

Reprinted from

ICLA'91  
TOKYO

THE FORCE  
OF VISION 6

# Inter-Asian Comparative Literature

Volume Editors

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Proceedings of the XIIIth Congress  
of the International Comparative Literature Association

Actes du XIIIème Congrès  
de l'Association Internationale de Littérature Comparée

## Some Questions on Postmodernity

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*À la mémoire de Hitoshi Igarashi (1947-1991)*

The following is an impromptu commentary made in the workshop on Postmodernity. I pointed out three topics, namely terminology, representability, and responsibility of (and in) Postmodernity. The text makes no pretense of being a "full paper."

### 1. Postmodernity vs. Postmodernism

It is a frustrating task to speak of the subject which refuses to be "subject." Postmodernity is one such issue because it rejects the notion of subject. I am not going to say that Postmodernity means the death of the modern subject; I am simply saying that treating Postmodernity as a subject matter amounts to bringing the issue back into the context of Modernity. By positing Postmodernity as the opposite of Modernity, we are already back to the logic of Modernism (i.e. modernist consciousness), which consists of refusing continuity. The refusal of continuity leads up to the continuity of refusals, or the subversion of tradition which amounts to the tradition of subversions. That is why it is irrelevant to treat Postmodernity as the next phase to Modernity. So long as we judge Modernity as outmoded, we are in the modernist logic of refusal, and Postmodernism as a style or a consciousness is just one of the products of such judgement. Viewed as something which comes after Modernism, Postmodernism becomes the eternal prisoner of Modernism through its very claim to have got rid of it. And it is through this illusion that Postmodernism believes itself to have cast off the yoke of Modernism. Therefore, failing to recognize its fatal imprisonment within the context of Modernism, Postmodernism cherishes the fallacy that it is the exemplary representative of Postmodernity. And this

circular reasoning makes it clear—by its circularity—that Postmodernism does not belong to Postmodernity, as far as our definition is concerned.

Such absurd "brainstorming," though frequently practiced as a preliminary to the distinguishing of Postmodernity from Modernity, is no longer "relevant" or "up to date" because the catchword "Postmodern" or "Postmodernism" has undergone such a linguistic inflation in the last ten years that it has become "meaningless." Paradoxically, this *perte de sens* permits Postmodernism to be seen as a typically postmodern phenomenon. On the other hand, the desperate effort to distinguish logically what is modern from what is postmodern is considered a typically modern concern. Consequently, a framework for the discussion of Postmodernity is inevitably caught up in a "Frame problem." In this paradox lies a postmodern duplicity.

The distinction between Postmodernity and Postmodernism is my starting point. This viewpoint seems already divergent from what was proposed by Dr. Fokkema this morning, as well as from what is maintained in Fredric Jameson's monumental work, *Postmodernism*, recently published.<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I am saying nothing original, but trying to sum up the sophisticated arguments already developed by Shigehiko Hasumi five years ago.<sup>2</sup> His book entitled "Would you mind my speaking of mediocrity?" argues that Jameson's approach to Postmodernism is not postmodern at all, because Jameson treats Postmodernism as a subject matter whereas Jameson himself declares the subject (matter) to be dead in Postmodernism.

Hasumi's logic is much more complicated. He begins with a Flaubertian thesis, "La bêtise consiste à vouloir conclure": imbecility is based on the sense that one cannot help having the last word, making conclusions. Then, says Hasumi, by refraining from conclusions, one can be more intelligent than those who are so imbecile as to make conclusions. But this reasoning is illusory because the decision not to conclude is in itself a conclusion. Therefore, those who naively believe in the superiority conferred by not concluding are by no means wiser than those who attempt to draw conclusions. Such a naive belief in relative superiority is labelled "mediocrity" by Hasumi, who calls it a characteristic of Modernity. Hasumi opposes to this approach the conviction that one cannot help being imbecile because it is imbecile to conclude that those who do not conclude are no less imbecile than those who do. Therefore, if one does not want to be mediocre one should be consciously imbecile.

