

(Global flows 2002 draft conference paper)

**Space, race and surveillance. Memorialising military cultural dystopia in the work of Gekidan Kaitaisha, the Not Yet It's Difficult Performance group.**

**Peter Eckersall**

*The state functions to grid and organise, to hierarchize and coordinate the activities of and for the city and its state-produced correlate, the country(side).*

(Grosz: 107)

## Introduction

Since the 1980s contemporary and experimental theatre in Australia and Japan has shown a diversity of contradictory forms, aesthetic representations and cultural meanings. Some discussions of the era though are worth recalling.

Turning briefly to Japan—the so-called *angura* boom of the 1980s has been classified as a bubble theatre of euphoria (Eckersall); the "theatre of the private"—defined by Uchino as a theatre that rejected ideology and language and rather drew on an imaginary "community of sentiments" (TDR p. 87); a ludic theatre of speed and nostalgia (Rolf); and a theatre of transcendental, Cyberpunk-like images of the end of the world (Uchino): ie. "Japan as dystopia" (Eckersall, TDR). Indeed the theatre of the 1980s has been read critically in Japan in ways that point to a culture hell bent on the erasure of history and the enduring celebration of an 'endless present'—to borrow Harootunian's notion of Japanese postwar capitalism as an undifferentiated process of identity formation.

Cultural critics in Japan have pointed to a misplaced sense of elation that permeated through Japanese society and culture, during the 1980s. Its momentum towards cultural homogeneity is what some have termed the "identity trap" of Japanese essentialism. To this end, *Nihonjinron* has been constituted as a powerful force in Japanese social construction. Recent events demonstrate how national-imperial symbols such as the *Hinomaru* have been revived as euphoric statements of Japanese power in the region.

Meanwhile, Australian Prime Minister John Howard's vision for Australia as "comfortable and relaxed" marks the deliberate erasure of cultural complexity and sophistication in the Australian cultural imaginary. Ironically this has been read by many scholars as a calculated yet extremist

manoeuvre designed to resist the very kinds of identify confusion and plurality that have been debated in the Australian theatre since the 1970s.

In the broad context of globalisation Howard's singular vision of national cultural essentialism is experienced as a form of consensual euphoria. While the relaxed stance has now been replaced by the rhetoric of threat and war *in both formations* notions of race pride are bought to bear in the revision of mythical (and unreconstructed) images of Australianness.

The widely celebrated theatre production of Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet* (directed by Neil Armfield) that toured nationally and internationally as an iconic representation of the culmination of the fruits of the Australian alternative theatre project might at first appear to be a statement contrary to the Howard line. Yet this production has been the topic of sustained critique concerning issues such as the singular and nostalgic formation of an Australian identity that was also stepped in a fabricated imaginary of the Australian small business battler.

In any case we might say that in Australia *and* Japan, consensual euphoria seems to ride over another more dystopic turns of events; the loss of freedoms, widening income disparity, the privatisation of the public wealth, the rise of cults, and so on.

In this sense it is extremely productive to consider the evidence of an alternative in the theatrical representation of Australia and Japan. The experimental theatres have always been associated with notions of critique, resistance, the source of alternatives. In Uchino's terms: "It is this urge to erase history ... that all cultural productions ... have to resist" (TDR 93). But in an age of globalisation such a notion might seem quaint and improbable.

In theorising globalisation, scholars such as Hardt and Negri identify: "a *decentred* and *deterritorializing* apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers." (Hardt and Negri 2000: xii) Such observations have seriously challenged the very notion of an avantgarde. And perhaps therefore, the most productive thing to consider in respect of theatre is how theatre responds to—rather than participates in—the globalisation of the forces of production. In particular, as the disciplinary formation of globalisation becomes extreme we might study how its mechanisms might be dealt with—or understood in theatre works. Here I have identified formulations of space, race and surveillance that underpin the regime of globalisation and yet are evident as points of resistance in recent avantgarde theatre in Australia and Japan. This I am interested in how such disciplinary formations might be addressed in theatre as sources of comment on the cultural spaces within which theatre works.

