BUTOH: ON THE EDGE OF CRISIS?*
A Critical Analysis of the Japanese
Avant-garde Project in a Postmodern Perspective

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* Hijikata often used the word *crisis* in a wish to express a crisis in contemporary Japanese society. The title also refers to the renowned documentary titled “Body on the edge of crisis” by Michael Blackwell productions
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Foreword

Since I saw my first Butoh performance six years ago, I have loved its intense expression and enigmatic nature. Its unique quality lies in the fact that it “defies easy definition and embraces paradox”\(^1\). Trying to verbalise Butoh is a contradiction in itself, so I ask the reader to keep in mind that as it does not have any specific rules or techniques, there will always be performers who have completely opposite, and thus, opposing goals.

During my Masters, I believe I have been able to develop a deep understanding and appreciation of Japanese history and culture as a whole. This has been greatly helped and enhanced through my own Japanese background together with my university undergraduate degree in the field of Japanese studies. I have also found it helpful to master the language in order to get first-hand knowledge in order to understand how Butoh is perceived by the Japanese.

Further, I have been so fortunate as to receive a two-year grant from the Japanese government, which has allowed me to live in Japan. I have then been able to connect with the dancers and to see Butoh performances almost every week. I have also attended workshops, as well as I have frequented the Hijikata Tatsumi archives, part of the Research Center for the Arts & Art Administration at Keio University. I would like to thank everyone there for their kindness, as well as my supervisor, Professor Richard Emmert of Musashino University. Lastly, I would like to send a warm thank you to my professors at the University of Oslo, Reiko Abe Auestad and Siren Leirvåg, who have always been there for me when I needed advice.  

Tokyo, December 2005

\(^1\) [http://www.caveartspace.org/about.php](http://www.caveartspace.org/about.php) 09.09.05 New York Butoh Festival October 4-26 2005
1 Introduction

Bad consciousness is the deep sickness to which man was obliged to succumb under the pressure of society.

1.1 Schools of Butoh

Since the establishment of Butoh there has been a tradition of separating the dancers of the Hijikata Tatsumi school from the ones of the Ohno Kazuo school. The former is the accredited father of Butoh, while the latter, by the time he met Hijikata, was already an established modern dancer. Hijikata's Butoh traditionally represented the dark side of man, while Ohno's dance was light, often of a spiritual nature. Further differences which highlight this separation relate to their dance styles which were extrovert and introvert respectively, and upon which movements were either outwardly or internally focused. The former tends to emphasize the visual aspects of the dance, tending to be less contemplative, sometimes even focusing on the entertaining aspects of the show. The latter is often distinguished by its slow movements; the rediscovery of the body and its relation to space and time seems to be in focus. Dairakudakan undoubtedly belongs to the first group, but they are not representative of the large companies in general; the shows of Sankaijuku are of a calm and meditative nature.

However, recently I have witnessed a change of focus within the younger generation. There appears to be a tendency within the young generation of Butoh dancers to avoid

\footnote{Nietzsche 1989: 84}

\footnote{I write names in the Japanese tradition, with the family name first}
categorisation and to move away from the elements that once characterized the dance, such as the display of violence, the white body paint and the shaved heads. Today some of the third generation dancers train in Butoh before they move on to contemporary dance, and likewise contemporary dancers often take Butoh workshops. This leads to the blurring of the genres, and often the border between the two is crossed, even within the same performance. While some dancers still classify themselves as Butoh dancers, others feel that the term is too limited, preferring to call themselves avant-garde dancers. This expresses a wish to create an independent work that avoids categorisation, as well as a feeling that being labelled as a Butoh dancer will mean that people have all sorts of expectations and prejudices upon watching the performance.

In other words, today the number of schools is theoretically equal to the number of dancers. Almost every dancer seems to develop his own definition of Butoh, which makes it difficult or even impossible, to find any similarities serving to explain it. For the dancer Kasai Akira, Butoh is all about destroying the previous forms and pushing the border a little further every time he creates a new piece, something which might help to illustrate the undefinable nature of Butoh.

In my experience, I have found that there are some non-Japanese speaking Western scholars that have failed to realise the presence of this diversity in their research on Butoh. They take for granted that all Butoh is similar to that of Hijikata or Ohno or with whomever they have studied. Some of them also have the tendency to see Butoh in an Orientalist tradition, automatically understanding Butoh on the grounds of (traditional)

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4 A company counts as a single unit, since there always is a leader who is in control.
5 Orientalism is a term developed by literary critic Edward Said criticizing Western cultural imperialism and the regarding of the East as the “Other”.
Japanese culture such as Zen Buddhism. By doing so, they reduce Butoh to essentialist qualities, forgetting its diverse and paradoxical character. Overgeneralizations and cultural stereotypes seem to make many Westerners, in general, regard Butoh as something mystical and exotic, but the East should not be looked upon through Western standards.

Finally, I would like to point out that in Japanese traditional Performing Arts, such as Noh and Kabuki; there is no real distinction between theatre and dance. The same can be said about Butoh, although I refer to it as “dance” for practical reasons. According to the Butoh dancer Nakajima Natsu, Hijikata himself conceived of Butoh as a form of “total theatre”.

I have chosen to focus mostly on the Butoh of Hijikata Tatsumi, but I ask the reader to keep the above-mentioned in mind while reading my thesis, as well as every time he goes to see a new Butoh performance.

1.2 Theoretical approach

Time has a habit of passing quickly, and what art critic Peter Bürger called “The historical avant-garde” undoubtedly belongs to the past. However, I feel that the rise and fall of the avant-garde represents any époque in the history of art, whatever its goal was. Even though the word “avant-garde” (originally a military term signifying the part of an army or navy that leads an attack on an enemy), sounds a little bit outdated now, I believe that it reveals the role of the Arts in general, which is to open up new cultural

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6 Nakajima 1997
and political domains. It is hoped that the Arts will continuously be one step in front of historical events and politics, busily creating something new and innovative. This has actually come to be the main role of the Arts, and it is also what is expected of it.

In my thesis I will take a post-structuralist perspective to look at Butoh as part of the Japanese post-war avant-garde movement. I first intend to give a broad and general introduction to Butoh from a historical and ideological perspective. In the Phenomenology chapter I will present the Eastern perception of the body as well as a brief historical overview of the body, which I believe is useful for understanding the concept of the body in Butoh. The phenomenological view can be used to conceptualise the connection between the historical avant-garde movement and Butoh, because it helps explain Butoh’s role in expressing human perception and emotions, both positive and negative, which are limited in the linguistic form. Therefore, Butoh seeks to express exactly what language represses; the dark side of man through the expression of the flesh.

In chapter four I will try to explain what characterizes the avant-garde theatre movement with the help of the performance theories of avant-garde theatre director Richard Schechner. Then, I will further attempt to show how the avant-garde developed from a political rebellion to postmodern entertainment by using the Theory of the Avant-Garde written by Peter Bürger (1994). Together with Theodor Adorno, whom I will be mentioning later, he belongs to the Frankfurt school of Aesthetic Theory. Criticizing the autonomy of art, the historical avant-garde expressed a desire to break down the barriers between life and art. In the field of theatre, the avant-garde theatre
directors sought to connect the theatrical performances to primitive rituals. Likewise, Butoh was a kind of anti-dance, not relying on technique or skill, but a dance born out of the basic need to dance. The idea was that Art should no longer be a representation of life, but life itself. By reclaiming some of the primitive energy that originally belonged to the theatre, the avant-garde wanted to appeal to the common identity and tap into the universal consciousness of man. In their pursuit of ground-breaking artistic expressions, the dancers sought inspiration in performances which they meant had kept their authentic, ritualistic aspect; often looking towards the developing countries in South-East Asia for inspiration.

According to the avant-garde, the theatre of the industrialised countries had lost the ritualistic and therapeutic effect on its way to institutionalisation. In the industrialised world, theatre’s main value now lay in its ability to entertain the spectators, leading to the taming and domestication of its original impulsive nature.

Today, the historical avant-garde has been recognised and embraced by the Art institution, which was originally its object of criticism. The institutionalisation of the avant-garde theatre movement is characterised by performances moving out of the small theatres and into those of the big box-office, while advertisement is used instead of word of mouth to attract spectators. The dance has also stopped to rely on improvisation, and instead has a rigorous choreography. This results in reviews being fatal, and the dancers’ careers being dependent on the evaluations of critics. Furthermore, if a person has accomplished fame, he/she transcends his/her role, and people come to the theatre see him/her, and not the dance itself. Finally, when research is being conducted on the once rebellious and provocative avant-garde today, it means that it has been
acknowledged and considered as being “worth studying”. All this shows how the Arts have come to adapt to the machinery of capitalism. It reflects a Marxist way of thinking where economy forms the base, and culture, the superstructure of a society. This view I will try to analyse and criticize from a Post-structuralist viewpoint in chapter six.

There is no doubt that the style of Butoh was fresh and challenging at its time of conception, but almost fifty years after its creation, what should it do in order not to lose its creative energy? We must not forget that in postmodern philosophy the world has become deconstructed, meaning that the artworks cannot claim to have universal value any longer. This makes it necessary for Butoh and the historical avant-garde to reflect on their old ideologies. Thus, a question which needs to be addressed is as Hijikata’s Butoh was post-war and therefore political, what is Butoh’s role in a post-structuralist society?
2 The History of Butoh

2.1 Post-war Japan

Butoh appeared at a time when Japan was in a political and aesthetic upheaval. The Japanese had brutally lost the war, and was occupied by American forces, whose aim was to pursue the political and economical restoration of the country. In terms of culture, Japan underwent an identity crisis, oscillating between nostalgia for the traditional Japanese aesthetics, and an attraction towards the culture of the West.

Since the beginning of the 20th century the modern Japanese theatre had been represented by the Shingeki (“New Theatre”) movement, which attempted to create realistic plays in the Western tradition of Stanislavski and Ibsen. These types of plays were usually characterized by the traditional, linear narrative. However, as Shingeki became mainstream it was no longer a satisfying means for the younger generation of artists in expressing the frustration directed against the Western political and cultural dominance, and the atrocities of the war, which they felt was nothing but absurd. Artists, such as Okamoto Tarô of the Yomiuri Independant Group, called for “a new art that bordered on violence, that was not aesthetically pleasing, not technically skilful, and not complacent in any way”7. He wanted an end to the tradition of regarding the nature of Japanese art as beautiful and refined, and instead to communicate the raw power of contemporary Japan to a Western audience. It was believed that just like the annihilation of the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the arts should be destroyed with monstrous

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7 Monroe 1994: 154
energy, in order to allow for the birth of a new art.

At the time numerous experimental theatre groups appeared, led by such directors as Terayama Shûji, Kara Jûro and Suzuki Tadashi. Their works were often grotesque and violent, attempting to recreate the self in a time when all possible constructs of reality, politics, religion, art and racial identity had lost their meaning. The artists forced the audience to look at the horror of contemporary society and embrace it as part of the self. They valued confrontation and made little effort to entertain the audience. The ugly was seen as natural, and therefore, beautiful.

It was on these grounds that Hijikata Tatsumi (1928-1986) established Ankoku Butoh (“The Dance of Utter Darkness”) in 1959 with the performance Kinjiki, which was based on a book by the same name by the rightist author Mishima Yukio.

In the 1920’s and 1930’s the Shingeki movement was related to the Japanese Communist Party (JCP), but by the renewal of the US-Japan Mutual Defence Treaty or the ANPO in 1960, they showed a lack of political interest, thus disappointing the younger generation of artists. Also called Nichibei Anzen Hoshô Jôyaku, the treaty allowed for the assignment of American military forces to stay on in Japan after WW 2 for the alleged purpose of defending Japan, when in fact it was part of the Cold War military strategy.

Many of the artists then turned to the avant-garde movement and Hijikata. Hijikata, at this point, was soon to establish himself as an extraordinary artist, both on the stage and in real life.
Dealing with the tabooed theme of homosexuality, *Kinjiki* was scandalous and shocking to the bourgeois public; it was an offense to good taste and the rational common sense. Showing elements of eros and tanatos (death), it broke with the established rules for what was considered appropriate for the stage. Inspired by the teachings on the unconsciousness by Freud, it went back to the state of chaos, exposing topics that had been suppressed and hidden from view in modern society.

*Kinjiki* was choreographed for the 6th Annual Newcomers Performance of the All-Japan Art Dance Association. It lasted only for about ten minutes, depicting a young boy (Ohno Yoshito, Ohno Kazuo’s son) and a man (Hijikata) almost naked onstage. On stage, the boy simulates sex by smothering a live chicken between his thighs, expressing the sexual passion suppressed by modern man. The older man then makes advances towards the boy, but he flees into the darkness. The man follows and the soundtrack plays sounds of heavy sexual breathing. The audience was shocked and many people left in the middle of the performance. As a result of this performance, several members

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8 Motofuji 1990: 58: Hijikata to the left and Ohno Yoshito to the right
of the organisation threatened to resign if similar pieces should ever appear again. Hijikata answered by actually resigning himself a few days later, signalling Butoh’s break for the mainstream modern dance world.⁹

2.2 Butoh’s ideological and philosophical background

Hijikata’s widow Motofuji Akiko (1928-2003) explained Butoh’s background in the following terms:

“Our generation hoped to express our experience during the war, about which we could do nothing, through art and share it with our friends. I assume that Butoh was created by those who witnessed death and experienced the war.”¹⁰

To this Hijikata added his childhood memories from Akita, in the province of Tôhoku. He was a farmer’s son, the youngest of eleven children. At the time, Tôhoku was haunted by famines, killing thousands of people and forcing farmers to sell their daughters into prostitution. This became the destiny of one of Hijikata’s sisters. He also lost several brothers in the Sino-Japanese war. As a child, he was often left by himself to play while his parents were working in the fields. He enjoyed discovering nature and being close to the elements. He later used his rural background, displaying the life and works of the farmers in one of his most famous pieces; the Tôhoku Kabuki: shiki no tame no 27 ban (Tôhoku Kabuki: 27 nights for four seasons) in 1972. Here his intention was to show what the Tôhoku climate and the hard physical labour do to the bodies of the people. In a search for a more “natural posture” he lowered the dancer’s point of gravity into a bow-legged crouch (the ganimata), also referring to the farmers squatting

⁹ Sanders 1988: 149
¹⁰ Waguri 1988
in the fields. This style has now come to epitomize the Ankoku Butoh movement in general. However, even though Hijikata said he wanted to express the climate and the everyday struggle of the farmers in the Tôhoku region, his most famous female dancer, Ashikawa Yôko, said in an interview that he never mentioned it to the dancers during the rehearsals.\textsuperscript{11} The link to Tôhoku was an attempt to make it easier for the audience to understand, but it was perfectly possible to view the dance without having the Tôhoku culture in mind.