Such an imbecile conviction, which denies one any possibility of not being imbecile, whether one concludes or not, is the cruel conclusion of Postmodernity. Hasumi seems to say that whether one concludes or not, Jameson remains in the sphere of relative superiority, i.e. mediocrity, while Hasumi himself is satisfied "for a while" with being as mediocre as he is consciously imbecile because he would betray Postmodernity if he decided to have the last word about it.

In my opinion, Hasumi and Jameson do not stand in contradiction to each other, so long as we apply the distinction we introduced at the beginning between Postmodernism and Postmodernity. Confusion comes from the fact that Jameson's remark on Postmodernism was taken by Hasumi to be a commentary on Postmodernity. Hasumi is frustrated by the fact that Jameson does not seem to be frustrated in discussing Postmodernism. Instead of talking about Postmodernity, Jameson takes refuge in the secondary problem of Postmodernism, which, for Hasumi, is nothing but a disguised Modernism, a decoy which prevents Jameson from looking at Postmodernity. Hasumi also seems to be frustrated by Jameson's optimism concerning the loss of historicity in Postmodernism. Why, he wonders, can Jameson recognize Postmodernism as a historical concept if as Jameson says, historicity is lost in Postmodernism?

Such a discrepancy in Jameson's argument between the "observing apparatus" and the "objects observed" testifies either to his resistance to the "auto-intoxication" of critical discourses or to his fear of losing his "distinction" (Pierre Bourdieu's term) vis-à-vis his object. What Hasumi seems to propose instead is a kind of pervasive (an adjective too modernist to be used here), "homeopathic" involvement (a strategy examined by Jameson himself without his own homeopathic involvement) in the abolition of the distance in question between the observer and the observed.

## 2. Modernism vs. Avant-garde

So far, my point is not to identify the confusion which remains unresolved in our discussion on Postmodernity, but simply to establish a kind of Lyotardian "*différend*" between Jameson and Hasumi. A similar confusion seems to exist between Modernity and Avant-garde in non-European cultures. My second point is to clarify the status of this contradiction as a problem of representability in a cross-cultural situation. It is a well-known fact that Fauvism and Cubism were inspired by

the art of Black Africa or Oceanic "aboriginal" art. Reference to these exotic sources entitled European artists to claim membership in the avant-garde, but it is evident that an African or Oceanic who refers to the same "indigenous" sources cannot be appreciated as an avant-gardist but is simply classified as traditionalist. What is linked to Modernism in European contexts happens to be regarded as anti-modernist in its original non-European context. Here lies a distortion inherent in Primitivism.<sup>3</sup>

The same dilemma can be observed in modern Asian art history. In the process of the modernization of Japanese painting in the second half of the 19th century, which Norman Bryson treated yesterday,<sup>4</sup> the main Japanese interest resided in the introduction and the implantation of European academic techniques such as linear perspective, *chiaroscuro* and modelling in oil painting. But it was precisely these academic techniques that were being rejected by the contemporary European avant-gardist movements, from Impressionism onward. One of the reasons why traditional Japanese art was enthusiastically appreciated as "Japonisme" in Europe in the second half of the 19th century was simply that traditional Japanese art and painting were free from these European academic regulations<sup>5</sup>.

From these "crosspurposes" comes a (triple) paradox. First, the modernization of Japanese painting in the second half of the 19th century was in total opposition to the tendencies of the European avant-garde. In European countries Modernity was synonymous with avant-garde, but in non-European countries Modernity was the antonym to avant-garde. Secondly, to join with the European avant-garde, at least in this context, leads to a return to the Japanese tradition which Japanese painters had been trying to abandon<sup>6</sup>. What had been regarded as obstacles to modernization eventually revealed themselves as "tacit accomplices" to the European avant-garde.

