

## IN SEARCH OF COMMON GROUND BETWEEN COMPARATIVE STUDIES OF CULTURE AND COGNITIVE SCIENCE

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### Introduction

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### *Introduction*

Specification and examination of the cultural characteristics peculiar to a given ethnic group or country, followed by comparison of the similarities and differences of these characteristics as observed worldwide, has been undertaken primarily in the realm of comparative studies of culture (hikaku bunka kenkyu) in Japan. The discipline has thus far provided many new insights and perspectives into the studies of culture(s), enhancing people's knowledge and understanding of their own and other culture(s). Despite such significant achievements, the discipline has also attracted criticism. In recent years, for example, leftist scholars and critics of culture (the 'cultural Left') have bitterly denounced comparative studies of culture in Japan (and worldwide) as a form of political ideology that implicitly instigates racism and nationalism. The effect of leftist criticism has been devastating, inflicting a mortal wound on the continuation and progress of the discipline in Japan. Whatever be the rights or wrongs of the leftist critique, it seems certain that the discipline has lost its centripetal force in Japan, drifting aimlessly into the turbulent ocean of social globalization and cultural hybridism. Meanwhile, the inexorable tide of globalization and hybridization, as is widely acknowledged, exacerbates the rampant growth of cultural friction and conflicts worldwide.

Faced with such problems, people across the world have increasingly begun to recognize the importance of cross-cultural tolerance and understanding. How will the field of comparative studies of culture in Japan be able to respond to the pressing problems of contemporary cultural criticism? To explore this question, I want to seek assistance outside the discipline of comparative studies of culture proper.

First, I turn to the field of historical representation for guidance. More specifically, I refer to the concept of figural realism as proposed by Hayden White, a contemporary American cultural critic and philosopher of history. White originally created his concept through a series of fierce debates about how realistically historians can represent the horrific events and

experiences of the Holocaust. White designates the form of truth represented by figural realism as an entity that exists somewhere between bare facts and sheer fiction. Although White's prime target in using figural realism is the sophistication of historical representation, his critical mind, which breeds figural realism, also seems to be efficacious in addressing the problem of representing the cultural Other. To those who have to face the challenges of the Other, whether historically or culturally, their objects of cognition and recognition almost always appear as puzzling to represent and to interpret. Unfortunately, however, White's argument remains insufficient and leaves much to be desired for further application.

Second, to break the deadlock, I seek assistance from two fields outside of comparative studies of culture, fields that are loosely intertwined with each other: cognitive science and rhetoricism.

Regarding cognitive science, I begin with the interesting fact that cognitive scientists share with White an interest in the grammatical phenomenon of the middle voice. Whereas White refers to the middle voice as one of the prime examples of figural realism, cognitive scientists cast light on the phenomenon from the broader perspective of the environment. The latter surpasses the former in terms of persuasiveness, because the cognitive science approach, which is based upon the broader perspective of the environment, elucidates the characteristics of the middle voice in terms of 'searching attempts' and 'communality.' The potential orientation of the middle voice toward searching attempts and communality is grounded in a three-part relationship between the parties involved in human cognition: the self, the Other, and the environment. This remarkable analysis of the middle voice suggests that, unlike conventional wisdom that regards historical studies exclusively as the discipline of discovering precisely what happened in the past, historical studies is a future-oriented practice of searching for a common understanding between the self and the Other—among all and sundry who have conflicting views and opinions—within the inescapable horizons of the environment.

Next, I turn to rhetoricism for the philosophical basis of cognitive science (especially cognitive semantics): relativism. Regarding this theme, I start by mentioning the intense rivalry between cognitive semantics and the mainstream of twentieth-century linguistics. The major driving force behind the formation of cognitive semantics is a critique of objectivist linguistics, such as Saussurian structuralism and Chomskian generative grammar. Against the objectivism and scientism that underlie these two dominant modes of contemporary linguistics, cognitive semantics is founded on the relativistic premise of rhetoricism—that the rhetorical use of or practice of language relates to the relativistic view of truth. Rhetoricians typically have a firm belief that truth is not a monolithic, fixed entity, but that it always emerges in various forms and in response to specific situations created by the environment that surrounds human beings. Whenever the milieu of enunciation—under what condition (i.e., when and where) one speaks, or specifically to whom one speaks—changes, one must respond and adapt to such situational changes swiftly and appropriately. For rhetoricians, truth exists only in the realms of relativity and plurality.

After a somewhat lengthy detour to examine the three catalytic agencies (figural realism, cognitive semantics, and rhetoricism), I return to my primary concern: the future of comparative studies of culture in Japan (and in the contemporary world). I suggest that the cognitive perspective, which I hereafter refer to as a loose amalgamation of the three catalytic agencies, is beneficial to the advancement of comparative studies of culture. In other words, the cognitive perspective might be able to rescue comparative studies of culture from the demeaning stigma

of nationalism and racism. This tentative conclusion can be further substantiated by two points.

The first point concerns the understanding of the Other. The cognitive perspective teaches us that the challenge of representing and understanding the Other, whether historical or cultural, cannot be handled well within a simple-minded dichotomy between the self and the Other; instead, we are challenged to take into consideration the third factor, namely the environment. The introduction of the environmental viewpoint helps us to bridge the assumed chasm between the self and the Other and thereby to establish some kind of communality.

The second point relates to the reconciliatory function of relativism. In contemporary discussions of culture, especially of multiculturalism, the antagonism between proponents of universality (i.e., human nature and rights) and those of particularity (i.e., diverse cultural differences) stands out most. Meanwhile, the cognitive perspective, which insightfully revives relativism by way of rhetoricism, suggests the further possibility of using relativism and rhetoricism to bring about a reconciliatory mediation between universality and particularity. Given that suggestion, I further argue that the cognitive perspective seems to provide some promising ways to break the impasse of comparative studies of culture, and restore it to its former vigor. That is, the cognitive perspective can refurbish the comparative method in studies of culture as a new strategy for mediating the antagonism between universality and particularity, eventually paving a new path for the advancement of cross-cultural understandings on a global scale.

