

# Death and Desire in Contemporary Japan

Representing, Practicing, Performing

edited by Andrea De Antoni and Massimo Raveri

## Hijikata Tatsumi's Sabotage of Movement and the Desire to Kill the Ideology of Death

Katja Centonze

(Universität Trier, Deutschland; Waseda University, Japan)

**Abstract** Death and desire appear as essential characteristics in Hijikata Tatsumi's *butō*, which brings the paradox of life and death, of stillness and movement into play. Hijikata places these contradictions at the roots of dance itself. This analysis points out several aspects displayed in *butō*'s death aesthetics and performing processes, which catch the tension between being dead and/or alive, between presence and absence. It is shown how the physical states of biological death are enacted, and demonstrated that in Hijikata's nonhuman theatre of eroticism death stands out as an object aligned with the other objects on stage including the performer's carnal body (*nikutai*). The discussion focuses on Hijikata's radical investigation of corporeality, which puts under critique not only the *nikutai*, but even the corpse (*shitai*), revealing the cultural narratives they are subjected to.

**Summary** 1 Deadly Erotic Labyrinth. – 2 Death Aesthetics for a Criminal and Erotic Dance. – 3 *Rigor Mortis* and Immobility. – 4 Shibusawa Tatsuhiko. Performance as Sacrifice and Experience. – 5 *Pallor Mortis* and *shironuri*. – 6 *Shitai* and *suijakutai*. The Dead are Dancing. – 7 The Reiteration of Death and the *miira*. – 8 The *shitai* under Critique. Death and the *nikutai* as Object. – 9 Against the Ideology of Death.

**Keywords** Hijikata Tatsumi. *Butō*. Death. Eroticism. Corporeality. *Acéphale*. Anti-Dance. Body and Object. Corpse. Shibusawa Tatsuhiko.

I started to dance when I decided to die.  
(Murobushi as quoted in Centonze 2016a)

### 1 Deadly Erotic Labyrinth

Death and desire are the presupposition and founding principles of *butō* dance. As its further definition *ankoku butō* (dance of utter darkness)<sup>1</sup> im-

<sup>1</sup> For the distinct forms and definitions of *butō* throughout history see Centonze 2014, 91-6. For the concept of *ankoku* see Centonze 2002. A general discourse on postwar *butō* would be misleading. Even the dance of its founders, Hijikata Tatsumi and Ōno Kazuo, differs from each other. Here I will focus on the former's art, which in its turn changes throughout its history. A great part of the issues displayed in this essay have been pushed to their limits

plies, discussing death and eroticism in relation to it leads to a tautological discourse. *Butō* offers an immense and diversified landscape in reference to both, to their interrelation and implicitness. By venturing into this labyrinth, we see how it explores in profundity both realms accessing immaculate territories, although death and eros have always underpinned dance history.

This vanguard dance condenses and articulates chthonic and catachthonic principles at a corporeal level, and brings the paradox of life and death, of stillness and movement into play. Hijikata Tatsumi places this dilemma at the roots of dance itself. His pursuit of radically rethinking dance is reflected in this poly-oxymoron: "Dance can be defined as a corpse [*shitai*] standing straight at the risk of its life" (Hijikata 1987b, 87).<sup>2</sup>

Generally speaking, the sixties avant-garde in Japan worked and developed under the banner of death and desire, which were incorporated in its countercultural strategy of dissidence against the situation established by postwar domestic policy and the Japan-U.S. alliance politics evolving under the Security Treaty first signed in 1951.

Hijikata's *butō* emerges as an aesthetic and corporeal revolt, forging through outrageous acts the special corporeality which sustains this innovating and turbulent decade: the *nikutai*, the carnal body (cf. Centonze 2010).<sup>3</sup> The intervention by means of the body itself, as a site of protest, characterises his subversive engagement.

The *nikutai*, transient and anarchic, is the living and raw corporeality most exposed to deterioration and most attached to life and eroticism. Its highest expression and potential are shown in processes like metamorphosis, modification and mutation. It continuously fluctuates between states of life and death, presence and absence. In this study, the *nikutai* may be interpreted as the nucleus of death, that which 'disappears' mutating into the *shitai*, the corpse. Facing the *nikutai* necessarily implies facing death and mortality.

Hijikata disembowels and eviscerates body and dance showing the risk they imply and how close they stand to death. In his challenge to theatre and dance, he pushes the nonhuman dimension in performance to the extremes and investigates, intellectually and choreutically, processes for which the dancer or experiencer starts to animate the inanimate and make inanimate the animated. In his dance the corpse stands out as protagonist. Beyond dramatisation and religious purpose the body is lived in its fatal collapse.

Obliterating and suspending the dimension of transcendence, this form of art does not direct the attention towards the concept or image of death,

---

in Murobushi Kō's artistic work and life. Unfortunately, after Murobushi's death in 2015, I was not able to centre this essay on his death aesthetics.

2 All translations from the Japanese are the Author's.

3 As discussed in previous studies (see, for example, Centonze 2002; 2009; 2010, 116), I intentionally do not translate *nikutai* as 'flesh', but as 'carnal body'.

but enacts its omni-pervasive presence. The audience is guided through the tunnel of the abyss of *ankoku* and dives deep into its bottomless profundity.

## 2 Death Aesthetics for a Criminal and Erotic Dance

Focusing on the practices of walking and standing,<sup>4</sup> Hijikata parallels his dance to the gait of the criminal on death row. As argued in “Keimusho e” (To Prison, 1961), he studies the dance of criminals, who do not have to learn how to stand in a prison, a place he designates as the stage of tragedy and drama, where “naked bodies and the death penalty are indivisibly united” (47). Quoting Georges Bataille,<sup>5</sup> he refers to the connection among human solidarity, nakedness, solitude, continuity of being, death and obscenity.

His dance tries to catch the state of tension between being dead and/or alive realised in the moment when a death row convict is forced by the juridical system to walk towards the guillotine. In this paradoxical situation vitality rises to its apex.

The guillotine directs our attention towards the acephalic condition, the beheaded body.<sup>6</sup> The decapitated corporeality explored in *butō* performances<sup>7</sup> challenges further characteristics in respect to the image of the *acéphale*<sup>8</sup> chosen by Bataille, who writes: “man has escaped from his head just as the condemned man has escaped from his prison” (Bataille 1985, 181). To put it simply, in the case of Hijikata’s *butō* the entire body

4 For the principles in *butō* practice of *aruku* (walking) and *tatsu* (standing), stripped off their common social connotation, see Centonze 2002.

5 Hijikata quotes words from the introduction of *L'Érotisme* (1957) but, unfortunately, the Japanese source he refers to is not specified. The first Japanese translation of Bataille’s *L'Érotisme* (1957) was published in 1959 by Muro Junsuke. If we confront Hijikata’s quotation with Muro’s translation, it emerges that the two versions, although similar, are different. It seems as if the dancer would have picked up parts from the sentences of Muro’s translation and recreated the text with omissions and slight changes. Moreover, in Hijikata’s ‘adapted quotation’ appears for example the term *shikei* (death penalty) (Hijikata 1961, 47), probably standing for ‘mise à mort’ (Bataille 1957, 25), translated by Muro as ‘*shinaseru koto*’ (the act of making die) (Bataille 1959, 17).

6 For the guillotine in Bataille’s thought see, for instance, Bataille 1985, 220-1.

7 See, for example, the use of brass panels as guillotine in Murobushi’s gender-questioning performances *Bibō no aozora* (Handsome Blue Sky, 2003) and *Heels* (2004) discussed in Centonze 2009.

8 *Acéphale* was the revue (1936-1939) founded by Bataille, and its associated secret society. Its cover image, a drawing by André Masson inspired by Leonardo da Vinci’s *Vitruvian Man*, depicts a headless standing man symbolising the death of God and the classical concept of man, and the refuse of a leading figure, thus hierarchy (cf. Bataille 1985, xix-xxiii, 178-81). His groin is covered by a skull. Instead of reason this image denotes gnostic culture.

is concretely challenged and put into question. In early *butō* the performer is prevailingly decapitated of facial expression by concealing face and head and privileging the back.<sup>9</sup> As Hijikata declared in “*Kinjiki*” (Forbidden Colours, 1959),<sup>10</sup> in his dance the expression of the body writhing in agony is reoriented from the face to the rear, which, together with the chest, emanates all the evil and is prioritized (cf. Centonze 2016b, 451-2).

