

‘The Way of the Samurai’: *Ghost Dog*, Mishima, and Modernity’s *Other*

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In the late 1960s during the world-wide students’ New Left Movement, Mishima Yukio began a series of disturbing public appearances as an ultra-nationalist. On 25 November 1970 he staged a civilian’s *coup d’état* at the Eastern Army HQ of Japan’s Self Defence Force, leading a small number of dedicated young officers from his privately trained ‘Shield Society’. They wore brash uniforms that looked like stage costumes, and the media, including the foreign press, notified of the event well in advance, were there in force to report it. Despite these elements of theatricality, Mishima ended the drama with a genuine *seppuku* suicide.¹

Jim Jarmusch’s 1999 film *Ghost Dog: the Way of the Samurai* plays upon postmodern eclecticism; ‘almost all scenes have reference to the films in the past’. The ‘so-called’ *Mishima Affair* of 1970, by contrast, has been defined by critics both within Japan and abroad as an occurrence confined to its socio-historical context. What links these two texts is the concept of *bushidō*, the code of the samurai. By juxtaposing *Ghost Dog*, the hero of Jarmusch’s film, and Mishima I will suggest the breakdown of the apparent proximity of Mishima to the concept of *bushidō*.

Mishima: An Obscene Object

Mishima Yuko was a ‘high modernist’ who wanted to believe in the modern discourse of purity and unity. He was also acutely aware of the *ominous* sign of the collapse of those values. Mishima is, like any other genius, a socio-historical product; his belief in a Japanese core culture stems from a typically modern concept of authenticity. He worked as a professional novelist, playwright and literary critic from c.1945 to 1970, the time of rapid Americanisation in post-war Japan. The novel is a genre through which Japanese writers have, since their torrential exposure to Western literature in the Meiji period, sought to create an indigenous subject endowed with an interior as ‘deep’ as that of the Western subject. Mishima’s novels in particular were able to evoke a Westernised/modern space that was foreign and therefore seductive, set in the familiar landscape of Japan. Despite this, when Mishima is read in the West, he is often ‘Orientalised’² and the modernity of his texts is ignored. It seems to be easily

¹ The incident has been dramatised by Paul Schrader in the film *Mishima: a Life in Four Chapters* (1985). Andō Takeshi records the incident in detail in *Mishima Yukio kenkyū nenpyō* [Research chronological table of Yukio Mishima] (Tokyo: Nishida Shoten, 1988).

² By this, I mean the widespread tendency among Western readers to read non-English texts only for their difference. Any features that are peculiar in those texts are attributed to cultural differences. Mishima’s *seppuku* is often discussed as if it represented the collective psyche of the Japanese, or in terms of Japanese ‘tradition’. ‘Tradition’ is an ideologically constructed notion, and to view Mishima’s *seppuku* as his effort to restore a lost ‘tradition’ will reinforce that ideology.

forgotten that what initially gives Western readers access to Mishima's texts is their conformity to the rules of the 'modern novel'³ and that exoticism alone cannot induce a reader's personal engagement. Also ignored is that Mishima often re-invented an ethnicity in order to authenticate and particularise his texts for Western readers.

In the same way, the *Mishima Affair* has become slotted into Western memory as something exclusively *Oriental* (and therefore *pre-modern*), or in certain quarters as a landmark of queer/homosexual aesthetics. It appears to me though, that the significance of the affair lies in the fact that it marks a resistance of *modernity's Other*, a certain lack we feel in the totalitarian operation of modernity. Mishima successfully invoked a 'pre-modern-scape'⁴ by performing suicide by *seppuku*. This 'pre-modern-scape' of the fissured human body was able to threaten the *clean-and-proper* order of modernity that Japan had to strive for all over again in the post-war devastation. As Michel Foucault pointed out, when a modern nation-state centralises its power and constructs clean and hygienic cities, it effectively hides the sites of *abjection*⁵: hospitals, prisons and mental asylums. The crises of nation-states, revolutions and wars, bring back the sight of *abjection* (and the corporeality of human beings) to popular consciousness.⁶ Between 1945 and 1970, Japan reinvented herself as a clean-and-proper (democratic) new nation-state. The *sight* of Mishima's severed head and bleeding lower body was a *site of abjection*, which had been forced away in people's memory as 'reject', or things past. Mishima embodies a point of encounter between a modern subject that strives to demarcate and solidify its territories, and an other (anti-modern) self that disrupts the demarcation of the inside and outside. For Mishima these positions are neither topographically nor historically mapped, but are continuously shifting, passing through each other, unanchored and unsettled.