### I. *Comparison in Trouble: Comparative Studies of Culture in Japan and Criticism of the Discipline*

The discipline of comparative studies of culture in Japan is in a quandary. During the past few decades, it has expanded the horizons of people's understanding of culture(s). In recent years, however, it has borne the brunt of criticism. The conflicting appraisals of comparative studies of culture in Japan are prominent in the interpretations of certain works, such as Tetsurō Watsuji's *Climate and Culture* (1935), Ruth Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946), Masao Maruyama's *Studies in the Intellectual History of Tokugawa Japan* (1952), all of which adopt a strategic approach of comparison.<sup>1</sup> Nowadays, these masterpieces of comparative studies of culture in the middle twentieth century are severely criticized as hotbeds of essentialism and nationalism: it is opined that these three works implicitly presuppose the simplistic binarism of East-West. Critiques of this kind have been raised primarily by leftist scholars and critics of culture, who have ridden the tide of new types of politico-cultural criticism, such as post-colonialism and cultural studies. The leftist critique of comparative studies of culture has had a devastating effect on the discipline in Japan, plunging it into a predicament. How will comparative studies of culture in Japan be able to restore its former prestige and vigor?

In cultural criticism in modern Japan, methods of 'comparison' have played a major role

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<sup>1</sup> Tetsurō Watsuji, *Climate and Culture*, trans. Geoffrey Bownas (Tokyo, Japan: Yūshōdō Press, 1961). Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1946). Masao Maruyama, *Studies in the Intellectual History of Tokugawa Japan*, trans. Mikizo Hane (Tokyo, Japan: University of Tokyo Press, 1974).

and been esteemed until just recently. To understand the change of circumstances of the comparative method in Japanese studies, let me first summarize the outline of the three books mentioned earlier herein, focusing on their 'comparative' aspects, and then refer to the leftist criticism of these books.

Tetsurō Watsuji's *Climate and Culture* is a comparative analysis of the correlation between the climatic features of a region and the characteristics of a given culture. Watsuji, who was stimulated by the twentieth-century phenomenology of Heidegger and others, holds the view that people around the world have cultivated their own forms of life and culture under the influence and restriction of climatic environments. Based on this view, Watsuji classifies world cultures into several different prototypes—the monsoon type in East Asia, the desert type in the Middle East, the pasture type in Europe, and so forth—and then provides a classificatory description of the cultural characteristics of the people who live in each region (and nation). Regarding Japan, for example, Watsuji posits that the Japanese cultural characteristics of 'passivity' and 'patience' stem primarily from the overwhelming threat of seasonal monsoon storms. It is important to note that Watsuji's attempt at national and cultural typology in *Climate and Culture* is heavily underpinned by a 'comparative' perspective, which makes it possible for an observer of cultures to describe a panorama of various types of national and cultural characteristics observed worldwide using the weapon of 'comparison.'

*The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* has been widely regarded as a classic of comparative cultural studies of the United States and Japan. As is shown by the well-known fact that it was originally intended for the United States army's enemy research during the Pacific theatre of World War II, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* has always been a Japanese studies book. The author, Ruth Benedict, tries to identify the specific patterns of Japanese culture through a series of conceptual couplings that suggests the importance of social reciprocity in Japanese daily practices. Those couplings are best represented by the Japanese words *on* (mercy or favor) and *giri* (obligation); reciprocal relationships usually take place between superiors and inferiors. Starting from such an observational analysis, Benedict finally discovers the prime characteristic, or pattern, of Japanese culture in the hierarchical stratification among its people. This conclusion laid the groundwork for the Japanese studies in Japan, as well as overseas, in the latter half of the twentieth century.

However, it is noteworthy that throughout the book the author's implicit interest in a 'comparative' perspective peeps out. A renowned example is an East-West comparison of moral ethics; Benedict sharply contrasts the shame-based culture of Japan with the guilt-based culture of the West. Is this attempt at comparative ethics, based on the East-West binary, nothing more than a temporary aberration from the main theme of the book, namely the analysis of the characteristics, or essence, of Japanese culture? In my view, quite the contrary—the comparative perspective constitutes the very basis that underlies the entirety of Benedict's writings including *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*. One of the themes or ideals that Benedict passionately espoused as a liberal anthropologist throughout her career was cultural relativism. Presumably, her interest in worldwide comparison of culture(s) stemmed from her relativistic view of humankind's diverse cultural practices. Therefore, it is inadequate to regard *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* simply as the product of Japanese studies proper; it is also a book of 'comparative' studies of culture.

In *Studies in the Intellectual History of Tokugawa Japan*, Masao Maruyama sheds new light on modern Japanese intellectual history from a 'comparative' perspective. Before the

introduction of Western thought after the middle of the nineteenth century, Maruyama argues, philosophical and political modernity in Japan had already been incubated in the disintegration process of neo-Confucianism, which took place during and after the seventeenth century. A key figure in the process was Ogyū Sorai (1666—1728), a Confucian scholar and politician who rebelled against the orthodoxy of neo-Confucianism and developed his own methodology of ancient learning (*kogaku*). In the authentic doctrine of neo-Confucianism, the Way (*tao* in Chinese; *michi* in Japanese), which is ranked as the first and foremost norm of mundane affairs in the overall schema of Confucianism, is essentially subordinate to the laws of nature; humans are completely left in the dark about the Way. The static world-view of neo-Confucianism was drastically subverted by Ogyū, who completely separated the poles of nature and humans. Ogyū argued that the Way is by no means subservient to the order of the natural world; he stated that the Way does not exist inherently in nature, but rather was fabricated intentionally and historically by the ancient human saints. The epistemological rupture between nature and humans also marked the dawn of political modernity in Japan. The collapse of the neo-Confucianist world-view, which ideologically underpinned the feudal regime of the Tokugawa shogunate, also gave birth to the separation between the private and the public spheres, eventually paving the way for the autonomy of the individual.