Heads wrapped in newspapers are exposed, for example, in *Anma. Ai-yoku o sasaeru gekijō no hanashi* (The Masseur. Story of a Theatre That Sustains Sexual Desire, 1963). The use of the back and the acephalic body emerges also in Hosoe Eikō’s *Heso to genbaku* (Navel and A-Bomb, 1960).<sup>11</sup> In this short film Hijikata and Ōno Yoshito appear naked or in underpants with their heads veiled by white cloths (fig. 1),<sup>12</sup> or with a thick rope bound round their necks, designating the condition of being hanged or captured. In a close up of Hijikata’s limbless torso, his back creates twitching and syncopated moves. His head is hidden behind his back and therefore absent from the scene as he perfectly bows it. Male figures in underpants stand in a line on the shore with their back to the camera in a position of peeing men (fig. 2). A white decapitated hen flutters and struggles, tossing nervously, in agony on the sea’s edge.

The underworld has been profiled since Hijikata’s duo with Ōno Yoshito, *Kinjiki* (May 1959), officially considered *butō*’s debut. A young man (Ōno) seemingly strangulates a white hen between his thighs. An older man (Hijikata) lies down on him in a sodomitic attitude.<sup>13</sup> In reference to the relation among the young man, the hen and the older man, critic Gōda Nario envisions a circuit of violence and abuse, a sexual coercion lived by the younger as a nightmare, while being initiated into the gangland (cf. Centonze 2013, 659-61). With *Kinjiki*, Hijikata consecrates dance and the body to darkness, death and desire, and brings scenic heresy, zoerasty/zoo-

9 Murobushi made of this condition his trademark. For the headless body in *butō* see also Centonze 2014, 79-80; 2009, 175-6. For a comparison between the neutral mask in Etienne Decroux and *butō* see Centonze 2014, 79.

10 Notes written for the performance *Kinjiki nibusaku* (Forbidden Colours 2, September 1959).

11 I refer to the frames of the experimental short 16mm film *Heso to genbaku*, directed by Hosoe Eikō in Japan. This unique portrait of death and destruction centred on life and sex may be considered to be one of the most important filmic documents of the initial *butō* experimentations (Centonze 2012, 228-30). For the collaboration among Hijikata, Hosoe and Mishima Yukio see Centonze 2012.

12 In Hosoe’s photos taken in those years we may see that the performers used to wrap their heads in black cloths. I discussed the parallelism between these black cloths and the long, black head covers, called *hikosa zokin*, used during the *Nishimonai bon odori* in Ugo, Akita (cf. Centonze 2014, 80). *Bon odori* are folk dances performed during the death ritual of *obon*, which are festivals celebrated to honour the departed spirits.

13 For a detailed analysis of *Kinjiki*, its versions and the presence of the animal on stage see Centonze 2013.



Figure 1. The veiled heads of Hijikata Tatsumi and Ōno Yoshito in *Heso to genbaku* (1960) by Hosoe Eikō (Courtesy Hosoe Eikō)



Figure 2. Men standing in a peeing position seen from behind: scene from *Heso to genbaku* (1960) by Hosoe Eikō (Courtesy Hosoe Eikō)

philia, homoeroticism, murder, sacrifice, viciousness into play. Androgyny and cross-dressing are further deepened in his following projects, such as during the sessions of Hijikata Tatsumi DANCE EXPERIENCE no kai (1960-1961). This early stage of Hijikata's aberrant dance, according to Ichikawa Miyabi's periodization,<sup>14</sup> integrates and elaborates the scabrous literature of Jean Genet, Comte Lautréamont and Marquis de Sade.

The entangled intimacy between death and desire/sex, which is nothing but the texture of life, is highlighted since the beginning of *butō's* adventure in Hijikata's statement for his new dance:

It is an extremely natural course that I am urged to the world of male love which the prioritised drama, mingled with the semen and sweat of the rehearsal room, pricks applying the technique of erection. Also in the male [*osu no*] dancers' gestures of tender nature this is an obvious opening. In this moment six penises are grasped in my hand. On the skin of the young men who receive the attack of hard muscles run the

14 For Ichikawa's historical gaze see Centonze 2014, 86-8. For the periodization proposed by Shibusawa Tatsuhiko, which differs from Ichikawa's, see Shibusawa 1992.

letters of welts after being touched by the overhead wire. This signifies death. (Hijikata 1959)

*Osu* is the term that defines the male referred to animals and plants. Hijikata's erotology goes beyond the *Menschanschauung*. He breaks with the assumption that eroticism concerns exclusively the human sphere, as suggested by Bataille. It is important to consider here that the French philosopher, although blurring categories, develops the concept of eroticism as an 'inner experience' linked to mysticism, which transcends 'flesh' (Bataille [1962] 1969, 23-33, 88). For Bataille human eroticism differs from animal sexuality and calls inner life into play (23). Conversely, for Hijikata, who drastically obliterates the dialectic between dancer/human being, animal and the object, everything runs through our body, including knowledge. As a consequence, dance, if pushed to its extremes, is the art that is able to produce and concretize the very moment of death and desire. As will be discussed later, experience is the raw material of performance; it is posited as the "inner material and material" (Hijikata 1960) and, therefore, experience is not limited to inner life, but deposited in our (material) bodies. Hijikata's "dance of terrorism", as he defines his dance (cf. Hijikata 1960), unfolds not only on a socio-political plane, but invests the conception itself of artistic creation considered as a human domain. In his nonhuman and amorphous dance he puts the metamorphic body into practice. Mutability is absorbed by *butō*'s morphologic texture and becomes the fundamental condition of its corporeality.

### 3 *Rigor Mortis and Immobility*

I would suggest that *butō* embraces the different stages of biological death<sup>15</sup> subverting choreographic laws and instituting anti-aesthetic and grotesque states of the body. It breaks with the common physical law that associates movement to life and immobility to death. Death, without a beginning and an end, is taken in its process including pre-mortem and post-mortem states. These are experienced by the dancer (and by the audience), who enacts conditions of the body and becomes a practitioner of death and eros.

Hijikata dissociates death (and dance) from time. Due to the abrogation of the chronologic monopolism prevailing in the concept of rhythm and of choreographic phrase, time is radically corroded. It is my contention that Hijikata, rather than 'rethinking' time, 'kills' time in dance practice.

---

15 The recognisable signs of biological death considered here are: *pallor mortis*, *algor mortis*, *rigor mortis*, *livor mortis*, decomposition/putrefaction and skeletonisation.

The stiffened and paralysed bodies in *butō* performances recall the state of *rigor mortis* (fig. 3).

As highlighted by Mishima Yukio, one of the specific aspects in this avant-garde dance is the discontinuity, the unexpected interruption of movement, which disobeys the spectator's telic consciousness (cf. Centonze 2012, 220; 2016b, 442-6).<sup>16</sup> This practice becomes a distinctive component in Hijikata's experimental strategy. His renovation consists in conceiving dance by suffocating dance, which means by preventing and sabotaging its commonly perceived dynamic essence, i.e. movement. Hijikata's dance launched an attack to the roots of terpsichorean art by denying its harmonic and fluent dynamics, and promoting the non-dancing, non-moving body. Ōno Yoshito often recalls (Centonze 2013, 657) that he was not told to execute a series of paths, but only to stiffen his body. The petrifying body introduced since *Kinjiki* is controversial, self-contradictory and separates the performer from ordinary dance hindering the act of evolving form in space. The stone-like physicality was a clear manifestation and declaration for the death of dance. This inversion of perspective leads to the fact that immobility is dance. The paradox of life and death is realised on stage so long as the immobile dancer's blood continues to circulate and his/her heart to beat.

A new platform, which is not a horizontal stage, but a collapsing and sinking space, is disposed.<sup>17</sup> *Butō* eludes the three-dimensional perspective and opens dance to a multidimensional playground. These factors lead to new possibilities of movement, or to the potential bodies, which enable the performer to explore different aspects of motility, even in stillness, approaching also the sphere of the dead body.

The 'motionless' body may be associated with what Hijikata advocates as the *mumokutekina nikutai*, the aimless, atelic *nikutai* (cf. Hijikata 1961, 46; Centonze 2010, 118-9; 2016b, 442-6). In his critique and resistance to consumer society, Hijikata redeems corporeality from the oriented purpose imposed by the capitalistic system, which invests our bodies with false needs. The system of productivity is beheaded by this atelic *nikutai*, rather than by a choreographic content or an ideological concept. At the same time, the atelic *nikutai* is exempted from its function of 'means', or 'instrument of expression' subordinated to choreographic laws and methodologies. Hijikata divests the dancing body of its directed vectoriality and acts outside the Cartesian coordinate system consecrating it to the entropic sphere.<sup>18</sup>

16 For an analysis of Mishima's literature on Hijikata's dance see Centonze 2016b.

17 For the concept of "*kūkan o tsukuru*" (construct/make space) in Japanese performing arts see Centonze 2011.

18 I have argued elsewhere that Hijikata achieves the shift to dance viewed as entropic movement or thermodynamics (Centonze 2013, 672-6).



