

## Art of Digression: The Écritures of Abe Kazushige's *Amerika no yoru*

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### Abstract

This article analyzes the art of digression in Abe Kazushige's 1994 debut novel *Amerika no yoru* arguing that it is an expression of *écriture*, meaning borderless writing that pushes the boundaries of form. International research has tended to limit the impact of Abe Kazushige's 1990s fiction to his 1997 bestseller *Individual Projection*, which was heavily featured in the 1998 *J-Bungaku* marketing campaign. In contrast, this article spotlights novels and short stories that appeared *before* the presumed beginning of *J-Bungaku*. Abe's earliest pieces are characterized by a complication of linear storytelling, which had a more lasting effect on defining the author's originality in *Heisei* literature than later texts. It is precisely his early writing that made Abe one of Japanese contemporary literature's distinctive writers, and had a profound effect on power relationships within the 1990s literary scene. The analysis shows that before Abe had adapted to a more accessible style in *Individual Projection*, his works consciously performed a radically non-mimetic, non-linear mode of writing, barely recognizable as literature. In order to assess Abe's true role in the formation of *Heisei* literature, it may be deemed indispensable to look at his earliest fiction and their formal distinction.

This running in circles may extend to areas that have nothing whatsoever to do with Tadao's story.

– Abe Kazushige, *Amerika no yoru* (Day by Night), 1994.

### 1 Introduction: The “Early, Early” Abe<sup>1</sup>

European and US scholarship on Abe Kazushige's 阿部和重 1990s fiction has tended to narrow down Abe's contribution to 1990s literature to his participation in the 1998 Japanese

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literature marketing campaign *J-Bungaku* J-文学, or focused on his widely translated 1997 bestseller *Individual Projection* インディヴィジュアル・プロジェクション.<sup>2</sup> Against this background, my article makes the contribution of focusing on the author's fiction published *before* that campaign. Japanese research on Abe's earliest novels and short stories, largely remaining journalistic, has notably neglected to focus on the subversion of linear storytelling as a trademark of these pieces. Suwabe Kōichi (2012: 106) indicates that "the 'theme' of Abe's early fiction" primarily consists in "a philosophical problem on the 'meta' level" of the narrative, "namely the problem of 'not having aūthing to tell'." *Amerika no yoru* アメリカの夜 (*Day for Night*, 2001 [1994])<sup>3</sup>, *ABC sensō* ABC 戦争 (ABC War, [1994] 1995), *Kōshaku fujintei no gogo no pātī* 侯爵夫人邸の午後のパーティー (Afternoon Party at the Duchess' Mansion, [1995] 1997) and *Triangles* トライアングルス ([1997] 1999) all postpone their stories through different techniques of narrative deferral. One possible reason for the lack of scholarship on narrative deferral as main characteristic of Abe's earliest novels and short stories may be that even Abe's peers have called their radically non-linear style difficult to access.<sup>4</sup> In turn, it is precisely Abe's earliest fiction's trademark of complicating linear storytelling in favor of straightforwardly conducting it that established the author as a new, unique voice in *Heisei* literature among critics during the 1990s. Indeed, this testimony of the literary quality of Abe's writing – if we understand "literary" as *formally* ground-breaking, in other words, not necessarily aimed at being intuitively cognized as literature to begin with – may be more expressive of what Abe represents for *Heisei* literature (*Heisei bungaku* 平成文学) than what he became known for in the following through *J-Bungaku*, namely primarily being the photogenic face of the campaign in its related brochures and labelled as one of its *shibuya-kei* 渋谷系 authors.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, while Abe's choice of a more straightforward style in his first bestseller *Individual Projection* (1997) as well as the short story *Mujō no sekai* 無情の世界 (1999) could be attributed to the author's aim for better audience access, the trademark complication of linear storytelling found in Abe's novels and short stories published before

<sup>2</sup> JACOBOWITZ 1999 analyses how *Individual Projection* reflects postmodern subjectivity and information society within the context of emerging *Heisei* literature. MCKNIGHT 2011 singles out *Individual Projection* as one example of how 1990s Japanese literature was intricately linked to subculture. Similarly, GILDENHARDT 2008, introducing Abe as the most important *J-Bungaku* author, highlights, at the example of his 2001 novel *Nipponia Nippon* ニッポニア・ニッポン, how Abe's early fiction rejects the modern dichotomy of *junbungaku* 純文学 and *taishūbungaku* 大衆文学 through popular culture references. My own book chapter (RÖMER 2015) on *Individual Projection* analyses how the novel's depiction of precarity and youth violence, relates to the cultural discussion on Aum Shinrikyō in the late 1990s. FUKUSHIMA Yoshiko 2003 lists *Individual Projection* as one of ten important novels of Japanese 1990s literature.

