



# Monstrosity as Emancipation in the Cinema and Theatre of Shūji Terayama

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In many respects, Shūji Terayama was somewhat of an outcast, a freakish presence in the Japanese ‘angura’ (underground) theatre scene during the 60s and the 70s. While his mastery of poetry made him one of the most beloved Japanese poets of his time, his subsequent abandonment of ‘tanka’ poetry and dedication to experimental theatre, with his circus-like ‘Tenjo Sajiki’<sup>1</sup> theatre troupe, and to film, made him controversial in many ways. And even today some of his legacy is disputed, such as his reliance on the threatening, downright monstrous, female stereotype. Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei, probably the greatest expert on Terayama outside of his home country, attributes this to the misogynistic attitudes of the traditional Japanese art and culture.<sup>2</sup> In his defence, she relates such imagery to the postmodern nature of his work, which she links directly to the mechanisms of the carnivalesque aesthetics, as introduced by Mikhail Bakhtin.<sup>3</sup> While such defence is sincere, in further text we will see that it isn't adequate.

<sup>1</sup> Which translates to “children of paradise” after Marcel Carné’s film of the same name.

<sup>2</sup> See Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei: “Deadly Love: Mothers, Whores, and Other Demonic Females in Japanese Theatre”, in: *Contemporary Theatre Review*. Vol. 1. Issue 2, London: Routledge 1994, p. 77–84.

<sup>3</sup> See Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei: *Unspeakable Acts: The Avant-garde Theatre of Terayama Shūji and Postwar Japan*, Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press 2005, p. 168–169.

This text will hypothesise that such supposedly misogynistic imagery was actually one of the most potent feminist formulations in all of his oeuvre, and that the archetype of a circus freak, both literal and metaphorical, was an important model of liberation and social emancipation in Terayama's art.

The construct of a demonic, freakish, bizarre circus image of a woman, almost always central to his film and theatre, has to be approached through the lens of a wider interest of all of Terayama's oeuvre, namely the imagery of flamboyance, circus and carnival. Despite its significance within the conservative Japanese tradition, his depiction of monstrosity was in fact a platform for discussing the ideas of feminist emancipation because Terayama's outlook was politically radical. It resulted in the stereotype of female monstrosity being appropriated by that radicalism and through a mixture of the popular culture and tradition turned into emancipation. Although Terayama cited Federico Fellini as one of his influences,<sup>4</sup> the carnivalesque of Terayama is in many respects very different from the one of Fellini and in opposition to what Bakhtin had in mind.

### Carnavalesque-grotesque body dichotomy

In order to understand these differences, we need to examine the deficiency of Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas of carnivalesque and its natural supplement, a grotesque body. According to Bakhtin, a carnival, in which social hierarchies are profaned and overturned, is a social institution (with an equivalent being a literary device) and serves as a means of cultural and political change.<sup>5</sup> But the cynical irony of a carnival, its bizarre humour, its laughing at the official rituals, at the normative and socially accepted, through excesses and chaos doesn't necessarily have to be anti-ideological. In fact, Slavoj Žižek's assessment concerning this matter is that such ironic distance is what serves the ideology of 'normalcy'. In his own words: "An ideological identification exerts a true hold on us precisely when we maintain an awareness that we are not fully identical to it, that there is a rich human person beneath it."<sup>6</sup> Grotesque, circuslike representations of social mores, of power structures, are therefore not necessarily a progressive force in art.

Films of Emir Kusturica, who can be considered an heir of Fellini, for example, are rich with carnivalesque poetic, but also with a kind of an apolitical reactionary

<sup>4</sup> See Sorgenfrei: *Unspeakable Acts*, p. 94.

<sup>5</sup> See Mikhail Bakhtin: "Rabelais and His World", Diss. Gorki Institute of World Literature Moscow 1946, p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> Slavoj Žižek: *The Plague of Fantasies*, London: Verso 1997, p. 20–21.

nihilism. Ideologically, they are as far from emancipatory and transformational as they can get. A case in point is the embrace of the stereotypical and racist depiction of Roma and other people of the Balkans in most of his films, especially the Milošević regime apology<sup>7</sup> in films such as *Underground* (1995).<sup>8</sup> These examples show us that carnivalesque, which – rendered in Lacanian terms – Žižek identifies as ‘jouissance’,<sup>9</sup> stands for politically unengaged, reactionary and conservative, in the sense that the entire society is presented as fallible and grotesque. Hence, there is no point in doing anything else but embracing the societal bitter-sweet ugliness and more conveniently, the system's corruption – which is precisely how Kusturica's art was implemented into the authoritarian politics of the 1990s Yugoslavia.

