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The Impossible Avant-Garde in Japan

Does the Avant-Garde Exist in the Third World?

Japan's Example: A Borderline Case of Misunderstanding

in Aesthetic Intercultural Exchange

AVANT-PROPOS

My subject will be incommunicability while forgoing the incommunicable, for how can one communicate the incommunicable? The latter constitutes the limit of what I will communicate here, and indeed of communication itself.

Ten years ago, much was said about intercultural dialogue. Dialogue is only possible about that which is dependent upon the logos. For a culture in which the logos is considered a form of ethical betrayal (Confucius), dialogue is no more than an expression of infidelity, perfidy, and ingratitude. Everything communicable is merely a rhetorical subterfuge seeking to satisfy a diplomatic need.¹ Dialogue with such a culture obscures rather than reveals its intended subject, at the cost of multiplying illusions of this 'other' which eludes presentation.

Without getting into a philosophical or sociological discussion on this subject, and so as not to repeat yet again the myth of

'inscrutable Japan,' I will limit myself to the analysis of a specific example of the tragi-comedy brought about by this (by definition unmaintainable) 'dialogue.' In so doing, I will pose a concrete question: is the Japanese avant-garde (re)presentable to the Western public?

Here, words such as 'avant-garde,' 'Japan,' 'the Orient,' 'the non-Western (or Western) world,' are granted purely operational and provisional value. They will be, then, subject to replacement... If dialogue between France and Japan proves problematic, it follows that one must reexamine not only the relation between Japan and Korea along with other Southeast Asian countries, but also that between France and England, or England and Scotland or Ireland, or between France and Francophone (and non-Francophone) African (and non-African) countries. Our considerations of this question would then have to be increased in number. My own is simply a modest point of departure towards this end.

THE FUNDAMENTAL AMBIGUITY OF JAPANESE AVANT-GARDE

In relation to Japanese fashion, I would like to begin with concrete examples (without rushing towards a synthesis which, in the final analysis, seems pointless to establish in the case of cultural misunderstanding). Let's look at the case of Fauvism and Cubism. As we know, the adoption of an avant-garde stance in early 20th century Europe was made on the authority of its reference to African and Oceanic art. Now, if the 'autochthon' African people referred to the same sources as did Westerners, it could under no circumstances claim to be avant-garde; on the contrary, this choice of sources would merely signify, within autochthon culture, a type of 'traditionalism' which would be seen as, if not outdated, at least antimodernist to the extent that 'modernization' means, by definition, Westernization within the historical framework of this question.

The same dilemma is perfectly applicable to Japan's case. Consider an example from poetry. If '*haikai*' served as a decisive inspiration for the incontestably 'avant-garde' imagist movement, in France as in the English-speaking world, the same genre of 'traditional' poetry in Japan was apparently viewed as nothing more than an outmoded tradition to be consigned to the past through efforts at modernization. What may be considered avant-garde in the Western context is, in the Orient, nothing other than a type of 'feudalism' to be rejected in favor of modernization.

Hence here lies the fundamental ambiguity of claims to an avant-garde orientation in Japan. On the one hand, one cannot automatically consider *haikai* avant-garde simply because *haikai* poets inspired Western imagists. On the other, one would obviously be overly selective to see Japanese avant-garde poets as coming exclusively from among dadaists and Japanese surrealists. Rather than attempting to draw a line of demarcation between the avant-garde and the non-avant-garde, our interest lies in questioning the very possibility of doing so.

The notion of 'modernization' is therefore problematized. Take the case of painting as an example. The modernization of painting in Japan after the country was opened to foreigners in the mid-19th century consisted in learning the basic techniques of Western academism: namely, modeling, chiaroscuro, and linear perspective to cite only three criteria. During precisely the same period, the agenda of Western avant-garde painting was formed through the abolition of these academic rules. It is in this context that the vogue of traditional Japanese art in Europe in the second half of the 19th century should be understood. Japan's traditional art was free from the rules of Western academism, and it was due to this freedom that Japan served as a model for the European avant-gardes. '*Japonisme*' in Europe was characterized above all by its negation of Western academic rules.

The Japanese reaction to this change of direction initiated by Western painting could not help but be a contradictory one, indeed triply so. First of all, modernization stands in sharp contrast to the avant-garde agenda, given that the members of the Japanese avant-garde were to abandon what they had only just learned from the Western academic tradition, all in the name of 'modernization'. It would require enormous naïveté not to take note of this discontinuity, indeed of this contraction, between modernization and the avant-garde in the Third World.