<sup>3</sup> In the following referenced as: ABE 2001 (the publication date of the paperback version). The novel initially appeared under the title *Ikeru shikabane no yoru* 生ける屍の夜 (Night of the Living Dead) in the journal *Gunzō* 群像 in 1994.

<sup>4</sup> See ASANO *et al.* 2009: 512–520.

<sup>5</sup> See GEBHARDT 2000: 2–3.

*Individual Projection* and the *J-Bungaku* campaign laid the foundation for Abe's ongoing distinction as one of the most recognizable writers of Japanese literature, who by now has carved out an original niche for himself as a self-identified literary formalist (*keishikishugisha* 形式主義者).

In this article, I wish to reframe the subversion of linear storytelling in Abe Kazushige's debut novel *Amerika no yoru* by using the term *écriture*. I argue that, on a philosophical level, the novel's complications of linear storytelling speak to a global, deconstructionist discussion on writing understood as an open, processual experiment, a *mode* rather than a result. The digressions of its narrator take *Amerika no yoru* far away from its story. I will show that they extend to areas entirely unrelated to it, and even unrelated to "literature" strictly speaking. Instead, the digressions grow into philosophical texts questioning the concept of language and the nature of media. In doing so, they turn *Amerika no yoru* into a deconstructionist narrative, in which meaning is radically decentralized and pluralized, and the boundaries of genre continually unsettled.

## 2 The Écritures of *Amerika no yoru*

Overall, *Amerika no yoru* pretends to be a story about protagonist Nakayama Tadao, but it does not want to seem to start. Instead, after replacing the beginning of Tadao's story through a long, critical essay on Bruce Lee, *Amerika no yoru* keeps postponing its protagonist's tale; the narrator Watashi 私 ("I") repeatedly digresses to discuss apparently more pressing issues. And indeed, Tadao's story – a coming-of-age story featuring the film school student and freeter Nakayama Tadao's growth – does not strictly begin until the middle of the book. The first 99 pages, out of a total of 187, largely consist in Watashi's performance as a conflicted narrator, who cannot help himself digressing.<sup>6</sup> As a consequence, much of *Amerika no yoru* belongs to the narrator Watashi and his verbose performance of postponing Tadao's story during the first half.

The debate on *écriture* was initiated by the international success of French postmodern theory from the late 1970s onwards, providing scholars and artists with a common idiom across linguistic and cultural borders. The interdisciplinary field of Comparative Literature, primarily, facilitated the popularization of *écriture* as a "concept of different modes of thinking and writing beyond the traditional boundaries of the disciplines (...)", especially those of literature and philosophy.<sup>7</sup> Narratorial digression is one specific literary practice of

<sup>6</sup> The page numbers refer to the paperback version of the novel referenced in this article: ABE 2001.

<sup>7</sup> BRINK/SOLTE-GRESSER 2004: 13. Different theorists have defined *écriture* differently, sometimes even changing their definitions over the course of their career. I second Brink's and Solte-Gresser's understanding of *écritures* in a plural sense, while still using the single term *écriture* for readability throughout the analysis. My inquiry focuses on *écriture* as defined by Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes, and excludes later feminist definitions of the term.

*écriture*, in the sense that it is “non-linear, aimed at excess, the plurality of meaning and the inscription of the Other.”<sup>8</sup> In the case of *Amerika no yoru*, the novel’s digressions seem to overthrow reader expectations, according to which a novel in the first person will, somehow, *narrate the story* of a person.<sup>9</sup> We may recognize here, on a textual level, a subversion of what Suzuki Tomi has called the “I-novel metanarrative” of modern Japanese literature.<sup>10</sup> However, the scope of Abe Kazushige’s artistic resistance during the 1990s seems broader than that. Abe Kazushige closely associated with *Nyū Akademizumu* (*Nyū Aka*) critical theorists during the 1990s; his admiration, specifically of the criticisms of Hasumi Shigehiko 蓮見重彦, has been well documented publicly.<sup>11</sup> According to Sasaki Atsushi 佐々木敦, *Amerika no yoru* largely parodies *Nyū Aka* critical theory (*hihyō* 批評), earning the author the reputation of being “a direct heir of *Nyū Aka*”<sup>12</sup> at the time of his debut. Relating to that, I would suggest that the digressions of *Amerika no yoru*, rather than subverting the conventions of a *literary genre*, subvert *the notion of genre* as such. Indeed, we may locate the literary historical context of Abe Kazushige’s earliest novels and short stories’ non-linear storytelling in *Nyū Aka* critical theory, rather than in Japanese literature strictly speaking.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>8</sup> BRINK 2004: 34.