But in the case of Terayama, who also used carnivalesque imagery, we note an anti-ideological criticism, especially evident in the carnival-grotesque body dichotomy. In other words, contrary to Bakhtin, Terayama puts carnivalesque and grotesque body in opposition to one another. In his play *Our Age Comes Riding on a Circus Elephant* (1969), Terayama links carnivalesque with capitalistic excesses of the United States during the Vietnam War. It presents caricatured segments of American popular culture literally as a circus act. Another famous example of him attacking the notion of carnivalesque is found in his highly controversial film, *Emperor Tomato Ketchup* (1971), in which he links the excessive capitalist-consumerist indulgence, represented by an infantilistic child rebellion, with the reactionary patriarchy of the revived Japanese post-imperial nationalism (targeting the support such political movements were getting from the US in the 60s and 70s).<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, grotesque body in Terayama's art always serves as a progressive force. In order to confront the reactionary power of the carnival, the grotesque body needs to be aggressive, which automatically distinguishes it from the grotesque of Bakhtin.

<sup>7</sup> As noted by many critics (including Slavoj Žižek, Bernard-Henri Lévy, Alain Finkielkraut, Aleksandar Hemon and others) the film downplayed the atrocities by presenting the people of the Balkans as collectively savage (racism) and showing the war as a natural state for them (which was obviously convenient to the regime which waged the war, hence Milosevic regime propaganda). Žižek sees *Underground* as an example of reactionary carnivalesque. See *ibid.*, p. 60–64.

<sup>8</sup> See *Podzemlje*, D: Emir Kusturica, YU/FR 1995.

<sup>9</sup> Žižek: *The Plague of Fantasies*, p. 57.

<sup>10</sup> See *Tomato Kecchappu Kôtei*, D: Shūji Terayama, JP 1971.

### The Mother as a Circus Freak / Another Female Personality

Terayama's most famous film, *Pastoral: To Die in the Country* (1974), by many regarded as highly autobiographical, presents us with a quintessential example of how carnivalesque-grotesque body dichotomy works. The life of a village in the impoverished Aomori prefecture, as seen through the eyes of an adolescent boy, is ruled by a dichotomy of the separation of the village itself (with its mysterious spirituality and mountain shrines) on one hand, and a simple travelling circus at the outskirts on the other. That the meddling mobs of villagers and their colourful religious processions are linked to carnivalesque is emphasised by the fact that all of them, including the boy protagonist, wear carnival paint on their faces.<sup>11</sup> The imagery of the circus in *Pastoral*, however, is sensual and erotic, not in a symbolic or caricatured, but in an explicit and grotesque way.



Picture: *Pastoral* 1h25m0s sinister mother character played by a male actor.

<sup>11</sup> See *Den-en ni shisu*, D: Shūji Terayama, JP 1974.

The boy's first exposure to the travelling circus is a shocking, although non-traumatic, event. Behind the circus tent the boy witnesses a sex-orgy, which shocks him to the extent that he quickly runs back home. On his next visit to the circus he meets a 'fat lady', who is actually a woman in an inflatable costume. In order for the lady's grotesque body to get inflated, the costume needs to be pumped up by another person, which in effect results in the woman's sexual arousal. Needless to say, the boy readily gives a hand, and this seems to be his first introduction to female sexuality.

A similar, but semantically opposite image of female sexuality is found in films of Federico Fellini. In many of them there is an episode of the protagonist boy's first encounter with sexuality through a contact with sexual, fertile and sometimes corpulent women. In *Amarcord* (1973), there are several such figures. In one episode the boy's face gets pressed against the enormous breasts of a corpulent lady who is teasing him. But that is as far as it gets.<sup>12</sup>

Far from being controversial, such constructs of female sexuality in Fellini's films have something cosy, nonthreatening, and motherly about them. The central premise of *Amarcord*, which, like *Pastoral*, is set in a small conservative town, is in part dealing with the 16-year-old boy's fascination with Gradisca, a local woman who embodies stereotypical female mystique and is regarded as immoral by the community. In the end, the threatening sexuality of Gradisca, and by implication all female sexuality, especially in the context of being a danger to an innocent boy, is deconstructed and reshaped as maternal and benevolent: Gradisca finds happiness in a marriage to a local carabinieri, and her seductive sexuality is simply seen as a distorted way an adolescent interprets what are essentially attributes of one's future wife and mother.

In contrast to Fellini, Terayama presents female sexuality as anything but motherly and mothers as anything but good and nonthreatening. In fact, Terayama was infamous for not only presenting most of his mother characters as domineering and evil, but often monstrous, physically grotesque circus freaks, which is one of the main reasons why such images are sometimes contested by Terayama's critics as misogynistic. In public he also preached that parents in general and mothers in particular are obsolete.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> See *Amarcord*, D: Federico Fellini, IT/FR 1973.

