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Review: Kojin Karatani & The Return of the Thirties: Psychoanalysis in/of Japan

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1. Returns of the Romantic Discourse of “Japanness”

According to Jacques Lacan, “psychoanalysis in Japan” is neither possible nor necessary; hence his wish to make Japanese readers close his book the moment they open it.¹ This arrogant assertion in the preface for the Japanese translation of *Écrits* is, of course, far from discouraging: Lacanian psychoanalysis, or what is sometimes called the “French Freud,” is no doubt among the most marketable commodities for “high brow” publishers in Japan. We know so well, to our chagrin, that Lacan’s high-handed enigmatic aphorism, while baffling our understanding, nevertheless (or rather therefore) attracts us unfailingly, thus serving as a good marketing strategy. It is the uniqueness of the Japanese language, Lacan stresses, that makes impossible “psychoanalysis in Japan”; a uniqueness that can work to stimulate the self-conscious nationalism of Japanese intellectuals, conservative or otherwise, who tend to feel flattered by any theory that renders Japan exceptional.

Nonetheless, Kojin Karatani, a most radical, bitter critic of the ideology of “Japanness,” is inspired by this preface.² What draws his attention is Lacan’s materialistic/linguistic interest in the system of Japanese letters, which, Karatani believes, helps deconstruct any romantic, a-historical discourse of “Japaneseness” - thereby disclosing “the historicity of the écriture by which history is constructed.” (Karatani was a close friend of Paul de Man, whose critique of “aesthetic ideology” is notable for its perusal of textual materiality. In a certain way Karatani’s criticism might thus be described as “deconstructive,” yet it must simultaneously be noted that he is extremely critical of the “post-modern,” pseudo-Derridian indulgence in “textual play,” which he sharply distinguishes from de Man’s essentially politico-ideological “close reading”). To repeat, Karatani’s focus is on Lacan’s interest in the materialistic dimension of the Japanese language. They both show especial interest in the “unique” way in which *kanji* (Chinese ideograms) was introduced into Japanese, emphasising the fact that *kanji* is read two ways phonetically [on], a

reading that is similar to the Chinese sound, and semantically [*kun*], that is, a reading using native Japanese sounds.” Which is to say that “Japanese sound can be directly transferred to the use of *kanji*. In other words, aside from its sound, one can receive the meaning of *kanji* visually.” Karatani is here reminded of Freud’s representation of the unconscious as a hieroglyph, which gives a clue to Lacan’s elusive statement: “in Japanese the distance from the unconscious to the spoken language is palpable.” Lacan’s implication here is, Karatani argues, that the unconscious (= hieroglyph) is exposed in Japanese consciousness, instead of being repressed. Hence Lacan’s declaration that “psychoanalysis in Japan” is not only unnecessary but also impossible. Linguistically speaking, therefore, there is neither “the unconscious” nor “repression” that enables Lacan to psychoanalyse the Japanese.

In this context, further, Karatani attempts to explain in a Lacanian terminology “a common phenomenon when one civilization encounters another, more advanced one.” In such cases - the encounter between Korea and China, for instance - “Lacanian castration is the inevitable consequence of intervening in the symbolic order, namely, the world of articulated language (= culture).” Psychoanalytically, the Japanese way of intervening in the symbolic order of Chinese ideograms through *their own native sounds*, rather “unique” an “encounter,” suggests the absence of complete “castration.” Japanese *écriture* could thus be seen as a historical product of the Lacanian “foreclosure” of primal repression.

Karatani might sound a devoted Lacanian, but he isn’t. His use of Lacan here is highly strategic: to resist the romantic representation of “Japanness” as a product of, say, “the ancient substratum” of “the racial unconscious.” He surveys the ideological manners in which the cultural peculiarities of Japan have recurrently been viewed as “the cohabitation of foreign and native elements” without any serious conflict inside. This was sometimes idealised as “Japanese religious magnanimity” or (in)famously figured as “a reservoir and museum of the Asian civilization.” Of course, the “unique” Japanese way of absorbing foreign cultures should not be attributed to “the depths” of their “collective unconscious” - “the womb of the Japanese earth mother,” as a Jungian scholar puts it. On the contrary, Karatani claims, such “uniqueness” - based on “the cohabitation of foreign and native elements” - is characteristically exposed on “the surface” of the Japanese language: the way of reading/absorbing Chinese ideograms through *its own native sounds* [*kun*]. Referring to Lacan’s materialistic/linguistic approach to the “uniqueness” of Japanese, Karatani thus concludes: “If there is anything on earth that can be deemed Japaneseness, it is this system [i.e., this *kun*].” This is precisely what Karatani means by “the historicity of the *écriture* by which history is constructed.” It is noteworthy that Karatani’s careful distinction between Jungian “depth” psychology and Freudian/Lacanian psychoanalysis is intended to deconstruct the former romantic discourse by means of the latter verbal/textual approach, thereby revealing the “historical” fact that something “deep” is a linguistic/ rhetorical product of the “surface”/ “*écriture*.”

