

Steffen Döll

## The Aesthetics and Limits of Metacriticism. Dorsey on Kobayashi Hideo

- James Dorsey, *Critical Aesthetics. Kobayashi Hideo, Modernity, and Wartime Japan*. Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Asia Center 2009. X, 283p. [EUR 34,99]. ISBN: 978-0-674-03284-2.

Kobayashi Hideo (1902-83)<sup>1</sup> is one of the most highly acclaimed, but also one of the most controversial figures in recent Japanese literary history. His acclaim, no doubt, is based on the originality of his writings in literary criticism. His controversiality, on the other hand, is due to the fact that Kobayashi, though commonly seen as a collaborator with Japan's ultranationalist regime, survived the postwar purge of the literary world almost unscathed. While this situation is the concern of a multitude of publications in Japanese, it seems astonishing that Dorsey's complex study is, as a matter of fact, the first original, commercially available book-length study of Kobayashi in English. As such, it makes accessible the thought and milieu of one of the protagonists in the discourse that shaped the course of Japan's modernity. *Critical Aesthetics* thus is of relevance beyond the narrow confines of Asian studies and will, no doubt, interest anyone working in the field of intellectual history.

So far, Kobayashi studies in English include – apart from several journal articles – a collection of Kobayashi's essays in English translation by Paul Anderer,<sup>2</sup> and Takamizawa Junko's *Ani Kobayashi Hideo* (1985) as translated by James Wada.<sup>3</sup> The earliest book-length study of Kobayashi in any western language was conducted by Matthew Königsberg,<sup>4</sup> whom Dorsey accordingly credits with »[b]reaking the mold for Kobayashi studies outside Japan« (15). Two years later, Ninomiya Masayuki published his *La pensée de Kobayashi Hideo* in French.<sup>5</sup> In 1996, Matsui Midori wrote a dissertation<sup>6</sup> that Dorsey in a footnote acknowledges as »particularly helpful to me in formulating my reading of Kobayashi's wartime essays« (233).

### Structure and Contents

*Critical Aesthetics*, on its part, comes in six chapters along with Prologue (1-6), Introduction (7-16), Epilogue (223-227), and Reference Matter (229-283) including Notes (231-260), an extensive bibliography (»Works Cited«, 261-275), and an Index (277-283).

The prologue introduces Frank Lentricchia's »shocking apostasy« (1) of 1996,<sup>7</sup> in which he renounced his readings of literature as illustration of the discourses of power, and Susan Sontag's »Against Interpretation« (1964). In both instances, publicly acclaimed literary critics turned their backs on interpretative efforts and began to favor an approach that refused to see the literary work as anything but art. Dorsey claims that, at the heart of Kobayashi's thought, we find »a very similar sort of metacritical intervention« (6), and it is to this issue that his study is dedicated.

The concept of metacriticism is of high importance for the picture Dorsey paints of Kobayashi who »waged his war against interpretation through a genre that is virtually synonymous with it: criticism« (7). He admits that to a thinker and public intellectual as active as Kobayashi there are a »myriad approaches« (15) and logically outlines the limits of his study: It focuses

on the first 20 years in Kobayashi's career as a critic, and in loose chronological order, the book's main chapters take us from Kobayashi's literary beginnings in the 1920s up to his wartime writings. Out of Kobayashi's vast oeuvre, Dorsey selects approximately a dozen of texts »in order to concentrate on the works of Kobayashi Hideo as an important intersection of aesthetics and ideology« (15-16). Although he does not elaborate on the methodology in use at great length, it soon becomes clear that Dorsey works on a textual basis that is carefully and thoroughly reflected, and as a historian of ideas in that he puts Kobayashi into context with his historical situation and the contemporary trends in literary criticism.