The affair of 1970 was also part of Mishima's *project of masculinity*,⁷ an expression of the way of the samurai. Carrying out the ritual as prescribed in the texts, Mishima cut open his lower stomach before being beheaded by an assisting swordsman, a young

³ In my thesis I argue through textual analysis that Mishima's last novel, a tetralogy, *The Sea of Fertility* shifts away from such 'laws of a modern novel'. The features of Western realism—the emphasis on character's internal landscape rather than external events—are most apparent in the modern novels. *The Sea of Fertility* is a failure—*weak* and *unrealistic* characterisation—when it is read from such modernist perspectives. By the same token, the *Mishima Affair* is a failed political action or avant-garde (new and creative) performing art, if one read it from the modernist viewpoints. This paper aims to present an alternative approach in which anti-modern representations, the *weak* and *unrealistic* characterisation, copying and mimicking, claim their validity⁷.

⁴ I use this term to relate to Arjun Appadurai's insightful work, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, c.1996).

⁵ Julia Kristeva's thesis on *abjection* is a useful means to critique the ways in which a modern subject is constructed. See *Powers of Horror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

⁶ For Foucault's expression of these ideas see *Madness and Civilisation: a History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (London: Tavistock, 1967, c.1965); *The Birth of the Clinic: an Archaeology of Medical Perception* (London: Tavistock, c.1973); *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, c.1977). The site of *abjection* has been marginalised and tucked away through the project of modernisation since the moment of Westernisation in the Meiji period.

⁷ By using the phrase 'project of masculinity', I indicate the whole aesthetic landscape which not only includes Mishima's obsession with a muscular body, military uniforms and martial arts, but also his affiliation with a *kōha-danseiteki*/mannish-style of writing. See 'Bungaku ni okeru kōha: nihon bungaku no danseiteki genri [Kōha regarding literature: the masculine principle of Japanese literature]' in *Mishima Yukio hyōron zenshū* Vol. I, pp. 1015–1016 (originally published in *Chūōkōron*, 1964).

man who was said to be his lover. As it happened, the young man, Morita, did not have the strength to sever Mishima's head, and a second swordsman was required to step in to finish the job. Morita then cut his own stomach, and his head was in turn severed. The swordsman, a man of impressive physical and psychological strength, subsequently served a jail term. I must note here that Mishima, who was a law graduate himself, had before the action calculated the legal cost of defence for the people involved. This demonstrates the fact that he had the insight of a film (or theatre) producer as well as being an artist who wrote the script and performed it. It is crucial to note that he never completely departed from the sense of grim reality as he dived into his fantasy world.

The *Mishima Affair* is one of the most idiosyncratic performances of modern Japan. It does not hide its theatrical devices, nor aim to create a monological discourse of nationalism. Its style takes it beyond avant-garde, and into the 'postmodern'. The presence of a self-mutilated body is an 'obscene object'⁸ of desire, to use Zizek's terms; it has an overwhelming effect on the audience. The scene threatens the *clean and proper* space of modern Japan, evoking the suppressed memories of war and uncovering the abject nature of the human body. It was all the more transgressive since the process of recovering from the post-war devastation was to re-build cities, develop lands and thus reinstate the notion of 'clean and proper', in other words, ultimately to recover humanity. Mishima's suicide undermined the unified effort made by Japanese people.

What's in a Name?

Mishima had written a few memorable *seppuku* scenes in his novels.⁹ He also produced and starred in a film called *Patriotism* which gave him the opportunity to perform the ritual as an actor. He fetishised the 'way of the samurai' and wrote extensively on *The Book of Hagakure*.¹⁰ This book was written by Yamamoto Tsunetomo (Jocho) in the early eighteenth century, more than one hundred years after the Tokugawa government established a centralised power, using Confucian ideology to legitimate the position of the samurai at the top of a social hierarchy. By the time the *Hagakure* was written, the development of urban centres and the subsequent accumulation of merchant wealth had begun to force the samurai class to reinvent themselves to stay in power.¹¹

⁸ By the term 'obscene object', I am referring to the Lacanian 'Thing', the incestuous maternal object, which is brought into proximity. See also Slavoj Zizek 'The Obscene Object of Postmodernity' in *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 141–153.

⁹ One of the most unforgettable is a young nationalist's *seppuku* in front of the imaginary rising sun in Michael Gallagher (trans.) *Runaway Horses* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977). The original Japanese title *honma* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1969). The original title of *Patriotism* (1965) is *yūkoku*. The script was published as a short story in *Shōsetsu chūōkōron* in 1961. Mishima plays the main character, a newlywed army officer who commits *seppuku* after failing to join a coup.

¹⁰ Mishima discusses the book of *Hagakure* on many occasions. See *Mishima Yukio hyōron zenshū* [The complete collection of the critical essays of Mishima Yukio] Vol. I, pp. 689–732 (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1989). Mishima sometimes uses an English term 'fetish' in contexts devoid of sexual connotation. If a fetish is defined as a displaced object of desire, *Hagakure* is obviously a fetish for Mishima.

¹¹ My thanks to the anonymous referees who pointed out to me that the author of *Hagakure* was from a small, rural Daimyo house further distanced from power by its *tozama* status, and that the book was written for circulation among his housemen. This supports my argument that the ideology of *Hagakure* cannot be simply referred to as Japanese 'tradition'. The reception of this text has shifted over time, and the meaning it conveys has shifted with it.

