PLAYING ST. SEBASTIAN: A QUEER READING OF AND BETWEEN LITERARY AND VISUAL TEXTS FROM THE MODERN PERIOD

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First, let us look at two controversial works in Japanese art history: the first is a work titled *Chōshō* 朝粧 (Morning Toilette), a painting of a female nude by Kuroda Seiki while studying in France at the end of the nineteenth century. This painting is the first nude in modern Japan. When it was exhibited at the National Industrial Exhibition (Naikoku kangyō hakurankai) held in Kyoto in 1895, it was met with great criticism and sparked the so-called "nude painting debates." The second is a photographic work by Takano Ryūdai titled *Ore to* (Together with Me). When this picture was exhibited at the Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art in 2014, the Aichi Prefectural Police declared it obscene because it showed male genitalia, demanding either the removal of the work or the cancellation of the exhibition. In the end, the work was exhibited with the lower half of the nude body covered with a cloth.

These two events clearly illustrate a shameful situation of expression in which the representation of the naked body or bare genitals is still repeatedly subject to repression despite the time gap of more than a hundred years between the two works. At the same time, these incidents imply that the situation of sexual expression has gradually changed over the past hundred years. They also imply that in the 21st century we have moved beyond the heteronormativity of whether the model is a woman or a man and have moved one step further toward a discussion of queer representation. How have performances about sexuality and the body transformed over the past one hundred years? Here I will refer to such issues in mind.

The postwar period in Japan can be divided into the following categories based on the body. Writings of the most representative thought of their periods are also listed.

Name	Period	Representative Works
Age of Flesh	1945–1950s	Tamura Taijirō, *Nikutai no mon* (The Gate of the Flesh, 1947)

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Age of Spirit	1950s–1960s	Takeyama Michio, *Shōwa no seishin shi* (A Spiritual History of the Showa Period, 1956)
		Irokawa Daikichi, *Meiji seishin shi* (A Spiritual History of the Meiji Period, 1964)
		Various other intellectual history books (Geistesgeschichte)
Age of the Body	1970s–80s	Ichikawa Hiroshi, *Seishin to shite no shintai* (The Body as Spirit, 1975)
		Nakamura Yūjirō, *Kyōtsū kankaku ron* (On Common Sense, 1979)
Age of the Skin	1980s–90s	Hasumi Shigehiko, *Hyōsō hihyō sengen* (The Manifesto of Surface Criticism, 1979)
		Minato Chihiro, *Kangaeru hifu* (Thinking Skin: A Cultural Theory of Touch, 1993)
Age of the Brain or Externalized Body	1990s	Yōrō Takeshi, *Yuinō ron* (Brain Only Theory, 1989)

After Japan's defeat in World War II, literary expression in Japan began using "flesh" as a keyword. The works of Tamura Taijirō, including *Nikutai no mon* (The Gate of the Flesh), should be mentioned first as representative of this trend. A literary scholar, Mitsuishi Ayumi, has demonstrated that in the late 1940s, after the defeat of Japan in World War II, a great deal of *nikutai bungaku* (Literature of the Flesh) was written and published as *nikutai-bon* (Flesh Books) under GHQ/SCAP censorship (Mitsuishi, 2019). Mitsuishi's work focuses on two subjects and their associated flesh: one is the "flesh" of Japanese women who have broken free from the repressive system of the previous age and achieved the brilliance of the new age. The second is the "flesh" of Japanese men who are trying to recover their injured sexual identity by conquering the female body.

In his collection of essays, "The Literature of the Flesh," Tamura writes:

> I have learned in my bones that the physiology of the flesh is the most intense and *only* human activity. I believe no human idea is dependable that is not founded on an understanding of the flesh. The flesh is everything. My thirty-seven-year-old flesh is convinced of this. I absolutely do not believe in any "idea" that does not come from the flesh. (Tamura 1948, 14)

Here, Tamura is placing *nikutai* 肉体 (flesh) in opposition to *shisō* 思想 (idea), and the "idea" that he is making a virtual enemy of here can be paraphrased as "spirit."

