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Exteriority and Transcritique: Karatani Kōjin and the Impact of the 1990s

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An indication of the cultural effects of the recession and the end of the Cold War in Japan during the 1990s is the development of the thought of Karatani Kōjin. The author traces this development, focusing on the shift from an emphasis on a 'lack of exteriority' in early texts to the idea of 'transcritique' in his recent works. The aim is to elucidate what occasions the shift in his thinking and to what degree the concern with exteriority is retained in the notion of transcritique. The author pays particular attention to Karatani's discussion of the 'centreless' shape of Japanese power and the possibilities of resistance it offers. He also uses the concept of trauma in order to locate Karatani's philosophy in relation to two competing ideas of 'recovery' in contemporary Japan, one nursed by the recession in the 1990s and another by the defeat of the protest movements of the 1960s. The notion of transcritique, the author suggests, is Karatani's response to the wave of neoliberal globalization after the end of the Cold War and the need to think through the implications of this process for the problem of how to counteract 'centreless' power.

You know what a miracle is. Not what Bakunin said. But another world's intrusion into this one. (Thomas Pynchon)

It is customary to describe the 1990s in Japan as a 'lost decade' plagued by a widespread social malaise and an oppressive feeling of deadlock.¹ The development of the thought of the philosopher and critic Karatani Kōjin (1941–) evinces the cultural effects of the changes during this decade. For a long time Karatani was probably best known for his pioneering use of deconstructionist and genealogical methods in literary criticism. However, as he himself states, his thinking underwent a radical change in the early 1990s under the influence of the end of the Cold War, the impact of the globalization of neoliberal capitalism and the long Japanese economic recession. From now on, he states, the emphasis is less on deconstruction than on construction: 'Beginning in the 1990s, my stance, if not my thinking itself, changed fundamentally. I came to believe that theory should not remain in the critical scrutiny of the status quo but should contribute something positive to change the reality.'² This new stance was manifested in the founding of the New Associationist Movement (NAM) in Osaka in June 2000, which represented the culmination of a long process of his growing political engagement.³

¹ An earlier version of this article was presented at the NAJS (Nordic Association for the Study of Contemporary Japanese Society) conference in Copenhagen in April 2005. I am grateful to the participants of the conference and to the anonymous referees of this journal for their comments and to Karatani Kōjin for taking the time in the summer of 2005 to discuss some of the issues I examine in this article.

² Karatani, *Transcritique*, xii.

³ NAM, a movement designed to counteract what Karatani calls the 'trinity of state, capital and nation', quickly gained the attention of the media and the support of several noted intellectuals and artists but was dissolved in January 2003. Although its membership was never large, it numbered close to 600 members a

The central text in this new phase in his thinking is his 2001 work *Toransukuritiku* (published in English as *Transcritique* in 2003), a work on Marx and Kant which he himself considers his magnum opus and which had a direct bearing on the theories put to praxis in NAM—indeed, portions of the NAM manifesto were borrowed from its introductory chapter. A curious fact is the absence in this book of any mention of the lack of ‘exteriority’ (*gaibusei*) in the discursive space of Japan, which had been a predominant theme in his earlier writings since the 1970s. Instead the idea of ‘transcritique’ (*toransukuritiku*) occupies central stage.

My overall aim in this paper is to elucidate the turn in Karatani’s thinking in the 1990s. Why is the concern with a ‘lack of exteriority’ and the attempt to ‘deconstruct’ the closed discursive space of Japan replaced by the ideas of ‘transcritique’ and social activism? What leads Karatani to shift the notion of exteriority to that of transcritique, and to what degree is the concern with exteriority retained in the notion of transcritique?

I will give particular attention, first, to Karatani’s discussion of the ‘centreless’ shape of Japanese power and the possibilities of resisting it. This will bring the significance he attributes to the idea of exteriority into view and clarify the dilemmas that affect this idea to ‘deconstruct’ the closed space of Japan. I will show how he uses the idea of ‘transcritique’ in the 1990s to surmount these dilemmas and that a change of emphasis occurs simultaneously through which he gradually turns his attention away from what he considers to be problems of a specifically Japanese situation towards the equally ‘decentred’ but nevertheless profoundly different system of power operating in global capitalism.

Second, I will address the issues of ‘trauma’ and ‘recovery’ in Karatani’s thought. These concepts are useful theoretical vantage points from which to understand his thinking—especially his concept of ‘exteriority’—and they will also allow me to widen the scope of this paper to include some more general currents in contemporary Japanese culture.⁴ Specifically, I suggest that a tension exists between two ideas of ‘recovery’ in contemporary Japan, which can be traced back to the defeat of the radical protest movements of the 1960s and the collapse of the ‘bubble’ economy in the early 1990s. On the one hand, there are calls for a recovery of the national self-esteem and economic and political might that bolster an officially endorsed and increasingly unconstrained neo-nationalism. On the other hand, there is a more subdued, competing idea of cultural recovery centring on the increasing strength, after decades of slumber, of citizen protest and activism.

While NAM is certainly part of this latter trend, Karatani is critical of activists and intellectuals who call for a heroic repetition of the revolutionary activism of ‘1968’, and stresses the need to find new strategies of resistance in order to break out of the ‘sterile cycle’ of failed protest which he perceives in Japanese history.⁵ In his diagnosis

year after its inauguration (membership information is based on the self-reporting of NAM’s successor organization FA; www.freeassociations.org/whatsnam, 2004-03-14). Activities included creating a LETS (Local Economic Trading System) with its own internet-based currency and also setting up a ‘new school’ in Osaka. Cf. Karatani, *NAM Genri*.

⁴ I follow the approach of Berger (*After the End*) and others who have applied Freud’s concepts of trauma in cultural analysis in relation to the decades following the defeat of radical protest movements in the late 1960s and 1970s. The concept of trauma also plays a crucial role in Karatani’s own writings, especially his discussion of postwar literature, the suppression of popular movements in the Meiji and early Shōwa periods, and the postwar ‘peace constitution’. Karatani, *Nēshon to bigaku*, 61–126; *Kindai bungaku no owari*, 100–102.

