

# Marxist Realism: Kobayashi Takiji and the Politics of Representation

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the cross-cultural dynamics and contradictions that surface when attempting to apply the universal claims of Marxist literary aesthetics to the particular case of a non-Western national tradition. More specifically, the key work of 1930s proletarian writer, Kobayashi Takiji ("The Factory Ship") and his mentoring relationship to Marxist critic, Kurahara Korehito, will be analyzed by examining the tensions in trying to remain faithful to the universal, international claims of global Marxism, while also respecting Japanese historical and cultural particulars and conditions. Broadly speaking, the issues that surface in the Kobayashi/Kurahara relationship reflect inherent difficulties in maintaining metanarrative dimension of orthodox Marxism that belies its Western framework regarding world historical movements. The tension between the universal and particular poles of Marxism's global vs Japanese context also frames parallel tension between the literary/aesthetic realm of art and its political content; remaining true to the former may bracket the assumed-to-be applicable state of the latter. In short, the question of the viability of a particular work of fiction's realism (namely, its literariness) vs its fidelity to political orthodoxy, often articulated in terms of its form versus content. Finally, this tension between the universal global and particular national culture setting of Marxist literature and Marxist politics also may indicate a tension inherent within the revolutionary ambitions of idealist philosophy, namely Hegelianism. Stated differently, is Marxist philosophy itself a work of art/fiction – the utopic impulse of the classless society and worldwide revolution – at odds with the realities of specific historical and cultural conditions 'on the ground'?

**Keywords:** Japan, Metanarrative, Realism, Western Marxism, Aesthetics

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## 1. Introduction

*Modern art has shown us that art can no longer be regarded as the representative image of such totalities. It cannot, therefore, be an expression of those systems; and so the style of interpretation developed during the nineteenth century has the effect today of seeming to degrade the work as the reflection of prevailing values, and this impression is a natural consequence of the fact that such norms sought to interpret the work in the Hegelian sense as the 'sensual appearance of the idea' [1].*

Since Aristotle, the notion of mimetic representation of the real has long informed Western poetics, yet as the anti-representation discussion within postmodernism would indicate, the issue remains, if only to be contested. Those opposing representation or realism in art criticize the underlying metaphysics of truth that, it is claimed, would

inevitably promote essentialist notions of gender or culture. Hence, the deconstruction of Eurocentrism in all its modernist authority is welcomed as opportunity for those marginalized. On the other hand, those supporting some notion of representational art argue that the pluralist appeal of postmodern aesthetics veils a late capitalist political hegemony quite capable of allowing for non-linear, non-mimetic art forms. In this sense, postmodernism, rather than being seen as overcoming the modern, is actually the ultimate fulfillment of it, creating the ideal ideological system, simultaneously homogenizing while granting expression to pluralist uniqueness.

With the contemporary issues in mind, this paper explores some problems of representation presented within orthodox Marxism, especially focusing on the theoretical framework of Kurahara Korehito and the writing of Kobayashi Takiji. Kurahara's prominence in the theoretical grounding of

proletarian literature in the 1930s, as well as his role in the continued discussion on democratic art in postwar Japan, illuminates the various notions of critical subjectivity and agency that surface in a Marxist ontology vis-a-vis art and literature. When Kurahara's role as valorizing critic is coupled to Kobayashi's role as producer of fiction, rather complex issues integral to Marxist historicism come into play. Basically, what is at stake is defining a theoretical perception of the objectively real, procuring that perception, and the subject/author acting through the mediation of literary expression. Making use of Michel Foucault, Wolfgang Iser and John Frow's analyses, tying the nineteenth century notion of authorship as being analogous to the development of copyright and property rights, Marxism, when seen as the property of Marx, leads to contradictory notions of content versus form, idea as self-expression of an author versus the exteriority of language and, also, revolution as the expression of the proletariat versus the metanarrative construction of the intellectual class.

## 2. Marxist Aesthetics

*In the whole conception of history up to the present this real basis of history has either been totally neglected or else considered as a minor matter. The exponents...in each historical epoch have had to share the illusion of that epoch... While the French and the English at least hold by the political illusion, which is moderately close to reality, the Germans move in the realm of the 'pure spirit,' and make religious illusion the driving force of history [2].*

In order to understand how nineteenth-century critical thought, as seen in the writings of Marx and Freud, may have attacked, while it revamped, traditional notions of mimetic representation in Western history, it is important to see representation as a methodology, not a set doctrine with a fixed content.<sup>1</sup>