It was during this time that Hijikata started to work with women, and the names of Ashikawa Yôko, Kobayashi Saga and Nakajima Natsu (Kobayashi and Nakajima are still performing today) are some of the women worth a mention. \textit{Shiki no tame no 27 Ban} played for 27 days, which was, and still is, unusual for a Butoh performance. The performance gathered 8500 spectators altogether and received good critics, signifying Butoh’s establishment as a new form of performance art.

Hijikata’s works can briefly be separated into two phases: in the first period, starting with \textit{Kinjiki}, the dance form was an expression of the dark side of the unconscious inspired by the psychoanalytic theories of Freud. In his second period, starting in 1972 with \textit{Shiki no tame no 27 Ban}, the dance was heavily influenced by Surrealism and its exploration of the unconscious as well as expressing a nostalgia for the past symbolized by images from Hijikata’s childhood. At the same time the dance form became more advanced, and greater emphasis was placed on external elements such as the stage setting and lighting. The choreography for \textit{Shiki no tame no 27 Ban} is the closest Hijikata’s Butoh has come to a technique, setting the standard for the Hijikata school of

\textsuperscript{11} Morishita 2000: 61
Ankoku Butoh. Ankoku Butoh-ha\(^{12}\) held a number of performances altogether from *Kinjiki* in 1959 until they formally disbanded with the performance of *Tomato – Seiai Onchôgaku Shinanzue* (Tomato – Introductory Lessons in the Blessed Teachings of Erotic Love) in 1966. However, the dancing style remained being called Ankoku Butoh, until eventually the word “Ankoku” was replaced by “Butoh”. This was because many of the dancers felt that “Ankoku” (darkness) was too dark and pessimistic.

In Butoh, although the movements can be so minute they are hardly perceivable, the body and face are in a permanent state of transformation, constantly moving from one image to the next. According to Kobayashi Saga, Butoh is “non-muscular”, meaning that it is danced in the space between the muscles. “The pit of the stomach”, the “spaces between the fingers” and “inside the eyes and the mouth” are the examples she gives\(^{13}\).

Butoh has always been an enigmatic dance form, and the closest Hijikata has ever come to explain Butoh is by quotes such as “When I begin I wish I were crippled – even though I am perfectly healthy – or rather that I would have been better off born a cripple, that is the first step towards Butoh.” He further states that “In other forms of dance, the movements are derived from a fixed technique; they are imposed from the outside and are conventional in form. In my case, it is the contrary, my dance is far removed from conventions and techniques… it is the unveiling of the inner life”.

Hijikata’s last stage appearance was with Dairakudakan in 1973, after this he dedicated himself to choreography, mostly for his female Butoh company, *Hakutôbo*, as well as for other dancers such as Ohno Kazuo, for whom he did *Admiring la Argentina* in 1977 and *My mother* in 1981.

\(^{12}\) “ha” means “group”, or “school”  
\(^{13}\) Kobayashi Saga workshop 17.10.04
2.3 Ankoku Butoh

Ankoku Butoh (until 1966 it was called “Ankoku Buyō”) can in short be defined as some kind of anti-dance, rebelling against all the conceptions of dance of that time. Not only did Butoh want to break with all the former dance forms; it also wanted to go back to a time before the term “dance” was invented, to a time when the body was still struggling in vain to stand on its feet. It is not about mastering a technique, but rather a spontaneous desire to dance, just like a child unhindered by social conventions. This means that Butoh is happening in what the psychoanalyst Lacan calls the Imaginary order\(^\text{14}\), at the time when the child identifies itself with the mother, and there is a direct and unhindered relation between signifier and signified. When the child reaches the famous “Mirror stage”, he learns to distinguish between the Other and the Self, and as he enters into the language system and learns to name the things, the direct relations words-things is being lost forever, together with their universality.

Following this, Butoh is born on the inside, within the individual bodies instead of studying certain postures and movement patterns. It is about discovering a unique dance technique, unlimited by athleticism and youth, letting the body talk through the means of the flesh, without the intervention of the rational mind. As the classical dance training makes one ballerina out of ten dancers, Butoh makes ten individual dancers out of ten persons\(^\text{15}\). Thus, Butoh is a non-conformist dance.

Butoh scholar Paul Roquet lists four ideological backgrounds for Ankoku Butoh\(^\text{16}\)

\(^{14}\) Sarup 1993: 30  
^{15}\) Motofuji 1990: 38  
^{16}\) Roquet 2003: 53
1. Our experience of the world is usually mediated through the habitual interpretations of the intellect, which is the product of pervasive socialisation. This is especially true in modern societies, which have foolishly attempted to separate the mind from the body and so alienated us from the natural cycles of birth and death, aggregation and dissolution.

2. Socialization alienates us from a fluid and natural relationship with our surroundings. Destroying this socialization and learning to move from a more open awareness brings one back with the natural law. (...) This means quieting the discriminating intellect and raising sensory awareness, so that the dancer is fully sensitive to all stimuli that reach the body and is able to respond to these stimuli fully and non-judgementally. This stimuli is the source of all Butoh movement and includes a) the surrounding environment, and b) imagery (body memory) pulled out by the mind (by the Butoh-fu).

3. Building sensitivity to the surrounding environment and the inner conditions of the body, the Butoh dancer is able to tap into a universal consciousness, bridging the gap between ‘self’ and ‘other’. This is a move from an individual body to a "community body"(in Hijikata disciple Kasai Akira’s terminology), an “ecological, integrated way of being in the world”.17

4. The Butoh audience picks up a) the physical transformation occurring onstage, and b) the non-dualistic structure of Butoh performance, leading to heightened sensitivity and a non-dualistic mode of awareness that parallels the dancer’s experience onstage.

Butoh scholar Vicki Sanders goes as far as to compare Butoh to Zen Buddhism, saying that Butoh takes place in a mu no bashō, (a place of nothingness) where the mushin (no mind) prevails.18 In order to reach this state, the rational mind must stay out of the way; the body should be empty, just like a vessel (utsuwa). The dancer becomes nothing (mu) in order to become something (nani). This “something” was originally given through the use of the Butoh-fu (see section 2.5). Exactly the same way of thinking can be found in the shaman dance, where the body is emptied of its own personality, in order for the

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17 Fraleigh 1999: 230
18 Sanders 1988: 159 See also section 1.1
spirits to take possession of the body (see section 2.4). Amagatsu Ushio, the founder of Sankaijuku, explains Butoh “as a style where the body enters a state of perfect balance between life and death, between human reality and the unknown.” This has also been called the “the dead body” to which Hijikata refers to in his famous quote: “Butoh is a corpse standing straight up in a desperate bid for life”. The corpse is an object; he does not have a mind of his own any longer, but has become a part of the universal consciousness. Hijikata wanted to tear down all the common notions of dance, both Japanese and Western, and like the historical avant-garde, reach back towards a premodern time, where one first of all had to learn how to stand before one could learn how to dance, that is why Hijikata developed ganimata, where the dancers should picture themselves as if they have razor blades on the inner soles of their feet. This pose makes them see the world from the point of view of insects and small animals. Originating with shiki no tame no 27 ban, Hijikata also emphasized that it was developed to illustrate the natural body of the farmers working in the fields and carrying heavy burdens on their backs. The Butoh dancers do not try to defy gravity as the dancers in the classical tradition, but rather accepts that they are constantly pulled towards the ground, and are often seen sitting down or writhing about on the floor.

Observing the dancers expressionless eyes we are able to understand the meditative, trance-like condition in which they allow themselves to reach into. Keeping the eyes half-closed also makes the dancers able to look both inside themselves and at the surroundings at the same time. When the mind is emptied, a state of hyper-sensitivity is reached, which the dancer Tanaka Min explains: “When I am dancing I can think and feel more than usual. If I continued this awareness all the time, I would be crazy, it’s
like a dream.” Butoh is an intellectually demanding dance form, according to Nakajima Natsu, as the word “Ankoku” can be replaced with “spirituality”. She suggests that “when I examine in retrospect, my path over the past thirty years, I feel that I did not take up dance in particular, but rather, I have borrowed the “field of the body” to go on a spiritual journey”. At the same time, theatre director Peter Brook also expresses in Conference of the Birds that the goal in every Japanese art form is of a spiritual nature, and not only mastering a technique.

2.4 Influences on Butoh

Hijikata was influenced by both the popular origins of Noh and Kabuki and by Western modern dance, especially German Expressionist dance. Just like the Butoh dancer, the Noh actor empties his body in order to fill it with the meaning of the play. (The Western acting method is traditionally based on creating a second personality adding it to your own.) Yūgen, the beauty principle of Noh, is defined as a “deep, mysterious, dark inner core of transcendent beauty, revealed through a sublimely elegant performance.” It is also about holding intense energy in check. Hijikata took this search for subtlety and elegance and turned it up-side-down, showing exactly what centuries of aesthetic overlay and institutionalisation had hidden from view. The built-up energy is let out in a violent ritual, the uncontrollable Id taking over the rational self. One way of showing what was behind the social mask was “to expose the underbelly”. Butoh was famously striving to expose the “body that has been

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19 Sanders 1988: 159
20 Nakajima 1997: 2
21 Heilpern 1977: 181
22 Sorgenfrei 1998: 18
23 Sanders 1988: 148
robbed,” meaning that the rational mind has alienated man from his primal instincts. By taking back some of the original energy and instinctual movements in dance, the dancer should reach the real self. It is suggested that one way to achieve this would be through the means of violence and sacrifice. In *Hijikata Tatsumi to Nihonjin: Nikutai no Hanran* (Hijikata Tatsumi and the Japanese: The Revolt of the Flesh) from 1968, Hijikata throws off his white kimono signifying the rational mind, revealing nothing underneath but a golden phallus. His dance is violent and uncontrolled before he kills a rooster by breaking its neck just like in a primitive ritual of sacrifice.

Butoh was also looking back to the pre-Meiji Restoration period (before 1868) when Kabuki served as an outlet for negative energy. At the time it was a popular theatre form, depicting everything from the people living on the margins of the society to the ruling

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24 Klein 1988: 33
25 Picture from www.hijikata-tatsumi.com 15.09.05
classes. The faults and mischief of the latter was often exposed and ridiculed. The name “Kabuki” actually stems from the archaic verb “kabuku”, meaning “off-kilter”, “skewed”, or “perverse”. After 1868, however, the flamboyance and decadence was removed in order to “raise the moral standards of Kabuki”26.

A further influence on the development of Butoh was that of Hijikata’s dance teacher, Masumura Katsuko. Masumura lived in Akita where Hijikata grew up. She was a disciple of the German Expressionist-influenced dancer Eguchi Takaya, which helps explain Hijikata’s interest in German Expressionist dance forms and thus, its influence on Butoh. Eguchi and his wife studied with Mary Wigman in Germany from 1931 to 1933. Wigman claimed that classical dance was incompatible with modern dance and she emphasized a spontaneous dance with a dramatic use of gestures, celebrating the human instinct and the irrational mind. Her dance could be quite violent and related to such universal themes as life and death.

26 Klein 1988: 13-14
In the same tradition Butoh also explored the world of eroticism and violence, further exposing tabooed themes such as sexuality, death and insanity; topics that had been hence hidden from view since modernisation. In the current Butoh performances the dancers often appear naked on the stage, which can both be regarded as a rejection of the system, and an affirmation of the body. However, it should be kept in mind that nakedness is also a costume, which, according to Schechner, “turns the inside out, or projecting into the surfaces of the body events of the depth”28. In contemporary society, nudism in a sexualized context is ubiquitous, treating the body as merchandise. Early man celebrated nakedness and fertility, but with the introduction of the “modern” religions and the abandonment of the mythologies, sexuality was considered impure and should therefore be hidden from view. The avant-garde, in its search for a natural state

27 Picture of Mary Wigman from http://waynesweb.ualr.edu/ExpressionisticDance.htm 15.09.05
28 Schechner 1994 B: 87
of being, shows that the body can have other significances, which are often of a symbolic nature. At the same time, it represents not only innocence and vulnerability, but also imperviousness, such as the Gaulish Gaesatae going to war stark naked, invoking magical protection. Nakedness to frighten off demons is also a common theme in folk Europe. However, in medical circumstances the naked body is regarded with clinical detachment, even though it is mostly eroticized, recalling rituals of fertility and cults of the vulva and the phallus. Furthermore, being naked also seeks to restore the “natural body”, breaking free from all the social conventions and bodily restrictions. It is simply about showing “who you are”, and not “who you would like to be”.

Other sources of inspiration to Hijikata were European dancer Rudolf Laban (1879-1958) and Russian ballet dancer Vaslav Nijinsky (1890-1950). It can be stated that Laban liberated the dancers from the pain of the classical tradition of dancing en pointe, further lowering the dancer’s gravity point, an element which Hijikata pursued. Nijinsky, on the other hand, is known for scandalous performances such as The Rite of Spring and The Afternoon of a Faun, which included a bestial sacrifice of a virgin and a “masturbation” scene.

2.5 The Butoh-fu

The originality in Hijikata’s work can be found in the lack of a linear story, a fixed

29 Schechner 1994 B: 93. This statement is incompatible with postmodern philosophy and proves Schechner’s position as an avant-garde theatre director. According to postmodern theory, man has lost touch with his “real self”, there is only role-playing and gaming.

