Faculteit Letteren en Wijsbegeerte

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# The Hauntological Dramaturgy of *Ground and Floor* and *Time's Journey Through a Room* by Okada Toshiki

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> Art is thought from the future. […] If we want thought different from the present, then thought must veer toward art. (Morton 2016, 1)

**Fraudepreventie**

Ondergetekende, Sélena Hyacintha de Waard, masterstudent Taal- en Letterkunde Theater- en Filmwetenschappen verklaart dat deze masterproef volledig oorspronkelijk is en uitsluitend door haarzelf geschreven is. Bij alle informatie en ideeën ontleend aan andere bronnen, heeft ondergetekende expliciet en in detail verwezen naar de vindplaats.

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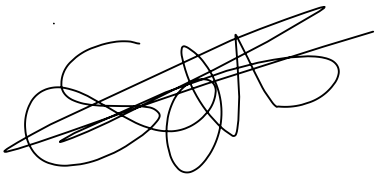

This thesis is dedicated to my grandmother, Truus Spijker.

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# 1. Introduction

The central idea of posthumanism is that the human is no longer central. On a global scale, there are new and seemingly insoluble problems, like climate change, that require innovative and unprecedented ways of thinking. Posthumanist thinkers envision new, more durable ways to look at such problems and help re-define our relationship with the present. Similarly, theatre can be used as a medium to enable new ways of thinking. The theater of Okada Toshiki is an example of such theatre.[1] After the triple catastrophe of the Great East Japan Earthquake, tsunami and subsequent nuclear fallout at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant in March 2011, he was one of the first Japanese artists to openly address and create narratives around the disaster (Iwaki 2015). His post-Fukushima disaster-triptych thematizes the alienation, paralysis and disorientation that came with the catastrophe. Okada starts staging ghosts and nonhumans in an attempt to give a voice to what usually remains silent.

"The stage is a place where ghosts can be seen," the audience learns at the beginning of *Ground and Floor* (2012) as the phrase is projected onto a screen at the back of the stage (see appendix, image 1). *Ground and Floor* was Okada's first ghost play. Produced shortly after the 2011 disaster, the play tells of "a family's uneasy existence in the shadow of Fukushima" (Eckersall 2021, 112). It portrays the confliction between the dead and the living, the possibility of listening to ghosts and ghostly narratives emerging not from humans, but from a specific land. Three years later, *Time's Journey Through A Room* (2016) premiered at the Kunstenfestivaldesarts in Brussels.[2] Like *Ground and Floor, Time's Journey* features ghosts that are desperately, sometimes even annoyingly trying to capture the attention of the living. The living, in this case a young and newly formed couple, are left conflicted. On the one hand, there is a wish to hold on to the past. On the other hand, a desire for a fresh start and to move forward into the future.

This thesis examines Okada Toshiki's *Ground and Floor* and *Time's Journey* from the perspective of post- and nonhumanism, especially in the vein of those dead. Posthumanism lends itself as a theoretical framework to analyze the nonhuman elements of Okada's theatre, because the posthuman is open to the paranormal, the immaterial and the supernatural (Pepperell 2005). Within the various strands of post- and nonhumanism, the focus is on ghosts,

[1] Throughout this thesis, Okada Toshiki and other Japanese authors and critics will be consequently referred to in the traditional Japanese way, with their family name first and surname last.

[2] Henceforth, *Time's Journey* will be used as an abbreviation for *Time's Journey Through A Room.*

especially as described by Jacques Derrida, who coined the term "hauntology" in *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (1994). Derrida's concept of hauntology describes how a presence can linger within an absence. For example, how the past can be present - and in that sense haunt - the present. Late critic and cultural theorist Mark Fisher used the term in his book *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (2014). *Ground and Floor* and *Time's Journey* both visualize hauntological elements. This is apparent in how they make the past present by staging dead family members. In doing so, Okada "accounts for the increasing merging, layering, and intersecting of non-synchronous times in Japanese society today" (Jansen 2016). Derrida, Fisher and Okada are all very political. Their work focuses on the loopholes of the system and argues against the idea that there are no alternatives possible. Their theories and the ways in which they correspond will be described in more detail at a later stage of this thesis.

## 1.1 Methodology and theoretical framework

This thesis consists of a qualitative analysis of Okada's first two ghost plays, *Ground and Floor* and *Time's Journey,* which are discussed in detail as case studies. The aim is to go beyond the modernist framework of posthumanism which adopts new theories to old works.. In *From the cyborg to the apparatus,* Kristof van Baarle describes a "deficit between theory and practice" in posthumanism (2018, 28). He argues that "authors theorizing and analyzing posthumanism in the performing arts keep on referring to a group of artists that during the eighties and nineties created innovative work with technology and established new forms of staging subjects" (28). This thesis aims to supply that deficit, by analyzing contemporary theatre. As a contemporary artist, Okada's work reflects contemporary sentiments and the *Zeitgeist* it is embedded in. This thesis shows how his theatrical and dramaturgical choices put post- and nonhumanism into practice.

Similarly, I will also seek to avoid applying old theories to new work. According to Steve Dixon, "the actual specificities of the changing ontology of [digital] performance and the performer within virtual space are rarely addressed except in old terms" (2007, 156).[3] Consequently, "the field is already saturated with re-rehearsals and revivals of postmodern

[3] Dixon defines digital performance as "all performance works where computer technologies play a key role rather than a subsidiary one in content, techniques, aesthetics, or delivery form" (2007, 3). In that sense, *Ground and Floor* and *Time's Journey* are not digital performances (except for their dependence on English subtitles). However, while *Ground and Floor* and *Time's Journey* are not digital performance per se, Dixon's statements are still relevant to Okada's work as they emphasize the importance of describing current phenomena from a contemporary perspective.

philosophy and deconstructive analysis" (156). In order to avoid an outdated perspective, this thesis supplements Derrida's theory with more recent theory by Mark Fisher, Richard Grusin and others.

Finally, I will go beyond an imperialist mindset which sees non-western theatres from a westerner's point of view. Dixon also warns of a danger of theoretical imperialism, "of certain analytical modes and philosophical worldviews colonizing, civilizing, and trivializing digital performance" (156). For a less eurocentric perspective, this thesis relies on the work of international writers and scholars. Many of the consulted source material is by Japanese critics. Also, the theory of British-Australian scholar Sara Ahmed is drawn upon for perspectives on phenomenology and mourning.

## 1.2 The theater of Okada Toshiki

Okada Toshiki (1973-) is the founder and writer-director of theater company chelfitsch (always written in lowercase). They are known for productions that examine the relation between body and language, using a choreography that draws on physical movements from everyday life (Geilhorn 2017, 163). chelfitsch' productions are often critical and political. From the start, their work has been concerned with the harsh living and working conditions of Okada's generation. The plays thematized their lives and were written in a highly stylized version of their daily vernacular. By using a language that is typically considered "poor", Okada gives a voice to subcultures that often remain unheard "and to a whole generation deemed 'lost'" (Jansen 2016).

Theatre as an artistic and cultural medium can both reflect, but also alter a *Zeitgeist.* It can be at the forefront of developing and challenging new ideas. According to Marvin Carlson, theatre is "a simulacrum of the cultural and historical process itself" (2001, 2, qtd. in Martin 2013, 15). It "has always provided society with the most tangible records of its attempts to understand its own operations" (2001, 2, qtd. in Martin 2013, 15). In this sense, theatre and society are always in a dialogue with each other. Theatre, embedded in society, can build further on new ideas but can also criticize them. Likewise, Okada not only responds to the public opinion, he also shapes it. He thinks that art can confront reality with "something strong"

> And that something is essential for society—all the more for a society in which catastrophes have occurred, like in Japan. Because if this something, an antithesis, does not exist, people will believe there was only one reality. Therefore, their thinking is limited. (Okada 2011, 19ff, qtd. in Geilhorn 2017, 166)

Theatre can help make the unthinkable imaginable. Okada utilizes that potential and, through his work, tries to give his audience the possibility to think in alternative ways. Besides critically representing the "now", he also radically re-thinks the past, the present and the future (Jansen 2016). This is one of the main ways in which Okada's work overlaps with nonhumanism as a philosophical theory and the larger posthumanist project, which will be discussed in more detail within chapter two.

