The Scientifically Minded: A Play by Hirata Oriza

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Abstract

Despite regular international tours by his theatre company Seinendan, interest in Hirata Oriza’s plays in the Anglophone world is not as pronounced as it might be. One reason for this might be negative comments on certain aspects of Hirata’s work by the critic Uchino Tadashi. In introducing this new translation of Kagaku suru Kokoro (The Scientifically Minded, 1990), theatre director Tim Keenan argues that while criticism within Japanese cultural contexts may be merited, it tends to focus on Hirata’s theoretical writings rather than the plays themselves, thereby overlooking some often subtle cultural commentary. Moreover, the import of Uchino’s arguments may be negated when the plays are considered outside Japanese contexts, especially in translation as here.

The play itself is an early but characteristic example of Hirata’s ‘Quiet Theatre’ style which, in its aim to represent the mundane interactions of daily life, eschews many of the features of conventional drama including overt theatricality and plotting. Whether in the original Japanese or, as here, in an idiomatic English translation, The Scientifically Minded is ideally suited for university production. The large cast (16) includes nine female roles, the age range is approximately from 19 to early 30s, and actors and directors will relish the performance challenges posed by Hirata’s style.

In Hirata Oriza’s play Kagaku suru Kokoro (The Scientifically Minded, 1990) a primate researcher pompously refers to a visit to his laboratory the previous year by a philosopher from Kyoto University named Nishida Kitaro. On hearing this, another scientist immediately shouts “Kitaro!” in the voice of the character ‘Daddy Eyeball’ from the popular anime series GeGeGe-no-kitaro and mugs with a colleague while the primatologist struggles to continue the original conversation [video 1]. This brief exchange not only encapsulates the play’s comic style (and raises a familiar translation problem), it also points, albeit allusively as I will explain, to critical concerns with Hirata’s practice and theoretical ideas. These concerns relate to, and indeed only make sense in, Japanese cultural contexts, but there has been little English-language evaluation of Hirata’s work since Uchino Tadashi’s dismissal of
him, around the turn of the century, as a political conservative unconsciously participating in the essentialist Japanese discourse known as *nihonjinron* (theories of the Japanese), which promotes notions of cultural uniqueness (Uchino 2009, p.89).(1) The most recent English-language commentary devoted to Hirata’s ‘human’ drama is Cody Poulton’s excellent analysis of the playwright’s dramaturgy in the introduction to Poulton’s own translation of Hirata’s most successful play, *Tokyo Notes* (1994) (Poulton 2002, p.1-8).(2) The lack of critical attention in the Anglophone world is a pity, because, while acknowledging the validity of Uchino’s reservations within Japanese contexts, I believe there is much to admire in Hirata’s meticulously crafted and often subtly resonating plays of the 1990s. One such play is *Kagakusuru Kokoro* (The Scientifically Minded, 1990), which I directed in the new translation presented here as part of a theatre-exchange project between Hirata’s theatre company, Seinendan, and my then institution the University of Hull (UK). The ‘Hirata 2010’ project brought Seinendan productions of Hirata’s *S Kogen Kara* (From ‘S’ Plateau, 1991) and *Tokyo Notes* to Leeds and Hull in 2009 and saw *The Scientifically Minded* performed by Hull undergraduates at Seinendan’s own Tokyo base, the Agora Theatre, Komaba in 2010.

Hirata’s plays have become noted for a style of performance in Seinendan’s productions that eschews overt theatricality in pursuit of a highly-realistic representation of ordinary life. Key features of Hirata’s dramaturgy include the use of a single setting with no changes of scene, diegetic (fictional) time that is congruent with the passing of real time, and an absence of traditional dialogue and formal plotting. The use of diegetic space is particularly distinctive. Typically, Hirata places his characters in a neutral setting that can be either public or private according to use. In *The Scientifically Minded*, for example, this is a postgraduate student common room, while both *Tokyo Notes* and *From ‘S’ Plateau* are set in foyers, of a museum and sanatorium respectively. In these plays and others, the setting, as Poulton notes, is also the situation (Poulton 2002, p.5). In other words, Hirata’s fictional locations are ‘transit’ spaces through and within which characters can move and interact. Technically they provide Hirata with a means of substituting for the motivations and expositions provided by conventional plotting and dialogue. As characters come and go chatting often aimlessly an audience gradually becomes aware of certain thematic threads that build over time to create an atmosphere and a context from which meaning can be constructed.