A point that deserves special notice herein is that, when he tells the story about intellectual modernity in Japan, Maruyama heavily (albeit implicitly) depends on a 'comparative' perspective. In other words, Maruyama consciously constructs his own view of modern Japanese intellectual history in parallel with the development of early modern European intellectual history: the disintegration of medieval Scholasticism, followed by the birth of modern political thoughts. Maruyama analogizes the works of Ogyū and other Confucian revisionists in eighteenth-century Japan with those of European political theorists such as Machiavelli and Hobbes, who, in opposition to the dominant Scholasticism of the Middle Ages, advocated the political autonomy of individuals. Again, we can confirm that the 'comparative' perspective plays a vital role in the discourse of cultural criticism in post-war Japan.

The achievements that the comparative cultural field in Japan has accomplished so far are enormous. In recent years, however, the comparative approach has received harsh criticism from leftist scholars and critics of culture (i.e., proponents of cultural studies and postcolonialism). The gist of the criticism can be summarized primarily as follows. The first point contends that the discipline of comparative studies of culture has fallen into the fallacy of essentialism. Another is that it has been deeply involved in the production and diffusion of the vicious political ideology of the modern nation-state. Let us examine each of these claims.

First, the leftists criticize the comparative approach to culture by saying that it commits the fallacy of essentialism. Comparative studies of culture, they argue, erroneously encloses a diversity of cultural phenomena within the fixed frame of the existing, centralized nation-state or ethnic group, thereby creating an illusion that there exists a homogeneous, unchanging essence of a given culture. Behind this type of criticism lies the view that the notion of the modern nation-state was, in fact, invented at some point in the course of modern history and hence that it is imaginary after all. Now that the rigidity of the modern nation-state is thus undermined, any comparative analysis of nationality, national characteristics, national culture, or other such ideas are branded as fallacious. Discourses on such themes are invariably constructed on the imaginary or invented premise of cultural essentialism. The leftist criticism also contends that the static, homogenized image of national culture created by the fallacy of

essentialism can lead to the neglect of racial and cultural minorities, and eventually to the suppression of the variegated existences of those groups in society.

The fallacy of essentialism can be observed, for example, in *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*. As mentioned earlier herein, Benedict describes hierarchical stratification and social reciprocity as the essential characteristics of Japanese culture. However, a moment's consideration will reveal that similar kinds of social structure and practices might exist elsewhere too, and that not all Japanese common people necessarily acceded to such a feudalistic relationship throughout the long history of Japan. Also, recent historical studies indicate that hierarchical stratification itself was, in fact, constructed historically; also more importantly, the construction process synchronized the formation of the modern Japanese nation-state. First-hand experiences and studied facts raise questions about Benedict's comparative method, thereby underpinning the leftist criticism of essentialism.

Second, the leftist criticism of cultural ideology argues that the practice of comparing and contrasting cultural differences across the world is also fallacious. At the heart of this type of critique is an allegation of complicity between the comparative perspective and the ideological spectrum of the modern nation-state. In the realm of contemporary cultural criticism, as mentioned earlier herein, the notion of the nation-state is predominantly regarded as the product of political invention. The invention of the nation-state was made possible by drawing an imaginary line of distinction between one's own territory and the rest of the world. Once a distinction is made, the notion of comparison naturally comes into being; distinction and comparison are two sides of the same coin. As a result of these two types of political maneuvers, namely distinction and comparison, there emerges a notion of national identity, which eventually gives birth to chauvinistic nationalism. Outside the nation-state, the self-centered ideology of nationalism tends to establish a hierarchy among the various other nation-states, cultures and races that exist worldwide; this hierarchy eventually creates racism, imperialism, and other types of social ideology. The criticism continues by arguing that the problems associated with the ideologies of the nation-state easily transfer to those of comparative studies of culture. If the notion of the nation-state, which is constructed and imaginary after all, is the source of nationalism and racism, then so are the discourses of comparative studies of culture. Thus, the fictitious, or constructed, nature of the modern nation-state drags comparative studies of culture into the vicious ideology of the nation-state.

A good example of complicity between the political ideology of the nation-state and comparative studies of culture can be found in *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*.<sup>2</sup> As is well known, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* concerns not only the national characteristics of Japanese culture but also provides a comparison of morality and ethics among ordinary citizens in Japan vs. the United States; Benedict sharply contrasts the shame-based culture of Japan with the guilt-based culture of the United States. On the surface, Benedict's soft and placid tone makes her comparative discussion sound fair and unbiased. Benedict's gentle personality is also partly responsible, as is the conscientiousness of cultural relativism, an ideal that she fervently espoused as a liberal intellectual in the 1930s and 1940s. At root, however, Benedict seems to

<sup>2</sup> C. Douglas Lummis, *A New Look at the Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (Tokyo, Japan: Shōhakusha, 1983). Naoki Sakai, "Subject and/or Shutai and the Inscription of Cultural Differences," in *Translation & Subjectivity* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997). Lisa Yoneyama, "Habit of Knowing Cultural Differences: Chrysanthemum and the Sword in the U.S. Liberal Multiculturalism," in *Topoi*, 18 (1999).



conceal some sort of racial prejudice; she implies that the guilt-based culture of the United States is fundamentally superior to the shame-based culture of Japan and that Japan's defeat in the Pacific War was fortunate, even to the Japanese themselves. According to recent criticism, Benedict's implicit, albeit unintentional, racism is deeply embedded in her method of comparison, namely that of drawing a strict line of distinction between Western and Eastern cultures. Given the complexity of Benedict's career and scholarship, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* should not be read naively as an unprejudiced, objective observation of cultures but rather as an ideological apparatus that reassures Americans of the goodness and authenticity of their own culture, thereby strengthening the cultural-national identity of the United States. The criticism concludes that *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* represents a typical example of the complicity between comparative studies of culture and the nation-state's ideology of nationalism and racism.

