



Butoh

On 24th May 1959, **Tatsumi Hijikata**, at 31 years of age, portrayed the character of the "Man" in the first presentation of a play called ***Kinjiki*** (*Forbidden Colours*) using a novel by author Yukio Mishima whose eponymous novel was published in 1951. Alongside Hijikata, Yoshito Ôno, at 21 years of age played the role of the "Young Man".

The argument set forth by *Kinjiki* is simple, and much more simple than the long novel on which it is inspired: an elderly man chases after a younger man and forces him to wring the neck of a chicken between his legs. The chicken fights, the young man bleeds. The lights go out, and then the performers make some wild and erotic noises, rolling around noisily on the stage. To finish, Hijikata lets out some "I love you"s.

The Ankoku Butoh was born, "dance of darkness" or, literally "compulsive movements in the dark". It has often been written and said that this current bloomed on the ashes of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. One thing is certain and that is that Japan, as a defeated country, should turn the page and protect the memory of the hundreds of thousands of dead buried beneath the rubble of these martyr cities. It is never superfluous to reiterate that no other country in the world has undergone the experience of the nuclear bomb, a unique experience, and therefore, the terrifying aftermath which exceeds even the many deaths, such as the never-before seen lesions on victims, totally unknown medical symptoms. Hiroshima and Nagasaki inaugurated a new page in history of mankind, no doubt one of the most sombre and alarming. And so, it was from the darkness that Butoh arose and the term Ankoku is there to remind us.

Before taking this name, Hijikata firstly decided to call it "Ankoku Buyo", with buyo generally being used in Japan as a reference to dances imported from the West and the USA such as jazz and rock. He had also undergone training in the waltz, flamenco and jazz, which he even performed on television. *Kinjiki* is an official declaration, a break with the rationality of western culture. The piece immediately created a scandal. This is nothing of a surprise since an entire nation, beginning with its Emperor, accepted to submit itself to a modernity, which was not his, but that which General MacArthur and the USA imposed on the post-War world. Young people in Tokyo in the 60s were a testimony to this. Keen to forget, young people were not ready to integrate forms of representation, which promoted the expression of violence and transgression. Only the intellectual spheres welcomed this radicalness with enthusiasm, and it was away from the Japanese borders that Butoh would gain its due reward.



Tatsumi Hijikata : *Hosotan*

For this performance which dates back to 1972, Hijikata underwent a drastic fast to such point where he barely had any flesh on his bones, with his skin being covered in rags of *papier maché*, almost ripped in parts. Hunched over, the dancer showed us a primitive body which took all of its energy from the pit of his stomach and, slowly, emerged from nothing to access self-consciousness.

This body had affinities with the literature of Mishima, it goes without saying, particularly with one of the *Kinjiki* first scenes in which the third wife of Shunsuke, an old author and primary character, was found dead at the foot of a cliff. She had committed suicide in the company of her lover. Mishima described the scene in these words:

"It was no less difficult to separate the two bodies. They were completely melted into each other and their skin, which was like Japanese paper, gave the impression of belonging to a single person".

Both of these sentences are alone sufficient in showing us the experience of Butoh as Hijikata portrays it, but they also show us a thought for a much more complex movement. What is it about here? Relations or attitudes, which shock above all. Mishima put these into words, "cursed authors" such as Jean Genet, Raymond Radiguet or Oscar Wilde before him. Hijikata put these into bodies, acts and metamorphosis on stage. Hence the intense fascination, perhaps, which the west harbours for this dance, as if it believed it could notice the representation of another self in a disfigured mirror; it shows the image of a strange, yet familiar body.

As Butoh, just like the nation in which it was created, is the juncture point of two pathways. Mishima, just as Hijikata, felt this intellectually and intuitively more than anyone. One, convinced that the ancestral Japanese spirit was morose, would kill himself by seppuku in 1970; the other would never stop questioning this "primitive body", that of the farmers with folded limbs and arched legs who he saw in his childhood. It seems that Hijikata wanted to offer a new life, painful without doubt, and his body in performance was like an empty bowl, dispossessed of all cultural determinism, ready to open up to the world, and to the new perception he had of it.

Kazuo Ôno : *Homage to the Argentina*

As the second founder of Butoh, Kazuo Ôno moved the boundaries even further, with the famous solo *Hommage à La Argentina (Hommage to La Argentina)* by establishing a direct relationship between the western aesthetic and Japanese aesthetic. It is first of all necessary to indicate that, contrary to commonly accepted ideas, the



Hommage à La Argentina is not a choreography by Kazuo Ôno but for Kazuo Ôno. Friend and collaborator Tatsumi Hijikata signed it. If it has a major resonance in the West, it is no doubt due to the mirror effect created by a foreign object which appears familiar, or a familiar object which appears strange in our instance, namely the Argentine tango or Spanish dances considered from the perspective of Butoh.