Even in Aristotle's *Poetics*, the concept of mimesis is not just the descriptive mirror-like copy of external reality, but an attempt to prescribe an essence or idea that is reflected within the natural world. Representational art is valued as an instrument for contemplating the ideal realm. The project of representation as well as its objects--God, transcendent eternity, spirit--may have changed, but the epistemological system has basically remained unaltered. Thus, Marx, by appropriating Feuerbach's critique of religion as a projection of the mind, turned the tables on reality in an anthropomorphic sense only, recentering the movement of history within a humanism. In redefining the real as scientific, economic and material forces, Marx perpetuates the false consciousness aspect of ideology that he criticizes. The real and the true are the unquestioned determining forces of production embodied in the State that expresses "different theoretical products and forms of consciousness, religion, philosophy, ethics, etc" (Marx, 165-166). in the superstructure. Marx inverts the former Hegelianism that charted the gradual, but revelatory progress of the world spirit through diverse cultures, as he interprets the workings of economic forces. In this equally

grand, totalizing, basically hermeneutical, mode of interpretation, class structures--veiled invisible by ideological constructs--are read and rendered into the realm of intelligibility, i.e., history. In this light, the camera obscura metaphor, the illusory appropriation of the real through technological reproducibility, soon engulfs Marx as well, as the ideological nature of scientific objectivity, the relationship between ideological definitions of realism and illusion, have become somewhat clearer since the mid-nineteenth century. As Susan Sontag argues, what Feuerbach (then Marx) essentially did was to, in a secular way, change the rules of the game by experiencing what had heretofore been included as part of the real (religion) as now a projection [3].

### 2.1. Marxism as the Property of Marx

Marx critiqued nineteenth century Hegelianism and the rise of the modern State for its abstraction of real history, allowing people to be falsely particularized, atomized under a mystified historical movement. Ironically, this critique, including that of private property and the illusion of individuality, allowed for the rise of another modern individual with the hermeneutic capacity for interpreting hidden meanings, if only to debunk them: the valorizing, intellectual critic. The nineteenth century conception of the romantic self who expresses himself in writing--the property of an interior self--may have been discarded in theory, but the practice continued. There are several issues involved here that need to be explored singly, ranging from the question of the critic's role, the changed conception of authorship to the duality of form/content and art/politics.

Implicit to this position is the internality of a unified mind who, ahistorically, is able to gaze and reflect upon an aestheticized external world. Applied to modern authorship, this detached, unified mind produces a fixed, unified content that is reflected upon a text. The consequence of this idealized notion of author is the mimetic idea of representation that it supports. A text then, is really just the perfect mirror of the author's inner world. However, there is a tension in that it is unclear what exactly the author mirrors. Does the author merely reflect his inner world (documented on a text) or does he mirror the heterogeneous forces within society? In the latter case, the author, by his person, would be the symbolic representation of the external world, which is again, documented onto the text. In either case, it seems apparent that the methodology of mimetic representation is at work. Even if post-structuralists turn the author->world->text paradigm into world->author->text, allowing for linguistic determination of the author, this merely regresses the external referent to the realm of language, but still maintains the methodology of a certain mode of representation. Otherwise, a total rupture between language and externality would, besides leading to psychosis, merely shift the eternal transcendent realm from diety to an idealized category of language. Thus, there is a double sense in which even those who advocate denunciation of the author as a subject and instead emphasize texts and writing merely resurrects the problem they sought to escape:

*...Giving writing a primal status seems to be a way of*

*retranslating, in transcendental terms, both the theological affirmation of its sacred character and the critical affirmation of its creative character. To admit that writing is, because of the very history that it made possible, subject to the test of oblivion and repression, seems to represent, in transcendental terms, the religious principle of the hidden meaning (that requires interpretation) [4].*

This usage of the notion of writing runs the risk of maintaining the author's privileges under the protection of writing's a priori status: it keeps alive, in the gray light of neutralization, the interplay of those representations that formed as image of the author.

For this reason, the Marxist canon has strangely reappropriated the status of divine, sacred texts that infinitely open up the demands of textual exegesis. Although the modern conception of the determination of the author by social forces would seem to undermine any possibility of an autonomy, the new notion of the idealized critic and the privileged status of writing reinstalls the transcendent role of, not authorship, but of an ahistorical, all-pervasive consciousness. Closely resembling a certain theological discourse, the potentially unstable nature of texts require exegetical work, tending to stabilize readings by establishing authoritative positions validated by social institutions. Power is consolidated through ownership of texts and language. Not surprisingly, the rise of modern notions of authority parallel that of nation-states in the nineteenth century as well as the valorization of art and education in the museum and university pedagogical structures and canon formations. As such, the authority of the professoriat as cultural transmitter and custodian would seem to parallel the establishment of papal authority and interpretive power by institutions (the Vatican, Comintern, the museum, the university) and the standardization of official languages (Latin, Russian). Ironically then, the modern disestablishment of the author has allowed the rise of a transcendent consciousness and metanarrative authority of the critic or critical institution. The name of a particular writer like Marx establishes a theoretical rubric; any new discovery of reworking of extant manuscripts are invaluable in revealing new insight into the consciousness of a "Marx."

