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Images of Armageddon

Japan's 1980s Theatre Culture

Uchino Tadashi[1]

I

The end of Japan's "bubble economy" around 1990 created a new version of neonationalism.[2] Cultural producers have been desperately attempting to create a narrative connecting the failure of Japan's once invincible economic power to its unexpected downfall. Was it global capitalism made in the USA that undermined "our" healthy desire for prosperity? Or was it some deep-rooted "national" character flaw that ended "our" own global economic hegemony? Everywhere in Japan, from daily televised talk shows to representative serious literary magazines, these questions are discussed and debated in the interest of redefining Japan's "national" character and what "we, Japanese" should do in this critical stage of Japan's modern history.[3]

Yet in the process of redefining Japan's "national" character, it is what I call the "Aum-esque" that is eliminated from Japan's discursive space.[4] I say "eliminated" because the Aum-esque is surreptitiously implied by both the political Right and the Left. Those who are familiar with the Aum Shinrikyō's terrorist gas attack in 1995 might be surprised to hear this, as more effort has been spent on trying to "explain" the Aum phenomenon than on the disastrous outcome of the Hanshin-Awaji great earthquake earlier in 1995. It was as if there was nothing to explain about the earthquake because it was a "natural" phenomenon, while what the Aum attempted to "achieve" through their poison gas attack had to be explained.

Toward this end, a recurring Japanese narrative relying on the idealization of a homogeneous Japanese identity has been resurrected. In this narrative, the dichotomy of "outside" and "inside" is unanimously employed so that Aum cult members and their actions are of those exceptionally sick outsiders with criminal minds. They are labeled as such precisely because there is something obviously disturbing about them. The Aum-esque thus has been successfully "bracketed" within Japan's cultural memory. Within the narrative of Japan's new national character, the Aum-esque is fully understood and therefore already vanquished.

The same kind of manipulative displacement of Japan's cultural past can be detected in the construction of the narrative of 1990s theatre culture. Mainstream theatre journalism has taken up the notion of *shizukana engeki* (quiet

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theatre) as the representative style for the 1990s. Major critics unanimously praise quiet theatre practitioner Hirata Oriza[5] as a major artistic voice in the post-bubble Japan. Politically conservative and artistically innovative, quiet theatre practices have been successful in drawing unreasonably emphatic media coverage and younger audiences. This success, however, is predicated on conservative journalists designating 1980s theatre culture as not a quiet theatre, precisely by *not* referring to it. Thus in affirming the quiet theatre practices of the 1990s as better and more appropriate, Japan's theatre culture of the 1980s—as well as the Aum-esque—has become something "fully" understood, therefore already overcome.

Historically speaking, the year 1982, when the first Toga International Arts Festival was held, was an important point of departure for theatre culture. As the festival was a rare occasion for postwar avantgarde theatre artists both from the East and the West to present their work, it was an important point of departure for Japan's theatre. Audiences, including myself, were very excited by the sumptuous display of diverse and provocative visions, and were led to imagine theatre arts in the future tense. For critics like me, at least, the festival signaled the coming of an age of truly intercultural theatre.

The festival was organized by Suzuki Tadashi, the director of SCOT (Suzuki Company of Toga). Prominent European and American avantgarde artists such as Robert Wilson, Meredith Monk (both of the US), John Fox (of the UK), and Tadeuz Kantor (of Poland), along with Teraya Shūji, Oota Shōgo, and Suzuki participated. It was the first international festival in which mostly avantgarde theatrical works were presented to Japanese audiences.

Thinking about it now, however, I cannot help but feel that we should have felt fear instead of aesthetic pleasure at the contradictions of post-WWII world theatre. Watching, for instance, Kantor's radically contradictory performative and reflexive commentary on the nature of representation and on the incongruities between memory and "lived" experiences in *The Dead Class*, we should have seen the limits of representation and the impossibility of theatre as a political practice.