## Gekidan Kaitaisha

For the director of Japan's Gekidan Kaitaisha, Shimizu Shinjin, "ideology is a shadow" of action. The possibility of action—specifically performative acts that might be seen as moments of theatrical resistance—has become an unworkable proposition for this company. Shimizu proposes that the contemporary body had yielded to the demands of Foucault-like disciplinary regimes and is waiting for instruction. This is a body at sea, unable to rise above the waves and gain a sense of its position, the undercurrent is too strong. The space too bent on the bodies erasure.

In the same vein Phillip Auslander reasons that in postmodern theatre the:

... conflation of the cultural and the economic renders "critical distance" impossible—the cultural can no longer presume to stand back from the economic/political and comment on it from without. (Auslander 1997: 59).

As we see in this excerpt from Kaitaisha's *Into the century of degeneration* (2000), bodies are washed over, erased and propelled as if by a disciplinary vortex. This is an image that suggests the kind of military cultural dystopia that I am trying identify here.

<p><b>VIDEO ONE: GK BODIES PERFORMING WHILE WASHED OVER BY MILITARY IMAGES.</b></p>
-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

The conflation of space, race and surveillance is terminal in this work. There no further room to manoeuvre as each principle element seems to be complete in its ability to dissolve the body (*ninjen jokyô*).

To give this an historical perspective, Shimizu contrasts the present day with theatrical representations of the body in the Japanese avantgarde of 1980. In the era of hyper-capitalism in Japan Shimizu asserts that the performing body was aesthetically driven and erotic. Such performance exhibited the aching beauty of the slow, undulating, aestheticism of the Zen-like Japanese body. As noted above the condition of this body has been described by critics as apocalyptic and otherworldly. Seminal 1980s performance by San Kai Juku for example, or Tenkei Gekijô's *Mizu no Eki* (Water Station),—wherein a parade of slow moving silent figures gathered water from a village tap—held nostalgic, otherworldly and culturally distinctive associations for viewers. In other words, we saw the origins of a postmodern avantgarde orinentalia in Japanese performance. Space was an aesthetic construct and Japaneseness was denoted in mystical, pseudo-contemplations of some hidden awesome

power. “To end the world in order to imagine a renewed sense of (national) community” (cited in Uchino 2000: 89) is the goal of Uchino 's understanding of the ‘Theatre of the Private’ of the 1980s.<sup>1</sup>

According to Shimizu the body since then has been conditioned by war and expresses a militarist sense of space and identity. He notes “It was a shock for theatre, that a war without bodies ... raised the curtain of the 1990s.” (GK book 2001: 71) Accordingly Shimizu argues, we must retrain our imagination to see the bodies that have been evacuated from the scene by media and ideology; by forces of globalisation as might be theorised in Baurdillard's notion of the media war. This is an observation that has only intensified in the present-day so-called “war on terrorism”. To this end, Kaitaisha's work in recent times has consisted of scenes that are called ‘reconstructions’, ‘meditations’, and ‘testimony’, that document how that last decade fell into political disorder. “there is nothing but *kaitai*—Shimizu says—nothing but deconstruction..<sup>2</sup> Shimizu's theatre contests the myth of identity. Nishido, suggests that Shimizu regards the Japanese bodies as "the bodies of cattle". They are deprived bodies without intention, For Shimizu this is not symbolic or theatrical metaphor it is simply the way things are—in his words "the body brings something to light".

## NYID

Exploring notions of Australian spatial reality in performance is for NYID artistic director, David Pledger at centre of an Australian avantgarde. NYID's *Scenes of the beginning from the end* (2001) was a theatrical journey through—and political commentary on—Australian experiences of space.

Performed in multiple sites within a public car park, *Scenes* offered three main spatial categories: the desert and Australia's vast interior, the suburbs, and the city—on the peripheral vision of an Australia that resists the inward gaze. For many Australians, the “nether regions” are a source of anxiety and a political divide. Australia is divided between those who live in cities and in regional areas, and between those who seek to reconcile with the interior and those who don't. Interior Australia is largely populated by indigenous peoples with whom mainstream Australia has a violent history and an uneasy present day relationship at best.