A ritual suicide *seppuku* (or *harakiri* as it is commonly referred to in the West) was a privilege granted only to the samurai class, through which one not only demonstrated one's purity of heart, but also reclaimed one's honour. The latter was particularly the case when it was ordered by the lord as punishment. Tokugawa Japan already demonstrated characteristics of modernity: rigidly centralised and excessively bureaucratic. By executing one's own death, a samurai subject brought a closure to a disturbance that had threatened the establishment. It was a 'way of the samurai' through which one could rise from anonymity to a position of certain power.

By protecting the name of his lord, the samurai subject also saved his own name. If a person would give his life for his name, we may like to ask, in Shakespearean fashion, 'What's in a name?' A 'name' is, without harking back to Saussure, always-already an empty sign. At a time when only those of samurai rank were entitled to a name, when society was overwhelmed by the prosperous merchant economy, every samurai subject decisively hung on to his name. What was really at stake was class identity. The power bestowed by rank during the time of prolonged political stability, was a virtual power and could only be sustained by confirmation through ritual performance; the emphasis was necessarily on form, style and name. Nothing therefore, is in a name except an absence of content that would otherwise solidify one's subjectivity.

In this context, I argue that the act of *seppuku*, within the 'Way of the Samurai', carries the same motive we find in Western Enlightenment Humanism. In short, it is essentially modern. In saying so, I define 'modernity' to be a system of thought and language that is tightly linked to the concept of a modern subject—autonomous and unique—and to the notion of overcoming and progress. The 'Way of the Samurai' was foregrounded by Wang Yangming's 'philosophy of action'. It is the code of overcoming man's corporeality. The act of *seppuku* is therefore an ultimate demonstration of 'will to power'.¹²

Terms such as 'determination' and an 'honourable death' are universally recognised values of the warrior class in any culture. Despite its façade of collectivism—the submission of an individual to the benefit of the whole—the favourite Orientalist's description of Japan and the Japanese, the 'Way of the Samurai', I would argue, can be the way of 'self-fashioning'¹³ of a unique and coherent subject. The difference is that the self-fashioning in this case takes place without a verbal persuasion crucial to, for example, a Shakespearean tragedy. This is because in the 'Way of the Samurai', language becomes almost redundant; speech is irrelevant, or secondary to action.¹⁴ Written words, on the other hand, have a different significance. In any culture, words, once written, become the law. *The Book of Hagakure* in that context becomes a paradox, or rather, an irony, for it aims to implement the code of non-verbal action by verbally stating it. To put it briefly, the body of the text—words—embodies the antithesis of

¹² It goes without saying that the phrase comes from Friedrich Nietzsche's critique of Western Humanism. Cf. Walter Kaufmann (trans. & Ed.) *Ecce Homo* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989). Mishima was fluent in German, and Nietzsche was for him the most influential of all thinkers.

¹³ See Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-fashioning: from More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, c.1980).

¹⁴ That language is secondary to action is manifest in both Zen and Yomeigaku (Wang Yangming School) teachings. Nevertheless, the ritual procedure of *seppuku* includes writing of a death poem. Curiously, however, the contents of the death poems are not necessarily related to *seppuku* itself; they cannot always be read as caption written for the *seppuku* scene. They are more of an additional demonstration/performance of one's art. This also supports my view on *seppuku* as a non-verbal expression of a self.

words. Similarly, the body of a samurai is put to the fore, while *Hagakure* advocates the ways of overcoming bodily desire.

A Ghost at Large

Setting aside the *Mishima Affair* for now, I turn to a cinematic narrative in which a similar non-verbal 'self-fashioning' takes place. The title character of *Ghost Dog* is an African-American contract killer who has found a personal code of conduct in an eighteenth-century Japanese text, *Hagakure*. Ghost Dog, a role played by loveable and cuddly Forest Whitaker, is a black knight, *anachronistic* and *unsuited* to contemporary New York. He creates an 'unwritten contract' with a small-time Mafia boss who once almost accidentally saved his life. The latter is a reluctant participant in this pseudo-feudal relationship. After a series of complex events Ghost Dog willingly throws himself on the *sword* of this boss, who is himself bound to the unwritten law of the Mafia.

The film is a collection of postmodern 'blank parodies', to use Fredric Jameson's frequently quoted definition of postmodernism.¹⁵ Parodies have by definition a sting to mock an original seriousness. Postmodern blank parodies are on the other hand somehow without a sting, because for them the meaning of the original has already collapsed and therefore there remains only the *form* of the original, or its particular *style* without a content. Blank parodies mimic the styles of the past: in *Ghost Dog* Godfathers discuss their business in a Chinese restaurant; they have no young successors; and they are three months behind in paying the rent. One of them stares nostalgically at violent American cartoon classics on TV, while another taps along to rap music. And quite unexpectedly, a Japanese text, *Hagakure* dominates the narrative of the film, appearing in white at each crucial moment on a black background. It dictates the plot and circumscribes the meaning of the visual, finally leading Ghost Dog to an honourable samurai death.