Since an author as a transcendent consciousness is nonrepresentable, forever lost to the reader, a project of logical consistency is undertaken to make distant texts intelligible, albeit within the framework of the reader's intellectual world. At one end of the spectrum lies socialist realism or propaganda in which the official, authoritative framework is agreed upon, wholly subsuming the reader's world and leaving out any possibility of interpretation or engagement by the reader. At the opposite end is, as Iser points out, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, where the author's construction dominates, leaving little area for the reader's framework to coincide with the author's, creating a "lack of availability":

*... a lack of availability serves to heighten the degree to which he [the reader] will project his own standards. And this confirms the suspicion that the uniform meaning of the text--which is not formulated by the text--is the reader's*

*projection rather than the hidden content [5].*

Ironically, the attempts by the German higher critics to desupernaturalize biblical texts tended instead to spiritualize existential experience, removing the need of textual verifiability. In other words, critical debunking of a particular tradition led to an exaltation of spirituality in a general, ecumenical sense, tending to treat diversity of religious traditions homogeneously. Thus, a two-sided dilemma emerged within both Judeo-Christianity and Marxism: on one hand, the need for logical consistency as defined by the reader created a static, rigid definition of authoritative orthodoxy while, on the other hand, this critical function also led to an amorphous, unsure presentation of both theoretical frameworks. Even on a theoretical level then, the illusion of a hypostatic norm would seem to be related to doctrinal fragmentation, paralleling the earlier description of how "objectivity" allegedly gained by science may in fact be connected to the illusion of subjectivist certainty.

## 2.2. Form and Content

Content is 'prior' because it is, or is the representative of, reality within the work. But this leads to a profoundly ambivalent ontology of the text. Insofar as content is more real than form, it is both inside and outside the text, and so the text straddles two realms, two distinct orders of being--reality and fiction. The signified of the text lies outside the sign; or more precisely, the literary sign incorporates the referent into itself, since the content is grasped as both signified and referent.

The central problems within Marxist historicism is succinctly demonstrated within the tension between form and content. The problem can be expressed in multiple ways. If there is an objective perception of the real by an observer, then, to that degree, content is given primary status within a text. There is first and foremost a message to be communicated and a purity of content to be maintained, giving the forms of grammar, style, etc. a secondary status, only communicating content with transparency. The mechanics of writing become the instruments by which content is conveyed. This raises the problem among Marxist theoreticians in coming up with a developmental view of literary genres that matches the notion of historical progress culminating in scientific realism. In order to accomplish this historicizing of genres to match the world historical movement of dialectical history, an equally historicist view of diverse genres occurs as there is, by this perspective, only one true content that can only be conveyed by the corresponding literary form. The disparate meanings attached to a multiplicity of forms in a plurality of cultures are judged at arm's length, from the perspective of an idealized historical movement. The Hegelian spirit, moving through time and manifesting itself in scattered progression, thus, finds its parallel in the development of genres:

*...they [genres] grow out of the concrete determinancy of the particular social and historical conditions. Their character, their peculiarity is determined by their capacity to give expression to the essential features of the given socio-historical phase....they change their character radically (the epic is transformed into the novel),*

*sometimes they disappear completely, and sometimes in the course of history they rise to the surface again* [6].

Along the lines of classical Marxist theory, Lukacs continues the stage theory of genre in which the base expresses the superstructure.

The difficulty in totally conflating form and content upon each other, rather than admitting their heterogeneity, lies in representing a moralist position whose fulfilment is yet deferred. In other words, in a Marxist historical movement still to be completed, how does one mimetically represent it? This has always been the problem in trying to embody absolute ideals into the world of particulars, often resulting in the rigid presentation of ideal types such as in the cold, fossilized examples of ancient Greek sculpture under the period of Platonic influence, not unlike contemporary neo-classical depictions of the ideal body in advertising. Static depictions of the real compensate for historical flux, using a chiliast eschatology to impel social action, until particular difference in the present is stabilized under fulfilled metahistory. Thus, polarizing goal oriented notions of objective truth (the ideal) against historical circumstances (the social) creates a "rigged" effect of social types, symbolizing political platforms, as in social realism. While medieval Christianity never produced a tragedy, the sense of present imperfection and a fallen state made possible the development of comedy and irony. Thus, the creation of a common realm, shared by author, reader, and history, seemed to allow for a more "organic" interplay between ideal and real spheres, converging in the literary work of art. Seen from this perspective, perhaps Marxist aesthetics has suffered from only trying to represent the unrepresentable.<sup>2</sup>

