

## Article

# The Sought For Butoh Body: Tatsumi Hijikata's Cultural Rejection and Creation

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### Abstract

This paper studies the influence of both Japanese and Western cultures on Hijikata Tatsumi's butoh dance in order to problematize the relevance of butoh outside of the cultural context in which it originated. While it is obvious that cultural fusion has been taking place in the most recent developments of butoh dance, this paper attempts to show that the seeds of this cultural fusion were already present in the early days of Hijikata's work, and that butoh dance embodies his ambivalence toward the West. Moreover this paper furthers the idea of a universal language of butoh true to Hijikata's search for a body from the "world which cannot be expressed in words"<sup>1</sup> but only danced.

The research revolves around three major subjects. First, the shaping power European underground literature and German expressionist dance had on Hijikata and how these influences remained present in all his work throughout his entire career. Secondly, it analyzes the transactions around the Japanese body and Japanese identity that take place in the work of Hijikata in order to see how Western culture might have acted as much as a resistance as an inspiration in the creation of butoh. Third, it examines the unique aspects of Hijikata's dance, in an attempt to show that he was not only a product of his time but also aware of the shaping power of history and actively fighting against it in his quest for a body standing beyond cultural fusion or history.

In the final speculative chapter, the paper argues for the universal language of butoh also being a dance beyond mere expression, form and meditation. Trying to show that to Hijikata, in his search, it never was the danced vessel for artistic catharsis but the body in dance and the danced body that is genuinely human and beyond expression – the primal body.

## I. Introduction to the Topic

Butoh dance, founded at the end of the 1950s by Hijikata Tatsumi (1928-1986, born Yoneyama Kunio), is one of the most influential forces in the contemporary performance scene. Whereas Noh is seldom shown abroad, recent years have seen an increase in the number of butoh performances taking place outside of Japan, and the multiplication of butoh dance festivals organized abroad.

Furthermore, many Western contemporary dancers and companies claim to have been influenced by butoh. In fact, butoh dance appears to be more popular abroad than in Japan at the present time.

Fraleigh (1999) deems butoh as perhaps “the most intercultural postmodern art we have (if the labels postmodern and Butoh have not become too limiting)” (p. 8). However, by stating that “butoh has branched out from its beginnings to become international” (Fraleigh, 1999, p. 8), she implies that butoh was not intercultural in its roots. Regarding the trajectory of butoh, Fraleigh and Nakamura (2006) stated that “the butoh aesthetic loops historically from Japan to the West, and goes back to Japan” (p. 13). While this is an extremely interesting point to explore, it is possible to argue that Hijikata’s focus on the Japanese body, which can be seen in his work from 1968, was incidental rather than a conscious “search for the Japanese identity” (Fraleigh & Nakamura, 2006, p. 13). The multiple shifts of focus in Hijikata’s dance, from a body inspired by the European avant-garde in the early years to the weakened body in his late works, can be interpreted in that direction.

While the idea of a “traditional” Japanese butoh, represented by Hijikata as opposed to a Western butoh, is prevalent in the contemporary discourse around butoh, the main opposition for Hijikata seems to have been that of the tamed body, under the influence of society, and the natural body, freed from social conventions, rather than that of the Japanese body as opposed to the Western body. Representative of the new discourse on butoh is Endo’s (n.d.) statement that “Like Kazuo Ohno says: “everybody can dance Butoh” but maybe not the Japanese butoh. Everybody can find his/her own movements in the sense of butoh” (para. 1).

In my paper, I study the influence of both Japanese and Western cultures on Hijikata’s butoh dance in order to problematize the relevance of butoh outside of the cultural context in which it originated. While it is obvious that cultural fusion has been taking place in the most recent developments of butoh dance, I would like to show that the seeds of this cultural fusion were already present in the early days of Hijikata’s work, and that butoh dance embodies his ambivalence toward the West. Finally, I would like to further the idea of a universal language of butoh true to Hijikata’s search of a body from the “world which cannot be expressed in words”<sup>1</sup> but only danced.

For the purpose of this investigation, I conduct research around three major subjects. First, the shaping power European underground literature and German expressionist dance had on Hijikata and how these influences remained present in all his work throughout his entire career.

I examine the dichotomy in the image of the West in Hijikata's work and how the Western influences he incorporated in his work were rather European than American, and underground rather than mainstream. Second, I analyze the transactions around the Japanese body and Japanese identity that take place in the work of Hijikata, to see how Western culture might have acted as much as a resistance force as an inspiration in the creation of butoh. Third, I examine the unique aspects of Hijikata's dance, in an attempt to show that he was not only a product of his time but also aware of the shaping power of history and actively fighting against it in his quest for a body standing beyond cultural fusion or history. Beyond history and culture, I aspire to explore the "inexpressible" element I believe to be central to Hijikata's butoh, and which drove me to butoh.

In my final speculative thesis, I wish to argue for butoh also being a dance beyond mere expression, form and meditation. To show that for Hijikata, in his search, it never was the danced vessel for artistic catharsis but the body in dance and the danced body that is genuinely human and beyond expression – the primal body.

## II. Butoh before Butoh: Hijikata's early encounters with Western culture

While there is a general consensus amongst scholars that *ankoku butoh* (dance of the darkness, referred to as butoh in English), originated with the performance *Kinjiki* (Forbidden Colors) in 1959, the precise moment when butoh acquired its unique characteristics appears as almost impossible to determine. Sas (1999) states that Hijikata declared that butoh had been created in 1956 and that *Kinjiki* was the first butoh performance. However, since Hijikata started his career as a modern dancer, and was involved with the Japanese avant-garde movement, it is possible to infer that in the early stages, his work might have been indistinguishable from modern dance or the experiments of the Japanese avant-garde.