30 Laban's parents were Hungarian, but his father's family came from France, and his mother's family was from England.
dance technique and the use of music accompanying the dance. Except for the faint sound of a harmonica playing, *Kinjiki* didn’t have any kind of musical accompaniment, but later Hijikata used all kinds of musical styles within the same dance, which still characterizes Butoh today. However, musical accompaniment is not necessary for the dance; very often we see that the body moves against the rhythm of the music, which can run the gamut from classical music to disco, including sounds from nature, such as wind, thunder, waves, etc.

Hijikata was inspired by such “decadent” authors as Jean Genet, Comte de Lautréamont and Marquis de Sade. Like Genet, he applied the *negative-affirming principle*\(^\text{31}\) to his work, finding beauty in what was generally regarded as ugly, and therefore, not brought forth. He emphasized what had generally been regarded as a handicap in dance, like one of his legs being longer than the other, and the fact that he had a stiff body which was unsuited for the techniques of classical ballet. He also embraced his Tōhoku origins and his Akita dialect which was considered rude. Together with his troupe, the Asbestos-kan, he lived on the edge of society just like the performing artists during the Edo period (1603-1867) had lived in restricted places, isolated from the “civilized” world. At the time, the theatres were often to be found in the pleasure district, and the actors were often working as prostitutes on the side. By living as outsiders, Hijikata and his disciples refused to adapt themselves to the structure of modern society. They were taking odd jobs during the daytime and rehearsing during the night time. By holding other occupations at the same time, the dancers deepened their understanding for their art, as well as putting themselves in touch with the outside community. Hijikata also made some of his female dancers work as cabaret dancers (often in places frequented by

\(^{31}\) Kurihara 1996: 26
American soldiers) in order to build a sense of detachment from the body. By emptying the body of emotional attachment he created “dead bodies” which he could use to fill with his Butoh-fu. The more strenuous the lifestyle, the better equipped the dancers were to give up their attachment to the body and achieve the emptiness of the “dead body” on stage.32

In the beginning, Hijikata mostly worked with male dancers, such as Ohno Kazuo and his son Ohno Yoshito, Kasai Akira, Ishii Mitsutaka, Tamano Koichi, Yamamoto Moe and Waguri Yukio. Marô Akaji, the founder of Dairakudakan, never formally joined Hijikata’s Studio Asbestos, but they were close friends, sharing the common viewpoint of “asserting that the body had no limits, but is draped and propelled forwards by ancient ghosts”.33 Amagatsu Ushio, the leader of Sankaijuku, was originally a member of Dairakudakan, until he broke away in 1975, forming his own Butoh company. Bishop Yamada was also a member of Dairakudakan in the early years, until he moved to Hokkaido and formed Hoppô Butoh-ha. The forth member of the early Dairakudakan worth a mention is Murobushi Kô. In the period from 1980 to 1985 he choreographed the works of the critically acclaimed all-female Butoh company Ariadone no kai, before he formed his own company, Kô & Edge, in 2000.

With the exception of Ohno Kazuo, all of them are still performing today. Ohno Kazuo is now 99 years old34 and was still active until a couple of years ago. When he was in high school he saw a performance by the Spanish Flamenco dancer Antonia Mercé aka La Argentina. He was so moved by her dance, to the point where he was convinced that

32 Roquet 2003: 41
33 Program notes by Bonnie Sue Stein for the 2001 Dairakudakan guest performance in Michigan
34 He turned 99 years old the 27th of October 2005
she was a part of the “creation of heaven end earth”\textsuperscript{35}, a process which is still continuing. From that very day in 1929, he says that she has been living inside his body, which he claims resulted in the creation of \textit{Admiring La Argentina} 48 years later, in 1977.

For Ohno, the individual consciousness is so closely connected with the universal consciousness that he believes that the dead people go on living inside him. Since life and death are interconnected, there is no difference between this world and the afterworld, he says.

Although Hijikata is said to be the architect of Butoh, Ohno is part of its creative force, as it has often been said that Butoh developed through the coming together of opposite forces, Ohno being the light, and Hijikata the darkness.\textsuperscript{36}

After the break-up in 1966 Hijikata shifted focus and started to work with female dancers such as Ashikawa Yōko, Kobayashi Saga and Nakajima Natsu. Ashikawa was his main dancer and her troupe was called Hakutôbo (white peach).

Butoh scholar Kurihara argues that Hijikata became interested in working with women because they were further away from mainstream society than men, placing them on the

\textsuperscript{35} “tenchi souzou”; the words frequently recur in \textit{sora wo tobu} (1999)
\textsuperscript{36} Tanemura 1993: essay by Butoh critic Gôda Nario
\textsuperscript{37} \textit{Seitai Onchôgaku Shinanzue} Motofuji 1990: 154
fringes of society together with the sick, the mad and the dead. This meant to Hijikata that they were closer to the instinctive irrationality that he was searching for in his dance. Hijikata repeatedly said that his dead sister was living on inside of him, and Kurihara further says that this is the reason that Hijikata let his hair grow, wore a woman’s kimono and started to use female language at the time.38

The Butoh-fu39 was developed by Hijikata as a method of teaching choreography. According to the Butoh dancer and former Hijikata disciple Waguri Yukio, the technique is to “physicalize images through words”40. Hijikata was inspired by modernist painters such as Odilon Redon, Pablo Picasso, Francis Bacon, Gustav Klimt, Hans Richter, Egon Schiele, and Salvador Dali among others. He cut out drawings from art books and pasted them into his scrapbook before he then found his unique way of comprehending the drawings with words and phrases, usually of a surrealistic nature. With these phrases he then directed his pupils at the Studio Asbestos.

In Butoh ka-den41, Waguri explains that when the everyday self was shed and the image-loaded language affected the body, the dancers delve deep into their unconscious and find their own, individual response to each Butoh-fu. He says that it is important that this happens unmediated by the rational mind. The result is an impromptu dance, differing from dancer to dancer. He further emphasizes that each dancer extracted parts of Hijikata’s spoken choreography and made notes of their own, and that there are no basic movements in Butoh like the “pas” (steps) in classical ballet. He also mentions the fact that some of the new dancers of the Studio Asbestos did not have any previous

38 Kurihara 1996: 72-74
39 Butoh-notations
40 Waguri 1988
41 Waguri refers to Zeami’s Fushikaden, an outline of the aesthetics of the Noh theatre
physical training and that this was one of the reasons for the development of the technique of the Butoh-fu.

Waguri has structured his own Butoh-fu into seven worlds in, although it is a paradox to organize something as formless as Butoh. As already mentioned, Butoh’s primary goal was to avoid categorisation, but it appears that many of the Butoh dancers (particularly of the first and second generation) wished to systematize and structuralize Butoh in admiration of and as a sign of respect for their teacher.

The seven worlds mentioned by Waguri in the Butoh ka-den are: 1: the World of Anatomy, 2: the World of Burnt Bridges, 3: the World of Walls, 4: the World of Birds and Beasts, 5: the World of Flowers, 6: the World of the Neurology Ward, and finally 7: the World of Abyss. The different worlds develop from being “shapeless, wet and dark”, then going through the “round, more distinctly formed and drier” worlds, to the worlds where the “form is decomposed into particles and nerves, losing its outline as it is melting into space”.

Examples of Butoh-fu from each world:

1. “Pus and flower of epilepsy”
   “Ear walk”
   “Leper hospital”
   “Behind the mask”
2. “Person at the war-ravaged city”
3. “Ghost holding a baby”
   “You live because insects eat you”
   “The materials walk”
   “Things the body remembers when I stood against the wind”
4. “A heron crying in the light”
   “’Tsuru’, the Japanese crane”
5. “The blind girl”
   “Hanako basked in light from behind her”
   “Pollen”
“Peony petals”
6. “See through the crystal”
   “The nerve walk”
   “The appearance of the God Maya made of nerves”
7. “Space”
   “The reflection of being watched and being deprived of the soul”
   “Flowers of light”
   “Mechanism of the person blowing thread from his mouth”
   “Women in ukiyo-e\(^{42}\) have become ghosts”

Many different Butoh-fu were then put together to form a dance. As mentioned earlier, the dance was characterised by a constant flow of movement, the dancers’ bodies ceaselessly metamorphosing from one Butoh-fu to another.

A further characteristic of Butoh is that the dancers traditionally paint their bodies white, and there are a number of theories on why they do this. Just like the distorted bodies, the white body paint showed the hopelessness of the war victims. A more trivial explanation, according to Ohno, is that the dancers in the early days wanted to cover up the fact that they were technically immature\(^{43}\), and Motofuji further mentions that the paint was used as a desire to cover up the scars which were caused by an accident with a melting furnace Hijikata had when he was working at a factory.\(^{44}\) More seriously she also argues that the white paint signified the ashes from cremated bodies\(^{45}\). In any case, it has strong similarities to the Kabuki makeup, consisting of a white base on which colored lines, kumadori, are painted. The kumadori signifies the character’s sex and his or hers status in society. Removing these significations leaving only the base shows the

\(^{42}\) Japanese woodblock prints from the Edo period
\(^{43}\) Klein 1988: 47
\(^{44}\) Motofuji 1990: 31
\(^{45}\) Harada 2004: 40
loss identity in contemporary society, and at the same time refers to a universal similarity among all living creatures; humans, animals and insects. In an interview with Asian Week Tamano Koichi declares that: “We paint our bodies white to provide clear, uncluttered canvas for physical manifestations of agony, ecstasy - the whole spectrum.”

Shaving their heads (and sometimes the eyebrows) at the same time, the dancers reach a state beyond sex, age, race or gender. Lastly, the painting turns the body into an *object*, allowing the dancers to alienate themselves from their daily bodies, becoming *material* which can be molded.

It is interesting to see how the white makeup comes off during the performance, often surrounding the dancers with a fine white mist. It can also be interpreted as the stage works as a canvas on which the dancers use their bodies as paintbrushes, smearing the white make-up all over the stage floor.

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46 [www.AsianWeek.com](http://www.AsianWeek.com) 21.01.05: *The Big Bang of Bay Area Butoh*

47 In Japanese Butoh only the men do this
3 Method of analyzing Butoh - Phenomenology

With practice anybody can learn the steps of a folk dance, but becoming a butoh performer demands a lot more than that." 48

3.1 What is Phenomenology?

Dance is often said to be a preverbal art form, communicating feelings directly through the body where words and language are insufficient. In other words, phenomenologist philosophy emphasizes dance’s ability to go behind the words and to express man’s basic instincts and desires on which the French phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty calls the primordial level 49. I chose to take a phenomenological view on Butoh because the historical avant-garde reproaches language for repressing our basic instincts, and because the Butoh dancers exactly seek to express this dark side of man, a place where elements of eros and tanatos are hiding, through the means of the flesh.

Consequently, phenomenology and Butoh also share common traits because they are both facing paradoxes: the former seeks to verbalize something which is pre-verbal and therefore cannot be put into words; the latter develops a technique against its will.

Twentieth-century phenomenologists blame Descartes for separating body and mind with his famous quote “I think, therefore I am”. They accuse him of suggesting that the self was purely a thinking being that could exist independently of a body. This only

48 Ohno 2004: 24
49 Fraleigh 1987: 6
served to strengthen the religious thought of the flesh as sinful in need to be controlled by the soul, which was superior to it. This dualism was common in Western culture until Descartes received massive criticism from existentialists and phenomenologists alike for ignoring the felt body, also called the tactile-kinesthetic body, in the conception of the self. Merleau-Ponty namely insists that the world is perceived through the body. He viewed the body as fundamentally active and meaningful, not merely as a passive instrument of the soul. Existential phenomenology further maintains an attitude of being in the world, emphasizing that the body is something one is, and not something one has. How the body and the self are formed depends on our lived experiences in the world. Dancer and scholar Sondra Horton Fraleigh calls the phenomenological body the “lived body”. She deliberately uses the term “lived” and not “experienced”, which she believes is of a mental nature, when talking about the phenomenological body.

In rationalised and structuralised dance forms like classical ballet, every gesture and movement can easily be put into words, but by learning steps that do not come naturally to the body one is objectifying it. On the other side, a nondualistic dance is a direct form of communication; the body is talking directly to the spectators on a physical level, regardless of social and cultural borders. Since what is seen is received in an instinctive manner, the phenomenological dance is likewise of a universal nature, meaning that it is not limited by language or the intellect.

The body cannot be reduced to a mere tool, an object; it is the subject of dance itself. When the Butoh dancer is naked onstage, i.e. uncovering his flesh, he symbolizes that he is in fact exposing his inner life, and that the body and the dance are one; they are

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50 Merleau-Ponty 1994
51 Ibid: 13
inseparable. The phenomenological dance is capable of creating new meanings and to induce sentiments in the audience which do not necessarily have word correlates.

In response to the alienation of the body from the soul, phenomenology seeks to restore a holistic view of the body. Sadly, people in post-capitalist societies are still alienated from their bodies, with the mind being regarded as being of primary value. History also shows that the negating of the body has resulted in neurological diseases which will be further discussed in the chapter on “The abandoned body and its shadows” (see section 3.3).

3.2 The materialisation of the body and the traditional Eastern body concept

According to Paul Roquet, modern society has “foolishly attempted to separate the mind from the body and so alienated us from the natural cycles of birth and death, aggregation and dissolution”\textsuperscript{52}. By dealing with these themes, Butoh appeals for a more humanistic understanding of the body. Modern man no longer listens to his body directly, only to what modern science tells him about it. Together with industrialisation and the apparition of consumer society, the body is de-humanised and fragmentalised. Modern medicine relates sickness to a certain body part and repairs it in isolation from the rest of the body; either surgically with tools or orally with pills. We have stopped listening to our bodies, and instead regard it as a machine made up of isolated parts which can easily be repaired or even changed (in the case of organ transplantation).

\textsuperscript{52} Roquet 2003: 53, see also section 2.3
Alienated from our organic selves, we manipulate the body for practical reasons without considering the long-term consequences. Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, the author of several books on phenomenology and dance, sees a parallel between the dissection of humans which became common in the sixteenth century and the beginning of the materialisation of the body. She also makes us aware of the fact that an examination of a dead body tells us nothing of the living body.