After the 2011 disaster, Okada's social and artistic engagement took on the form of the "disaster tryptic", consisting of the plays *Current Location, Ground and Floor* and *Time's Journey*. As mentioned above, the last two feature the ghost of a deceased loved one. By focusing on post- and nonhuman aspects of Okada's theatre, this thesis provides a perspective on how Okada uses the figure of the ghost to thematize the disaster and its impact on Japanese society. *Ground and Floor* and *Time's Journey* exemplify how theater with a focus on nonhumans can function simultaneously as a beacon of inspiration and as a warning sign for society.

### 1.3 Structure

Chapter two introduces ghostly post- and nonhumanism, especially through the eyes of Derrida and Fisher. Nonhumanism will be defined as a movement within the larger posthumanist project. Rather than as a sign of human self-hatred, post- and nonhumanism can be interpreted as a foundation for innovative thought and art. Chapter three focuses on the work of Okada Toshiki and his relationship to ghosts. The focus is on how his social and artistic engagement shows in his methodology and in his interest in ghosts. Chapter four consists of detailed analyses of the ways in which case studies *Ground and Floor* and *Time's Journey* feature ghosts, specters and other hauntological elements. The analysis will lead to a suggestion. As an alternative to the Anthropocene and as a companion to Donna Haraway's idea of the Cthulhuscene (2015), I will suggest the Hauntolocene in subchapter 4.3. Chapter five will consist of a conclusion. All referenced sources are included in the reference list in chapter six. Finally, as theatres have been closed throughout most of the academic year of 2020/2021, the analysis largely depends on video material. Any images that are referred to in the text can be found in chapter 7, the appendix.

## 2. Ghostly post- and nonhumanism

After centuries of humanist and anthropocentric thought, philosophy has come to a stage where it questions the centrality of the human. Posthumanism aims to redefine the relationship between humans and the earth in the "de-anthropocentrered" present (Herbrechter 2016, 17). In doing so, posthumanism addresses the "urgency for the integral redefinition of the notion of the human, following the onto-epistemological as well as scientific and bio-technological developments of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries" (Ferrando 2013, 26). While there are different strands and definitions of posthumanism, this thesis uses Laryssa Soussa and Rosane Pessoa's definition of posthumanism as a "project that questions what it means to be human, as it engages with ethico-onto-epistemological challenges that arise in contemporary times, since there is a constant attempt to consider and address human and nonhuman entities, language, and space from a flat hierarchy perspective" (2019, 521).

The term "posthumanism" was coined in 1976 by literary theorist and writer Ihab Hassan during a keynote address that he held at the International Symposium on Postmodern Performance. In *Prometheus as Performer: Toward a Posthumanist Culture?,* Hassan describes an "emergent culture" and coins it "posthumanism" (1977, 831). According to him, "posthumanist culture is the matrix of contemporary performance", but

> there is a matrix larger still: the universe itself, everything that was, is, and will become. What a performance! But who can speak for the universe? No one. (831)

This passage shows one of the main movements within posthumanism: zooming out from a solely human scale to infinitely larger and smaller ones that encompass non-human objects and others. Posthumanism "claims to offer a new epistemology that is not anthropocentric and seeks to undermine the traditional boundaries between the human, the animal, and the technological" (Bolter 2016, 1).

Like posthumanism, nonhumanism is a "response to an overconfidence about human power" (Bennett 2015, 227). However, posthumanism should not be confused with nonhumanism. In this thesis, nonhumanism is interpreted as a movement within the larger posthumanist project. It is a "continuation of earlier attempts to depict a world populated not by active subjects and passive objects but by lively and essentially intertwined materials, by bodies human and nonhuman" (224). According to Richard Grusin, nonhumanism is "engaged in decentering the human in favor of a turn toward and concern for the nonhuman, understood variously in terms of animals, affectivity, bodies, organic and geophysical systems, materiality,

or technologies" (2015, vii). Grusin does not actually include ghosts in his definition of the nonhuman turn. This thesis aims to fill that void by discussing how Okada's nonhuman dramaturgy fits within the nonhuman project. Going forward, I will refer to this strand of nonhumanism as ghostly nonhumanism and to posthumanism with a special focus on ghosts, specters and the concept of haunting as ghostly posthumanism.

"[T]he big project of the nonhuman turn," writes Jane Bennett, "is to find new techniques, in speech and art and mood, to disclose the participation of nonhumans in 'our' world" (225). The theatre of Toshiki Okada can be situated within this project because he stages non-humans and focuses on ways to emphasize their agency. In the case of *Ground and Floor,* for example, this happened rather literally. When *Ground and Floor* premiered at Kunstenfestivaldesarts, handouts were distributed that said that "bigger diplomatic effort" ought to be made to reconcile the interests of the living and the dead (Iwaki 2013). In advocating for the rights of the dead, Okada understands the human from the perspective of the ghosts and tries to recontextualize our relationship with them.

Mikhail Epstein criticizes Grusin's idea of nonhumanism. He interprets the "dismissive attitude toward the 'humanist subject'" as "an expression of the humanities' current self-hatred" (2017, 550). Epstein argues that "[t]he project of 'nonhumanities' is self-defeating, because promotion of the 'nonhuman,' […] is a step in human self-transcendence and thus in human self-affirmation" (550). He thinks that the nonhumanities "are inscribed in the domain of the humanities, just as atheism has no meaning outside of the history of religion" (550). While it is true that posthumanism and nonhumanism can be interpreted as an "ongoing critique that is already at work within humanism" (Herbrechter 2016, 17), there is more to it than human-centered self-hatred. Interestingly, Ihab Hassan already foresaw Esptein's criticism forty years prior and argued against it by emphasizing that while "posthumanism may appear variously as a dubious neologism, the latest slogan, or simply another image of man's recurrent self-hatred [, it] may also hint at a potential in our culture" (1977, 843). Similarly, Dixon writes that while posthuman perspectives in some ways "extend postmodern critiques of mediatization, simulation and the loss of the real," they also "offer a fresher, even more scientific approach toward a more specific and rationally considered analysis of the field [of performance]" (Dixon 2007, 156). By discussing how the staging of ghosts allows Okada to present creative alternatives to society, rather than just criticizing it, I will try to show how post- and nonhuman philosophy can help inspire creative, innovative and effective ways of re-thinking the human

that surpasses mere self-hatred. The next part of this chapter will focus on how Derrida and Fisher's theories fit within this project.

### 2.1 Jacques Derrida

Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) was a French literary critic and philosopher who is mostly known for his work in postmodernist and poststructuralist theory. Poststructuralism is a movement in philosophy and language and literature that emerged in the late 1960s as a reaction to structuralism: a philosophical and linguistic movement that sees "cultural practices as being made up of a system of underlying systems" (D'Allevia 2012, 126). Whereas structuralism seeks to expose the underlying systems of texts and language, the focus of poststructuralism is on where these systems are inadequate. Poststructuralists accused structuralist theory of being "ahistorical" and of disregarding "the experience of actual readers or viewers" (130). They argue that linguistic systems are not universal. Rather, they are "fictions that we create in order to be able to interpret the world around us" (131). To the poststructuralist, the relation between words and their meaning is slippery, unstable and arbitrary. Poststructuralism represents the skepticism of postmodernity: when fewer people believed in the power of institutions, nothing was still immune to sharp criticism and everything could be questioned.

Derrida was radically against the concept of logocentrism: the idea of "a unified meaning that directly refers to a pre-existent reality" (D'Allevia 2012, 137). He coined the term deconstruction, which is a "strategy of reading" that "starts from the idea […] that structures are not some kind of deep truth waiting to be uncovered but are themselves cultural constructs created through discourse [...] to indicate a theoretical project that explores how knowledge and meaning are constructed" (137). As a poststructuralist, Derrida was not a posthumanist philosopher per se. However, poststructuralism and postmodernism both criticized the "totalizing practices and rhetorics of the modern era" in an "attempt to subvert claims to unity, simplicity, or universality" (Bolter 2016, 2). In doing so, they formed the foundation for later posthumanist thinking.

The essay *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (1994) is based on a two-part address that Derrida held at *Whither Marxism? Global Crises in International Perspective* - a conference organized by the Center for Ideas and

Society at the University of California, Riverside in 1993.[4] A central question of the conference was whether or not the collapse of communism and the success of global capitalism have led us to "the end of history", especially as described by Francis Fukuyama in *The End of History and The Last Man* [1992] (Cullenberg and Magnus 1994, viii). Fukuyama had argued that Marxism had been defeated and liberal democracy had triumphed. In his address, Derrida disagrees with this stance. He introduces the term hauntology to exhibit how in the absence of something remains the presence of a spectral element (Glazier 2017, 241). Within the absence of Marxism, Derrida finds the spectral element of its possible return, just like Marx opens the *Communist Manifesto* [1874] by announcing that "the specter of communism" haunts Europe (Harper 2009). In this way, Marxism haunts within liberal democratic systems as "the haunting of a historicised present by spectres that cannot be 'ontologised' away" (Harper 2009).