In the program note for the *Kinjiki*, Hijikata described himself in the following terms: "I studied under Ando Mitsuko, consider Ohno Kazuo a brother, and adore Saint Genet" (as cited in Fraleigh & Nakamura, 2006, p. 8). This sentence is interesting because it problematizes the extent to which Hijikata was influenced by diverse movements.

Ando Mitsuko, a modern dancer, is described by MaGee (2010) as avant-garde choreographer. According to Kurihara (2000a), Hijikata started studying modern dance under Masumura Katsuko at the age of 18 in his native Akita. He later became a disciple of Ando Mitsuko in Tokyo. The dance taught by Masumura and Ando was *Ausdruckstanz*, German expressionist dance. Ando and Masumura were in the lineage of Ishii Baku (1886-1962) and Eguchi Tayaka (1900-1977), pioneers of Japanese modern dance. Ishii studied Eurhythmics under Dalcroze and both Ishii and Eguchi studied under Mary Wigman. Viala and Masson-Sekine (1988) contend that the work of Ishii, on what he called "Creative Dance" which attempted to "create new forms, to reveal new concepts, which would allow him to freely express the spirit of his time", set an atmosphere conducive to

experimentation for younger dancers such as Ohno and Hijikata (p. 16). For Viala and Masson-Sekine (1988), “the first butoh dancers attempted to develop Ishii’s theory (p. 16). It shows the extent to which modern dance can be seen as having influenced butoh. Hence, while later in his career Hijikata strongly rejected modern dance, stating that if no training in other forms of dance was necessary to dance butoh, “classical ballet [was] certainly better than what’s called modern dance” (as cited in Shibusawa, 2000, p. 49), it nevertheless can be said to have had a strong influence at the beginning of his career. According to Shiba (2006) Ishii “had the resolution to get rid of the opera-like plays and to pursue “the genuine dance”” (p. 118), which is not without a resemblance to Hijikata’s search for the primal body.

Yet, it is important to also remember that if butoh was linked to Japanese modern dance, *Kinjiki* nevertheless caused Hijikata to be expelled from the Japanese Dance Association (Fraleigh & Nakamura, 2006).

Kazuo Ohno, considered as the co-founder of butoh dance along with Hijikata, was a figure of Japanese modern dance. According to Kurihara (2000a), Hijikata was strongly impressed by a performance of Ohno he saw in Tokyo in 1949. According to Fraleigh (2010), Ohno and Hijikata came to frequent each other through Ando sometime between 1952 and 1954. While both Hijikata and Ohno are regarded as the founders of butoh, Hijikata and Ohno had very different backgrounds and ways of dancing. Fraleigh and Nakamura (2006) recall an interesting anecdote: when Hijikata once asked Yoshito Ohno how he looked upon his father’s dance, Yoshito would state without hesitation that it was modern dance. Hijikata would completely consent and then add further that there is no need for Ohno’s dance to be butoh, that “Ohno Kazuo has to be lively forever”, and that his dance neither is Japanese aging beauty or wabi sabi but “has to be *modaan*” (p. 36).

Nevertheless, whether or not Ohno’s dance should be regarded as butoh, he was a source of inspiration for Hijikata.

Hijikata’s adoration for “Saint Genet” (as cited in Fraleigh & Nakamura, 2006, p. 8) is representative of the influence of French avant-garde literature, and by extension, the influence of the European-inspired Japanese avant-garde on Hijikata. “Saint Genet” refers to the French writer Jean Genet, who had a shaping influence on Hijikata. Fraleigh (2010) points out that Hijikata used “Hijikata Genet” as a pseudonym and drew inspiration from the writer for the piece *Diviinu sho* (Divinariane) he choreographed for Ohno in 1960 (p.22).

Apart from Genet, Hijikata seems to have been an avid reader of French avant-garde/underground literature as, for example, the work of Sade, Bataille or Lautréamont, writers who appear as quite popular amongst the Japanese avant-garde artists of his time.

Notably, butoh also drew inspiration from other arts. Hijikata’s butoh scores show he was inspired by the work of artists such as Bellmer and Bacon. Hans Bellmer (1902-1975), a major influence in Hijikata’s work, was sharing the same idea of the fragmentation of the body and surrealism of the flesh.

The Japanese avant-garde movement was another source for Hijikata. In its beginning, butoh was strongly linked to the avant-garde and it is important to understand the early stages in that context. According to MaGee (2010), Hijikata drew inspiration from the work of other artists like, for example, the Neo-Dadaist groups *Gutai* (Jiro Yoshihara and Shozo Shimamoto) and *Hi Red Center* (Genpei Akasegawa, Natsuyuki Nakanishi, and Jiro Takamatsu). *Gutai* invented happenings to “highlight the beauty of destruction and decay” while *Hi Red Center* was known to “pioneer guerrilla style street theatre performances throughout Tokyo” (para. 13). Hijikata felt attracted to their activist approach and the perspective for *ankoku* butoh to become “a total theatrical experience”, subverting the experience of passive onlooking by bringing the dance into the streets (MaGee, 2010). In those early days of butoh, Hijikata did some street performances too and performed his butoh also during the 1968 student riots in Tokyo (Kurihara, 2000a).

Hijikata's linkage to the avant-garde can also be seen in his long-term collaboration with the artist Natsuyuki Nakanishi, who painted Hijikata's back for the 1967 performance *Metemotionalphysics* and helped with the staging of *Hijikata Tatsumi to Nihonjin: Nikutai no Hanran* (Hijikata Tatsumi and the Japanese: Rebellion of the Flesh). According to Chong (2012), Nakanishi and Hijikata mutually inspired each other. As art-director of several Hijikata performances, his “anti-paintings” are said to be “paralleling Hijikata's *Ankoku* Butoh, which likewise defied the conventions of medium” (p. 78).



