

BOOK REVIEW

Disruptions of daily life: Japanese literary modernism in the world, by Arthur M. Mitchell, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2020, 276 pp., US\$ 55.00 (hardback), ISBN13: 9781501752919

This is an erudite and well-researched book that adds a new angle to the study of Japanese modernist literature. Mitchell examines not only the works of major and lesser-known modernists in the 1920s and 30s – Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, Yokomitsu Riichi, Kawabata Yasunari, and Hirabayashi Taiko – he also includes media and daily life as the correlative context of the study, leading to the central thesis that modernist works are not limited to the “ingenuity of their design and textual play” (2) but should be noted for their intricate connection and embeddedness in late-Taishō and early-Shōwa society. This book attempts to close the gap between a formalistic study of modernist Japanese literature focusing on hermeneutics and a cultural studies approach based on an investigation of the historical and cultural circumstances of its production. The author argues convincingly that the modernist language is deeply enmeshed in and a reaction to the language of the media and daily life, challenging what is taken for granted and the status quo of the quotidian linguistic signs.

In the chapter on Tanizaki, Mitchell argues that *A Fool's Love* is “a subversion of social discourses that ran through the mass media of the early twentieth century” (55), especially the discourse of “daily life” and the illusion of women’s emancipation stemming from the profusion of words such as “freedom, progressivism, Westernization” (55). The rich references to the language of women’s magazines and newspapers in comparison to the way such language is turned on its head in the novel show meticulous research and careful close reading. Through Mitchell’s analysis, the reader comes to appreciate Tanizaki’s mischief, humor, and genuine social criticism in transforming the main character Naomi into a vehicle for “the subversion of social language” (90) and challenging the seemingly progressive but in fact empty linguistic signs that flooded daily life without genuine meaning.

No study of Japanese modernism can leave out Yokomitsu, and Mitchell seeks to understand Yokomitsu’s modernism in the context of the local society. He argues that Yokomitsu’s works are not just “manifestations of global trends or reflections of historical crisis, but direct critical engagements with their social contexts” (103). This chapter examines Yokomitsu’s modernist manifesto, “The Theory of Neo-Sensation,” as a reaction against Satō Haruo’s treatise that links literature with Japanese ethnic nationalism. Finally, this chapter includes meticulous close readings of Yokomitsu’s urban fiction to argue that Yokomitsu’s modernist works are disruptions of daily life “as defined by essentialist visions of Japanese ethnicity and urban development” (104). This is the most ambitious chapter in the book in that the discussion ranges from Kantian phenomenology to Satō’s and Yokomitsu’s treatises on aesthetics and ethnic essentialism, and the complexity of the argument at times obscures its insights. I will be curious to find out the legacy of Yokomitsu’s modernist engagement in the critical works of Kobayashi Hideo, whose *Impressions (Kansō)*, 1958–63 includes extensive philosophical ruminations on the discourse of sensation and the thing-itself, ideas that feature prominently in Yokomitsu’s fiction and nonfiction.

The chapter on Kawabata’s *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa* identifies the story as a post-1923 earthquake story and convincingly argues that Kawabata undermines “the language of the state and the ideology of reconstruction” (191). This is a chapter that speaks directly to

contemporary readers in 2021 who have spent at least a decade inhabiting the language of reconstruction (*fukkō*) in the media since the 3.11 earthquake in 2011, to the extent that the Tokyo Olympics is often called the Reconstruction Olympics (*fukkō gorin*) in Japan. While the slogans of reconstruction in Taishō boast of “The Greatness of Tokyo” and “The Completion of the Project to Reconstruct the Imperial City” (157), Mitchell argues persuasively that Kawabata’s inconclusive and unfinished narrative undermines the rhetoric of completion and rebirth. Building on Mitchell’s astute observation of Kawabata’s modernist critique, I would draw attention to Kawabata’s vested interest in the lives of characters who are young, gender-fluid drifters, casualties of a national rhetoric of reconstruction that threatened to marginalize or erase their existence. Kawabata’s critique of the rhetoric of reconstruction is as important today as it was ninety years ago when the story was serialized.

The discussion of Hirabayashi Taiko as a modernist writer is significant in that she had been identified as a proletarian, feminist, or political writer but not as a modernist in previous studies, and Mitchell’s analysis of her language of physical pain in relation to childbirth and other forms of suffering adds to our understanding of modernist expressions. However, this chapter succumbs to the conventional binary of male and female perceptions and sensations that reinforces the artificial gender divide in literary imagination. In comparing the focus on the body in Yokomitsu’s and Hirabayashi’s works, Mitchell writes, “While Yokomitsu’s concern was with cognition and perception, Hirabayashi was more concerned with the physical sensations of the body” (231). Admittedly, Hirabayashi’s description of birthing pain was a tour de force, but Kawabata is also capable of capturing the abject in the detailed description of Otoko’s cramps and bodily fluids after a miscarriage in *Beauty and Sadness*, not to mention the uncanny description of birthing in Sōseki’s *Grass on the Wayside*. The gender binary stems from the assumption of cisgender authors, and modernist works force the reader to rethink the gender identity of the author and not to take male and female writers at face value.

Overall, this is a valuable study with rich research materials and in-depth close reading in both English translation and the original Japanese texts. Particularly noteworthy is Mitchell’s ability and commitment to analyze the structure, rhythm, and vocabulary of the original texts, down to the use of specific *kanji* or radicals to create mental images and physical sensations, as well as revealing the internal disruptions in the composition as the language questions its conventional meaning. This book builds on and responds intelligently to existing scholarship of Japanese modernist literature and serves as an important bridge to further studies.

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