Uchino’s English-language criticism of Hirata is mainly concerned with the playwright’s theoretical writings in relation to Japanese socio-political contexts. To deal with the theoretical ideas first, Hirata believes that Western dramatic dialogue is not a suitable vehicle for the representation of Japanese speech or social interactions (Poulton 2002, p.4). He claims, furthermore, that Japanese

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(1) The work cited here is a revised version of an earlier publication (Uchino 1999).

(2) There has been a flurry of interest in Hirata’s most recent work involving human-machine interactions, so called android or robot theatre. See for example Hibino 2012.
drama which employs dialogic structures sounds strange to Japanese speakers (Hirata 2007); hence, his concern to develop a dramaturgy that reflects everyday Japanese speech. Hirata’s emphasis on the uniqueness of Japanese conversation makes his theories susceptible to criticism on nihonjinron lines; as Poulton suggests it tends to promote “the myth of some kind of telepathic communication among the Japanese” (Poulton 2007). In addition, Hirata’s assumption that his plays can represent reality transparently and directly is problematic, as Uchino notes (Uchino, 2009, p.89, 161). Moreover, his claim to have developed a stage language that is an accurate reflection of how people actually speak raises the questions, which people and when? Poulton states the people are Tokyoiites (Poulton 2002, p.4), but several Japanese colleagues have suggested it is perhaps even more specific, and in private correspondence Professor Noda Manabu of Meiji University detects a strong influence from the International Christian University where Hirata studied as an undergraduate in the 1980s. The issue of time is particularly important, because the claim to have developed a “contemporary colloquial theatre” (gendai kōgo engeki), as Hirata terms his style, appears self-contradictory if the language is fixed – Tokyo Notes is still touring nineteen years after its first performance with substantially the same script. In this regard, the work of other playwrights, such as Okada Toshiki’s celebrated Sangatsu no Itsukan (Five Days in March, 2004), offers a more contemporary language – to the extent that the slang in the original script of Okada’s play is probably now out of date. On these grounds, then, Hirata is vulnerable, though the extent to which we need concern ourselves with his theoretical writings in considering the import and impact of his plays is questionable.

Uchino’s second point is that in the difficult 1990s, a period in which traditional cultural values underwent “category breakdown” (Uchino, 2009, p.88), Hirata naively embraced certain state-endorsed neo-nationalistic sentiments by accepting government funding. According to Uchino, the state saw in Hirata’s so-called ‘Quiet Theatre’ style a new “‘national’, theatrical mode” (Uchino, 2009, p.22) and Hirata’s rise to fame can be explained as an outcome of state promotion of this mode as part of a wider “national poetries” that incorporated the familiar nihonjinron theme of a timeless Japanese identity (Uchino, 2009, p.89). This is an interesting point, but it is not developed in relation to the plays. The closest Uchino comes is to comment diffusely on the dramaturgy: “Hirata claims that this [his dramaturgy] is an objective reproduction of our daily life, thereby betraying his naive belief and unconscious participation in the ‘national poetries’ described […] by Harootunian” (Uchino, 2009, p.89). It is a pity that he does not discuss the plays or the dramaturgy (beyond necessary description) to demonstrate his ideas. In his English language publications, at least, Uchino is more concerned with outlining a cultural history of modern Japanese theatre and drama in relation to his own theories of Japanese socio-political developments, than he is with dramaturgical analysis. Nevertheless, his focus enables us to set up a crude, but useful polarity between Hirata’s two main English-language commentators, Poulton and Uchino. Poulton’s trenchant analysis of Tokyo Notes refers to Hirata’s “sly anatomy of various Japanese attitudes” (Poulton 2002, p.6), whereas for Uchino, as we have seen, Hirata is cul-
turly and politically naïve. Poulton suggests subtle cultural commentary, while Uchino sees only conservative conformance. The difficulty is it is possible to view the work with both poles in mind. Ordinarily, one would be inclined to consider the plays and the dramaturgy within their individual contexts, but the uniformity of Hirata’s dramaturgical methods, at least during the 1990s, does invite Uchino’s overarching approach.