Figure 3. The corporeality of the corpse performed in Murobushi Kō's dance: Murobushi Kō. *Quick Silver* (2006). Azabu Die Pratz, Tokyo. Photo by Awane Osamu (Courtesy Awane Osamu)

In technical and practical terms, this dance, nourished by unbalance and crisis, destroys the common concept of choreography. Linear and geometric movements are further menaced and denied by *keiren*, convulsive seizures or nervous contractions. These spasms or shivers resemble a dystonic attack that affects one or different parts of the body, or its entire build. *Keiren* may embody the intersection between the orgasmic apex and *tremor mortis*. Movement disorders, usually uncontrolled and involuntary, appear as crafted dynamics in this choreutic art. Staged are micro-movements and sometimes infinitesimal shock-like jerks, imperceptible to the eye but deeply sensed by the audience. The *teboke* (hand senility or tremor occurring in the hands), discussed also by Mishima in terms of *Begriff* and *begreifen* (Centonze 2012, 224-5),<sup>19</sup> disarrays the relation between object and body, thus the vectoriality of language and naming.

Also refined falling techniques are carried out. Sudden falls are performed on the ground from a vertical position, sometimes without inter-

---

<sup>19</sup> Mishima discusses the relation between object, body and words in Hijikata's *butō* (cf. Centonze 2016b, 455-8).



mediate movements and change of intensity. The body falls heavily and rigidly like a compact block under the influence of gravity.

The intermittent movements executed in *butō* may be compared to the agonal phase of the decapitated hen in *Heso to genbaku* struggling vividly and violently until it stops moving.

Ground-breaking theories and new visions of dance only recently refer to the conception of dance as a non-flowing, anti-dynamic phenomenon, as offered in André Lepecki's ontological investigation (2006).

In her seminal study, Peggy Phelan (1997) illustrates the case of a New York City Ballet member,<sup>20</sup> who after an injury experiences the impediment of movement. The immobilised ballerina explores the conflicting interrelation between utterance in psychoanalysis and the necessity of their performative and corporeal enactment. Phelan's analysis helps the reader to discover that "spasms might be closer to 'pure' movement than dance is" (67). Though the ballerina's condition may appear similar, in Hijikata's strategy the sabotage of movement is a conscious act, which reaches beyond psychoanalytical terms or conflicting aspects between corporeality and verbal utterance.<sup>21</sup> At the same time the negation of dance becomes in Hijikata the way of emancipating this art in a world dominated by verbal (theatre and literature), visual (visual arts and film) and acoustic (music) practices.

#### 4 Shibusawa Tatsuhiko. Performance as Sacrifice and Experience

An extensive literature on eroticism, fetishism and obscenity has been produced by Shibusawa Tatsuhiko, whose works are an important channel that conveyed to Japan culture and art concerning also Western medieval demonology and esotericism. The influential figure of the counterculture and close friend of Hijikata refuses the sentimental and optimistic vision diffused during the eighties of the rebellious decade, and asseverates that it is impossible to describe his experience of the sixties without talking about the dancer (Shibusawa 1992, 223).

Shibusawa (1992, 231) expresses his personal conviction that the ultimate idea of Hijikata's dance lies in Bataille's concept of "non-continuity of life".<sup>22</sup> When Shibusawa writes about the dancer, a strong emphasis is laid

20 Here we should keep in mind the fundamental difference between the corporeality in Balanchine's choreography and in *butō*.

21 As I discussed in Centonze 2016c, Hijikata treats bodies as words and words as bodies.

22 Shibusawa, scholar of French literature, translated works of Jean Cocteau and de Sade, and published in 1973 the translation of Bataille's *L'Érotisme* (1957). For the companionship among Shibusawa, Mishima and Hijikata see Centonze 2016b.

on the aspect of sacrifice, which Hijikata himself regarded as “the source of all work” (Hijikata 1960). Shibusawa’s interpretation gives prominence to the “eroticism of ritual sacrifice” (Shibusawa 1992, 227),<sup>23</sup> individuated as the main characteristic of Hijikata’s dance taken in its first phase. In relation to this facet, the critic portrayed him as “*hansai no buyōka*” (dancer of burnt offerings):

The Dancer of Burnt Offerings

Roman emperor Caracalla at the halfway of his pilgrim journey to the Temple of the Moon, died after being stabbed by the assassin, while he was in the midst of urinating outdoors [*tachishōben*]. The Japanese dancer, Hijikata Tatsumi, discovers the position of human crisis in the figure of a standing man, who pees outdoors, seen from behind.<sup>24</sup> At the dawning of the second half of the 20th century.

The Byzantine theologians disputed endlessly during a night full of stars shining serenely to define the sex of angels. The Japanese dancer, Hijikata Tatsumi, choreographs without end during the night of darkness, for assigning the sex to all things in the universe. Asceticism.

The Italian despot of the Middle Ages under the resplendent sunlight of high noon amputated the organs of young boys in order to preserve the castrato. The Japanese dancer, Hijikata Tatsumi, in order to cause the miracle of rejuvenation in dance amputates the poisonous organ of the choreographer, who is not able to dance any longer. On top of that, [all this] in the tragic, broad daylight produced by the footlights.

The poet and scholar of metaphysics, Joséphin Péladan, in the crepuscule of Latin decadence, dreamt of the androgyne who realises the magic purity of the sexes. The Japanese dancer, Hijikata Tatsumi, after having chipped off everyday life, creates the androgyne as his new concept of the *nikutai* in order to capture the possibility of dance in the criminal fiction.

This is the dialectic of Hijikata Tatsumi’s choreographing art. All dances are his experience, and are burnt offerings to the earth. It should be thought there is no stage. (Shibusawa 1961)

*Hansai* indicates the burnt sacrifice, i.e. one of the highest forms of sacrifice in which the victim is completely burnt on the altar. The concept appearing in the *Book of Leviticus* is known in English also as ‘holocaust’.

---

23 Mishima defines Hijikata’s performance as a heretic rite (cf. Centonze 2012, 223).

24 As Hijikata declared in a conversation with Mishima in reference to his “dance of crisis”, one of the emblematic postures that reflect this condition is the rear of a standing man who urinates outdoors (*tachishōben*) (cf. Centonze 2012, 224; 2016b, 450-1).

In 1970 the term *hansai* is revived, when Hijikata began to sign his productions with the name “Hangidaitōkan”. As referred by Motofuji Akiko, this acronym has been selected by poet Takahashi Mutsuo. *Han* stands for the first syllable of *hansai* and *gi* stands for the first syllable of *giseishiki* (rituals of sacrifice).<sup>25</sup> Takahashi, a close friend of Mishima, depicts Hijikata as “one character, who climbs onto the altar, which is the stage, and stamps on the great earth symbolised by the wooden boards” (Centonze 2016b, 441). For the poet, Hijikata is the dancer, who raises the sacrificial flame towards the sky aspiring to a model of *butō* as big as the great universe and chooses the hardest way: to live honestly.

Only a few months before his own ritual sacrifice and act of denouncement, Mishima, whose self-inflicted death marked a watershed between the sixties and the seventies, wrote with a brush the epithet “Hangidaitōkan” on a two metre-long bleached cloth. It was destined to hang down from the terrace of the Seibu Department Store in Ikebukuro, where the performative exhibition *Hijikata Tatsumi Hangidaitōkan (fu) korekushontenji sokubai* (Hijikata Tatsumi Hangidaitōkan with sale of exhibited collection items, 28 August - 1 September 1970) was hosted (Centonze 2016b, 442).<sup>26</sup>

Shibusawa continues to articulate the discourse on sacrifice and connects it to the discussion of the term *pafōmā* (performer). He calls attention to the early use of this definition by Hijikata demonstrating that the concept of performer, or *taikensha* (lit. experiencer),<sup>27</sup> was highly considered by the dancer. As elucidated by the critic: “the performer, in this case, is the executor who offers on the altar in sacrifice his flesh [*niku*]”<sup>28</sup> (Shibusawa 1992, 227). The self-sacrifice, a self-immolation that stands as a consequence of a risky and challenging dance, where the performer’s own body is involved, is implied here.<sup>29</sup> According to Shibusawa (1992, 227) the killing of a hen on stage should be considered as a consequence in those years.