⁵ Karatani, ‘Kakumei to hanpuku’. The background of Karatani’s warning may be the renewed public interest in the student activism of ‘1968’ today. See, for instance, Akane and Shibata, *Zenkyōtō*, Suga, *Left Alone*, Suga, 1968, and Shima, *Yasuda kōdō 1968–1969*.

of today's nostalgia for '1968' and the history of protest as a cycle of defeats, we hear echoes of Freud's theory of compulsive repetition. Instead of consciously working through the loss and verbalizing it, a traumatized patient is still caught in it and forced to re-enact it symptomatically. Indeed, in several instances Freud seems to admit that repetitions can contribute towards a retrospective mastering of the trauma. Nonetheless, Karatani's rejection of romantic or heroic protest in favour of a study of history and economics in order to avoid previous failures and find alternatives for the future can be interpreted as a call not merely to act out but instead to 'work through' the trauma of defeat in order to bring about a genuine recovery. Karatani depicts the decades following '1968' as a situation of closure, reflected in literature as a state of melancholic imprisonment and a claustrophobic absence of 'exits', and the 1990s as a situation of inflowing exteriority, in which Karatani tries to reactivate resistance and 'break out' of the cycle of failed protests, while at the same time criticizing the nationalist calls for 'recovery' that increasingly win terrain in Japan.

Part I: Exteriority

Going south on a California freeway, Oedipa Mass, the protagonist of Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, becomes exasperated at 'this illusion of speed, freedom, wind in your hair, unreeling landscape—it wasn't'. This, I suggest, is an illusion of *exteriority*—an illusion that the car ride would take her outside the circle of the repetitious everyday and provide relief from her boredom. This illusion haunts her through the entire novel. As we are given to understand in one of her inner monologues, what she is really after is 'a real alternative to the exitlessness, to the absence of surprise to life, that harrows the head of everybody American you know, and you too, sweetie'.⁶

Japan certainly differs from California, but the problem of a lack of 'exteriority' has also been a predominant and recurrent theme in Karatani's writings. It appears most noticeably in his early writings of the 1970s and 1980s—during the decades of economic triumphalism and national 'self-complacency' in Japan before the end of the Cold War and the recession of the 1990s. Repeatedly stressed in these writings is the thesis that contemporary Japan overflows with 'information', but that its discursive space is 'closed' and lacks a genuine sense of the outside world.

What then, philosophically speaking, is exteriority? Let us have a look at some of its most important features. Karatani defines it as the correlate to a 'transcendental' consciousness capable of stepping out of given contexts and 'being external to the system', as opposed to a formalistic 'transcendent' consciousness that tries to catch history within the confines of a single unitary perspective.⁷ He explicates it with a reference to a quotation by Derrida:

To 'deconstruct' philosophy . . . would be to think—in the most faithful, interior way—the structured genealogy of philosophy's concepts, but at the same time to determine—from a certain exterior that is unqualifiable or unnameable by philosophy—what this history has been able to dissimulate or forbid.⁸

⁶ Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*, 16, 118.

⁷ Karatani, 'One Spirit, Two Nineteenth Centuries', 262.

⁸ Derrida, quoted in Karatani, 'One Spirit, Two Nineteenth Centuries', 268. It should be noted that the present article makes no attempt at comparing Karatani to Derrida. For Karatani's disagreements with Derrida, see Karatani, *Hyūmoa*, 65–91; and his *Nihon seishinbunseki*, 7–54.

Karatani adds: ‘But this “certain exterior” is nowhere to be found in a positive form. It is a purely transcendental exterior: if it were not so, it could only be a transcendent, imaginary subject’.⁹

The use of the term ‘transcendental’ here signals Karatani’s refusal to focus merely on the destructive aspect of deconstruction. An equally important part of his critique, one to which such destruction appears as but a preparatory step, is to remind philosophy of its own transcendental presuppositions. This procedure has much in common with Derrida’s notion of *différance*, which is not only a tool for destruction but also a way of gesturing towards these presuppositions, which it must leave unsaid since its words are by necessity insufficient. Like Derrida, but unlike Kant who believed that the content of these presuppositions could be identified in the form of a universally valid set of propositions, Karatani takes care to avoid defining or determining them in any fixed way.¹⁰ ‘I determined not to presuppose exteriority as something that exists substantively, because exteriority, once grasped as such, is already internal.’¹¹ This is why the transcendental must always remain ‘unqualifiable’ and ‘unnameable’.

Despite being unnameable the transcendental is a state that consciousness may approach and at least temporarily occupy or access.¹² Karatani exemplifies such consciousness by discussing Descartes’ *cogito*. As Karatani points out, *cogito* is stripped of all psychological determinants since nothing remains after Descartes’ methodological doubt but doubt itself.¹³ Consisting of pure doubt *cogito* always exists on the exterior, as a force that puts conceptual systems in question. It is situated in the ‘gap’ (*aida*) between the systems and only exists as the difference (*sai*) between them. The element of *cogito* is therefore, according to Karatani, empty space (*kūkan*) or ‘nothingness’.¹⁴ An important feature of *cogito* repeatedly stressed by Karatani is that it is not a standpoint, but rather exists as a movement or dynamic oscillation between standpoints. In order to remain a pure *cogito*, criticism must avoid the trap of taking recourse to any single system, perspective or ‘truth’. The appearance of pure *cogito* is therefore often linked to a sense of rupture or crisis, to the sense of living in an historical situation that makes established orders or perspectives appear obsolete and unreliable. ‘History’, as Fredric Jameson once pointed out, ‘is what hurts’. In this sense, exteriority is not a standpoint we can reason our way towards, but rather something we may catch a glimpse of in moments when history helps us break through our given conceptual schemata. Exteriority, then, is not a category that can be integrated into a philosophical system. As a category, it would have been part of the distinction between inside and

⁹ Karatani, ‘One Spirit, Two Nineteenth Centuries’, 268.

¹⁰ To Kant, the term ‘transcendental’ refers to preconditions of experience that cannot themselves be validated by empirical investigations, but only by self-reflection. Unlike Kant, Karatani’s concern is not to rebut empiricism but to deconstruct conceptual systems. The problem with conceptual systems is not, as empiricism would have it, that they lack empirical support, but that they impose a closure on thinking and refuse to leave room for any ‘exteriority’ beyond their reach.

¹¹ Karatani, *Architecture as Metaphor*, xvi.

¹² Here Karatani draws on the Husserlian notion of the ‘transcendental ego’—a pure cognition deprived of all substance and distinct from our everyday ‘psychological ego’. Such an ego is not a mere presupposition for consciousness, but is also a ‘pure’ subjective state which can be accessed through a suspension (*epoché*) of knowledge that is taken for granted. For Karatani’s reservations against Husserl, see *Transcritique*, 88–91.

¹³ In similar fashion, Derrida describes *cogito* as a ‘zero point’ that, far from serving as a reliable cornerstone of the edifice of subjectivist *ratio*, strikes the philosopher with ‘terror’ and which is equally hospitable to reason and madness. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 69.

¹⁴ Karatani, ‘Non-Cartesian *cogito*’; *ibid.*, *Hyūmoa*, 11–13, 58, 92–116.

outside generated by the discursive system and incapable of putting the system itself in question.