Derrida coined "hauntology" as a pun on "ontology", which is the study of being. During the entire address, Derrida mentions the term thrice and describes it rather inconsistently as (1) "the logic of haunting", (2) an element that is "neither living or dead, present nor absent [and that] spectralizes" and finally as (3) the introduction of haunting "into the very construction of a concept" (1997, 10; 63; 202). To understand the concept of hauntology better, it is worth looking at passage in which the term is introduced:

> What is a ghost? What is the effectivity or the presence of a specter, that is, of what seems to remain as ineffective, virtual, insubstantial as a simulacrum? Is there, between the thing itself and its simulacrum, an opposition that holds up? Repetition and first time, but also repetition and last time, since the Singularity of any first time, makes of it also a last time. Each time it is the event itself, a first time is a last time. Altogether other. Staging for the end of history. Let us call it a hauntology. (10)

Hauntology is introduced to understand the postmodern experiences such as that of "disjointed time" (repetition and first or last time), fear of "the end of history", "the extremity of the extreme" and the opposition between "to be" and "not to be" (10). Derrida took both the concept of "out of joint time" and the gap between "to be" and "not to be" from Shakespeare's *Hamlet.* The first comes from the following passage:

> Hamlet: Sweare.
> Ghost [beneath]: Sweare.

[4] Henceforth, *SoM* will be used as an abbreviation for *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International.*

> [They swear]
> Hamlet: Rest, rest perturbed Spirit! So Gentlemen,
> With all my loue 1 doe commend me to you;
> And what so poore a man as Hamlet is
> Doe t'expresse his loue and friending to you,
> God willing, shall not lacke: Let us goe in together,
> And still your fingers on your lippes, I pray.
> The time is out of ioynt: Oh cursed spight,
> That ever I was borne to set it right.
> Nay, come, let's goe together. [Exeunt] (Act I, scene V, qtd. in Derrida 1994, 1)

In this fragment, Hamlet converses with the ghost of his dead father, whose return made time become "out of joint" or unhinged. Derrida compares the beginning of *Hamlet* with the beginning of the *Communist Manifesto,* as both begin with the return of a ghost. In the case of *Hamlet*, this is the return of the dead king, Hamlet's father. *The Communist Manifesto* starts with the statement that the specter of communism is haunting Europe. Derrida emphasizes the parallels between the *Communist Manifesto* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to address the experience of time being "out of joint" and to address the ways in which the past, present and future can overlap.

In essence, hauntology refers to how a presence can linger in an absence and how the past can haunt within the present. Within this logic, Derrida defines the specter as

> a paradoxical incorporation, the becoming-body, a certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit. It becomes, rather, some "thing" that remains difficult to name: neither soul nor body, and both one and the other. For it is flesh and phenomenality that give to the spirit its spectral apparition, but which disappear right away in the apparition, in the very coming of the revenant or the return of the specter. (5)

Both *Hamlet* and Okada's ghost plays portray the way in which theater is especially suitable to visualize Derrida's concept of the specter, as to stage a ghost requires that something that is initially invisible is given a body or a form. Moreover, a play is always "repetition and first time" (10). Peggy Phelan explains that

> [p]erformance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance. To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology. Performance's being [...] becomes itself through disappearance. (1996, 146)

Due to their liveness, theatre and performance disappear the moment they appear. However, while every live performance is unique, there is an element of repetition when something is performed multiple times. In that way, theatre is similar to Derrida's description of the spirit who "comes by coming back" (10). "To come by coming back" exemplifies the concept "disjointed time" or "time being out of joint". Chapter four will analyze how such and other hauntological concepts are present in *Ground and Floor* and *Time's Journey.*

## 2.2 The ghosts of Mark Fisher

The concept of hauntology has been adapted by Mark Fisher (1968-2017), a British writer, philosopher, and cultural theorist who was also known under his blog alias k-punk. Throughout his life, Fisher only published three books: *Capitalist Realism: is there no Alternative?* (2009), *Ghosts of My Life* (2014) and *The Weird And The Eerie* (2017). *Ghosts of My Life* and *The Weird and the Eerie* are largely composed of k-punk blog posts and discuss the ways in which hauntology and Fisher's idea of lost futures and his definitions of the concepts "weird" and "eerie" present themselves in modern and popular media.[5] The next passage will shortly discuss these books, the ways in which they are relevant to Okada's theatre and their larger embedment in ghostly posthumanism.

In *Capitalist Realism,* Fisher critically examines the idea that there is no alternative to global capitalism. Fisher writes that while the postmodern condition of the 80s still saw the possibility of political alternatives to capitalism, our current situation knows "a deeper, far more pervasive, sense of exhaustion, of cultural and political sterility" (2009, 7). According to Fisher, "[c]apitalism is what is left when beliefs have collapsed at the level of ritual or symbolic elaboration, and all that is left is the consumer-spectator, trudging through the ruins and the relics" (10). When capitalism arrives, it "brings with it a massive desacralization of culture" (12). Fisher explains that "[t]he power of capitalist realism derives in part from the way that capitalism subsumes and consumes all of previous history" (4).

Fisher is critical, but pessimistic. However, while his view of the world may be gloomy, he is not completely without hope. Instead of as an end, Fisher describes the present as "year zero" and as an "ideological rubble" (78). He describes how "[f]rom a situation in which nothing can happen, *suddenly anything is possible again*" (81, emphasis added). Like Derrida,

[5] The role of weirdness and eeriness in *Ground and Floor* and *Time's Journey* is discussed in detail in chapter four.

Fisher argues against Francis Fukuyama's idea that "hat history has climaxed with liberal capitalism" (2009, 12). He addresses loopholes within capitalist realism by emphasizing "that what is currently called realistic was itself once 'impossible': the slew of privatizations that took place since the 1980s would have been unthinkable only a decade earlier" (17). Then, he continues to list other aporias of capitalist realism: the climate crisis, its disregard for mental health issues, and the persistence of a deficient bureaucracy. These issues are like specters that haunt capitalist realism. The system can only function when their presence is largely ignored. Still, they loom in the background, felt but invisible.

The most prominent idea in *Ghosts of My Life* is the idea that we are haunted "not only by the past but by lost futures" (2014, 55). The postmodern condition of capitalist realism is one in which "the past cannot be forgotten [and] the present cannot be remembered" (62). To further detail this condition, he relies on Derridian concepts like hauntology, "trace" (58) and "messianicity" (9) - the idea that there is a saviour or messiah coming. Fisher writes that our *Zeitgeist* is "essentially hauntological" and that the "power of Derrida's concept lay in its idea that of being haunted by events that had not actually happened, futures that failed to materialize and remained spectral" (59). He describes "an increasing sense that culture has lost the ability to grasp and articulate the present. Or it could be that, in one very important sense, there is no present anymore" (Fisher 2014, 14). *Ghosts of My Life* discusses various ways in which these lost futures haunt various modern media. Whereas Derrida describes specters as the "*frequency* of […] the visibility of the invisible" and as "what one imagines, what one thinks one sees and which one projects – on an imaginary screen where there is nothing to see" (1994, 125), Fisher interprets them as "the agency of the virtual [:] that which acts without (physically) existing (2014, 18). This shows how the focus within hauntology has shifted from the "visual" to the "virtual".[6] The concept grew over time to adapt to contemporary sentiments and anxieties.

In essence, Fisher uses the term hauntology to show how the present is haunted not only by the past, but also by the loss of the futures it promised (Seaton 2021). The disorientation that Fisher describes as a result of these lost futures, is comparable to how Okada felt after the 2011 disaster:

[6] Fisher's focus on the virtual also shows in his distinction between two directions in hauntology. First, the hauntology that refers to "that which is (in actuality is) no longer, but which remains effective as a virtuality (the traumatic 'compulsion to repeat', a fatal pattern)" (2014, 18). Second, hauntology that refers to "that which (in actuality) has not yet happened, but which is already effective in the virtual" (18).