Despite its name, this ghost is thoroughly visible to the audience from the beginning. Jarmusch does not veil this central object; the ghost is not behind a door. Its habitat is not in a dark basement, but on a rooftop where he innocently takes a nap under the blue sky in a long spell of idleness between his killing assignments. To compensate for this hyper-visibility, the film offers to us a familiar excitement of 'uncovering' the secret: the *true* identity of Ghost Dog. Using a conventional flashback technique, the film tells us the so-called 'primal scene', the original story. The young Ghost Dog was once a street-sleeping, homeless youth. When he was attacked by a couple of thugs, a Mafia boss happened to pass by and saved his life. But this original event is no more important than the second event: Ghost Dog's encounter with *Hagakure*, a 'sacred book' of the so-called 'ancient Japanese culture' to which it belongs. The term 'ancient' is repeatedly mentioned in the film, despite the fact that *Hagakure*, an early eighteenth-century text is, historically speaking, neither ancient nor medieval. The terms are used therefore as a code that signifies the unspecified past that is not one but many; sanctifying the text by relegating it to an ahistorical antiquity. By the same token, the term 'Japanese' in the film is an uncanny code that simultaneously evokes both familiarity and unfamiliarity to the American audience. Their everyday life is sur-

¹⁵ See Fredric Jameson's essay, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', in Hal Foster (Ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983).

rounded by Japanese products: Honda, Toyota, Sony, Casio, Panasonic and so on. The more familiar they feel with such high-tech products, the more ‘uncanny’¹⁶ the images of ‘ancient’ Japan become.

A postmodern film like *Ghost Dog* is designed neither to send out a transparent message to the audience, nor to privilege a particular meaning among others. It instead, offers a *style* that is selected out of many, a method of eclecticism. The ‘Way of the Samurai’ in *Ghost Dog*, is thus presented as an arbitrary style chosen from the past; it is an intensely one-dimensional way of living. A life with principles, or a unified (and therefore not fragmented) way of living is something our present society has long dismissed as backwards and pre-modern. Our *anti-hero* Ghost Dog chose to enter a *lord-samurai* relationship with an arbitrary master, a small-time gangster. The fact that he is also a *mad* contract killer who has killed regularly without hesitation is intentionally understated by the film’s narrative by giving a comic touch to his nightly actions. In effect we, the audience, are led to warm to his unquestioned submission to the law—the code of the Samurai—that finally swallows up his life itself. We come to love Ghost Dog because he demonstrates lost values: the strength of will-power, immaculate self-discipline and kindness towards the weak. These qualities effectively evoke nostalgia.

Nostalgia is what we feel when we recognise a lack in our present condition, and we falsely project that lack onto the past in order to construct an image of the past that is full and whole. As we have seen, Yamamoto Tsunetomo wrote *Hagakure* at a time when the *samurai* class was losing its original warrior role. Mishima mocks the fact that Yamamoto lived a long peaceful life and died on a comfortable *futon* in a comfortable *tatami* room without the opportunity to perform his principle of an honourable death. *Hagakure* was a text inspired by the vanishing of the values of the samurai, a narrative produced from one man’s nostalgia, a literary reconstruction of a samurai subject. The meaning of the author’s life was at stake there.

What is it about the *Hagakure* that can turn a homeless African-American youth into a well-controlled and ‘powerfully attractive’ warrior? The author, Yamamoto, was greatly influenced by Wang Yangming’s philosophy, also called the ‘philosophy of action’. That is why *Hagakure* was one of Mishima’s favourite books. Mishima’s ontological position is somewhere between Wang Yangming’s words, ‘Truth is within me’, and Nietzschean nihilism, ‘Will to power’, or rather, a combination of the two. ‘The Way of the Samurai’ is a circulating narrative that dangerously empowers certain souls such as Mishima and Ghost Dog. While Mishima had lost faith in the power of language, Ghost Dog patterned his existence on the words of the book leading him to an unnecessary death. Ghost Dog is lost in the sea of the text.

A Postmodern Break: Presence of a *Jouissance* and Absence of the Truth

New York, the setting of *Ghost Dog* is turned into a ‘postmodern-scape’ of cultural *bricolage*. The values that *Hagakure* advocated in early eighteenth-century Japan, have, in this American movie from the end of the twentieth century, just one arbitrary style

¹⁶ For the original Freudian notion of the ‘uncanny’, see his paper, ‘The Uncanny’, in Sander L. Gilman (Ed.), *Sigmund Freud, Psychological Writings and Letters* (New York: Continuum, 1995).

of a *jouissance*¹⁷ chosen for an alienated man who has found a place/meaning in the fast-moving, excessively affluent capitalist society. A *jouissance* is an experience outside of language, and hence outside of official *knowledge*. In Lacanian psychoanalysis and French feminist literary criticism the term *jouissance* connotes an intensive bodily pleasure, an ecstasy. In a postmodern text (*text* in the wider sense of the term) a *jouissance* is fully visible, evoking a certain anxiety in the viewers. As Slavoj Žižek points out, a postmodern break (from the modern) occurs when a *jouissance* is present even when one is utterly alienated. This opposes the modernist depiction of an alienated and de-humanised individual. It is crucial to note here that Žižek distances the terms 'modern' and 'postmodern' from their designated temporality, and he does so in order to capture more precisely the complexity of our time.