It is important to emphasize here that this *nikutai* (flesh) is different from the notion of *shintai* 身体 (body) that emerged after the defeat of the war.

The difference between the Japanese words *nikutai* and *shintai* may be slightly different from the difference between "flesh" and "body" in English. In general, however, it seems to me that *shintai* is positioned in correlation with the spirit, including a mind-body harmony. On the other hand, *nikutai* is based on the separation of mind and body, is disconnected from the spirit, and can be positioned as a category that is rather inconsistent with mental activity. Moreover, it was always deeply connected with sex and violence.

This tendency toward a separation of mind and body has continued ever since. In the 1950s and 1960s, the word *seishin* 精神 was foregrounded as a keyword in Japan's intellectual space within the country's economic development after the US Occupation. What is noteworthy here is that books with the title *seishinshi* 精神史 "Geistesgeschichte" or "spiritual history," "intellectual history" were published one after another. Of course, many books with *seishinshi* in the title had also been published in the 1930s. However, most of them were titled *Nihon seishinshi* 日本精神史 or "A History of the Japanese Spirit," reflecting an era enmeshed in the total war system. After the defeat in World War II, the number of books on the Japanese spirit declined noticeably, but from the 1950s onward, interest in *seishinshi* increased, and major works by Takeyama Michio and Irokawa Daikichi were published under that title. The rise of spiritualism seems to have diminished the shadow of the "flesh" that emerged in the postwar period, but this may not be the case. The "body" as a subject has been made invisible only by men regaining the subject of sex and violence and objectifying women's bodies/flesh.

The "Age of Flesh" and the "Age of Spirit," though seemingly at odds with each other, were half-brothers born from the same root of

mind-body dualism. At the root of this dualism was logocentrism. The "Age of the Body," in which body theory 身体論 overcomes this logocentrism, was advocated from the 1970s. Criticizing Cartesian logocentrism and mind-body dualism, body theory was introduced into the Japanese intellectual space in the context of phenomenology and post-structuralism and had a great impact. Ichikawa Hiroshi, who led the body theory movement in Japan, proposed an original model of the body called the "expanding body" (*hirogaru shintai* 拡がる身体), and combined the phenomenological concept of intersubjectivity with the issue of the body. This focus on intersubjectivity and relationships with others led to a focus on the boundaries of the body, namely, the skin that we all wear.

Next, the 1990s saw the "Age of the Brain." Yōrō Takeshi's work, *Yuinō ron*, ignited the thought of that era. The idea that the brain corresponds to all social systems and representations of the real world was gaining momentum, and interest in the activity of human cognition increased. The idea of virtual reality, which now dominates the system of modern society, is also connected to this centralization of brain activity. However, we have not yet been able to clearly envision the stage that will follow the "Age of the Brain." The brain is a part of the body and is situated at its core, but the age after the "brain age" seems to be an age of the "loss of the body." We now use computer hard disks and cell phones as substitutes for the brain, and by using them, we are controlled by them. Since the body has been externalized there, more precisely, we can call the present the "Age of the Externalized or Virtualized Body."

The "Age of the Body" was accompanied by its derivative, the "Age of the Skin." The focus on the body has prompted an interest in the surface of the body as opposed to the interior and the inside, and among the bodies, interest in the skin has been particularly strong. The "Age of the Skin" also brought attention to clothing and fashion that adhered closely to, and was an extension of, the skin, leading to the "Age of Fashion," a variant of the "Age of the Skin." It is also worth recalling that during this period, the so-called "Body-con" fashion, in which clothing that adheres closely to the body and emphasizes the lines of the body, became popular in Japan. Bodycon is an abbreviation for "body-conscious," a byproduct of the "Age of the Body" and the "Age of the Skin." In Japan, criticism of the "Age of Fashion" can be typified by Yamada Toyoko and Washida Kiyokazu, for example.

