

Homely Feelings on a Shattered Land: The Politics of Boredom in Toshiki Okada's

Eraser Mountain

I. "Small Choreography"

At the beginning of *Eraser Mountain*, performers come into the stage one by one. When they stand still, instead of facing the audience or looking into each other's eyes, they form everchanging assemblages and look towards their partners who speak in different corners of the stage. This Brechtian way of mise-en-scène lasts till the half of the play. When one of the actresses talks about the broken washing machine at home, her arms twist while her knees bend, makes the audiences fail to find the connection between the lines and the movement. As time go by, the narrative becomes dreamy because of the way they deliver the text: all these trivial things and random facts in everyday life are told in the third person, performers address lines on stage like they are chatting in the idle. They either speak their lines standing awkwardly or carry out a dance-like movement, without psychological motivation.

All these moments have formed the aesthetic characteristics of Toshiki Okada as a director. He has come to be known for his use of hyper-colloquial Japanese and unique choreography ever since the recognition of his theatre group Chelfitsch to its audience. As part of the revolution of Japanese contemporary theatre, his practice aims at overthrowing the artificial way of representation which cannot be related to the real-life of younger generations anymore. Following the steps of his predecessors like Hirata Oriza who ushered the way for the colloquial Japanese to be spoken on stage, Okada pushed the boundary of colloquial theatre and makes it into a documentation of everyday life, in meantime, he uses the bodily expression that he calls "small choreography" to liberate the actor's body from the text and makes the

acting inconsistent to the text. This rupture is fundamental to his art, as he states, “Body movement can be a completely separate track within the performance. That’s one of the most important things for me when producing theatre.”(Potter2020,Exbeliner) In my opinion, the division between the performer’s language and the body as one of the aesthetic choices of the director has contributed to generating affective boredom on stage and into the audience.

The stage setting in *Eraser Mountain* is an important aspect for us to glean insight into the bodily expression and the boredom affect in *Eraser Mountain*. On the stage designed by installation artist Teppei Keneuji, objects from different categories are put together: balls of different sizes; PVC pipes of different lengths; bottles of different shapes; nets, boards, squares, triangles, and cones; pictures of pets, projections of humans, etc. However, the function of these objects is more or less defamiliarized that they are beyond mundane: tennis balls are staged to form passages on stage; the mixer is running and roaring to make the white noise. The agency of these assemblages on stage interacts with and empowers the assemblage of performers: those combinations don’t give transcendent meaning to these objects, they become useful as they serve the purposiveness of the performance, instead of being submissive tools or props, these assemblages regulate and guide performers’ body. Due to these assemblages on stage, the bodily expression is not the supplement of the text but actions formed by the material world they are in.

The landscape and soundscape of the stage setting resemble the reconfiguration after the catastrophe, in the reconstruction when everything is upside-down; inside-out; when every substance has to be recalculated. The paradox of objects being both purposive and purposeless implies the artificial, hectic, and superfluous world of reconstructions, it presents disorder and

order of the ongoing constructions. Devastated by the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011, the same earthquake which caused the Fukushima Nuclear leak, the city of Rikuzentakata in Iwate Prefecture is now undergoing immense reconstruction to elevate the area as a countermeasure against future tsunami waves and restore the lives they have lost. People use local rocks to raise the land more than ten meters (33 feet) higher than before that they make the surrounding mountains disappear. After a visit to the Rikuchenkataka in 2017, Okada started to conceive the piece, he doesn't want to create melancholic dramatic catharsis, but rather choreograph both the emptiness and the fatigue around the shattered land of Japan instead. It looks like the performers carry out micro-movement in a limited parameter, but the physical demands are intense for the performers since they have to do it constantly in 3 hours. In meantime, the piece becomes an endurance that leads the audience to be hypnotized and drawn in.

When explaining the technique of choreography in his theatre, Okada amplifies the equality of the text and the body. He claims that in traditional theatre, speaking and movement are derived from the text, but in everyday life, there has to be the image inside the actor from which the texts are born, and the movement is generated from the image too. He believes that compared to the traditional way of looking for psychological implications from the text, it would be easier for the actor to initiate the movement and the speech from the image in their head so that they can keep the colloquial text alive (JPS2009, Youtube). This method aims at using the image and imagination to subvert the authority of the text, like Artaud advocates in his *Theatre of Cruelty*: (The superstition of text and director) will once more become gestures; and the logical and discursive intentions which speech ordinarily uses in order to ensure its

rational transparency, and in order to purloin its body in the direction of meaning, will be reduced or subordinated. (Derrida1978, 302) Then the problem becomes, where do those images come from? What kind of image serves as the nondiscursive force in Okada's theatre? The constantly changing gestures of the performer and their interactions with the assemblages on stage makes overloaded body images and object images. Furthermore, in the latter part of the play, the adding of projected images talking about time and space ironically queers the temporal and special realm on stage .By manipulating images of different quality and different forms, Okada ultimately includes the structural moments of boredom in a Heideggerian sense of "being held in limbo" (Heidegger1995,59-164).The durational "small choreography" and superfluous images and their interactions on stages make the boredom arise together.