After a biographical sketch of Kobayashi Hideo, chapter 1, »An Endless Clutter of Things and Events« (17-47), explores the implications of the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923 for an epistemological shift in Japan's intelligentsia. The earthquake and the massive fires that ensued laid waste to the Tokyo area but altered more than its mere architectural paradigm: The destruction served to quicken the pace of Westernization and instill it even further in people's everyday lives. Technologies came to be readily available, and soon the whole city seemed animated as an organism unto itself. Old publishing houses within months came to be replaced with factories functioning on modern technologies in printing and distribution, thereby allowing for the cheap production of huge quantities of books (the so-called *enpon*, »one Yen books« [cf. 36]). Literature lost the elitist »aura« (36) it had during the Meiji (1868-1912) and early Taishō era (1912-1926), and in processes similar to the ones described in Walter Benjamin's »Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner mechanischen Reproduzierbarkeit« (1935) became – along with other cultural artifacts, even culture itself – a mere secular commodity.

The earthquake thus was the cause of a new, porous materiality that surrounded and engulfed man and threatened to devour his artistic endeavors. At the same time, it turned literature and culture in general into something that increasingly functioned within the realm of abstract automatons and ever-changing machinations, and was – just as these – analyzable and interpretable. To the mind of Kobayashi Hideo this was unacceptable. He was convinced, however, that memory could remedy these deficits of modernity: Therein, a time before the earthquake along with its old, stable materiality was preserved. There was, however, a grave problem: Due to his age, he himself had no such distinct memories (this is what is meant by the title of his 1933 essay »Literature That Has Lost Its Home«) and found himself in his chosen area of literature unable to create without »manufacturing [...] embellishments« (33), i.e. without fictionalizing literature. Thus, the restoration of literature to a state of intangibility and immunity to interpretation came to occupy the foremost position in Kobayashi's agenda: »Only that which remains unperturbed, resisting interpretation, is beautiful« (188).

Chapter 2, »Making Shiga Simple« (48-85), approaches the years after the earthquake from political and ideological angles. More precisely, it describes how Shiga Naoya (1883-1971), became the focal point of Kobayashi's hopes to »resurrect a subjectivity sufficiently confident to trust its intuition and bold enough to surrender itself to an uncompromised encounter with the beautiful« (49). In order to achieve this goal, Kobayashi had to re-establish the distance between the perceiving subject and the appreciated object, as the new, post-earthquake materiality had rendered the old, obvious demarcation void. Kobayashi credited Shiga with a »unassailable simplicity«, and he duplicated this impression in his critical work by portraying his idol's writings as art so utterly beyond interpretative approaches that they themselves turned to »impenetrable materiality«. Ironically, Kobayashi's reading of Shiga thus relied heavily on interpretative techniques – »[i]t had to be constructed« (ibid.).

Shiga belonged to a group of writers called the »Shirakaba group«. The intellectual climate of the Taishō era (1912-1926) – in many respects comparable to Germany's period of the Wei-

mar Republic (1918-1933) – that gave rise to the Shirakaba writers was essentially ambiguous: It was »progressive and cosmopolitan« on the one hand while being »politically apathetic and insular« (54) on the other. This is also mirrored in the Shirakaba personalities: Shiga and his peers were highly receptive towards foreign literatures and immensely egocentric at the same time. This allowed for a subjectivity of an »atomized individual« that faced its objects as materiality »beyond intellectual analysis« and related to these by »intuitive *appreciation*« (56, emphasis in the original). While this outlook on the world opened the Shirakaba group to criticisms of self-absorption and naiveté, it also permitted them to circumvent political instrumentation:

While Marxist critics and proletarian writers link the self to society through political ideology, Shiga (and Kobayashi himself) forge the link through aesthetic principles. In a Shōwa environment where the intimately human experience of fine art or literature *as fine art or literature* was slowly being eroded by commodification and a concomitant hyperactive intellect, this Shiga-esque subjectivity surely seemed not only viable but absolutely indispensable. (67, emphasis in the original)

It appears that Kobayashi had only been able to formulate such aesthetic principles only since the late 1920s, as Dorsey's quotes from »Shiga Naoya« (1929) and »Shiga Naoya ron« (1939) suggest.

The second part of the present chapter is dedicated to Kobayashi's early writings, »The Octopus's Suicide« (1922) and »One Brain« (1924) as expressions of »confusion and intense angst« (84) and of a disrupted psychological condition. Therein – much to the credit of his circumspect way of argumentation – Dorsey counterbalances the positivity in the chapter's first half with his conclusion that the early Kobayashi was »much closer in spirit to the emerging modernist movement than he was to the Shirakaba connoisseurs« (83).