<sup>13</sup> See Sorgenfrei, *Unspeakable Acts*, p. 34.

## The Transformed Mother

The basic ‘demonisation’ strategy employed by Terayama is the masculination of mother characters. Often, he cast sinister looking male actors in mother roles.

We cannot avoid alluding to the fact that Terayama had a very complicated relationship with his own psychologically disturbed mother, who was asserting control over his life until his untimely death in 1983, when he was only 46 years old. In fact, in spite of the negativity of mother characters in all of his work, his life was marked by a more than strong devotion to his mother. And while his calls for young people to abandon their parents resulted in many of them actually doing it and some even arriving at his doorstep and joining his theatre troupe Tenjo Sajiki, his own mother was deeply involved in all his decisions and at some point caused the end of his marriage by an alleged attempted murder of him and his newly wedded wife.<sup>14</sup> Even so, their closeness didn’t stop and grew even more. And it is a paradox that is baffling to this day, and not many were able to give a satisfying explanation for it. The answer is potentially non-trivial, because Terayama advocated the blurring of boundaries between life and art, he even adopted some of the Tenjo Sajiki members as his siblings and put his mother directly at the centre of some of his art projects.

Sorgenfrei invokes psychoanalysis and suggests that he was maybe suffering from the Japanese mother-centered form of Oedipus Complex, called ‘Ajase’.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, there are many indications that support this argument, including the abandonment by his mother when he was just a boy and later reconciliation during his early adulthood.

Rei Sadakari, who unlike Sorgenfrei, tries to seriously contest the claims of Terayama’s misogyny, presents a different picture which is not dependent on psychoanalytical reading. For that purpose, she identifies two classes of female characters in Terayama’s work: a ‘fatherless girl’ and a ‘domineering mother’.<sup>16</sup>

A fatherless girl in Terayama’s work is therefore a woman who is not yet a mother. She is ‘fatherless’, because she lives in freedom from male domination, which goes hand in hand with marriage and motherhood. Figuratively speaking, the moment her status changes, she subsequently transforms into an evil domin-

<sup>14</sup> See Sorgenfrei, *Unspeakable Acts*, p. 41.

<sup>15</sup> Sorgenfrei, *Unspeakable Acts*, p. 61–62.

<sup>16</sup> See Rei Sadakari: “Fatherless Girl and Domineering Mother: Terayama Shūji’s Portrayal of Women”, Dipl. University of Hawai’i Honolulu 2004, p. 5.

earing mother. What Sadakari does not identify, however, is the transformed mother, a reawakened, resurrected fatherless girl. As we shall see, such transformation is crucial to a large part of Terayama's work and invaluable in solving the paradox of his relationship with his mother.

Transformation of a mother character happens on many occasions in several of Terayama's works. In *Pastoral*, there is an episode about a woman who gives birth to an illegitimate child, to the scorn of the entire village. She is forced by the village to drown her own child, which eventually drives her crazy. After returning to Aomori, months later, she is a different, sexually liberated and significantly transformed woman. And unlike Fellini's sexual yet benevolent motherly women, her teasing sexuality is anything but nonthreatening. At some point she seduces and violently rapes the protagonist boy inside of a temple.

Another instance of the transformation of a mother is presented in the play *Hunchback of Aomori* (1967). In it we are confronted with two instances of 'freakishness'. One being Matsu, a vengeful mother, and the other being her hunchback son, Taishō, a 'freak of nature' born as a result of rape, with whom she reunites after 30 years. This is where Terayama deals with the sensuality of a grotesque body most directly. In one scene Matsu orders the servants to massage Taishō's hump, which in turn causes sexual arousal. Later it is reported that she had incestuous sex with him at the same place where she was raped as a young girl, and we find out that Taishō's hump was a result of her cursing him before he was born. This rejection of motherhood by performing an act of incest is what helps her overpower the patriarchal oppression of the family, where she was working as a servant when her master raped her and forced her to abandon the child. Like in *Pastoral*, we have a drama played out as a confrontation between the carnivalesque and the grotesque, between the corrupt society and an individual.