The leftist critique has devastated comparative studies of culture in Japan; the vigor of the field seems to have fallen into steep and severe decline in recent years. As sketched out earlier herein, the comparative method played a vital role in the studies of culture in Japan, especially in the post-war period. Nowadays, however, the method is stigmatized as a source of political ideology and relegated almost to the periphery of cultural criticism. It seems to me that an overall stagnation of comparative studies of culture in Japan is evident in the decline of the general public's interest in the field. The prime reason for this stagnation is, as leftist critics harshly point out, that adherents of the established method of comparative studies of culture—often derogatorily called 'culturalist'—have long been reluctant, or even resistant, to acknowledge the correlation and complicity between culture and politics. To put it differently, the desire of comparatists to confine cultural matters within the realm of culture proper is ingrained in their minds in such a deep and unconscious way that their neglect of politics (whether intended or unintended) has, in the end, incurred a heavier cost than expected. The field of comparative studies of culture in contemporary Japan seems to have almost reached a paralyzing deadlock, finding itself at a loss to make its way out.

In addition to the uncompromising starkness of the leftist criticism, there is another, more fundamental, reason for the sluggish performance of comparative studies of culture in contemporary Japan; namely the spread of globalization. In my opinion, the effect of globalization on comparative studies of culture seems twofold: first, people's everyday practices of intercultural negotiation simply surpass, in depth and breadth, the views and opinions that the discipline of comparative studies of culture has provided; second, the rapidly dwindling status of the nation-state erodes the very foundation on which comparative studies of culture has implicitly depended.

First, the impact of globalization simply overwhelms the profession and practice of comparative studies of culture. The rising tide of globalization has made it possible for people around the world to interact with each other with fewer obstacles. People have come to acknowledge and feel the presence of the cultural Other in a more real, intimate, and concrete way and manner. The physical touch of such experiences always impacts scenes of intercultural communication, whereas the academic discourses of comparatists, which are mostly analytic and often too schematic, seem to have lost some momentum and faded into relative insignificance. Needless to say, it is too easy and is thoughtless to dismiss the validity of scholarly works compared with people's first-hand experiences in such a hasty manner; the strength and potential of scholarly works, to a fair degree, must be admitted. Unfortunately,

however, unearthing the concealed potential advantages of comparative studies of culture seems difficult. In some senses, I will tackle the daunting task of reappraisal in the latter half of this article.

Second, the spread of globalization has undermined the foundation of the nation-state and of comparative studies of culture. To understand this proposition, it is sufficient to recall the aforementioned argument by the leftist critics: that the discipline of comparative studies of culture is involved in an ideological conspiracy with the modern nation-state. Once the existing social and cultural framework of the modern nation-state is destabilized by the trend of globalization, it is a matter of time before the alleged accomplice of the nation-state finds itself in a pinch.

In closing this chapter, I briefly reconsider the advantages and disadvantages of the leftist criticism. Regarding the advantages or strengths of the criticism, as I argued earlier herein, the impact of the criticism has largely jeopardized the continuation of comparative studies of culture as a discipline in contemporary Japan. Meanwhile, what concerns me most is, as I have discussed elsewhere, that the leftist criticism consists of nothing but a negative campaign against its assumed adversary, consequently failing to offer any promising or constructive proposals for the future of cultural criticism. In a sense, the leftist criticism seems to have fallen into the pitfall of “criticism-for-the-sake-of-criticism.”<sup>3</sup> Yet, presumably behind the scenes of the provocation, leftists might be mulling over some alternative plans of their own, which I surmise will materialize in some hybridized or intermingled forms of culture (s). Nevertheless, most of such plans have thus far remained in a highly abstract, theoretical stage. It is still unclear whether the plans will come to fruition in the near future.

Does the predicament of comparative studies of culture in contemporary Japan, which I have so far delineated in a somewhat roundabout way, mean that the discipline is on its last legs? On the contrary, there remains a mountain of important, difficult problems, which should be attended to more seriously than ever by contemporary scholars and critics of culture, including those of comparative studies of culture. For example, as the world becomes smaller and smaller, multiple problems accompanying the globalization process also arise, such as the outbreak of cultural frictions or conflicts among different factions within or outside a nation-state, and the relentless homogenization or leveling of diverse cultural differences nation-wide or world-wide. These pressing problems must be explored as the first priority of contemporary cultural criticism. In the following chapters, I examine the question of how this can be accomplished.

## II. *Hayden White's Concept of Figural Realism*

In this chapter, I will search for some clues to extricate comparative studies of culture from its entangled predicament. In so doing, I will go outside the field, seeking the assistance

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<sup>3</sup> As for the problems of the leftist criticism of culture, see two articles of mine: “The Predicament of Speaking about Cultural Differences: Two Readings of Watsuji Tetsurō’s Cultural Typology and the Context of American Multiculturalism,” in *Hitotsubashi Review of Arts & Sciences*, Hitotsubashi University, no. 3, 2009 and “Two Faces of Postmodernism: Postmodernist Critique of Cultural Typologies and the Future of Comparative Studies of Culture,” in *Saitama University Review (Faculty of Liberal Arts)*, Saitama University, vol.46-2, 2010.



of an adjacent field; namely historical representation. More specifically, I will reference Hayden White's concept of figural realism. Through a series of discussions about representations of the Holocaust, White groped for ways to represent the truth of historical events properly; he finally, albeit tentatively, proposed the idea of figural realism. Figural realism is a way of representing the reality of history by presenting information that lies between bare facts and sheer fiction. As an example of the concept, White refers to the grammatical phenomenon of the middle voice. Meanwhile, some linguists have recently identified the characteristics of the middle voice in the aspects of *the searching attempts* and *communality*. There seems to lurk some kind of correlation between a linguistic representation that mediates 'between facts and fiction' and a linguistic phenomenon that is oriented towards 'searching attempts' and 'communality.' Cognitive semantics, a new trend in linguistics and psychology, provides some useful suggestions for the task of elucidating such correlation precisely.

