest’, the poetry of specific time and place, the moral lessons of history and supernatural intervention in the natural order. The stories are located in sites spanning the length and breadth of sixty-six provinces. The fables begin with a prophecy of social unrest and war as the wandering poet / priest Saigyō meets the

ghost of an earlier emperor. They end, in the last story, with a prediction that the TOKUGAWA *shogun* would, at last, bring unity and peace to the land.

‘Ugetsu: Hell Raising to Heaven’, 1995

This *butoh*¹⁵⁾ performance is two continuous hours long. It requires a suitable space to accommodate the large cast of dancers and the complexity of events existing in synchronic and diachronic¹⁶⁾ time. The stage is edged on both sides and the rear with many lines strung vertically from ceiling to floor, on which are hanging hundreds of evenly spaced, folding fans, *maiohgi*, which are all the same size but with slightly differing designs, open, pointing upward. A pool of water, about 6 feet in diameter, is simulated in stage center. Evenly spaced around the pool are six 24” clear plexiglass cubes, half filled with water. These elements remain throughout the performance while figures, images and objects move through them.

Sound is by computer. Cross-cultural and eclectic, it borrows attitudes from experiments by John Cage, themes from contemporary electronic music, *Gagaku*, *Noh* and *Kabuki*. One hears references to heroic ballads, romantic arias and classical Western fugues as well as traditional instruments such as the *shoh*, *shakuhachi* and *taiko* drums. Recorded sounds of gunfire, helicopters and airplanes as well as live vocalization from the dancers, *kakegoe*, are incorporated. Sound, especially in the opening passage, is repetitive and ritualistic, bringing to mind the *Kyrie Eleison* of the old Latin Mass. Percussive, obsessive repetition, whether referring to Eastern or Western precedents, is used throughout.

The presentation of the body is a highly developed aesthetic central to *butoh*.¹⁷⁾ Maro’s ‘Ugetsu’ opens with sixteen dancers,

eight men and eight women, nude except for white g-strings, all over white body paint and narrow lengths of light blue cloth knotted, hanging, or variously dragging off the figures. The men are bald. The women's hair is tied up in assorted knots, distressed and dusted to appear unkempt.¹⁸⁾ All are struggling, tethered by one arm to metal chains secured at the top of the wall of fans. Some dancers are hung with other lengths of chain about their waists and arms, writhing. Facial expression is possessed, deranged. Today, a classic *butoh* vocabulary.

Maro's own vocabulary is extensive. A few examples: a group of six dancers appears in slim white gowns carrying long, straight blades. They are wearing thicker, shorter versions of the straw raincoats, *mino*, worn by Japanese peasants with the round straw hats, *mino kasa*, which were elevated about 8 inches above their heads by wire rigs. Seeing swords, and a suggestion of wings and halos, it is very tempting to call the figures 'archangels'.

At other points, the core of dancers is wearing *Noh* masks¹⁹⁾ inverted in front of their own white faces,²⁰⁾ secured by a tongue protruding from the mask and clenched in the dancer's teeth. The mask is constructed so that a facsimile of the dancer's tongue is seen in the concave, inverted surface of the mask, suggesting that the two faces are held at nose length from each other by a mutual biting of tongues. This formal element, rife with psychological implications, is present in several passages of the dance and developed in a number of affects from lyrical to foreboding.

In one of the last passages of the performance, sixteen dancers advance in a phalanx, wearing the very high *geta* of the *Bunraku* puppeteers with reddish, rude kimono on backward. By holding the kimono high and extending arms straight out at the shoulders,

the dancers appear huge and headless,²¹⁾ the kimono empty.