Thirdly, a synthesis of Oriental tradition and European avant-garde can be accomplished only through treachery: if one is faithful to the spirit of the European avant-garde, one must reject one's own tradition, but in Japan it was the rejected Japanese tradition that guaranteed the formal affinities with the European avant-garde. Fidelity to the European avant-garde in "spirit" is thus antithetical to fidelity in "form." Because of this double bind, the tentative implantation of European academic oil painting in Japan was abandoned at the beginning of the 20th century. Consequently, from the beginning the Japanese modern-

ist movement was deprived of any native authenticity because they could not provide an answer to the question of what they had to reject in order to be emancipated.<sup>7</sup>

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The next problem to be examined is the possibility of an avant-garde in the third world. As Henri Lopes made it clear yesterday,<sup>8</sup> if one tries to present avant-gardist art work of the third world in Europe, the result tends to be a tragicomical distortion. The discrepancy between "the observer" and "the observed" appears typically in this context. In this sense the Pompidou Center's 1987 exhibition, *Le Japon des avant-gardes*, was especially revealing.<sup>9</sup>

The fundamental irony is as follows: On the one hand, all the works that are from a European point of view identifiable, through their formal similarity to European works of art, as avant-garde are, by definition, European epigones, pastiches, indistinguishable from the European "arrière-garde." On the other hand, all those works which find no antecedents or disciples in the European context are excluded from consideration as members of the category of avant-garde. This primary condition for European critical appreciation of non-European arts reflects a self-censorship which serves at once to justify and to mystify European criteria. The conveyance implicit in this double operation has fostered several blindspots. Here let us point out three of them.

First, all the innovations in the field of traditional Japanese painting (*Nihonga*) were simply put aside as something which had nothing to do with avant-garde. One contemporary Japanese art critique went so far as to declare that this genre of painting called "*Nihonga*" could not be translated into European languages except by using such contradictory terms as "traditional style modern Japanese painting." In other words, *Nihonga* is by definition outside the context of avant-garde.<sup>10</sup>

Secondly, all "artistic" movements not regarded as Fine Arts in Europe were also ignored, or simply did not enter into the field of possible investigation. Calligraphy, ceramics, flower arrangement, etc. (which constitute, with paintings and sculpture, the category of "ars" in the traditional Japanese taxonomy) are among the omissions. Curiously enough, only those "ex-artisans" who had previously "taken off," so to speak, i.e. those who had had their names inscribed in the list of "avant-garde artists" in Europe, such as Yone Noguchi, Yagi Kazuo, Teshigahara Sôfû, Morita Shiryû, or Inoue Yûichi were "admitted" to

the exhibition because they "represented" "emancipated artists." But those who (like Serizawa Keisuke, Hamada Shôji or Munakata Shikô of the group Mingei) were so faithful to the spirit of European avant-garde as to practice a kind of Medievalism or Primitivism in referring to their own Asian roots were systematically rejected, for the reason of "*nécessaire rigueur dans la sélection*" with no further explicit criteria.<sup>11</sup>

The third "omission" is a methodological one: at first one chooses works similar to those of the European avant-garde, then one tries to find in these European imitations some original Japanese characteristics. This procedure is a curious "reversal" because through it one tries to determine, retroactively, the aesthetic uniqueness of Japan by examining a corpus established by the elimination of precisely the specifically Japanese features in question. Interesting examples were singled out in advance from the corpus to be established for that purpose. The result of this approach is curiously reminiscent of the historical fact that the dream of Japanese avant-gardists in the first half of the 20th century consisted of an unconditional identification with the European avant-garde, at the price of their own originality.<sup>12</sup>

### 3. Intellectual Responsibility in the Postmodern Era

It is *lieu-commun* to say that such cognitive difficulties as we observed in the case of the exhibition *Le Japon des avant-gardes* were overcome with the coming of the Postmodern era. But it is still an open question whether these blindspots in the representation of the "Other" have actually been eliminated by what Fredric Jameson yesterday called "internationalization of national situations." Perhaps the term "avant-garde" has simply been replaced by "Postmodernism," with the effect of automatically concealing the question of representability itself. By putting all local artistic particularities together under the rubric of "Postmodernism" or "trans-avant-gardism," we certainly arrive at a global perspective; but the superstructure provided by such a perspective is equally as delusive as the naive belief that one can grasp a pluralistic situation simply by calling it "plurality." This literary subterfuge implies the loss of any privileged perspective, as Eva Kushner remarkably demonstrated in her key-note lecture at the Munich Congress three years ago, but we forget what the loss really means.<sup>13</sup>