### 3. Kurahara Korehito and Japanese Proletarian Realism

The contradictory notions inherent within depiction of the real became particularly problematic in the theoretical formulation of proletarian realism in the 1930s and continued on into the postwar discussion, as well. The conflicts of form and content, art and politics, fiction and reality were all felt to some degree as Marxist theoreticians attempted to postulate a literature that would be true to the notions of revolution within political theory, largely coming with authority from the Soviet Union and Comintern. In particular, the thought of Kurahara Kurahito, perhaps the most prominent among Marxist literary circles at the time, will be analyzed in light of the issues already raised in this paper. Also, the relationship between Kurahara and noted proletarian writer, Kobayashi Takiji, will be studied in terms of the valorizing role of the intellectual critic.

Kurahara, aptly describes the twin poles contained within Marxist aesthetics by explicitly stating the need for artistic value while, at the same time, stressing an essentially political purpose. In trying to theorize a third way, apart from the total autonomy of art and the rigid orthodoxy of propagandist art, Kurahara works within the contradictions of realism:

*For us the important thing is to discover in the midst of reality that reality which is neither distorted nor embellished by our subjectivity, the reality which corresponds to our subjectivity--the proletarian class subjectivity. Thus only will we be able to make our literature for the first time truly useful in the class struggle of the proletariat. That is to say, first, we must look at the world with the eyes of the proletarian vanguard, and second, describe it with an exact realist's attitude--this is the only path to proletarian realism* [7].

While Kurahara's understanding of realism stays within the methodology of representation and subject/object correspondence, there is subtlety in how the objectively real is procured. Objectivity is static, thus the ability to define a proletarian class as the avenue to realism, yet there is the admittance that the proletarian vision is not automatically at hand, but requires the active movement of the writer towards them. Epistemologically then, there is correspondence between subject and object, but it lies elsewhere and must be achieved. There is also the realization that the perception itself is not readily available as an object or thing that simply stares back at you, but requires a mind-set, a line of vision. In other words, the perceiving subject must alter himself in order to achieve realism. Ironically, the intellectual has created the various conditions and required coordinates of perception, but there is a gray area being acknowledged where knowledge is not transparent. Basically, the proletariat is Kurahara's artifice for maintaining an ideology of truth lodged in the social realm. In a confusing historical situation, the proletariat defines a direction and space to dialectical history--an epistemological organizing principle--where ideal and material realms can converge. It is for this reason that Kurahara articulates "the social" as an overriding category, the place where the Hegelian spirit is manifesting itself, where "things are happening": "Based on this method [materialistic dialectics], proletarian realism selects what is essential out of the endlessly complicated social phenomena, and proceeds to describe that from the viewpoint of the direction in which it necessarily advances." Curiously, in positing the proletariat as the object of his political agenda, Kurahara ends up aestheticizing them much the same way peasants had been a focus of objectification, a poetic trope, for centuries in classical Japanese literature.

In the end, rather than representation within their own lived, historical time and space, the peasants (now the proletariat) were being represented as aestheticized objects.<sup>3</sup> Because of placing ultimate value on the depiction of proletarian realism, Kurahara's attempts to synthesize the dualities of form/content and art/politics amount to subsuming both of the former categories under an overriding definition of the latter. Using materialism as the unquestioned foundation, Kurahara then posits a seemingly more egalitarian exchange between form and content, but in actuality, is defining both within the rubric of historical progress based on materialism. Thus, the distinctions between form and content amount to little more than epiphenomena: "As we understand it, art in its entirety, that is, both its form and content, is a reflection of materialistic

life in society, and is nothing materialistic in itself" [8].<sup>4</sup>

Thus, along the lines of classical Marxist aesthetics, content (meaning the base) is primary and all forms can be read as disclosing the hidden meaning of the social reality moving towards progress. The role of the critic is often to reveal, by supplementing the meaning, even if the form under question would deny it, as in abstract or pop art. In these cases, the interpretive critic can, by falling back on and exercising judgement from prior, universalist norms of self-expression, critique the artwork as decadent. In this situation then, what is being represented are the norms themselves, revealing just how blatant the role of the critic is in using art forms to mirror his own assumptions.

