

Tatsumi Hijikata
— The Reception and Transformation of
Dance of Darkness (3) Body, Language, and Image

—With insights from the Noguchi Gymnastics Method and Miki Morphology—

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I will examine reception and transformation in Dance of Darkness by Tatsumi Hijikata, the founder of Butoh, a leading form of physical expression in the 20th century and investigate the new reality of physicality in the 21st century from the viewpoint of body, language and image. To do this, I will take into consideration the state of research on Hijikata, the Noguchi Gymnastics Method of Michizo Noguchi known as Noguchi Taiso and the morphology of Shigeo Miki.

The only dissertations on Hijikata, two in number (one by Mikami published in 1993 and the other a doctoral dissertation presented by Nanako Kurihara in 1996 and her subsequent article in English published in 2000) are identical in their analysis and contents. This indicates that no new theory on this dance technique has appeared since Mikami published her decoding method and thesis on Hijikata's choreographic notes.

What we can understand about Butoh's metamorphosis from the theory put forth by Satoru Kawai and Akira Kasai which showed Hijikata's Butoh as 'embryological alchemy,' workshops occurring subsequent to Mikami's dissertation and the new interpretation of Hijikata's choreographic notes are first, that the content of the dance expresses alterations undergone in chaos or by fetuses, second, that the focus of Butoh training began to develop along the lines of thought, images, or structural functions of the body and third, that the Noguchi Taiso method and its theory of 'inquiry of the body' is a major influence.

The utterances of both Hijikata and Noguchi are such as those spontaneously broadcast when bodily sense is forming; sounds which pre-date onomatopoeia and words. These sounds are the pre-verbal body language which evolved before articulated language. Hijikata's language rejects interpretation as his Butoh assumes the appearance of a swindle, in which the subject and object are undergoing metamorphosis so rapidly, it swindles even his dancers' bodies. Noguchi,

on the other hand, traces the origins of language back to inscriptions of Chinese characters on animal bones and tortoise carapaces and to etymologies of words in Japanese language prior to the introduction of Chinese, and goes so far as to playfully dabble in primitive phonology a way of discovering the meaning of language through individual physical reactions to the pronunciation of each of the fifty common Japanese phonemes.

Both Hijikata and Noguchi, as they have searched through new combinations with disconnected parts of the flesh and body, quest for the new meaning and possibility of language by means of reconsidering it at the site where it is forming. This method would not be that of dualistic thought by a “superior” brain, but of “thought by the flesh” or “thought through image.”

Under the assumption that “image is the entity of consciousness and it is only humans that can move through image”, Noguchi Taiso, which advocates “learning directly from nature”, is called “image exercise”; using rocks, minerals, plants, and toys such as whips as models of movement. Only the contraction of muscles is typical of exercise, while the phrase of Noguchi who believes “gravity to be the primary energy and weight to be thought and thought, image,” can share common ground with Hijikata who also explored the relation between the flesh as substance and the mind containing thought and image with the conclusion that “technique without images is barren and images without technique, unreliable.”

The dualistic methods and basic terms of both Noguchi and Hijikata, from ‘the primordial organisms’ and ‘the water bags of the skin’ of the former to ‘the feeble or the collapsed body’ and ‘the column of ashes’ of the latter, and Noguchi’s ‘release work’ contrasted with Hijikata’s ‘binding,’ are not indicative of their view that exercise depends on muscle contraction but of one which holds dear such characteristics as our being caught up in time and space dynamics or the gradual collapse of the inner body with every passing moment and even points to the states and means of recognizing and verbalizing the living flesh which has the capacity to become a physical body.

Miki sees the vestige of an ancient fish on the faces of 36 week-old fetuses and seeks the ‘metamorphosis’ of a ‘life memory’ of 3.8 billion years in this “primordial figure”. This idea becomes grounds for the metamorphosis of 21st century Butoh, through the “release work” of Noguchi Taiso. This work can, by relaxing the boundaries of our physical being, allow us to listen to our visceral internal voice because we have experienced the passing of time known to rocks and plants. It can enable us to become our original fundamental selves through directly reconnecting with the power of the universal rhythms of the meditative womb state.