Our "innocent" acceptance of Western aesthetic avantgarde theatre traditions as "our own" during the 1980s gave us a theatre dominated by notions of universality. But this was, in fact, a perverse manifestation of a localized/Japanized version of postmodernism. Ahistorical and unproblematized "imported" radical theatre practices became yet another "brand" name for the Japanese middle class to eagerly consume. "Native" theatre practitioners, consciously or not, began investing in cultural relativism—allowing them to follow their immediate and comprehensible impulses, without facing what was "other" and incomprehensible. Under the guise of postmodern universality, contemporary Japanese theatre was able to be unselfconsciously xenophobic.

Within these closed-circuit theatrical and discursive practices, references to what was outside of Japan—"otherness"—were repressed in favor of postmodernist notions such as surplus consumption, simulacra, play of visualities, and "surface," as if these ideas contained apriori "universal" applications. In short, in the very gesture of opening up toward the "other" and the "foreign" instigated by the Toga festival, Japan's 1980s theatre culture closed down around itself.

As the Aum Shinri-kyō incidents became known to the Japanese public in 1995, many people associated the cult with 1980s theatre culture, usually referred to as *shō-gekijō* (little theatre). This resonance was a result of the Aum Shinri-kyō's strategies for attracting its cult believers, which exploited the sensitivities of the 1980s youth. Their apocalyptic dogmas and teachings propagated images of the end of the world. Asahara Shōkō, the Aum leader who was deemed the second Christ, was to save the world after Armageddon. The

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Aum's political and religious campaigns used many theatrical and performative techniques considered unique to 1980s theatre culture. Their outrageously kitsch and cheap costumes, and unprofessional yet "sincere" energetic acting style in pseudo-Broadway song and dance performances in the streets seemed to be replicas of the "little theatres" of the preceding decade. Yasumi Akihito, a theatre critic, wrote that "the Aum is a grand repetition of the theatre culture of the 1980s." Referring to the Aum cult, he defines the theatre culture of the 1980s as "young people's theatre" talking about "the end of the world" as if within "the premises of the nuclear shelter" (1995b:167). Yasumi had already written that:

> The "here and now" that was "rediscovered" during the shō-gekijō boom was theoretically secured by the kind of closure that makes it possible to accumulate scattered memories in the ongoing process of oblivion, as if carefully observing the "outside" from within a nuclear shelter in order to make sure that the world "outside" has certainly ended. (1995a:160)

In the subcultural genres of the 1980s, including shō-gekijō, everybody was concerned with describing the end of the world and the post-Armageddon (i.e., nuclear holocaust) dystopia. Within this world of "euphoric nothingness," in which traditional value systems were declared dead, there was only one transcendental "truth": "people will die—everyone will die and there is no exception" (1995b).

According to Yasumi, the lesson to be learned from the theatre culture of the 1980s and the Aum is that "poor strategies such as parody or pastiche do not constitute a viable site of resistance against the invisible space of power," and "those who feel alienated from Japan's power system eventually construct its mirror image in their own organizations" (1995b:167). Power relations within the Aum mirrored Japan as a nation-state. The Aum had an organization very similar to the Japanese system of government: they had their own bureaucracy within the organization; they had their own version of a Ministry of Finance. Asahara was the Emperor, the transcendental being.

II

Theatre culture of the 1980s also contained the return of what I call the "Theatre of the Private." Because I have discussed the term elsewhere (see Uchino 1996), I want here only to give a loose definition of the term. Theatre of the Private is a Japanese form of melodrama in which an unarticulated subjectivity, neither singular nor collective, dominates the theatrical space, including the audience. 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. Theatre of the Private presupposes the existence of a community of sentiments, a community of sentiments in which members are neither connected or defined by ideology or by language, nor by law or by contract, but rather only by and through shared sentiments.