Hasumi Shigehiko's *Hyōsō hihyō sengen*, which I have cited as a representative essay of the "Age of the Skin," is not an essay on skin as

such, but rather, as an ambitious attempt to focus on the "surface," is symbolic of the thinking of this period. Let me quote a passage from it:

> The "surface" disappears through the forced separation of "word" and "paper," and the "system" is a false arrangement of infinite movement that fictionalizes the birth and death of a single being. (79)

For Hasumi, who developed his criticism of the "system" on the basis of the "surface," the "surface" was the materiality of paper, and the fact that words are in close contact with that paper. In his postscript to the same book, Hasumi describes the experience of true surface criticism as a physiological pain felt by the body of words, which is opposed to intellectual and spiritual activities. In other words, the materiality of the paper on which the words are drawn can be described as corporeality, and the surface layer of the paper can be replaced by the skin.

I believe that the "body" in relation to writing should be considered first and foremost as a surface layer of skin. Peter Greenaway's 1996 film *The Pillow Book* is based on Sei Shōnagon's *Makura no sōshi* (The Pillow Book), but it strongly reminds me of Lafcadio Hearn's *Kwaidan* (Ghost Stories). In Greenaway's film, the repetition of the act of writing on the face and all over the skin creates a narrative progression. This is based on Hearn's "Hoichi the Earless" (Mimi-nashi Hōichi) included in his book, *Kwaidan*. In this work the text of the Heart Sutra is transcribed on the skin of a blind biwa player, Hōichi, in order to save his life from the Heike clan's vengeful spirits.

Elsewhere, Claudia Benthien finds a double meaning in skin. One is the skin as the other existing in the body of the self, and the other is the skin as the self itself, as the identity of the self. The self in relation to the skin is "Selbst als in der Haut" ("the self as in the skin") and "Selbst als Haut" ("the self as the skin"). The skin is a boundary, and as Benthien says, the boundary separates the self from the other and at the same time protects the self from the other. In other words, skin as a boundary raises two images of the other: the other as defender and the other as intruder. In her book *Haut (Skin)*, Bentine also felt compelled to include a chapter entitled "Durchdringung" ("penetrations").

In "Hōichi the Earless", as is well known, Hōichi, a blind biwa player, has his ears plucked off by a vengeful spirit because the transcriber of the sutra forgot to write it on Hōichi's ears. Blind, Hōichi cannot read the text of the sutra written on his skin with his eyes. In this sense, his body bears the same materiality as paper, and by

foregrounding the materiality of his body, it bears the medium's incantation. The text written on the skin is, in this sense, a new boundary inscribed on the boundary, and the blank space (vacancy) of the skin-as-paper is an opening aperture that provides a route of entry from the outside to the inside. Thus, writing on the paper page is also ambivalent, both defensive and invasive. Benthien states that the pre-modern body was "a kind of porous tissue that could potentially have an opening anywhere," (Benthien 2002, 40) whereas the modern body is a single, closed, two-dimensional body. In the modern body, the physical negotiation with the other, which is centered on sexuality and violence, is specialized in an opening, aperture. The aperture is privileged independently from other parts of the skin.

Incidentally, in the film *Kwaidan*, directed by Kobayashi Masaaki in 1964, the Heike warriors are depicted in a Sebastian-like manner at the beginning of the film, where they are shot with arrows while standing on the boat at Dan no ura. The arrows that penetrate the bodies of the warriors are analogous to the sutra characters that are written on the bodies of Hōichi.

Writing on the skin is, in this sense, a kind of violence that damages the skin. Writing on the material surface of paper is also a trace, a scar, so to speak, of that violence. Injury on the surface of the skin, which is closed except for apertures, can be seen as an attempt to create new apertures in the skin and to penetrate into the interior. And as long as writing on the skin does not cut through the body and remains in the superficial dimension, the attempt to penetrate inside is always unsuccessful.

Hasumi's advocacy of superficial criticism as a critique of idealism and his statement that such criticism consists of the physiological pain of the body of language is connected to the idea that to write a text is to injure it. In the "Age of the Skin," when writing and scratching on the surface of the skin transformed the boundary of the body into an ambivalent place where the self and the other, the inside and the outside, engage in negotiation, have all attempts to break through the surface and boundaries and enter the inside ended in failure? The answer is no. The "Age of the Skin" is connected to the late 1980s, when the AIDS panic broke out in Japan. Various prejudices caused by unfounded fears of invisible infectious diseases were carried over to other pandemic panics such as SARS and COVID19. Infectious diseases that entered the body through genitalia, the throat, and other orifices or apertures raised awareness of the need to protect the skin in general.