Figure 1 Hosoe, E.. (Photographer). (1968). *Kamaitachi #5* [digital image]. Retrieved from <http://www.ibashogallery.com/artist/eikoh-hosoe>

For *Kinjiki*, Hijikata also drew inspiration from the work of Mishima Yukio, whom he later came to develop a friendship with.

Regarding all these influences on Hijikata's work, they can be understood in line with his writings on Takiguchi Shuzō, the main figure of the Japanese Surrealist movement on which he wrote:

It's not that I usually live my life thinking about Takiguchi Shuzō. He is, rather, like air; up until now, there was no need to consider what meaning he might have. On the contrary, by not searching for meaning one is more likely to discover, as if by accident, what one is searching for – this is the manner [*ambai*] in which I have breathed Takiguchi Shuzō. (as cited in Sas, 1999, p. 162)

Sas (1999) states that while Hijikata “takes this air for granted”, he also implies that without it “it would not have been possible to become what he is, to do what he has done” (p. 162).

To some extent, the same can be said of many of the things that inspired Hijikata: they

were embedded in the zeitgeist. And yet, they laid the basis for Hijikata to create butoh. This is not to agree with Baird (2012), who said that Hijikata was a mere “product of his times” (p. 16) and butoh “part of a collective response to the information age and Japan’s era of high-growth economics” (p. 17). Butoh was highly personal to Hijikata. His search for a genuine butoh body was in constant conflict with all types of cultural influences, also with the inspiration received. In the next three chapters, I further explore this momentum in the context of a critical discussion on cultural fusion.

### **III. The Other West: the West dichotomy in Japanese avant-garde and in Hijikata’s work**

While there are numerous references to Western art and culture in Hijikata’s work, a closer examination allows the extraction of patterns regarding their selection. The references to Western culture in Hijikata’s work appear as specifically European as opposed to broadly Western, and to belong to underground culture rather than mainstream culture.

Hence, it is possible to speculate that the choice to find inspiration in European culture was an attempt to resist the pervasiveness of American culture in Japan at the time.

Hijikata’s work has often been regarded as strongly inspired by the West in its early years, before shifting to an exploration of Japanese identity with the performance *Hijikata Tatsumi to nihonjin: Nikutai no hanran* (Hijikata Tatsumi and the Japanese: Revolt of the Body) in 1968. While this is at least partly true, it appears as too much of a simplification. Indeed, references to European culture remain present in Hijikata’s butoh scores throughout his whole career. Furthermore, the attitude toward the West in Hijikata’s work is from the beginning dualistic: incorporation of European underground culture and rejection of mainstream American culture. While it should be noted that this dichotomous attitude toward the West is not unique to the work of Hijikata and can be understood in the context of the Japanese avant-garde movement that shared a similar choice of references, it can also be linked to Hijikata’s personal history.

This dichotomous attitude towards the West is particularly visible in Hijikata’s early writings. In the text *Naka no Sozai* (Inner Material), published as a pamphlet for *Hijikata DANCE EXPERIENCE no kai*’s recital in 1960, Hijikata recalls his first encounter with German dance:

Fourteen years ago, I became a disciple of a woman dance teacher in my hometown. I was fond of the phrase “to become a disciple,” so I put on new underpants and went through the gate to the teacher’s house. *Because the term “foreign dance,” however, made me vaguely anxious, I hesitantly asked her what kind it was, while at the same time thinking I would just quit if it were not what I wanted. When she told me it was German dance, I immediately took steps to become a disciple. I figured that since Germany was hard, its dance too would be hard.* (2000b, p. 36, emphasis added).

The passage shows that the very idea of foreign dance had a negative connotation for Hijikata,

since it was something he felt anxious about. It further implies that not all foreign dances would have been as appealing to Hijikata as a dance with a German ancestry.

While Hijikata's desire to become a disciple could be understood in the frame of the *iemoto* system, defined by Henderson, Spigner-Littles and Milhouse (2006) as "a master-disciple relationship" considered "the core of Japanese life" (p. 141), and hence as a way to stick with the Japanese values, his claim that he was "always fond of the expression" seems to belie that version by making it sound more like a linguistic choice than an engagement. Furthermore, O'Neill (2013) states that one of the characteristics of the *iemoto* system is "a strong sense of duty and obligation within a school" (p. 20), which does not sound in line with Hijikata's statement that he could always quit if he did not like the dance.

The examination of Hijikata's butoh scores, using a notation referred to as *butoh-fu*, shows a profusion of references to European artists such as Michaux, Bellmer, Bacon or Genet. However, references to American artists and culture appear rare if not totally absent. Furthermore, in his later years when rejecting the Western influence on his work, the rejection concerned mostly the American influence prevalent in Japan. Therefore, the term "Western influence" does not appear as an accurate term to discuss the influences in Hijikata's work.

Yet, while the influence of American culture is never directly discussed in Hijikata's writings, his texts often refer to the negative consequences of the American occupation. Indeed, one of the recurrent themes in Hijikata's work is hunger. Hijikata (2000b) states "hunger must have been the theme of the universe" (p. 39).

Some of his texts can also be understood as indirectly referring to the American occupation, such as the following passage:

Time passed and there appeared a necktie who got us to hate hunger. The necktie belonged to the Great Japan Sugar Manufacturing Company, which was then having a boom. We put some sugar on a piece of paper and licked it off. It was the first time in our lives that we realized how horrible sweetness could be, and we all bowed our heads and prayed. (Hijikata, 2000b, p. 38).

Kushner's (2011) essay "Sweetness and Empire: Sugar Consumption in Imperial Japan" allows to locate the boom in sugar consumption in the early post-war years. Kushner (2011) explains that the consumption of sweet products in Japan rose during the American occupation of the country, in line with the traditional image of American soldiers distributing treats and chewing-gum to the population as a way of reassuring them.