The issue of art and politics well capsulizes the theoretical tensions inherent in trying to conflate a metanarrative political agenda upon particular form of literature. In brief, if the content is truly preeminent, then what becomes of an art form with categories of beauty that, although grounded as aesthetic judgements arising in history, may continue to offer aesthetic pleasure and simply be appreciable works beyond the particular historical period in which they were created? In a stage theory of progress, there is an implicit assumption of the value of the overarching scheme dominating over the particular history that is subsumed. There is a logic of utility and certain acceptance of the disposable as priority is granted to historical movement. The difficulty in absorbing the artistic dimension under the political is in the ability to register levels of meaning beyond the limitations of historical determination. A kind of aesthetic exteriority, an irreducibility exists whose meaning can outlive the usefulness of the particular political purpose it may have been intended for. At any rate, there is a certain unquantifiable aspect to a work of art that is additional to whatever political function it may have served, producing an immaterial dimension to appreciation, an "instability" of aesthetic resonance. Understanding that quality of art, Kurahara attempted to theorize a politics that would remain prior in importance and be the basis upon which art, in all its meanings, would derive its social value:

*It is clear that, just as science has to have scientificity, a work of art has to have the quality of being a work of art....to have the quality of art is after all...not a value in and of itself. It is a 'pre-value.' Hence, it does not necessarily mean that a piece of art with artistic quality is of value [9].*

Again, much the same way that Kurahara aestheticized particularities of art forms and the "proletariat" by invoking the transcendent realm of historical movement, art's value is categorized by the language of specialization under the umbrella of the social. Though allowing each realm (science, art) to have its own maxims, they are all still dehistoricized under an overriding social project, symbolized by a proletariat that he gave shape to himself.

Further, Kurahara attempts to handle the problem of art by categorizing it into two areas: art for agitation-propaganda of the proletariat and eventual proletariat art, as Kobayashi Hideo observed: "It was not that young Marxists had lost the feel for everyday life, but that their ideology instructed them

to transform the concept of 'life' from the mundane to the 'historical'" [10]. The former category attempts to solve the problem of, in a sense, "artless" art that is produced for the sole purpose of immediate utility (posters, flyers, etc.) as opposed to art that is to last. Besides the fact that this simply internalizes the universalist, bourgeois notion of "good" art being synonymous with lasting quality, the categories themselves do not contain their genres in an exclusive way. Theoretically, it is possible for agit-prop art, made with less reflection for a scheduled purpose, to create more interesting aesthetic results, from the viewpoint of hindsight. Conversely, an overwrought work of art may be so comprehensive in conflating message over style that it might appear to be tedious and unimaginative, being uninteresting later. The dilemma of historicism's relation to the exigencies of the present becomes obvious: where is the perspective from which to judge when an artwork passes from being agit-prop to "valid" art? That shift in assessment finally depends upon a place of exteriority from which to evaluate stages of political progress. Like the thin line that defines when and where a determined individual becomes an agent of change, the line between agit-prop and "art" would seem to be undrawable but from the idealized perspective of the intellectual's field of vision. Curiously, for Kurahara, when a work of art breaks through the limitations of its social determination--thus, making an argument for artistic value as such--it does so by affirming "objective reality," an almost direct revelation of the true essence of things. Thus, like the acknowledged ambiguities involved in procuring the true perspective that only resides with the proletarian class, Kurahara allows for the possibility of flux to occur in the social with periodic artistic manifestations of the true and the real.

#### 4. Kobayashi Takiji and "The Factory Ship"

Kobayashi is often cited as the outstanding writer of proletarian literature with his short novel, Kani Kosen ("The Factory Ship"),<sup>5</sup> usually hailed as exemplar of a literary and political achievement. "Factory Ship" will be briefly analyzed to show how the story works as a political text with of intentionality, while the attempt to be "believable" as a story allows it to gain a measure of authenticity for its realism, yet also mitigates against its politics. This is related to the tension between content, as didactic doctrine, and form, as realized through narrative and stylistic structures. In short, at a certain point, the extreme care in realistic portrayal seems to undermine the political content of the situation depicted. Like the American government's sending out of photographers to catalogue the misery of farm victims of the dust bowl in the 1930s, the portrayals of hardship were calculated and posed to create the "look" of disaster. Kurahara's role as critic in correspondence to Kobayashi further illustrates the "unnaturalness" of giving voice to a proletariat class. Kobayashi acknowledged Kurahara's stature as critic and openly sought to please, to create the well-balanced

proletarian novel. Interesting is a diary account in which Kobayashi desires to know Marx "the same way that I know Goethe, Dostoevsky, and Strindberg" [11].