That even notions designed to pinpoint the purely ‘other’ of discourse—such as exteriority or *cogito*—turn into traps as soon as they are regarded as standpoints, as conceptual givens, is an important part of Karatani’s criticism of Japan’s most famous modern philosopher, Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945), who is perhaps above all known for his philosophical exploration of the ‘place’ (*basho*) of nothingness as a transcendental precondition of all experience.¹⁵ In an essay from 1988, Karatani argues that Nishida’s mistake was to turn the notion of ‘nothingness’ into a static absolute, into a ‘standpoint’ that could never be objectified but in which everything was included. By viewing it as an absolute rather than a relative nothingness in relation to concretely existing beings, it was deprived of connections with the contingent, shifting world of beings. As a consequence, according to Karatani, Nishida’s philosophy fails to provide a ground for ethical responsibility, something that presupposes a sense of the difference between oneself and a concrete other. As a result, ‘history’, and with it the issue of war responsibility, is extinguished. What is crucial to Karatani, then, is not ineffability *per se*, but rather the ceaseless movement between irreconcilable perspectives.¹⁶

To summarize, at least three points are central to the meaning of exteriority in Karatani’s early thinking: (1) it designates the quality of being ‘outside’ the discursive system, (2) it can, at least briefly, be accessed by consciousness (as *cogito*), and (3) it exists only as a movement between systems, never as a static standpoint in its own right.

Postmodernism and the Return of the 1930s

When economic triumphalism reached its apogee in Japan in the 1980s, Karatani repeatedly warned that Japan was trapped in a complacent discursive space that lacked exteriority. One reason for his harsh dismissal of the reign of play and superficiality in the consumerism of the 1980s was his fear that it was the flipside of a growing ultranationalism. ‘There is an almost pathological play with language, with the reign of the superficial on the one hand, and the regeneration of ultranationalistic ideology on the other.’¹⁷ In particular, he directed his criticism against the ideology of ‘postmodernism’,

¹⁵ This paper makes no attempt to deal directly with Nishida’s philosophy, but will show how aspects of Karatani’s understanding of Nishida are clearly relevant for the interpretation of NAM. While criticizing the ideological use to which Nishida’s philosophy was put by himself or his disciples during the Pacific war, much of Karatani’s philosophy can be understood as an ongoing dialogue—partly submerged in silence and consisting in oblique or implicit references—with Nishida and his legacy. Karatani is clearly aware of how close his own position is to Nishida’s, stating, for instance, that deconstruction in a ‘formal’ sense was already anticipated by Nishida (*Hihyō to posutomodan*). His description of the element of *cogito* as an empty ‘gap’ serving as a transcendental condition of possibility may also be a reference to Nishida’s notion of ‘place’. Karatani himself acknowledges the similarity between *cogito* and ‘place’ when he criticizes Nishida for having criticized Descartes unjustly (‘Non-Cartesian *cogito*’, 29). An arguably central problem for Karatani has been how to maintain a deconstructionist approach while avoiding what he sees as the ideological pitfalls of Nishida’s philosophy.

¹⁶ Karatani, *Hyūmōa*, 148–187. Karatani’s insistence that *cogito* is not a standpoint echoes Adorno’s assertion that ‘dialectics is no standpoint’. While Karatani scorns Hegelian dialectics, Adorno’s ‘negative dialectics’ shares with Karatani the aim of destabilizing conceptually fixed systems or ‘identity-thinking’. Karatani’s criticism of Nishida that notions designed to pinpoint the purely ‘other’ of discourse turn into traps as soon as they are regarded as conceptual givens, as ‘standpoints’, is also the criticism Adorno directs against the Heideggerian notion of *Sein* or Being in *Negative Dialectics*.

¹⁷ Karatani, ‘One Spirit, Two Nineteenth Centuries’, 272.

which in his view reflected a repetition of the complacency of the Taishō period that resulted in the militarism of the early Shōwa period.¹⁸

The link Karatani sees between postmodernism and the 1930s is perhaps brought out most clearly in his criticism of the role played by Nishida's philosophy in the ideology of Japanese postmodernism. Not only did Nishida spearhead the Japanese cultural self-image as founded on 'nothingness', which was later utilized by postmodernist ideologues celebrating the non-logocentric nature of Japanese culture,¹⁹ but his notorious theories of the 'place' of nothingness at the heart of Japanese culture were used to legitimize the 'Greater East-Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere', the Japanese wartime empire. His wartime report 'Principles of a New World Order' (1943) is especially infamous for the way he appears to equate the notion of a 'place' of nothingness with the Japanese empire. Japanese culture is described not only as one culture among many, but as the very 'place' in which the cultures of the world may interact in the formation of a future world culture.²⁰ Behind this assertion was Nishida's belief that Japanese culture was capable of operating in a 'centreless' way, lacking a unifying principle or power at its centre and hence being able to be equally open and hospitable to all outside influences. As Karatani points out, 'Nishida wanted to stress that in the Great East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, the imperial household had to exist like a zero sign that unified autonomous Asian nations, instead of reigning over them as a ruling power'.²¹ As I will show, Karatani took great pains to avoid constructing a philosophy in which a similar mistake—the fashioning of seemingly universalistic positions to suit the interests of aspiring 'world empires'—would be possible. This, I suggest, is one of the reasons that he insists that *cogito* can never be a standpoint, never be a static 'place' that cultures or political institutions can claim to possess as an inherent quality along the lines of Nishida's 'place' of nothingness.

Japan's Empty Centre

The discussion of Karatani's criticism of Nishida has brought us to the theory of the power structure of Japan as distinguished by its lack of a ruling principle or

¹⁸ This leads him to claim a 'return of the 1930s' in the present-day world (Karatani, *Shūen o megutte*; 'The Problem of Historical Repetition'; and cf. Karatani's recent revisions of this theory in 'Kakumei to hanpuku' and *Kindai bungaku*, 85–87). Karatani lays out the reasons for his critical assessment of post-modern thought in his 1984 *Hihyō to Posutomodan* (a summary can be found in the 1988 postscript in *Origins*, 188). To put it briefly, in Karatani's view postmodernism in Japan had itself turned into a self-sufficient verbal game lacking exteriority. Rather than raising awareness of the problems of modernity, it simply carried on the self-congratulatory rejection of *ri* or reason performed by nativist scholars of the Edo period.

¹⁹ Nishida envisioned nothingness as a quality inherent in Japanese culture which, unlike Western culture, avoids posing a 'being' (*u*) at its centre (Nishida, *Fundamental Problems*, 237). Japanese postmodernists used this idea to reinforce a self-congratulatory nationalism. 'Postmodern' qualities such as love of the fragment and the contingent, the aesthetics of incompleteness, a decentred subject, deconstruction and so on were extolled by conservative intellectuals as mainstays of Japanese 'tradition' (cf. Clammer, *Difference and Modernity*). Karatani argues that this 'postmodernism' offered a mere semblance of exteriority despite its celebration of 'otherness' and 'contingency'. In this sense it was similar to the 'aestheticism'—a surmounting of actual contradictions on an imaginary level rather than an overcoming through struggle—which he sees in the wartime discourse of 'overcoming modernity'. Karatani, 'Overcoming Modernity', 101–118.