The heterogeneity of the Other, if reduced to the word "otherness" (*altérité*), is easily treated in a homogeneous linguistic space. By the same token, the word "plurality" makes us forget what plurality is

about. "Incommensurability" is commensurable with other words, but this does not make incommensurable worlds commensurable. It was this gap between words and worlds which was revealed by the Salman Rushdie affair, for example. In this gap resides the intellectual responsibility that comparatists can (or cannot) assume in the Postmodern era. The assassination last July of Igarashi Hitoshi, a young Japanese comparatist, deserves to be analysed here.

As the victim was the translator into Japanese of *The Satanic Verses* of Salman Rushdie, the killing was immediately connected with the novel and was welcomed by some Moslem authorities in Japan as well as by several Teheran sources, while the Western press strongly criticized such "a criminal attack on human liberty of expression." But between these two antagonistic interpretations a question remains unanswered: why did Igarashi undertake the translation of such a controversial work?

A leading Islamic scholar in Japan, and special advisor for Middle Eastern affairs to the Kaifu government, the late Professor Igarashi was, first of all, a philologist competent in more than ten languages, including Arabic and Persian. In the context of Igarashi's diverse academic achievements, including work in Greek and medieval philosophy, mathematics, medicine, as well as Oriental music, the translation in question was a rather minor endeavor. I share with many of our colleagues' regret concerning the "premature" loss of such an exceptional intellect, whether the loss is directly connected with the novel or not. His previous books, especially his study of Ibn Sina, suggest that Igarashi had long been prepared to devote his life to the Islamic Cause.<sup>14</sup> He deliberately and respectfully "imitated" the radical heritage of Islamic philosophers. He believed in Islamic wisdom in the same sense that Simone Weil believed in Catholicism, and this somewhat "dissident" standpoint toward Islam would explain Igarashi's "eccentric concern" for the Islamic fundamentalist movement.

Some Japanese colleagues criticized Igarashi's lack of prudence, as well as his "arrogant" way of intruding into Islamic affairs. Nevertheless, convinced of his vocation as mediator, Igarashi did not hesitate to confront danger and criticism if his conscience as a scholar impelled him to do so. Instead of retreating from the burning issue he rather hoped "to be burnt up in the Islamic pathos," which he tried logically to discern. This "pathological" (Igarashi's own expression) engagement provoked hatred as well as admiration, and finally seems to have

made him a martyr. It is also undeniable that Igarashi had expressed sympathy for historical figures doomed for their principles. Evidently he would not have regretted it if the same fate eventually, for whatever reasons, befell him.

But it is not my intention to make of Igarashi a tragic hero. Rather it must be pointed out that, beyond the incommensurability of the responses of the Teheran and European presses, Igarashi fulfilled his ambition to be a "particular point in the geometrical locus of Islamic intellectual history," as he used to put it. Whether we agree with him or not in his critical assessments of the Rushdie affair,<sup>15</sup> the fact remains that he would not abrogate what he regarded as his intellectual responsibility.

Trying to become a bridge between the Islamic and the non-Islamic world by setting up a reconciliation between an exiled writer and the Islamic sensibility is in itself a suicidal commitment, insofar as it means a reconciliation of irreconcilables. It is true that tolerance is forceless if confronted by intolerance. But Igarashi believed in the "negative capability" of tolerance. The irony was that his tolerance was intolerable to those whom he wanted to tolerate. Igarashi's death demonstrates the impossible position of an intellectual in today's postmodern pluralistic world.<sup>16</sup>