Chapter 3, »Seeing Past Akutagawa« (86-124), delineates how Kobayashi developed his own position of a »literary aestheticism« (126) in dialogue with the writings of Akutagawa Ryūnosuke (1892-1927) and in opposition to this modernist writer's critical acclaim. Introducing Henri Bergson (1859-1941) and Nishida Kitarō (1870-1945) for theoretical background, Dorsey shows how Kobayashi dismissed Akutagawa on the grounds that his works lacked the »passion of the intellect« (107) that to »an analyst who has sincerely explored a changing reality« (109) necessarily manifested itself in the form of paradoxes. The paradoxes Akutagawa was concerned with, in contrast, arose from a convenient »disarticulation of reality« (116); they were »not a matter of intellectual passion [but] a twitching of his nerves« (110). Having re-established the distance between subject and object, the true paradox for Kobayashi comes into being quite naturally in the »holistic, largely involuntary act of seeing« (117). This insight provided Kobayashi with a methodology to consequently battle the methods of other literary criticisms: »As theoretical and critical methodologies had increasingly encroached on the world of fiction, the only recourse must have seemed to lie in bringing the intimately literary and poetic into the genre of criticism« (124).

Chapter 4, »The Inescapable ›Designs‹« (125-158), discusses Kobayashi's engagement in essays like his »Various Designs« (1929) with other critical methods as exemplified by the Marxist literary theories of Tosaka Jun (1900-1945). It was Marxism »that most aggressively pursued the disarticulation of cultural phenomena into its component parts and ideological motivations« (125). Under the motto of »literary aestheticism«, Kobayashi opposed what to him was a misappropriation of literature by politics and in turn posited literature as an expression »not apolitical but rather anti-political« (126). Especially, he despised the attitude according to which literature, like science, had to produce »instrumental« (129) or »deployable knowledge« (109, *et passim*). He did so by revealing the positivist claims to objectivity and

universality as »formalism and dogmatism – mere ›designs‹« (133), arriving at the claim that »ideology is more than a matter of abstract thought; it is a matter of one's entire existence« (135). Thus, Dorsey shows Kobayashi's aestheticism to have been a vibrant »critical praxis« that aimed at rescuing art out of artificiality and political exploitation into a state of its own right. While the rightist purges of literary activists in the early 1930s led to the »conversion« (152) of many a Marxist writer to more compliant forms of criticism, Kobayashi stubbornly stuck to his program »without succumbing entirely to the fascistic totalism« (124).

Chapter 5, »A Nation and History of One« (159-195), investigates why – or more precisely: where – Kobayashi succeeded in keeping his distance from the ultranationalist discourse that came to dominate intellectual life during the 1930s: »Kobayashi's thoroughly literary orientation did indeed prompt him to resist the temptation to pursue the simplistic manipulations of history and reductive notions of cultural identity that buttressed Japan's military endeavors« (160). Dorsey introduces two main models that were applied in the definition of Japan's culture and role in the modern world: He shows Pan-Asianism to be largely indebted to Western Universalism, while the Romantic School lapsed into a constructed but stale historicism. Kobayashi, in contrast and in a critical move much like the one he employed when discussing Shiga Naoya, went to great lengths to turn history along with the nation into »stuff« (171 and 180), i.e. immutable materiality.

Dorsey singles out the essay »The Fact of Evanescence« (1942) with its »hauntingly beautiful paeans« (11) for illustration. In this essay Kobayashi relates how, while »wandering aimlessly« (185) along some mountain path, a piece of classical Japanese literature (a Buddhist text dealing with impermanence called *Ichigon hōdanshō*<sup>8</sup>) came to his mind. The exceptional beauty of the literary piece struck him quite suddenly and is he presented not in terms of his reading the words of the passage, but his visually perceiving the text as if he was »following the course of the slender but strong lines of an old picture« (186). However, this sort of mystical communion with a time before the machinations of modernity lasts but a fleeting moment, and Kobayashi is unable to reactivate the experience:

But the beauty that so moved me – where has it gone? Perhaps it has not disappeared but remains right before my eyes. Perhaps it is that particular state of body and mind appropriate for grasping it that has disappeared, and I know not the technique to regain it. (187)

Dorsey characterizes Kobayashi's approach to Japanese classical literature as one of embodiment that is, in a way, »a form of spirit-possession« (188). In that it resolutely and consequently resists any and all interpretation of the artifact in question, however, this does not mean that the past comes alive in the present, but that its aesthetic experience is »the recognition and lamentation of the pastness of the past« (190).