Historically speaking, much of Japan's theatrical representation, as I have argued elsewhere, can be understood as Theatre of the Private—including *noh*, *kabuki*, and *shingeki*. It has been given different names, but it continues to dominate Japan's theatre culture. The only notable exception is the *angura* (underground theatre) of the 1960s, in which clearly definable Cartesian selves were the dominant form of theatrical representation. Angura's desperate attempt to establish a Western modern theatre tradition in Japan was doomed to fail, however, and in the 1980s, the Theatre of the Private returned with dazzling speed and spectacular quality. This characteristic was amply demon-

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strated, for instance, by Noda Hideki, a playwright/actor/director who was an exponent of the shō-gekijō boom. In spite of the naivete of its contents, his flashy, fast-paced spectacles, in which young actors ran around and jumped onstage, felt like something new. The 1980s Theatre of the Private, accordingly, was also called "Young People's Theatre," and as Kazama Ken acutely observed, this kind of theatre became as popular as kabuki had been during the Edo period (1992:133).

Young people constituted both the practitioners and audiences of Theatre of the Private. These were mostly city dwellers, many of them university students, who occupied the middle ground of the social structure. They were positioned between two areas of adult supervision: between their high school years and their life as business persons. In high school, under strict school supervision, they were urged to study hard so that they could win the race to enter one of the better universities. In the business world, under strict corporate supervision, they were urged to win the race in the capitalist economy. Stranded between those two inevitable socialized states, young people seemingly have—or had, for a brief moment—a liminal space and time between the school world and the business world.

What made the return of Theatre of the Private possible in the 1980s? Theatre works suddenly started to engage the subject of "nuclear holocaust" and/or "the end of the world." References to the apocalyptic dominated Theatre of the Private visual and thematic representations. Critics consider Kitamura So's *Hogi-uta* (A Celebration Song, 1980) one of the most representative and influential plays of this period (plate 1). The text starts with a simple and drastic stage direction: "The nuclear war has ended. A local city in the Kansai area. A road among the ruins. Smells of burning air [...]" (Kitamura 1982:7). Other shō-gekijō practitioners such as Kokami Shoji of The Third Stage and Kawamura Takeshi of Daisan (Third) Erotica, were known for setting most of their plays in the near future after the Armageddon.

Shō-gekijō theatre practices had a strong affinity to other subcultural genres of the same decade. For instance, *Akira*, an epic *manga* (comic) written by Otomo Katsuhiro, later made into an animated movie (1988), was serialized in

1. A scene from Hogi-uta *(A Celebration Song) by Kitamura So. A TPO ★ Division production at Nanatsudera Kyodo Studio, Nagoya, Japan, May 1980. (Photo courtesy of Project Navi)*

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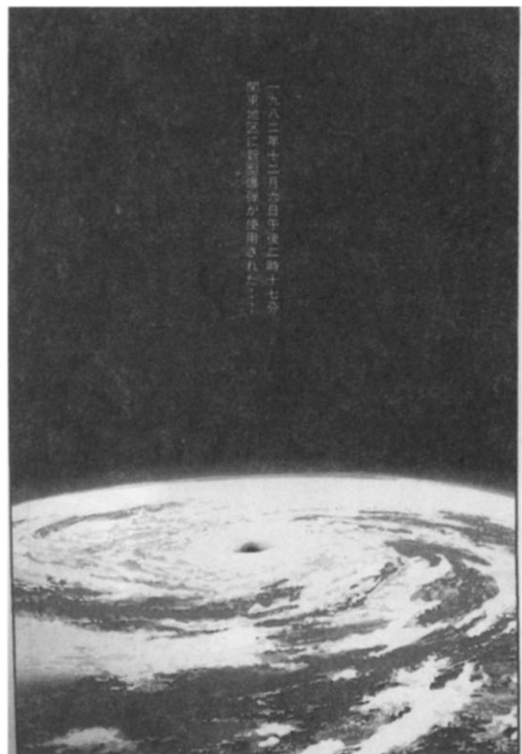
2. *A scene from* Asahi no Yona Yuhi o Tsurete *(With a Rising Sun Which Looks Like a Setting Sun) by Kokami Shoji. A production by The Third Stage, February and July 1985, Kinokuni-ya Hall, Tokyo, Japan. (Photo courtesy of The Third Stage)*