Maybe the most obvious realisation of the idea of a violent femininity being directly linked to feminism is in Terayama's short film *Laura* (1974). The film shows a stage act where three aggressive, sexually intimidating female 'predators', literally exhibited like circus animals, are shouting at the cinema audience. They mock a certain kind of sexually explicit art cinema, which objectifies women and, in their words, only serves the perverts who sit at the back seats and watch these films just for the female nudity. In a diegetic interruption, the women grab one young man, who they accuse of being such a kind of pervert, strip him naked and violently rape

him. These women are assertive, active, sexual and anything but timid or motherly. Their monstrous transformation serves their emancipation in a most direct way.<sup>17</sup>



Picture: Laura 0h0m50s aggressive female sexuality.

But the truest transformation of a mother character takes place in *Poison Boy* (1968), which of all Terayama's plays is the most ignored, misrepresented and readily dismissed by Sorgenfrei,<sup>18</sup> even though it presents the essence of Terayama's mother complex.

In that musical play developed by Terayama and a famous feminist playwright, Rio Kishida, the mother character is a sinister circus attraction, a 'snake-woman', who marries a widower after seducing him with her hypnotic yet terrifying sideshow number. The woman brings a son with her and subsequently schemes against her husband's own son in order to make her son the sole inheritor. The husband's son is convinced that his stepmother possesses mysterious powers of

<sup>17</sup> See *Laura*, D: Shūji Terayama, JP 1974.

<sup>18</sup> See Sorgenfrei, *Unspeakable Acts*, p. 151.

transformation. He believes that she and his female teacher are one and the same person. At the same time, she becomes an object of his secret desire. She has an incestuous desire for him as well, but it is conflicted with her objectives of replacing the boy with her own son. Eventually, she blinds and 'poisons' him with leprosy, after which he is forced to leave home. Years later, the boy returns home and tries to infect the woman's son, as a revenge for what she did to him. Instead, he is confronted with the woman herself, which does not only end in reconciliation and the admittance of her love for him, but also in a wild sexual embrace between the boy and his stepmother. By sexually embracing her stepson, even though her maternal instinct should dictate that she takes side of her own son, and by committing an act of incest, the snake-woman rejects her role as a mother, the sole thing which was the driving force behind her ruthlessness. Her road of liberation, from a carnivalesque sideshow mother to a liberated woman, would not be possible without her ruthlessly grotesque nature, exemplified by her incestuous desire for her stepson.

That this transformation from motherhood to empowering self-realisation can have other forms and social significance is testified by one of the most famous plays by Terayama, *La Marie-vision* (1967). The central character of the play is Marie, a vain transvestite who keeps his adopted son, Kin'ya, in a closely controlled space, isolated from the outside world. At the same time, Marie is in the company of beautiful sailors and engages in beauty treatments.

During the play we learn about his grudge with Katsuko, the boy's mother, who was a young waitress in the inn where he was growing up as a feminine boy, dreaming of one day becoming a woman. Jealous of his beauty, Katsuko sneaked into Marie's bed and started sexually stimulating him, only to in the next moment alarm everyone in the house and point to Marie's observable erection, while making a point that he is a freak who will never be a woman. Marie's revenge is cruel. He hires a man to rape Katsuko. After she becomes pregnant, she dies while giving birth to Kin'ya. But Marie's revenge is not complete before fulfilling his stated intention of turning Kin'ya into a gay boy as well.

Sorgenfrei surprisingly denies that *La Marie-vision* has anything specific to say about homosexuality,<sup>19</sup> even though in one instance Marie gives a beautifully poetic defence of his 'unnaturalness' by saying that, whenever a man plants a seed in the ground, he performs an unnatural act as well. The most controversial idea presented in the play is perhaps that a gay boy, in a proto-female (therefore norm-

<sup>19</sup> See Sorgenfrei, *Unspeakable Acts*, p. 93.

atively unnatural freakish and grotesque) body, is able to, at least briefly, enjoy heterosexual sex and that his insistence on becoming a girl and being gay is therefore not caused by genetic predestination, but by his resolved choice. But this is just another instance of Terayama's uncompromising social radicalism. To him, homosexuality and other metaphorical 'freakishness' have to be instrumentalized as a means of emancipation, not merely as benevolent disorders. Like feminism, homosexuality, too, has to become dangerous in order to be transformative. And Marie's subsequent attempt to turn Kin'ya into a gay boy by trying to seduce him with another boy, disguised as a girl, is part of this radicalism. Queer sexual and social liberation is for Terayama clearly not possible through its 'normalisation', which in turn amounts to appropriation into the social system's corruption (note the phenomena such as homonationalism, as described by Jasbir Puar<sup>20</sup>). Similarly, in regards to a feminist identity, in choosing between a 'mother-goddess' and (what Žižek calls) the "traumatic-subversive-creative-explosive power of feminine subjectivity",<sup>21</sup> Terayama picks the latter.