Let us begin by examining White's challenge of figural realism. Elsewhere, I had discussed the details of the concept vis-à-vis Erich Auerbach's literary concept of 'figura.'<sup>4</sup> Due to limitations of space, I will restrict myself herein to describing the contours of figural realism and the process of how the concept has taken shape.

1. In his article "The Politics of Historical Interpretation," (1982) White discusses some extremist views of the Holocaust.<sup>5</sup> He argues that, if the political nature of historical interpretation is acknowledged properly, some degree of validity must be conceded even to some extreme, ideological interpretations of the incident, such as Holocaust revisionism or Zionism.
2. White's quasi-defense of Holocaust denial incurred criticism from Carlo Ginzburg, an eminent social historian who, like White, pioneered the field of historical representation around the 1970s. Ginzburg contends that White's argument merely rehashes that of Giovanni Gentile (1875—1944), a twentieth-century Italian philosopher of neo-idealism. Armed with his theory proposing the socio-communal role of the self and the negation of individualism, Gentile openly advocated Italian fascism. Ginzburg indicates a similarity between the views of White and Gentile: the two theorists, who equally emphasize the political effectiveness of historical interpretations, tend to advocate the annihilation of the distinction between facts and fiction, and, eventually, to tacitly approve of fascism. Ginzburg claims that fiction and facts must be distinguished strictly; White is fundamentally wrong in this single point.
3. In the face of Ginzburg's criticism, White was forced to reconsider the relationship between facts and fiction; as a result, he proposed the concept of figural realism.
4. For the formulation of figural realism, White is heavily indebted to the concept of *figura*, especially to Erich Auerbach's version of it. The concept has a long history that dates back as far as to classical antiquity. For a long time, it had been regarded as a concept of rhetoric, especially of biblical hermeneutics. Auerbach's unique stratagem was to convert the rhetorical concept of *figura* into that of historical interpretation; Auerbach effectively

<sup>4</sup> Kazuhisa Yoshida, "Kindai no rekishishugi to gendai no bunkatagenron wo tsunagumono (A Connection between Modern Historicism and Contemporary Cultural Pluralism)," in *Hitotsubashi Review of Arts & Sciences*, Hitotsubashi University, no.4, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Hayden White, "The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-sublimation, in *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

used his rendering of *figura* as a conceptual apparatus that underpinned his unique, almost unprecedented analysis of the whole history of Western literature in *Mimesis*, a masterpiece of comparative literature. Auerbach's *figura*, which was thus modified as a concept of time and history rather than of rhetoric, makes it possible to view two distinct events separated by time as displaying an inherent connection; with the help of *figura*, (literary) historians can reveal a consistent correlation of prefigurement and fulfillment between one event and another one that follows it.

5. The concept of *figura* provides White with some crucial hints into the conundrum of historical representation. White transposes the coupling of prefigurement and fulfillment into that of nineteenth-century realism and twentieth-century modernism; he then attempts to present a new perspective of modern literary history. Literary historians have traditionally believed that many writers of realism pursued the reality of expression by observing things as they were, as objectively and accurately as possible, whereas some ambitious modernist writers have attempted to transcend such a naïve idea of reality by devising various methods of expression. Those historians have further believed that with regard to the status of history, writers of realism generally favored history, whereas modernist writers definitely disfavored history, instead emphasizing the fictitious nature of literature. Against such an established view, which sharply contrasts realism with modernism, White searches for an inherent correlation between the two types of literary representations; the concept of *figura* provides an important clue. White assigns the role of prefigurement to realism and that of fulfillment to modernism, concluding that the two are mediated by *figura*.
6. Another source of figural realism is the grammatical phenomenon of the middle voice. A sentence written in the middle voice denotes passivity in the active voice. The originality of White's approach is that he attempts to release the middle voice from the realm of language and to apply this linguistic phenomenon to the problems of representation. White indicates that from an epistemological standpoint, the middle voice occupies a space midway between the subject and the object, and from a viewpoint of literary representation, midway between facts and fiction. White argues that the potentiality of the middle voice as a medium of reconciling these opposing factors is enormous and, therefore, that it suggests something very promising to the advancement of figural realism and historical representation.

Bearing in mind the points I've just summarized, let us consider White's own words. First, White explains the relationship between realism and modernism as follows:

Auerbach is quite explicit in characterizing modernism as a kind of fulfillment of rather than as a reaction to earlier realisms. Auerbach does not present literary modernism as a flight from history. To be sure, Auerbach's characterization of modernism's principal stylistic and semantic features amounts to a claim that it has transcended nineteenth-century historicism. But it seems to me that Auerbach interprets modernism as a further development of nineteenth-century realism, hence as a fulfillment of nineteenth-century realism's identification of reality with history—and hence as a further elaboration of the notion of history itself. What appears to be a rejection of history is a further elaboration of its nineteenth-century form, which now appears as a figure beginning to be fulfilled in mid-twentieth century. It is not history that is being rejected but the nineteenth-century

form of it.<sup>6</sup>

In this passage, two elements stand out. First, White favors modernism over realism. That is, the relationship between the two factors in each coupling—prefiguration/fulfillment and realism/modernism—is not necessarily reckoned to be equivalent. White surmises a kind of hierarchy between the two factors. Second, White's concept of *figura*, an English rendition of *figura*, is assigned a higher status as a means of synthesis of the two factors. The preeminence of figure (*figura*) is also parallel with that of fulfillment, which is indicated by a phrase such as “a figure beginning to be fulfilled in mid-twentieth century[.]” In other words, White refers to *figura* not so much as a mere mediator but rather as something loftier, namely an absolute in history. In this sense, the tripartite combination of modernism, fulfillment and figure can be bundled into a single category of *figura*, or figural realism.

Next, White goes on to argue that the concept of *figura* might present some useful suggestions to the problems concerning representation of the Holocaust.