These repetitive and exhausting movement upsets and bores the audience because like the performers on stage, the audience also waits for the change、 the reconstruction or the revolution to happen. Like Porzak says, "If waiting for the revolution is boring, then boredom would be perhaps the most fundamentally political affect" (Porzak 2017, 593). Then the problem becomes "how does the malaise of boredom become the productive force for the performance, and for the future it awaits?"

II. Feeling at home

In order to answer the above question, we have to go back to Okada's methodology of choreography. "My way (of performer training) is always the same, I will ask the actors to tell how your current house or the house you use to live is like. Where is your house entry, where is the bathroom? While talking about your house, spontaneously move your body. Why your

movement is like this when you talk about your house, you have to have an image in your head first, which makes you move. How much imagination is enough to choreograph you? Find movement base on that kind of imagination.” (Segal2020, Youtube) The imagination or image he mentioned in previous interviews are specifically about the memory of one’s home, in order to get the “small choreography”, actors have to have the image of themselves at home, and they have to perceive it as an imagination rather than analysis, to use it as an experience rather than reference. Memory as the representation of their past experience is the resource for imagination, “imagination is a choreographer.” (Segal2020, Youtube) Amongst which, the imagination about the most private sphere in performer’s life is the most important to get the small choreography of *Eraser Mountain* and other plays of Chelfisch.

This method resonates with the origin of the theatre company’s name Chelfitsh: “.....[Japanese] society that has a selfishness that pervades everyone who lives in it. The selfishness I’m thinking of as distinctly Japanese doesn’t have to do with money. It has to do with my perception that our awareness of ourselves as members of a society is thin. In Tokyo during the morning commute, the trains are insanely packed. Hundreds of thousands of people are taking the train packed like sardines. In order to tolerate it, I feel people don’t treat this time as public. They behave as if they are alone in their own room.” (Zinoman2014, NYT) The dissolution of the boundary between public and personal life, changes the way of imaging theatre since the selfishness becomes the essence of human being, looking for the abstract representation of humanity or art becomes illusional, the corporeality of the performers in Chelfitsh is a vital part for *Eraser Mountain* to make sense.

Okada's another recent work *The Vacuum Cleaner* makes an interesting foil to *Eraser Mountain*, as in *The Vacuum Cleaner* the physicality the director demands doesn't come naturally. Okada thinks that it is because "The German actors are more analytical when they try to find the choreography on stage in comparison with the actors of Chelfitsch." (Berlin, n.d.) The intuitive and half improvised way of moving the body becomes demanding for those trained actors. At the beginning of the play, the younger daughter enters the stage and begins her monologue. When she starts to describe cleaning up the objects with the vacuum cleaner at home, she moves her body fumblingly and repeats the same sequence of movement through the whole show. In some scenes, you can still find the connection between the movement and the text, but most of the time, the repetitive movement of the actors becomes their way to justify themselves to the psychological acting. The movement continues and it becomes the portrayal of the same kind of emptiness, therefore, the representation of boredom of the hikikomori people in society.

The other big gap between these two plays is the image or the imagination of home. The subjectivity which works as a productive force in Okada's plays is partially generated by objects of everyday life, or these objects at home. Okada's actors re-enact their imaginations from their memories, re-simulate the material world they lived, therefore their bodies become the threshold of material and the immaterial world. "Imagine that you are at home", says Okada to the performers. By "at home", he does not mean an empty home, but a home full of objects. The emptiness on the stage of *The Vacuum Cleaner* gives the audience space to think and participate, while the excess of objects and body images in *Eraser Mountain* bores the audience. The agencies of these two performances differ in the sense that they communicate with the

audience in different ways. The descriptions of “home” also vary and highly depend on the performers’ corporeality. Unlike the stage design of *Eraser Mountain*, *The Vacuum Cleaner*’s stage contains nothing but a video-game-like cross-section of a traditional Japanese room, Peter Brook’s definition of theatre —a person walking through an empty space (Brook2008,11) — becomes people living in an empty home in Okada’s play. However, after watching the whole play, you will find that the rooms in *The Vacuum Cleaner* are not so empty: each family member demonstrates to the audience through their memories and restores the items that once existed in this space. The actor's imagination and description make this empty space crowded by the end of the play. As they suggest the position of the objects in the memory, they illustrate them with their movement, like in traditional Nô theatre. However, Okada claims that his method is also at odds with the Nô styled performance. For him, the body and language are two distinct tracks with different possibilities rather than complete each other. (Berlin,n.d.)