25 *Dai* (macro) derives from *daiuchū* (macrocosm), and ‘kan’ derives from *kikan* (model, example) (for a detailed explanation of “Hangidaitōkan” see Centonze 2016b, 441-2). *Tō* refers to *fumu* (stamp). The stamping of the feet is a universal element in dance and rituals, in which death and sex converge. Re-evoked also in *bu-tō*, its importance in Japanese theatrical tradition and folk dance is transversal. *Fumu* recurs in death rituals such as *chinkon*, executed for the appeasement of the souls, or in rites of fertility and abundant harvest, like the *ta-ue odori* (cf. Centonze 2008, 129-30).

26 Its artistic curator was Nakanishi Natsuyuki.

27 Hijikata defines since his programme notes for *Kinjiki nibusaku* the performers as *taikensha*.

28 In this case corporeality is defined as ‘*niku*’; therefore I translate it in a strict sense as ‘flesh’.

29 For a discussion of *kagura* (ritual dance) as sacrifice in Japanese performing arts see Centonze 2008, 130-3. For an analysis of sacrifice and the animal on stage as conceived in *butō* and contemporary performance see Centonze 2013, 661-6.

The intrinsic quality of art understood not as representation but as experience *hic et nunc*, which involves the performer as well as the audience, emerges here. Hijikata often emphasises that theatre requires a sense of actuality (cf. Hijikata 1961, 48).

If we follow Shibusawa's argument, who punctuates the importance of *experience* and *performance*, the *butō* dancer *experiences* death, while *performing* (taken in its etymological meaning) death.

## 5 *Pallor Mortis* and *shironuri*

Not only *rigor mortis* is pursued, but also the other stages of death can be visibly and sensibly detected.

*Pallor mortis* is reflected in *shironuri*, the practice of painting the dancers' body white, implemented especially after *Anma*.<sup>30</sup> Conversely, in his earlier years, Hijikata tended to darken his skin with black greasepaint and olive oil (Centonze 2013; 2014, 80).<sup>31</sup> Compared to the black paint, which is more affiliated with 'relentless ardour' (Hijikata 1960), *shironuri* shifts towards alidity or the process of *algor mortis* and enhances the condition of ambiguity. As a matter of fact, this chromatic device leads to a deferment of aesthetics itself approaching the indefinable, which is the essence of the corruptible *nikutai*. The white naked bodies are projected into a refracted and distorted eroticism. On the one hand, the applied colour suffocates nakedness. On the other hand, it empowers the erotic expression by deviating it.

Putrefaction and decomposition are usual aesthetic aspects displayed in *butō* dance. Both are articulated also in relation to movement (Centonze 2016b). The white make up mixed with glue hanging from the performers' body like shreds may address the dirty and decaying body. It may appear as aesthetics of visual disturbance and, therefore, their nakedness does not necessarily titillate the audience's sexual desire.<sup>32</sup>

The *shironuri* may disguise the performer's age. This theatrical strategy creates a peculiar play of shadow and brightness, visibility and non-visibility.

---

30 For the connection between the naming of Hijikata's dance and *shironuri* see Centonze 2012, 221. For additional aspects of *shironuri* see Centonze 2004, 69-73.

31 The bodies were painted with gold dust in the dance shows directed by Hijikata, a practice still cultivated today by Maro Akaji's Dairakudakan, in whose performances the dancers are sometimes also painted blue, suggesting also *livor mortis*. In contrast, the colour chosen by Murobushi, lately, is silver.

32 On the other side, due to their queerness, the dancers may appear more desirable. There is a connection with the aesthetics known under the name *ero guro nansensu*, based on the combination of eroticism, grotesqueness and nonsense expressed in modernist literature and art emerging between the Taishō (1912-1926) and the Shōwa (1926-1989) periods.

bility, and interacts with the stage lights. An important effect, I would like to stress here, is that this make up erases the identity, gender and social status of the performer, and appears as a strong expedient of pulverising residues of subjectivity.<sup>33</sup>

In addition, it disengages the performer from his/her human identity while levelling the difference between the human anatomy and the organic/inorganic surrounding space, landscape or natural elements, crafted objects facilitating the heteromorphic process.<sup>34</sup> The dancer moves between the appearance and disappearance of existence, presence and absence on stage, between this and the other world, which are undistinguished.

Skeletonisation is manifested as well. The bones and the skeleton of the dancer are emphasised in performative dynamics.

Gunji Masakatsu (1977, 43) reckons *ankoku butō* as a second coming of the dance of death, or *danse macabre*, diffused in Europe during the Middle Ages.<sup>35</sup> Gunji envisions Hijikata's dance in contrast to the metropolis of Tokyo, which flourishes in its economic growth following the postwar Reconstruction (43). He images the dancer with a skull mask and a big scythe performing secretly his skeleton dance in the city underground.

In his studies are traced several connections between the new dance and aspects of Japanese folklore and traditional dance, to the extent that, in his opinion, Hijikata's art, which shows the dying *nikutai* moment by moment, epitomises "a beautiful classical dance of death" (Gunji 1973, 121), which radiates eroticism.<sup>36</sup> The scholar specifies that it is not an artistic dance which renders the *nikutai* as its material. Instead, it is a pre-artistic dance of death, which is validated as such because it is the act in itself of devouring the same *nikutai* (122).

Examining the feeling of terror provoked by the white colour, Gunji (1985, 86) perceives that the white painted bodies confer a sense of being plastered in the wall, as if this condition would be a consequence of crime of rebellion and its punishment. Their whiteness does not connote a clear candour; rather, "at the bottom of these white, naked figures, after sinking into the black of darkness, a smell of concealment is queerly condensed" (Gunji 1985, 86).<sup>37</sup> Conversely, Ōno Kazuo's bright transparency "does not reveal this uncanny and sordid darkness" (86).

33 For Ōno Yoshito's discourse on *shironuri* and identity see Centonze 2004, 70.

34 It is important to note here that the metamorphic body does not perform an act of mimesis in Hijikata's *butō*.

35 For a comparative study of Tarantism, *danse macabre* and *butō* see Centonze 2008.

36 For an analysis on Japanese traditional performing arts and *butō* see Centonze 2004, 2008.

37 The dirty whiteness is also discussed by Shimizu Masashi (cf. Centonze 2004, 71-3).

According to Gunji (1985, 86), the bodies smeared with white mud echo the idea of all living creatures covered with the death-ashes of World War II. Since ancient times whiteness has been associated with the bleached white bones of the corpse. The scholar (1985, 88) argues that *ankoku butō* embraces *shironuri* full of vengeance, as a taboo rebelling against medical theory and science, which determine those who are subjected to social segregation. Its whiteness bears also the idea of the return to the womb (Gunji 1985, 88).

In a contrasting sense, the white make up is applied also in order “to connote the existence of the body [*karada*], defined as *nikutai*, inside darkness” (Gunji 1991a, 250). The corporality defined as *karada* plays a fundamental role in Japanese death culture, as underlined by Gunji Masakatsu (cf. Centonze 2008, 126-8). It indicates also the hollow container, the cicada.<sup>38</sup>

It is further suggested by Gunji (1991d, 260) that those irregularly white dappled bodies, with the powder peeling off and dropping from their skin, develop an image for which the sexual relationship exists only as a shadow. The white powder they are encrusted with cools down and provokes lead poisoning; therefore, this make up is associated with death ever since its use in Japanese classical dance. Gunji (1991b, 257) compares the white dancing figures to hibernating people, underlining the condition of their stiffness, which is related also to the climatic condition of the freezing Tōhoku, Hijikata’s native region.

## 6 *Shitai* and *suijakutai*. The Dead are Dancing

Corporeality and its fluid nuances undergo an accurate analysis and investigation in Hijikata’s dancing and writing practice. From the late sixties, Hijikata articulates the corporeality of the *suijakutai* with more emphasis. This body is bound to asthenia, debilitation, weakness, emaciation, feebleness and implies a critique against the prosperous and sanitised postwar society of Japan (cf. Hijikata 1985, 70). The *suijakutai* is a dehydrated body, which may be also viewed in contrast to the healthy and steady body heralded by the German *Körperkultur* (cf. Centonze 2015, 102-8).<sup>39</sup> It may be interpreted also as the contaminated or hybrid body (cf. Centonze 2008, 127-8; 2016c, 129).