Factionalised and fetishised in Australian cultural imagination, the reality of the use of this space by settler Australia is often one of occupation, racialisation, and exploitation. Huge swathes of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Defined as “This is not a theatre of Cartesian subjects but of premodern undifferentiated selves in which spectators are supposed to contribute a full range of sentiments.” (2000: 87).

<sup>2</sup> There is a belief that exterior forces condition the performance of Kaitaisha —“there is nothing but *kaitai* (deconstruction). (GK book 2001: 83)

centre become massive scars for the purpose of mining. Woomera, Curtin and Port Headland detention centres—the prison like structures for refugees awaiting processing—are far from mainstream view. America spy installations are secreted at Pine Gap. Scholars point to the sense of unease and “(dis)possession” experienced by Australians in respect of space.

While the city might be seen as home it too has its anxieties and the final part of the performance—which began with a train driver point of view commute to work—was designed to create in the audience an overwhelming sense of the intrusion of surveillance and disciplinary regimes. NYID have long incorporated images of surveillance into their work: The director comments:

All of this technology is completely and utterly possible and in between that spectrum of looking at someone when they’re not watching you, and that kind of organisation of power and capital, are these multiplicities of mediation which determine the way that we organise ourselves in space, our emotional lives, our thinking. (Richard Murphet , *David Pledger: the Danger Zone Real Time* 44.)

In *Scenes* images of the surveillance of the city and of the journey through the city to the venue of the performance were projected onto large video screens. Smiling operators at computer terminals gradually switched between surveillance images of the city, the car park venue and finally real time images of the audience. Ben Zipper’s review comments:

“in a performance that picks up on earlier themes of work versus home, intimacy versus pop culture, independence versus mass persuasion ... a new theme – corporate surveillance – is overtly introduced, through screen imagery of public cameras filming private lives. By the end a few audience members have signs hung around their necks, saying for example, "I once imagined I was thinking. I atone for my transgression". (Zipper 2001: <http://www.stageleft.com.au/scenebeg.html>)

As the following excerpt shows, these people were removed from the space and the audience watched a final scene in which they were punished.

## **VIDEO TWO: SURVEILLANCE IMAGES FROM SCENES**

At the time, reviewers seemed to think that the dystopian tone of the surveillance scene was perhaps naïve, too overt. In response to the evident didacticism, Ben Zipper called the scene “insulting”. Peta Tait, while positive overall, thought the work had “Echoes of Foucaultian regimes but not

---

punishing dismemberment in this Australia.” (Peta Tait Real Time 43.)<sup>3</sup>

### Space, race, surveillance

As in the nyid, example, the goal of the disciplinary formation is self-monitoring. Alphonso Lingis writes:

Surveillance registers the transgression as soon as it is initiated, indeed observes every possibility of transgression and every temptation to transgress, and neutralises them in advance. (Lingis 1994, 59-60).<sup>4</sup>

For NYID surveillance and the performative acts of deterrence are basis of a new power structure in Australian life and the cornerstone of Shimizu's dystopian critique of Japan. Shimizu further notes that in his view the image of the refugee camp is a disciplinary one designed to foster the minds of citizens a fear of difference and rejection by the state. He writes: “in the case of Japan, in the midst of globalisation there is rising nationalism, which means excluding the outside”. (GK book 2001: 75) He argues that globalisation was “conceived to allow for the possibility of differentiation” ... but in reality “forces a homogeneous norm.” (ibid) As result in his performance “power has come to control the body even more tightly”.

Following from this suggestion we might note that "excise" is the word used in the Australia Border Protection Bill that removes Australian territories from the legal definition of Australia for the purpose of defining the locus and responsibilities for refugee groups.<sup>5</sup> In election mode in October 2001, the Prime Minister said to the parliamentary Press Gallery: “those people will never set foot on Australian soil” (Howard cited in Rundle2001: 3). As Ang has noted:

[When] (mostly Asian or other non-European) refugees arrive on Australian shores, the deep-seated fears around the violability of the nation's borders in the Asian region are brought

---

<sup>3</sup> As Peta Tait: “Scenes of the beginning from the end consists of intersections of live bodies and filmed (e)scapes, physical talk and verbal football; cars as cultural fantasies of freedom set against fears of social monitoring.” Real Time 43.