Secondly, this abandonment of academic techniques ironically intersects with Japanese tradition, which the Japanese avant-garde was above all supposed to denounce. Ostensibly an obstacle to the latter's emancipation, the national tradition found itself, contrary to all expectations, in tacit complicity with the Western avant-garde. Given this troublesome complicity, reference to the West no longer afforded Japanese artists the possibility of resolutely opposing a Japanese tradition as something to be left behind. At the same time, the Japanese avant-garde in the plastic arts was left without the internal necessity for a revolt against the national artistic tradition's authority.

Thirdly, the dream of a synthesis of the Western avant-garde and Oriental tradition proves theoretically impossible because it is tautological. Remaining true to the avant-gardist spirit, moreover, requires a revolt against tradition. In the case of Japan, then, it is in fact this national tradition which guarantees the plastic arts' faithfulness to the Western avant-garde. Under these conditions, an East-West synthesis could only be accomplished in spite of the avant-garde artists, as they must inevitably be unfaithful to its spirit so as to remain faithful to its form, and vice versa (we will come back to this point). One would have to be hypnotized not to sense the threat of betrayal implied by any such optimistic dream of East-West synthesis.

THE AVANT-GARDE, AN OVERLY WESTERN NOTION

Separating traditionalism from avant-gardism within such an osmosis would be tantamount to cutting the Gordian knot, whereas it is this separation, this distinction, that stands as the avant-garde's very definition. Put another way, it is logically impossible to find an authentically avant-gardist position within Third World culture. What causes this ambiguity? The notion of the avant-garde itself is based on a Eurocentric point of view. It is not by accident that the avant-garde came into its own during the colonial period. The appropriation of the Other by a Western Europe hoping thereby to regenerate its own traditions attains at this point its ultimate manifestation, and brings with it an inevitable identity crisis within Western Europe itself. That which is considered traditional in a non-Western context becomes avant-garde as it is integrated into a Western context. But this transplantation is a one-way dispossession. For a non-Western culture, this represents a double alienation: non-Western culture provides the Western avant-garde with an alibi but, in so doing, the non-Western avant-garde is uprooted, and is capable of basing itself upon its own culture only through reference to the Western avant-garde. From this indirect means, moreover, can only result an Eastern *arrière-garde*.

A BLIND SPOT AND ITS THREE CONSEQUENCES

The definition of the Western avant-garde is thus not applicable to non-Western reality. Yet whenever a constitution of an avant-garde corpus for non-Western countries is attempted, it is inevitably the definition of the avant-garde forged in the context of European art, which is invoked as the criterion of demarcation. This tendency creates a blind spot which makes doubly impossible any conception of an avant-garde belonging to the non-Western world. On the one hand, that which is identifiable in Japan as avant-garde through its formal resemblance with examples of the West is, by definition, an epigone of Europe. On the other hand, that which does not fit into the latter '*déjà vu*' category is automatically subsumed into 'Tradition'.

Divided between imitating the West and regional tradition, the non-Western world is refused the right to its own 'authentic' avant-garde. This is clearly a tautology, for once such an 'authentic' avant-garde appears in the Third World, it goes beyond the very definition of the avant-garde. Is not the avant-garde label in the non-Western world, then, devoid of originality by its very nature? An original creation from these countries must seek another label than that of avant-garde. (Here we see a clear and surely incisive solution; nevertheless a dilemma of irrecoverability remains unresolved. We will come back to this.)

It would be difficult to play a double game as absurd as this self-censorship, for the object of interest is removed in advance from the corpus to be established towards this end. Repression at once self-justifying and self-mystifying, since it is the logical coherence of this double operation which creates lacunae. We will mention three such types.

To begin with, all attempts at grafting the Western avant-garde onto Japanese culture are automatically excluded from consideration of the avant-garde. One need only think of the so-called 'national traditional' (*Nihonga*) genre of painting in modern-day Japan. The translation of the term for this type of painting into

European languages in itself leads to confusion. To Westerners, the term 'national' style is equivalent to 'traditional' style (a debatable substitution; but what other options are there?). This genre is consequently outside the avant-garde. What's more, through this self-contradictory designation of a type of painting both traditional and modern, any possibility of this branch of Japanese painting renewing or 'modernizing' itself is ruled out. Here the effort at communication cuts both ways. No such ambiguity exists in the Japanese term *Nihonga* which, on the other hand, is meaningless to foreigners. Leaving *Nihonga* as the genre designation without translating it would make it a euphemism reserved for specialists. Yet once paraphrased, the term engenders inevitable confusions. Explanation leads to deviation.