Since the early seventies, death aesthetics and folkloric aspects have become more refined, as visible, for example, in *Hōsōtan* (Story of smallpox, 1972). Gunji (1991c, 84) notes that in a broad sense Hijikata’s and Ōno

---

38 The term *karada* is composed by *kara*, meaning the slough (*nukegara*) completely deprived of its liquids and life, and the suffix *da*. It has been used during the Heian period (794-1185) in order to designate the cast-off skin of the cicada after its ecdysis or the dead body (*shitai*). For *karada* see also Centonze 2010, 115-7.

39 For the relation between *Ausdruckstanz* and dance in Japan see Centonze 2015.

Kazuo's *butō*, which incorporates the Japanese body fallen to pieces after the defeat, and its desperately grotesque reality, may be traced back to the "*honegarami' no nikutai buyō*", the dance of the *nikutai* reduced to skin and bone, which he considers to be at the root of Japanese folk customs.

As observed by Shibusawa (1992, 229), the latter period of Hijikata's *butō*, with its choreographies constructed around Ashikawa Yōko, is characterised by a gender turn towards the female,<sup>40</sup> and focuses on Hijikata's above-mentioned thesis, which posits dance as a standing corpse.

A well-known *topos* in Hijikata's dance is that he identifies his *butō* masters with the dead<sup>41</sup> and that he lets his elder sister dwell inside his body (Hijikata 1985, 75).<sup>42</sup> He expresses this situation in terms of making the dead gestures die again within his body and making the dead die once more completely. For him, those who once died may die over and over again inside his body. In reference to his sister he adds: "when she stands up inside my body, I involuntarily end up sitting down. For me to fall is for her to fall" (Hijikata 1985, 75). In this case the performer acts and is made to act.<sup>43</sup> The dead may become more present or alive than the dancer himself, as if they would dictate the movement. They are co-workers of the performative act. The defunct is a body that moves inside the dancer, whose own body is foreign to the dancer him/herself. Enacting the contradictory unison of life/desire and death, the deceased stands up, sits down, while the foreign body opposes or parallels the dead's moves nearly automatically.

Although I elsewhere formulated this situation in relation to *butō* and memory as a process of "reification of memory" (Centonze 2003-2004, 34), I would say that, rather than to the mnemonic act, in Hijikata's *butō* priority should be given to the *res* of death, to its objectification, i.e. the reification of death.

40 Figures of deceased women as well become central in *butō* starting from the seventies.

41 Conversely, the motto *mortui vivos docent* adopted by the medical community conveys the meaning related to the scientific practice of anatomic dissection. Hijikata's assertion may be read also as an intention to undermine the *iemoto* system, the hierarchically structured schools in Japanese traditional arts, centred on the headmaster with a conditioned teacher-student relationship.

42 In Ōno Kazuo's dance his defunct mother and the modernist flamenco dancer Antonia Rosa Mercé y Luque (1888-1936), known under her stage name La Argentina, appear.

43 For the condition of 'being danced' see Centonze 2008. In relation to this idea, I also traced a connection between *butō* and the 'diacronic polymorphism' of *wazaogi* in Japanese performing arts (Centonze 2004, 73-5; 2008, 130-3). In *Nihon shoki* (Chronicles of Japan, 720) the first *kagura* (a stamping striptease dance) executed by goddess Ame no Uzume is defined *wazaogi*. *Wazaogi* is a polysemantic concept embracing the meaning of 'calling forth the souls', 'imitative gesture' or 'mimetic dance'. It further indicates the performance as well as the performer. Ame no Uzume is considered to be also the ancestress of the Sarume no Kimi, the female performer, who makes the *chinkon* ritual.



Figure 4. Gokurakuhama (Paradise Beach), one of the spots at Osorezan, the Mountain of Fear in Shimokita Peninsula of Aomori Prefecture. Osorezan is venerated as the door to the dead's world. The peaceful and beautiful area of Gokurakuhama is considered to be the place where the living can meet the deceased by calling their name. Photo by the author (August 2015)

The case “return of the corps” illustrated in Phelan’s study (1997, 66-8), which deeply explores female corporeality in relation to psychic events and where problems concerning truth and time<sup>44</sup> – although declassified – are still at play, is linked to traumatic experiences and symptomatic manifestations. Conversely, in *butō* we may speak of the ‘return of the corpse’. The appearance or presence of the dead in Ōno Kazuo and Hijikata’s dance is detached from psychoanalytic processes. Present and past are not questioned. It is difficult to discern in Ōno Kazuo and Hijikata the common sense of mourning or grief. There is no loss of the (dead) person’s presence. Rather, their dead-dance, although different from each other, unfolds a sort of *parousia*, taken in its etymological sense of physical presence or arrival – both incorporate feminine bodies/corpses and consequently pro-

---

<sup>44</sup> Phelan (1993, 127-9) discusses the perspective of a ‘second time’, a concept adopted from Ilya Prigogine’s theory on the reversibility in thermodynamics.





Figure 5. Murobushi Kō's stiffened body and his falling technique: Murobushi Kō. *Krypt* (2012). Kamakura Shōgai Gakushū Center Hall, Kamakura. Photo by Awane Osamu (Courtesy Awane Osamu)

duce transgendered dances assisted by cross-dressing, without erasing completely their masculine part. In Hijikata's case the feminine body is of the corpse, which questions the dancer (cf. Hijikata 1985, 75), whereas in Phelan's discourse on the phantom pregnancy of patient Anna O. and the feminine body is emphasised that: "feminity is that part of bodies that logic can treat only as a question: the feminine body, the psychoanalytic body, can take only an interrogatory form" (Phelan 1997, 67).

As Hijikata (1985, 74) outlines in relation to his dance and training, the movements in his *butō* (and, therefore, the dead's presence) are naturally forced out of his body, and "there is no time for expression". His dance is a matter of course, rather than a form of possession or trance.

## 7 The Reiteration of Death and the *miira*

The endless reiteration of death developed in *butō* unfolds as a constant at diverse levels, considering also the continuous engagement of the performer who faces his or her own mortality on stage. Murobushi Kō, for example, has persevered through decades in his death practice pursuing the dance of the *miira* or *sokushinbutsu*, ‘the ascetics’, as explained by Massimo Raveri (1990-1991, 250), “who sought to achieve salvation and immortality through self-mummification”. Here we encounter one of the paradoxes in Murobushi, who approached exclusively the physical practice without aiming at ‘salvation’ and ‘immortality’. In his performances he worms like an annelid into death, savours the rarefied and dense texture of it, and propagates its erotic and mortiferous resonance among the audience’s corporeality.

The paradox displayed in *butō* is synthesised in the image of the mummy/*miira*. As Raveri (1990-1991, 256) points out, “ascetic self-mummification means the achievement of an ambiguous condition which is not life (because the *miira* does not have all the characteristics of a living person) but which also is not death (because the *miira* lacks all the classificatory features of a dead person)”. The *miira* may be denoted as anti-establishment catalysts, who cast doubts on the cultural difference between life and death (cf. Raveri 1990-91, 257).

At the beginning of his career, Murobushi conducted on the site of Dewasanzan a research of the body-techniques of *shugendō*, practiced by the mountain ascetics, *yamabushi* (cf. Centonze 2009, 168-9).

In his essay on Murobushi’s performance *Komusō* (1976),<sup>45</sup> Hijikata (1987c, 227-8) declares that he has discovered in Murobushi’s strange dance a new form of Buddha’s holy remains (*bukkotsu*), a new *miira*, a new *butō*, which he considers very close to the starting point of his own *butō*.

I would suggest that Dante’s phonaesthetical hendecasyllable ||*E caddi come corpo morto cade*|| (And fell, even as a dead body falls) (Dante, *Inferno*, 5, l. 142; cf. Di Salvo 1987, 93) finds its embodiment when Murobushi smashes his body violently to the ground (fig. 5). Oda Sachiko (2016) describes the dancer’s unique fallings as *hotokedaore* (lit. fall of Buddha), a terminology borrowed from Noh technique, which indicates the falling backwards like a statue of Buddha.<sup>46</sup>

A controversial facet is that Murobushi’s body-practice is divorced from religious, mystical or ecstatic purpose; his performing art does not

45 *Komusō* are mendicant Zen monks, who conceal their head under a straw basinet.

46 It should be specified that Noh theatre and great part of Japanese traditional theatre are based on death and desire.

contemplate states of trance. This helps us to frame also the incongruent concepts of asceticism and sacrifice in Hijikata's dance, which slide on oxymora like what he has called the "sublime karmic suffering [*kugō*] of crime" (Hijikata 1961, 48).<sup>47</sup> The shrill dissonance of categories is highlighted also by Gunji (1991c, 84), who underlines that *ankoku butō* is characterised by sexual abstinence and, at the same time, develops eroticism.

