

Between the technique of living an endless routine and the madness of absolute degree zero: Japanese identity and the crisis of modernity in the 1990s.


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 **Between the Technique of Living an Endless Routine and the Madness of Absolute Degree Zero: Japanese Identity and the Crisis of Modernity in the 1990s**

Yumiko Iida

positions: east asia cultures critique

Duke University Press

Volume 8, Number 2, Fall 2000

pp. 423-464

ARTICLE

[View Citation](#)

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**Between the Technique of Living an Endless Routine and the Madness of Absolute Degree**

# Zero:

## Japanese Identity and the Crisis of Modernity in the 1990s

Yumiko Iida

The aesthetic is at once . . . the very secret prototype of human subjectivity in early capitalist society, and a vision of human energies as radical ends in themselves which is the implacable enemy of all dominative or instrumentalist thought. It signifies a creative turn to the sensuous body, as well as an inscribing of that body with a subtly oppressive law; it represents on the one hand a liberatory concern with concrete particularity, and on the other hand a specious form of universalism.

-Terry Eagleton

In *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990), Terry Eagleton defiantly argues that art in the "postmodern" age has lost its emancipatory potential, and that the aesthetic has come to represent either the agent of late capitalism characterized by a "fetishism of style and surface" and a "cult of hedonism and technique" or the echo chamber of the voices of ghosts returning from the past armed with a "panoply of myths, symbols and orgiastic spectacles."<sup>1</sup> Despite **[End Page 423]** these pronouncements, one can hear in the above passage another Eagleton who wants to find room in the aesthetic for an emancipatory potential and who feels sympathy for the "discourse of the body" as the excluded Other of Enlightenment Reason. Eagleton's ambivalence about the utopian potential implied in "the aesthetic" is shared by many in our times who have witnessed this returning specter, the twentieth century's obsessive desire to pursue and possess the body, self, and nation, that has resulted in a whirlwind of malaise and human misery. Yet this negative half of the Enlightenment has once again been pressed into service as a counterhegemonic site of resistance against Reason's tyrannical control, gathering together all the inarticulate desires seeking to transcend modern dualism in a vision of utopic harmony. As the late twentieth

century witnesses the forward movement of a modernity increasingly transforming itself into an ever oppressive inscription of technical rationalism into the empirical life sphere, the aesthetic has reemerged at the center stage of our intellectual and political life.

It has been two decades since Jean-François Lyotard defined the postmodern as the coming age of "incredulity towards metanarratives" and gestured toward the ample potential for individual freedom in the indeterminate space that was opened by the decline of the all-encompassing scientific truth.<sup>2</sup> Since then, the term *postmodernism* has been added to the handful of the most significant concepts in the scholarly lexicon and has played a central role both in the conception of a radical democracy and as a platform for progressive causes.<sup>3</sup> Today, however, the concept seems to demand a critical rethinking in light of the changing face of the contemporary world. The intellectual, sociocultural, and historical climate of the 1990s appears to be, in my view, in a state of profound disarray, deeply troubled by the effects of postmodernity-or what I suggest is better described by the term *late modernity*-that are more deeply felt today than ever. In the case of Japan, the 1990s witnessed a multiple breakdown of political, economic, and sociocultural orders and induced a visible shift in the mood of society reflecting an end to the glorious age of Japanese economic success on the global stage. The decade saw a burgeoning political instability, the Heisei depression and financial crisis, and the so-called burst of the bubble economy, [End Page 424] developed in the midst of the dramatic international geopolitical restructuring that followed the end of the Cold War. This seemingly sudden barrage of misfortunes is far from accidental; rather, as I hope to convince my readers, it is the structurally caused outcome of the continuous development of the modern.

In this article I examine some disturbing features of contemporary Japanese society as a way of coming to grips with the greater problematic surrounding the issues of identity and modernity and the troubled relations between the two. With this aim in mind, I focus on a

number of manifestations of the crisis in the realms of subjectivity and the collective imaginary, interrogate some...

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