The concept of 'emptiness', of 'emptying the body'²²⁾ is key to the choreography. ASHIKAWA Abeno²³⁾ demonstrates the concept on videotape²⁴⁾ by simulating how a body might respond if hit by lightening, how it would receive the shock, react as the energy moves downward and out the feet. She shows how the body might walk with such a force running through it. Recovering, she moves as an empty shell ready to be filled. The 'filling' is well described by NISHITAKATSUJI Nobusada, the head priest, *Guji-san*, of the Dazaifu *Tenman-gu*.²⁵⁾

In Shinto, there is a basic concept called '*musubi*' [結] that is roughly equivalent to the English [word for] creativity. Japanese find *musubi* flowing through all things, indeed serving as the source of all things. And when they stand before a great stone or waterfall...they discover the power that *musubi* contains....*musubi* is mediated through great and virtuous personages...those...who live in the truth of *musubi* as it manifested in human relationships...the giving of one's whole self to the other...[those] who form human ties in pure devotion...find therein the outflow of creativity (*musubi*)...*Musubi* is concerned not only with a positive, nurturing creativity within the human psyche, but recognizes what MISHIMA Yukio termed the psyche's "dark side"...crisis begetting life-giving reconciliation, then reconciliation broken up by destructive forces demanding new harmonizing responses...the unfolding of *musubi* within...*Musubi* not only unites the individual to his personal destiny, but is...actively engaged in the flow of history...*musubi* welds the divergent forces of history into a creative flux...

The range of affect in the performance is wide, extending from the profound, existential angst frequently offered by *butoh*, to several comic episodes. One sees a group of

women dancers affecting a benign, frenetic lunacy while another troupe moves through them in a passage that is controlled and gymnastic. Many different affects might be presented simultaneously, appearing unaware of and unrelated to each other.

Visitations

Curious to locate correspondences between the *monogatari* and the *butoh*, the writer reviewed a videotape of the performance numerous times, noting that the dense layering unfolds in nine 'passages' which loosely correspond to the nine folktales in terms of subject, symbol and theme. But the *butoh* is in no way an illustration of the *monogatari*. So, how to locate correspondences sensed, but out of direct verbal reach? How to traverse the involuted cognitive spaces between the words and the images? The writer found a path of inquiry in the form of questions — questions without answers.

Do the sixteen confined, white-painted dancers represent the sequence of barriers and mountains traversed in the first story, 'White Peak' (*Shiramine*)? Is MARO Akaji the journeying 12th century priest Saigyō as well as the scholar HASEBE Samon in the second story, 'Chrysanthemum Tryst' (*Kikuta no Chigiri*)? In the second passage of the *butoh*, Morimura appears on stage as Marlene Dietrich in gold top-hat and blonde wig, posed with excellent legs showing, atop an oversized oak barrel that moves silently around the stage propelled by a secret power. Does the return of Dietrich represent the ghost of the loyal *samurai*²⁶⁾ keeping the promised 'chrysanthemum tryst' with his adopted brother? Or is Dietrich a manifestation of the ghost of the tragic and beautiful Miyagi in the third story, 'The House Amid the Thickets' (*Asaji ga yado*)? The process required a high tolerance for ambiguity.

Discussion

As the writer progressed through the nine passages of the *butoh*, paralleling the nine folktales, searching for correspondences in the form of questions, a pattern emerged. One's perception of figures and themes in the *butoh* can be invested with the content of at least two contiguous fables, and in some cases, 'packed' with related themes running on through several of the narratives, while also referring to earlier points, in a pattern of looping back. Other figures and themes might be simultaneously effecting a similar pattern, so that one experiences a rich, associative network, a kind of synchronic 'knitting together' of the *butoh* and the *monogatari*.

The themes and iconology present in the tales appear to have been reinterpreted into the present cultural time which has come to accept the possibility of many kinds of meaning in the insanity²⁷⁾ embedded in fast-moving, densely layered, synchronic events. Indeed, the founding philosophy of *butoh* itself is phenomenological and opposed to restrictions of any kind that would limit or control meaning.

Synopsis

The timeless and universal fascination with folklore is a function of the continuous need to redefine the self in changing cultural time. There comes a discomfort with outdated 'consensus reality' and the resulting loss of a sense of meaning. The functioning reality of daily life seems to promise a unity of perception that will remain constant. However, one knows that reality consists of many layers, so there is chronic, sub-conscious anxiety that something can break through at any moment, for good or for evil. That possibility is rehearsed in the archetypes, the great themes²⁸⁾, which are pan-cultural but couched

in iconology that may be distinctly culture-specific.²⁹⁾ In all cultures, that centering sense-of-self is largely defined by 'consensus reality' and any threat to that sense is painful, fundamentally disorienting, and frightening.