²⁰ Nishida, 'The Principle of the New World Order'.

²¹ Karatani, 'The Power of Repression'.

centre.²² The target of Karatani's criticism is not so much logocentrism as the peculiarly amorphous Japanese system of 'decentred' power. He argues that Japan—thanks to the 'destruction of *ri* [reason or principle]' conducted in the eighteenth century by nativist scholars like Motoori Norinaga—achieved deconstruction far earlier than the West. Unlike postmodern ideologists in Japan, he is careful to point out that such a state is neither desirable nor an indication of genuine postmodernity. The 'destruction of *ri*' was a nativist exclusion of foreign thought such as the texts of Confucianism or Buddhism which cleared the way for the closure of Japan's discursive space.²³ Karatani emphasizes that the lack of a ruling principle or centre in Japan does not indicate an absence of power. While granting that the imperial institution can be described in terms of 'nothingness', he points to the power relations operating behind it and through it. 'In Japan', he warns, 'the centre of power was always nothingness. But that is also power, perhaps even the essence of power.'²⁴ The paradoxical character of this nothingness is obvious: even in the absence of any visible centre, it controls people through a cosy, soft totalitarianism—through a power which is even more insidious and efficiently integrative since it lacks the overt features of repression (*yokuatsu*), operating instead by 'foreclosure' (*haijo*).²⁵

This discussion of the 'empty centre' of the Japanese system helps complete the elucidation of the meaning of 'exteriority' in Karatani's philosophy. It is evident that what exteriority must mean for his brand of deconstruction to have any liberating effect in the context of Japanese culture is not simply a relativization and detachment from *logos* (*ri*), but also a disentanglement from the entire structure of centreless power. Unless it takes on this new, more comprehensive meaning, deconstruction risks complicity in the 'destruction of *ri*' that gave birth to this dispersed and amorphous network of power and which was perversely celebrated in the 1980s under the name 'post-modernity'.²⁶

To what extent does Karatani's notion of 'exteriority' succeed in achieving this? In fact, the centreless nature of the system confronts him with a methodological dilemma. While it would certainly make sense to call for a radicalized exteriority, which would not only be exterior to *logos* but also to the entire system of non-logocentric power, it is highly questionable whether such an undertaking is possible under the name of deconstruction. In the preface to his *Architecture as Metaphor (In'yu to shite no kenchikugaku)* he confesses to the impasse and the sense of 'emptiness and futility' that this problem led him to in the 1980s. The dilemma, he explains, stems from the fact that Japan had not yet achieved any modern subjectivity or 'construction'. Would it not be more subversive to call for

²² Apart from Nishida, Karatani also refers to the well-known theories of the 'Emperor-system' by Maruyama Masao and of Japan's modernization by Takeuchi Yoshimi. See Karatani, 'The Power of Repression'; *Hyūmoa; Nihon seishinbunseki; Nēshon to bigaku*.

²³ Karatani, *Hyūmoa*, 46–64.

²⁴ Karatani, *Hyūmoa*, 134f.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 135. What is meant by foreclosure? According to Lacan, 'foreclosure' means that the original repression of castration, which is necessary for the constitution of a subject, fails to occur (see Karatani, *Nihon seishinbunseki*). In Karatani's writings it basically means a foreclosure of the historical character of the surrounding society, which instead appears as nature. Nature, Karatani writes, is the semblance of spontaneous becoming (or what Marx called *Naturwüchsigkeit*), the semblance that things simply appear to have arisen or become the way they are, without human artifice or intention. But since, in reality, someone has determined it, the semblance of nature means that the operations of power are hidden. Even if this kind of 'becoming' differs from an ordinary power or system, it possesses a controlling force to an equal or higher degree. Karatani, *Hihyō to posutomodan*, 46.

²⁶ Karatani, *Hihyō to posutomodan*, 47; 'The Power of Repression'.

construction and engage in what he calls ‘being architectonic’ than to engage in a ‘deconstruction’ that would risk being absorbed and co-opted by the system? ‘Unlike in the West, deconstructive forces are constantly at work in Japan. As strange as it may sound, being architectonic in Japan is actually radical and political.’²⁷ These doubts foreshadow Karatani’s embrace of a form of ‘architectonic’ option during the 1990s under the name of ‘transcritique’. By then, however, the prime target of his criticism is no longer the amorphous system of Japanese power. It is in the face of the increasingly ‘decentred’ condition of power in a world dominated by neoliberal globalization that Karatani is led to resolve the abovementioned dilemma by opting for construction as a more adequate strategy than conventional deconstruction.

Political Suppression and the Extinguishing of Exteriority

I have shown that for Karatani, exteriority is linked to a destabilization of power. Taking some liberty with his texts, I suggest that exteriority serves as a codeword for a fundamental political freedom: the capability to choose and the responsibility to act beyond the constraints of a single system. In *Nihon kindai bungaku no kigen* (1980, published in English in 1993 as *The Origins of Modern Japanese Literature*) he points out that the emergence of ‘landscapes’ in writers of the late Meiji period was the result of the disappearance of exteriority. Significantly, he links this emergence to the internalization of libido that followed on the trauma of the suppression of the People’s Rights movement in the 1880s.

To speak in Freudian terms, the libido which was once directed toward the People’s Rights movement and the writing of political novels lost its object and was redirected inward, at which point ‘landscape’ and ‘the inner life’ appeared.²⁸

The exclusion of exteriority is seen here as a corollary of political disillusionment, a withdrawal or retracting of energies that had once sought an outlet through political imagination and action, especially in the first half of the Meiji period when the People’s Rights movement was active. According to Karatani, modern Japanese history is marred by several such traumatic setbacks. In writers of the early Shōwa period, he again sees a consolidation of the discursive space against the background of the suppression of Marxism, a Western political philosophy that existed as an ‘other’ in Japan. Symptomatic of the closure was Kawabata Yasunari’s *Snow Country*, which he describes as a world lacking in history and carefully crafted in order to avoid meeting the ‘other’.²⁹

To avoid misunderstanding, I should point out that Karatani never argues that it is the various individual authors that are the subject of repression, but rather the discursive system as a whole, which becomes affected in a form analogous to what can be seen in cases of individual traumata. Just as a traumatized patient withdraws attention from the present world, which no longer seems to interest or engage him, so the interdiction on political involvement and the resulting conformism produce a generalized withdrawal from the outside world which has the effect of presenting this world as an indifferent landscape or ‘nature’, existing objectively as a counterpart to the apperceiving

²⁷ Karatani, *Architecture as Metaphor*, xlv.