Karatani is well aware of the possibility that even this sort of analysis, despite its intention, could encourage the ideologues of “Japanness,” effectively

reinforcing their discourse in Lacanian terms. It is for this reason that he radically and strategically historicises his psychoanalytic discussion “in the context of the Far Eastern geopolitical structure.” The foreclosure of Lacanian castration - i.e., the primal repression by the Chinese, which made possible “Japanness,” including the “unique” system of the Japanese Emperor - is a result of the simple fact that “Japan has never been ruled by foreign forces, thanks to Korea.” Karatani thus drastically reduces something “Japanese” - whether cultural, linguistic, or political - to the historical, geographical fact that “the Korean Peninsula exists between China and Japan.”

The reason for my focus on Karatani is that, while “psychoanalysis in Japan” is often a “post-modern” fashion on the university campus, his use of Lacan and Freud - in sharp contrast to current trends, and not only in Japan, of which he is highly critical - is clearly motivated by a sense of crisis. Karatani’s psychoanalysis of “Japanness” is an attempt to resist a growing tendency towards reactionary politics in Japan since its economic recession in the 1990s. Quite obviously, what urges him to re-read psychoanalytic texts *now* is a series of actual political events that might be termed “the return of the thirties” in Japan. That said, Karatani’s target is not limited to recent political situations in Japan. His pressing concern is a critique of “Japan’s own condition of modernity within universal modernization.” And this is a concern that extends far beyond any analysis of psychoanalysis in Japan.

2. “A Freudian Marx”: the Problematic of Repetition/Representation

In this sense, Karatani’s psychoanalytic re-reading of *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* demands our particular attention, for he re-evaluates this text as a penetrating observation of Freud’s “repetition compulsion” in “a universal model of fascism.” His Freudian examination of Marx is successful enough to foreground “a certain structure” that repeats itself in the 1870s, the 1930s and the 1990s “beyond their periodical differences” - “the repetition compulsion in the political domain” as “the return of the repressed.” To be sure, it is often said that the 1930s are similar to the 1990s, especially in terms of the crisis of global economy and parliamentarism, and in terms of the decisive defeat of the left wing. Yet Karatani’s interest is not in “events themselves, but in the form immanent in them” - namely, “the issues of representation in the parliamentary system and in the capitalist economy, both forming the modern problematic of ‘representation’ par excellence.”

What distinguishes *The 18th Brumaire* from a mere journalistic reportage is, Karatani claims, Marx’s insight into the “inevitable crisis,” or “the unfillable void” of the modern parliamentary system created by the “arbitrary” relationship between the representer and the represented. Marx emphasises that “parties and their discourses are detached from the real existing classes, or rather that the real existing class is a sort of ‘class unconscious,’ as observed by Kenneth Burke, which comes into consciousness only in the discursive domain of the representer.”³ It was precisely this “arbitrariness”/ “void” between the representer (i.e., “the parties and their discourses”) and the represented (i.e., “the real existing classes”) that turned Louis Bonaparte - “a nobody except for being a nephew of Napoleon” - into Emperor representing all classes. Clearly discernible here is a collective desire

(beyond class interests) for an imaginary solution to the crisis of the representative system; an impossible yet necessary drive to fill “the unfillable void,” the “gap” between the representer and the represented.

It is worth remembering that “the hole that the representation or parliamentary system contains is the King, whom the very system has executed and banished.” Of crucial importance, then, is the fact that the representative system, which made Bonaparte the nobody Emperor, was realised by democratic universal suffrage. Having thus argued, Karatani warns us: “Hitler’s regime arose out of the Weimar Republic, from its ideal representative system. And though often ignored, the Japanese emperor-fascism of the 1930s was not the result of a military coup, but gradually consolidated after the realization of universal suffrage in 1927 and the crisis that followed.” Karatani’s “void,” reminiscent of the Lacanian “real” or “lack,” thus makes the modern/democratic system of representation at once possible *and* impossible, while producing a compelling drive for “the directness” of the representer (as signifier) in the manner of Freudian “repetition compulsion.” What matters in analysing fascism is, therefore, not “a mythos descended from ancient times, as advocated by some cultural anthropologist,” but “a lack immanent in the modern system of representation.”