Such a way of penetrating the body beyond the surface layer of the skin is symbolized by the icon of Saint Sebastian, the saint repeatedly depicted in the history of Christian art, often shown with an arrow shot into his body. In the preface to the catalog of the 2003 *Saint Sebastian* exhibition in Vienna, Gerald Matt and Wolfgang Fetz described Sebastian as an icon that penetrates various polarities, including the gender identity of men and women, but twenty years later the icon of Sebastian seems to have also acquired a queer meaning.

In modern times, the name of Gabriele D'Annunzio, who wrote the play *Le Martyre de Saint Sebastien*, and the name of Mishima Yukio, who himself translated and revitalized D'Annunzio's *Le Martyre*, must first be mentioned along with the icon of Sebastian. In *Confessions of a Mask*, published in 1949 prior to his translation of D'Annunzio's *Le Martyre*, Mishima depicted the protagonist masturbating to the image of Sebastian drawn by the Italian baroque painter Guido Reni. Let me quote only one sentence, in which an arrow is shot into Sebastian's skin behind the protagonist's gaze: "The arrows have eaten into the tense, fragrant, youthful flesh and are about to consume his body from within with flames of supreme agony and ecstasy" (Mishima 1958).

The narrator, the protagonist of the story, was led to ejaculation by sexual excitement, and he dared to use the Latin *ejaclatio* to describe the peak of his ecstasy. In Japanese, *shasei* 射精 is a word of Chinese origin, meaning "ejaculation." Sebastian's pain and pleasure as the arrow was shot into his body awakened him to his sexual awakening, and he shot not an arrow but semen at the image of Sebastian. The semen, as an arrow, was scattered and returned to the protagonist's own body. For the protagonist, who loved his classmate Ōmi, whose "flesh was not eroded in the slightest by reason," (Mishima 1958) and who was especially fascinated by his axilla, in which armpit hair grew richly, the arrow was no longer a penis that pierced the blank page of a virgin's paper. Or to be more precise, it was surely a penis, but it was not the penis at the core of heteronormative sexuality.

There is a passage in D'Annunzio's text that reads, "He who hurts me more deeply is the one who loves me more deeply" (D'Annunzio 2020). Sebastian's image in Mishima's *Confessions of a Mask* evokes within us male homosexuality, masochism, and the desire for death. The unhesitating orientation toward queerness of this work overlapped with the criticism of the idealism or spiritualism of the "Age of the Body" that dominated the 1940s, defined by the image of a feminized Japanese body embraced by the United States.

It is difficult to determine whether Mishima's novels were independent of the heterosexist framework. The protagonist loved a woman named Sonoko, but he realized that he had no sexual desire for her. He went to a brothel to buy a woman, but his attempts at sexual intercourse proved his impotence. The protagonist's anguish showed how isolated he was in the heterosexual system of his time. The protagonist used the word *hairi* 背理 or "transgression" to describe a love affair devoid of sexual desire. He then tried to affirm that human passion is based on transgression.

When we look at Mishima Yukio from the perspective of performance, we are reminded of the fact that he has been the subject of works by photographers such as Hosoe Eikoh and Shinoyama Kishin. This is not some extra-territorial topic related to the artist's image. Mishima exposes his nude body and skin in front of the camera to become the subject of their works, and his body itself is extremely eloquent. Hosoe Eikoh's *Barakei* (Killed by Roses, 1963) seems on the surface to have aimed at destroying the idol of Mishima, but the photographs contributed to upgrading the idol of Mishima. Mishima contributed a lengthy preface to the book, "Introduction to the Works of Hosoe Eikoh," which includes the following passage:

> In front of Hosoe's camera, I found that my spirit and mind were not needed in the slightest. It was a mind-expanding experience, a situation I had always longed for.