Terayama's other perceived obstacle seems to be territoriality. He even developed an Antonin Artaud-influenced theatre theory, much criticised in some Walter Benjamin-centered European theatre circles, which claims that a touch between the audience and the actors, even a violent one, results in not only a destruction of the classical illiberal 'dispositiv theater', but also in a destruction of social hierarchies. He believed that there should not be a separation between art and reality and that art should not be merely performative, but engage in changing the reality.<sup>22</sup>

## Grotesque Deterritorialisation

By interpreting Terayama we find that this radical deterritorialisation of body and space, is the product of a clash between the corruption of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque (standing for camouflaged global capitalism) and the actualisation of the individual's grotesque body (in the form of a rape in a temple, bloodshed in a theatre, incest instead of motherhood and stubborn homosexual transformation).

<sup>20</sup> See Jasbir Puar: *Terrorist Assemblages. Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Durham: Duke University Press 2007, p. 2.

<sup>21</sup> Slavoj Žižek: "The Antinomies of Tolerant Reason", from: *lacan dot com*, <http://www.lacan.com/zizarchives.htm> (05.05.2011).

<sup>22</sup> See Sorgenfrei, *Unspeakable Acts*, p. 262–314.

Such reaction is basically a revolution without stated objectives, a deterritorialisation without reterritorialisation.

The use of the term 'deterritorialisation' might seem paradoxical in this instance, because it is sometimes related to capitalist permissiveness, therefore in some sense to the carnivalesque itself. Unlike the carnivalesque, however, which is performative and symbolic, this grotesque deterritorialisation is active, visceral and part of the Lacanian Real. Accordingly, grotesque body in Terayama's art is a means of Deleuzian 'becoming', of transcending the context of the ruling conditions,<sup>23</sup> which is the basis for a true emancipation.

To put it another way, the grotesque is simply a guarantee (put on constant alert) against suffocation in the system's inherent corruption. In a true Deleuzian sense, this deterritorialisation is not a solution but a way to sideline the territory as a problem in the first place.<sup>24</sup>

Reconsidering the grotesque circuslike femininity as emancipation begs a conclusion that Terayama's devoted stance towards his own mother was actually in line with what he preached. Sadakari, after analysing some statements and a series of semi-erotic photos he made, featuring his mother, points out that Terayama might have even been open to the idea of incest.<sup>25</sup> But in any case, he might have seen his mother as victim of the patriarchal society of post-war Japan. According to Sorgenfrei, after Terayama's father died in the war, he and his mother survived the deadly firebombing of Aomori. When the war ended, his mother left him with his uncle. Without any support, like many Japanese women, she went to work at American military bases (possibly as a prostitute) in order to support him. Of course, she wasn't able to take the boy with her because of the shame – this was unknown to him at the time, and resulted in his extreme hatred for his mother.<sup>26</sup>

After they reunited when he was 18, however, they reconciled and their relation grew even stronger. Her later excesses, dominance over her son, like the dominance exerted by the freakish women of Terayama's art, might have been understood by him as her transformation, her emancipatory rejection of the role and the circumstances which made her compromise her dignity in surroundings

<sup>23</sup> See Slavoj Žižek: "Becoming vs. History", from: *lacan dot com*, <http://www.lacan.com/zizcatpower.html> (10.05.2011).

<sup>24</sup> See Gilles Deleuze/Félix Guattari: *A Thousand Plateaus*, London and New York: Continuum 2004, p. 60–63.

<sup>25</sup> See Sadakari: *Fatherless Girl and Domineering Mother*, p. 57.

<sup>26</sup> See Sorgenfrei, *Unspeakable Acts*, p. 27–29.

excessively cruel to women. Perhaps he believed that her sacrifice was all because of him, and that her rejection of motherhood, however vicious and destructive, was a deserved radical response aimed at the normative society, even though he was its primary victim. The only good mother is, therefore, a transformed, monstrous freak, a snake-seductress, an incestuous rapist, a transvestite, in other words, a creature which is not a mother at all, yet like Marie from *La Marie-vision*, stubbornly resolved to one day turn into a 'real' woman.

For all these reasons, Sorgenfrei's view, that this aspect of Terayama's art is merely a Japanese misogynistic legacy, only eased by being postmodern and ironic, is unsupported. Although it is obvious that his art was created under the conditions of a conservative society, and that it was deeply entangled with the language of the postmodern popular culture, a closer analysis of his work, which was only touched upon in this text, demonstrates not just principled feminist convictions, but it also detects a strong sense of a more general<sup>27</sup> emancipatory liberation governing most of his life and work.

<sup>27</sup> Regarding not only feminist, but also queer issues (as we have seen) and more general radical politics of liberation.