The modern representative system, thus psychoanalytically re-defined, provides us with “a prototype or a matrix of fascism,” which is to say, “a form of Bonapartism.” Theoretically speaking, this term is comprehensive and flexible enough to explain even “what happened in the US in the 1930s” - the political phenomenon in which “Franklin D. Roosevelt, who got unconditional support from both left and right, all parties, all classes, and all ethnic groups, nullified the American convention of the two party system.” More significantly still (at least to the Japanese), Karatani’s argument is of great use in resisting the discourse of those Japanese revisionist historians who have recently tried to distinguish the politics in pre-war Japan from German fascism particularly on the ground that there was no “Holocaust” by the Emperor’s army. Rather “uncanny” here is the sense of *déjà vu* that Karatani makes us see among Japanese desirous for “the directness of referendum” in order to realise a strong political leadership, caused by their collective exasperation over the lingering recession since the 1990s. Without doubt, his psychoanalytic re-examining of “a universal model of fascism” reminds us of Freud’s famous definition of something “unheimlich” as “the return of the repressed.”

Needless to say, Marx’s text suggests that what produced Bonaparte the Emperor was not only the “void” of the modern representative system, but also the economic panic in 1851. To be more exact, it was due to the latter that the former - the structural “void” of parliamentary system - revealed itself in a scandalous manner that infuriated Marx, as, for example, Jeffrey Mehlman (1977: 14-41) has emphasised. Interestingly enough, Karatani attempts to analyse the capitalist economy also from the perspective of “the modern problematic of ‘representation’ par excellence,” namely, as “a system of representation in which crisis appears as financial panic.” Referring to Marx in *Capital*, he regards money as “the hole” of that system, or the “Being that is compelled by its eternal self-increasing drive, even beyond the will of its owner” - the “nothingness of Being,” as Sartre defined it. It is

this point of view, Karatani has repeatedly argued, that essentially differentiates Marx from those “classical and neo-classical economists” who failed to understand the meaning of this “perversion of Monetarism (Monetary System),” therefore seeing money as “just a measure of value or means of payment.” In the case of financial crises, money’s “brutal power of nothingness” exposes itself, making us “rush to grab” it as “a sublime fetish.” Here again I find his psychoanalytic analogy convincing: “money exists as unrepresentable, and people are forced to experience it as such at the times of panic that recur as repetition compulsion.”

Both politically and economically, Karatani’s “Freudian Marx” thus gives us an insight into “a universal model of fascism” as “the modern problematic of representation,” although, as he admits, the financial panic in 1851 (that made Bonaparte so scandalously popular) differs from “the larger scale crisis that recurs in approximately 60 year cycles, accompanying the structural transformation of capitalism-that of the 1870s, 1930s and 1990s” (what is called “Kondratieff’s Wave”). In other words, Marx’s texts thus psychoanalytically re-read allow us to observe “symptoms of what is repeated in the 1870s, the 1930s, and possibly in the 1990s” and, more uncannily, imagine “the as-yet-uncategorized situations that have been developing since 1990.” In each instance the modern systems of “representation,” politically and economically, disclose their inevitable crises, while necessarily producing an almost unanimous desire/drive for an imaginary solution to them.

3. The Politicising of Psychoanalysis as a “Philosophy of Representation”

Karatani’s criticism attends carefully to the two meanings of the word “representation,” political and philosophical, “which would have been clear to Marx, writing in German, but which English usage elides” - namely, *Vertretung* and *Darstellung* - in the same manner that, for example, Spivak does in her reading of *The 18th Brumaire* (see Landry 1996: 6). It is from this perspective that Karatani attempts to contextualise Heidegger’s “philosophical” privileging of “the ‘directness’ of referendum at the total expense of the representative system of parliament.” Karatani writes:

In the wider context, the difference between the congress and the president as representational forms corresponds to an epistemological question of representation: how can truth be represented. On the one hand is the Cartesian doctrine that says that truth can be deduced from a priori evidence. On the other hand is the Anglo-Saxon inclination that truth can exist just as a temporary hypothesis achieved on a case by case agreement between others. Seen politically, the former amounts to saying that the general will should be represented by Being, beyond contradictions between classes, while the latter suggests that the general will be achieved by agreement via discussion. For Heidegger, both are modern thoughts which are *content with represented truth*, and he criticizes them radically. Politically, he denied both president and parliament. For him, truth was something that should be directly presented as Being, either through the poet-philosopher or the Führer. (emphasis added)