²⁸ Karatani, *Origins*, 39.

²⁹ Karatani, *Shūen*, 26f, 243–245.

subject. Quite in line with Freud, Karatani states that this repression is what constitutes interiority: 'To maintain this kind of conscience requires one to exercise constant surveillance over one's inner thoughts . . . It is this surveillance, in fact, that produces interiority.'³⁰ Repression causes a retraction of energy that builds up to the disengaged, solitary spectator, separated from the outside world which becomes viewed as a landscape, expressing his inner feelings in literature.

This clarifies that the Japanese system of power is not so much characterized by a *lack* of repression as by a peculiar *reaction* to repression, which resembles the state of trauma. What characterizes trauma is a 'melancholic' (Freud) state in which the ego is unable to verbalize its loss, which instead manifests itself symptomatically. A traumatized patient remains trapped by the traumatic event, which is repressed in his or her consciousness and is therefore, in a sense, also trapped in the past, which explains the patient's apathy and indifference to the present. This is unlike what happens in mourning, in which the articulation and conscious 'working through' of the loss helps prepare the way for recovery.

The issue of exteriority is thus essentially linked to the complex problems of 'trauma' and 'recovery'. Karatani, however, is often tantalizingly brief on this subject, and sometimes appears to have forgotten it entirely—for instance, in his harsh assessment of Murakami Haruki, whose attitude of rejecting political involvement in the early works led Karatani to criticize him for escapism.³¹ Nevertheless, Murakami's fiction provides a useful example of how the lack of exteriority is experienced and helps bring into view the relation of Japanese 'postmodernism' to the suppression of the radical protest movements of the 1960s, and helps to paint a more nuanced picture of the triumphalist 1980s as a 'fallen' traumatized state, brought about through a paralysis of protest.

Many literary critics, including Karatani, have remarked on the abstract character of Murakami's cities, which appear as mere 'landscapes', unrelated to the disengaged, introvert spectator. Descriptions and place names are sparse. The cities are simply the indifferent background or setting for dialogues.³² Just as Karatani links the emergence of 'landscapes' in Meiji period writers to the internalization of libido that follows on suppression, most of Murakami's stories are set in the decades following the defeat of the radical political movements of the 1960s. Although they offer very little glorification of rebellion, his protagonists clearly share many of the underlying values of the activists. Their distrust, however, is directed not only against the system but against many of the variants of active confrontation as well.

'I didn't think so then, but the world was still simple in 1969. In some cases, it was enough to throw stones at the riot police for people to achieve self-expression. In its own way, it was a good time', one of Murakami's protagonists says. But in today's 'advanced capitalist society', even opposition has become part of the system: 'A net has been stretched from one corner of society to the other. Outside the net there is another net. We can't go anywhere. If we throw a stone it's deflected and bounces back.'³³ There is, then, no simple way to disentangle oneself and negate the system, no trustworthy point of exteriority on which to lean. Throughout Murakami's writings one encounters the vision of the system as an encompassing whole in which all opposition is recuperated and co-opted. Matthew Strecher has observed that this system is 'a

³⁰ Karatani, *Origins*, 79.

³¹ Karatani, *Shūen*.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Haruki Murakami, *Dansu, dansu, dansu*, 114.

manifestation of the postmodern State: hidden, elusive, and unaccountable'. Indeed Murakami portrays it as the very 'adversary State against which his generation battled in the 1960s' which 'is now more powerful, and, indeed, more deadly, than ever'.³⁴ In this system it is easy to recognize the decentred form of power that Karatani is trying to criticize.

In Murakami the lack of exteriority is the counterpart to the fading away of the sensation of shock, which Walter Benjamin defined as central to the experience of modernity. When one of Murakami's narrators gazes out at Tokyo from the window of a train, the city seems to induce the hallucination that it is all that exists. 'We can go anywhere, and yet we're locked up', he thinks. 'There's no exit anywhere.'³⁵ When Karatani criticizes the 'discursive space' of contemporary Japan as 'filled with complacency and almost totally lacking in exteriority', it is this semblance of 'exitlessness' that he has in mind. This 'lack of exteriority' is the philosophical aspect of the waning shock. In order to understand Karatani's valorization of exteriority, we may recall how for Benjamin shock was not only something painful but also a liberating rupture that helped bring about an 'awakening from the nineteenth century' and an increased attention to the real problems of the present. Exteriority, in other words, is something that disrupts myth and destabilizes the encompassing whole of the 'perfectly wrong' worlds described by Murakami.

Despite the parallels between Karatani and Murakami in how 'exteriority' is portrayed as lacking and how this correlates to the problem of a centreless power structure, Karatani dismisses Murakami as a cynical and embittered nihilist who 'escapes' from 'reality'; as an exponent of Japanese postmodern 'snobbism' and 'the contemporary version of Kawabata Yasunari'.³⁶ It is possible to raise a number of objections against this rather un-nuanced dismissal. Chief among them, I believe, is not the obvious one that by seeing Murakami as a repetition of Kawabata, Karatani (in line with his thesis of a repetition of the 1930s) misses their profound difference.³⁷ More importantly, however, Karatani seems blind to the implications of his own theory linking the emergence of landscapes to traumatic suppression. It is deeply problematic to project an accusation of escapism into a context which is shaped by traumatization. In fact, Murakami's works are helpful precisely because they bring into view the dynamics of traumatization, which is far from a simple escapism. Their mood is far from complacent. Even where libido is withdrawn from the political arena, a traumatized state always includes a conscious or unconscious reference to recovery, to a future day in which libido may once again be directed outwards to the external world.

Part II: Transcritique

Karatani's relation to deconstruction changed decisively around 1990. One reason was Japan's plunge into a prolonged recession following the burst of the 'bubble-economy'. For Karatani this was a breath of fresh air. Looking back in 1997, he writes that he 'felt almost suffocated in Japan during the 1980s', when people were euphoric and Japanese capitalism seemed triumphant. Fortunately, he adds, the system which had supported that capitalism—a system of Jüngerian 'total mobilization' had been applied to

³⁴ Strecher, 'Beyond "Pure" Literature', 358, 356.

³⁵ Haruki Murakami, *Chūgoku yuki no surō bōto*, 49–51.

³⁶ Karatani, *Shūen*; 'Sōzōryoku no bēsu'.