Hijikata's feeling of disgust toward sugar can be understood as a rejection of the American occupation itself. Indeed, sugar was not traditionally consumed in Japan. It appears as a change in Japanese culture due to the Western occupation. If Hijikata did endorse European culture, it is clear that he did not endorse all forms of Western culture, even in the early stages of his work.

The similarities between Hijikata's choice of references and that of the avant-garde seems

worth exploring. Indeed, according to Hornblow (2006), the mix of French and Japanese influence found in Hijikata's work was characteristic of the "Tokyo art and literary circles at the time, in part a form of resistance to the impotence [sic] of American influence" (p. 26). Therefore, the choice to refer to European culture rather than American culture was not unique to Hijikata. In fact, it would even be possible to see the choice of references in Hijikata's work as a consequence of the influence of the Japanese avant-garde on his work. It can be hypothesized that Hijikata was introduced to European culture through the Japanese avant-garde movement, and that he just integrated the cultural fusion that took place within the previous generation of artists. Indeed, Hackner's (2014) essay "Worlds Apart? The Japan-Europe Historical Avant-Garde relationship" shows that their European counterparts inspired Japanese early avant-garde movements in the pre-War years. Hackner (2014) points out that "the Japanese artists were obviously looking for inspiration, not for a movement to join" (p. 211), which is not without similarities with Hijikata's later attitude towards the Japanese avant-garde movement. Since the Japanese avant-garde had already taken inspiration from the European avant-garde, it is very likely that Hijikata, who was very close to the Japanese avant-garde movements in the beginning of his career, met European culture through them. Indeed, writers such as Bataille, Genet or Rimbaud were popular amongst the avant-garde at the time Hijikata had strong interactions with avant-garde artists in Tokyo. Yet, for Hijikata, who came from Akita, Tokyo avant-gardes might have been as foreign to him as the European ones.

Hijikata refers to his early encounters with avant-garde artists:

Kuroki Fuguto's studio was in Ikenohata kuromon-cho and, after a close examination, anyone who said he loved Rimbaud could become a member of the club. Even recalling it now, our mad baptism was something. We all went by the name of Torakūru or Soutine or some such. (2000b, p. 36)

According to Kurihara who accomplished the translation of the text, Kuroki Fuguto was a painter linked to neo-dada, while the nicknames Hijikata refers to are inspired by foreign artists such as Soutine, Modigliani or Trakl (in Hijikata, 2000b). This shows that at the moment Hijikata arrived in Tokyo, cultural fusion had already blossomed amongst the avant-garde.

As a consequence, the fact Hijikata was mainly inspired by European artists could be understood as a heritage from the European inspired Japanese avant-garde.

Nevertheless, it is also important to keep in mind that Hijikata grew up during the War and was strongly affected by it. Hijikata's (2000d) statement "I would like to have a person who has already died die over and over inside my body. I may not know death, but it knows me. I often say that I have a sister living inside my body" (p. 77) was often understood as linked to real events. Indeed, Hornblow (2006) states that "the older sister who took care of [Hijikata] was sold into prostitution never to be seen again" (p. 33). However, while this fact has often been reported in books, Morishita (2010), who is in charge of the Tatsumi Hijikata Archives at Keio University,



states in an interview that “speaking as if it were true [Hijikata] would say things like he was one of eleven children and all his brothers died in the War and all his sisters became prostitutes, for example.” (p. 11). It appears that some of the things which later were reported as facts might have been stories created by Hijikata. Morishita further states that “when thinking about the creation of Butoh, it doesn't matter if imagination springs from fact or fiction” (p. 11). Indeed, while it is important to remember that Hijikata was first of all an artist and that his texts should be considered for their artistic value rather than regarded as presenting exact facts, it is just as important to consider what Hijikata chose to incorporate in his writings. Whether or not Hijikata's sister was actually sold into prostitution, it is the story Hijikata chose to tell. As a consequence, it is possible to speculate, even though it might not have happened directly to his sister, the fact that women were sold into prostitution during the war was a reality he was aware of and that marked him enough to incorporate it in his story. As mentioned before, in his texts, Hijikata frequently refers to suffering from hunger in his childhood during the War. Growing up during the War, Hijikata might have been more inclined toward European culture than towards American culture, considering the relationship between the two countries at the time. Since Hijikata's memories of growing up during the War and later under the American occupation do not appear as positive ones, it seems reasonable to believe he did not aim to incorporate American influence in his dance.

As a consequence, it is possible to find a dualistic attitude towards the West in Hijikata's work. The European influence was regarded as higher than the American one and appeared as a way to escape the latter's influence. However, while *Hijikata Tatsumi to nihonjin: Nikutai no hanran* (Hijikata Tatsumi and the Japanese: Revolt of the Body) marked a turn and led him to focus on the Japanese body and identity, it is important to note that Western references never disappeared from Hijikata's work.

#### **IV. Japanese Body “vers un” Butoh Body: the West as a resistance force**

The performance *Hijikata Tatsumi to Nihonjin: Nikutai no Hanran* (Hijikata Tatsumi and the Japanese: Rebellion of the Body) in October 1968 is regarded as a major turn in Hijikata's work. According to Kurihara (2000b), with this performance, Hijikata was “making a conscious change from an apparently “Western” focus to work that intensely examined his own body, specifically, a male body that grew up in Tohoku, probably to liberate himself from the body” (p. 20) while for Fraleigh (2006), “*Revolt of the Flesh* (1968) marked Hijikata's shamanistic descent into his native roots” (p. 328).

However, the change of focus in Hijikata's work should not be regarded as a process of liberating his work from Western influences.