'*Butoh* begins with the abandonment of the self...the dancer, through the *butoh* spirit confronts the origin of his fears...a dance that crawls toward the bowels of the earth...there is an element of catharsis. It is closer to a process of mourning ...First you enter into the world of darkness and then from that point on you seek joy, happiness and satisfaction³⁰⁾.

The *Ugetsu Monogatari* appears to be linear and existing in ordinary time. Cross-references between the stories may not be apparent on first reading but if revisited, the associative layering between the tales emerges subtly, as if out of a fog, much as an apparition takes shape. Early *butoh* initially appeared chaotic and in defiance of rationality. Both the *monogatari* and the *butoh*, as constructed aesthetic experiences, draw upon

universal themes and invest them with culture specific iconology, reacting to imperatives present in different cultural times.

The goal is to make a pause in the space/time continuum; to translate the presumably objective world, for a moment, into a manageable reality, an art form, in order to offer 'fellow travelers' access to the flux of the collective unconscious where one may renew the sense of self by entertaining the elements presented, questioning them for relevance and thence, the quality of one's own connection to the sustaining archetypes.

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Notes

- 1) A collection of nine Japanese folktales. In English, *U* means 'rain' and *getsu*, 'moon'. *Monogatari* means story, narrative, or fable, so: 'Tales of Moonlight and Rain'.
- 2) Translated as 'Big Camel Battleship'.
- 3) The term reflects the use of the word as it relates to the definition set forth by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and made applicable to aesthetics by Don Ihde, *Experimental Phenomenology*, 1986, and E. F. Kaelin, *An Aesthetics for Art Educators*, 1989.
- 4) Also romanized as *butō*, the word now refers to a category of dance with numbers of diverse practitioners but the term originates in 1959 with the first group of this genre, *Ankoku Butoh Ha*, 'Dance of Utter Darkness Movement', founded by HIJIKATA Tatsumi in collaboration with OHNO Kazuo and first coming to attention in 1959 with the performance '*Kinjiki*', 'Forbidden Colors', based on the novel of the same name by MISHIMA Yukio. The group disbanded in 1966. The form has only been familiar in the West since the mid 1980's.
- 5) Entitled '*Ugetsu*', it is the story of the traveling Buddhist priest and poet, Saigyō (1118-90), during a time of war in the 12th century.
- 6) Best known is the 1953 classic, '*Ugetsu*' by MIZOGUCHI Kenji.
- 7) *Butoh* was born directly out of the psycho-social stress of the 1960's, especially those surrounding the renegotiation of the U.S.-Japan Mutual Defense Treaty. Artists and intellectuals were strong voices in protest to that action. MARO Akaji is prominent among the first wave of contributors to the development of the *butoh* aesthetic following the originators, HIJIKATA Tatsumi and OHNO Kazuo. *Butoh* is a distillation of the painful crisis of national identity following World War II. In much the same way, Akinari rendered the folktales as an answer to the moral questions of his time.
- 8) Since 1986, Morimura's work has generated questions about personal and cultural identity, sexuality, individuality, the ownership of ideas, the psychology of perception and criteria for the evaluation of art. He began by introjecting his own facial features into reproductions of established icons such as Rembrandt's self portraits. Lately, he has been donning costume and make-up to impersonate living pop figures such as Madonna as well as film stars from the past.
- 9) During this anniversary summer, Morimura has had an exhibition of his works, especially his large image of an atomic cloud called *Two Brothers (A Late Afternoon Prayer)*, 1991, at the Museum of Modern Art in Hiroshima.
- 10) Demonstrating links to *butoh*'s two antecedent dance forms, *Gigaku* and *Bugaku*, the latter said to be the oldest extant dance form on earth, from China, known for more than 1,300 years.
- 11) In Japanese folklore, it is said that ghosts do not have feet. The feet of Marlene Dietrich are quite visible (in silver high heels) but Morimura put one condition on his appearance in the *butoh*, — that his feet must never touch the stage during the performance. So, he sits atop a gliding barrel, flies a trapeze bar and rides on the side-car of a motorcycle. During the curtain call he is picked up and carried by Maro to the front of the stage, where he arranges himself into a graceful recline for the remainder of the bows.
- 12) To the writer, June 1995 interview with Morimura. The writer has, as yet, been unable to confirm the existence of the rumor, much less the substance.
- 13) Hijikata and Ohno first studied Western dance forms. They rejected that aesthetic and the search for more authentic sources led back to the origins of the Japanese sensibility — the earliest reference to