Curiously, the ‘Kitaro’ exchange from The Scientifically Minded, noted above, appears to raise the spectre of the nihonjinron issue before it came to Uchino’s notice in the late 1990s and also before Hirata came to prominence by winning the Kishida Prize in 1995 (Japan’s most prestigious drama award). The play is set in a science-faculty common room in Tokyo where researchers engaged on a genetic-engineering project to boost ape intelligence indulge in trivial chitchat: few details of their work are mentioned. The play is thus linked to (though not concerned with) primate research, a branch of Japanese science that is either celebrated or notorious, depending on one’s point of view. Historically, many Western scientists have held the view that Japanese primate research was too subjective, and therefore not scientific. Conversely, in Japan, the rigid focus on objectivity in Western research has been considered arid. In The Myth of Japanese Uniqueness, Peter N. Dale refers to Japanese primatology to demonstrate the impact of nihonjinron discourse on science. According to his provocatively titled chapter, ‘Monkey Business’, Japanese primate research has been co-opted by nihonjinron writers to demonstrate unique neurological differences between the Japanese and other races (Dale 1986, p.189-98). As Hirata’s play is not about primate research, he could have specified any ‘scientifically minded’ researchers (although the topicality, in this case of gene manipulation, is important). The specification, therefore, might appear deliberate. This impression firms when we consider the name of the fictional professor from Kyoto University, Nishida Kitaro. Hirata’s choice of name and place of origin cannot be coincidental; this is the name of the man the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy refers to as “the most significant and influential Japanese philosopher of the twentieth-century” (Maraldo 2010). The historical Nishida (1870-1945), moreover, founded the Kyoto School of philosophy at Kyoto University and was a friend and colleague of Imanishi Kinji, the man most closely associated with the founding of Japanese primatology. While it is likely that Japanese audiences would recognise the incongruity of Nishida’s name appearing in the context of the play’s inconsequential and surreal exchange, thereby rendering it ironic, the link to Imanishi is too arcane and might be considered as a serendipitous if over-subtle irony. Serendipitous or not, it is unlikely that a Japanese dramatist writing about Japanese primate researchers would have been unaware of the embedded irony, or unaware of issues surrounding such research. Indeed, despite Hirata’s indirect and allusive style, it is clear that the central concern of the play is science itself, specifically the role of the scientist in society. By choosing the contested field of Japanese primatology, Hirata is already interrogating the fundamental tenet of scientific objectivity before the play starts. Not only does this tactic suggest an example of Hirata as ‘sly anatomiser,’ it also brings into question Uchino’s charge (Uchino 2009, p.64 n3) that
Hirata is politically disengaged.\(^{(3)}\) We should always be wary of authorial claims, but this is a charge that Hirata explicitly, and I believe plausibly, refutes. In an unpublished interview conducted as part of my Hull University Project ‘Hirata 2010’ he stated:

I personally think that I am a very political playwright, but perhaps I use ‘political’ in a different sense to what has been used before […] here’s an example. Usually when playwrights write about the colonization of Korea they portray the Japanese soldiers and merchants as villains. Contemporary audiences, therefore, are obliged simplistically to view the Japanese in the play as wrong and to sympathise with the Koreans. But it’s more complex than that. In Europe, colonization is still regarded as an ongoing problem, but in Japan it is regarded as belonging to the historical past. I wanted contemporary Japanese audiences to understand that colonization still has repercussions, that it is still a problem, so I wrote *Citizens of Seoul* [Seoul Shimin, 1989].

