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Review: *Marilyn Ivy, Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan, The University of Chicago Press, 1995*, Chapter 1 “National-Cultural Phantasms and Modernity’s Losses”, p. 1 – 28

Marilyn Ivy in this work starts with the stereotypical perceptions about Japan society in American press which is not confined to the Japan one. Americans know that Japan is “an exclusive, homogeneous Asian ocean-and-island realm, tribal, intricately compact, suppressive, fiercely focused”. (p.2) Despite the absorption of the foreign in everything from cooking to philosophy, a feeling of isolation haunts many in Japan. (p. 2) But the author probes anxieties about the potential loss of national identity and continuity that disturb many in Japan. She discloses these anxieties as she tracks what she calls the vanishing: marginalized events, sites, and cultural practices suspended at moments of impending disappearance.

By using the idea of the imaginary, she pointed to the element of phantasm that lies at the basis of national-cultural communities. She uses the configurations of the imaginary of Benedict Anderson’s “imagined communities”, Cornelius Castoriadis’s “social imaginary”, Claude Lefort’s “imaginary community”, and Lacan’s “imaginary” as the phantasmatic basis for the human subjects. What is important to recognise here is that the content of such phantasmatic representations, the images and patterns which make them up, are the *vehicles* whereby these emotions become constituted. The relation between the affect and the phantasy is not simply one of causality but one of constitution. The images within phantasmatic representation carry the affects.

Marilyn Ivy analyzes the discourses of modernist nostalgia in Japan, as mediated through the popular culture and its fetishization of the uncanny. The paradox is that this fetishization, as Marilyn Ivy calls this process, necessitates and presupposes the distancing of the lost object of desire. Even as those who have been erased by modernization and then longed for in modernity’s nostalgic mode are restored, they are restored according the logic of modernity, a logic that assigns such practices a subordinated and devalued position. However, in order to maintain a sense of triumph and the tenuous congratulatory certainty of modernity, these objects of desire can be neither eradicated nor fulfilled; they must be maintained at a distance, removed from the modern as what Ivy calls the uncanny, the longed for objects of a past constructed by a future-oriented modernity.

In many ways Marilyn Ivy’s analysis of the role of memory in Japanese modernity extends study of amnesia in the making of the modern nation. Ivy explores the actual mechanism of the construction of memories through a Lacanian analysis, looking not at that which is repressed and

forgotten in modernity, as exemplified in the above précis of Meeker's fieldwork, but rather how the repressed returns in the form of the fetishized commodity, the uncanny of modernist nostalgia. In creating a sense of the modern, the novel, that which preceded the modern, must be removed and placed at a distance from the experience of the immediate present. However that which is repressed or erased, in semiotic terms, must return and it does so in the constructed guise of a commodity, the uncanny that is strangely familiar yet somehow dangerous. It is through this process that modernity both removes and maintains that which the ideology of modernism claims to have surpassed: the past left behind. "Modernist nostalgia must preserve, in many senses, the sense of absence that motivates its desires". (p. 10).

Ivy shows how a fascination with cultural margins accompanied the emergence of Japan as a modern nation-state. This fascination culminated in the early twentieth-century establishment of Japanese folklore studies and its attempts to record the spectral, sometimes violent, narratives of those margins. She traces the obsession with the vanishing through a range of contemporary reconfigurations: efforts by remote communities to promote themselves as nostalgic sites of authenticity, storytelling practices as signs of pre modern presence, mass travel campaigns, recalling of the dead by blind mediums, and itinerant, kabuki-inspired populist theater. "Through tourism, folklore studies, education, and mass-media – and through everyday moments of national – cultural interpellation and identification – Japanese of all generations seek recognition of continuity that is coterminous with its negation". (p.10)

The author has ploughed the fields of marginalized traditions in Japan, finding at the far side of Japan's modernity a ghost of the past. The continuing vanishing of past practices within those practices that now memorialize the past through novel media and means: "An organizing theme of this study is that of the vanishing, which (dis)embodies in its gerund form the movement of something passing away, gone but not quite, suspended between presence and absence, located at a point that both is and is not here in the repetitive process of absenting. How is that moment – if it can be called that – made to signify? What marks it as founding entire regimes of authentication? The vanishing can only be tracked through the poetics of phantasm, through attentiveness to the politics of displacement, deferral, and originary repetition. Practices and discourses now situated on the edge of presence (yet continuously repositioned at the core of the national cultural imaginary) live out partial destinies of spectacular recovery. Their status is often ghostly. And it is through the ghosts of stories and (sometimes) stories of ghosts that I work, disclosing an economy of the appropriated marginal, of lacunae in representation at the center of the dominant" (p. 20-21).

Marilyn Ivy tries to look closely at the unequal power relations that make the negotiation of identity through memory formation on the border a seemingly over determined situation.