Second omission: everything to which one cannot assign an equivalent, either anterior or posterior, in Western culture is categorically excluded from consideration of the Japanese avant-garde. This would include flower arrangement ('the way [*tao*] of making the flower live'); what is called, for lack of a better term, arts and crafts (*kôgei*, a neologism in Japanese as is *bijutsu* for 'fine arts' since the 1870s), or calligraphy ('the way [*tao*] of ink writing'). I am irresistibly tempted to add to these the martial arts, since all of these arts are Japanese culture's only export products. Far from being traditional and antiquated, these last art forms are very much alive and are not banished, unlike in Europe, as lesser arts, but enjoy a 'status' that is at least socially equivalent to 'high' art.

This is a doubly meaningful exclusion: first, insofar as it functions as a Procrustean bed, mutilating realities which fail to fit into its own category; next because, in reality, the Western avant-gardist-inspired revolts arose precisely in these properly Japanese areas dominated by traditional authority. A contradictory statement at first glance, to be sure, but not a paradoxical one; because it was enough for the Western school in Japan to import and adopt the latest Western styles in order to call itself avant-garde, whereas it was the national schools

which were to undertake a general self-questioning to renew themselves. This renewal, which should be an avant-garde option par excellence in autochthon eyes, is nonetheless not deserving of the title 'avant-garde' from the Western point of view. An inevitable difference of perspective!

Finally, the third lacuna: one which strikes me as the most ironic of all, dealing as it does with the logical consequence of attempting to represent the Japan of the avant-gardes. By means of a logic of things, one first discerns the counterparts of Western avant-gardes in works made in Japan; next, these counterparts are examined for specifically Japanese traits. An apparently logical approach, but one which in fact constitutes a very odd reversal, in that this approach tries after the event to find the 'Japanese' specificity that had been systematically eliminated during the establishment of the corpus in question. The irony is that anyone doing so must seek out typically Japanese traits in artistic efforts which had the specific intention of doing away with their 'Japanese' nationality. Indeed, the dream of the Japanese avant-garde between the wars was one of unconditional identification with the European avant-garde.

REPRESENTABILITY AS BETRAYAL

The ironic contradiction doesn't end there. This cosmopolitan dream of identification with the West proved alienating once these Japanese artists came into contact with the real Europe. The fate of these Japanese artists was a peculiar one; they could only make their mark in Europe by playing up their 'Japaneity' even though the desired end of their trip to Europe was to separate themselves from it. In the West, they were called upon to represent typical Japanese people in spite of the fact they desired to reject their Japanese background; in Japan, however, they could be recognized as being international, to the extent that they affected to have freed themselves from Japan. In both cases, recognition is only made possible through the filter of what they reject.

This presents an impossible situation, unless the artist, Janus-like, could exploit this antinomy by presenting him/herself to the Japanese as a Parisian artist, while in Paris exhibiting him/herself as an incarnation of Japanese aesthetics, a temptation as irresistible as it was dishonest. Yet this brand of two-faced opportunism was the only remaining compromise that permitted a work of art's originality to be communicated and recognized. This recognition was tragic in itself, for it could only be assured through an act of cultural betrayal. This constitutes, after all, the only brand of eclecticism which allows for coexistence between Japan and the avant-garde. But was Japanese nationality, in fact, still involved? To respond to this question, one need only consider the Ecole de Paris of the 1920s: the members of this school were, for the most part, exiles lacking any sense of nationality, or were even marginalized *Heimatlos*.

JAPANEITY AS A LACK OF ORIGINALITY

An avant-garde considered typically Japanese would therefore be merely a product of intellectual hypocrisy. Indeed, nothing could be more absurd than seeking out Japanese originality in faithful imitations of the Western avant-garde. 'Japaneity' in this context would only serve to emphasize the shortcomings of these attempts at unconditional identification with the West, unless it be a kind of nationalistic excess subject to rejection before it can be recognized as being avant-garde.