Uchino bases his criticism partly on the fact that Hirata “has stated on many occasions that he is not trying to send a message to the audience” (Uchino 2009, p.64 n3), implying opportunities missed or avoided. He fails to acknowledge, however, that Hirata’s dramaturgical approach is founded on the very principle of precluding dialogic messages. Hirata is not concerned with *sending* a political message, but as the quotation above indicates, he is concerned that such messages can be *inferred*. All the plays mentioned so far (including *Citizens of Seoul*) have clear political concerns. Rather than writing overtly political drama, Hirata’s dramaturgical style invites audiences to assemble meaning from various discursive threads. In *Tokyo Notes*, which is predicated on the idea of a disastrous European war sometime in the future, the war itself is never discussed directly. Instead, through snippets of conversation we become aware of a range of attitudes to the war, and the extent of Japan’s involvement. At the height of the Bosnian war, when the play debuted, these attitudes would have been grimly familiar; indeed, Hirata has defined the majority attitude in Japan as “surprisingly apathetic” (Nge 2006). By positing the same responses in an imaginary future as the then situation in 1994, the play invites ironic reflection on Japanese attitudes to constitutional issues and Japan’s role in the world. By contrast, the political vision in *From ‘S’ Plateau* is directed inward, to what Hirata sees as the source of the apathy itself, the empty consumerism of the bubble economy. Of what value is the life of a single human being in such a society? By re-imagining the then current HIV/AIDS scare (1991) as a deadlier more random disease, grimly comical in its symptoms of increased apathy and listlessness, but irrevocable in its grip, the play undermines faith in capitalist expansion and technical/medical progress as guarantors of individual well being. In comparison, the political content of the *The Scientifically Minded* is more diffuse. Unlike the two later plays it is not set in an imaginary

\(^{(3)}\) Uchino has ameliorated his position somewhat since the original version of this essay appeared (Uchino 2000).
future – a device that invites immediate reflection on current situations – but as the play progresses it is the absence of ethical debate concerning the still contested subject of genetic engineering that becomes increasingly obvious; ironically the dramaturgical style, which is designed to preclude didactic political comment, here works as a *via negativa* to political content. The play calls into question the attitudes of the researchers as they banter about their experiments; mundane life and its concerns carry on amid bad jokes about Frankenstein mutations. Ostensibly charged with developments of a profound moral and ethical dimension, Hirata’s scientists barely recognise such issues. By revealing them as all-too-human in their concerns and attitudes, Hirata reminds us of their potential fallibility, and of our responsibility to make collective decisions as societies, rather than leaving them to business and science elites.

So far this discussion has concerned a Japanese cultural context. I would now like to consider the plays from an international perspective. According to Seinendan’s website (www.seinendan.org/en/play), Hirata’s plays are regularly translated into other languages. At the time of writing, the website lists twelve target languages of which the majority of translations are in French (sixteen), English (ten) and Korean (nine). This variety reflects both Hirata’s interest in international collaboration and the number and regularity of Seinendan’s international tours. The international aspect of Hirata’s work is important for several reasons. First, it suggests a universal quality to Hirata’s plays, or at least a quality that is readily assimilable by non-Japanese audiences. Second, it places a focus more on the practice, rather than the theories; and third, it concerns either non-Japanese reception of Seinendan’s Japanese-language productions, or reception of Hirata’s plays in non-Japanese languages via translated texts and productions. When it comes to the reception in English-speaking countries in Europe, North America, and Australasia, of either Seinendan’s own productions or of Hirata’s plays in translation, the relevance of criticism along *nihonjinron* lines is eroded, if not rendered superfluous. Separated from specific Japanese contexts, including Hirata’s theoretical writings, international audiences and readers can concern themselves only with perceived dramaturgical, literary and aesthetic qualities, and various cultural frames of reference within which to place Japanese cultural products (including Orientalist frames(4)). The universality of themes such as the care of elderly relatives and aesthetics in Western art (*Tokyo Notes*), attitudes to disease and medical technology (*From ‘S’ Plateau*), and the ethics of genetic engineering (*The Scientifically Minded*) is irrefutable. Such themes positively invite international engagement, and when coupled with cosmopolitan intertextual references, as in *Tokyo Notes* (Ozu, Jan Vermeer), and *From ‘S’ Plateau* (Samuel Beckett, Thomas Mann), it can be argued that at the level of content engagement by international audiences and readers is equal to that