If we understand the essence of man as "a living thing", an "animal", Okada’s “body at home” means not only the sense of belonging of a human being; by using the choreography is a way of self-taming, it also shows the actor’s awareness of his/her own existence, and the reality they need to rebuild. As Lefebvre writes: “Humans break themselves in [se dressent] like animals. They learn to hold themselves. Dressage can go a long way: as far as breathing, movement, sex. It bases itself on repetition. One breaks-in another human living being by making them repeat a certain act, a certain gesture or movement” (Lefebvre2004, 39)

If we put “body at home” in a socio-political spectrum, in the reality *Eraser mountain* depicts, "body at home" has another name "Otaku", which is the title of people who cannot adapt to society due to various problems in Japan’s declining economy. Okada responded with

his small choreographer to the prejudice about “Otaku”. The performers dance around the destroyed land, organize “Choreopolitics” towards an unknown future (Lepecki2013,22).

If we deposit “body at home” in psychological scope, homely (*Heimlich*) means sense of belonging for human beings; or being tamed or companionable to man for animals; Furthermore, *heimlich* also means the relationship between human being and his/her surroundings: the better orientated in his environment a person is, the less readily will he get the impression of something *unheimlich*(uncanny) regarding the objects and events in it. (Freud1997,196) However, *heimlich* is an ambivalent word, through the usage of speech, it extends itself and become the opposite- *unheimlich*. (Freud1997, 206) Derrida develops this usage of speech and claims that as speech fixes things down with words, art (poem) fixes down the world with power, that is how art as a form of representation renders people as the objects of the sovereign. The homely feelings in *Eraser Mountain* transfer into uncanniness when the text chases the body and try to fix things down by awarding meanings to them. Emotional engagement is not what Okada is looking for (Berlin,n.d), as an artist who is highly influenced by Brecht” (Zinoman2014, NYT), he wants to create a theatre that reflects the status of everyday life instead. In Okada’s theatre, as the speech and the body expression are not inconsistent, art as a representational form becomes debatable, this betwixt and between creates space for the affect of boredom to come.

Unheimlich (uncanny) as a fundamental way of our existence (Heidegger2008, 295), the *heimlich* acting of Okada’s performers reveals not the uncanniness of the acting, which usually means how individual actors' emotions resemble the audience’s expectation, but the uncanniness of theatre, which mean how the world on stage resembles the world of everyday

life. Derrida quotes Heidegger and claims what is at home(*heimlich*) in art seems to exceed human in human, seems to step outside human in human art(Derrida2010, 263). Okada's goal of theatre-making is to discover, to imagine the future with performers' everyday behaviors, rather than with the highly theatricalized manners (JPS2009, Youtube). His *Eraser Mountain* reveals two different agencies of boredom. In everyday life, we hide ourselves into the imagined private sphere to maintain our integrity; on stage, we bore our audiences into inattention by choreographing this private sphere so that they may not ever fully or accurately encounter the text (Porzak2017,581) . The emancipation happens when those performers are able to politicize the space on stage and between objects with their improvised movement, and when the lags between text and performers body ennui the audience and challenge their cognitive state. By performing the boredom, Okada intends to form a mode of constant deferment of understanding, constituting a passive mode of resistance against the fixed future, both about the "Otaku" generation and the post-Fukushima Japan.

III. Conclusion

In *Eraser Mountain*, rather than acceding to the text, the actor's movement is adjusted and coordinated by the objects on stage. Instead of looking for the neutrality or nobility in an actor's body, Okada brings into our attention the fact that we live in a material world. As Jean Luc Nancy says: we are in the midst of another transcendence, which is that of the dissipation of any vision of a "true humanity". (Nancy2015, 33) Nancy's claim resonates with lines from *Eraser Mountain*, "The world is full of objects unknown that people stare at them with indignation, and there are more and more objects that the hierarchy of objects made human

beings getting ignored.” In a world where the relationship with objects is embedded in humanity, how can we not find a new definition of humanity in the actor’s body on stage? The politics of boredom in *Eraser Mountain* demonstrates how this new kind of humanity is possible regarding the devastating reality of both Japanese after Fukushima Nuclear and the whole world in a mass market of globalization.

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