[W]e are even tempted to say that postmodernism in a way precedes modernism. Like Kafka—who logically, not only temporally, precedes Joyce—the postmodernist *inconsistency* of the Other is retroactively perceived by the modernist gaze as its *incompleteness*.¹⁸

Through the works of James Joyce, a high modernist, one can return to Kafka and read its postmodernity. Žižek explains it: while a modernist text is driven by an absence (such as Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*) and therefore it provokes interpretation, in a postmodern text (such as Franz Kafka's *The Trial*) the central object is already present, and therefore the text blocks interpretation.¹⁹ In a high-modernist text, human beings are alienated and isolated because the *true* is not attainable. In a postmodern text, on the other hand, although human beings are equally or even more alienated by the modern systems, there is no attempt made to represent the *truth*; there is only the series of happenings. In *Ghost Dog*, the Thing (the primal scene, the sacralised text *Hagakure*, Ghost Dog's corporeality) is present from the beginning. There is no interpretation required there. Likewise, in the *Mishima Affair*, the Thing (a discourse of ultra-nationalism, the sacralised text *Hagakure*, Mishima's corporeality) is always-already present to the audience. There is no unconscious hidden deep below the surface of the affair for us to discover; numerous attempts at such discovery have been made by critics only to find that everything one needed to know was always-already provided by Mishima himself. Both *Ghost Dog* and *Mishima* resist interpretation in the sense that the central object (the text of the body and the body of the text) is already present, and the modernist critiques that find *inconsistency* and *incompleteness* in them are missing the point. Because *inconsistency* and *inauthenticity* are the characteristics of modernity's *Other* which circulate steadily in these narratives.

Ghost Dog is yet another model of a *dumb* type that the American cinema has increasingly fetishised. These unthreatening and inarticulate heroes have an exceptionally kind, uncorrupted heart. Furthermore, they often have a hidden talent, which will

¹⁷ It was initially used by Roland Barthes to advocate a new reading that does not aim the closure of a text. He described the pleasure of reading as '*jouissance/coming*'. It was a critique of the institutionalised reading of literature that focused on finding the *truth* of a text. I am here relating the term *jouissance* to 'modernism's *Other*', the terms used in Andreas Huyssen's 'Mass Culture as Women: Modernism's *Other*', in *After the Great Divide* (London: Macmillan Press, 1986).

¹⁸ Žižek, *Looking Awry* (1991), p. 145. Žižek offers an alternative perspective to Habermas's diachrony of modernism versus postmodernism.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* The term 'interpretation' is used in a poststructuralist sense. A text 'provokes interpretation' when it is loaded with symbolism and metaphor, which is the case of modernist writings. A postmodern text 'blocks interpretation' because there is no layered structure that implies a hidden Truth.

bring them to the fore from their initial marginality ('Forest Gump' immediately comes to mind). The stories map a division between the centre and periphery so that a lone creature moves into the centre as others begin to recognise it. In *Ghost Dog*, on the other hand, there is no map to demarcate *here* and *there*; the postmodern space of the city cannot be clearly divided. The film implies that *Ghost Dog* has an established network among 'his people' who are floating, unanchored, constantly moving, instead of occupying the space. Freemason-like greetings are exchanged in the street, at a doorstep and in an urban park. Their exchanges are brief and non-verbal, for both are always in the process of *going somewhere*.

What *Ghost Dog* and others in his network have in common is that their existences are 'excessive'²⁰ to the main economic operation of the city. Although their associations can be viewed under a broad daylight (unlike the tradition of the Mafia), they are invisible to the rest of society. Other characters of *Ghost Dog*—the Mafia, a French-speaking Caribbean migrant, and a man who builds a ship on the rooftop of a building—all hang on to a style of their choice, their own *Hagakure* which brings them a daily experience of a *jouissance*, a bodily pleasure beyond symbolic representations. Their choices are against the trend; they are *anachronistic*, *inefficient*, and therefore, amusing and pleasurable. In other words, they are antithetical to the modernist economy of rationality. I must add in haste that a *jouissance* does not construct the notion of an autonomous subject. The experience of a *jouissance* will make it possible for a self to meet with the *Other*, while the autonomy of a modern subject will fortify the boundaries of a self and consequently throw it back into an alienation. A *jouissance* breaks the *unified* subject in so far as it gives pleasure even in alienation.