As stated in the previous chapter, Hijikata's work embodied a dualistic attitude toward the West from the very beginning. To think that the turn taken by Hijikata with his 1968 performance was led solely by a rejection of Western influence, in his work and in society, is contradicted by

his earlier writings. Indeed, in 1961, Hijikata wrote that,

One thing for sure, though, I will no longer be cheated by a bad check called democracy. No future correspondence will reach me from slightly soiled pigeons set free by society's hands and I am enforcing silence too on my youth, when I was not even a dog licking the wounds of capitalism. (2000c, p. 43)

Similarly, the examination of his butoh scores show that European references never disappeared from his work. Therefore, the turn in Hijikata's work should not be regarded as a dramatic change of attitude toward the West. Hijikata's attitude toward the West was as complex and contradictory as it was persistent throughout his entire career.

The fact that *Hijikata Tatsumi to Nihonjin: Nikutai no Hanran* marked a dramatic change in Hijikata's work should also be regarded with caution: indeed, from the beginning, butoh was marked by several changes and pluralism appears as one of the fundamental characteristics of Hijikata's butoh.

However, the necessity for Hijikata to explore the Japanese body might still be seen as a consequence of the pervasiveness of Western culture in his early work as well as in the Japanese society of that time. It is possible to argue that the necessity to define oneself as Japanese can only occur in presence of a non-Japanese point of comparison. This appears in line with Roland's (1988) statement that "the new cultural paradigms with their institutional implementation intensified the old identity struggle between being Japanese and Western to a magnitude previously unknown, and has led to a constant self-identification of what it means to be Japanese" (p. 130). Kosaku (2006) further states that "Japanese identity is the anti-image of foreignness and, as such, can only be affirmed by formulating the images of the Other; namely, the West" (p. 11). Far from being absent in Hijikata's work, Western culture can be seen as the reason for Hijikata's decision to examine the Japanese body. It is possible to say that Western culture acted as a resistance force in Hijikata's work, and motivated his decision to focus on the Japanese body.

Another important point to observe is that Western culture should not be regarded as the only "Other" in Hijikata's work. Indeed, Hijikata does not only define the Japanese body as opposed to the Western body: he defines the natural Japanese body as opposed to a body under influence, be it the influence of Western dance or of the avant-garde.

While Hijikata refers to the Japanese body as opposed to the Western body in the sentence "our [referring to Japanese people] concept of the body is truly anarchic" (as cited in Viala & Masson-Sekine, 1988, p. 184), it is important to notice that this does not happen very often. Indeed, most of the time he refers to the Japanese body as opposed to techniques applied to it, or to butoh as opposed to Western dance. As a consequence, the real "Other" in Hijikata's work might be systems and techniques.

This is illustrated, for example, by the following text written by Hijikata:

In other forms of dance, such as flamenco or classical dance, the movements are derived

from a fixed technique; they are imposed from the outside and are conventional in form. In my case, it's the contrary; my dance is far removed from conventions and techniques ... it is the unveiling of my inner life. (as cited in Viala & Masson-Sekine, 1988, p. 185)

But if he rejects the influence of Western dance on the body, he does not show more acceptance for the Japanese avant-garde movement, on which he wrote:

There is nothing to fear in the avant-garde; it's only a dry intellectual comprehension. We *should* be afraid! The reason we suffer from anxiety is that we are unable to live with our fears. Anxiety is something created by adults. The dancer, through the butoh spirit, confronts the origins of his fears: a dance which crawls toward the bowel of earth. I don't believe this is possible with European dance. (as cited in Viala & Masson-Sekine, 1988, p. 185)

This passage is particularly interesting because it shows the rejection of three kinds of influences on the body: the influence of the avant-garde, the influence of upbringing or adulthood, and the influence of European dance. Butoh, as opposed to these three influences, appears as a process of liberation of the body.

In his work, Hijikata instead put forward characteristics inherent to the body of Japanese farmers such as *ganimata* (bow-legged walk). It is possible to think that Hijikata's own body had been ill-adapted for modern dance, in which straight legs are the ideal standard, and he tried to explore his natural body rather than to tame his body into a precise technique.

Hijikata refers to his childhood experiences as a source of inspiration, particularly being left in a rice basket while his parents worked in the fields. Hijikata for example stated in an interview with Shibusawa:

Going back to talk of my childhood again, there was a straw basket, called an izume, that was used as a cradle for toddlers. You were seated in the cradle and left in the middle of a rice paddy all day long, from morning to night. No matter how you scream and cry, you can never reach the grown-ups who are working.... I had no master, after all, to teach me my first steps in dance. My influences came from those childhood experiences, the trees and icicles I saw then, and from my father. (as cited in Shibusawa, 2000, p. 54)

The rejection of all external influence is also visible in the passage. Indeed, Hijikata's claim that he had "no master" and was influenced by his childhood experiences rather than the techniques acquired later on, is a powerful statement.

It can seem paradoxical that Hijikata chose *Tōhoku kabuki keikaku* (Tohoku Kabuki Projects) as a title for a series of performances he choreographed in 1984, considering the fact that he claimed to reject external influences on the body and that kabuki is a highly stylized dance technique. In fact, Hijikata did say about kabuki that it was "dance puffed with silk wadding" and "completely cut off from the sacred domain where form consists only of shouts and cries" (as cited in Shibusawa, 2000, p. 50). As a consequence, the reason for Hijikata's choice of the term *kabuki*

might not be an attraction to the dance itself. It could be understood in terms of an attraction to the social stigma attached to kabuki. Fujikura (2010) states that kabuki actors “were often referred to as “Kawaramono” or “dried-up riverbed people”, a discriminatory term referring to social outcasts” (p. 77). Since the beginning of his career, Hijikata had demonstrated an attraction to the world of outcasts. It might have been inspired by the work of the French writer Jean Genet. Genet depicted the world of people living at the margins of society in his work, and considered himself an outcast, stating that he “like[d] being an outcast just as, with all due respect, Lucifer liked being cast out by God” (as cited in Plunka, 1992, p. 37). Nevertheless, it is interesting to see that Hijikata did not fully reject Japanese dance, stating that “the origins of Japanese dance are to be found in the very cruel life that the peasants endured” (p. 185) with some form of respect. Hijikata’s butoh embodies paradoxes and contradictions.