a manga magazine for young adults (*Young Magazine*, published weekly by Kodan-sha) in 1982. Like Kitamura's play, *Akira*'s story begins when the world ends in 1982 because of World War III (plates 3-6). In relation to these kinds of subcultural representations, shō-gekijō practitioners, some would argue, chose images of the apocalyptic as an appropriate, though cheap, metaphor for the world they were forced to live in; the world in which, to quote Yasumi again, "euphoric nothingness" was the only shared and sharable sentiment, where "traditional value systems are declared dead" (1995b:167). It is tempting to interpret the themes of 1980s theatre culture as such; the apocalyptic is an easy metaphor for "childish" theatre practitioners who cannot face the real world.

Plates 3–6. Opening Scenes from Akira *(1984) by Otomo Katsuhiro. (Photos © Otomo Katsuhiro Kodansha)*



3. *"At 2:17 P.M. on 6 December 1982, a new type of bomb was used in the Kanto area."*

III

Still, this does not explain why they had to end the world. Interestingly enough, most of the cultural representations of the end of the world, from Kitamura's *Hogi-uta* to *Akira*, do not explain how the world actually ended. Their narratives start after the apocalypse. In the case of *Hogi-uta*, as we have seen, Kitamura only tells us that there was a devastating nuclear war. In the case of *Akira*, Otomo tells us it was World War III. These representations of the end of the world lack historical specificity. They are more concerned with trying to reconstruct the world in the midst of the ruins of war than with any actual historical reality.

In his influential sociological study of the 1980s subcultures and their relation to the Aum Shinrikyō, entitled *Owari naki Nichijō o Ikiyo* (Live and Endure a Neverending Everyday Life), Miyadai Shinji asserts that the subculture of this period wanted to evoke a sense of community after Armageddon. In this, Miyadai sees two contradicting impulses: "to face the reality that whatever happens in everyday life will continue on forever," and "to end the world in order to imagine a renewed sense of community"

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4. *"Akira"*

(1995:86). This ending the world to foster a renewed sense of community was appropriated by Asahara Shōkō to attract adherents. He and the Aum would later take the idea from the virtual/cultural space of theatre and manga to the real space of a Tokyo subway where on 20 March 1995 they implemented a gas attack that killed 11 and injured more than 5,000 people.

More importantly, however, what Miyadai posits as two contradictory ontological questions do in fact coexist in shō-gekijō practices and its major works. Kitamura's play *Hogi-uta* is constructed around three major figures: Gesaku, a middle-aged popular entertainer; Kyōko, a young female stripper; and Yasuo, a magician and Christ figure. We can hear a definite echo in the characters and setting of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. "Nothing happens" in *Hogi-uta*, and we do not find out anything about the characters. There are, however, very important differences between *Hogi-uta* and *Godot*. The most obvious is the fact that, unlike in *Godot*, there is a God, or at least, a Christ figure in *Hogi-uta*, although he cannot "save the world" or do anything about what has happened or what is happening. He is simply depicted as a very sensitive and helpless "guy." The setting itself is more concrete than Beckett's abstract universe and the characters often refer to various lights in the sky from far away nuclear missiles as "fireworks," though we do not know if these people are the only survivors of the nuclear holocaust.[6]

The message is very clear: Even if a nuclear holocaust devastates Japan, some people will survive and will have to live Miyadai's everlasting everyday life. What will they do after the holocaust? The characters in the play converse meaninglessly, eat, and entertain each other by enacting some of the scenes that Gesaku and Kyōko used to play, while Yasuo preaches his Christian beliefs. They are not allowed to kill each other or themselves, but have to