Does not this negative condition call for a change in perspective? The famous 'Japaneity' should not be viewed as a kind of idiosyncrasy unique to Japan, but rather should be defined by its very lack of originality, for 'Japaneity' resides nowhere else but in absolute fidelity to the Western model, in other words in the lack of originality itself.

This leads us to an aberrant consequence, since it would surely be asking too much of the general public to appreciate a lack of originality. Herein lies the deadening dilemma faced by any

serious organizer of a Japanese avant-garde exhibition, despite his best efforts to avoid it.

A CONSIDERATION OF THREE BORDERLINE CASES

How can this vicious circle be escaped? How is such self-intoxication to be prevented? The problem is that this impasse is inherent to the methodical approach itself. As long as we grant ourselves the authority of selecting works to be filed away in our prefabricated desk drawer labeled 'avant-garde,' we will be blocked at every turn. This said, it is not for us to propose another classification system, given that an 'autochthon' point of view no more guarantees an 'authentic' vision than does the Western perspective. We resist any such normative and authoritarian attitude. More useful to our purpose is a look at the incompatible interplay of intercultural glances as they meet over certain borderline cases. We will briefly consider three examples ordinarily excluded from the definition of avant-garde, in the West as well as in Japan. The logic of exclusion at work here is worthy of examination.

First of all, "The Popular Craft Movement in Japan" (*mingei-undô*), which sought to question the typically Western distinction between high and low art. According to YANAGI Sôetsu, who founded the movement in the 1920s, nothing is more pure and beautiful than everyday objects fashioned by anonymous and innocent artisans, 'untainted' by the wealth and ambition of modern artists. Unlike other avant-gardes in Japan, this movement did not model itself on the Western avant-garde but drew from its basic precept, namely the inversion of the scale of values. From the West, it took not the fruits but the tree which produces them, in order to transplant it into Japanese soil. It would be all too easy to call this a 'traditionalist' movement directly descended from William Morris, but it should instead be recognized that this traditionalist stance was itself part of the lessons learned by Japan from the West. The rehabilitation of Japan's cultural heritage required the help of a foreign eye. One

should not lose the sight of the fact, moreover, that in Europe as well, medievalism and primitivism laid the groundwork for the avant-garde. We have come this far only to have returned to our starting point: in the Third World, fidelity to the avant-garde spirit equals infidelity to the avant-garde on the plastic level.

The second example is what is termed 'creative engraving' (*Sôsakû hanga*). If the *Mingei* tried to regenerate tradition with the help of Western ideology, in *Sôsakû hanga* it was through negating both Western and Eastern tradition that it claimed its *droit de cité* as an avant-garde art form. A double negation, this, for it was called upon both to denounce the lowly position of engraving within the Western fine arts hierarchy and to set itself against the Japanese *ukiyo-e* print tradition.

Yet it was not in Japan but in China that this massive means of communication regained its 'popular' character, helping to sensitize the Chinese people in search of emancipation under the Communist flag. Is not Art in the service of Revolution also, at the same time, the revolution of a lesser art into the avant-garde? If this were so, wouldn't this constitute a paralogism?

Intimately related to engraving, Japan's graphic arts, for their part, went beyond the parameters of the avant-garde through their commercial successes during the 1970s. The avant-gardes of the '60s, mobilized en masse at the 1970 World Fair in Osaka, were fated from then onwards to be caught up in the wheels of the commercial market, under the aegis of publicity patronage. With this commercialization of talent, one realizes in retrospect that the avant-garde period was the final vestige of a romantic myth which still believed in the possibility of an elect individual's immediate communication with the entire universe. Disabused of this myth, graphic designers or video artists can no longer count themselves among the avant-garde.

Thirdly, a glance at architecture confirms in another way the end of the avant-garde. Scarcely had Japanese architects become a massive presence on the international scene, which by then

the term avant-garde fell into decline. The end of a half-century of catching up on 'cultural backwardness' by Japanese avant-gardists coincided oddly with the disappearance of the object to which they had aspired. Coincidence or historical destiny? What is certain is that, once having attained fame, the emblematic figures of Japanese architecture in so doing crossed over the avant-garde's very threshold. Once again, the avant-garde and Japanese nationality profess their mutual incompatibility. Incidentally, it is not by accident that the advent of 'postmodern' architecture sparked debate in Japan of a supposed return to premodern culture of the Edo period. Does our leaving behind the avant-garde usher in a return to the premodern past.