An instance in which Kobayashi sees his convictions about aesthetic perception proven is the case of the masks worn by main actors in *nō* theater: They hide the facial expressions of the mime behind an unchanging countenance and thus preclude anything that could incite interpretation. The audience's view, in Dorsey's words, slides on »the impenetrable surface of the mask« which in its sheer materiality »takes priority over the language that emits from behind it« (194). Dorsey concludes: His mature writings show »Kobayashi not calling for a vibrant literary praxis, but instead practicing it« (195).

In the sixth and final chapter, »The People Cope in Silence« (196-222), Dorsey starts off by emphasizing that Kobayashi's works of the period during the war »represented neither a conversion from a liberal to a reactionary stance, nor a contribution to the discourse of national identity spurring on Japan's imperialist agenda on the continent« (196), i.e. mainland China.

Nonetheless, the following pages are devoted to show how Kobayashi's aesthetic vision »leads him [...] to impulsively condone the existing state of military aggression and violence« (197). Both Kobayashi's earlier call for a radically individual aestheticism and his »heartless, unconditional support of oppression and brutality«, Dorsey insists, »are fully consistent with his earlier writings on literature and philosophy« (198).

The diaries Kobayashi wrote during his trips to war-torn China are impressive examples of an equally inherent and unconscious ambivalence. While he found himself moved to tears by young Japanese recruits' »energy that does not recognize adversity as adversity« (204) and innocence, the Chinese people could expect no such empathy: They were reduced to lifeless stereotypes, inhuman caricatures, or mere parts of the landscape. Surprisingly, Kobayashi does seem – to a certain degree – to have realized this contradiction and broached it at least implicitly: »He attributed his lack of empathy to a perceived failure of Chinese literature to create fictional characters through which he could appreciate the real-world Chinese.« (209) Quite deliberately and conveniently, he thus limited his aesthetics to arbitrarily chosen areas of personal experiences and preferences.

On the Japanese archipelago, on the other hand, Kobayashi was one of the main participants in the infamous 1942 discussions on »Overcoming Modernity« (Dorsey translates »Overcoming the Modern«) that among other leading intellectuals also featured Nishitani Keiji (1900-1990). In contrast to Nishitani's and others' attempts at logical justification of Japan's imperialist efforts, Kobayashi – in keeping with his aesthetic vision discussed above – refused to rationalize the war. To him, it was »a unique historical contingency« (213); something so utterly new that it was impossible to interpret analytically but only appreciate aesthetically.

In his epilogue, »Literary Aestheticism in the Postwar World« (223-227), Dorsey introduces one more essay by Kobayashi on a newspaper photograph showing burning warships after the bombing of the US fleet at Pearl Harbor. Once more, he shows how Kobayashi's rhetoric serves to distance the reader from the scene and thus precludes him to engage in interpretation. Instead, he »pulls us up high over the ships ablaze, preventing us from pulling them close and noticing the carnage below.« (225) From this bird's eye view, »the burning ships and the dying sailors are no more important than the sun and the ocean and the waves« (226); they turn into objects of aesthetic appreciation beyond the artificialities of morality.

## Commentary and Conclusion

Dorsey's study convincingly portrays Kobayashi, his historical situation, the intricacies of his thought and work, and – most important – the relations between these aspects. It is based on careful research, presents a balanced view, employs nuanced arguments, is powerfully written, and above all highly thought-provoking. In this regard, especially the first and the last chapters stand out as truly innovative approaches to modern Japanese literary history.