Despite (or rather because of) the great philosopher's impatience with "represented truth," we have to regard the Heideggerian "revelation of truth, *aletheia*" - his unrepresented, immediate "truth" - as "nothing other than another form of representation, namely, an imaginary synthesis of the contradictorily splitting classes," "another form" of Bonapartism/fascism. Thus, the complicity between *Vertretung* and *Darstellung* in Heidegger is quite obvious. Here again Karatani's "deconstruction" is useful enough to subvert the politico-philosophical foundations of Heidegger's yearning for "aletheia" beyond representation: "everything happens within, and nothing happens without, the system of representation. Attempts to get out of it and to grasp the directness beyond mediation are by themselves already representation." (It is precisely in this context, I would add, that de Man's "Heidegger's Exegeses of Hölderlin" should be re-examined [de Man 1983: 246-66]). It is worth repeating here that fascism is nothing but a product of the modern system of "representation," in spite of or because of its compulsive desire to go beyond representation. When we reconsider the historical context in which Heidegger's philosophy/politics demonstrated a strong ideological affinity to that of Nazism, it is evident that Karatani's critique should not be seen as the post-structuralist cliché: the "closure of representation." Far from a-historical 'textual play', Karatani's reading of Heidegger no doubt functions as a highly effective strategy to reveal the recurring structure of fascism as "the repetition compulsion" in the modern politics of "representation."

Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, an elegant critic of psychoanalysis, remarks that "I don't want anything of, or from, psychoanalysis anymore," crying "Basta cosi!" (in Oakley 1997: 217). He also points out a set of theoretical limitations of psychoanalysis as "a philosophy of representation," claiming that "even if representation was always present, it wouldn't follow that there is nothing *but* representation" (224). Given the breezy optimism of the current "post-modern" usage of the term "representation," his deepening frustration with the "French Freud" is certainly quite understandable (although this does not mean that the intellectual attraction of his earlier work fades in any way). At the same time, however, I would stress a historical fact: there *have repetitively been* certain political situations that call for Karatani's radical politicising of psychoanalysis as "a philosophy of representation," historical contexts which make it crucial for us to openly declare: "there is nothing but representation" by way of a counter-discourse to defy the Bonapartist/fascist/essentialist assumption of something beyond representation.

Viewed from this perspective, Leo Bersani's reading of psychoanalysis - especially his celebration of "a certain type of failure in Freud's thought" (Bersani 1986: 3)- could acquire a new historical significance. What Bersani means by "a certain type of failure" is Freud's impossible struggle to represent the unrepresentable (*Trieb*, for instance) to the very extent of "the collapse of representation itself" (113). We have to remember here the political climate in which a new paradigm emerged in Freud's theorisation on *Trieb* in the 1920s and 30s. Put simply, any comparison between the Heideggerian intolerance and the Freudian endurance of the impasse of "representation" - "ever-renewed mediation"

(de Man 1983: 260)- would be sufficient to suggest the ethics/politics of the latter's "textual blockages and representational failures" (Bersani 1986:115) in representing the unrepresentable. Re-historicising the Freudian "masochistic" suffering of the impossibility of "representation" (to its own textual collapse) in the political context of a collective desire to grasp the directness of "the immediate givenness of Being" (de Man 1983: 256)- this, I would argue, is indeed one of the most urgent tasks of the historiography of psychoanalysis, at least in Japan.

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Endnotes

1. Almost all of Freud's and Lacan's texts are available in Japanese translation. However, many complain (rightly so) that the Japanese *Ecrits* is especially awful. But the Japanese Freud is not so good, either. Probably the most important analytic texts in Japan are Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*; Lacan's *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*; and Žižek's *Sublime Object of Ideology*.

2. Since Karatani's recent text is not available in English, I have cited from two English translations that capture his arguments, and are widely available on the web. They are "The Power of Repression and the Power of Foreclosure: Foucault and Lacan vis-à-vis Japan," archived at <http://www.karataniforum.org/fl.html>; and "Representation and Repetition: *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* Revisited," archived at <http://www.karataniforum.org/represent.html>. Please note that these web sites have no page numbers.

Karatani's other texts include, in Japanese, *Transcritique* (2001), *Researchers* (1985), *Language, Number, and Money* (1983), *Introspection and Retrospection* (1980), and *Marx: The Centre of His Possibilities* (1974). His texts in English are *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature* (1993), and *Architecture as Metaphor* (1995). For an accessible discussion of Kojin Karatani, see Sabu Kohso, "About the Karatani Forum" <http://www.karataniforum.org/about.html> and "Translator's Remarks" <http://www.karataniforum.org/sabu.html>. Karatani's sense of crisis is such that he has recently begun an activist movement called "NAM" (New Associationist Movement). Concerning this, see <http://www.nam21.org/english/>.

3. In this context, Karatani reads *The 18th Brumaire* as a theoretical precursor of Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, arguing that Marx focuses not only on "dream thought"- "the actual class relations based upon class interests" - but "dream work": "the process through which the class unconscious is compressed and transferred." Marx, indeed, describes a chain of events in his text "like a dream."