## NOTES

1. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism* (Duke UP, 1991).
2. Hasumi Shigehiko, *Bonyō-sa ni tsuite o-hanashi sasete itadakimasu*, 『凡庸さについてお話しさせていただきます』 [Would You Mind my Speaking of Mediocrity?] (Tokyo: Chūōkōronsha, 1986) pp. 244-48. The author is referring to an article by Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," *The Anti-aesthetics*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend: Bay P, 1983) Chapter 7. Of Hasumi Shigehiko, see also *Monogatari-hihan-josetsu*, 『物語批判序説』 (*Preamble to the Critique of Narrative*) (Tokyo: Chūōkōronsha, 1985).
3. See William Rubin et al., *Primitivism* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1988). See also the exhibition catalogue, *Magiciens de la terre* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1990), and the controversies it aroused.
4. Norman Bryson, "Cultural Translation and Incommensurable Worlds" (ICLA '91). See also the standard introduction by Thomas Rimer in the exhibition catalogue, *Paris in Japan* (St Louis: Washington U, 1987).

5. Cf. Shigemi Inaga "La transformation de la perspective linéaire au Japon (1760-1830) et son retour en France (1860-1910)," *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, Nr. 49 (1983): 29-49.
6. The introduction of Nabism and the adoption of Fauvism in Japan can be reexamined from this standpoint. See my articles, "L'Invisible avant-garde du Japon," *Ecrit-voir* 10 (1988): 38-54 (to be translated in Chinese); and "Trois propositions sur la notion de 'décoratif'", report presented at the symposium on *Signes d'Orient signes d'Occident*, organized by UNESCO, Florence, 1990.
7. For discussion of further ambiguities in the process of modernization, see my paper, "Esthétique de rencontre," *Word and Image* 4.1 (1988): pp. 139-147.
8. See also my paper, "Impossible Avant-garde au Japon," *Connaissance et réciprocité*, (Louvain-La-Neuve: ed. Ciaco, 1988), pp. 197-207; also translated into Chinese as "理解异质文化的可能性与局限性," in 『獅在华夏—文化双向认人识况的策略问题』王宾 Alain le Pichon (編) 広州: 中山大学出版社, 1993. 99-110.
9. Exhibition catalogue, *Le Japon des Avant-gardes* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1988). The show did not travel to Japan.
10. Chiba Shigeo, *Sengo Nihon Bijutsu Itsudatsu-shi*, 『戦後日本美術逸脱史』 (*History of Après-guerre Japanese Art as Deviation*) (Tokyo: Shōbunsha, 1988).
11. Recent exhibitions such as *High and Low, Modern Art and Popular Culture* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1991), and *Art et la publicité* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1991) can be recognized as the outcome of this problematic.
12. On the problem of Modernism in Japan, refer to Toshiko Kishida's discussion in the Postmodernity Workshop, ICLA '91.
13. Eva Kushner, "Perspectives sur l'histoire littéraire," lecture delivered at the Munich ICLA Congress, 1988.
14. Igarashi Hitoshi, *Tōhō no I to Chi—Ibun Sīna Kenkyū* 『東方の医と知——イブン・シーナー研究』 [*Oriental Medicine and Sagesse: A Study in Ibun Sīnā*] (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1989); *Chi no rensa* 『知の連鎖——イスラーム・ギリシアの饗宴』 [*Chain of Knowledge—Islam-Greek Symposia*] (Tokyo: Keisōshobō, 1983); *Isurāmu Runessansu* 『イスラーム・ルネッサンス』 [*Islamic Renaissance*] (Tokyo: Keisōshobō, 1986); *Isurāmu Radicarizumu* 『イスラーム・ラディカリズム』 [*Islamic Radicalism*] (Tokyo: Hōzōkan, 1990), etc..
15. See *Eureka*, Nov. 1989 special issue on the Rushdie affair (in Japanese).
16. Cf. see my paper "Negative Capability of Tolerance: The Assassination of Hitoshi Igarashi," to be published in the proceedings: *Cross Cultural Communication and International Understanding*, The University of Chicago, 12-17 Sep. 1992.