...the kind of anomalies, enigmas, and dead ends met with in discussions of the representation of the Holocaust are the result of a conception of discourse that owes too much to a realism that is inadequate to the representation of events, such as the Holocaust, which are themselves “modernist” in nature.<sup>7</sup>

...modernist modes of representation may offer possibilities of representing the reality of both the Holocaust and the experience of it that no other version of realism could do.<sup>8</sup>

For contemporary historians, cataclysmic historical events such as the Holocaust are difficult to portray and continue to be a subject of controversy. Most conscientious historians hold a view that because of their atrocious and highly political nature, the events of the Holocaust must be observed and depicted strictly from the standpoint of neutrality and objectivity. However, some extremists cast doubt on the orthodoxy of the Holocaust historiography, often going so far as to approve of the incident or to negate its existence entirely. Representations of the Holocaust thus oscillate between the two extreme poles of objectivism and subjectivism. In the face of the conundrum of representations of the Holocaust, White presents the idea of figural realism, an attempt to find some middle, common ground not only between realism and modernism but also between objectivism and subjectivism. It also encompasses realism's affinity for history and modernism's refusal of history, thereby aiming at a higher level of representation of history.

In the meantime, I should point out here that in all three passages cited herein, White is talking only about modernism; never, in fact, touches on figural realism. I guess that the main reason for such reticence is that the idea of figural realism has not yet been elaborated enough by White to be persuasive and consistent. I propose that the term modernism, as used in this context, should be (at least tentatively) rephrased as *modernism as figura (figure)*, or simply *figural realism*. What White meant to imply with the term *modernism* can be better defined as

<sup>6</sup> Hayden White, “Auerbach's Literary History: Figural Causation and Modernist Historicism,” in *Figural Realism* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p.99.

<sup>7</sup> Hayden White, “The Problem of Truth in Historical Representation,” in *Probing the Limit of Representation*, ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), p.50.

<sup>8</sup> White, *ibid.*, p.52.

a synthesis of the three factors of modernism, fulfillment, and figura in the higher form of representation.

Then, White shifts the focus of argument from the field of literature (i.e., literary representation) to that of linguistics. The mediatory function of modernism—or, for the reason mentioned herein, figural realism—is handed over to the middle voice, as described in the following citation:

Whereas in the active and passive voices the subject of the verb is presumed to be external to the action, as either agent or patient, in the middle voice the subject is presumed to be *interior* to the action.<sup>9</sup>

If we place this passage within a larger frame of historical representation, White's claim can be summarized as follows: first, the grammatical opposition between the active and the passive voice can be parallel with the philosophical opposition between subjectivism and objectivism; second, and more importantly, the middle voice, which is located somewhere between the active and the passive voice, provides some potential solutions to the problem of how to reconcile subjectivism and objectivism.

Although it is admittedly interesting, this argument of White's remains sketchy and unconvincing. A foremost example of its insufficiency can be pointed out in terms of temporality. In the case of the coupling of realism and modernism, there is a palpable relationship of temporality between the preceding entities (i.e., realism and prefiguration) and the following ones (i.e., modernism and fulfillment). In contrast, there is no temporal context relationship involved in the oppositional pair of the active and passive voices but only a synchronic dimension. Given such a fundamental difference, it seems premature to equate, as White does, the middle voice with figura. In any case, White's reference to the middle voice is, at least for now, in the stage of tentative attempt, which should be regarded as successful insofar as it has raised new questions and problematics.

This analysis sums up the gist of White's figural realism, which starts with the examination of the politics of Holocaust historiography and ends with the proposed plan of reconciling facts with fiction via modernist literature and the middle voice. In the wake of White's problematization and proposal, how can a series of problems concerning historical representations—and, eventually, comparative studies of culture—be pursued?

Elsewhere, I returned to the origin of figural realism, namely Auerbach's figura, and examined the common features and differences between these two concepts.<sup>10</sup> The tentative conclusion I reached in that work was twofold; first, that Auerbach's figura is a sort of weird combination of historicism and idealism; second, that this weirdness is overtaken by White's figural realism. Although historicism and idealism are the products of the intellectual climate in nineteenth-century Germany, they present fundamentally conflicting interpretations of history. Historicism is an idea that seeks to find an immediate, lived contact between the present and the past; by contrast, idealism is a form of philosophy that attempts to grasp the totality of history dynamically, from a dialectical perspective. Despite such a fundamental difference, Auerbach seems to be unaware that his concept of figura embraces the two mutually

<sup>9</sup> White, *ibid.*, p.79.

<sup>10</sup> Kazuhisa Yoshida, "The Interplay between Philology and Modernity: Some Considerations on Erich Auerbach's Concept of Figura," in *Hitotsubashi Journal of Arts & Sciences*, Hitotsubashi University, no. 50-1, 2009.

incompatible ideas of history. Notwithstanding the inconsistency, Auerbach's figura worked successfully; it underpinned the dynamism with which he depicted the entirety of Western literary history in *Mimesis* and also provided a basis for his criticism of contemporary Western civilization. In comparison, White's figural realism does not have sufficient cogency to convince us, at least for now. In my view, perhaps the insufficiency of White's view stems partly from the fact that he does not properly recognize the idiosyncrasy of Auerbach's figura, an amalgamation of historicism and idealism. Thus, in my earlier examination, I had sought a solution, in a retrogressive direction, to the problems arising from the concept of figural realism.

In this article, I aim to take a step forward by turning to other fields than cultural criticism. An important clue for further investigation of the middle voice can be found in a remarkable observation by new branches of cognitive science, such as cognitive semantics and ecological psychology. Compared with White's passing reference, analysis provided by cognitive sciences seems to be more elaborated and sophisticated. The strength of cognitive science is that it attempts to analyze the middle voice from a unique perspective of which neither White nor Auerbach had ever conceived; namely an interaction through language between the human body and the environment. Cognitive science teaches us that the middle voice functions as a 'searching attempt of communality.' The defining characteristic of the middle voice, which is thus identified in terms of a sort of sociality, seems to provide useful suggestions for the advancement of figural realism.