> I felt that I could not 'identify' myself with Tokyo. The feelings I have when I am in Tokyo were becoming closer to those I have when I am in foreign cities like New York or Berlin. I even thought that [Tokyo] is something already over, or already lost, for me at least. (Okada 2013, qtd. in Iwaki 2015, 78)

This passage shows the alienation that Okada felt and that he thematized in his disaster-triptych. When *Ground and Floor* was shown at the Kunstenfestivaldesarts in Brussels in 2013, it was defined as "theatre of alienation" that shows the apathy that his generation has succumbed to after the disaster and years of economic instability (KFDA 2013). The next chapter will discuss Okada Toshiki's work in more detail and analyze how he translated his experience with the 2011 disaster into his affiliation with ghosts.

# 3. The Ghostly Dramaturgy of Okada Toshiki

## 3.1 Okada Toshiki's lost generation

In 1997, Okada Toshiki founded the theater company chelfitsch. The name chelfitsch is a portmanteau that was coined by blending the words "childish taste" and "selfish" (Tanaka 2008). Initially, Okada used the term to refer to himself:

> I thought myself childish and selfish. I was twenty-three years old. But it changed its meaning after the company's name got to be known. When a critic said "chelfitsch" describes the social situation of our time in Japan, especially Tokyo, I was somehow convinced of it. Then I got to like using this explanation. (qtd. in Barker 2011)

From the start, Okada has written and directed all of chelfitsch' productions. His early work addresses the strange reality of the "lost" generation that he belongs to (Jansen 2016). Compared to their predecessors, Okada's generation faced a lot of disillusionment and economic uncertainty. They "entered the workforce in the 1990s, when Japan's exceptional postwar economic growth came to a sudden halt and familiar structures and institutions collapsed" (Jansen 2016). The number of temporary workers, for example, grew from one sixth in the 1990s to one third in the 2000s (Kuhn 2009). While they must work as much as regular workers, they cannot rely on the same security and insurance benefits.

As aforementioned, the reality of Okada's generation resonates with the world as it is described by Mark Fisher. Fisher explains that in the post-Fordist economic model

> [t]he slogan which sums up the new conditions is 'no long term'. Where formerly workers could acquire a single set of skills and expect to progress upwards through a rigid organizational hierarchy, now they are required to periodically re-skill as they move from institution to institution, from role to role. (2009, 32)

As a result,

> [w]ork and life become inseparable. Capital follows you when you dream. Time ceases to be linear, becomes chaotic, broken down into punctiform divisions. As production and distribution are restructured, so are nervous systems. (34)

Meditating on this reality, Okada's early work shows how his generation feels disconnected from society (Jansen 2016). The plays thematize contemporary life and the state of being weak,

unmotivated or languid (Soma 2010, 6). They were often set in the offices, convenience stores and family restaurants where his generation worked under harsh circumstances (Jansen 2016).

At the start of his career, Okada was inspired significantly by the "contemporary colloquial theatre" of Hirata Oriza. Hirata and his theatre company Seinendan were part of a 1990s theater movement called "quiet theatre" – which Hirata himself prefers to call "contemporary colloquial theatre" (Poulton 2002, 4). It was a response to the "larger-than-life festive spirit of 1980s theatre" (1). The style emphasizes informal Japanese speech that is typically colloquial and thus sounds very realistic. Hirata's plays often feature several characters speaking simultaneously, fragmented sentences, inaudible speech and a subdued, "normal" speaking tone. *Tokyo Notes* (1994), for example, deals with the dissolution of human relationships in modern society. Set in the near future, the play is about siblings who meet in the lobby of an art museum when their sister from their hometown comes to visit. A major war is raging in Europe. The siblings sit in front of paintings which have been evacuated from Europe. There, they continue endlessly fragmented conversations about things like caring for elderly parents, their future careers, love, etc. Against the enormous backdrop of war, Hirata places a family living their ordinary daily lives and in doing so reveals a whole range of problems and crises of modern society (Seinendan 2010).

Okada elaborated on Hirata's use of colloquial, informal Japanese by developing his own style of "hyper-colloquial" or "super-real" Japanese (chelfitsch 2021; Okano 2005). Especially in his early plays, characters speak in abbreviated sentences full of conjunctions and without verbalized subjects, that sound like snippets from private conversations (Okano 2005, 1). Okada was also inspired by Hirata to emphasize the strangeness that occurs when an actor is self-conscious about their lines (2). During the repetition process, a main goal is to take the actor's consciousness away from the script and from themselves, to create distance between them and their characters. This self-consciousness is achieved through several acting methods. One of these is to have two conversations on stage that the actor has to respond to simultaneously (1). Okada also borrowed Hirata's method of diverting the actor's consciousness away from the script by placing a physical burden on them (2).

Besides speech, Okada's theatre is known for its unique and expressive use of body language. Okada's methodology evolves "around the relationship between speech and body" to discover new modes of expression (chelfitsch 2020). Experiments with body and speech in the rehearsal process play a decisive role in shaping the final product (Barker 2011). In the final product, this desynchronization of body and voice creates new layers of meaning (Jansen 2016).

In *Ground and Floor*, for example, characters physically play with the theme of balance. Each character has a specific body language in which movements are repeated. “An arm above the head, a hunched body, grasping hands in space, scanning feet, a route through space; *Ground and floor* is not only a play but also a choreography” (van den Broek 2013).

During the rehearsal process of *Ground and Floor*, Okada did not involve a choreographer. Instead, he invited a specialist in rolfing (a type of bodywork acting on the frame) to give weekly lectures about anatomy (Hayashi 2013). From there, the actors had to create their own unique body language. Yamagata Taichi, who plays the role of Yukio, “wanted the audience to feel the world below the ground through [his] physical expression” (qtd. in Hayashi 2013):

> My basic image was the nebulous one of energy being transmitted to my body from beneath and then returning there. I try to really move my spine and tailbone while flaying my arms and legs about as well. (Yamagata, qtd. in Hayashi 2013)

Because of Okada’s acting method, his actors feel distanced from their characters. Instead of being “one”, with them, they feel more like “mediators” (2013). “I'm not sure who it is, but it is not me,” explains Yamagata (qtd. in Hayashi 2013). Similarly, Okada sees the function of the actor as a “symbol” whose role could be performed “by a cup or anything” (Soma 2010, 6). Okada tries to emphasize the fictionality of theatre. He insists that the full potential can only be brought about by accepting, even emphasizing, the representative gap between the actor and their character (Soma 2010, 7).

Okada aims to uncover an “underlying reason” or “origin”: something that precedes the script and bodily expression (Okano 2005, 1; 4). He thinks that “having a source within where every word or movement originates is an extremely essential element of theatre” (1). Okada’s desire to uncover a reality beyond the script and behind the actor’s body shows the influence of Bertolt Brecht’s theatre theory. Early in his career, Okada read Brecht’s *Can the theater reproduce the current world?* [*Kann die heutige Welt durch Theater wiedergegeben werden?* (1955)]. On a philosophical level, Brecht’s theory inspired Okada’s aim to uncover the “true meaning of theater” and to affect the audience:

> the system we call theater is in fact something for the audience, a system intended to do something to the audience. In other words, it is not a matter of how much reality you can bring to your staging of the drama within the play, but how you can bring a change in the audience. (Okada, qtd. in Soma 2010, 5)

According to Okada, Brecht's concept of theatre is not necessarily to "show" the audience something - such as "the moving emotions of a drama" - but rather to change them with what is presented (Okada, qtd. in Soma 2010, 5). To achieve this, Okada's rehearsal process is focused more on affecting the audience, rather than channeling the consciousness of the actor.

Okada also employs Brechtian techniques on a dramaturgical level. The Brechtian technique of breaking the fourth wall, for example, is an important strategy in both *Ground and Floor* and *Times Journey.* In both plays, the audience is addressed directly. In the first scene of *Time's Journey,* for example, character Arisa asks the audience to close their eyes and not open them until she tells them to. The moment they do, they have been transported to the year 2012, the year in which the play is set (see appendix, image 3). Throughout the rest of the piece, Arisa repeatedly returns to her microphone at the front left of the stage to explain what her character is doing and why. There is an omniscient, clairvoyant quality about her that is so obviously unnatural that the audience is repeatedly reminded of her fictionality. In *Ground and Floor,* the fictionality of the play is emphasized when characters interact with the subtitles on the screen behind them. There are instances where they comment on them directly or where they must wait for the subtitles to catch up with their fast-paced speech.

chelfitsch achieved international acclaim in 2007, when *Five Days in March* was performed at the Kunstenfestivaldesarts in Brussels (1). Starting from *Five Days in March (*2005), their productions were created especially for an international context, in collaboration with festivals and theaters. Okada became interested in "placing works dealing with local Japanese issues in front of foreign audiences who don't know Japanese and have different cultural backgrounds and seeing what their reaction is" (qtd. in Soma 2010, 3). He wanted to address "social realities and the directions the world is moving" (7). Okada is interested in what he calls the "public" aspect of performance: the aspect "that implants something in the audience" (7). To him, a "public" work is a strong work:

> Doing theater as a public art shouldn't mean that we have to focus on social themes, or that we can't do overly experimental things. On the contrary, it is perfectly acceptable to do things that involve highly individualistic concerns or obsessions. The measure of whether a work is "public" or not should be how powerfully it is realized, or whether it is being realized at a high level or not. (7)

For Okada, a work is successfully realized when the audience is affected. This does not, however, require knowledge of Japan or the Japanese language. Instead, Okada explains that

"European audiences don't have to think about situations in Japan to experience [*Time's Journey*]. [He is] happy if they think about conflicts with which they are familiar" (qtd. in SPRING 2021).