³⁷ I discuss these differences in Cassegard, *Shock and Naturalization*.

the national economy, which he traces back to war time fascism—is now collapsing under the onslaught of global capitalism, and with it the ‘self-sustained and self-complacent space of Japan’ is gradually collapsing too. Although Japan’s economic crisis made it less ‘interesting’ to many foreign observers, he hails the intrusion of global capitalism as a liberation, which has allowed alternative hidden traditions (such as Japanese Marxist studies) to spring to light.³⁸ ‘Shock’, in Benjamin’s sense, had returned, shattering the closed discursive space of the 1980s and bringing with it possibilities of exteriority.

Karatani’s glee at the impact of globalization on Japan is easily comprehensible in light of his earlier views on the market. In the 1980s, he described the global market in positive terms as a liberating and deconstructive tool that undermined the autonomy and closure of national communities. In opposition to communal space where rules are shared, the market is an ‘intercrossing space’ existing in between communities where participants confront each other as strangers without presupposing any common norms. Like the *cogito*, it exists in the ‘gap’ between communities, in a position of ‘exteriority’ to them.³⁹ This celebratory equation of the market with exteriority is certainly crude,⁴⁰ and we need to remember that we find it mainly in writings belonging to the period when the prime target of his criticism was still the closed, amorphous system of Japanese power. Neoliberal globalization was welcomed not because he saw the market as good in itself but because he hoped that the collapse of the Japanese model would liberate buried alternative traditions.

In the 1990s, however, the victory of the market led Karatani to a stance which is more nuanced and more critical of the capitalist world economy. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the Gulf War were pivotal events in the introductory stages of this shift.⁴¹ Deconstruction, he writes, ‘could have critical impact only while Marxism actually ruled the people of many nation-states. In the 1990s, this tendency lost its impact, having become mostly a mere agent of the real deconstructive movement of capitalism.’ A more urgent task than criticizing the closure imposed by states now existed. Instead of going along with the ‘deconstructive’ movement of capitalism, he now felt the need to contribute something constructive, not in order to support mainstream society but in order to provide new alternatives. The problem that ‘deconstruction’ lacked critical edge in a ‘centreless’ context was firmly resolved by opting for a constructive endeavour, namely, transcritique.⁴²

From Exteriority to Transcritique

Amidst the general crisis in Japan during the 1990s when ‘exteriority’ seemed to have returned, Karatani practically stopped using the word. Instead ‘transcritique’ has pride of place in his latest writings but this does not mean that he abandoned his concern with exteriority. Transcritique is described in words directly reminiscent of how he

³⁸ Karatani, ‘Japan is Interesting Because Japan is Not Interesting’.

³⁹ Karatani, *Shūen*, 182; *Architecture*, 143ff.

⁴⁰ Surely, the market usually functions on the basis of a shared set of rules, and can hardly be regarded as a pure ‘intercrossing space’. Despite its semblance of ‘centrelessness’ it is hardly more ‘empty’ or neutral than the Japanese empire theorized by Nishida. Karatani himself nowadays refers to his earlier view of the market as ‘ironical’. Karatani, ‘Kenchiku to asoshiēshon’.

⁴¹ Together with several well-known writers Karatani published an appeal to protest against Japan’s support of the Gulf War. See, for example, Karatani and Murakami Ryū, ‘Jidai heisa no toppakō’, 78f.

⁴² Karatani, *Transcritique*, ix f.

once described *cogito*. Just as with the ‘certain exterior’ described in Karatani’s earlier writings, the space for transcritique cannot be determined positively:

Cogito, the doubting subject appears in between systems, in between communities. And this interstice is a space of sheer difference; finally it is insubstantial and amorphous. It cannot be spoken of positively; no sooner than it is, its function is lost. It is a *transcendental topos*—a space for *transcritique*.⁴³

Karatani compares this space to the Kantian ‘transcendental subjectivity = X’, calling it an ‘apperception that can never be represented’.⁴⁴ A further similarity is that transcritique is a movement of thought that prevents thinking from hardening into a system, rather than a standpoint. The inspiration for the idea is Kant’s description of an experience of a ‘parallax view’ in *Dreams of a Visionary*, where Kant writes about observing himself and his judgments from the point of view of others. As Karatani points out, the crucial point is not simply to adopt the perspectives of others—which may be just as delusive as one’s own—but the oscillation between various perspectives that reveals their delusional character. To conduct transcritique means to adopt such a ‘parallax view’, oscillating or moving incessantly between discursive systems. Rather than resolving antinomies, it is a critique that endlessly moves between incompatible positions without ever reaching any stable third position or synthesis.⁴⁵

This is remarkably reminiscent of how ‘exteriority’ was described in Karatani’s earlier writings. Nevertheless, the idea of ‘transcritique’ does mark a departure from the earlier idea of ‘exteriority’ in at least three respects. First, while ‘exteriority’ was said to be ‘lacking’ in the discursive space of the 1980s, Karatani appears to see no similar lack of possibilities for transcritique today, when the sense of crisis and the distrust of established solutions is far more pervasive than in the 1980s. Second, as a consequence of this, the possibilities for the subject to actively engage in exercising transcritique are more emphasized. Third, transcritique is portrayed as a generative movement of thought that serves to construct new ideas, rather than as a negative or destabilizing movement along the lines of what he used to call deconstruction.⁴⁶

Let us now have a look at how Karatani’s philosophical reorientation affects how he deals with his old dilemma of how to counteract power—or, to be more precise, how his stance changes in regard to the market and the role of social movements.

⁴³ Karatani, *Transcritique*, 134.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 86. Nishida is not mentioned in *Transcritique*, but we find an explanation of the similarity between Karatani’s description of transcendental subjectivity and Nishida’s notion of place if we turn to one of Karatani’s earlier texts, where he argues that Nishida’s philosophy should not be defined as Buddhist since ‘his “place of nothingness” corresponds to Kant’s “transcendental apperception”’ (Karatani, ‘Buddhism, Marxism, and Fascism’).

⁴⁵ Karatani, *Transcritique*, 1. The idea of parallax is reminiscent of Cubist aesthetics and the multiple representations of space requires by Einsteinian relativity (cf. Miller, *Einstein, Picasso*). Slavoj Žižek, acknowledging his debt to Karatani, uses the idea as the cornerstone of his 2006 work *The Parallax View*.

⁴⁶ Karatani finds an example of this generative function of transcritique in the development of Marx’s thinking: exposed to a profound parallax when Marx moved to England, his ‘shock’ at confronting a new reality outside the ‘German ideology’ produced the energy, the new critical perspective, which he later brought to fruition in *Capital* (Karatani, *Transcritique*, 3f). In recent texts Karatani adds that it depends on the situation whether transcritique has ‘constructive’ or ‘deconstructive’ effects (Karatani, *Kindai bungaku*, 164).