BEYOND THE AVANT-GARDE, OR THE DANGER OF CONSERVATIVE REGRESSION

At this point, we risk losing sight of the avant-garde's *raison d'être*: if, from now on, the West demands very 'Japanese-looking' work of Japanese artists, why would the latter not play the role of the model Japanese? Leaving behind the avant-garde, we are now concerned with presenting Japan itself to a foreign audience. Is this an inverted nationalistic conversion, in the service of foreigners? Since the 1970s, many Japanese artists have chosen this option. But rather than counterbalancing the contradictions of the avant-garde just analyzed, this new effort runs the risk of duplicating them. For ethno-aesthetic nationalism is nothing other than the negative of avant-gardist imperialism. This new nationalism is, in reality, an act of cultural betrayal; identical to a new orientalism staged this time by ourselves as Orientals.

Let us remember that 19th century European Orientalism was a form "*d'appropriation par l'Occident qui, pour posséder l'Orient, le réduisit à ses propres catégories, à son propre code, à son 'Universalisme'*" (Laude 1975-76, 99).² Does not the same danger threaten us in an inverted form, boasting the grand title of "rehabilitation of 'ethnic' values?" One must first

ask the question: what of Japan can be presented to a foreign audience? Paradoxically, representative Japan is not deserving of representation, leaving only the exceptional as representable, either in the form of ancient cultures or in its more peculiar aspects. Japanese who are internationally representable therefore conceal the 'true' Japanese. So long as they live in Japan, the Japanese need never question their identity. The issue surfaces only in relation to foreigners who are, in effect, non-existent in Japan (or so claims Japanese collective consciousness). What requires no explanation on the national level suddenly becomes problematic once a foreign gaze is focused on it. How, then, is one to represent to a gaze exterior to the culture that which has not been represented within the culture? Responding to questions that go unasked in Japan is in itself an experience of displacement; applying logic to that which happens without needing a specific logic is in itself a type of detachment and uprooting. Ultimately, these kinds of explanations cannot be formalized without a feeling of betrayal. Fidelity and infidelity intermingle within them; it is the intellectual effort at exact communication which constitutes an instance of cultural infidelity. Communication cannot take place without this symbolic wound: is not this sanction, to which activity of interpretation must submit, indicative of the *grandeur* and *misère* inherent in our diplomatic mission?

Ethnology reminds us that a good native informant is by definition suspect, because easily transmitted information is already a rationalized interpretation designed specifically for its recipient, i.e., the ethnologist. For this reason, any good informant is a cultural exile.

AN UNMAINTAINABLE MISSION OF TOLERANCE: BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

No effort at presenting Japan to a foreign audience can be realized without this kind of trauma. Uprooted from the Japanese cultural soil, the position of informants far removed

from Japan confers upon them, whether they like it or not, the role of representatives. Theirs is a mission placed under the sign of negation, since they will only accomplish it insofar as they are detached from what they seek to represent. Only through suffering the stigma of transgression can we reach the goal we have set ourselves.

Yet this wound alone constitutes the cause and effect of Japan's power to fascinate as a (fictive) site of unknowability. We are incapable of crossing this threshold of intelligibility, this epistemological border. What we can communicate and transmit is limited to truth wounded by symbolic violence. But does not the intellectual task before us consist, rather, in constantly representing this wound, instead of arrogantly claiming to be Truth's keepers?

I should no doubt bring this to a close. In doing so, I venture to remind you of an old aporia. Its subject is tolerance. Can tolerance be tolerant towards intolerance? Our intellectual goal will ultimately consist in bearing up resolutely under this intolerable condition, even if we should fall victim to it.

Notes

- 1 The word *kataru* signifies in Japanese 'to talk,' 'to converse' and also 'to tell a lie'.
- 2 Jean Laude, *Peinture pure et/ou avant-garde: les Orientalismes 1860-1960*. Diss. Université de Paris I, 1975-1976.

The original French text was read in the Actes du Colloque "Connaissance et réciprocité," 25-27 May 1987, and first published in *Transcultura, Connaissance et réciprocité* (Louvain: Presses universitaires de Louvain, 1988), pp. 197-207. The English translation was first published in *Comparative and General Literature* 41 (1993): 67-75. Translated by Margaret J. Flynn

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