Politicisation of Art

In the year of 1970, at the onset of Japan's rising economy and prospects of mesmerising material wealth, the *Mishima Affair*—a civilian's *coup d'état* and his provocative death by *seppuku*—was no less *anachronistic* and *unsuitable* than *Ghost Dog* of New York in 1999. Then Prime Minister Sato Eisaku, who was later awarded a Nobel Peace Prize for the 'non-violent' return of Okinawa, dismissed the *Mishima Affair* immediately after its occurrence by simply saying that Mishima had gone 'mad'. By calling Mishima 'mad', Sato could avoid the responsibility of dealing with the larger issues this event indicated: Japan's political and economic affiliation to the United States (the former enemy); the existing emotional resistance to that affiliation among its people;²¹ Sato's own involvement in that resistance by befriending and supporting Mishima to a certain degree.

Mishima is thought to have endorsed fascist ideologies; he formed a private army and used the Defence Force facilities to train them. He was being accused of confusing writing with acting, or aesthetics with politics. It is evident, however, that Mishima did not unknowingly confuse the two, but that he brought them together as a conscious philosophical choice. Mishima elsewhere makes it clear that his political stance differs

²⁰ The term 'excess' I use here is a Derridean one. They are not 'outside' the mainstream, but an 'excess' or supplement that suggests a fragmentation of the whole.

²¹ During the late 1960s and early 1970s, the government was bombarded by the student protests and riots as part of the world-wide New Left Movement. Along with that, the government also had to deal with the protests made by the nationalist groups that were opposed to the US—Japan Security Pacts and the existence of US bases in Japan.

completely from that of Japan's pre-war nationalism.²² He does so by theorising about European fascism and communism. Although it may appear tedious to some, I will recapitulate his formula below. This helps to further explain my points that the *Mishima Affair* is a product of eclecticism and therefore polyphonic, rather than a return of the repressed of monological ultra-nationalism.²³

Mishima considered that both communism and fascism are political forms based on worldviews, which differ fundamentally from previous forms of governing. Greek democracy, for example, was a highly technical tool of living and for the rulers of the Renaissance metropolis, governing was a form of art. In contrast, both communism and fascism are founded on ontological questions and therefore claim universality. Moreover, they are historical events peculiar to the early twentieth century. Communism regards itself as a science (primary cognition) and fascism seeks its basis in myths (primary memories). Communism attempts the politicisation of science, and fascism, the politicisation of art. In both cases the goal is to achieve the realisation of one man's perspective, be it Marx, Hitler or Mussolini. The operation of power is no longer technical but is systematic in each scheme. Although each attempts to control religion, morals, science and art, and thus often appears to be more of a 'culturalist' project, in the initial formation it is a personal philosophical choice.

Mishima then goes on to say that so-called 'Japanese wartime fascism' was a far cry from European fascism described above, for the right-wing groups of pre-war Japan are all *organic* royalists and Shintoists. On this point I would argue that emperor worship was historically and politically constructed and that to call it *organic* (or non-artificial) conceals its systematic operation, particularly in education. But by the same token, the rituals and establishment of Shinto have been so widely accepted by ordinary people at the level of animism that it seems almost an *organic* process for one to become its follower. Mishima is right in that Japanese right-wing groups did not have to have a systematised worldview, and that for the same reason it could not attract the intelligentsia who were keen to obtain systematised knowledge, Western technology and thoughts.

Contrary to Japanese wartime ideologies, European fascism of the early twentieth century is a philosophical position that stems from nihilism. In nihilism, according to Mishima, the world loses its meaning—the world collapses—and in the utmost despair a nihilist begins to maintain this meaninglessness in the best possible way. He then becomes a hypocrite; for as there is no meaning to the world, he is free to act as if there was a meaning. (Mishima seems to indicate here a Nietzschean superhuman, the 'overman'.²⁴ Note that he does not confuse it either with the Buddhist notion of a 'void' or with a popularised version of nihilism—anarchism.) A nihilist can never be a relativist, but is totalitarian and absolutist in his schemes, which are the inevitable models for the concept of nothingness. All fascist dictators are nihilists in this sense, and Japanese right-wingers who are essentially optimistic and relativistic have nothing to do with European fascism. Mishima concludes that while parliamentary democracy

²² See 'Shin fashizumu ron [New Critique of Fascism]', in *Mishima Yukio Hyōron Zenshū* Vol. III, pp. 315–320 (originally published as 'Fashizumu wa sonzaisuruka? [Does Fascism exist?]', in *Bungakkai*, Oct. 1954).

²³ This section summarises the ideas found in 'Shin fashizumu ...'. The term polyphony (many voices) is coined by Mikhail Bakhtin who pointed out the dialogical nature of the works of Dostoevsky in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

²⁴ See Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*.

is a technical form that can exist under the emperor's constitution, fascism will be incompatible with the imperial system. Therefore, Japanese imperialism, which employed worldview politics in its strategy of military dictatorship, economic control and censorship, cannot be called fascism.²⁵ While European fascism attracted various social groups of professionals and was considered to be a revolution of the petit-bourgeoisie, Japanese 'fascism' could not receive the same support.