Hijikata (1985, 72) stated that he learned his *butō* from the mud and that it is unrelated to the performing arts of shrines and temples.

A fundamental requisite in Hijikata's art is the distance between the dancer and his/her body, between the dancer and his/her movements. In his discussion with Suzuki Tadashi and Senda Akihiko (1977, 119-20), Hijikata observes that dance, the art that is based on one's own body, is easily susceptible to ecstasy, and recognises therein a danger. Consequently, he disapproves the tendency of modern dance towards "ecstasy without resistance", and rejects improvisation in performance, when it results as a 'superficial ecology' (Hijikata et al. 1977, 119-20).

Therein lies also the difference in respect to Bataille's disposition towards mysticism and ecstasy. In contrast to Hijikata, Bataille seems to defend the state of rapture:

He who tries to ignore or misunderstand ecstasy is an incomplete being whose thought is reduced to analysis. Existence is not only an agitated void, it is a dance that forces one to dance with fanaticism. (Bataille 1985, 179)

## 8 The *shitai* under Critique. Death and the *nikutai* as Object

Hijikata's writings raise not only awareness of the unreadable nature our body is endowed with, but reveal also the unintelligibility of death. We all are acquainted with death, which electrifies our bodies and deepest part, but we never do experience it perfectly unless we are completely dead and mute. As he puts it: "even if I do not know death, it knows me" (Hijikata 1985, 75).

Hijikata's essay "Nikutai ni nagamerareta nikutaigaku" (The study on the *nikutai* scrutinised by the *nikutai*, 1969) stands as a *nikutai* that observes

47 Nevertheless, it should be noted that, some days before his performances, Hijikata practiced *danjiki* (fastening). Probably this should be interpreted in terms of 'preparing the body' for his dance practice rather than in terms of achieving purification or enlightenment. Here we should refer to the concept of *karada o tsukuru* (construct/make the body), which plays a fundamental role in Japanese performing arts (Centonze 2011, 213-5).

the cognitive practice concerning corporeality.<sup>48</sup> This 'bodily text'<sup>49</sup> emerges as a representative example of the intricate debate on the *nikutai* in the sixties. It is also an important key to access Hijikata's conceiving of diverse corporealities and their intriguing rapport with language and words.

Hijikata's corporeal investigation involves, for example, criminal bodies reflecting on utterances from their affidavit. Kodaira Yoshio (rapist and serial killer executed in 1949) and his relation with the female bodies he had raped are taken into consideration. Without touching on moral issues, Hijikata approaches also Abe Sada's corporeality, whom he personally encountered (fig. 6).<sup>50</sup> Abe's scandal-ridden case became an emblem of sex and death, after she erotically asphyxiated her lover, Ishida Kichizō, in 1936. She castrated the corpse and carried his penis and testicles with her for days.<sup>51</sup>

Hijikata discusses also *nikutaigaku* (study on the carnal body) and *nikutaishi* (history of the carnal body). Both are not common designations. In my opinion, these neologisms are emphasised in relation to the *shintai* (body), the corporeality prevalently considered in a philosophical survey. As a consequence, *nikutaigaku* and *nikutaishi* can be viewed in contrast to the common designation of *shintairon*, the theory on the body (cf. Centonze 2010, 2011). In relation to *nikutai*, *shintai* is further a sort of normalised body inserted into a social context.

Hijikata compares *nikutaishi* and *nikutaigaku* to bacteria and envisages both disciplines as a mythology, which is shared by a large number of people and lives on the surface of the carnal body. He ironically observes that these discourses on the *nikutai* are meant to keep the "hygiene of the body [*karada*]" (Hijikata 1969, 31). Here, again, he manifests a sort of critique against the hygiene norms introduced in Japan's postwar society by the occupying force. According to the dancer, this condition of the 'discoursified' *nikutai* is transitional and then he adds that 'real extinction' makes its entrance. Here Hijikata punctuates the difference between real extinction and the cadaver: the *shitai* does not take part in real extinction and, therefore, also the corpse is affected by mythological bacteria.

---

48 Here the connection between the *nikutai* and the discourse on the *nikutai* is inverted. Present dance studies punctuate this very aspect: the scholar's body should be included epistemologically in the analysis and corporeality should be brought back to its corporeal sense (Centonze 2016c, 134-5).

49 In this essay orality and writing, performance and literacy, bodies and words are melted. For bodily writing see Foster 2010.

50 Hijikata and Abe appear in Ishii Teruo's film *Meiji, Taishō, Shōwa: Ryōki onna hanzaishi* (Love and Crime, 1969).

51 Abe is considered as an icon of the *ero guro nansensu* culture. She is also world-wide known thanks to Ōshima Nagisa's *Ai no kōrida* (*In the Realm of the Senses*, 1976).



Figure 6. Abe Sada and Hijikata Tatsumi: flyer for *Shiki no tame no nijūnanaban* (Twenty-seven Nights for Four Seasons, 25 October–20 November, 1972). This performance series held at Art Theater Shinjuku Bunka by Hangidaitōkan included also *Hōsōtan*. The original photo depicting Abe Sada and Hijikata was taken by Fujimori Hideo in 1969 (Courtesy Research Center for the Arts and Arts Administration, Keiō University)

The corpse [*shitai*] is a temporary extinction and resembles landscape [*fūkei*]. Even to this [corpse] stick the bacteria of myth. Our *nikutai* is a thing which precipitates into life while it already breaks, and we know it through physiology. (Hijikata 1969, 31)

Hijikata's lucid and radical critique of corporeality is carried to the extreme. Not only the *nikutai*, but even the *shitai* is put under examination, and the dancer individuates the cultural narratives it is subjected to.

In a further passage, Hijikata comments on the corpses of drowned children and focuses without rhetorical gloss on the relation between natural catastrophe and the infant body:

Natural disasters and children are connected. There are many children considered to be the appendix to natural disasters. It is a natural disaster when they are swept away by illness, as well when a *mochi* [rice cake] gets stuck in their throat. Children are standing next to natural calamity. They scream, not because they have found their hat or one of their shoes has fallen, but rather because they cannot find their body [*karada*].

I have made the experience, one after the other, of being nearly thrown into the iron pot, but I was not able to have such a natural disaster in the city. Speaking about natural disasters reminds me of the flood. Together with the flood come the corpses of drowned children [*kodomo no*

*suishitai*], and when the children's white swollen belly comes drifting, it gives a cool sensation. (Hijikata 1969, 33)

His dry and cold-blooded words manifest an absence of desperation and lie outside the sphere to which moral judgments apply. The dancer appears even more 'impassive', when he describes the swollen bellies, which are 'grilled' by the sun and float on the water's surface, while they keep swelling and expelling objects. It happens that he confuses the cadaver with a doll, a straw bag or a dog, and prods at it with a stick (cf. Hijikata 1969, 31).

It appears evident that his assertions or images, and his death-dealing dance in general, are not meant in terms of *memento mori*. The examples given above confirm the reification of death and the dead in *butō*. The corpse is akin to objects, and the human body, dead or alive, and the object are equalised.

An important aspect in Hijikata's revolution, enunciated by Mishima ante litteram, is the relation between the body and the object, which is exemplified by the dancer as a patient affected by poliomyelitis, who tries to catch an object. Mishima envisages a process of estrangement in this relation and detects the thing (*mono*) as a dreadful thing-in-itself (*monojitai*) (cf. Centonze 2012, 224-5). I think that, what is described by Mishima, can be connected and extended to that specific corporeality of the *hagurete iru nikutai* (the alienated, lost *nikutai*),<sup>52</sup> often mentioned by Hijikata (Centonze 2016c, 132-3).

Ichikawa Miyabi focuses on this *nikutai*/object relation and discerns in Hijikata's dance an operation, which he defines as the *nikutaika sareta mono*, or the *nikutai*-zed thing (cf. Centonze 2014, 96-100; 2016b, 457).

In his 'dehumanising' dance centred on the *hiningen* (nonhuman), Hijikata dismisses an anthropocentric vision of dance in terms of human expression:

In dance [*butō*], which amuses itself, [...] the stimulus to forget the fact of being a human elicits the condition of feeling affection for things below humanity. The possession of nonhuman power and subhuman power reaches the caustic emotion, which enucleates the psychology of inanimate objects. (Hijikata 1987a, 92)

In "Nikutai ni nagamerareta nikutaigaku" Hijikata argues that too much has been written about the *nikutai* and that the *nikutai* scrutinised by theory is already a dead *nikutai*. He underlines then that he does not regard the other's death as his own.