### III. *The Middle Voice: From Figural Realism to Cognitive Semantics*

Before starting the discussion of this chapter, I want to identify what the middle voice and cognitive semantics are about.

First, what the middle voice is all about? The grammatical phenomenon of the middle voice, which is observed in many of the Indo-European languages, goes back as far as ancient times: it was used in Sanskrit and classical Greek. The following is an example of a sentence in the middle voice from modern English: "This car handles easily." The same content can be conveyed by either of the following sentences: "One can handle this car smoothly," or "This car can be handled smoothly by any driver." Hence, a sentence in the middle voice can be paraphrased in the active or the passive voice. A sentence in the middle voice is close in meaning to a comparable one in the passive voice, although its verb form is active. However, a sentence in the middle voice can be definitely distinguished from a comparable one in the passive voice in that the former cannot be accompanied by an adverbial phrase that denotes the performer of the action, such as "by the driver." Second, what is cognitive semantics all about? Cognitive sciences, including cognitive semantics and ecological psychology, are relatively new as separate disciplines, and, hence, are distant from the traditional disciplines of the humanities (at least currently). As a result, I will first summarize, at some length, the outline of cognitive sciences, primarily focusing on the relationship between cognitive semantics and ecological psychology (in the coming subsections A through I), and then touch on the analysis that cognitive sciences provide of the middle voice (in subsections J through N).

I will start with a survey of the cognitive approaches to language. In recent years, some linguists have attempted to invigorate the discussion of cognitive semantics by introducing the

behavioral-scientific perspectives and the approaches of ecological psychology.<sup>11</sup>

- A. *Two Premises in Contemporary Linguistics*. In contemporary linguistics, there are two distinct, mutually incompatible types of views about human language ability; namely, generative grammar and cognitive semantics. Generative grammar regards human language ability in general as being autonomous and composed of separate, independent modules. By contrast, cognitive semantics considers that the overall cognitive ability of individuals, which is not limited to the language use, affects the general nature of human language ability.
- B. *The Semantics of Construal*. The basic stance of cognitive semantics is called the semantics of construal. This stance poses a series of questions about human language ability from the standpoint of human cognition: what kind of things do enunciators, or subjects of cognition, specifically choose as the object of construal? How do they construe that particular object? What sort of mechanism lies behind such methods of construal?
- C. *A Connection Between Cognitive Semantics and Ecological Psychology*. Another branch of cognitive science that linguists hope and expect to enrich cognitive semantics is ecological psychology. Cognitive semantics and ecological psychology share the view that humans know the world through their bodily experiences. Cognitive semantics argues that linguistic meanings are produced through the interaction between human bodies and the environment. Ecological psychology discovers a mutually complementary relationship between the perception of objects and the sense of the self.
- D. *From Cognitive Semantics to Ecological Psychology*. Cognitive semantics posits that meaning takes shape by way of the human subject's conceptualization of things; humans as active, individual subjects give birth to the meanings of things. By contrast, ecological psychology considers that meaning does not exist inherently inside a human subject but rather outside it; meaning occurs in the world as an objective, albeit invisible, relation between humans and the environment. Because the subjectivism of cognitive semantics and the objectivism of ecological psychology thus differ, it is natural to assume that the objectivism of ecological psychology might suggest something new to cognitive semantics. As will be shown hereafter, one promising point of contact between the two disciplines can be discovered in the analysis of the middle voice.
- E. *Affordance*. One of the central concepts in ecological psychology is affordance. Affordance does not exist as a distinct entity but rather as an objective relationship between an object that a human being perceives and the human being who perceives the object.
- F. *Affordance and Searching Attempts*. Ecological psychology does not regard human perception as a mere mechanical function with which a human receives external stimuli passively but as that which is supposed to be more active and dynamic. An active activity of seeking, which ecological psychologists surmise underpins human perception, is called a *searching attempt*. Behind the acquisition of information through perception, the process of searching attempts is always observed.
- G. *Ecological Self*. The concept of affordance presupposes that the perception of the environment is complementary to that of the self; that humans know the world, while they

<sup>11</sup> Akira Honda, *Afōdansu no ninchi imiron (Cognitive Semantics of Affordance)*(Tokyo, Japan: University of Tokyo Press, 2005).



simultaneously become aware of themselves. The image of the self, which is thus perceived concomitantly with that of the environment or the world, is called *the ecological self*. The concept of the ecological self also indicates that the perceived form of the self is constantly altered as the outlook on the environment that surrounds a cognitive subject changes. Conversely, if cognitive subjects change the viewpoint from which they perceive the environment, or relocate their position to encounter the environment more directly, their perspective on the environment changes accordingly and necessarily.

- H. *Interpersonal Self*. Another aspect of the self, which ecological psychology emphasizes, is *the interpersonal self*. The interpersonal self takes shape as a result of a subject's active interaction with the Other. The interpersonal self is perceived together with the outlook of the Other that a subject encounters face to face.
- I. *Directly Perceived Self and the Communality of the Self*. In the system of ecological psychology, the two types of the self—the ecological and the interpersonal—are integrated into a superordinate category, namely *the directly perceived self*. With this synthesis, there emerges a new perspective of human cognition, a tripartite relationship between oneself, the Other, and the environment. One establishes and maintains a relationship with the Other through the environment, and with the environment through the Other. In other words, the concept of the directly perceived self represents the communality of the self.

Two of these aforementioned points, searching attempts and the communality of the self, must be borne in mind here. For further discussion, I will refer to an analysis of the middle voice that was recently proposed by some linguists in an attempt to introduce a new perspective by joining cognitive semantics with ecological psychology.