Today “taking care of oneself” is understood as trying the latest dieting, workouts and cosmetics, although this is not always compatible with the concept of the organic body, which takes the body’s inner conditions into consideration as well. Consequently, Butoh seeks to readdress this alienation of the physical body from the spiritual self.

For instance, Johnstone suggests that such inspiration for readdressing the connection of body/self can be found in traditional Greek medicine which she says took a holistic approach to the patient’s health. This is similar to the principle of homeopathy today; where the whole of the body and the spirit/mind is dealt with, not just the localised disease. The homeopath spends a considerable amount of time with his patient in order to get a unified picture of his patient’s medical as well as personal history.

Similarly, the Orient has a long tradition of regarding the body as a whole, seen in treatments like for example acupuncture. Dating as far back to year 200 BC, acupuncture stimulates the ki-energy flowing through the whole body via the network of the ki-meridian. Although there are no anatomical connections between the places where the needles are inserted and the places where the change is occurring, its effect has been proven on x-rays. It is interesting to note that the ki-energy can only be

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53 Johnstone 1992: 138
54 Johnstone 1992: 58
detected in a living being, and not in a corpse.

However, during the Meiji restoration between 1866 and 1869, Japan sent students abroad to study conventional Western medicine, which they brought back to Japan. This period marks the time from which the traditional holistic approach to medicine began to evolve into a more de-humanised approach, in which the body and mind/spirit were separated. These students adopted much of the Western ideology together with the Cartesian dualism alienating the body in favour of the mind. Still, the frequent use of the word *ki* (spirit) in Japanese everyday language marks their belief in what the conventional school calls “alternative medicine”.

The contemporary Japanese philosopher Yasuo Yuasa illuminates the traditional Japanese body perspective which is quite different from the way the Occidentals view the body, by combining Merleau-Ponty’s theories found in *Phenomenology of Perception* with depth psychology and neurology.\(^5\):

\(^5\) Johnstone 1992: 48; Shigenori Nagatomo: *An Eastern Concept of the Body: Yuasa’s Body-Scheme*
Yuasa’s body-scheme:56

This model illustrates how the traditional Japanese perception of the world avoids dualism by connecting the conscious mind with the unconscious, further believing that the unconscious can be found in the field of the body. Yuasa explains the interrelation of the three circuits in the following way:

The sensory stimulus received from the external world enters the first “external sensory-motor circuit”, that is the uppermost surface layer, and passing through the second circuit of coenesthesia, reaches the third emotion-instinct circuit that is the lowest layer where the emotional response of pleasure or pain is generated. This response returns to the second circuit, and eliciting its movement, it further activates the first circuit, which is expressed as a bodily movement in the external world.57

As we can see, the first circuit connects the body to the external world through the sensory organs. The second circuit is subdivided into the “circuit of kinesthesia” and the “circuit of somesthesia”. The former deals with kinesthetic movements and is closely connected to the first circuit, the “external sensory-motor circuit”. The habitualisation of movement patterns happens on this level. When the body is conceived mechanistically,

56 Ibid: 54
57 Johnstone 1992: 53
the training of a dancer is equal to the training of the body, meaning the drilling of a certain movement pattern, thus leads to the habitualisation of the body in a certain direction. According to Yuasa, the movements are stored in the “automatic memory system” 58, an idea which is derived from Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the “habit body”; meaning that the body learns and knows. Riding a bike or driving a car are good examples of the habitualisations of movement patterns; once they are learned, they are stored in our automatic memory system. He further argues that the goal of Western sports (and dance) is exactly to “master certain techniques for moving the body through training. Enhancing the capacity of the second circuit in turn heightens the level of activity in the first circuit” 59.

This reflects the Cartesian philosophy of the superior mind: the mind tells the body what to do, and the body automatically responds to the command. What Descartes did not take into consideration, is that the automatic memory system is on the border of the unconscious; meaning that the body learns and then stores the data in the motile memory. As we can see, it is exactly between these two circuits that the problem of the dichotomy of mind and body arises.

The second subdivision within the circuit of coenesthesis, the “circuit of somesthesis”, concerns the internal organs and their connection to the respective nerves. When a person is in a normal and healthy condition, the circuit of somesthesis recedes into the background of the circuit of kinesthesis and the external sensory-motor circuit, meaning that its sensations are only vaguely perceived. It is interesting to note that the Butoh dancer Kobayashi Saga tries to build a sensitivity to the inner conditions of the body in

58 Ibid: 51
59 Ibid: 54
her workshops by encouraging the students to look inside themselves and try to feel the operation of the internal organs, such as the stomach and the digestive organs. She is in turn influenced by Franz Anton Mesmer (1734-1815), who invented the concept of “animal magnetism”. He interpreted health as the free flow of life through a number of channels in the body. Thus, illness was caused by obstacles, blocking some of these channels. As a conductor of animal magnetism, he believed he had the power to cure the illness by simply touching the patient’s body. This led to the development of hypnosis towards the end of the eighteenth century, which contains similarities to shamanistic rituals in which the shaman (and sometimes other participants as well) reaches a condition of trance when he is being possessed by a god or a demon.

The third circuit is the “emotion-instinct circuit”. Yuasa argues that this level has never been included in any body-schemes so far. Here, Yuasa’s philosophy deviates from the one of Descartes. While the latter insisted that emotions, such as anger and joy, were localised in the mind, Yuasa maintains that “the centrifugal path of this circuit sends out to the distal internal organs those stimuli which the brain receives from the external world vis-à-vis the sensory organs, converting them into an emotional response (i.e. pleasure or pain)” , meaning that the emotions take over the whole body, and not just the mind.

The “emotion-instinct circuit” is closely connected with the “circuit of somesthesis” when it comes to the working of the internal organs as well as the basic instincts. Yuasa explains it in the following quote: “This circuit has a very close relationship with human

60 Workshop attended 17.10.04
61 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mesmer 16.09.05 Franz Mesmer
62 Johnstone 1992: 53
instincts such as sexual desire and appetite. For this reason, I call it emotion-instinct circuit.”63 The internal organs and instincts mainly operate on the unconscious level and don’t manifest themselves in the consciousness before the apparition of a desire, which needs to be filled.

According to the theories of psychotherapy, suppressed desires may manifest themselves as stress. Stress is a sensation of loss (negating the body can be experienced as loosing it) which in turn manifests itself in grief. In his essay *Life under Stress: From management to Morning*64, Robert Kugelmann concludes that:

> Stress is a metaphor for grief, for a specific type of grief that could not exist before the modern world of deadlines, skylines and EEG lines. Stress names, albeit in a distorted manner, the grief of living with the constant loss of the familiar.65

As a matter of fact, Eastern meditation techniques such as the development of an inner awareness to examine the body, have been a source of inspiration in the development of Western stress management exercises66.

When Nakajima Natsu once said that she “has borrowed the field of the body to go on a spiritual journey”67, it was exactly the Occidental dualism linking spirituality to the mind that she criticized. In his essay on Yuasa, Nagatomo indicated that in contrast to the training methods of Western sports, which do not reach the third level, or the emotion-instinct circuit, the goal of Eastern self-cultivation methods such as martial arts, archery and the tea-ceremony is to “control the pattern of emotional response”68.

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63 Ibid: 52
65 Johnstone 1992: 113
66 Ibid: 115
67 Nakajima 1997
68 Johnstone1992: 55
Through the act of habituating the body, it is possible to control the function of the “emotion-instinct circuit”. These exercises do not depend on the will to control the emotions, but by correcting the modality of the body it is possible to correct the modality of the mind.\(^69\) (emphasis added)

The process is explained by Yuasa in the following:

> The information entering the first external sensory-motor circuit reaches the third emotion-instinct circuit, and an emotional response to this information ricochets back to the second circuit which \textit{habitualizes} the body, forming a definite passage among the three layers of these circuits.\(^70\)

Yuasa mentions breathing exercises, which are emphasized in all forms of Eastern training and self-cultivation methods, as an example of linking the conscious to the unconscious. Although breathing is done unconsciously in daily life, we have the capability to control it, and then in turn affect the emotions through the respiratory system on the level of the emotion-instinct circuit. An example is that anger can be controlled by controlling the rough and fast breathing accompanying it.

Under these three levels lies the unconscious, or what Yuasa calls the “circuit of unconscious quasi-body”. This stage is relevant in the study of Butoh because the dancers constantly try to dive into the unconscious when they are performing. The term “quasi” indicates that it does not have to do either with the subject-body or the object-body which to date has not been thoroughly investigated in the field of phenomenology. The whole point is that through various self-cultivation methods (including Butoh), it is possible to render the quasi-body visible. Using acupuncture again as an example, Yuasa argues that there is a mediation between the conscious and

\(^{69}\) Ibid: 55  
\(^{70}\) Ibid: 56
the unconscious through the flow of ki-energy. Its substance is not within our understanding, but the effect caused by the inserting of needles at the acu-points makes its presence incontestable. Furthermore, it links the mind and the body and cannot be explained by Descartes’s dualistic philosophy.

Finally, Yuasa mentions meditation as a means to reach into the unconscious:

When the level of activities of the first external sensory-motor circuit and the circuit of somesthesia is lowered in meditation, the autonomous function of the unconscious surfaces into awareness as “wandering thoughts and delusions”, that is, ki-energy appears as images.\(^{71}\)

Martial arts, in particular, attempts to “let the mind and ki-energy accord with each other”\(^{72}\). As mentioned earlier, Sanders indicates that Butoh occurs in a place of nothingness (\textit{mu no bashô}). This term is directly taken from Zen Buddhism, showing how the close connection between Butoh and meditation can be surmised.

In its pursuit of a oneness of body and mind, meditation is commonly understood as being performed seated, but Yuasa affirms that a meditative state can also be reached through dance and other forms of moving the body. The way of thinking that the training itself builds a strong mind and a deep awareness of the body, shows the emphasis placed on the process of training itself, and not just the performance results, which is common in traditional Western theatre.

\[^{71}\text{Johnstone 1992: 61}\]

\[^{72}\text{Ibid: 63}\]
3.3 The abandoned body and its shadows

In his essay *The Human Body as Historical Matter and Cultural Symptom*\textsuperscript{73}, Robert D. Romanyshyn, a clinical and cultural psychologist, illuminates the “history of the repressed living flesh”\textsuperscript{74}. According to Romanyshyn, it was not until the mid-nineteenth century when Jean-Martin Charcot and Sigmund Freud first brought Hysteria to light, that the existence of what Romanyshyn calls “the shadows of the abandoned body” was recognised. This condition was impossible to explain in terms of the dominant philosophy of Descartes.

With the invention of the linear perspective during the Renaissance, the Western cultural, historical and psychological world was transformed. Not only did it change the world of art, but it also laid the mathematical foundation for modern science and technology, leaving the religious consciousness of the Middle Ages behind. Romanyshyn cites art historian Samuel Edgerton as saying that the pursuit of the vanishing point culminates in the embarking on space explorations in the second half of the twentieth century.

In the first official study of perspective dating from 1435, *De Pictura* (On Painting), Leon Battista Alberti compares the canvas to a window through which the subject of painting is to be seen. However, by separating the onlooker from the world, he established a division between mind and body. Romanyshyn explains it in the following:

> The window as a condition for vision is an invitation to keep an eye upon the world, but also to lose touch with it. (...) The sound, touch, taste, and smell of the world

\textsuperscript{73} Johnstone 1992: 159; Robert D. Romanyshyn: *The Human Body as Historical Matter and Cultural Symptom*

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid: 169
are destined to become secondary qualities as increasing emphasis is placed upon what is visible, observable, measurable, and quantifiable.\textsuperscript{75}

Furthermore, with the dissection of human beings in the sixteenth century, emphasis was placed on the corpse instead of the living being, which meant that the muscles and the organs began to be simply defined in terms of their anatomical functions. In this way the story of the living flesh, or how the unity of body and mind works together in order to maintain the life processes, was forgotten. That is,

Within the space opened up by linear perspective vision, the history of the flesh has taken two distinct but related paths. There is the history of the corpse, of the abandoned body, which is a kind of official history, of that body which we uncritically index with the notion of reality. And there is an unofficial history, a kind of shadow history, which remembers the body of living flesh disguised, forgotten, or otherwise ignored in that official history. This latter history is a history of the repressed living flesh. It is the unconscious of the corpse.\textsuperscript{76}

\textsuperscript{75} Johnstone 1992: 162
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid: 169
Even though feminine characters dominate in the realms of the shadows of the abandoned body, they should be treated in terms of gender, not sex. The two levels run parallel to each other, with the lower one showing the bodies that often do not know how to conform to modern, patriarchal society where “masculine qualities” such as order, clarity and control rule. The upper level is characterised by such scenarios as a doctor regarding the human body from a distance when dissecting it, and an astronaut seeing the earth from a distance. On the lower level, the witches are the shadows of modern medicine because they were supposed to be in possession of supernatural powers that could not be explained by science. Today, space travel is the absolute control of the flesh and the supreme realisation of modern technology. On the other hand, in her obsessive counting of calories, the anorexic is the shadow of the astronaut or the body perfected as a machine. She believes that what she eats, and not how she

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77 Ibid: p. 170
eats, is relevant. In our defining of food as fatty and non-fatty, rich or poor in calories, we are objectifying it, further emphasizing the separation between mind and body. Romanyshyn concludes that the shadows of the abandoned body are “either burned as witches, imprisoned as madness, mesmerized and hypnotised into sleep, abandoned by their creators, diagnosed and treated by the scientific-medical complex, or otherwise silenced, ignored and relegated to the margins of history and society” (italics added).

78 Ibid: 174
79 Ibid: 171
3.4 Closing comment with regard on Butoh

The picture on the previous page shows Hijikata in front of an acupuncture chart on the set of “A la maison de M. Circe, Rose coloured dance”\(^8^0\). This highlights that the creators of Butoh did indeed encourage a return to a genuine Asian culture and philosophy (see chapter 2: The history of Butoh).