Death is discussed also in relation to stillborn children, who do not have genealogy and whose beauty attracts him. The dancer specifies: "the

---

52 In Hijikata this definition takes on several connotations (Centonze 2016b, 455-6; 2016c, 132-3).

dead body standing straight while risking its life belongs to us and things projected into the distance are located in our *nikutai*" (Hijikata 1969, 31).

## 9 Against the Ideology of Death

In the light of the issues discussed until now Hijikata's perception of death, if viewed in a certain perspective, appears close to Herbert Marcuse's political speculation exposed in "Die Ideologie des Totes" (2002).<sup>53</sup>

Marcuse (2002, 102-3) criticises Western thought, which has posited death as a *telos* of life and an existential privilege as human being. He discusses death in its historical construction and demonstrates the process of its elevation to a metaphysical category. As Marcuse maintains (104), death has been submitted to an 'ontological inversion' and the biological process of dying, which is a matter of fact, has been culturally transformed into an ineluctable necessity, which allows human beings to fulfil their ontological being.

The philosopher shows evidence of the tight relation between power and death, and remaps the coupling between eros and death. Not only in the past but also in contemporary sanitised societies the power over death is one of the most important instruments of repression and the ideology of death is still at work. Therefore, repressive social control and coercion imply the institutionalisation of death and the right to dispense it. In this case the death penalty plays a fundamental role. Marcuse (2002, 109) deprives death of the fear it is made to evoke, of its violence and intangible transcendence. He asserts that freedom is possible only when death does not appear as negation of negation or as redemption from life. The power over death must be taken back and everybody should decide on his/her own end.

In Marcuse's terms (2002, 112-3) we may say that Hijikata "brings death under his autonomy" and subtracts it from imposed socio-political and cultural rules. The dancer undermines the foundation of social oppression by disintegrating the control it exerts over our bodies and by strengthening the corporeal consciousness in a complex and conflicting connection with (theatrical) fiction. Focusing his discourse on death penalty and corporeality (cf. Hijikata 1961), Hijikata addresses the direct expression of the ideology of death.

His iconoclastic operation achieved through words and body/dance disfigures and destroys the idea in itself of death, which he relocates at an organic/inorganic level. Nevertheless, Hijikata's disintegration of cultural categories goes further: his critique of the *nikutai*, the *shitai*, the *nikutai*-

53 First published in 1959 as "The Ideology of Death" in *The Meaning of Death* edited by Herman Feifel (New York: McGraw-Hill).



Figure 7. Utagawa Toyokuni (1823). *Ehon kaichū kagami*. Picture Book: Pocket Mirror, considered innovating for its macabre and violent themes at that time: death and desire as depicted in the Edo Period. Here the love story between a *rōnin* (masterless samurai) and a ghost woman is featured (Courtesy International Research Center for Japanese Studies)

*ron* and *nikutaishi* dismantles the ontic and ontology. He goes beyond conventional cultural terms concerning the cadaverous, defunctive and defective condition that the concept of death implies, subtly playing with presence and absence and erasing their common definition and perception. Hijikata operates in a context where existence and reality are placed in a different system. He destabilizes the concept of death by dissecting those of existence and presence, and by fragmenting the condition of *fuzai* (absence) and *hizai* (non-existence), transforming death into a different form of presence.

Deprecating the theatre of his time, Hijikata insists on the necessity of actuality (*akuchuariti*) and on the right to claim its assurance (cf. Hijikata 1961, 48). He divests culture produced by the machine civilisation and takes into consideration the *de facto* situation of his days, which is underlined by the repetition of *kyō* (today, nowadays). He reflects on the young generation, who enrol in the Jietai (Self-Defence Force), and defines them as “deadly weapons that dream” (48) whom, while desiring imposed





Figure 8. Utagawa Toyokuni (1823). *Ehon kaichū kagami*. Picture Book: Pocket Mirror. The woman is transformed into a skeleton and the *rōnin* continues to embrace her (Courtesy International Research Center for Japanese Studies)

suffering (*kugō*),<sup>54</sup> rather than worrying about their sustenance, sacrifice their life in the name of the ideal of death. In his essay “Keimusho e” Hijikata (1961, 48-9) connects his art to Marcuse’s thought declaring that the concept of ‘provocation’ outlined by the philosopher is for him ‘dance’. But, as the dancer underlines, this provocation is not addressed if “we lick the wounds of the machine civilization run out of control”. In order to oppose “politics that inhales into their breast skeletonised functions” (Hijikata 1961, 49), in this actual situation it is necessary to arm oneself with a blackboard eraser and cancel “the culture of tearful and sorrowful cries, which exists in the carcass of victim mentality”, and its signs of an impotent future.

54 I deliberately did not touch upon the issue of pain in *butō*, as it requires a peculiar section for its analysis.

## Bibliography

- Bataille, Georges (1957). *L'Érotisme*. Paris: Les Éditions De Minuit.
- Bataille, Georges (1959). *Erotishizumu*. Transl. by Muro Junsuke. Tōkyō: Daviddosha. Transl. of: *L'Érotisme*. Paris: Les Éditions De Minuit, 1957.
- Bataille, Georges [1962] (1969). *Death and Sensuality. A Study of Eroticism and the Taboo*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Bataille, Georges (1985). *Visions of Excess. Selected Writings 1927-1939*. Ed. by Allan Stoekl. Transl. by Allan Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt, Donald M. Leslie Jr. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Centonze, Katja (2002). "La ribellione del corpo di carne nel *butō*". Boscaro, Adriana (a cura di), *Atti del XXV Convegno di Studi sul Giappone*. Venezia: Cartotecnica Veneziana Editrice, 151-65.
- Centonze, Katja (2003-2004). "Aspects of Subjective, Ethnic and Universal Memory in Ankoku Butō". Ceresa, Marco (ed.), *Asiatica Venetiana*, 8-9. Venezia: Cafoscarina, 21-36.
- Centonze, Katja (2004). "*Ankoku butō*. Una politica di danza del cambiamento". Boscaro, Adriana (a cura di), *Atti del XXVII Convegno di Studi sul Giappone*. Venezia: Cartotecnica Veneziana Editrice, 61-76.
- Centonze, Katja (2008). "*Finis terrae. Butō* e tarantismo salentino. Due culture coreutiche a confronto nell'era intermediale". Migliore, Maria Chiara (a cura di), *Atti del XXX Convegno di Studi sul Giappone*. Galatina (Lecce): Congedo Editore, 121-37.
- Centonze, Katja (2009). "Resistance to the Society of the Spectacle. The '*nikutai*' in Murobushi Kō" [online]. Casini Ropa, Eugenia (a cura di), *Danza e ricerca. Laboratorio di studi, scritture, visioni*, 1(0), 163-86. URL <http://danzaericerca.cib.unibo.it/article/view/1624> (2015-02-15).
- Centonze, Katja (2010). "Bodies Shifting from Hijikata's *Nikutai* to Contemporary *Shintai*. New Generation Facing Corporeality". Centonze, Katja (ed.), *Avant-Gardes in Japan. Anniversary of Futurism and Butō. Performing Arts and Cultural Practices between Contemporariness and Tradition*. Venezia: Cafoscarina, 111-41.
- Centonze, Katja (2011). "*Topoi* of Performativity. Italian Bodies in Japanese Spaces/Japanese Bodies in Italian Spaces". Scholz-Cionca, Stanca; Regelsberger, Andreas (eds.), *Japanese Theatre in a Transcultural Context. German and Italian Intertwinings*. München: Iudicium, 211-30.
- Centonze, Katja (2012). "Encounters between Media and Body Technologies. Mishima Yukio, Hijikata Tatsumi, and Hosoe Eikō". Eckersall, Peter Geilhorn, Barbara; Grossman, Eike; Miura, Hiroko (eds.), *Enacting Culture-Japanese Theater in Historical and Modern Contexts*. München: Iudicium, 218-37.
- Centonze, Katja (2013). "I colori proibiti di *Kinjiki* 1959-2009. Ōno Yoshito, Hijikata Tatsumi e il corpo eretico nel *butō*". Coci, Gianluca (a cura di),