*Kobayashi seemed to value Das Kapital because it was a Western classic, further complicating the historicism involved as revolutionary impulse in Japan is stimulated by admiration for the European tradition in art and literature. Curious still is the apparent fact that he wrote "“FACTORY SHIP”" while on company time; he was being supported by the bank institution that he sharply criticized [12].*

Briefly, "Factory Ship" is a story of a motley group of peasants and students who, faced with the economic hardships of their families, take on the work of crab fishing boats. The work is extremely hard with serious illness resulting from overwork and lack of nutrition. Whatever pay is earned is usually squandered on drink and prostitutes during rare periods while docking, thus creating a cycle of dependence for most of the men to remain on the ship. Nationalism is indoctrinated as the men fish off Russian waters for the glory and strength of Japan, creating a dangerous situation for the men's lives, but extremely lucrative one for the companies who finance the excursions. Human life is definitely expendable under the severe authority of a superintendent.

One the level of its political agenda, "Factory Ship" is fairly typical. Virtually all the shipmates go unnamed but for the superintendent who is stereotyped as the cruel exploiter. The workers are pitted against each other until they finally see the value in organizing and challenge the superintendent with demands. Coming across some Russian fishermen in a smaller expedition boat, the Japanese men learn the value of communism while better understanding the wrongheaded, nationalistic line they were being fed by their leaders, the conspirators of capitalism. Narratively, the devices are fairly typical as well. The men are constantly described in animal metaphors, conveying their subhuman condition. The tension and drama of the story gradually builds, finally leading to an organized strike and storming of the superintendent's cabin. The opening line, "We're on our way to hell, mate!," is carried as a running motif, then made symmetrical with the declaration, "The superintendent can go to hell!" at the pivotal point of recognizing the possibility of revolt. This revelation of social action is also described with an illumination metaphor: "...they could clearly see what their existence had been...it was as if a flashlight had suddenly been turned on..." Finally, among the three organizing leaders is a stutterer who ends up leading the three-hundred men in unison in a rallying cry and calls the superintendent "a damn fool!" In many respects then, this revolutionary novel merely appropriates the conventions of narrative storytelling. Revolution is only in the content.

The more interesting elements of the story lie in its discontinuities, the truths that are communicated in spite of itself. At some points, this is characterized as the aesthetic autonomy within the text that causes destabilization of any predetermined meaning. Interestingly enough, the aesthetic ruptures sometime occur when Kobayashi attempts to be the most didactic. This follows with Kurahara's guidance that

"directed the artist to study and then to portray the objective realities of daily life rather than to give expression to the artist's autonomous perspectives of the world...to serve moreover, by means of this objective literature, as an instructor to the people..." [13]. It is the displacement of his own propaganda, creating a break in the narrative, that allows for narrative irregularities. At other times, there are logical inconsistencies that create humor and problematize the narrowly conceived moralistic meaning (key example is the men being described as sexually and physically strong, thus, explaining their turn to homosexuality while, just a little earlier, describing them as physically exhausted due to overwork and disease).

The use of impersonal description creates ambiguities as well. In wanting to portray a class rather than individual awareness, Kobayashi has left out the names, but for the superintendent. Though there is a tie to geographic region (identifying men by their respective prefectures), the result is that "Factory Ship" only contains social types: peasants, students, capitalists, and nationalists. Besides the fact that, historically, prefectural designation is also an organizing category of the State, there is a further problem in that the categories under criticism, like nationalism and capitalism, also remain equally abstract. Thus, when the "Russians" and a "Chinese" turn out to be "human beings," they retain their former nationalist labels, causing their difference, their humanness, to register only on the level of affect. The international, historicist categories of capitalist versus proletariat are used to win solidarity among diverse nationalities, but ultimately, the more universalist labels merely play one abstraction off another. The actual individuals remain in relief under Kobayashi's social constructs as he pictures the peasants as politically and socially resigned (they drink away their income, blindly accept authority) while the students are the ones who organize and break the cycle of oppression. There is also the privileging of the urban over the rural as the social isolation on the ship matches the intellectual isolation of its peasant workers. Several references are made to the effect that acquiescence to similar working conditions in a city factory would never happen. In this light, the students on board represent an urban consciousness that ignites revolutionary consciousness within the peasants.

Besides the impersonal social constructions, the men are situated metaphysically, too. In the pivotal section where the men are enlightened by revolutionary consciousness, it seems that an attempt is made to link the struggle on the ship with the movement in history:

*Everyone realized that the man had not spit out the words on the spur of the moment in a hollow show of bravado. They had been wrenched out of him, almost despite himself, by some maniacal force--the words of a man who had known nothing but humiliation. The man, driven involuntarily by this force, was himself bewildered and taken aback at first, unaware that what had made him speak was a hidden strength within him. Could we do such a thing?... Once caught up in the mood, they could clearly see what their existence had been up to this point; it was if a*

*flashlight had suddenly been turned on* [14].