It is not, however, an easy book in that it requires an attentive reader familiar with the literary, philosophical and sociopolitical developments of the 20th century. There are also some small deficits that might be addressed: *Critical Aesthetics* is not without redundancies, especially in the parts that are narrated chronologically (e.g. the first half of chapter 1). Then again, there are some translations that might be challenged by Japanologists for lacking philological rigor.<sup>9</sup> Also from a Japanological point of view, the inclusion of Japanese characters in the body of the text – or, at least, of a glossary in the »Reference Matter« – would be highly desirable: The romanized transliterations of Japanese terms are of no interest at all to non-

Japanese speakers, and they are insufficient for the needs of the scholar of Japanese studies.<sup>10</sup> And while I am no specialist for Bergson or Descartes and therefore find it hard to evaluate Dorsey's sources there, I am sure I would have wished for the inclusion of some of the newer studies on Kyoto school philosophy.<sup>11</sup> These might have led to a less simplistic view of, for example, Nishitani's thought – problematic though it undoubtedly is.

Apart from these few issues with Dorsey's otherwise excellent study, there are two things I would like to call attention to. Both of them, to be fair, move beyond what *Critical Aesthetics* actually sets out to do and thus should rather be seen as suggestions for subsequent explorations.

First, there is the general question in relation to Dorsey's approach and frame of reference: Where does he venture beyond what has already been addressed? Or, to put it more precisely: Königsberg's 1995 study covers the same period in Kobayashi's work, though maybe not nearly in as much detail. Some remarks on how Dorsey's approach differs from what Königsberg had done would be helpful for most readers – especially since the older German publication is not exactly easy to track down. The 1996 French language study by Ninomiya Masayuki, on the other hand, is concerned mainly with the years between 1942 and 1948, and although it is listed in »Works Cited«, it consistently fails to turn up in Dorsey's references. This is unfortunate, since Ninomiya's work seems to me to connect unusually well to the later parts of *Critical Aesthetics* in terms of chronology, but also in such key issues as Kobayashi's attitude towards modernity and history. Therefore, even if we combine these three major studies, we are left with a portrait of Kobayashi that is exclusively based on his early to middle periods. Accordingly, when Dorsey touches upon the issue of Kobayashi's »quick re-emergence« in the years immediately after the war, we are left wondering how exactly he remained unaffected by all efforts to stigmatize him as a collaborator with the ultranationalist regime and was able to continue his work through the next three decades. In his review of Ninomiya, Roy Starrs had called for a »follow-up volume on Kobayashi's later career«,<sup>12</sup> and so far, this challenge remains unanswered. We can only hope that Dorsey will continue and broaden his exceptional work on Kobayashi.

The second issue pertains to the concepts of critique and criticism that Dorsey employs. The title of his study as well as his overall line of argumentation suggests that criticism is the main concern in all of Kobayashi's thought and writing. He shows this criticism to be, however, of metacritical nature: Kobayashi exploits criticism in order to render criticism itself powerless *vis-à-vis* the immutable materiality of the cultural artifact. Dorsey analyzes Kobayashi's strategy into three parts, and he does so very early on in the book: First, the distance between subject and object that had collapsed when modern materiality irrupted is reestablished; second, the object is solidified thereby preventing the subject from analytical disarticulation; third, the subject is urged into an aesthetic appreciation of the object as object. This critical mechanism is then applied to different aspects of Kobayashi's art with hardly any modification. This leads to the characterization: »Kobayashi is not so much a critic as a prose poet« (12). If that is the case, the question arises: Are Kobayashi's aesthetics actually critical? Is his criticism?

Dorsey has convincingly shown the limits of Kobayashi's criticism but somehow seems to have shied away from taking the next step: He does not attempt to ask the seminal question of responsibility, and in consequence refuses to take position on whether Kobayashi's thoughts and words were justifiable, let alone legitimate. As such, Dorsey's work remains largely descriptive in tone and is itself perhaps less critical than it could have been. From a thoroughly critical perspective one might have wished for *Critical Aesthetics* to be at times less aesthetic and more critical.