(4) The lack of overt Japanese inscription in the plays and productions means they are not as open to conventional Orientalist framing as other Japanese theatrical exports that have been less reticent in this regard. As Denton Hewgill, Hiroko Noro, and Poulton put it in relation to a North American context, “The most successful Japanese productions abroad tend to rely on action, spectacle, and music” (Hewgill, Noro, Poulton 2004, p.233).
of Japanese audiences.\(^{(5)}\)

The technical and aesthetic qualities of Seinendan’s productions aid this engagement and in performance the style, while initially striking, appears organic and integral. Paradoxically, though, by drawing attention to the mode of performance, Seinendan’s productions run the risk of appearing superficial. The style is both familiar and strange. Familiar because we instantly recognise its antecedents, but strange because it is so detailed, precise, and we come to realize, beautifully choreographed. Its very precision exposes the approximation of much so-called stage naturalism, while simultaneously deconstructing the concept before our eyes – what is so crafted cannot be natural. This recognition is both exciting and puzzling: exciting because of its sheer finesse and clever play with our critical perceptions, but puzzling because at first we do not know its purpose. Western audiences, especially, might suppose that the purpose is the style; this was certainly my first response on encountering a Seinendan production for the first time – *Tokyo Notes* – in Dublin in 2002. However, Hirata’s plays have a habit of resonating in the mind long after the production, and one comes to realise that the style and dramaturgy are actually cleverly tuned vehicles for the transmission of ideas, including, as we have seen, political ideas. While Hirata seems unaware of the ideological implications of some aspects of his theoretical notions and dramaturgical style, as Uchino and others have shown, it is I believe more productive to follow Poulton and analyse the plays. Hirata conceives his plays through his dramaturgical methods, so in that sense the dramaturgy is separable and ‘universal’. That said, in performance the effect is one of inseparability and inevitability; style and content are fused and symbiotic. By viewing the dramaturgy in relation to the plays, rather than as a separate phenomenon, one is in a better position to appreciate the subtle cultural commentary, or ‘sly ananomies’ that Hirata provides.

**Play, translation, production**

The play is a comedy set in a common room attached to a laboratory at a university science faculty in Tokyo, which is shared by researchers, postgraduate students, and undergraduates. These ‘scientifically minded’ personnel come and go between common room and the laboratory, and the room and the outside world, and the play focuses on their social and professional interactions, rather than their work. As the play progresses we learn more and more about individual characters and their relationships, and gradually we learn to recognise and anticipate certain moods, tensions, and motivations. This information is skilfully released by Hirata as the play progresses to avoid any obvious exposition, a technique that encourages an audience to attend to stage action and dialogue.