Also, the empowerment of atomized men by a transcendent movement of history is contrasted with the earlier helplessness of them under the ravages of nature (violent storms, icy waters) and the superintendent, both of which form a background of impersonality and callousness. Since the dawning of a revolutionary consciousness overlaps with a refusal to venture into stormy waters, the victory over social evil is linked to that over alienation in nature, ultimately presenting a kind of humanism, a birthing of a new human type who, by seeing truth in historical movement, organizes and masters the world.

In its vividly detailed descriptions of suffering, "Factory Ship" relies upon an aesthetics of realism to convey social truth and brutality. Like Zola's naturalist novels, Kobayashi uses and confuses coarse portrayal as necessarily being an instrument of conveying one's stance towards social injustice. The gap between art and politics is particularly glaring in narrative instances where such obsession with gruelling details (causing repulsion in the reader) is meant to trigger social outrage as well. The difficulty is that this kind of almost photographic technique anaesthetizes as well as aesthetizes pain. A narrative of pain is not the same as pain itself and, again, calls into question the unideological use of realism under a political project. Curiously, as the revolutionary intention of the narrative description is not automatically conveyed, Kobayashi breaks into direct narrative commentary, filling in the reader with the intended meaning that the story itself is not sufficiently conveying. Usually during these breaks, Kobayashi links up the events on the "Factory Ship" with the international scene of global capitalism, resurfacing the tension between freewill and determinism within the novel form as, periodically, the omniscient author simply has to override and state his case. As in the descriptions of brutality and life on the ship, the prescriptive meanings can largely only be conveyed didactically as a content. Ironically, the social integration of historical movement onto the level of human existence also only gets communicated as the narrator "talks at you." The only successful integration, the breaking through of a transcendent meaning in the narrative realm, only occurs in the more quirky moments, the ruptures, when the autonomy of brutal description loses sight of the political purpose. These graphic close-up shots become curiously disengaged from their social context as infatuations with cruelty as such.

In the immediate postwar era, it would seem that Kurahara's theoretical position concerning the development of a new literature remained markedly similar to the earlier proletarian literature discussion. He continues to deal with the epistemological difficulties in moving towards the point of view of the masses by positing a dialectical historical movement. By maintaining the developing process of objective reality, Kurahara gives a sense of the dynamic, but, again, his notions of allowing human subjectivity a role to play are thoroughly governed by the idealized critic who is able to perceive reality accurately. The only uncertainties lie in the intellectual having to move towards the masses for that positionality of truth, thereby forever deferring the question by aesthetically removing the masses from a present social

history. In actual fact, since the "masses" is an idealized abstraction, the only space being defined here is the role of the artist/intellectual who is in constant self-cultivation and self-affirmation of his own subjectivity:

*Humanism appears within us in accord with the process of development of reality. Accordingly, if the artist is a social being, and particularly if he is a class artist, affiliated with the class which is recovering its humanity in society, no matter what kind of reality he reflects, so long as it is reflected through the subject, then when even the most unhumanistic reality is portrayed from that viewpoint it will become the object of art* [11].

Only by maintaining an ontological framework which is founded upon historical movement and aestheticized category (masses), read from the idealized critic's place, can the intellectual sustain the ideological function of realism or objective reality.

Hidden in this construction is the station of power that supports this strangely classless role of the intellectual who denies his class while never being fully part of the masses either. This is the case of the intellectual missionary, the ethnographer, whose myth of neutral observation maintains a relationship of power. Even when allowing for the subjective element in science and the role of experience generally, Kurahara maintains "it is also necessary for the artist to regulate this subjectivity, which is the product of all those experiences, by borrowing the strength of social science and natural science."<sup>6</sup> Like Bakhtin's analysis of monologic narrativity, neither the hero's voice, nor any combination of other voices, actually arises since all are subsumed and regulated under the author's: "The hero's subconsciousness is presented against the fixed background of the external world and is contained within the fixed framework of the author's consciousness" (Bakhtin, 42). Likewise, in Kurahara's thought, the differences and tensions between form/content, art/politics, emotion/intellect and determined individual/agent of change are all secondary, as they are subsumed under historical movement. The actor in history (hero in epic) is determined by an idealized intellectual/author, thus creating a metanarrative in which "the hero cannot stop being himself" (Bakhtin, 41).