Thus Mishima distances himself from wartime imperialism and takes a position closer to European fascism only in so far as the latter is an intellectual and philosophical choice. At the well-known public debate between Mishima and students of Tokyo University in 1969, having identified with students in their anti-American and anti-government views, he concludes his argument by saying, 'If only you, students could say the word, "the Emperor," ...'. This comment obviously misled the audience into identifying him as one of the royalists, an anachronistic believer in the emperor's birthrights. But we must take into account the fact that Mishima was a novelist, a modern storyteller by vocation and his words were thus always-already both metaphorical and paradoxical. 'Emperor' for Mishima did not refer to the actual person occupying the throne at the time, but to a metaphorical position outside the realm of human beings that transcends personal existence. It is a paradoxical statement because while the claimed authority of the Japanese Emperor resides in the Shinto rites, Mishima was an affirmed atheist. It is more plausible to assume therefore, that the *Mishima Affair* was about making a choice and politicising art rather than expressing a belief in ultra-nationalism.

The 'Purloined' Paperback

In *Ghost Dog* a little girl called Pearline notices Ghost Dog in a park and engages him in conversation. Later we find out that she is an arbitrarily chosen agent who will maintain the values of *Hagakure* after Ghost Dog's death. In the same way a daughter of the Godfather, who is initially presented to us as anaemic and powerless, accidentally becomes an agent to maintain the Mafia tradition. The two girls are also linked by a Japanese text, the paperback version of *Rashōmon* with a lurid cover. The title is widely known in the West through a film directed by Akira Kurosawa.²⁶ The book is a collection of short stories by modern novelist, Akutagawa Ryūnosuke.²⁷ Akutagawa skilfully psychologised stories collected from classic (pre-modern) Japanese texts to create a modern narrative of Western realism. *Rashōmon* is, therefore, also a product of eclecticism. The narrative of Kurosawa's film is based on one of the stories 'Yabunonaka'; the title is taken from another, 'Rashomon'. The Japanese phrase, 'Ya-bu-no-na-ka' is exchanged between Ghost Dog and Pearline, but seemingly without reference to the content of the story.

For the audience of the film, it is merely the pornographic picture on the cover of *Rashōmon* that implies its content. This reminds us of exchanges that take place between a French-speaking migrant and Ghost Dog who speaks only English. With his

²⁵ As for racism, according to Mishima, it comes as a secondary feature of the fascist operation that is simply useful as a practical weapon in achieving their goals.

²⁶ The film was originally released by Daiei in 1950. Also refer to *Rashomon: a Film by Akira Kurosawa from the Script by Akira Kurosawa and Shinobu Hashimoto with Consulting Editor, Donald Richie* (New York: Grove Press, 1969).

²⁷ Takashi Kojima (trans.) *Rashomon, and Other Stories* (New York: Liveright, 1952).

usual playfulness Jarmusch deconstructs the notion of communication and the role of language. The audience is made omnipotent through subtitles, understanding every masked meaning of the conversation, while the characters remain in their monolingual shells. Language is, according to Lacan, a metonymical chain of signifiers²⁸; meaning is always-already veiled from the viewer. What is conveyed can never be confirmed. The unconscious (the condensed hidden meaning) does not lay beneath the surface of consciousness to be represented, but instead, it is there in our proximity, structured like language, displacing and floating.

The gist of the story 'Yabunonaka' is that an incident can be described totally differently by different parties and that what has 'truly' happened cannot be obtained objectively. It is a modern narrative in the sense that it implies the existence of a core meaning and the hidden Truth. It also leads to the statement of Wang Yangming philosophy, 'Truth is within one's mind'. In *Ghost Dog*, however, there is no such statement made. It is rather a game to pass on a 'text of truth' from one to another. The film pretends that there is a hidden sacred *truth* carried within the words/language/texts. Two Japanese texts, *Hagakure* and *Rashōmon*, that have no connection between them, in this film belong to the same imaginary paradigm—'ancient Japan'—and are assigned to play the role of the couriers of the *true*.

The paperback copy of *Rashōmon* circulates from the Mafia daughter through Ghost Dog to Pearline, and finally returns to its original owner. The content of the book is treated as irrelevant, but the circulation bears some significance. Like the 'purloined letter' in Poe's story,²⁹ a paperback *Rashōmon* circulates metonymically in the film without carrying any meaning. There is no 'core' meaning to it, and a modernist effort to read a metaphor in the narrative is bound to fail. *The Book of Hagakure* is also transferred from Ghost Dog to Pearline who is reading it on the kitchen floor in the final scene. Are we to expect that she is going to be the second samurai? Will she re-live a *jouissance* that Ghost Dog has demonstrated to her? While Poe's 'purloined letter' was designed to arrive at its destination, the letters (paperback texts) in *Ghost Dog* always have a possibility of not arriving at all.³⁰

The samurai code of living that *Hagakure* advocates is likely to be lost on the way, and ironically enough, the text is evidence of the absence of the code. It is an empty style that can be borrowed by anyone at any time of history and it no longer signifies a *core* culture of an Oriental entity called Japan. In fact, it has never signified as such except in one man's nostalgia. We cannot deny the fact that the *Mishima Affair* was generated by historical necessity: a resistance to the unstoppable force of American cultural colonisation. At the same time, however, the political implication of the affair, 'far-right nationalism' and the ritual suicides,³¹ were merely the styles of resistance, arbitrarily chosen from the past. It was a choice made through personal

²⁸ Cf. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection* (London: Tavistock, 1997).