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live until they die. In the process of this nonlinear narrative, a sense of community is discreetly created between the characters—and perhaps with the audience. The characters do mention the devastation all over Japan and the world: "Mt. Fuji is half blown away" (1982:11). Yet the annihilated landscape is never seen and there is no chaotic confusion of any kind. Even the nuclear missiles are, for them, "fireworks" that somehow do not affect them. Their world is metatheatrically secured by what Yasumi calls a "closure," in which the characters are "carefully observing the outside from within the nuclear shelter in order to make sure that the world outside has certainly ended" (1995a:160). Inhabitants of the shelter are expected to acquire a sense of community—a community of shared sentiments. Toward the end of the play, it starts to snow and everything is eventually covered with white. Yasuo declares he will go to Jerusalem. The other two may or may not follow him. The world inside the theatre has virtually been made into a nuclear shelter, while the world outside the theatre remains uncertain.

IV

A similar evocation of shared sentiments and a sentimental plea for the construction of a new sense of community is unashamedly expressed by Kokami Shoji at the beginning of his 1981 play *Asahi no Yōna Yuhi o Tsurete* (With a Rising Sun Which Looks Like a Setting Sun) in the chorus's opening song (plate 2):

> With a rising sun which looks like a setting sun
> I keep standing
> Without connecting with each other
> Without flowing into each other
> Like a flashing star.
> For standing alone is painful
> For standing alone is enjoyable.
> With a rising sun which looks like a setting sun
> I am alone.
> For I cannot stand being alone.
> For I cannot do anything alone.
> To admit that I am alone
> Is to join hands with many people.
> To join hands with many people
> Is a very, very sad thing to do.
> With a rising sun which looks like a setting sun
> Like a star in a winter sky
> I am alone. (1991:11)[7]

Or as Kawamura of Daisan Erotica wrote in 1984:

> The myth, however, has completely collapsed. After its collapse, we started to weave our own narrative without the protection of myth, without any fantasy of "faraway," and without any confidence in ourselves. Is it even possible to write a "story" which resists "history"? If it is possible, how is it possible? This is the place. This is the place into which we may have been thrown whether we like it or not. It is a place of tabula rasa. (1984:277–88)

Kokami's melodramatic plea for "shared sentiments" in a community where everyone is "alone" is also a declaration of the lack of history. This same historical deprivation is manifested in Kawamura's passage as "tabula rasa."

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Kokami's easy metaphor of "a rising sun which looks like a setting sun" is like a shared déjà vu. In the repetition of history there is nothing new, only the endless repetition of everydayness.

In this shared sense of the deprivation of historical memory, sentimental as it may sound, we are logically led to interrogate these representations of the end of the world. Is it really the end of the world? Is it really set in the near future? Especially in 1999, after the Aum, after the collapse of the bubble economy, representations of the end of the world cannot be read at face value. In other words, it is possible to read these representations of the end of the world as a desperate and largely unconscious attempt to historicize the dehistoricized present that the shō-gekijō practitioners found themselves in during the 1980s.

When we read his words now or look at Kitamura's landscape and characters, we are struck by the fact that the play could have been written right after the War. Kitamura's image of three "bums" strolling through the ruins of war does not make us think of an upcoming Armageddon or a Beckettian metaphysical posthuman landscape, but rather of the ruins of war in post–World War II literature and popular culture.

Was Kitamura then talking about Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Not necessarily. His representations of the end of the world can and should be read as constitutive of a viable site of resistance against the "ongoing process of oblivion," as Yasumi puts it, within the ideology of postwar democracy, which incessantly asks us to "forget" and deprives us of history and historical memories. What are we being asked to "forget"? Is it, to use Carol Gluck's words, "the

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5. "Nine hours later, World War III broke out. Leningrad, Moscow, Kazan, Vladivostok, Irkutsk, Novosibirsk, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, New Orleans, Houston, Cape Kennedy, Washington, New York, Okinawa, Berlin, Hamburg, Warsaw, London, Birmingham, Paris, New Delhi..."

memory of the Empire" (1995:4), the process of modernization in Japan after the Meiji restoration, which led to World War II and the Nanjing Massacre?