### 3.2 "I Think I've Changed A Lot"

Another turning point in Okada's career came with the triple-catastrophe of earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear fallout in the Tōhoku region of March 2011. The Japanese population tried to deal with the catastrophe through "excessive social unification" (71). Everything was aimed at avoiding possible further harm of the victims. Kyoko Iwaki explains that sociophobia increased "from people's fear of being cast out from their groups, as such exclusion would severely harm the already fragile status quo" (70). The unspoken rule became the "code of wa" (harmonious integration). Non-compliance with the "code of wa," however, could be punished by social marginalization (Geilhorn 2017, 171).

Okada was one of the first artists to publicly speak out about the dangers of this excessive social unification, self-censorship and the merging of "here" - the safety zone - and "there" - the hazardous area (Iwaki 2015, 71). In 2012, he published a two-page essay called *I Think I Changed A Lot* (2012). In the essay, Okada describes the way in which the distinction between "here" and "there" evaporated due to the disaster (77). The title of the essay reveals his different stance on the issue compared to the rest of society. "I think I changed a lot", writes Okada, where others desperately tries to emphasize the ways in which everything has remained normal. Okada argued that " conformity should be carefully avoided after such historic catastrophes" and "that the feeling of discomfort generated by the excessive social unity of wa should be accentuated rather than concealed" (79).[7]

Whereas the art of his contemporaries dealt with the confusing reality disaster by addressing it in a fragmented, often collage-style manner, Okada was one of the first Japanese artists to explicitly create literary narratives about the disaster (72). His first artistic attempt to come to terms with the catastrophe presented itself in the form of *Unable To See* (2012), a short piece that used "satire as a means of social and political criticism" (Geilhorn 2017, 167). The title of the play "not only refers to the invisibility of radioactivity, but it also blames the incapability of Japanese society and those responsible to recognize the dangers of nuclear power and to react appropriately" (167). After *Unable To See,* Okada created what would later be

[7] For more information on the "code of wa" and the effects of the catastrophe on the Japanese population, see Iwaki (2015).

called the "disaster triptych", consisting of *Current Location* (2011) and the two ghost plays *Ground and Floor* (2013) and *Time's Journey Through A Room* (2017).

Following the 2011 catastrophe, Okada realized that his casual 'super-real' language "no longer sufficed to capture the world" (Iwaki 2015, 86). Instead, Okada saw the need for a "new theatre language that could speak beyond hum - drum reality" (86). Moreover, the disaster caused Okada to turn to fiction. However, that fiction is not an "unreal fabrication" but rather an "alternative reality" that "the current society in Japan" should adapt to (qtd. in Barker 2011). Okada starts to explore fiction as a "recessive reality": "fiction that threatens reality by proposing an alternative" (Okada 2011, 20 qtd. in Geilhorn 2017, 166). As the centrality of the "super-real" recedes, Okada's plays start thematizing the "unreal" and welcomes nonhuman guests, prominently the ghost. Okada explains his sudden interest in ghosts as follows:

> [I]t partially came out of aesthetic curiosity. After all these years of commitment in theatre, spontaneously, an interest in spirits emerged. That is because, in my thought, spirits and actors are alike. For instance, we living humans obviously exist even when we are alone in the room, right? However, actors and spirits are possible to exist, only if someone observes them. As a theater maker, I simply got interested in this aspect. Having said that, however, there were the effects of the aftermath, which inevitably forced me to think about the dead. Also personally, apart from the disaster, the death of my own father had a certain impact on me. Gradually along the way, I started to think about not the victims of the disaster, but about all the dead people who have passed away long ago. More precisely, I started to reflect on the rights of all the dead people. (qtd. in Iwaki 2013)

In another interview, Okada explains that to him theater is inherently "ghostly" (qtd. in Shimanuki 2015). Ghosts and actors are similar because both only "exist when they are seen, when there is a witness, to actualize the past differently in the present" (Jansen 2016).

Being a contemporary theatre maker, there are different interpretations of the type of theatre that Okada makes. According to Wilson and Goldfarb, Okada makes *shingeki* theatre (2018, 567-568).[8] They place him within a movement of young Japanese dramatists "who mix traditional Japanese techniques with Western forms and focus on the key issues confronting Japanese and global societies" (568). Okada's work, which has Western influences (like

[8] Wilson and Goldfarb divide Japanese Theatre into (1) traditional, (2) *shingeki* and (3) avant-garde/experimental theatre (2018, 567). *Shingeki* literally translates to 'attack'. Wilson and Goldfarb broadly define it as "a modern theatre that sets aside the more fantastical attributes of traditional theatre for the realism of Ibsen and Checkhov, though nonrealistic elements started appearing in *shingeki* dramas toward the latter half of the twentieth century. In general, it remains a theatre in which the playwright is a central figure" (567).

Brechtian theory and technique), but also Eastern influences (like Noh),[9] fits within this paradigm. However, while some of Okada's work is indeed shingeki-like, others are more postdramatic. In general, Okada is "predominantly recognized as a postdramatic theatre maker whose artistic ambition lay, first and foremost, in developing *Zeittheater* – drama that most effectively captures the socio-psychological issues of contemporary life" (Iwaki 2015, 86). Okada tries to show these socio-psychological issues by employing "slow dramaturgy": he combines "the staging of the everyday with slowing down the tempo of performance as a dramaturgical strategy" (Geilhorn 2017, 163). Okada's theater is political. Like his inclusion of the unheard voices of the "lost generation", including the voices of the dead is an attempt to make the invisible visible and the unheard heard (Jansen 2016). He builds on the ideas of Brecht and Hirata[10] by including "as part of his audience not only people from the past but also generations still to come" (Jansen 2016).

[9] The centrality of the dead shows an influence of Noh theatre. Similarly, van den Broek (2016) argues that the controlled physical movements of Okada's actors are reminiscent of the controlled movements that characterize Kabuki theatre. The role of Noh in *Ground and Floor* will be discussed in chapter four.

[10] Hirata wrote that "Japanese theater since the 1990s differs from its predecessors in that it is genuinely concerned with the other and reflects on its context. Okada expands this idea by addressing his theatre to the invisible other" (Jansen 2016).

# 4. Analysis

## 4.1 *Ground and Floor* at KAAT, Brussels (2013)

*Ground and Floor* is Okada's first ghost play. The story revolves around two brothers, Yutaka (the oldest) and Yukio (the youngest). The play "explores the different positions taken by two brothers in relation to the calls of the ghost of their deceased mother to honor her wishes and stay put in" the toxic environment of her grave (Jansen 2016). Okada explains that "after the disaster, despite their villages being enormously close to the epicenter of the nuclear accident, there were people who decided not to leave their land just because their ancestors' graves were there" (qtd. in Iwaki 2013). While Okada initially did not understand their decision to stay, eventually he concluded that it is wrong to denounce the choice to stay to watch over the graves of ancestors as nonsensical:

> I kind of feel that our disposition to consider such things as nonsense is, probably, more or less related to the fundamental causations which forged the overall issue that we are confronting at the moment. The problem is still there, precisely because we are disregarding or neglecting the interests of the dead. Things like science and rationality have isolated us from the wisdom of respecting the dead. And even though we already know, by not restoring this veneration, we are suffering from the detriments that it has naturally generated. Not in terms of haunting or voodoo, but rather in a very practical way, I think that if we do not count in the interests of the dead, it will turn against the benefits of the living. Somewhere in my mind, I think that if we respect the ancestors, the nuclear plants will be gone. (Okada qtd. in Iwaki 2013)

This fragment shows how Okada finds it important that the dead are respected. However, *Ground and Floor* does not glorify the dead, nor is it an example of peaceful co-existence between the dead and the living. Instead, "[g]hostly spirits haunt the living, who ultimately become entrapped in an incessant and ever-repeating cycle of grief work. Extending the endlessness of mourning into a lamentation for the country's future, Okada not only alludes to the temporality of nuclear issues, but also places the disaster in a national framework, implicitly questioning the unity of 'Japan'" (Geilhorn and Iwata-Weickgenannt 2017, 11).