Hosoe's camera captures every detail of the subject's skin surface. Take, for example, the famous close-up of a wide-eyed Mishima staring at us with a rose in his mouth. Mishima's skin from forehead to the bridge of the nose and neck is shiny, with fine skin particles, pores, a mole, not to mention his dark eyebrows, eyelashes, and eye capillaries, all clearly expressed. In the age of logocentrism, which separates body and spirit, Mishima's skin as a text he performed anticipates the "Age of Skin" twenty years later.

Mishima as an object in photography, with his intensely staring eyes, insists that he is here the *subject* and not the object. He sees but is never seen. The works of *Barakei* shows that Mishima was a performer who, by disclosing the texture of his own skin, asserted the autonomy of the body beyond the power of the spirit or mind. Moreover, Mishima's criticism of spiritualism is connected to the fact that he was also a performer of exceptional ability to manipulate language independent of the body.

In the "Notes on Photography" included in *Barakei*, Hosoe states that Mishima asked for his approval by showing an Italian Renaissance art book and praising a painting depicting the "Martyrdom of Sebastian." This can be understood as Mishima's implicit request that St. Sebastian be the theme of the photograph, but Hosoe, who could not accept the sense of pain, did not adopt it, and only used Giorgione's painting of Venus from the same art book.

However, Mishima never gave up his own physical performance practice, which he repeated in response to his own work, *Confessions of a Mask*. In 1968, five years after the publication of *Barakei*, the first issue of *Chi to Bara* (Blood and Roses), "a comprehensive study journal of eroticism and cruelty," edited by Shibusawa Tatsuhiko, featured a photograph by Shinoyama Kishin titled "The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian." The expression of the subject in this photograph was quite different from that of Hosoe Eikoh. Mishima's face is turned upward, and his eyes look as if he were wandering in a state of euphoria, having lost his poise. The proportions of the body, with its emphasis on muscular protuberance, are the same, and here, too, there is no hiding his deviations from the canonical iconography of St. Sebastian, which is depicted as the opposite of machoism. The phallus-centric power of the eye and the muscles and body hair in the *Barakei* creak and dissonate with original St. Sebastian's masochistic passions.

In Shinoyama's remake of St. Sebastian, despite the expression on Mishima's face as he is shot with an arrow and immersed in a masochistic ecstasy, the engorged muscles in which the arrow was shot bulge, as if they were joined together in a strange, artificial complex. This is very different from the feminine-bodied Sebastian archetypes depicted by Guido Reni. In his essay for the catalogue of the exhibition *St. Sebastian* held in Vienna in 2003/2004, Richard A. Kate focuses on the iconography of St. Sebastian, which has symbolized male victimhood, masculine beauty, and homoerotic desire, and notes the unique additions to the iconography of St. Sebastian by women writers such as Frida Kahlo and Louise Bourgeois. Kahlo suffered the aftereffects of a car accident when she was young, which cast a dark shadow over her life, but her wounds and trauma can be seen in her portrayal of St. Sebastian. Almost alone in the iconography of St. Sebastian, which thus transcends sex and gender, Mishima's body is the only one that asserts an anti-chronological masculinity.

Kate discusses Kahlo's works based on St. Sebastian by juxtaposing them with Mishima:

> Her anthropomorphized stag, a totem of animal grace, harbors a playful primitivism of proto-feminist import that mocks the solemnity of martyrdom as depicted by Renaissance male masters as well as the heroes of masculine self-surrender embodied in Mishima's grisly photographic self-portrait. (Kate 2003/2004, 14–15).

The revival of the image of St. Sebastian in the contemporary period seems to linger in the background of the deeply entrenched cultures of sado-masochism and self-injury. This situation may be read as a kind of queer situation. This queer situation is not unrelated to the recovery of homosexuality against a homosocial power base. In terms of the genealogy of the Sebastian image, it was a feminist objection to phallocentric iconography. There is no escaping the fact that Mishima, as a writer, has a machoistic and conservative side to his sexual identity that cannot escape feminist criticism. However, it is possible to point out that Mishima embodied a certain queerness in his creation and performance as a dimension of possibility.