La Argentina (Antonia Mercé y Luque by her full name) is a famous Hispanic-Argentine dancer from the early 20th Century who, by revisiting the Spanish tradition, entirely overhauled the genre, particularly in *L'Amour Sorcier* by Manuel de Falla. The intensity, which is given off on stage, inspired Ôno (he was present at one of her recitals in 1929). Several years later, he felt the need to bring the character back to life, and back to the world. The strength of this choreography, which Ôno would perform until the very final years of his life, came from a simple and yet seemingly contradictory idea: by taking hold of an aesthetic which is not a priori their own, the dancer and choreographer seek to look inwards, beginning by inside themselves and to "bring life to something new" according to their own terms.

"If you want to interpret a flower, you can mime, and it will be the flower seen by everyone, simple, without any interest. However, if you place the beauty of this flower and the emotions it feels within your lifeless body, the flower that you create will be real and unique and the public will be moved".

This phrase, as stated by Ôno, enlightens us as to his intentions. It is not simply a question for him to bring life to the emotions that filled him at the time of the representation at which he was present in 1929, but to share, for good, with La Argentina. The "lifeless body" he mentions is none other than the dressed up body of the dancer, a sort of ghostly figure which welcomed the woman in the soul and was reborn within. It is a living figure and entirely moving which we see as it clearly refers to the specificity of Butoh. In the "dance of the darkness", it is life, always compulsive, which arises from death and not the contrary. However, there is also an image for the onlooker, which appears, this time the flower rising from the ashes. And behind this image, it is clearly the memory of a whole people that comes to life, that of post-War Japan, post-Hiroshima, the Japan of reconstruction in which *Butoists* can barely recognise themselves. For *Hommage à La Argentina* Hijikata gave Ôno a very simple instruction: "your arms no longer belong to you ". And it is effectively the case in the third scene, *Mariage du Ciel et de la Terre (The Marriage of Heaven and Earth)*, where the dancer slowly reaches out to make an offering to the universe.

Ko Murobushi : *Iki, Edge*

Ko Murobushi is part of what we called the "second generation" of Butoh dancers; these have been largely exported throughout the world. Some have not, moreover, failed to fall into the trap of internationalisation and gave western onlookers a "book of images"



often very sophisticated and close to the "new age" aesthetic, which was so in vogue in the 90s. Murobushi was soon aware of the need to be closer to Butoh and its origins and radicalism. This position is hardly strategic. It sticks to the skin of this unusual dancer who portrays the experience on stage of a body without any attachment, a nomad body, as if it dreamed of becoming what doesn't exist. He says this in his own words: "*to become nothing, you need to transform yourself into everything, to have the fingers of a bird, the arms of another animal... Butoh does nothing else. Its base is to transcend, even genders*".

In the Murobushi dance, as in that of his mentor Hijikata, the pulsating bubbling of life and the inevitability of death are at work, as if everything that the body knows, or used to know, is destined to disappear. This is about "not knowing", as in Butoh there is no useable language, contrary to classical or contemporary Western dances, which provide the performer with a corpus of postures and steps designed as a grammar. The body, for Murobushi as for his predecessors, involves metaphysical questions and everything comes quite simply from the body's presence.

But what do we mean by presence? It is sufficient to watch the solos of *Iki* or *Edge* to understand to what extent Murobushi is on stage like an intermediary between a body without any substance, mummified if you like, and the world, the illness of the world which, little by little, grabs a hold of the body. Constantly in performance, it registers in the present the conditions experienced in an instinctive manner in an erotic dynamism, which refers directly to Hijikata's *La Rébellion de la Chair (Revolt of the Body)*. Murobushi is without doubt one of his most faithful heirs.

Carlotta Ikeda : *Waiting*

Carlotta Ikeda and Ko Murobushi mutually fuelled each other. In 1974, both founded the Ariadone company, which is only for women. In Ikeda's dancing, once more, the question of transgression is ever present, and particularly that of erotic impulsiveness. The title of her first creation *Mesu Kazan* (Female Volcano) is a demonstration of this. This is a question of one's internal landscape, of the absolute need for the choreographer to "*see inside. It is important for me, eyes are not there, fixed on the face, they are within one's head, turned inwards on the body... It is what is inside which should dance... Behind this search for solitary ecstasy is the fear of emptiness, nothingness, the meeting point with another life, with death. Sometimes, the emptiness fills my body like a desire to die*".

The dancer, who is entirely overtaken by the fluctuations which invade her body, unshackles herself from who she is and undergoes a metamorphosis with the expression of a desire, an interior landscape. Her body appears empty, is finally inhabited as in *Waiting*, a solo by Carlotta Ikeda in 1996, in a wedding dress, seeking



with her hands, and her fingers, this pleasure which resonates through her, the wave which animates her body and spreads through each of her members to the point of ecstasy, to the point of meeting with space. The emptiness around her returns her to the solitary pleasure of the body which is being discovered. Birth and death, flow and return are the primary motors of Butoh, which as underlined by Carlotta Ikeda, seeks to show the inside, this precise location where, on the inside, there is trembling.