In scene one, Yukio visits the grave of their deceased mother Michiko. He proudly tells her that he finally found a job as a construction worker and that the new government is finally more concerned with the conditions of people like himself. There is an emphasis on how hard

and shameful his life was before finding a job, and how he sees this job as a prerequisite for future happiness. “A man either has a job or he doesn’t. Everything else comes after the question of work,” Yukio says. “Because of your work you will find happiness, I am sure of it,” Michiko tells Yukio later in the play. They underline the importance of having a stable job to get by in society. While the new ghostly thematic is accompanied by stylistic innovations, this emphasis on the reality of the unstable job market is in line with Okada’s earlier work. “In this play too Okada questions the idea of Japanese identity, the meaning of the nation, and the role of the government (which remained reticent about the real consequences of the catastrophe) by juxtaposing contrasting positions and responses” (Jansen 2016).

*Ground and Floor* was heavily inspired by Noh-theater. Noh “is after all the ultimate ‘haunted stage,’ the supreme form for exploring the intersections between dreams and reality, life and death” (Geilhorn 2017, 135). The initial idea was to create Noh-like musical theater together with Koizumi Atsuhiro from Sangatsu (Iwaki 2013). Music, therefore, plays an important role in the play. Okada and his dramaturg Sebastian Breu argue that music is the perfect catalyst to create an awareness of time and space and allow the audience to experience both (2013). To them, whether the power of music can be fully utilized depends on how the actors share the time/space of the stage with the music. The actors have to listen to the sounds on stage and need to have a good understanding of the interaction between the music and the performance (Breu and Okada 2013). The aim is that the actors' bodies, the text and the music co-exist at the same level. Koizumi explains that the goal was to make music as lighting or scenery (qtd. in KFDA 2013). The resulting music was especially composed to fit the different characters and the narrative. Some sounds, for example, are meant to recall the sound of an earthquake (Iwaki 2013). While the 2011 triple disaster is rarely mentioned directly (once, Yukio mentioned that he will happily help “rebuild” the country), choices such as the latter make that its presence pervades the play subtly and omnipresently.

The influence of Noh is also visible in *Ground and Floor’s* minimalistic *mise en scène* of *Ground and Floor*. The performance space consists of a simple wooden stage with a screen for subtitle projections at the center. Occasionally, a chair is used at the left side of the stage. At the right side of the stage is a full-length mirror. Finally, the right side of the stage has a mound: a light on the floor that signifies the grave of Michiko and functions like a portal between the dead and the living (see appendix, image 2). The simple wooden stage reminds of Noh-stages.

The narration of *Ground and Floor* was also influenced by the initial idea of creating a Noh-like musical theatre. Traditionally, Noh theater is believed to be played by the spirits of the dead (Breu and Okada 2013). Like Noh, *Ground and Floor* transforms flesh-and-blood actors into ghosts. A key issue in the play is appeasing the dead. Throughout the play, Yutaka's pregnant wife Haruka makes it clear that she has no interest in ghosts: "I don't even want to sense the presence of ghosts here" (precog 2013). She is, however, haunted by her deceased mother-in-law, who is angry and spiteful that Yutaka and Haruka visit her grave so little. Michiko often contradicts herself. On the one hand, she professes that all she can hope for is for time to "go on forever". However, throughout the play she expresses several other desires: "I am angry that I cannot do anything to you", she scornfully tells her daughter in law. "Why couldn't it have been the other way around?" she asks later in the play, questioning why her favourite son, Yukio, had to suffer so much more bad fortune than Yutaka. Haruka objects: "I think that for the dead to have any demands of the living is too much. That is why I won't listen. I refuse to acknowledge the ghost here."

The border between the living and the dead is not always clear-cut. For a large part of the play, for example, it is not clear if Satomi, the eldest daughter, is alive or dead. She has withdrawn from society for reasons that are not explicitly mentioned but that connote depression or mental illness. Her living situation connotes that of a grave:

> YUTAKA
> When Satomi had given up completely on her life and this world, she only had despair. She had already made up her mind that everything was pointless, that nothing she could do would change her situation. We tried to help her out of that state, but what we did with good intentions in the end resulted in the exact opposite. We forced her to a place where she can no longer see people at all.
>
> YUTAKA
> So now she's cooped up all alone in a small dark place, and she will probably never come out for the rest of her life. What does the air feel like, how humid is it, what is the light like, what does it smell like in that place? It is probably an unendurable place. […] But Satomi is not a ghost. She goes through life making sure she doesn't ever
> encounter anyone, but she is alive.
>
> SATOMI enters far upstage in the dark.
>
> HARUKA
> The ghost of a dead person. A living person who is like a ghost. They're the same thing.
>
> YUTAKA

Haruka. It's not right to put those two together. (Okada, script *Ground and Floor*)

While the exact cause remains unspecified, it is clear that Satomi lives like a ghost. She can "no longer take part in shaping the world or do anything in order to preserve [it]" (precog 2013). Satomi feels hopeless and powerless and is convinced that that will not change because she and people like her "are already in a state in which [they] don't have a single drop of strength or will left to do anything like that" (precog 2013). According to Mark Fisher, this pervasive "suspicion that the end has already come" is typical to capitalist realism. While Satomi expresses this suspicion, Haruka's survival instinct leads her to ignore it.

Like Hirata Oriza's *Tokyo Stories, Ground and Floor* is set in Japan in the "not too distant future" (precog 2013). However, the future that Okada envisions is gloomy. Japan is reclining and threatened by war. Besides Michiko (and Satomi), there is yet another specter haunting in the background: the threat of a future war. Yutaka, for example, dreams that he has to fight as a soldier in a war between Japan and China, which leads Haruka to tell him that she "can't imagine their child being happy in Japan" (precog 2013). "When the war starts you are going to be a soldier, right?" Yutaka asks Yukio towards the end of the play. "People like me will die for people like you" he replies solemnly. The looming war connotes the war that is threatening in the background of Shakespeare's *Hamlet.* Japan in Okada's distant future is in decline. Satomi emphasizes the weak global status of the Japanese language and the importance of knowing English. She emphasizes the language gap between the audience and herself and thinks about the possibility of Japanese disappearing: "Even now there are hardly any people who understand what I am saying" (precog 2013).

Time, in *Ground and Floor,* is flexible. At the start of the play, the subtitles denoting the time switch from "Japan, in the distant future" to: "Japan, in the not too distant future" to "Several thousand years later" to "Several hundred years later" to "Several decades later" (precog 2013). Throughout Statomi's scenes, which are mostly monologues, her speech switches in tempo, going from a normal pace to an unnaturally fast manner that reminds of Samuel Beckett's *Play* (1963). She talks so fast that both she and the audience have to wait for the subtitles to catch up until she can keep going. Satomi does not, however, consider speaking slower, creating the sense that her pace is in fact natural and that the audience is just too slow to keep up. In effect, Okada here creates the feeling that the time is out of joint, or the "out of joint time of hauntology" (Fisher 2014, 83).

## 4.2 *Time's Journey Through A Room* at Theatre Tram, Tokyo (2017)

*Time's Journey* "addresses the impossibility to move on from an event the effects of which are invisible but life-treathening" (Jansen 2016). As aforementioned, the play starts with character Arisa directly addressing the audience. She explains the setting of the play and asks the audience to close their eyes and not open them until she tells them to. When she does, the audience sees a man sitting next to a table on a chair that was empty a moment prior. The year is 2012, one year after the disaster. Arisa tells us she is on her way to meet a man – the male protagonist of the play whose name remains unknown – and that she is late due to a traffic accident. In the meantime, the protagonist is joined by his deceased wife Honoka, who – as is revealed later in the play – died due to an asthma attack four days after the earthquake. As she starts talking to him, we find out about their relationship and the way they experienced the disaster. *Time's Journey* shows the feeling of powerlessness that took hold of society. All three characters cope with it differently. The protagonist "remains mute and immobile nearly the entire time" (Jansen 2016). Alisa, on the other hand, lives in the here and now. Honoka, the ghost of the protagonist's dead wife, is very talkative and keeps bringing up the past. At the end of the play, the new couple unites, but Honoka stays close and the audience stays uneasily aware of the persistence of the past. "Okada carefully composes a complex temporal texture by layering and juxtaposing diverging times and temporalities. The result effectively transforms the audience's perception of time" (Jansen 2016).