The revisionist neonationalist narrative of the 1990s does not include this "memory of the Empire." World War II and the Nanjing Massacre are "exceptions" to the successful modernization of Japan. Similarly, 1980s theatre culture is excluded from the narrative of theatre history and theory, just as the Aum is excluded from historical memory. These phenomena have been explained away, so they are not part of our cultural memory of either the remote or recent past.

It is this urge to erase history, I would propose, that all the cultural producers at the end of the millennium have to resist. Both 1980s theatre culture and the Aum still offer critical insight into this particular historical crossroads.

Notes

1. I am using the usual order in the Japanese language for proper names; the family name comes first, the first name last.
2. The original Japanese version of this article appeared in 1995 in *Theatre Arts* 4. I have, however, updated and rewritten some of the content in translating the original into English for this publication.
3. In the past few years there has been much reinterpretation of World War II. Many want to revise a "self-torturing sense of history" which, they claim, has afflicted "our" national pride and sense of identity since World War II. This assertion is, in part, a reaction to a new consciousness of "comfort women," Korean women forced into prostitution by the Japanese army during WWII. These women, all very old now, finally agreed to testify.

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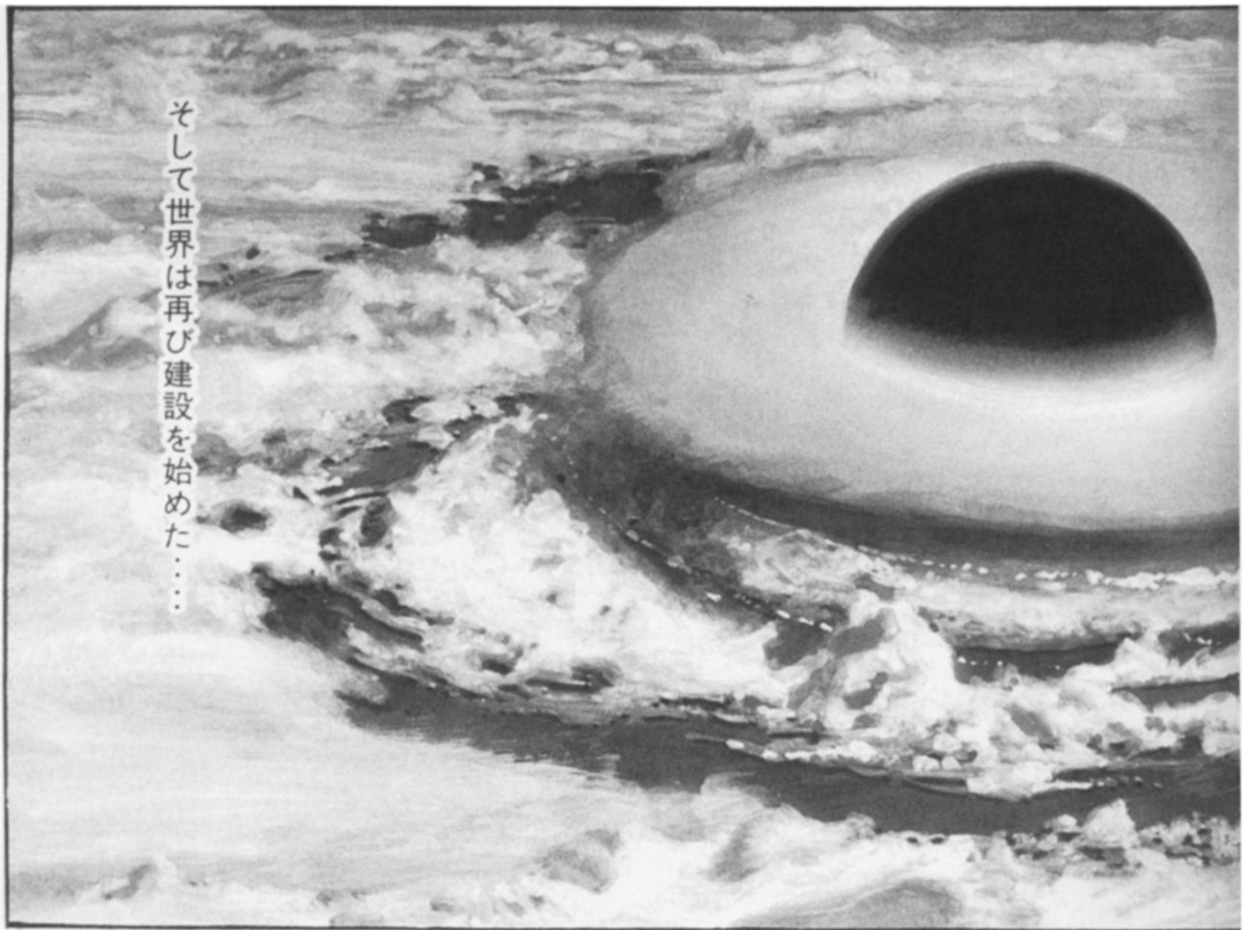
A heated debate occurred between revisionists and liberals concerning how the history of Japan's involvement with World War II should be written in school textbooks. Revisionists argue that the Nanjing Massacre and "comfort women" issues are not "proven" historical facts, and that school textbooks should not mention them. The debate continues in various fields. Kobayashi Yoshinori, a popular *manga* (comics) writer, is a major revisionist voice in this debate, and a series of his manga discussing these issues have become the best sellers.