In many ways, Butoh similarly encourages a return to the field of the body. On the surface, the dancers simply invite people to develop a physical awareness in a society where there is very little room for physical activity. When Ohno Kazuo dances, he says that he puts himself in a trancelike state. He then delves into his subconscious where feelings of joy, remorse, terror and melancholia are hidden. When he has reached this level, his mind and his body are able to interact freely, thus overcoming the Cartesian dualism. Just like the theories of phenomenology, mentioned in the previous section, Butoh has a strong belief in the body and its potential; it lets the body talk, without the interruption of the rational mind.

Looking at Romanyshyn’s table of the abandoned body and its shadows, there is little doubt that Butoh represents the field of shadows and darkness. Butoh has often been called “surrealism of the flesh”, due to the Dadaist and Surrealist tendencies of dealing with the same themes of nostalgia and insanity present in the Western society where industrialisation and alienation proceeded at a high speed as well. As opposed to the rationalist industrialist society, Butoh speaks the language of the unconsciousness of the flesh; a realm where the universal myths of life and death are hidden. Hijikata’s *The

\(^{8^0}\) Nakatani 2003: 24
**revolt of the flesh** exposes all the pent-up energy that has been suppressed for centuries as a result of the negation of the body’s darker sides; its shadows. As a metaphor of the dissected corpse, Butoh shows images of death. However, the term “body” is not limited to the flesh and blood of this world; Butoh often pushes the perceived barriers between the realms of the living and the dead, showing the transmigration of the souls, and how the souls of the dead go on living in and around us, thereby making a performance that is larger-than-life.

It is interesting to note how Johnstone looks back towards early Western medical practice and Oriental medicine in order to avoid the alienation of the body. She insists that the body should be treated for what it is: a living, organic unity. Likewise, the avant-garde finds inspiration in primitive rituals as well as Oriental and African theatre; where the theatre ritual is part of a larger, communal ritual (see section 4.1). Contemporary society, where everything is digitalised and one push of a button is all it takes to eradicate the whole world, is their invisible enemy. French Surrealist playwright and poet Antonin Artaud wanted theatre to be a place where our suppressed feelings could be brought to life. In other words, he wanted theatre to leave the world of harmony behind, and go back to a state of chaos. In his own words, “renouncing psychological man, with his well-dissected character and feelings, and social man, submissive to laws and misshapen to religions and precepts, the Theater of Cruelty will address itself only to total man”\(^{81}\) (italics added). In his most famous work, *The Theatre and its double*, he sought to shatter the false reality which lay as a shroud over our perceptions by bringing the shadows of the abandoned body back into the theatre.

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\(^{81}\) Artaud 1958: 123
Butoh’s images of “the shadows of the abandoned body” shocked people at a time when dance was expected to be pleasing to watch. However, it signified a paradigm shift in the Japanese dance world, influencing the following generations of dancers and choreographers. Seen from a Marxist perspective, where art is merely a reflection of society, the display of violated and tortured bodies reflected the atrocities of the war, but postmodern theory does not allow for such a simplistic explanation. Adorno explains the “ugly” (he prefers to call it *dissonance*, as he believes that the term “ugly” is too naïve) as “what art rejected on its path towards autonomy.”  

He points out that the concept of the “ugly” originated in the separation of art from its archaic phase. In fact, elements of intoxication, sexual orgy, and the rending and devouring of sacrificial victims (including humans) were all natural elements of the notorious Dionysus rituals. As man became more sophisticated, this negative energy was tamed. However, the “ugly” was still present during all the years it was negated by the art world.

The ugly is an attack on the aesthetics of beauty. In his critique of aestheticism, German contemporary philosopher Wolfgang Welsch accuses traditional aesthetics for focusing on beauty alone, thereby neglecting other aesthetic values. He blames the embellishment of society in general, from “the individual’s appearances to the urban and public spheres and from economy through ecology” for destroying the quality of what is really beautiful. Saying that the aestheticization of society simply leads to mere *prettiness*, he calls the anaestheticization in art a “survival strategy”. Contrary to traditional Marxist theory, where ugliness produces the ugly, Welsch argues that the ubiquitous beauty is the actual reason that has caused the dissonance in the artworks. In

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82 Adorno 2004: 47  
83 Brockett & Hildy 2003: 14  
84 [http://www2.uni-jena.de/welsch/ 28.10.2004 Aesthetics beyond aesthetics](http://www2.uni-jena.de/welsch/)
this case the ugly becomes the content of art *because it is dissociated from life praxis.*

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85 Nakatani 2003:1
4 Theory

4.1 Richard Schechner: Performance theory

The historical avant-garde wanted to return to a time when life and art had not yet been separated. They criticized the alienation of man in the industrial society and the lack of person-to-person interaction which they claimed could still be found in communal societies. Therefore, Modern society was and still is a fragmented one: the workplace, the restaurant, the art gallery, the theatre and the family all being part of different spheres. According to such a perspective, with the development of an elite society, the people who could not compete were regarded as being outcasts. These people, living on the margins of modern society, became those members of society upon which Hijikata focused. The goal of the historical avant-garde movement was an attempt to overcome the fragmentation by reintegrating art into life. They wanted the theatre to be a collective celebration, including the audience just like in the rituals. According to Richard Schechner, the political and ideological goals of the avant-garde were as following:86

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>a whole person</th>
<th>not mind/body</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>families</td>
<td>not fragmented individuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>communities</td>
<td>not government vs. governed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jobs like play</td>
<td>not alienated work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>art where we are</td>
<td>not in museums far away</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>one world in peace</td>
<td>not wars and international rivalries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>human one with nature</td>
<td>not ecological warfare</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

86 Schechner 1994 A: 39
He further writes that the proscenium scene of the traditional theatre is the perfect model of capitalism: with the separation of the performers (sellers) and the spectators (consumers), it combines both the factory and the selling shop in one building. This means that the play is a commodity to be purchased, and the spectators are the consumers, paying for a ticket and buying a glossy program for the show. The theatre workers enter from the back door, so that the ticket-buying audience shall only view the perfected product. The stage is further separated from the house by the proscenium arch, emphasizing the division between the play and the real life. The backstage area is often cramped and resembles an industrial workplace while the area occupied by the audience is spacious and often gaudily decorated. The house is divided into different seats, the ones closest to the stage being the most expensive, available only for the wealthiest of the consumers. This kind of theatre is purely for entertaining; rapid scene shifts and coups de théâtre are used to increase the excitement and the realistic effect. During the play the stage is lighted while the lights are turned out in the house to make the audience feel like they are secretly watching the play through a fourth wall. In the intermission, the theatre workers do the scene shift while the audience have a glass of wine while discussing the play. When the play is over the actors take a bow and the audience applaud before they hurry home or to a nice restaurant. The competition for customers is fierce, and the different theatres use different means to attract the customers, such as advertising and hiring famous actors. This was traditionally the theatre of the bourgeoisie, and is still considered a necessary activity by the elite in order to be a cultural being.

On the other hand, in its pursuit to give back to the theatre some of the ritualistic aspects,
the environmental theatre of the avant-garde was originally “built in cheap hit-and-run
spaces, often out-of-the-way neighbourhoods – exemplifying a resistance and
alternative to the conglomerates”). Butoh artists also often perform in “found places”:
bars, cafes, clubs and outdoors where the space is used organically, not trying to change
its nature in order to transform and mould it into an arena for the display of the art.

Ever since Aristotle, the concept of mimesis has been decisive in the development of,
and the way we regard, theatre. Today, it is the common view that art is a representation
of life. The development of the traditional theatre runs parallel with the rationalisation
and refinement of society. This includes purification, and a removal of what is generally
regarded as offensive. Schechner compares the transformational process of turning life
into art, to the cooking process of preparing raw food into digestible forms. This is
also exactly what Artaud criticizes: he wants the theatre to return to the state of rawness,
and it should “bring into fashion the great preoccupations and great essential passions
which the modern theatre has hidden under the patina of the pseudocivilized man.”
This is the reason the historical avant-garde turned to tribal communities for inspiration,
where rituals still took part of everyday life. That is why the actor was often compared
to the shaman, making spiritual journeys on behalf of his people.

Similar to Artaud’s theories found in The Theatre and its double (1958), the role of the
theatre should be to change the whole structure of society. The experience should be like
a violent blow to the face, and as a result, the audience should respond in turn with its
own transformation, from a state of non-thinking to spiritual awakening. This clearly

87 Ibid: 164
88 Ibid: 38
89 Artaud 1958: 123
had the political intention of changing man and society into something better.

The use of the grotesque was one method Hijikata used in his attempt to reintegrate art into the daily life. By liberating man’s darker side, the dancers functioned as some sort of scapegoats for the audience who would feel a relief and a sense of purification by the end of the show. Even though in Butoh the grotesque images on the stage evoke a feeling of repulsion, the audience feels a sort of identification at the same time. It is based on the premise that civilized man has learned to control many instincts that guided him in earlier times, which means that the grotesque has been deliberately repressed; however it is still hidden in our unconsciousness. By applying the negative-affirming principle to his works, Hijikata showed the beauty of the grotesque.

The display of the raw and unfiltered energy on the stage established a more direct line of communication between the dancer and the audience. Freud famously claimed that man’s suppressed feelings needed to be recognized in order to avoid psychological traumas. The Butoh dancers use the field of the body to track the repressed consciousness. In order to avoid the interruption of the rational mind and let the body speak for itself, they make themselves empty, like a vessel. That is why the Butoh dancer, in his pursuit to physicalize painful images such as hatred and anger, doesn’t recall his own experiences, but rather calls upon a universal feeling of such emotions.

According to Schechner, performances can get at, and out, two sets of material simultaneously: “1) what was blocked and transformed into fantasy; 2) stuff from other channels that otherwise might have had a hard time getting expressed at all.” It is

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90 Schechner 1994 A: 231
this cathartic effect at which the avant-garde is aiming. That is why the dancers take on the role as scapegoats, and perform the act of releasing some of the negative energy on behalf of the spectators. This all happens in controlled circumstances on the stage, making sure that the act does not get out of hand. This redirection of frustration and aggression has a therapeutic effect which makes it especially significant in an era of upheaval, like in the sixties. This way the dance has the same purifying function as the collective celebrations of the primitive rituals.

Schechner demonstrates how the New Theater of the avant-garde relates more to ritual and play than to orthodox theatre in his “performance chart”\(^{91}\). I here intend to look at what, in the avant-garde tradition, distinguished Butoh as a ritual separating it from traditional theatre (and vice versa).

1. **The inclusion of the audience.** The ritual usually includes close contact with, or the involvement of the audience in some way or another. The goal of the

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\(^{91}\) Ibid: 13
historical avant-garde was similarly to make the theatrical performance part of a larger, communal experience in order to avoid the alienation and fragmentation mentioned above. The Butoh performance is a ritual when the dancers wish their performance to be efficacious\textsuperscript{92}; to permanently transform the consciousness of the audience. In order to do so, they traditionally stay in close contact with the audience by the means of using tight acting spaces; sometimes the theatres are no bigger than a living room. This establishes a direct line of communication with the audience, so that they are able to enter the universe created by the dancers, making them feel part of the performance. Some of the small theatres used by Butoh dancers today are limited to only 20 spectators. Furthermore, there is almost always a handout of an \textit{ankeeto} (from French: enquête, inquiry), asking the audience for their opinion and their impression of the performance, an \textit{aafutatôku} (aftertalk), where the performer(s) usually is (are) asked to talk about the background of the dance, about Butoh, and their relation with Hijikata. This makes the performance part of a larger scale event embracing more spectres of everyday life because the story of \textit{how} the performance is being made replace the story the performance itself would ordinary tell. In this case the audience is usually allowed to ask questions directly to the dancers as well. Schechner indicates that this is what the anthropologist Gregory Bateson calls “metacommunication”, signals whose subject of discourse is the relationship between the speakers”.\textsuperscript{93} Through this communication, the audience is included as the “speakers” in the theatrical event. Some small theatres also give parties at the end of the performance, where alcohol and light food is served, in order for

\textsuperscript{92} Ibid: 120
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid: 121
dancers, spectators and the staff at the theatre to come together and talk. Finally, many dancers give Butoh workshops, both in order to gain extra money and to let the audience into his or her world of dance. This is similar to the Dadaists “recipes” on how to make a Dada poem. This is a way of integrating the art into everyday life, making it possible for everybody to become an artist.

According to Schechner, there are two different types of audiences; the “integral audience”, and the “accidental audience”. The former go to the theatre because they have to, they attend from ritual need. The latter is a group of people who come to the theatre because the play has received good critics, or they have seen advertisements, etc. When the show is over they go home without trying to get in contact with the other spectators or the actors. This is the typical audience at what theatre director Peter Brook calls the “Deadly Theatre”.

A ritual is distinguished by its presence of an integral audience. The Butoh audience consists of both groups, but through the act of having receptions and parties after the shows; the dancers are trying to turn the whole audience into integral spectators.

Today, except for Sankaijuku and to a certain extent Dairakudakan, and solo dancers such as Kasai Akira and Tanaka Min (they have more or less moved into the domain of contemporary dance), Butoh is still quite marginal, and most of the spectators still go out of special interest. The audience mostly consists of dancers, art critics and students.

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94 Schechner 1994 A: 194
95 The stylization and codification of theatre that once used to be fresh and challenging.
2. *Improvisation.* The fact that a dance has been strictly choreographed is a sign of institutionalization; meaning that a fixed system of movement patterns has been deliberately put together into a dance. Improvisation emphasizes the *hic et nunc* quality of the dance because it makes the creational process of the dance visible. A new and unique dance is born every time. This way of working is comparable to the way of the shamans in the ancient times, where the use of *scripts* was common. In this sense, groups like Sankai Juku and Dairakudakan have been criticized for their elaborate choreography. Their goals are not compatible with the philosophy of phenomenology. Schechner differentiates between *drama* and *script.* The drama is “a written text, score, scenario, instruction, plan, or map”. The drama can further be transmitted from place to place, and from time to time by “messengers”; people unable to read, comprehend, or enact it. The script is “the basic code of events”, and must be transmitted from person to person; the transmitter cannot be a mere messenger, but must have an understanding for the script himself. The original goal of Butoh was to have no fixed technique (Hijikata developed the *method* of Butoh-fu late in his career), and this type of dance needs to be transmitted directly from master to pupil. This is because the Butoh-fu is different from the dance notation in, for example, classical ballet. The dancer filters the Butoh-fu through his own body, which is why the movements differ from person to person depending on how he or she interprets it. A Butoh teacher cannot tell a pupil how to move, his task is rather to help the latter develop a sensory awareness so that he or she will be open to the stimuli of the Butoh-fu.