One of the major themes in *Time's Journey* is the *unheimliche* or "unhomely".[11] The next passages will elaborate on the ways in which *unheimlichkeit* is created through the scenographic use of the table as a symbol of homeliness and through the presence of dead Honoka.

### 4.2.1 The unhomeliness of the table

The scenography of *Time's Journey* revolves around a table (see appendix, image 4). The protagonist is glued to his chair at the table and around him, the past and the present move and invade the space. Honoka, dead, cannot take place at the table anymore. Instead, she swarms around it. The table is a symbol of the home and of the family. Derrida writes that the table is "too familiar" (1994, 186). It has been "worn down, exploited, overexploited, or else set aside,

[11] While "the uncanny" is often used as a translation for *Unheimlichkeit,* Fisher argues that "unhomely is a better translation because "*unheimlich* is about the strange within the familiar, the strangely familiar, the familiar as strange — about the way in which the domestic world does not coincide with itself" (2016, 10).

no longer in use, in antique shops or auction rooms. The thing […] a little mad, weird, unsettled, 'out of joint'" (187). It invites us to imagine the rest of the house: "to imagine the world that is his home; to give it a face and a form" (Ahmed 2006, 29). In *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed studies the significance of the table in the home. Drawing on Edmund Husserl's *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology* [1913], she describes how, when the space around the table is imagined, "only the table remains the same" (2006, 36). Ahmed argues that the sameness of the table is *spectral*: "the table is only the same given that we have conjured its missing sides" (36) Ahmed argues that "what is 'missed' when we 'miss' the table to the spectrality of history, what we miss may be behind the table in another sense: what is behind the table is what must have already taken place for the table to arrive" (36-37).

In addition to imagining the homely space around the table, the audience is led to wonder what brought the table to be in the room. The audience is invited to imagine how Honoka and her boyfriend bought the table together, perhaps, when they moved in. Or how they possibly inherited it from a family member. Maybe the table was already part of the house, previously owned by a family. We are led to imagine a time before Honoka and her boyfriend and imagine children drawing at the table. The table conjures images of a past that Honoka and her boyfriend were never a part of, while simultaneously showing the future that was taken from them by Honoka's death; the family they never had.

### 4.2.2 Mourning

In *The Promise of Happiness,* Ahmed describes how suffering can bring the past into the time of the present (2010, 72). "Lost intimacies", like that of dead Honoka and her boyfriend, can "become lost possibilities, hints of a life [that might have been] lived, if things had not turned out the way they did" (73). Ahmed draws on Freud, who in his essay *Mourning and Melancholia* [1917] describes mourning as a

> reaction to the loss of a beloved person, or an abstraction *taking the place of the person*, such as fatherland, freedom, an ideal, and so on. (2005, 203, qtd. in Ahmed 2010 139-140, emphasis in original).

and the

> healthy process of grieving for a lost object: the aim of this grieve is to let go of the object, or to let the object go. The subject "moves on" and is free to form new attachment, which in turn mean a kind of staying alive. (2005, 217, qtd. in Ahmed 2010, 138)

The protagonist of *Time's Journey* is mourning. At the end of the play he forms a new attachment because he is "still alive and will keep changing" (precog 2017).

Ahmed elaborates on the ethical imperatives of- and the differences between mourning and melancholia. Letting go is seen as "a healthy relation to loss," whereas holding on is often regarded as "a form of pathology" (2010, 139). Ahmed would qualify Honoka as melancholic: someone who "'holds onto' an object [her life, her relationship] that has been lost, who does not let go, or get over loss by getting over it" (139). Honoka is not passive in her absence, on the contrary, she demands and desires. This is in line with Ahmed's interpretation of the melancholic as "a subject not only of loss, but of desire, where the desire can be for the loss of what is desired" (140). Despite focusing on the ways in which the earthquake "transformed her", Honoka does not acknowledge her death and she forces her boyfriend to acknowledge her presence (see appendix, image 5). Ahmed explains that in order to be successful, mourning involves at least two deaths:

> if someone has died, that person must be declared dead for the death to be real. We do not necessarily experience more than one death. Time is not orderly in hard times. The second death would be the first death for the mourner. The object must be recognized as dead for death to become real. (139)

Honoka refuses to be recognized as dead and subsequently refuses to be mourned. "Even with your eyes closed you can't not see me. You can only pretend that you can't see me," she objects (precog 2017). Can you mourn an object that refuses its own death? Because of her unclear status, it is hard to define exactly what Honoka is. First and foremost, she is scary. When she first enters the stage, Okada pictures her as a rather classical ghost – immediately recognizable as such. Dressed in black, with long black hair and a pale, greyish skin, she recalls classical horror story ghosts (see appendix, image 6). Similarly, Derrida writes that it is "of the essence of the ghost in general to be frightening" (1994, 181). However, there is more going on. More than just scary, she is *unheimlich.* There is a familiarity in her conversations with the protagonists and a naturalness in the way that she speaks for both of them ("After the earthquake our feelings were all mixed up. But then we felt a joyful feeling we never experienced before"). However, as the play progresses it becomes noticeable that the protagonist barely responds to her. Her persistence to continue the conversation as if he does, creates an ambiance of *unheimlichkeit.* It is eerie that she talks for both of them. Fisher ascribes eeriness to absence:

"We find the eerie more readily in landscapes partially emptied of the human" (2016, 11). Honoka and the protagonist's conversation is eerie because the answers of the protagonist remain absent. Additionally, his body movements make him look like he is in a looped, slowed-down state of fear. His uncontrolled movements connote epileptic fits, which - according to Freud - signify the unhomely (Fisher 2014, 33).

Honoka is not mourning, but haunting. Fisher defines haunting as a "failed mourning" (2014, 19). Her death seems to have been an "odious death": the death of someone who "met their end prematurely, whose death is not the proper conclusion of a life but its violent curtailment" (Quintin Meillassoux, qtd. in Fisher 2014, 46). Not-dead and not-alive, she moves in an in-between-space that recalls Rebekah Sheldon's concept of the "chora" (2015). The chora is that which "holds together and disrupts the movement from potentiality to actuality, swerves the smooth transition from model to copy" (Sheldon 2015, 212). It is the space where an idea resides before it materializes. It is an "autonomous, dynamic temporalized space through which subindividual matters, vibratory intensities, and affects might cross and *be altered through that crossing*" (212, emphasis in original). Okada's ghosts are depicted as if they are in a similar in-between space. While dead family members materialize and become-body on stage, they are not able to engage with the living in the way they would want.

Morton argues that Object Oriented Ontology "gives us a spooky world plagued with beings who may or may not be alive, who may or may not be intelligent" (2015, 188). He writes that "[p]owerful art threatens us from this slightly evil place" (188). I would like to argue that Okada Toshiki does the opposite. Both *Ground and Floor* and *Time's Journey* are set in slightly evil places, where Haruka's dead mother-in-law would hurt her if only she could, where Honoka refuses to be classified as dead – ever-present in the corner of the protagonist's eyes as he frantically tries to move on with his life. Okada's ghosts are weird, which Fisher defined as "that which does not belong" (2016, 10). They do not belong in the world of the living, yet they do not belong in the world of the dead either. By staging such ghosts, Okada draws attention to alternative ways of life. His aim is to provide the audience with an "antithesis" to confront their daily reality. He believes that

> [a]rt can confront social reality with something strong. And that something is essential for society—all the more for a society in which catastrophes have occurred, like in Japan. Because if this something, an antithesis, does not exist, people will believe there was only one reality. Therefore, their thinking is limited. (Okada 2011, 19ff, qtd. in Geilhorn 2017, 166)

Due to the disaster, Okada's doubts about the necessity of art disappeared. He realized that theatre encourages the imagination and "society always needs imagination in order to change itself into something better" (qtd. in SPRING 2021).