From Market to Empire

In *Transcritique* and other recent texts, the source of exteriority is no longer the global market but ‘associations’, and the market is instead increasingly envisioned in such negative terms as ‘empire’. Consequently Karatani redirects his criticism from the ‘centreless’ system of Japanese power to the system of global capitalism and lays a general groundwork for a theory of global capitalism in *Transcritique*. The market is now no longer conceived as a force bringing exteriority, but on the contrary as part and parcel of a system in which it has entered into collusion with the state and nationalism, forming what Karatani calls a ‘trinity of state, capital and nation’, in which the three elements support each other, making it futile to attack any single one of them without at the same time attacking the others.⁴⁷ It is this trinity, rather than the Japanese system of power *per se*, that he now sets out to counteract. Unlike in certain currents of the contemporary critique of globalization, he refuses to call for a strengthening of the nation-state. ‘When facing this fearless trinity, undermining one or the other does not work. If one attempts to overthrow capitalism alone, one has to adopt statism, or one is engulfed by nationalist empathy. It goes without saying that the former appeared as Stalinism and the latter as fascism.’⁴⁸

In his most recent texts, such as *Nēshon to bigaku (Nation and Aesthetics, 2004)* and *Sekaikyōwakoku e (Towards a World Republic, 2006)*, Karatani supplements the theory of the ‘trinity’ with the idea of a trend towards the emergence of regional blocs or ‘empires’ that attempt to safeguard and regulate trade and interaction between states. This echoes his old description of the market as an ‘intercrossing space’ for exchange between communities or nations, showing that the concept of empire has partially taken the place previously occupied in his thinking by the concept of the market. Unlike the market, however, empires are firmly rooted in the ‘materiality’ of power relations. Far from celebrating them, Karatani portrays them as a repetition of the block-building of the 1930s.⁴⁹

Let us return to the dilemma with which Karatani was struggling—the dilemma of how to counteract a system of ‘decentred’ power. As global capitalism arrives and introduces exteriority into the system of Japanese power, his thinking certainly becomes more ‘constructive’—painting in broad strokes a theory of economics and empires. But perhaps that is not the main point. If construction alone had been sufficient to counteract the power operating in global capitalism, the choice between deconstruction and construction in the 1980s would hardly have constituted a dilemma in the first place. The key to understanding the change in Karatani’s thinking is rather to be found in his frequent references to Marx’ criticism of religion, according to which what matters is not

⁴⁷ In a recent text, Karatani explicitly writes that the global market has created a singled unified world ‘without an exterior’ for the first time in history. Karatani, *Sekaikyōwakoku*, 2.

⁴⁸ Karatani, *Transcritique*, 15. Karatani therefore rejects the idea that globalization will lead to the end of nation-states. States and nations have always served to compensate for the shortcomings of capitalism, and capitalism needs them in order not to become vulnerable and unstable. This is why the inrush of global capital in Japan in the wake of the economic recession in the 1990s failed to bring any lasting sense of exteriority, instead immediately triggering nationalistic calls for ‘recovery’.

⁴⁹ Karatani’s concept of ‘empire’ should not be confused with Hardt and Negri’s wider, more abstract concept. Karatani’s concept is centred on regional blocks, the drift towards a multipolar world after the end of the Cold War, and a comparison with historical ‘world empires’ such as Rome or China. Importantly, ‘empire’ in Karatani’s sense does not connote a supersession of the nation-state but stands for the institutional framework regulating interaction between states or national communities. See Karatani, *Nihon seishinbunseki; Nēshon to bigaku*, ‘Kakumei to hanpuku’; *Kindai bungaku*, 89–91, 154; *Sekaikyōwakoku*, 41–64.

simply to denounce religion, but to change the reality that produces the need for religion.⁵⁰ No mere ‘theory’, no matter how constructive, would be enough to help Karatani solve this dilemma as long as it remains merely theoretical. The message is that power can only be combated by changing reality. Hence the attention Karatani henceforth gives to praxis and to the history of failed protest movements. The turn towards construction is also a turn towards praxis and this is the rationale behind why he felt the need to found a movement, NAM, and to engage in the construction of alternatives to the present economic system—namely, in order to be able to fight it, not only on the level of words, but also on the level of its own ‘material basis’. This means that activism is not a mere offshoot of his theory, but is in fact central to his philosophical undertaking.

From Market to Association—NAM as ‘Transcritical Space’

The aim of NAM was to ‘counteract’ the ‘trinity of state, capital and nation’. As mentioned, Karatani argues that in order to be successful, all three elements of this trinity must be rejected simultaneously. The Archimedean key to this undertaking is his idea of ‘associations’, which he extracts through an anarchistic reading of Marx, seizing upon the latter’s idea of an ‘association of associations’ and his support of the Paris Commune as a ‘possible communism’. In the idea of associations, Karatani finds a form of human interaction or ‘exchange’ unlike that which is typical of capitalism, state or nation. According to Karatani, the use of Local Economic Trading Systems (LETS) allows associations to revive exchange mechanisms that resemble the gift economy of small-scale communities but without their parochialism or dependency on intimate ties. Since LETS can extend over large areas through the use of electronic currencies, the transactions are in principle just as open and impersonal as in a capitalist market. LETS, as Karatani points out, is therefore a market economy but not a capitalist one. They differ from capitalist transactions since they cannot generate profit (as currencies are freely available, capital accumulation is meaningless).⁵¹ The spread of LETS was a central part of NAM’s activities, through which it hoped both to provide an economic safety-net for those who engaged in overt protest against the system and to plant the seed of an alternative economy that would undermine and eventually replace capitalism.⁵²

Karatani’s previous rather simplistic dichotomy of the world market versus the nation-state is now replaced by a more nuanced and differentiated theory of four kinds of exchange. Three of these—including the market—are constituent parts of the ‘trinity’, while the fourth—the associations—is seen as bringing exteriority into the system. Just as the notion of ‘empire’ inherited the ‘bad’ aspects of the capitalist market—the exploitation and the uneven distribution of power—associations seem to have inherited its ‘good’ aspects: the openness to heterogeneity and the possibility of interaction between strangers.

That associations are viewed as sources of exteriority is clearly indicated in one of the few passages in which the word ‘exteriority’ reappears in Karatani’s recent writings: ‘what we should do is to search for a place for resisting the capitalist nation-state

⁵⁰ Karatani, *Nihon seishinbunseki*, 42–44; *Nēshon to bigaku*, 68.

⁵¹ Karatani, *Nihon seishinbunseki*, 54. The idea of LETS was initiated by Michael Linton in 1982. It is a balance-of-payments system in which each participant maintains an individual account, in which all transactions are registered. The currency is not issued by a central bank, but is issued anew by the purchaser at the time of transaction. The sum total of all accounts always remains zero.