## 5. Conclusion

The adage, 'History doesn't repeat, it rhymes,' seems appropriate in describing contemporary appropriation of Japan to aid in intellectually justifying the present collapse of epistemological unity under postmodernism, in a bold revamping of Oriental exoticism. Although seemingly out of keeping with the postmodern project (dissolution of the subject in history, non-linear narrative, etc.), nevertheless, there seems to be a new variation on the old theme of exoticizing the Asian Other, only this time around coming from those who seek a paradisiac alternative to the Western tradition of rationalism, reigniting the tensions in the debates surrounding Marxist literature and Marxist literary aesthetics. This gesture is a contemporary version of the earlier critique of Western metanarratives of liberalism and Marxism that, as

Japanese constitutional law scholar, Nakano Tomio, observes: "Western theories of liberalism, democracy, and Marxism were not comprehensive worldviews" [15].

The fascination with postmodern aesthetics in texts and artwork continues to dominate theoretical discourse, suggesting that that representation is still with us, but that we are being represented, and that the scope of this is being maintained:

The traditional artwork is tied to content too, of course, but with this difference: the artwork is produced through the active intervention of a subject, the artist, who may be working realistically to render an object as an imitation of nature, or romantically to express an inner feeling, or abstractly to express the pure visual experience itself. But the artwork in all of these cases represents, whereas the image gives evidence [16].

And, finally, raising anew the unsettling question of arts' politically marginal status, as well as its autonomy in modern society:

...By breaking with the common language, such an esthetic deepens the division between art and society and perpetuates the spiral of artistic alienation and impotence. The more violently the arts overturn objective consciousness, the representational view of art, and the common language, the more surely do they guarantee their marginality and harmlessness... The strategic refusal of obedience to social demands on art permits the artist to ignore the fact that society has stopped making them [17].

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1In part, the confusion in John Marshall's "Freud and Marx at UNESCO," (*The American Scholar*, vol. 16/3, summer, 1947) over Marx and Freud is in pitting the two against each other as opposite poles of economic determinism versus personal subjectivity. On other levels, the similarities of the two writers is striking. As examples of nineteenth century hermeneutics, both men rely upon the power of interpretation to render external aspects of the "superstructure" intelligible, whether they be culture as expressions of economic forces or dreams, language, art, etc. as expression of underlying sexual aggression. Shared conceptions of how the past—whether material history of a reified object or childhood experiences—carries over into the present characterizes parallel explanations of alienation and trauma. Also, Marx's superstructure/base relationship seems basically similar to Freud's concept of psychic structures, the superego (moral norms, conscience) being premised upon the biological determination of the id.

2I have in mind Sartre's notion of intellectual as embodying the contradictions of State determination, while having developed the analytical skills in freedom of research, thus, "unhappy consciousness" as explored in *Between Existentialism and Marxism*.

3As in the origin of landscape portrayal, the configuration of a working class or proletariat as an aestheticized object parallels the rise of an altered, aestheticized epistemological framework. Informative is Hannah Arendt's argument that modern revolutionary movements are characterized by 'compassion,' the turning of a group of people into the object of one's feelings of pity or sympathy. Thus, rather than treating people with individual dignity and difference, modern egalitarianism tends to liquidate personality under the gaze of the viewer. "Fraternity, which the French Revolution added to the liberty and equality.. has its natural place among the repressed and persecuted.. whom the eighteenth century called the unfortunate, les malheureux, and the nineteenth century the wretched, les misérables....compassion has remained inseparably and unmistakably part of the history of European revolutions." See essay, "On Humanity in Dark Times" (Arendt).

4Kurahara, "Three or Four Theoretical Problems" (Shea).

8Kobayashi Takiji, trans. Frank Motufuji, *The "Factory Ship" and The Absentee Landlord* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973), 3-83.

6Shea, in his section on Kobayashi, also repeats the same pattern. The police's brutal torture of Kobayashi is graphically described in like manner to an earlier excerpt from Kobayashi, March 15, 1928. Thus, Kobayashi the revolutionary is portrayed in Shea's book as fictive characters were in Kobayashi's own stories.

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Also, due to total identification of author with characters, Shea feels the need to qualify quotes from characters, saying that "This, of course, is not a direct reflection of Kobayashi's own ideology." (318). Further highlighting the exteriority of language, even the content of a character's speech needs to be commented on to separate the intention of the author from the intention of the reader. Reference to unpublished translation by J. V. Koschmann, "Literature and Reality: A Conversation with Kurahara Korehito," Jan. 1946, 18-30.

Kurahara's rural/urban and feudal/modern splits help him to simultaneously blame Japanese naturalist literature's alleged narcissism on agrarian, feudal vestiges, leading to somewhat contradictory usage of the masses as being repository of truth and object of truth. The latter requires that the intellectual give shape to the masses before taking advantage of their perspective on reality. This is somewhat similar to Maruyama Masao modernization theory in "The Ideology and Dynamics of Japanese Fascism," linking agrarianism/feudalism with fantasy, irrationality and a lack of realism.