Unearthing Mishima's queerness also leads us to the genealogy of the Sebastian image that preceded it. For example, consider the protagonist of Tanizaki Jun'ichirō's *Konjiki no shi* (The Golden Death), Okamura-kun, who tried to make art of his own body and realized it under a sexual identity that is different from the heterosexual norm. Mishima paid homage to this story with a very Sebastian-like structure. The narrator, "I," assumed the role of witness and recorder of his friend Okamura-kun's death as the realization of his own body art, and a homosexual relationship between these two male persons seems to have been established as a tacit agreement. However, here I will focus more on the successors of Mishima's lineage, who were isolated from the era's spirit of mental/physical dualism.

I believe we can point to two successors of the somewhat longer novels of Mishima from the later 1940 that came out more than thirty years after the fact. One is Matsuura Rieko's early novel *Sebastian*, published in 1981 (revised in the 1992 Kawade Bunko edition). The other is David Wojnarowicz's 1982 work *Peter Hujar Dreaming / Yukio Mishima: St. Sebastian*, which depicts his love for his partner Peter Hujar, who died of AIDS in 1987, in the image of Mishima's *Confessions of a Mas*k and Saint Sebastian. Wojnarowicz himself would also die from AIDS in 1992.

Sebastian functioned as a central symbol of homosexuality during the AIDS era. Wojnarowicz has created several Sebastian images in

which blood vessels are exposed from the body, and the shot arrow appears to overlap with the image of the blood vessels and the syringe, symbolizing the AIDS panic era. Sebastian's image in art also suggests a connection with body art and action in the context of the Vietnam War, as well as self-injurious art that harms the body. Wojnarowicz drew on several other works based on the image of Sebastian.

Makiko, the protagonist of Matsuura's *Sebastian*, has masochistic tendencies and is intensely in love with a sadistic woman, creating an absolute master-slave relationship with her. The woman's name is none other than Seri 背理, which I believe is an echo of the expression *hairi* 背理 meaning "paradox," used as a keyword in Mishima's *Confessions of a Mask*. The title "Sebastian" comes directly from a song by Steve Harley and Cockney Rebel, and it is clear that its motif is based on Mishima's *Confessions of a Mask*. Furthermore, Makiko's boyfriend Takuya, who enters into sexual intercourse with her even though they were fellow homosexual masochists, was crippled, unable to move his legs, which functions as his stigma. The careful reader will notice how this echoes Mishima's *Kinkaku-ji* (Temple of the Golden Pavilion) in which the protagonist's classmate Kashiwagi is depicted as someone with a clubfoot.

Both Mishima's and Matsuura's novels succeed in depicting sexual love that is free from heterosexual genital couplingism. But that free sexual love comes at a high price. Seri finally drives Makiko to despair when she told her that she became pregnant. Just as the protagonist of *Confessions of a Mask* is not completely free from the heterosexual framework despite his sexual impotence, so Makiko in *Sebastian* puts her queer identity in danger through her hopeless sexual act with Takuya, and with Seri, who rejects lesbianism and the ethics of the master-and-slave relationship. The naturalness of biological sexuality ruthlessly violates Makiko's sexual freedom.

Sebastian as depicted by D'Annunzio commanded his archers to shoot their arrows. Let us recall again the phrase from D'Annunzio quoted earlier. "He who hurts me more deeply is the one who loves me more deeply" (D'Annunzio 2020). This characterization, which combines the narcissism and masochism of Sebastian, was also inherited by Mishima and Matsuura. The Sebastian-like element of narcissism and masochism was restored in the attempts of the so-called Body Art of artists such as Valie Export who presented her own skin and vagina, and self-injured expressions. Matsuura's *Sebastian* embodied the contemporaneousness of the "Age of the Skin" of the 1980s and stood in a unique position to bridge the gap between the masochistic art and

radical self-injurious art of the 1970s and the sex and life of the era of the AIDS Panic in the 1980s and early 1990s. We must, however, acknowledge that the seeds of this "turn" are detectable in Mishima's novels of thirty years earlier. Whether we ought to call this art, however, and whether it lives up to the name, is highly debatable.

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