⁵² Karatani, *Transcritique*, and his *NAM Genri*.

in the “exterior” (*gaibu*) of the trinity or, in other words, in associationism’.⁵³ This passage is revealing because it shows that when the word ‘exteriority’ reappears, it does so as a placeholder for something eminently effable and conceptually identifiable, namely, associations. Exteriority is now not simply something ‘absent’, but something which we, as acting subjects, have the possibility of accessing by engaging in associations.

That associations are viewed as sources of exteriority is also evinced by the fact that Karatani envisions them as functioning in analogy with transcritical space. NAM was conceived not so much as a substantial movement in its own right, but rather as a place or forum where other movements could associate, a transnational ‘association of associations’.

The association of associations is far from the organization of a tree structure, while at the same time it would remain isolated, dispersed, and conflicting, if it did not have a center. So it needs a center, but the center should exist as a function just like transcendental apperception X and not something substantial.⁵⁴

Karatani introduced a lottery system in the final stage of elections to the central board of NAM in order to prevent bureaucratization and fixation of power and to ensure that NAM would be able to function neutrally in the manner of a transcendental frame for a wide diversity of groups and individuals. ‘In this way, an organization with and without a center can be realized’, he writes, and claims that the resulting organization would be ‘the concrete form of the Kantian transcendental apperception X’.⁵⁵

The claim, however, that NAM would be able to ‘counteract’ the trinity of state, capital and nation by bringing exteriority into the system rests on the presupposition that associations do in fact approximate transcritical space. This, of course, is a daring claim which brings to mind what Karatani himself once criticized Nishida for: neglecting the power relations operating even in systems lacking visible centres. While the transcendental can certainly serve as a regulative ideal, as in Kant, it is extremely problematic to posit any concretely existing entity—such as the Japanese empire or a network of associations—as its embodiment.⁵⁶

Despite its early popularity, NAM soon ran into problems and collapsed in early 2003, a little more than two years after its inauguration.⁵⁷ In *Nēshon to bigaku* and other recent texts, written after the dissolution of NAM, Karatani revises his theory in an important respect. He retains the idea of four kinds of exchange but now sees associationism simply as a regulative ideal foreshadowed in ‘world religions’ such as Buddhism, Islam or Christianity, whose Utopian elements he redefines as the X of associationism.⁵⁸ How far these implications reach can be gauged by the fact that

⁵³ Karatani, *Nihon seishinbunseki*, 54.

⁵⁴ Karatani, *Transcritique*, 306.

⁵⁵ Karatani, *Transcritique*, 182, 306

⁵⁶ A similar point has been made by Žižek, who criticizes Karatani for failing to clarify how LETS and lottery can avoid the ‘fetishism’ of money and power. Lottery, for instance, makes the holder of power arbitrary but leaves the ‘mystique of the *place of Power*’ intact. Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 58.

⁵⁷ Problems included the small number of members, increasing bureaucratization and personal tensions. Disagreement between members concerning the LETS project finally triggered the collapse of NAM itself. Doubts about the claims of NAM to realize a genuine transcritical space for the encounter with alterity or to represent a radical break with capitalism have also been voiced by a number of critics. See, for example, Murakami Fuminobu, *Postmodern, Feminist and Postcolonial Currents*, 162.

⁵⁸ Karatani, *Nēshon to bigaku*, 11–20, 60; *Kindai bungaku*, 129–131; *Sekaikyōwakoku*, 6. It is easy to interpret his new stance as a sign of resignation after the failure of NAM. He has clearly lost faith in

Karatani no longer sees associations as ‘exterior’ to the trinity of state, capital and nation. ‘X or the associations that resist capital-nation-state must appear in the midst of the relations between them.’⁵⁹ This is a break with earlier texts in which associations were designated as ‘exterior’ to the trinity. One passage is especially blunt: ‘X does not exist in the exterior of this triad, but comes from its interior’.⁶⁰ What we see here is a retreat from Karatani’s earlier activism that took its point of departure in the belief that LETS was a reliable source of exteriority that could serve as an Archimedean point to critique the ‘trinity’ of the state, capital and nation. Karatani now appears to say that exteriority can only appear momentarily, along the lines of what Bloch used to call a *Vor-Schein* or ‘anticipatory illumination’ of Utopia, in the course of a dynamic movement involving various parts of the trinity, and that it becomes reified as soon as it is tied to a particular movement or ‘standpoint’ as such. Rather than locating the possibility of exteriority in a particular institutional or organizational arrangement, it is seen as arising in the movement between the elements of the system itself, in analogy with the constant oscillating movement of transcritique.

In the face of the discourse of ‘recovery’ in Japan today of economy and national self-esteem, I have suggested that there is also another tradition trying to make itself heard, heralding the ‘recovery’ of social movement activism. As exemplified by NAM, this recovery is certainly fragile. Did it not itself, after all, contribute to what Karatani calls the ‘sterile cycle of failed protests’? But as Freud demonstrated, even an illusory acting out can contribute to a genuine working through. If transcritique must keep moving without letting itself be tied to any fixed organization, there is no need for organizations to be long-lived. From such a perspective, the failure of NAM or any other movement need not be taken as a sign of its sterility. Every movement that at least momentarily succeeds in furthering exteriority may also contribute to ‘recovery’ in the sense of a gradual liberation from the cycle of repetitions.

I will summarize the shifts delineated above. First, in the 1990s, Karatani shifts his target from the Japanese system of power towards global capitalism. As global capitalism is recast as an ally of the nation-state, the market is replaced by associations as offering possibilities for destabilizing the system. Second, although the global market was once viewed as offering the possibility of destabilizing the nation-state, it was essentially a bringer of exteriority from outside Japan. Associationism, by contrast, appeared to be a strategy in which Karatani and his followers were able to participate directly through activism and praxis. Third, the insufficiency of mere criticism and the need for praxis and constructive and substantive proposals therefore become more emphasized. Throughout these changes and despite the change in terminology, we can see a persistence of the ideal of ‘exteriority’. Transcritique is itself a name for a critique that preserves the possibility of exteriority.

lottery and LETS, i.e. the main devices by which he once tried to forge NAM into an approximation of transcritical space. In recent texts, he still places hope in associations: ‘in terms of praxis, I think the time of NAM is yet to come’ (*Kindai bungaku*, 218). However, he is now much vaguer, more careful and less forthcoming with concretizations of what association is really supposed to mean. His recent idea of a ‘world republic’ (Karatani, *Sekaikyōwakoku*) which would transcend the ‘triad of state, capital and nation’ and serve as a complement to the various social movements that arise ‘from below’ still leaves unanswered the question how would such a world republic match up to the Utopian anticipations expressed in world religions.

⁵⁹ Karatani, *Kindai bungaku no owari*, 139.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 222.

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