Interestingly, Hornblow (2006) states that the influence of the European avant-garde, and especially the work of Artaud, was never as visible as in the performance *Hijikata Tatsumi to Nihonjin; Nikutai no Hanran*. While this can appear as diametrically opposed to the claim that Hijikata started his introspective work on the Japanese body with this piece, it is not necessarily the case. Artaud similarly referred to the Oriental body as opposed to Western conceptions of theatre and dance, and stated, for example, that

There is an absolute in these constructed perspectives, a real physical absolute which the Orientals are capable of envisioning - it is in the loftiness and thoughtful boldness of their goals that these conceptions differ from our European conceptions of theatre, even more than in the strange perfection of their performances (1958, p. 65)

It can be thought that Artaud’s writings on the body in Balinese dance inspired Hijikata in exploring the Japanese body. Artaud’s *The Theatre and its Double* was translated into Japanese in 1965 and certainly stimulated *Hijikata to Nihonjin: Nikutai no Hanran*. Fraleigh (2006) states that the golden phallus in Hijikata’s performance is directly inspired from Artaud’s performance *From Heliogabalus, or the Anarchic Crowned*. Therefore, it is very likely that Artaud’s interest for the Oriental body acted as a catalyst for the turn in Hijikata’s work.

But Hijikata’s decision to work on the Japanese body can also be seen as incidental: in his search for the butoh body, Hijikata had to remove external influences from his work, and the body he dealt with, his body, was Japanese. Unlike Artaud, Hijikata did not go out to look for a body that embodied his ideals better: he dealt with his own body as the material for his dance. Hijikata’s sentence “I come from Tohoku, but there is a Tohoku in everybody. There is a Tohoku in England” (as cited in Holborn, 1997, p. 9) seems to go against a purely geographical interpretation. Rather than exploring his national identity, Hijikata wanted to explore “the practical dimension in a man’s life, his animal instincts, his primal nature” (as cited in Viala & Masson-Sekine, 1988, p. 186). Therefore, while the question on whether or not butoh can be danced by foreigners is a recurring motif in contemporary manifestations of butoh dance, Hijikata matter-of-factly claimed “everybody

has the inherent ability to dance” (as cited in Viala & Masson-Sekine, 1988, p. 186).

## V. Beyond Culture and History: Hijikata's Quest for a Body “which cannot be expressed in words”

The previous chapters explored the ways and the extent to which Hijikata's butoh was affected by culture and history. Yet, Hijikata's butoh remains hermetic to interpretation. The body of butoh is a body eluding meaning, annihilating language. A body screaming to be looked at rather than looked through. Okamura (n.d.) emphasizes that “the body in butoh performance rejects being the medium to represent the sign” and that such a body, designed by the term *butohtai* (body in butoh) “is a body essentially liberated from being a tool” (para. 9). The body of butoh is a carnal body rather than a conceptual one. As a consequence, trying to understand butoh in terms of message, meaning or representation only leads us to overlook the essence of butoh. While the influences of European culture and the Japanese avant-garde are obvious in Hijikata's work, butoh should by no means be reduced to its history. It is fundamental to keep in mind that Hijikata was deliberately trying to fight a body bound by history and meaning. Mikami (2002) points out the importance of Hijikata's sentences “What is my work? Yes, it's myself” and “I've nothing to show you but my own body” (para. 2). These sentences are a useful reminder that to Hijikata, the body was the central part of butoh and not the concepts that can be applied to it, and that his butoh was highly personal and cannot be generalized when theorizing butoh.

Hijikata constantly strived to remove the meaning applied to his dance. Contrary to the current trend which wants to make Hijikata's dance the standard for “traditional butoh”, with a fixed set of characteristics, such as the slowness of movements, Hijikata's butoh was plural, constantly evolving and rejecting categorization as much as traditions. It is also important to remember that butoh evolved as much on stage as away from it, in strip clubs and in the streets. In an interview with Hijikata, the art critic Shibusawa Tatsuo reveals that for Hijikata, butoh encompassed more than solely performing arts:



Figure 2 Hosoe, E.. (Photographer). (1968). *Kamaitachi #17* [digital image]. Retrieved from <http://clair.me/portfolio/eikoh-hosoe/http://www.ibashogallery.com/artist/eikoh-hosoe>

SHIBUSAWA: Your “dance of darkness” is a philosophical statement of sorts, isn’t it? When you read poetry or look at paintings, you’re likely to say, “This is butoh.” Does that mean that anything at all can be butoh?

HIJIKATA: That’s right. After all, since ancient times solemn ceremonies have gone smoothly only with the help of dance. Paintings, too, are created by human beings and reveal their ultimate “butoh quality”. Really, it can be seen by anyone. But people stick to their own little world, their own particular genre and lose sight of it. Lots of people are now calling for an end to genres, but if they would just apply the idea of “butoh quality” to everything, the problem would be totally resolved. (Shibusawa, 2000, p. 49)

This interview raises the question whether current definitions of butoh, focusing on the performing arts aspects, do justice to Hijikata’s search for a butoh body outside of genres and traditions. Furthermore, what is referred to as “butoh traditions” or “traditional butoh” seems to correspond to the idea of “invented traditions”. It appears highly paradoxical to make a tradition out of Hijikata’s desire to step outside of traditions and to create something genuinely new and personal. In a time of intense cultural fusion, such an attempt to detach oneself from tradition might have been deemed impossible. Yet, focusing on the outcome at the expense of the process might make it impossible to grasp Hijikata’s butoh, for Hijikata’s butoh is also to be found in his contradictions.