dance, the myth recounted in the *Nihongi*. The Sun Goddess, Amaterasu Ō-Mikami, offended by her brother's behavior, took her light into a cave so that the earth was thrown into darkness. To coax her out, all the gods organized a *matsuri* — a decorative and rowdy procession of chanting deities featuring a dance by Ame-no-Koyane-no-Mikoto, with fervent stamping about on a wooden platform. Whereas Western dance aims at upward movement, a defiance of gravity, reaching toward a god in heaven, Hijikata developed a style of dance based on pantheism and drawing strength through the feet from the earthbound spirits. The stamping action of the *sumo* wrestler has the same origin.

- 14) Between two vigorous periods of cultural revival, the *Genroku* Era at the end of the 17th Century and that of the *Bunka* and *Bunsei* Eras in the early 19th.
- 15) *Buyoh* [舞踊] is the general term for all kinds of dance. Hijikata thought it too 'flabby'. He had studied the German Expressionist dance form, *Neuer Tanz*, and wanted a term that would convey a similar sense of 'hardness'. *Butoh* [舞踏] with the character *toh* [踏], meaning to 'stamp' or 'stomp', as in the *roppo* of *kabuki* or the stomping in *sumo*, carried that quality of meaning. It also represents a separate genre, like *bugaku*, *kabuki* and *noh*.
- 16) In the arts, these terms may have slightly different meanings. Synchronic is extended to include that kind of time experienced in dreams — wherein there is simultaneity of events but people, places and events can be in any order of time. Diachronic may include simultaneity but time is rational and linear.
- 17) Both Hijikata and Ohno were born and raised in the farmland of the Tohoku region, suffering harsh winters and food shortages. Hijikata's father was drunk and unemployed, his mother overworked. He grew up lonely, absorbed by the myths, demons and phantoms of the north. He said that it was frequently so cold, one could not speak, so his early dances were usually silent and the body naked to emphasize vulnerability. Hijikata drew his vocabulary from the postures of the cold, the field, and the *iibitsu* — the round straw baskets into which babies were stuffed and swaddled so that their legs were bent and only their hands were free. Bandy legs, squat, earth-centered bodies and limbs controlled by pain became the lexicon for movement in *butoh*.
- 18) Hijikata and Ohno, in a search for more authentic expression, developed a canon of gestures and movement, sounds and presentations of the body that intended to contradict, even insult both Eastern and Western classic standards of beauty. No possibility was considered too unseemly for inclusion in the repertoire, no taboos observed.
- 19) Very similar to the *Deigan*, (malevolent female spirit), the most familiar of which is attributed to Himi, 15th century.
- 20) On the day of the first interview with Morimura in his Osaka studio, he made a tea ceremony, presenting the writer with a tea bowl saying he had made it himself and that it was a bit unusual. As the green tea drained, a pinkish object on the bottom of the bowl emerged — a cooked shrimp? It slowly took the form of a nose. An exact copy of Morimura's nose was nose-to-nose with the writer. Morimura said: "At last, we are face to face."
- 21) The image of 'headless' is frequent in Morimura's work. The symbol of 'headless' or 'beheaded', cross-culturally, is ambivalent. The head is the seat of the life-force, the soul and its power. It denotes wisdom as well as folly. The wreath of victory and the ashes of repentance are both placed on the head. In consecration, it is crowned, in dedication, it is shaved. To nod the head is to pledge the life-force and head-hunters acquire the vital force and fertility of the slain. A severed head is an image of the vanquished and the emblem of saints. J.C. Cooper (1990), *An Illustrated Encyclopedia of*

Traditional Symbols, Thames and Hudson, Ltd., London.