- J. *Application of Ecological Psychology into Linguistics: Semantics of the Zero Form*. In general, there are two ways in English for which enunciators to express themselves; namely, using the first-person pronoun (this is the most common), and not using it. The latter option is known as *the zero form*.
- K. *Ecological Self and the Zero Form*. In sentences in the zero form, the presence of an enunciator cannot be confirmed as an explicit grammatical entity but one can perceive it somehow and somewhere in the scene. This kind of perception, cognitive linguists argue, suggests that the presence of the enunciator can also be expressed in the level of the ecological self.
- L. *An Example of the Zero Form*. An example of a sentence in the zero form (although not written in the middle voice) is "Kyoto is approaching." This sentence, if examined objectively, might be regarded as illogical because the subject of the sentence, "Kyoto," itself is a fixed entity and hence never moves. However, what if we take a human-centric viewpoint and assume that this sentence represents the experience of a man who is heading toward Kyoto on a bullet train? Then, it becomes possible to think that in this sentence, the presence of an enunciator, namely a man on a train, is implicitly expressed in the zero form, or at the level of the ecological self.
- M. *First Characteristic of the Middle Voice: Searching Attempts*. Now, let us examine a sentence in the middle voice: "Bureaucrats bribe easily." Again, what if we assume that the zero form is employed in this sentence and that an invisible enunciator exists at the level of the ecological self? Then, it probably follows that this sentence refers to a situation in which an invisible enunciator is actively and shrewdly approaching some

bureaucrats with the intent of bribing them. To put it differently, the sentence represents an invisible enunciator's implicit claim that bureaucrats in general are easy to bribe and that everyone can readily notice how easy it is if they actually attempt to do so. The deep meaning of this sentence can be paraphrased using the terms of ecological psychology as follows: if viewed from the meta-level perspective of the environment, the grammatical subject of the sentence (i.e., bureaucrats) has a relationship of affordance to its invisible subject (i.e., enunciator). As a result, the entire sentence implicitly connotes the enunciator's searching attempt at bribery.

- N. *Second Characteristic of the Middle Voice: Communality.* Addressees who receive the semantic content of the sentence in the middle voice, if not explicitly expressed, can generally be identified as enunciators themselves, or as the general public, which includes the enunciators themselves. In the example given in part M, the sentence suggests that bribing bureaucrats is tactically feasible not only by the enunciator himself or herself but also by a wide range of people; the action of bribing bureaucrats is possible on a practical level and is open to the general public. The multiplicity of the addressee(s) indicates the communality of the middle voice.

To recapitulate the gist of points J through N, cognitive science acknowledges that the grammatical phenomenon of the middle voice reflects an invisible tripartite interaction between an enunciator, the Other, and the environment; also, the interactive aspect of the middle voice is further characterized by the specific concepts; namely the searching attempts, an active approach to the enunciator's quarry, and communality, the extensive feasibility of the searching attempts.

After perusing the two seemingly different types of arguments about the middle voice, namely, White's passing mention in his discussion of figural realism and the new interpretation provided by cognitive science, I want to seek a link between the two and then introduce a new perspective. White poses the question of how the middle voice can mediate the differences and inconsistencies that confront historians in representing the past (i.e., historical events). Meanwhile, cognitive science shows that the middle voice is rooted in humankind's invisible interaction with the environment: humans construct their identities through negotiations with environmental conditions and restrictions. On reflection herein, the former lacks but the latter possesses a meta-level perspective of the environment, a perspective of examining the grammatical phenomenon of the middle voice—ultimately including various cultural phenomena—in terms of the interaction between humans and the environment. In other words, whereas White seems to have gotten stuck in a horizontal conflict between the self and the Other, cognitive science is slightly in advance of White in providing a three-dimensional, more dynamic perspective.

The next question would be how the representation of history cuts across the interaction between humans and the environment. Admittedly, however, this question is too loose and out-of-focus to answer. Instead of giving a direct answer, I want to try a short thought experiment. What would happen if we replace White's notion of the historian with cognitive science's notion of the enunciator?

This replacement creates a series of hypothetical propositions: first, that the representation of history is a searching attempt to find the truth of history; second, that the searching attempt is based upon the communality of the self; third, that the representation of history, which exists

not as an entity but as a relationship, is located somewhere in a triangle composed of a historian, the past, and the environment.

These groups of propositions seem to suggest two further corollaries. First, the propositions indicate the insufficiency of considering, as most historians do, the validity of historiography exclusively through the lens of the dichotomy between truth and fiction. It is insufficient to regard the job of historian to be giving their verdicts on the question of what actually happened in the past. Rather, the job would be better defined as a future-oriented, or forward-looking, attempt; historians dare to pose questions about the past in search of answers to matters of the future. Second, the propositions suggest that historical representation is committed to a search of communality among people. Cognitive science's analysis of the middle voice teaches us that the tripartite relation of the self, the Other, and the object, which is further embraced by a broader spectrum of the environment, has the potential to generate some kind of consensus-making process between the conflicting two parties (namely, the self and the Other). If, through the mediation of the middle voice, we adapt this scheme to the problems of historical representation, it naturally follows that despite a disagreement over the interpretation of a historical event, all those concerned in the cognition of the event, including the opposing two parties, are nevertheless looking toward the same object-event; that behind the tripartite relation (i.e., the opposing two and the environment) lurks the possibility of establishing some common understanding of the event.

These propositions and the ensuing two considerations seem to let some fresh air into the conundrum of historical representation. The political nature of controversial historical events, such as the Holocaust and fascism, continues to haunt us; the ghosts of the past still disturb those living in the twenty-first century. Meanwhile, cognitive science seems to provide promising possibilities of breaking the impasse over historical representation. Moreover, the scope of its promise seems to go beyond the realm of history to the various problems concerning studies of culture in general, especially those concerning comparative studies of culture, multiculturalism, intercultural understandings, and so forth. As yet, at least in this stage of my argument, the connection between historical representation and cognitive science remains weak because the two fields are mediated only through the grammatical phenomenon of the middle voice. For the further development of the argument, more convincing grounding for the connection between studies of culture and cognitive science must be sought. I will pursue this main theme in the following chapters.

(to be continued in another issue)

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