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96 Ibid: 72
A script is something that pre-exists in any given enactment, which in the case of Butoh, is to express the surreal world of dreams and the darkness of the unconscious. Schechner links the tradition of using these scripts to non-literate communities. After the development of the language (the systematization of signified into signifiers, which resulted in a gap between language and meaning) the script was replaced by the written drama, and “communication replaced manifestation”. Therefore, “The doings of each dramatic production became a way of re-presenting and interpreting the words-of-the-drama.”

However, the active sense of scripts was preserved in popular entertainment, such as Commedia dell’arte in the West, and the Misemono and the Yose in Japan. Susan Klein describes the two latter as “loosely structured dance, usually erotically suggestive if not downright indecent.”(This can also be said about Commedia dell’arte, which also included improvised dialogue.) She quotes from Edward Seidensticker’s: Low City, High City:

…nothing is more striking than the juxtaposition of piety and pleasure, of gorgeous altars and grotesque ex-votos., of pretty costumes and dingy idols… Her are raree shows, penny gaffs, performing monkeys, cheap photographers, street artists, jugglers, wrestlers, life-sized figures in clay, vendors of toys and lollipops of every sort…

It is this chaotic atmosphere that the Butoh dancers often strive to recreate in their attempt to break with the distinction between “high” and “low” culture.

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97 This, of course, varies from dancer to dancer. See section 1.1
98 Ibid: 71
99 Klein 1988: 16
3. Efficacy. In his efficacy-entertainment braid\textsuperscript{100}, Schechner shows how efficacy (ritual) and entertainment (theatre) has alternately been dominating in the history of the theatre from the 15\textsuperscript{th} century until the present. However, it should always be kept in mind that no performance is ever pure efficacy or pure entertainment; that the rituals are also fun, and that the entertainment can produce results.

In the 15\textsuperscript{th} century the efficacy was represented by the Cycle plays, the Church rituals and the Court ceremonies. The entertainment was, on the other hand, the Fairs, the Bards and the Troubadours. When the efficacy-entertainment braid is tight, it means that efficacy and entertainment are close to each other, or meeting in the same theatrical performance. At these times the theatre is said to be prospering. The last time this was seen was in the political theatre (including the avant-garde) of the 1960’s and the 1970’s. In the 1980’s the efficacy-entertainment braid again split into paratheatre, experimental

\textsuperscript{100} Schechner 1994 A: 122
performance, political theatre, and performative psychotherapies, on the one hand, and commercial theatre, regional theatre, theme parks, and street entertainment on the other. When efficacy dominates, “performances are universalistic, allegorical and ritualized”. When entertainment dominates, “performances are class-oriented, individualized, show-business, constantly adjusting to the taste of fickle audiences.”

The efficacy targets perfectly match the ideological goals of Ankoku Butoh and the avant-garde theatre movement. However, as I will attempt to show with the help of the theories of Peter Bürger in the following chapter, the avant-garde movement failed at the political and historical levels. This can be seen in the change in political and historical contexts in Japan in which Hijikata’s Butoh evolved and is currently practiced. That is, Hijikata’s Butoh was the expression of the cultural and ideological crisis which Japan was facing after WW2. Ironically, now the avant-garde ideologies themselves are facing a crisis with confrontation with post-modern philosophy and Butoh’s current challenge is how to adapt to the contemporary Japanese society.

101 Ibid: 123
4.2 Peter Bürger: Theory of the Avant-Garde

Art critic Peter Bürger points out that as the artist isolated himself from society with the development of bourgeois art, the art became autonomous. The peak of this stage was reached in Aestheticism, by the end of the nineteenth century. As a reaction to this, the avant-garde wanted to reintegrate art into life praxis, to make the whole artistic experience part of a communal ritual again. They wanted to return to the sources of the theatre, which they considered to be the primitive rituals; to a time when art and life was one, and there was no gap between the signifiers and the signified.

In the Middle Ages art was sacral, and wholly integrated into the religious social institution. Both the mode of production and reception were collective. In the Renaissance and the Baroque eras the purpose of the Courtly Art was likewise to serve the glory of the monarch. However, having lost its sacral function, the art was starting to move towards emancipation. Bürger defines “emancipation” as “the process by which art constitutes itself as a distinct social subsystem”\(^\text{102}\). The reception still remains collective, but the production has become individual, leaving the individual artist in the centre of the production. This was emphasized by the artist leaving his signature on his artwork. The talented artist was thereby recognised and renowned. Here, we see a development towards the traits of the bourgeois art, characterized by both the production and the reception as being individual processes, “satisfying residual needs”\(^\text{103}\). Art was now moving towards Aestheticism, “where bourgeois art reaches the stage of self-reflection”, and “apartness from the praxis of life now becomes its

\(^{102}\) Bürger 1994: 47

\(^{103}\) Ibid: 47, quotation from Habermas
content.”

As it no longer had a specific function (sacral or representational), art was then received by isolated individuals.

In Aestheticism “art becomes the content of art”, meaning that the form has come to be the main focus in the form-content dialectic of artistic structures. The aesthetic dominance in the artwork becomes so strong that an eventual political statement becomes invisible.

Karl Marx, through his famous quote, “religion is the opium of the people”, showed how people project into heaven what they would have liked to see realised on earth. In this way, the role of the religion is to immobilize undesirable forces wanting social change. The only road to true happiness, according to Marx, is “the abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people”. In the same way art loses its functionality by being exiled to the realm of imagination in bourgeois society. By banishing values such as humanity, goodness, joy, truth and solidarity to the sphere of art, they will not be part of everyday life. In Aestheticism, art allows only for a short satisfaction of the needs that are suppressed in daily praxis. This satisfaction lasts only during the brief interval of time such as when one is looking at a painting, reading a book, or watching a performance. As a reaction to this, German theatre director Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) wanted to make his art functional through the use of “verfremdung” (alienation effect), making people aware of their power to change the society if they could only break free from the chains of illusion. Brecht was an important forerunner and inspiration for the historical avant-garde in their response to Aestheticism and the phenomena of art for

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104 Ibid: 48
105 Ibid: 49
106 Ibid: 6
art’s sake, trying to reclaim art’s power to change society. Brecht is well-known for quotes such as: "Art is not a mirror with which to reflect reality, but a hammer with which to shape it".107

As already mentioned, Butoh does not have a universal style or a fixed technique. It is in fact distinguished, along with other kinds of avant-garde art, by its pastiche style, meaning that it differs from dancer to dancer and from production to production. According to dancer Kasai Akira, Butoh will never become institutionalized; undergoing a constant metamorphosis, it refuses to take any specific form, pushing the borders further every time.108 Itoh Kim compares his dance to an ever-changing jigsaw puzzle, taking a different shape every time it is put together.109

In the tradition of the historical avant-garde, Ankoku Butoh used the shock effect to open the eyes of the spectators, in that “shocking the recipient becomes the dominant principle of artistic intent”110. They borrowed the means of “defamiliarization” from the Russian formalists (like Brecht), saying that the role of art should be to defamiliarize words and objects that have become habitual and automatic in everyday life. When objects are taken out of their everyday context, the spectators are forced to rethink and question their use. In Ankoku Butoh the portrayal of the mentally and physically handicapped, and even death itself, meant that these elements had been taken out of their natural environments, like hospitals and mental asylums.

Until the avant-garde movement, art was purely seen as imitating nature and one artistic

107 http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Bertolt_Brecht 20.09.05
108 Personal conversation with dancer 24.07.04
109 Talk session at Waseda University 29.06.04
110 Bürger 1994: 18
style in particular dominated each cultural époque. According to Bürger, the various techniques and procedures of the past could only be recognized as artistic means after the appearance of the historical avant-garde, because now “the totality of artistic means becomes available as means”\textsuperscript{111}. This is exactly because the historical avant-garde was shamelessly picking and choosing among these different stylistic principles, regardless of their historical or cultural context. The fact that the historical avant-garde movement adopts the formalist principle of defamiliarization strengthens Bürger’s theory which stated that it is a technique of general validity; however it was only after the appearance of the historical avant-garde, that it became recognized as such.

This is similar to what is called the “mini-narratives” of postmodern theory, a “narrative” being a specific mode of production in this case. Lyotard criticizes the grand narratives which have so far maintained totality and stability in modern societies. According to such a perspective, every belief system or ideology has its grand narrative, but as Lyotard argues, these have been deconstructed into “mini-narratives”, which make no claim to universality, truth, reason, or stability.

It is only when art has reached this objective stage that self-criticism is possible. The historical avant-garde criticized art as an institution. They revealed “the nexus between autonomy and the absence of any consequences”\textsuperscript{112}, criticizing the apparatus producing and distributing art, and the art’s lack of social impact due to its autonomous status in bourgeois society. By doing so, they wanted to detach art from the praxis of life in order to reach the stage of self-criticism and then reintegrating it into life as a powerful means being able to change the society.

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid: 18
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid: 22

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However, German Neo-Marxist philosopher Jürgen Habermas pointed out as early as 1972 that “art is a sanctuary for the satisfaction of those needs which become quasi illegal in the material life process of bourgeois society”. He specifically mentioned “the happiness of a communicative experience”\textsuperscript{113} as one of the needs that are exiled to the realm of art. This epitomizes the failure of the project of the avant-garde movement: it is impossible for art to break free from the chains of institutionalization in capitalist society. Today, it is exactly this apartness from the life praxis that has become the content of art, or as Bürger puts it, “institutional frame and content coincide”\textsuperscript{114}. As the field of art has become a haven for socially illegal acts, it can only serve as a place for individual outbursts. The artworks of the historical avant-garde that used to be shocking and repulsive have now become classics. Since there is little in contemporary art that society finds scandalous, the shock effect has long since lost its value as an act. Today, even the most offensive art is sure to become a commercial success due to the work of the capitalist machinery.

According to Bürger, this process runs parallel to the development of the industrial society and the alienation of the industrial worker. Bürger used the example of the industrial worker performing fragmented tasks as part of a greater process of which he had no control over, meaning he was being “deskilled”, to illustrate the artist’s removal from everyday life, in that an artist, on the contrary, dealt with a piece of work that could be treated as a whole. While the everyday life of the factory worker had become fragmented, the artist still followed his work all along the production process. The Arts, having become a designation for poetry, music, the stage, sculpture, painting and

\textsuperscript{113} Ibid: 25
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid: 27
architecture by the end of the 18\textsuperscript{th} century, was considered non-purposive compared to the principle of the maximization of profit prevailing in other spheres of life. This further establishes the realm of art as being outside the praxis of everyday life, or as Bürger puts it: “its result is that artistic production is divorced from the totality of social activities and comes to confront them abstractly”\textsuperscript{115}. In the words of Marx, society is divided into a \textit{base} (the world of industrial production; of supply and demand) and a \textit{superstructure} (the world of culture; of the Arts and religion), in that the latter are all determined by the former and is part of an \textit{economic determinist} philosophy. However, it should be kept in mind that Marxist criticism forms what Lyotard calls a “grand narrative” and should therefore be treated with some skepticism (see section 6.9).

Attempting to avoid such a totalizing explanation, French Marxist theoretician and philosopher Althusser’s term \textit{decentering} is inspired by Derrida’s “metaphysics of absence”, indicating that structures do not have an essence, a focus or a centre. This is a dominating thought in the grand narratives, also called metanarratives, or super-narratives. This means that the distinction between base and superstructure is only of a relative nature. Cultural materialism takes the post-structuralist way of thinking one step further to the point of avoiding the partition between base and superstructure by defining “culture” as all forms of culture, \textit{both} high and low. This includes such “low” forms of culture as television, popular music and pulp fiction. The cultural materialist way of thinking is that culture is not simply a reflection of the political situation; however, it cannot completely transcend the material forces of production.\textsuperscript{116}

\textsuperscript{115} Ibid: 42
\textsuperscript{116} Barry 1995: 163
With the rise of modernism, society in general became more and more rational and practically-oriented, which was in contrast to the sphere of the aesthetics for which this didn’t apply. Through the use of shock effects, the historical avant-garde wanted to awaken the bourgeois spectators, challenging the established view that art should be something pleasant and beautiful. Thus, believing that traditional aesthetics should be avoided if it did not foster truth, they took back the means-end relationship to the arts.

It should be kept in mind that it was not into the existing society the historical avant-garde wanted to reintegrate their art; theirs was exactly a protest against the consumer society. On the contrary, “they attempted to organize a new life praxis from a basis in art”\textsuperscript{117}. Since the principle of competition is not pervading the sphere of art, this “new life praxis” could be both irrational and shocking. The avant-garde wanted art to be a mirror of the world showing every aspect of it, which was contrary to the bourgeois view of projecting an image of a better life order (similar to the role of the religion). By the use of real material and shock effects, the avant-garde also integrated life into art as well as the other way around.

In his attempt to make the mode of production a communal matter again, Marcel Duchamps famously signed a randomly chosen mass product (a urinal, a bottle drier, etc). This act also shows that in the world of the art market the signature of the artist had become prioritized before the artist’s skill or the actual quality of the work. Duchamps originally intended to criticize bourgeois art and the concept of an individual artist creating unique artworks on the edge of society, but as the urinal is placed in a museum, the gesture thus looses its provocative effect. What was intended to be a protest against

\textsuperscript{117} Bürger 1994: 49
the art market, had itself been accepted as art by the apparatus it originally was designed to turn against. When a work is accepted as a “work of art” by the art institution, there seems to be no avoiding it being classed as “acceptable”. In the same way, Hijikata’s negative-affirming principles are being used as an artistic means to create entertainment today. The white body paint originally intended to eliminate all personal taste and free the dancer from the consumer culture has in itself become a trademark, signifying Butoh’s commercialization. This is especially true if the dancer or the company has become famous, and the persons transcend the role. In this case, it is the “celebrity” the audience has come to see, not the dance in itself. This is another part in the unavoidable process of institutionalization.