4. The Aum Shinri-kyō (Aum Truth-cult) was established by Asahara Shōkō in 1984. It is a New Age cult based on the teachings of Buddhism. The Aum attracted many young people in the 1980s through the use of subcultural icons and techniques, including animated movies and manga. They asked their members to renounce the world and give all their material possessions to the organization. In 1989, a lawyer who acted against the Aum, along with his family, disappeared (it is now believed that they were kidnapped and murdered by the cult members). After this incident, the Aum became a social phenomenon and the fact that most of its believers were young and supposedly intelligent people from relatively rich families stimulated voyeuristic media attention. In 1990, as if to prove their legitimacy, 25 members of the cult ran for Congress, though no one was actually elected. During their campaign they used many 1980s theatrical techniques. After that, they grew dangerously radical and began to arm themselves. This culminated in the sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway in 1995. Although most of its members, including Asahara, are on trial, the organization still exists. In 1999, the remaining and new Aum members have become active again, while the trial



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continues. The Aum has its own homepage on the internet (mostly in Japanese) and you can see how they utilize the visual and multimedia language of cyberspace (see <http://aum-internet.org>).

5. Hirata Oriza (b. 1963) is a playwright and director of Seinen-dan Theatre Company (the name connotes a kind of 4-H club in agricultural regions). His major strategy is a literalization of realism, in which all notions of the dramatic are consciously excluded from his plays. As is demonstrated in one of his representative 1991 plays, *Seoul Shimin* (Seoul Citizens), characters gather and converse in a very nonchalant fashion; his plays are always an observation of the everyday life of select people. *Seoul Shimin* is set in the dining room of a house owned by a rich Japanese merchant just before the forced unification of Korea with Japan in 1910. Though the setting is very political, Hirata discusses neither colonialism nor imperialism. Rather he depicts the closed-down and self-contained world of the Japanese people living in Seoul at the time, surrounded by a noisy "outside" where the people of Korea are resisting Japanese colonialist aggression. This can be read politically, but Hirata has stated on many occasions that he is not trying to send a message to the audience, but is only trying to make "objective" observations. Accordingly, actors speak quietly, and there is no dramatic scene in the conventional sense of the word. In other words, there is no beginning (the play has already started when the audience members enter the theatre), middle, or end.
6. Gesaku has tactfully explained this phenomena on various occasions, saying that although the war has ended, many nuclear warheads remain and can be launched by computers.
7. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are by the author.

6. "And the world started to establish itself again."

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