At the center of butoh lays the inexpressible. Indeed, writing on his dance, Hijikata raised this question of expression:

I would like to make the dead gestures inside my body die one more time and make the dead themselves dead again. I would like to have a person who has already died die over and over inside my body. I may not know death, but it knows me. I often say that I have a sister living inside my body. When I am absorbed in creating a butoh work, she plucks the darkness from my body and eats more than is needed. When she stands up inside my body, I unthinkingly sit down. For me to fall is for her to fall. But there’s even more to our relationship than that. She says to me, “*You’re totally immersed in dance and expression but what you are able to express emerges somehow by not expressing it, don’t you think?* [emphasis added]” Then she quietly disappears. She’s my teacher; a dead person is my butoh teacher (Hijikata as cited in A. Senda, 2000, p. 77).

While Baird (2012) applied himself to find the truth about Hijikata’s sister, and showed she might have been an invention on his part, I would like to emphasize with Artaud (1942) that one “ha[s] the right to lie, but not about the heart of the matter” (Artaud as cited in L.J. Rodriguez, 1993, p. 3). In the case of butoh, I believe the heart of the matter to be the inexpressible. Whether they are the words of Hijikata or his dead sister, the sentence is extremely interesting since it summarizes very well the question of expression in butoh dance. Indeed, Hijikata warned his dancers “do not do expression, such a vulgar thing”, according to Rhizome Lee. The extent to which Hijikata disclosed himself in his dance does not necessarily need to match the way he disclosed himself outside of his dance. Not

so far from Magritte's "Treachery of Images", things can be expressed by not expressing them in butoh and expression can serve as a mean to hide. Hijikata (2000) stated in an interview that "there is a moment when words are uttered from a body" (p. 66). One thing we can ponder is whether the words uttered from bodies are the same as the words used in the scores.

A parallel might be drawn between the work of Hijikata and that of the Austrian poet Paul Celan. According to Knausgård (2014),

There are few places where the problem of representation is so acute as in Paul Celan's poem *The Straitening* [Engführung]. Neither places nor people have names, there is no time other than that of the verbs, nor any narrative or overall structure to give the words a setting or a coherent context. The words lie on the page like stones on the ground, and at first glance the only thing which seems to link them together is the fact that they are all German. On a closer reading of the poem, the possibility emerges that it deals with – or attempts to deal with – the fundamental abyss of all literature: that between the world and language about the world, rendered visible through an understanding of nothing, which, in the very moment it is named, is no longer nothing, but something. (2014, para. 1)

Hijikata's butoh is similarly detached from representation and context. Unlike ballet and theatre, butoh does not make use of narrative. Furthermore, butoh similarly detaches itself from a linear conception of time. Okamura (n.d.) points out that the time of butoh is freed from biological time. What butoh gives to see is a world impossible to express in words. On poetry, Artaud wrote that,

Poetry is anarchic to the degree that it brings into play all the relationships of object to object and of form to signification. It is anarchic also to the degree that its occurrence is the consequence of a disorder that draws us closer to chaos. (1958, p. 43)

Like Celan's poem, butoh abolishes the usual relationship between form and meaning.

It is not my intention to categorize butoh as a form of poetry; even though Hijikata's butoh scores could easily be understood as poems, it would be too much of a simplification. The relationship between Hijikata's butoh and Celan's poem cannot be generalized to butoh and poetry: it touches something genuine in Hijikata and genuine in Celan. While Baird (2012) argued that Hijikata's butoh scores form a new language, Hijikata and Celan similarly show the limit of any language, the part of the inexpressible that always remains. And while it is possible to analyze butoh, like a mirror, the analysis always reveals more about the writer than it reveals about butoh.

Artaud (1958) stated that "To break through language in order to touch life is to create and recreate the theatre" (p. 12). In his writings, Hijikata attempted to deconstruct language by distorting grammar and through the use of neologisms. A. Kasai (2013) states that "[n]o one can match Hijikata's writings in works like *Yamerumaihime* [Sick Dancing Princess]. I don't think there is anyone who could use words like objects to express Japanese thought like he did" (p. 5). The relationship to language or the impossibility of language inherent to Hijikata's butoh is peculiar and goes through pain. According to Scarry (1985), "pain does not simply resist language

but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned” (p. 4). Hijikata’s body of butoh is a body before language, which has not yet learned to speak or to act. Rhizome Lee, founder of Subbody Dance School, insists on the importance of the sentence “Regenerate a reduction by X” in Hijikata’s butoh score for the piece *Shizukana Ie* (Quiet House). Indeed, Hijikata attempted to scrap the surface, to unveil a truly naked body, a body standing before language and thought. This appears close to his sentence “Even your own arms, deep inside your body feel foreign [sic] to you, feel that they do not belong to you. Here lies an important secret. Butoh’s radical essence is hidden here” (Hijikata as cited in DeNatale, n.d., para. 9).

Efrati conveys the existence of a fundamental difference between Hijikata and Artaud on their relationship to the body by stating that,

Artaud complains about his body, his pains, while Hijikata is a dancer. It is in their reversed relationships to proprioception that Hijikata and Artaud irremediably separate, at the place where Artaud spent his life in physical pain, Hijikata turned his body into an instrument through iron-will discipline. Does that mean that Hijikata was a professional of the body while Artaud, once a man of the theatre, never had the choice, or the strength, to master his body in a satisfying way? (2012, pp. 18-19, personal translation)

However, it is possible to argue that Hijikata was a professional of pain as much as a professional of the body, since his relationship to the body was defined through pain. In Hijikata’s own words “when one considers the body in relation to dance, it is then that one truly realizes what suffering is: it is a part of our lives” (as cited in Viala & Masson-Sekine, 1988, p. 187).