The play is very much an ensemble piece and there is no conventional focus. The biologist Yasuoka has by far the largest part, but she is more of a structural anchor – the most connected character –

\(^{(5)}\) I suspect this is an argument that Hirata would tacitly support. In the Hull interview he stated that he finds Japanese audiences the most difficult, because they are less experienced as theatregoers.
than a conventional protagonist. There is also little in the way of dramatic situation. The nearest we come to this is the unexpected appearance midway through the play of a much talked-about character, Nishida. Despite the lack of such conventional dramatic attributes, Hirata skilfully maintains interest through manipulation of atmosphere, and variety of ensemble and spatial dynamics. The arrival of Nishida markedly changes the atmosphere, and we move from a tone of general banter, to one of significant tension. [video 2] The onstage balance among the characters is cleverly manipulated to ring all the changes between short solo appearances (but never monologues), through duos and trios, to several moments in the play with up to nine characters onstage. Spatial dynamics are very clear. The common room is a transit area between two offstage spaces, the laboratory on one side and the university and outside world on the other. The playing space is dominated by a large, irregularly shaped table. Much of the dialogue occurs while characters are sitting at this table. To avoid stasis, Hirata skilfully varies proxemic interactions among the characters, while simultaneously maintaining a realistic spatial logic – characters sit where they would most likely choose to sit in real life. Also important in this respect are personal lockers arranged upstage left and right that provide both spatial variety and motivation for characters’ movements, as they put on and take off lab coats, etc.

It is difficult to discuss the play without referring to the dramaturgy and similarly it is difficult to disassociate the text and performance. In performance, the dialogue should have an improvisatory, colloquial feel, and overall the effect is of witnessing or reading a devised, rather than a scripted play. This was the effect aimed at in preparing a first draft of the performing version from Hiroko Matsuda’s original translation (based on a Seinendan script from a production in 2000). To avoid spending time ‘teaching’ a style analogous to Seinendan’s – an exercise I felt would be spurious and unproductive – the Hull University rehearsals were preceded by several weeks of improvisations before the play was cast or the actors had seen the first draft. By gradually moving improvisatory work closer and closer to situations and characters in the play not only did an analogous style emerge spontaneously, but also casting became self-evident and there was a feeling of familiarity when the actors encountered the text for the first time. This was important as cast members then felt empowered, authorised so to speak, to comment on the text. Consequently, the first phase of rehearsals proper – discussion of the characters and line by line motivations – was an enjoyable and hugely productive process. The changes made to the dialogue at this stage and during later rehearsals were minor, usually just a question of fine tuning for idiomatic expression. Although the production context was British, the language the students themselves used in their daily conversations was not too far from that of US or, indeed, Australian students, so re-contextualisation in a different English-speaking environment should not be a major task. Moreover, as the Japanese university system reflects US influence, e.g. use in the play of the terms ‘sophomore’, ‘major’, etc., it was decided not to culturally transpose these terms to reflect the British system.

Structurally, the text presented here is close to that in the original translation. Aside from the
idiomatic substitutions noted above, there are some cuts in dialogue, and more stage directions have been added. The cuts are mostly where cultural knowledge is assumed, such as in the ‘Gifu’ sequences.\(\text{\textsuperscript{6}}\) \(\text[video 3]\) Given the lack of overt cultural specificity in Hirata’s plays, I felt it was important to retain as many of these references as we practically could, so these sections were trimmed rather than cut completely. Instead, we sought to avoid alienating a Western audience by the manner in which these references were acted. Consequently the ‘Gifu’ sections were played as if they referred to a specific region in the UK (decided collectively in rehearsals). This shared cultural knowledge helped the actors to develop intonation and comic timing, and an audience did not need to know anything about Gifu to understand the comic attitude towards it. (Other changes from the original are noted in the new translation where they occur.) The added stage directions follow the Hull production closely and are designed to help readers to imagine stage action. They are also intended as an aid for directors and actors wishing to stage the play.

References

8) POULTON, Cody. (2002). “Tokyo Notes: A Play by Hirata Oriza.” \textit{Asian Theatre Jour-}

\(\text{\textsuperscript{6}}\) Hirata tells me this is really a private joke and there is no particular reason why he chose Gifu. Even so, Japanese audiences would understand the lack of cultural connotations.