However, the historical avant-garde did achieve their goal of communal reception by inducing reactions of astonishment and disgust in their audiences. By distributing recipes on how to write Dada poems and automatic texts, Dadaist Tristan Tzara and the father of French Surrealism, Andre Breton also negated the category of individual production, encouraging the recipient to participate in the production of making art. This was not with purpose of inviting people into the Art Institution, but rather of liberating art itself from the chains of the Institution, erasing the terms of producers and recipients.

It should also be remarked that the avant-garde encouraged individuality and critical thinking. Art should be an “instrument of emancipation”\footnote{Ibid: 54} and not of subjection, which is the case with pulp fiction and commodity aesthetics, imposing on the reader a
particular kind of behavior and prompting the consumer to purchase a product he does not need. This is exactly what Althausser calls State ideological apparatuses: we are being made to feel that we are freely choosing what in fact is being imposed upon us. Thus, culture actually is a channel which fosters an ideology sympathetic to the aims of the state.

Bürger concludes that it is better to keep art at a distance from life if that is what is a requisite to create “a free space within which alternatives to what exists become conceivable”\(^\text{119}\).

The Neo-avant-garde movement is aware of the Art Institution’s resistance to the attack of the historical avant-garde. Abolishing the original project of making art part of the life praxis again, the neo-avant-garde has actually institutionalized the avant-garde as art itself. Now “the procedures invented by the avant-garde with antiartistic intent are being used for artistic ends”\(^\text{120}\). Today the artistic means of the avant-garde are used alongside techniques from other cultural époques, resulting in the parallel existence of realistic and avant-garde art.

Although their political intentions were never realized, the historical avant-garde did reveal the mechanism of art as an institution and its inefficacy in modern society, which had a huge impact on the art world and the way of viewing the Arts. Bürger indicates that this is a fact that all the Arts after the avant-garde movement must come to terms with: “The meaning of the break in the history of art that the historical avant-garde movement provoked does not consist in the destruction of art as an institution, but in the

\(^{119}\) Ibid: 54
\(^{120}\) Bürger 1994: 57
destruction of the possibility of positing aesthetic norms as valid ones 

The avant-garde project failed on the historico-political level, but not on the artistic. Its ground-breaking procedures opened up the way for a whole new range of artistic expressions.

121 Ibid: 87
6 From political rebellion to postmodern entertainment?

As previously stated, the bourgeoisie expected Art to be a pleasure to the senses, and for them, dance was a display of skill and beauty. However, Butoh and the historical avant-garde sought to destroy the established bourgeois life order. Like Richard Schechner, they wished to knock Art off its bourgeois pedestal, giving it back to the masses. When Hijikata was forced to resign from the All-Japan Art Dance Association after the staging of *Kinjiki*, Butoh was simultaneously liberated from the rules and conventions of the established dance world.

However, when Butoh today is performed on the proscenium scenes in the traditional theatres alongside other classical performing arts form like Noh Theatre, it shows that the Art institution has embraced what once did not even qualify as art. It confirms the fact that what Peter Bürger calls “the historical avant-garde” was just a passing period in the history of Art.

Still, it should not be forgotten that the term “avant-garde” (some call it the neo-avant-garde to mark the contrast to the historical avant-garde) is still in use today, signifying innovative and ground-breaking artworks. However, while the art of the historical avant-garde was ideological and moralizing, contemporary artists attempt to encourage critical thinking by questioning rather than giving the answers. Now, the Arts rather reflect the wish for a change instead of the conviction that this can be realised in a certain way.

Why did the political goal of the avant-garde movement fail? It can be stated that the
Art institution domesticated the rebellious spirit of the avant-garde. Second, post-structuralist philosophy further served to de-politicize the content of the artworks.

**6.1 Practical and political art vs. autonomous art**

The Italian Futurists turned to Fascism in their pursuit and love for speed, technology and violence, and their glorification of modern warfare as the ultimate means of artistic expression. This kind of experiences, in addition to the fall of the grand narratives, can be said to have resulted in the abolition of political and ideological art. Thus, has the religious sphere become the only realm where the ceremonies still have a ritualistic function? This is only partly true since the hymns and the sculptures have religious value only for the believers. Together with the secularisation of society, art that used to be religious has become autonomous. The only difference now is that since the sculptures and the stained glass windows cannot be removed, the church itself functions as the art gallery. This is unless the artworks are replaced with copies and the originals are moved to a museum where they “come to their right”. In fact, religious art has become “art for art’s sake”, and is valued mainly for its artistic expression. Here, we witness a shift of focus from content to form. Together with the loss of the traditional, explicit narrative there has been a growing tendency for the content to be identified with the form. “Art is concerned with the HOW and not the WHAT. (…) The performance – how it is done – that is the content of art”. (Emphasis in the original) This is what Bauhaus artist Josef Albers told his students in 1933 when he came to teach at the Black Mountain College.122

122 Goldberg 2001: 121
Theodor Adorno further defines an artwork as “the unity of the universal and the particular”\textsuperscript{123}. In what is called the organic or the symbolic work of art, the unity between the universal and the particular is brought forward without mediation. However, in the avant-garde, which represents the nonorganic or the allegorical work of art, the unity is a mediated one, and in some cases, it is created by the recipient alone. This explains why an avant-garde work of art allows the positing of any possible meaning. These works can also be characterized by a lack of meaning, which is in itself experienced as a shock by the recipient. This illustrates man’s alienation in modern society, urging him to reconsider his own life, and maybe initiate a change in his own life praxis.

Adorno actually requests a return to the principle of art for art’s sake. When art becomes “practical” and is treated as a commodity, the focus is on the profit, and not on the art itself. This is what he calls “art as profit-driven consumer goods”\textsuperscript{124}. This is when commodities are designed in order to enthrall people to purchase. What Adorno requests is autonomous art, encouraging critical thinking in a time when the Arts cannot justify itself to be neither practical nor political any longer. He argues that art has become an individual matter, and therefore cannot appeal any longer to society as a whole.\textsuperscript{125} This is because the organic artwork creates an illusion of a world that is whole, which belongs to the past and the world of the grand narratives. Further, except for the paratheatrical events, where the “audience-performer opposition is dissolved”\textsuperscript{126}, the spectators are aware that what they are watching is a performance, that it is staged. This shows the impossibility of completely erasing the borders between art and life, meaning

\textsuperscript{123} Bürger 1994: 56
\textsuperscript{124} Adorno 2004: 17
\textsuperscript{125} Ibid: 48
\textsuperscript{126} Schechner 1994 A: 122
that art does not always have the power to change society. However, it certainly has the power to view the world from a critical distance, which is just what we need in order not to be blinded by the society of which we are a member.

It is very interesting to see that Adorno has adopted the principle of the autonomy of arts, which was exactly the historical avant-garde’s object of criticism, showing why and how it is a positive virtue and the only way for independent art to survive today!

6.2 The avant-garde ideologies

The avant-garde sought to integrate art into everyday life by attempting to make the performance part of a larger communal ritual, embracing both actors and spectators. Serving as a counter-culture to the rapidly developing information society, the avant-garde was looking back towards a time when the role as the “spoken newspaper” was still occupied by the theatre. Several intellectuals have actually criticized what has become of the mass media. In his book Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business (1986), Neil Postman criticizes television for confounding serious issues with entertainment. He argues that in television “the form excludes the content”, making it incapable of conveying serious, rational arguments. The news has turned into a commodity due to its economic interest, further making politics more about image than ideologies127. This results in the television news resembling entertainment programs, resulting in what French cultural theorist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard calls “loss of the real”, meaning that due to the pervasive images of film, TV and advertising, there is no longer any distinction between real and imagined, reality and illusion, surface and depth. With the emergence of places such as Disneyland,

127 Postman 1986
which are trying to represent real in order to cover up that there is actually no real, we can no longer be sure whether the images of war we see on TV are real or simply taken from a movie, e.g. the images from September 11.\textsuperscript{128}

Today, practically everybody can choose from an inexhaustible number of television channels in order to be entertained, meaning that theatre as a means of entertainment strictly speaking is \textit{unnecessary}. The avant-garde intended to criticize the constant need to be entertained, but their violent and enigmatic artworks had the opposite effect; if it did not scare off the audience, it certainly did not serve to make art an indispensable part of life. Instead, a large part of the avant-garde audience became occupied by other artists and scholars.

Two main tendencies can bee seen in the world of the theatre today, although it goes without saying that there are directors who operate on the border between the two of them. On the first hand: by making huge box-office productions speculating in stage sets, costumes, lightning and special effects, some theatres try to attract audiences on the same premises as television and cinema do. On the other hand, avant-garde directors like Jerzy Grotowski, Peter Brook and their followers try to find the pure meaning of theatre by stripping it of all that is superficial and therefore unnecessary, leaving only the actor, the audience and an empty space serving as a stage. They argue that the quality of theatre lies in its possibility to manipulate characters, time and space without special effects. Brook insists that going to the theatre should not be felt like a cultural obligation; meaning that it should be an \textit{experience} “beyond the humdrum”\textsuperscript{129}. He emphasizes that his main concern is how to make theatre fundamentally necessary for

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{128} Barry 1995: 87
\item \textsuperscript{129} Brook 1990: 53
\end{itemize}
people again, just like eating and sex. The goal of theatre should be to create works that evoke “an undeniable hunger and thirst” in the audience.\textsuperscript{130}

These two divisions remain today, the former characterising popular arts, while the latter sits with the intellectual and marginal, often non-profit theatre groups.

6.3 The incongruity of the avant-garde ideologies in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century

Butoh is what Schechner calls “crease phenomenon”. It developed in a period of turbulence and change, and unquestionably brought the Japanese Performing Arts to another level. However, when experimental art “crosses a threshold of visibility and stability, it freezes, and becomes an attraction”\textsuperscript{131}.

The historical avant-garde attacked the theatres as an institution of commercialism. That is why Butoh, in the tradition of the avant-garde, was often performed outdoors or in the busy city streets. To a limited degree, this still occurs today. Dairakudan has an annual tradition of performing their \textit{kinpunshô} (gold powder show) in the streets of Nagoya. With their bodies entirely covered in gold, wearing heavy make-up, they perform a cabaret-style short dance, and the audience traditionally throw money at them.

Tanaka Min still often uses organic spaces such as rice fields, forests and streams as the settings for his performances. Searching for his artistic roots, he found that the origin of the Noh Theatre was the \textit{dengaku} dances, which were originally a part of a ritual celebrating the harvest. Discovering that dance was born from a close connection with nature, he became a farmer in an attempt to go back to the roots of dance. He believes that this is the only way he can seek to create \textit{true} dance again.

\textsuperscript{130} Heilpern 1977: 22
\textsuperscript{131} Schechner 1994 A: 164
However, even though peasant life was portrayed in the *Tôhoku Kabuki*, Tanaka Min criticizes Hijikata’s Butoh for being violent only for the sake of shocking people, and thus, not having a clear goal. By deliberately changing the place of audience and dancers, it made the spectators feel uncomfortable, creating distance instead of including them in the ritualistic event.

Thus, Tanaka Min argues that while Hijikata’s Butoh broke with the past, it didn’t offer anything as a replacement, which meant a vacuum was created.\(^{132}\) As an alternative to Hijikata’s empty rebellion, Tanaka suggests a return to an organic connection between man and nature. He currently lives in the Yamanashi prefecture together with five to ten dancers in a farming and dancing community called Tôkas on. By leading an almost self-sufficient life (he grows vegetables and keeps a few domestic animals), he reflects the avant-garde ideology. (However, it needs to be stated that he has also been embraced by the art institution, making him one of the most famous Butoh/contemporary dancers in Japan today.)

Even though part of the avant-garde philosophy is that everyone can produce art, capitalist society does not allow for this on a professional level. Instead, people are forced to have jobs that pay to make a living. This means that unestablished, young Butoh dancers living in the big cities have to take odd jobs to support themselves. Up-and-coming artists can get grants and financial support, but first the dancers have to achieve fame, which in itself is against the avant-garde principles. (Needless to say, it is easier to get a grant if you are practising the traditional performing arts.) This is a vicious circle making the institution of art and the specialisation of artists unavoidable.

If the dancers are recognized as such, they will have more time to perfect their art; they get better reviews and people go to see their performances. This is of course every artist’s dream today. It shows that the principle of competition pervades every sphere of society, including the field of arts.

Today, the Butoh dancers who can afford it have set up their own performance space, which they often lend out to the young and unestablished dancers. For larger productions, the established dancers and companies rent commercial theatre houses. Witnessing a decline in the enthusiasm for social change and a turn towards the neo-avant-garde thought of “art as entertainment” and “art for art’s sake”, the larger theatres are again considered as convenient outlets. If one wants to see art, one should be prepared to pay for the ticket and come to where the art is. The art is no longer brought to where the potential audience is. However, it must not be forgotten that the very reason that the art institution took interest in Butoh and accepted it as art might be one of the main reasons that it still exists today.
6.4 What happened to Butoh?

The following section is based on my personal experience, and it should be emphasized that it is strictly my interpretation of what has become of Butoh today.