### 4.3 The Hauntolocene

In her essay *Staying With The Trouble,* Donna Haraway (2015) proposes the Chthulucene as an alternative to the Anthropocene. By replacing the figure of the human with that of an octopus, she tries to create a world view with an eye for alternative life forms, decentralized or unhuman forms of intelligence and unexpected events. Haraway argues that the Chthulucene makes "a much hotter compost pile for still possible pasts, presents, and futures" (2015, 61). I would like to propose that, like the octopus, the ghost as an "avatar" of the posthuman (Herbrechter 2017) can be used as a metaphor within a more fruitious post-anthropocentric worldview. This would be a Hauntoloscene, a world in which we recontextualize our relationship with what is not. By being invisible, transparent or the embodiment of something altogether unearthly, the ghost embodies what usually remains unseen. In doing so, the ghost bridges the gap between the known and the unknown in a different way than the octopus. Additionally, more than the octopus, the figure of the ghost allows the past to be brought into the present. This would be a present that acknowledges the specter of Marx, the spirits of Michiko and *Hamlet*'s dead king, but also in-between presences like Satomi and Honoka. The ghost calls reality into question and allows us to rethink our definitions of the real and the unreal, the visible and the invisible, the heard and the unheard.

# 5. Conclusion

The post-fordist society as pictured by Okada, draws strong similarities to the world described by Mark Fisher in his blog k-punk and his book *Capitalist Realism*. Within the discourse of capitalist realism, individuals do not find the answers to the questions and fears of this existence. Capitalist realism offers a materialistic and alienating worldview that seems to pose no alternatives and where individuals are haunted by lost futures. Therefore, major social tensions occur or catastrophes like the triple disaster in 2011, can lead to feelings of paralysis. In *Ground and Floor* and *Time's Journey,* Okada thematizes such feelings of isolation and immobilisation. Additionally, he turns to the ghost of past family members and friends. In this way, a new awareness grows of a normally unseen world.

Throughout this thesis, I have pointed out the way in which the nonhuman aspects of Okada Toshiki's theatre contributes to the posthumanist project by inspiring the audience to think about nonhuman agency and alternatives to society. Okada's work becomes insightful against the backdrop of the 2011 catastrophe and the social tensions of today's Japan where the individual often feels alienated and disoriented. By providing theatre as an antithesis to reality, however, Okada inspires the audience to think about different futures. In *Ground and Floor*, for example, Toshiki Okada focuses on the possibilities of thinking differently. He sketches characters who want to speak in a society where silence or "ma" is the code word. The performance maps out contemporaneous anxieties as a metaphor for Japanese society. Through his plays, Okada aims to affect his audience by offering them something that they can interpret and take home. In that sense, his work is political. He wants to offer an alternative reality so that people are enabled to analyze and criticize their own.

*Ground and Floor* and *Time's Journey* both alter the audience's perception of time. *Ground and Floor* evokes the feeling of time being out of joint by combining a slow dramaturgy with speeded up parts. Derrida's concept of haunting is also evoked through the impending war that looms in the background, conjuring up a feeling that connotes Fisher's idea that the future is already lost. Similarly, *Time's Journey* evokes nostalgia and melancholia for lost futures. One of the main differences between *Ground and Floor* and *Time's Journey* is that while the first consists of more universal allusions to the 2011 disaster, the latter tells about the events from a first-person point of view. Okada explains that his previous works about the societal conflicts after the disaster had a "bird eye's view" (SPRING 2021). *Time's Journey,* on the other hand, does not. As a result, the plays are complementary. While *Ground and Floor* gives a clear perspective about contemporary anxieties, *Time's Journey* zooms in on the personal

effects of the economic climate and the 2011 catastrophe. While the protagonist is mourning, Honoka is haunting. The feeling of unhomeliness that comes with this is emphasized through the scenographic use of the table as a symbol of homeliness and through the presence of dead, weird Honoka.

To Okada, theatre is inherently ghostly. Actors are like ghosts because they only acquire meaning through being perceived. In *Ground and Floor* and *Time's Journey,* the line between life and death is thin and often blurry. It is not always clear who is dead and who is alive. Resultantly, the agency of the dead is emphasized and there is also an emphasis on the ways in which the economic and political system takes agency from the living. Like in Hirata Oriza's *Tokyo Notes,* the family in *Ground and Floor* can be interpreted as a society in its smallest scales, reflecting contemporary wishes and anxieties. Characters like Satomi embody the contemporary fear that "[a]ction is pointless" (Fisher 2009, 9). According to Fisher "only senseless hope makes sense" in this world (9). I believe that *Ground and Floor* and *Time's Journey* do promote a sense of senseless hope. While *Time's Journey* and *Ground and Floor* thematicize and illustrate the depression, alienation, desorientation and immobilization that is experienced by Okada's generation, they also point towards a future. Both *Ground and Floor* and *Time's Journey* show the promise of new life. *Ground and Floor* does this by having Haruka be with child and *Time's Journey* by ending with the unification of a heterosexual couple.

Where Okada describes his work as an antithesis (2011, 19ff, qtd. in Geilhorn 2017, 166), a new synthesis should include hauntology as part of our worldview. Hauntology is a philosophy that does not limit itself to anthropocentrism, but assumes a spacious, inclusive world, human and non human, with which we are inextricably linked and where we can also take on the responsibility to co-exist with this greater whole. As we saw in chapter two, ontology is the study of "what is and its "punning cousin" hauntology is the study of what is not (Whyman 2019). By replacing "being" with "haunting", Derrida prioritizes "that which is neither present, nor absent, neither dead nor alive" (Davis 2005, 573). In a world where climate change has caused feedback loops and other climatological effects that escape human control, ecological awareness leads us to a place where "nothing is exactly, ontically, precisely real, and all the more real for that" (Morton 2015, 188). In this world, re-thinking our relationships with the ghost as a sudden apparition, as something that materializes unexpectedly and in a manner that escapes human control, may help us be prepared for the unexpected. The Hauntolocene

presents an alternative to the Anthropocene – it offers a way out of the paralysis that afflicts us, gives us fresh impetus and endows us with spirit.

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# 7. Appendix


*Image 1* (precog 2013)


*Image 2* (precog 2013)

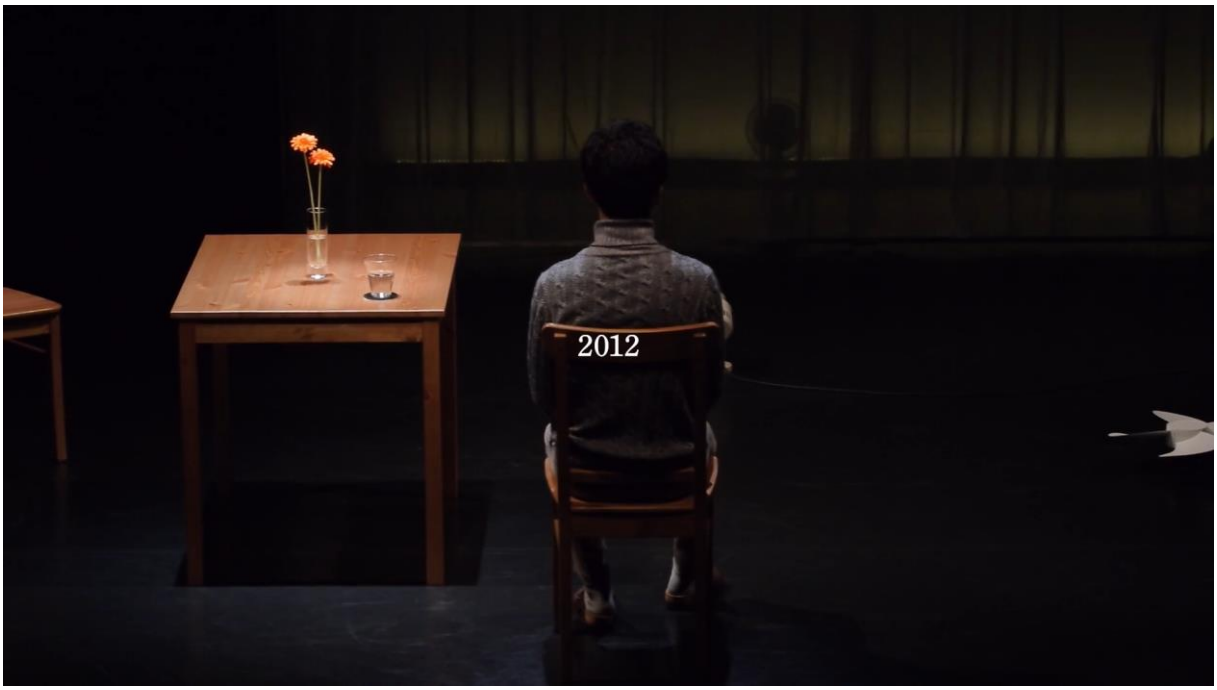


*Image 3* (precog 2017)


*Image 4* (precog 2017)


*Image 5* (precog 2017)

*Image 6* (precog 2017)