However, scattered throughout the volume are comments in which Dorsey does display just such a truly critical attitude. These passages prove most illuminating – above all the last paragraph of the book:

A genuinely literary man, Kobayashi had resisted the temptations to pen formulaic propaganda to fuel the war effort. A genuinely literary man, Kobayashi had written some of the most moving words on, and convincing arguments for, the carnage and oppression. (227)

May we claim that, in a way, this echoes rhetorics typical for Kobayashi?

In summary, Dorsey's study is a comprehensive, well-written, thoughtful account of the first 20 years of Kobayashi Hideo as a literary critic. The density of the book's prose and its intellectual challenges necessitate prolonged and intensive study. Scholars not only of Japanese and East Asian studies, but also of the history of philosophy, literature, and sociopolitics in general will undoubtedly find it a fine contribution to their respective fields. It significantly furthers our understanding of Kobayashi as the »dean of Japanese letters«, but more importantly also of the intellectual developments of the early 20th century.

Dr. Steffen Döll

Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich  
Japan Center

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Here as in the following instances, Japanese names are given in the traditional order, i.e. family name followed by first name.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Anderer, *Literature of the Lost Home. Kobayashi Hideo, Literary Criticism, 1924-1939*, Stanford 1995.

<sup>3</sup> Takamizawa Junko, *My brother Kobayashi Hideo*, ed. Kenneth Pyle, transl. James Wada, Sydney 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew Königsberg, *Der junge Kobayashi Hideo. Leben und Werk eines japanischen Literaturkritikers der Moderne*, Hamburg 1993.

<sup>5</sup> Ninomiya Masayuki, *La pensée de Kobayashi Hideo. Un intellectuel Japonais au tournant de l'histoire*, Geneva/Paris 1995.

<sup>6</sup> Matsui Midori, *Beyond the Failure of Modernism: Contradictions in the Poetics and Politics of T. S. Eliot and Kobayashi Hideo*, Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University 1996.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Frank Lentricchia, Last Will and Testament of an Ex-Literary Critic, *Lingua Franca* 6:6 (1996), 59-67.

<sup>8</sup> Late 13th/early 14th century; literally, »Selections from fragrant discussions in few words«, but Dorsey translates »Brief Sayings of the Great Teachers« without further comment.

<sup>9</sup> The above-mentioned 1942 essay's title »Mujō to iu koto«, for example, is given as »The Fact of Evanescence«. This could be seen as an over-interpretation, as a simple »On Evanescence« probably would do the original equal justice and sound somewhat less pretentious. Similarly, *bungaku shugi* would be sufficiently translated as »literary orientation«. In this instance, however, things are different as Dorsey constructs his whole view of Kobayashi and his work around the central concept of »literary aestheticism«. An actually misleading translation for Aono Suekichi's »Shirabeta« *geijutsu*« (1925) is Dorsey's »Investigative« Art« (129): The Japanese original implies an art that is itself investigated or based on investigation, not one that actively investigates some kind of object.

<sup>10</sup> The only instance of Japanese characters making an appearance in *Critical Aesthetics* is in note 106 (248) on different ways of writing the verb *miru*, »to see«. This lack of the original script is, of course, a general problem in Asian studies publications and may have less to do with the actual author/editor of a respective volume than with the publisher's responsibilities.

<sup>11</sup> Cf., above all, the collection of essays in *Re-Politicising the Kyoto School as Philosophy*, ed. Christopher Goto-Jones, New York/London 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Roy Starrs, review of *La pensée de Kobayashi Hideo: Un intellectuel japonais au tournant de l'histoire* by Ninomiya Masayuki, *Monumenta Nipponica* 50:4 (1995), 555.

2010-12-06

JLTONline ISSN 1862-8990

**Copyright** © by the author. All rights reserved.

This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and JLTONline.

For other permission, please contact [JLTONline](#).

**How to cite this item:**

Steffen Döll, The Aesthetics and Limits of Metacriticism. Dorsey on Kobayashi Hideo. (Review of: James Dorsey, *Critical Aesthetics. Kobayashi Hideo, Modernity, and Wartime Japan*. Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Asia Center 2009.)

In: JLTONline (06.12.2010)

Persistent Identifier: urn:nbn:de:0222-001414

Link: <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0222-001414>