Without Hiroshima, without Nagasaki, would this movement have ever come to life? As with any explosion (Butoh is considered as an explosion in twentieth century dance), it is necessary for the conjunction of several factors, starting with war. The expression "revolt of the body" which is used as a standard-bearer as much for Mishima as for Hijikata, refers to the lifeless bodies, mutilated bodies and also the re-conquered bodies. Slowly they are once more inhabited by a new impulse which they seek in the pit of their stomachs, as if they were regenerated from within through images, souvenirs of a life which is no longer. Inevitably we think of the work of German choreographer Pina Bausch who, in one of her mythical creations, *Café Müller*, cast sleepwalkers. From deep down inside, movement flourishes and animates the bodies which clash against turned over tables, walls, the tangible reality of the world, the devastation it creates; they die before being reborn and so on and so forth. Germany and Japan have lost a global conflict which they began; from the midst of the ruins, life has rejuvenated, an unknown expression until then, without doubt common expressionism.

Sankai Juku : hibiki

There is no doubt that second-generation *Butoists* are enthusiastically welcomed in Europe. Carlotta Ikeda has definitively moved to Europe; Ko Murobushi is a regular visitor and joins forces with the famous equestrian artist Bartabas for an unprecedented show: *Le Centaure et l'Animal (The Centaur and the Animal)*. However, the most famous representatives of Butoh on the old continent are undoubtedly the dancers from Sankai Juku. Placed under the aegis of Ushio Amagatsu, performers from the Atelier de la Montagne et de la Mer (Mountain and Sea workshop - this is the translation of Sankai Juku from the Japanese), open their repertoire to an art which does not neglect the foundations of Butoh. Amagatsu above all questions the balance between intimacy and universality, history and cosmology. On stage, the dancers and he seem to often emerge from an invisible world to enter into a dialogue with gravity.

"Deep down inside me, still, the image is motionless: that of two plates on the scales, turning around an axis, rising and then falling in constant search of balance. On the first plate is culture, as it is, in its singularity [...] On the other, is universality, namely everything which mankind has in common. The different and the common gravitate in search of a balance, in perpetual motion".

Ushio Amagatsu.



Hibiki does not escape the rule, and it is the relationship between sand and water which Amagatsu this time explores. The fluidity of bodies respond to the fluidity of elements, and although bodies are made up of bone and muscle, they appear to lack solidity: "*lie down and let your body initiate a gentle movement of oscillation; you will feel your bones begin to float in a sort of bag*". The living and primitive impulse which resides within the dancers, shared between tension and relaxation, evokes the incessant flow and return of the wave. The intimate and the universal form a whole, bathed in a sophisticated stage performance where light and dark are the magnificent and implacable measure of passing time.

Hibiki is one part of this vast puzzle in which each new part arises from the last. The onlooker, by following the work of the group, becomes aware of the slow movement of metamorphosis which inhabits the overall creation. Onlookers are invited to return back to the origin of time, to the fœtus which "*in its mother's womb recreates an adventure of several hundreds of millions of years*". Between gravity on earth and mental suspension, the dancers invite onlookers along a subliminal and sumptuous sensory experience, magnified by light and decor which does not conceal the talent of the performers.



To go further :

AMAGASTU, Ushio. *Dialogue avec la Gravité*, Arles : Actes Sud, DL 2000. 43 p. (Le Souffle de l'Esprit).

DE BRUYCKER, Daniel (dir.). *Le Butô et ses Fantômes*. Bruxelles : Alternatives Théâtrales, 1985 . 96 p.

DURIX, Claude. *L'âme poétique du Japon*. Paris : Les Belles Lettres, 2002. 191 p. (Architecture du verbe).

GINOT, Isabelle, MARCELLE, Michelle. *La Danse au XXe siècle*. Paris : Larousse, DL 2002. 263 p.

ROUSIER, Claire (dir.), DELARUELLE, Catherine. *Danses et identités*. Paris : Centre National de la Danse, impr. 2009, cop. 2009. 271 p. (Recherches).

A detour via the creations of Comte de Lautréamont, Jean Genet or Antonin Artaud (*Le Théâtre de la Cruauté – Theater of Cruelty* notably) can allow for better understanding of the movement at work with the *Butoists*. A glance towards German expressionism in dance (Mary Wigman, Kurt Jooss, Valeska Gert and their heir, Pina Bausch) will no doubt allow for parallels to be drawn between European and Japanese culture in the contemporary choregraphical field.



Credits :

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