- 22) Using all over white or silver body paint is a formal device characteristic of *butoh*'s emphasis on the body as an empty vessel. It detaches the figure from the usual empathic cues and locates the figure in the cosmology of symbols. That being accomplished, James Pilgrim writes, p. 142:

...the aesthetic principle...*Ma* [間] emerges as an in-between Reality where time, space, and all things merge into one flowing moment...a *ma* aesthetic features expectant stillness and open space pregnant with possibilities...[but]...it is no mere emptiness...it is the "living room" of the spirit...the very foundation of Japanese aesthetics. Minute particles of *kami* as it were, fill that *ma*.

And further, by the architect, ISOZAKI Arata, p. 36:

Ma is the way of sensing the movement of movement and is related to the term *utsuroi*. Originally, *utsuroi* meant the exact moment when the *kami* spirit entered into and occupied a vacant space...Later it came to signify the moment when the shadow of the spirit emerges from the void. This sense of *kami*'s sudden appearance...gave birth to the idea of *utsuroi*, the moment when nature is transformed; the passage from one state to another. The Japanese have honestly tried to fix the emergence, the flowing, the movement along time into space...a mode of thinking that merges rather than differentiates time and space. This interpenetration of time and space dominates Japanese aesthetics.

- 23) ASHIKAWA Abeno is a member of the the troupe *Hakutobo*, founded and directed by a favorite student of Hijikata's, ASHIKAWA Yoko. The members of the troupe, mainly women, take the family name of Ashikawa.
- 24) Richard Moore, 'Piercing the Mask', no date.
- 25) To the writer, interview, June 1991. The Dazaifu *Tenman-gu* has been one of the sites rich in the early Shinto and later Buddhist performances and festivals of the kind that were a touchstone in the development of *butoh*.
- 26) In Japanese mythology, ghosts are very frequently women according to Brenda Jordan, 'Yūrei: Tales of Female Ghosts' in *Japanese Ghosts and Demons*, by Stephen Addiss.
- 27) "Where there is no nonsense, there is no sense".

-Unknown.

Professor of Japanese Architecture at Columbia University, Kunio KUDO, included the above saying in his lecture notes for 1992, and extended them in a 1992 interview:

There are three ultimate destinations...in [Japanese] aesthetics...since the beginning of their history. These absolutes are *Jyo* [浄], *Kyo* [狂] and *Iyu* [遊] [sic], translated as purity, insanity and playfulness...The quest for *Jyo* is the strongest current...It is the unstained state of...life and mind...Philosophically, it comes from Shinto...[it] derives from the purifying function of...life — the cycle of birth and rebirth...a pre-logos world...*Jyo* [means] beautiful. To be beautiful doesn't mean...visual or audible "handsomeness," not formal perfection, but...the unspoiled intention and dedication behind the presentation...for the artist who does not possess this impossible *Jyo*, there remain two choices. One is the way of *Kyo*, (insanity)...the other is *Iyu*, (...playfulness) where they accept the status quo...Truth lies just behind beauty in Japan. The very truth comes to *Kyo*. Artists of *Kyo* traveled, died young or committed suicide: Saigyō (a monk poet), Bashō (a haiku master...), 'Rikyū (a teamaster...), Akutagawa (a novelist...), Takuboku and Kenji (poets...)... and, of course, MISHIMA Yukio...

The tea room is an architecture of *Kyo*...inch by inch, foot by foot, like nature, Rikyū's design keeps diverting from itself, reserving the conclusion for the final destination in the infinite.

- 28) For example: 'The Quest', 'The Forbidden Chamber', 'The Beauty and the Beast' and 'Real-Not Real'.
- 29) Hayao KAWAI, Jungian psychoanalyst.

Reality's multifariousness corresponds to that of human consciousness, or — if we follow the

thought of analytical psychology — it corresponds to the human psyche which contains conscious and unconscious layers. If fairy tales tell us about the structure of reality, [they] may as well reflect that of the psyche.

30) HIJIKATA Tatsumi, undated.