After many years of hesitation and indecision, Hijikata finally concluded that physical expression must be free. He is said to have disliked Dairakudakan because he believed they were too settled and codified.\(^{133}\) However, their international success proves that it turned out to be to their advantage. When the leader Marô Akaji instructs his pupils he does not explain anything about the meaning or the background of his production, which of course deviates from the original ideology of Butoh and that of phenomenology, too. He simply uses his dancers as tools, never showing them his personal Butoh-fu. It can be said that the strict hierarchy within the group shows that the equality principle associated with the avant-garde in the West does not have any value in this company. Although he has developed the term the *ichinin-ippa* (one dancer, one school), meaning that he wishes to maintain the qualities and talents of each and every dancer, the practice of the company shows there is a long way from this theory into practice. Around two weeks before the première when the pupils stage their own small productions in their studio-theatre, Marô Akaji watches the performance for the first time. He then makes sure that the structure of the show reflects and answers his demands and that it is in the traditional Dairakudakan style of Butoh. It is true that the easiest way to pass on the tradition of Butoh to the younger generation would be to

\(^{133}\) Information based on lecture by Nakajima Natsu in connection with workshop 20.05.04
develop a technique. However, the strict hierarchy within the group, and the deep respect for the teacher often seen in Japanese dance companies, which is reflected in the society as a whole, can in the worst case prevent creativity and innovation among the young generation of dancers.

The solo dancers of the Hijikata school of Butoh still apply the technique of Butoh-fu from which they draw inspiration. This emphasizes the learning process, sharpens the senses, and develops an awareness both towards the inside of the body as well as its surroundings.

The impromptu style of the Ohno school of Butoh can also be seen in contemporary dance and contact improvisation today. In his workshops Ohno Yoshito, Ohno Kazuo’s son, often shows paintings and pictures for inspiration, or he gives directions such as “imagine that you are a stone statue”. The students learn no technique or postures; the focus is rather on raising the students’ inner body consciousness.

The second generation Butoh dancers of the Hijikata school still find inspiration from Surrealist paintings and the theories of Jung and the psychoanalysts. This reflects a deep respect for Hijikata and a wish to preserve his heritage, but it also excludes Butoh’s chance to renew itself. Taking inspiration from artists that once used to be considered shocking and provocative, but later were embraced by the art institution, also proves Butoh’s wish for institutionalisation. I believe that in order for Butoh to stay alive and for people to be able to recognize themselves in the works, it would be better to take inspiration from contemporary artists and writers, thereby creating a postmodern Butoh.

Peter Brook also indicates that since society is a dynamic and constantly evolving place, theatre must constantly “put yesterday’s discoveries to the test” in order not to stagnate.
He means that both form and content have to be re-examined in order to keep its vitality, if a performance is to be restaged more than five years after its creation.

The shorthands of behaviour that stands for certain emotions; gestures; gesticulations and tones of voice – are all fluctuating on an invisible stock exchange all the time. Life is moving, influences are playing on actor and audience, and other plays, other arts, the cinema, television, currents events, join in the constant rewriting of history and the amending of daily truth. (...) In the theatre, every form once born is mortal; every form must be reconceived, and its new conception will bear marks of all the influences that surround it.134

The restaging of plays is one of the attributes of institutionalisation. Shows like Sankaijuku’s Unetsu (The egg stands out of curiosity, 1986) and Dairakudakan’s Kaiin no uma (The sea-dappled horse, also 1986), are still being restaged today, almost 20 years after their creation.135 Another example is the company Banyûinryoku specializing in the plays of the avant-garde theatre director Terayama Shûji. Their minute reproductions of the plays have an anachronistic air, proving that the shows have no more than an antiquarian interest today.

The initial freshness of Butoh came from its ability to shock, but today we are no longer shaken by would-be “controversial” material because we have become impervious to its shock tactics. In today’s society, Butoh has to rely on other elements to appeal to the audience if it wants to preserve its cutting edge performances. An example of such performances can be found in Marô Akaji’s shows in which he adds freshness to his productions by referring to popular culture. In his 2000 production, Kanzen naru hitobito (Complete Man), his costumes were inspired by the science-fiction movie The

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134 Brook 1990: 19
135 Marô Akaji finally decided to abandon Kaiin no uma after Dairakudakan’s tour to Israel and Korea in June 2005.
Matrix. Today, his audience mainly consists of young people, not necessarily intellectuals, but people who want something in addition to what TV, cinema and the traditional arts can offer.

In an attempt to renew Butoh, the productions of the company Sekishokusuiseikan of the Hijikata school use images which look like they are taken from Gothic horror movies. Other dancers include elements of popular exercise such as yoga, in their attempt to create something new and innovative. Hijikata once said that “we all have a Tōhoku from where we can extract primal memories”, meaning that a dancer coming from, for example Kyūshû, should not try to portray Tōhoku. (Somehow Butoh dancers from Tōhoku seem to be more popular than others…) In the same way, a Norwegian Butoh dancer should rather try to find his or her Norwegian roots than trying to copy the Japanese style, thus continuing the diverse and dynamic nature of Butoh performance.

6.5 Butoh seen in a postmodern perspective

Art as an institution neutralizes the political content of the artworks. This means that its role as a catalyst for a radical change in society is greatly impeded on a practical level. In fact, the only way for an artist to be “seen” today, is to provide something “new” to the world of art, which is usually on the level of form, and not content. As mentioned earlier, today the audience participates in creating meaning by adding the contents to the artworks themselves. There are just as many understandings of a work of art as there are spectators, and since the work itself no longer belongs to the artist in the postmodern era, none of the understandings can be said to be “wrong”. This can be explained by using what French literary critic Roland Barthes states in his essay “The Death of the Author”,
in which he argues that it is language which speaks, not the author. A postmodern text is “not a line of words releasing a single “theological” meaning (the “message” of the Author-God), but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writing, none of them original, blend and crash”\footnote{Newton 1988: 156}. The focus has shifted from the Author to the Reader, placing the latter in the position of being in the centre of attention for the first time in the history of Art. By understanding “text” in a broader sense than just a literary work, it can also be extended and applied to a stage production, and in this case Barthes’ theories can signify the move of attention from the Director to the Spectator. This is closely linked to the postmodern philosopher Lyotard’s criticism of the grand narratives (see also section 4.2), which are traditionally connected with the principles of reason and order, which are seen as “good”, automatically judging the opposite as “bad”. However, Lyotard states that the grand narratives only serve to mask the contradictions and instabilities that are inherent in any situation or practice. On the contrary, the postmodern mini-narratives are “situational, provisional, contingent and temporary, making no claim to universality, truth, reason, or stability”\footnote{http://www.colorado.edu/English/ENGL2012Klages/pomo.html 23.02.2004 Postmodernism}. Probably the most famous author to express the zeitgeist of postmodernism is the philosopher Jacques Derrida, also from France. In his famous essay, “Structure, sign and play in the discourse of human sciences”, he criticizes logocentrism for giving structure a centre or a fixed origin. There is not only one single “truth”, for the truth is constantly changing and is not a fixed and universal thing. It is time to decentre the universe and stop thinking in terms of the traditional binaries of signifier/signified, good/bad, rational/irrational, male/female and light/darkness. Instead “it is necessary to think that there is no centre, that the centre had no natural locus, but a sort of non-locus in which an infinite number
of sign-substitutions come into play”\(^1\)\(^3\). Derrida argues that the “signifier itself ought to be abandoned as a metaphysical concept”\(^1\)\(^3\). From reading his essay, it is clear that there is no longer an obvious coherence between the signifier and the signified, and that is why people will understand the semiotics of the dance in their personal way. The fact that meaning-making has become an individual matter reflects the individualistic and fragmented postmodern society, however, this does not mean that Art cannot be practical, but only that its significance is on a personal level. A work of Art can no longer aspire to change the consciousness of the audience as a group, but the dance might have an effect on some individuals in the audience, while for the others it will simply remain entertainment.

A question that needs to be addressed is, what was the background for Barthes’, Lyotard’s and Derrida’s philosophies? Derrida himself gives three different reasons for this. First, he mentions “the totality of the era”. Together with the will to control nature, rationality and “common sense” have been the ruling principles since the Age of Enlightenment. However, this has resulted, among other things, in disasters such as global warming and the disappearance of the rainforest. Second, the Nietzschean critique of metaphysics had a huge influence on every cultural domain of modern society. Third, Freudian critique of self-presence cannot be ignored: by introducing the theory of the unconscious, Freud proved that the self was not a stable and transparent unit, but rather a complex structure of Ego, superego, and Id. Looking at the above theories, it is understandable that the world has been decentred, and therefore artworks can no longer claim to speak “the truth”.

\(^1\)\(^3\) Newton 1988: 150
\(^1\)\(^3\) Ibid: 152
Butoh and the avant-garde represented what was traditionally called “disorder”, which was a threat to the grand narratives emphasizing system and order. However, since this is post-structuralism’s object of criticism, Butoh cannot lament the loss of meaning and identity; it cannot claim to have such a message anymore if it wants to renew itself, but simply has to embrace the fact that the world has been “decentered”.

The leader of Dairakudakan, Marô Akaji, has embraced this fact in order to “update” Butoh. In a postmodern tradition he borrows movements from all kinds of dance, from classical ballet and ballroom dancing to the whirling dervish dance of the Sufis. He strips these dance forms of their original significance, leaving nothing but the hollow forms, and then he re-invents them. The dance has no common points of reference; it cannot speak to the audience on a communal level, meaning that it has lost its political function. It can be claimed that this is why it can never be integrated into life, it remains simply entertainment.

Just after Dairakudakan’s establishment in 1972, the company members used to live together in a community, creating a space of their own, where art embraced every spectre of their lives. This is no longer practised today, and even though the dancers break with the rational, goal-oriented society when they are onstage, the off-stage life within the company reflects the strict, hierarchical structure of modern Japanese society. The Dairakudakan of today proves that art and life is separated, and that it has moved away from the goal of the avant-garde. Marô Akaji has accepted the fact that postmodern art cannot be political on a communal level, and that art cannot escape capitalist society of which it is a part.

Dancers such as Kasai Akira and Tanaka Min also try to create postmodern Butoh by avoiding categorisation and “messages”. Tanaka Min stated in an interview with the
Daily Yomiuri that he regrets that people always seek meaning from dance performances.\footnote{Daily Yomiuri, arts weekend, 26.05.05} In a personal interview\footnote{Conducted 24.07.04, after the staging of his performance "Salome"}, Kasai Akira also indicated that his Butoh has not been institutionalised, because it always refuses to take a specific form. Every time he creates a new piece, he says that he tries to break with the previous forms and push the border a little further.

The moment we try to pinpoint a style is when it stagnates, when it stops being dynamic, when it becomes “deadly” (see afterword). Neither of them shave their heads, and Tanaka Min does not paint his body white either. According to these dancers, this is because the exterior says nothing about the essence of the dance, which comes from deep within and differs from dancer to dancer.

Expressing a feeling of hopelessness, Butoh and the experimental theatre of post-war Japan lamented that the conceptions of art, religion, politics and culture had lost their meaning. Ironically, postmodernism, on the other hand, has accepted this fact and uses the anti-artistic inventions of the historical avant-garde as artistic means in itself. It does not lament the ideas of “fragmentation, provosionality, and incoherence”\footnote{http://www.colorado.edu/English/ENGL2012Klages/pomo.html 23.02.2004 Postmodernism}, but celebrates it. They have stopped believing that art can give meaning to the world by conveying a “message”. Postmodernism is carelessly celebrating the fragmentalised society over which the avant-garde was lamenting. Life is just a game, they say, the world is on the brink of a nuclear holocaust, and there is nothing we can do about it. Postmodernism seems playful and humorous on the surface, but is, as we can see, in reality, dark and nihilistic.
By showing grotesque images and playing with taboo themes (which represents disorder in the modernist tradition of the grand narratives); Butoh cleared the way for the decentering and destabilizing of the world, offering a whole new range of artistic means for the next generation of artists. While Butoh was a rebellion against war and cultural and political imperialism, postmodernism is a result of contemporary society where information is digitalised, the cloning of humans is possible, and the borders of what was traditionally known as “male” and “female”, “masculine” and “feminine” have been erased.

The question which now needs to be addressed is whether or not we are witnessing a change of attitude in the third generation Butoh dancers, based on the changes of the political, economical, and social conditions in Japan. Have they embraced postmodernism with its light and humorous, yet dark and nihilistic heart, in the pursuit of creating neo-avant-garde dance, or are they still finding inspiration in the ideologies of Hijikata’s Butoh?
Afterword

Butoh appeared at a time when people craved for a rebellion, a revolution in general. They found exactly what they were looking for in the surreal and violent world of Hijikata. Writer Mishima Yukio once said about Butoh:

Things that one creates to understand the world might be right in its own way at the moment, but it is not definite. Chasing after incomprehensible questions about life and death, ontology and creativity are inseparable. When creation becomes stylized and systematized as a methodology, we forgot about ontology and dance becomes superficially pleasant. It is easy to stylize dance as culture.\(^{143}\)

The first and second generation of Butoh dancers were able to rely on their direct relation to Hijikata to succeed. This is not the case for the third generation, the young dancers of today. They have to be skilled and innovative; they have to bring Butoh to a new level in order for it to survive and to be innovative and provocative. Most Butoh dancers today still seem to try to show universal truths in their display of surreal and dreamlike images. However, to avoid becoming what Peter Brook calls “deadly theatre” (the stylization and codification of theatre that once used to be fresh and challenging), I suggest that Butoh moves into the phase of the neo-avant-garde. Descending from the historical avant-garde, it is no longer “lamenting the loss of the communal society, but rather accepts that it has not the power to change the society”\(^{144}\).

Today, Butoh is performed alongside ballet, and what we people go to see depends on personal taste, not ritual need. Butoh has become an established dance form, with performers all over the world, and the number of followers is constantly growing.

\(^{143}\) Waguri 1988
\(^{144}\) http://www2.uni-jena.de/welsch/ 28.10.2004 Aesthetics beyond aesthetics
Forty six years after its creation, Butoh is still full of mystery. Questions like “can real Butoh only be created in times of crisis?” and “is it unavoidable for art to become “deadly” once it has been embraced by the art institution?” arise in discussion of Butoh’s future in society. However, what is “real Butoh”? There is not one, single definition that serves to describe it. Butoh is the dance of opposites and its interpretation of everything in between. I believe that one of Butoh’s qualities lies here, and maybe that is where the key to its regeneration lies.
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