The term “professional” also raises an interesting question. Butoh dancer Masaki Iwana (2009) states that “unlike dancers of traditional or classical dance, [butoh dancers] are in a sense amateurs” (para. 11). This relates to Hijikata’s statement “[s]ince I believe neither in a dance teaching method nor in controlling movement, I do not teach in this manner” (as cited in Viala & Masson-Sekine, 1988, p. 186). Since butoh is not a dance teaching method, the standards of what constitutes “professional” butoh as opposed to “amateur” butoh are non-existent. Furthermore, Hijikata argued against the necessity to become a professional dancer, stating, “therefore what is the point of becoming a professional dancer? If a man becomes a laborer and a woman a servant, isn’t that enough in itself?” (as cited in Viala & Masson-Sekine, 1988, pp. 187-188).

In fact, the relationship to pain and cruelty can be considered as quite similar for Artaud and Hijikata. Regarding his “theater of Cruelty”, Artaud (1958) wrote that it was “a theater difficult and cruel for [himself] first of all” and that the cruelty at its core was “the terrible and necessary cruelty which things can exercise against us” (p. 79). For Hijikata (2000b), “sacrifice is the source of all work and every dancer is an illegitimate child set free to experience that very quality... all dancers must first of all be pilloried” (p. 39). In both cases, pain appears not at the finality but as a catalyst for freeing the body from society and conventions. Pain is therefore seen by Hijikata as



the starting point of butoh, stating that,

Only when, despite having a normal, healthy body, you come to wish that you were disabled or had been born disabled, do you take your first step in butoh. A person who dances butoh has just such a fervent desire, much like a child's longing to be crippled. (Hijikata, 2000, p. 56)

On the role of pain in the creative process, Scarry (1988) states that “it is part of the work of creating *to deprive the external world of the privilege to be inanimate*— of, in other words, its privilege of being irresponsible to sentient inhabitants on the basis that it is itself nonsentient” (p. 285, emphasis in the original text). This appears to relate closely to the use of the body in Hijikata's butoh dance. For T. Kasai (2000), “one of the key words for understanding Butoh is the Butoh body, “butoh-tai” in Japanese, meaning a physical and mental attitude so as to integrate the dichotomized elements such as consciousness vs. unconsciousness, and subject vs. object” (p. 353). In Hijikata's butoh, the body functions at the same time as object and subject. The body in butoh is treated as an object deprived of the privilege of being inanimate, to paraphrase Scarry (1985). About Hijikata's butoh, Mishima wrote that “What we consider to be natural movements are a momentary cheating on what is in fact a severe and terrifying relation between human beings and objects, conspiring to cover it over with a veil” (as cited in Sas, 1988, p. 186). It was these seemingly “natural” movements Hijikata aimed at destroying through pain.

Hijikata saw the body as “criminal”, stating that “this is not a theoretical point; it's the practical dimension in man's life, his animal instincts, his primal nature” (as cited in Viala & Masson-Sekine, 1988, p. 186). For Mishima, butoh is “useful in exposing the lies of our daily movements, the lies of our so-called “natural movements” or manners [shizen no dōsa] as trained and made habitual by social custom” (as cited in Sas, 1999, p. 170). More than the nature of the Japanese body, it seems that what Hijikata tried to unveil was the nature of all



Figure 3 Hosoe, E.. (Photographer). (1968). *Kamaitachi #31* [digital image]. Retrieved from <http://www.michaelhoppengallery.com/artists/89-eikoh-hosoe/overview/#/artworks/9492>

bodies. It is possible to argue that Hijikata's butoh was incidentally Japanese rather than inherently, that his unveiling of the Japanese body was a step in the unveiling of the human body. The focus on the weakened body in his later work seems to validate the hypothesis.

Hijikata's definition of butoh, “Butoh is a corpse standing desperately upright” (as cited in Fraleigh, 2010, p. 67), and his focus on the weakened body at the end of his career tend to show that the exploration of the Japanese body was just a step in his search for a butoh body devoid of any of the conventions of society.

In a conversation with Mishima, Hijikata recalled an experience that had a strong impact on him:

In the meantime, I saw someone with cerebral palsy grasping for an object in such a manner that his (her) hand was not aiming directly at the object, but rather, after a few trials, took a great detour and approached and finally managed to reach it from the opposite direction. I then realized that it was precisely the course of movement I had been teaching my students. That was a huge encouragement to me (as cited in Miyoshi, 1988, p. 200, personal translation).

When looking at the trajectory of Hijikata's butoh, it is important to remember that what he achieved was not necessarily what he tried to achieve. If Hijikata did not succeed in removing all the layers of meaning applied to the body, and is understood as having created a dance method or system when this was precisely what he had tried to fight in his career, it can be understood as a movement stopped in its course. But while it is possible to say that Hijikata did not succeed in his trial, he planted the seeds of an intense cultural fusion. By focusing on a body devoid of all conventions, Hijikata opened the door for the most interesting form of fusion. Butoh should not be understood in narrow terms. While it is easy to look at a particular period of his work and see characteristics and systems, the fact butoh constantly changed should not be overlooked. If there is such thing as an inherently Japanese butoh in Hijikata's work, his work is also found in the multiplicity, the excess.

### Endnotes

- 1 "Straight legs are engendered by a world dominated by reason. Arched legs are born of a world which cannot be expressed in words." Hijikata (as cited in Viala & Masson-Sekine, 1988, p.189).

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