²⁹ Poe's text was discussed by Jacques Lacan in 'Seminar on "The Purloined Letter"', in *Yale French Studies* 48, 1972, pp. 38–72. It was then followed by Jacques Derrida's critique on Lacan's essay, which was discussed by Barbara Johnson in 'Philology: What is at Stake?', published in Jan Ziolkowski (Ed.), *On Philology* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1990), pp. 26–30. It is ironic that during this circulation of text the original has lost its context (the meaning it may have conveyed to the readers of the time) and has transformed each time. It has become its own purloined letter.

³⁰ Derrida points to this possibility in his criticism of Lacan's reading of Poe.

³¹ As mentioned above, another member of the 'Shield Society', chosen by Mishima to die in the same manner, followed Mishima's *seppuku* on site. Both were assisted by a third man who subsequently served sentences in prison.

preference, or perhaps one man's nostalgia, a conscious mimicry or a postmodern simulacrum.

The Tentative Agenda of the Postmodern World Text

I have elaborated above the postmodern implications of *Ghost Dog* and the *Mishima Affair*. As Žižek has pointed out, postmodernity is only recognisable when seen through a modernist gaze. It is then seen as inconsistent and incomplete. Mishima's final action was criticised as historically *incoherent* and strategically *inefficient*; a *coup d'état* in modern democratic Japan was from anyone's point of view unlikely to succeed. That Mishima focused on dying rather than carrying out the coup was taken as evidence of an *inauthentic* motive by the majority of critics at the time of the incident. *Ghost Dog*, on the other hand, does not entertain such criticism. The audience knows that it is a make-believe, and that Ghost Dog is a figure larger than life. The film does not attempt to depict Ghost Dog as an authentic warrior; it instead celebrates the eclectic nature of the character in a post-realist narrative.

Both Ghost Dog and Mishima are devoted to mimicry, re-enacting the samurai code. Although one may argue that Mishima is not a fictional figure and there is a difference between fiction and a true story, Mishima's life epitomises a blurring force of the boundaries. His career began by questioning the boundaries of a naked self and a masked one; the author and the 'I' in the novel.³² Mishima constantly re-imagined himself, creating a new 'Mishima' throughout his life. What if a historian *discovers* fifty years on that the *Mishima Affair* was a dramatic performance produced by an artist called Mishima Yukio? The *Mishima Affair* is, after all, a collection of stories narrated by newspaper reporters, literary biographers, critics and historians. It is a historical fact, but there is no 'unmediated' original text that holds the *true*. It is ready for circulation like any other text, transforming itself on the way.

Our present political and economic conditions are in need of a new means of description. Take for example the issue of globalisation. As a localised nationalism proliferates among the ethnic groups of impoverished nations, multinational corporations operate beyond state boundaries and transform a national subject into an anonymous consumer of global economies. While the discourse of nationalism dwells on the modern notion of an autonomous self (nation) and exacerbates the economy of already weakened nations, the superpowers of consumerism thrive on the 'knowledge' of a *jouissance*. They can effectively tune into, or even shape the desire of the masses through the advanced technology of communication.

That is not to say that the over-grown transnational corporations are not necessarily liberated from modernist ideals; their operation is generated by them, to develop and improve, to produce more and faster, and to grow larger today than yesterday. And yet they are the sites of a conflict among different fields of knowledge. The more they struggle to find an overarching single mechanism to maintain their unity, the more they find themselves being forced into adopting locality for survival and consequently breaking away from a centralised style of operation. Cities such as New York and Tokyo are also over-grown and over-sized transnational sites. They run without an orderly mechanism for their strength is to carry the excess (a *jouissance*) within.

The complexity of our present is such that understanding it requires a 'post-realist'

³² I am referring to *Confessions of A Mask* (London: Flamingo, 1993). Originally published in 1949 as *kamen no kokuhaku*.

and 'postmodernist' discourse. Our reading of texts will need to accommodate these epistemological shifts. The term modernity in academic discourses is now used to identify a system of thought and language that has claimed universality in the post-Renaissance Western world. It is linked strongly to the concept of a modern subject that is an autonomous and unique entity with clear-cut boundaries. It is also linked to the notions of progress and overcoming. The discourse of modernity therefore, already carries its critique within, and we find *modernity's Other* wherever the modern is located. By the same token, Mishima's suicide by *seppuku*—*modernity's Other*—is circumscribed by the modern ideology of 'Will to power'.