<sup>4</sup> Lingis continues: “It differentiates individuals, makes comparisons possible between the levels, abilities and performances of different individuals, and between the different stages in the evolution of an individual. ... The disciplined body is individual in his or her school record, examination results, aptitude tests, military record, employment record, prison record and medical file.” (Alphonso Lingis 1994, 59-60).

<sup>5</sup> Contemporary Australian political culture and media has made discourse racial and legitimated borders. The rhetoric of national leaders has popularised divides in the Australian community; the rhetoric of being "average" is contrast to the term “elite” which in turn is attached to nay people and/or institutions that might dissent from a heterosexual, white, privatised, neo-liberal view.

to the surface, with [Federal Minister for Immigration and Aboriginal Affairs Phillip] Ruddock responding to the often near-hysterical mainstream public opinion by emphasising the criminality of their entry and increasing border surveillance. (Ien Ang 2000: xiv).<sup>6</sup>

The interaction of globalisation and neo-liberalism with nationalism and parochialism had been widely commented on. We are reminded that we are being protected and we are being watched at every possible moment. The intersection of formations and practices of space, race and surveillance support an increasing authoritarianism and decline of democracy.

#### Conclusion

We might conclude then by returning to questions of theatre. If the sixties was—as has noted by many critics—a theatre culture of social critique it was also optimistic about the possibility that art might productively realise change. We have already noted that the 1980s gave rise to a theatre of euphoria that has remained with us as powerful aesthetic-political force. However, these theatres are different. Nishido argues that "The theatre of the 1990s intended to *subvert* both the theatre of the 1960s and the theatre of the 1980s." In doing so it reveals something rather than agitates. It shows a body under control, without will. An extreme and bleak perspective on the way things are.

(Here is an image of free trade—the underpinning of globalisation as it is revered in mainstream economic and political Australia and Japan.)

#### References:

Ien Ang (ed.) (2000) *Alter/Asians : Asian-Australian identities in art, media and popular*. Sydney : Pluto Press.

Phillip Auslander (1997) *From acting to performance: essays in modernism and postmodernism* London; New York : Routledge.

Peter Eckersall (2000) Japan as Dystopia: An Overview of Kawamura Takeshi's Daisan Erotica', *The*

---

<sup>6</sup> A Bill only partially defeated last week proposed 48 hour mandatory detention of Australians without charge and the power to ban organisations that the attorney general (a government member) deemed to be supportive of terrorist acts or groups. Greens Senator Bob Brown, who was one of the people responsible for defeating the bill in its unreconstructed authoritarian form said: the creation of new offences of

*Drama Review* (TDR T-165) 97-106.

Peter Eckersall, Edward Scheer, Denise Varney, Rachel Fensham (2000), 'Tokyo Diary: The City Performs', *Real Time* (No 39), pp. 33-4.

Gekidan Kaitaisha (2001) Theatre of Deconstruction Kaitaisha Tokyo: Gekidan Kaitaisha.

Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri (2000), *Empire* Cambridge: Mass. Harvard University Press.

Alphonso Lingis, *Foreign Bodies* London: Routledge 1994.

Richard Murphet, *David Pledger: the Danger Zone* *Real Time* 44.

Guy Rundle, (2001) 'The Opportunist', *Quarterly Essay* No. 3.

Peta Tait (2001) (Review) *Real Time* 43.

Tadashi Uchino (2002) 'Images of Armageddon' *The Drama Review* (TDR T-165)

Ben Zipper (2001) 'Review' <http://www.stageleft.com.au/scenebeg.html>

---

terrorism that could encompass some union activity, civil disobedience and dissent". Press Release from the Senator's office. (24/6/02).