- Japan Pop. Parole, immagini, suoni dal Giappone contemporaneo*. Roma: Aracne Editrice, 653-84.
- Centonze, Katja (2014). "Mutamenti del linguaggio estetico e segnico della danza. *Ankoku Butō*". Ruperti, Bonaventura (a cura di), *Mutamenti dei linguaggi della scena teatrale e di danza del Giappone contemporaneo*. Venezia: Cafoscarina, 74-100.
- Centonze, Katja (2015). "Butō, la danza non danzata. Culture coreutiche e corporalità che si intersecano tra Giappone e Germania" [online]. Casari, Matteo; Cervellati, Elena (a cura di), *Butō. Prospettive europee e sguardi dal Giappone*. Bologna: Università di Bologna, Dip. delle Arti e ALMADL, 102-22. *Arti della performance. Orizzonti e culture* 6. URL <http://amsacta.unibo.it/4352/> (2015-02-15).
- Centonze, Katja (2016a). "Ko Murobushi Faces Murobushi Kō. A Stranger In His Home Country And In His Body" [online]. *Theatre Arts*. URL <http://theatrearts.aict-iatc.jp/201602/3962/> (2016-02-23).
- Centonze, Katja (2016b). "Letteratura invaghita del corpo. La danza di Hijikata Tatsumi riflessa nelle parole di Mishima Yukio". Manieri, Antonio; Migliore, Maria Chiara; Romagnoli, Stefano (a cura di), *Riflessioni sul Giappone antico e moderno*. Roma: Aracne, 2: 439-62.
- Centonze, Katja (2016c). "Critical/Seismic Bodies in Hijikata Tatsumi's Writing Practice and Dancing Practice". Marenzi, Samantha (ed.), *Butoh-fu. Dance and Words*. Dossier 37. *Teatro e Storia*. Roma: Bulzoni Editore, 127-38.
- Di Salvo, Tommaso (a cura di) (1987). *Alighieri, Dante: La Divina Commedia*. Bologna: Zanichelli.
- Foster, Susan Leigh (2010). "Choreographing History". Carter, Alexandra; O'Shea, Janet (eds.), *The Routledge Dancer Studies Reader*. 2nd ed. London; New York: Routledge, 291-302.
- Gunji Masakatsu (1973). "Shi to iu kotenbutō" (A Classical Dance Called Death). *Bijutsu techō* (Art Notebook), 2, 121-3.
- Gunji Masakatsu (1977). "Hakai no naka no kongi - Butō e no michi" (Nuptial Ceremony Within Transgression. The Path Towards Butō). *Gendaishi techō* (Contemporary Poetry Notebook), 20(4), 43-7.
- Gunji Masakatsu (1985). "Butō to kinki" (Butō and Taboo). *Gendaishi techō* (Contemporary Poetry Notebook), 28(6), 86-9.
- Gunji Masakatsu (1991a). "Butō to kinki" (Butō and Taboo). Gunji, Masakatsu, *Gunji Masakatsu santei shū - Gen'yō no michi* (Gunji Masakatsu Revised Collection. The Path Towards Shapes of Illusion). Tōkyō: Haku-suisha, 3: 247-52.
- Gunji Masakatsu (1991b). "Hijikata Tatsumi to iu kotenbutō" (A Classical Dance Called Hijikata Tatsumi). Gunji, Masakatsu, *Gunji Masakatsu santei shū - Gen'yō no michi*. Tōkyō: Haku-suisha, 3: 253-8.

- Gunji Masakatsu (1991c). "Nobiru to kagamu" (Extension and Bending). Gunji, Masakatsu, *Gunji Masakatsu santei shū - Gen'yō no michi*. Tōkyō: Hakusuisha, 3: 79-86.
- Gunji Masakatsu (1991d). "Shironuri jigokukō - Chōshizen no shikisai" (*Shironuri* Infernology. Tints of Supernatural). Gunji, Masakatsu, *Gunji Masakatsu santei shū - Gen'yō no michi*. Tōkyō: Hakusuisha, 3: 259-62.
- Hijikata Tatsumi (1959). "Kinjiki" (Forbidden Colours). *Kugatsu itsuka rokuji no kai - 6nin no abangyarudo* (Meeting of 5 September at 6 o'clock. Avant-garde by 6 Artists) = Programme note, 650 EXPERIENCES no kai (Meeting of 650 EXPERIENCES. Daiichi Seimei Hall, Tōkyō, 5 September), s.p.
- Hijikata Tatsumi (1960). "Naka no sozai/sozai" (Inner Material/Material). *Hijikata Tatsumi DANCE EXPERIENCE no kai. Hijikata Tatsumishi ni okuru Hosoe Eikō shashinshū* (Hijikata Tatsumi DANCE EXPERIENCE Meeting. Hosoe Eikō's Photo Collection to Offer as Gift to Mr. Hijikata Tatsumi) = Programme notes, *Hijikata Tatsumi DANCE EXPERIENCE no kai* (Hijikata Tatsumi DANCE EXPERIENCE meeting. Daiichi Seimei Hall, Tōkyō, 23-24 July), s.p.
- Hijikata Tatsumi (1961). "Keimusho e" (To Prison). *Mita bungaku* (Mita Literature), 1, 45-9.
- Hijikata Tatsumi (1969). "Nikutai ni nagamerareta nikutaigaku" (The Study on the *nikutai* Scrutinised by the *nikutai*). *Gendaishi techō* (Contemporary Poetry Notebook), 12(10), 30-5.
- Hijikata Tatsumi; Senda Akihiko; Suzuki Tadashi (1977). "Ketsujo toshite no gengo - Shintai no kasetu. Butai kūkan e no puroseshu" (Language as Lack. Assumptions about the Body. Processes Towards the Performance Space). *Gendaishi techō* (Contemporary Poetry Notebook), 20(4), 108-26.
- Hijikata Tatsumi (1985). "Kaze daruma" (Wind Daruma). *Gendaishi techō* (Contemporary Poetry Notebook), 28(6), 70-6.
- Hijikata Tatsumi (1987a). "Asobi no retorikku" (Divertissement Rhetoric). Hijikata, Tatsumi, *Bibō no aozora* (Handsome Blue Sky). Tōkyō: Chikumashobō, 90-7.
- Hijikata Tatsumi (1987b). "Hito o nakaseru yōna karada no irekae ga, watashitachi no senzo kara tsutawatte iru" (The Replacement of Bodies, which Makes People Cry, is Transmitted by Our Ancestors). Hijikata, Tatsumi, *Bibō no aozora*. Tōkyō: Chikumashobō, 77-89.
- Hijikata Tatsumi (1987c). "Miira no butō. Murobushi Kō" (The *miira butō*. Murobushi Kō). Hijikata, Tatsumi, *Bibō no aozora*. Tōkyō: Chikumashobō, 227-31.
- Lepecki, André (2006). *Exhausting Dance. Performance and the Politics of Movement*. London; New York: Routledge.

- Marcuse, Herbert (2002). "Die Ideologie des Totes". Jansen, Peter-Erwin (Hrsg.), *Nachgelassene Schriften Herbert Marcuse*. Lüneburg: Zu Klampen, 3: 101-14.
- Oda Sachiko (2016). "Kemonoburi no hito" (The Beast-dance Man) [online]. *Theatre Arts*. URL <http://theatrearts.aict-iatc.jp/201602/4089/> (2016-02-23).
- Phelan, Peggy (1993). *Unmarked. The Politics of Performance*. London; New York: Routledge.
- Phelan, Peggy (1997). *Mourning Sex. Performing Public Memories*. London; New York: Routledge.
- Raveri, Massimo (1990-1991). "In Search of a New Interpretation of Ascetic Experiences". Boscaro, Adriana; Gatti, Franco; Raveri, Massimo (eds.), *Rethinking Japan*. Sandgate: Japan Library, 250-61.
- Shibusawa Tatsuhiko (1961). "Hansai no buyōka" (Dancer of Burnt Offerings). *Hijikata Tatsumi DANCE EXPERIENCE no kai. Hijikata Tatsumishi ni okuru Hosoe Eikō shashinshū 2* (Hijikata Tatsumi DANCE EXPERIENCE Meeting. Hosoe Eikō's Photo Collection to Offer as Gift to Mr. Hijikata Tatsumi 2) = Programme notes, *Hijikata Tatsumi DANCE EXPERIENCE no kai* (Hijikata Tatsumi DANCE EXPERIENCE Meeting. Daiichi Seimei Hall, Tōkyō, 3 September), s.p.
- Shibusawa Tatsuhiko (1992). "Hijikata Tatsumi ni tsuite" (About Hijikata Tatsumi). Hijikata Tatsumi, *Yameru maihime* (The Ailing Dancer). Tōkyō: Hakusuisha, 223-32.
- Shibusawa Tatsuhiko (1968). "Nikutai no fuan ni tatsu ankoku buyō" (*Ankoku buyō* Standing in the Uneasiness of the *nikutai*). *Tenbō* (Perspectives), 115, 100-3.