<sup>9</sup> In *Amerika no yoru*, the narrator Watashi is the amalgam of himself, called “Esu” (S) and his protagonist Tadao. As much as Watashi is the narrator of Tadao’s story, Tadao’s story is also Watashi’s own story. What is more, the name “Esu” being an abbreviation of “Shige”, which is short, again, for “Kazushige”, establishes a link to the name of the author of *Amerika no yoru*, “Abe Kazushige”. This, in turn, may suggest that *Amerika no yoru* has autofictional qualities; at the same time, it resists that label through, precisely, not doing what one expects from even an autofiction, namely, in any case, narrating the story of “Watashi”/Tadao, whether relating to “Abe Kazushige” or not. Yamada Natsuki similarly analyzes *Amerika no yoru* as a deconstruction of the Japanese I-novel (*shishōsetsu* 私小説), however, he focuses on how the novel enacts this deconstruction through the imagery of film (see YAMADA 2014: 129–135). SASAKI (2016: 235–238) also reads *Amerika no yoru* as departing from narrating the “self”, only to problematize this angle from multiple directions in the following.

<sup>10</sup> SUZUKI 1996: 3.

<sup>11</sup> See, most notably, Abe’s 2005 and 2010 printed conversations (*taidan* 対談) with Hasumi Shigehiko.

<sup>12</sup> SASAKI 2016: 237.

<sup>13</sup> “Digression” is a malleable term with regard to Japanese literature, as literary linearity, which digression is a deviation from, is not traditionally considered a principle of it. Inger Sigrun BRODEY (1998) explains that, while the Western aesthetic focuses on “plot and intentional linearity – stories with a clear ‘beginning, middle, and an end’”, the traditional Japanese aesthetic “focuses on sequentiality, or stories and commentaries connected by the association of ideas.” (196) Only in the Meiji period, did Japanese writers start experimenting with Western literary linearity, without, however, entirely shedding earlier conventions. Futabatei Shimei 二葉亭四迷, for example, uses the protagonist Bunzō in *Ukigumo* 浮雲 (Floating Clouds, 1889) to “develop a sense of unity and wholeness typical of Western, rather than Japanese, literary traditions. But he does so by using association of ideas to link scene with subsequent scene, rather than providing a Fieldingesque sense of rational order imposed externally by an authoritative and omniscient authorial or narrative voice (...).” (197) One may argue that the impression of Watashi digressing in *Amerika no yoru*, derives from exactly the fact that he presents himself as such an omniscient

Hasumi Shigehiko, in his essay on Abe's second novel *ABC sensō*, already indicates that the novel's play with the alterity between written letters of the alphabet and the Japanese script relates to Jacques Derrida's notion of *écriture* as written language, without going so far as calling the narrative discourse of the novel *écriture* generally.<sup>14</sup> I use *écriture* in both ways: to designate the experimental narrative discourse of Abe's fiction *generally*, and as a concept this fiction refers to *intertextually* to locate itself as *écriture*.<sup>15</sup> Derrida is as an overt intertextual reference in *ABC sensō*; the novel essentially builds its narrative on the French philosopher's understanding of *écriture* as written language and discusses the term エクリチュール<sup>16</sup> repeatedly. I see similar, albeit covert, conversations with Jacques Derrida's notion of *écriture* in *Amerika no yoru*. Precisely, I suggest that narrative delay is shown in a play with signifiers; some sentences are not concerned with making sense semantically. They read as if assigning power to the signifier over the signified by neither making sense in a common understanding of syntactic "sense", nor for the context of the story. Instead, the sentences are philosophical statements about language that seem to criticize the tendency to take language as a given, much in the same vein as the deconstructionist critique of structuralist linguistics. For Jacques Derrida, the notion of *écriture* implies that language is always already written. This was a deconstruction of the established assumption according to which the spoken word precedes the written word temporally and in influence. Derrida's understanding of *écriture* points to all the aspects of language that become evident through its graphisation in the first place. As a result, the written visualization of language opens up possibilities of playfully destabilizing the duality of signifier and signified. In structuralism, the former is reduced in meaning to the more powerful *thought* of a word. For Derrida, the graphic representation of language turns attention to its literalness; it empowers the

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narrative voice, only to then deviate from this role in the following. Note that *Amerika no yoru's* postponement of Tadao's story, on a broad scale, still, may likely be a parody of Natsume Sōseki's 夏目漱石 *Kokoro* ころ (1914), where Sensei's story is only told by himself in part three of the novel after two parts of arousing the reader's curiosity for it through accounts of Sensei through Sensei's student (see also BRODEY 1998: 193–291). The homoeroticism of Tadao's heterosexual love triangle with film school colleagues Mutō and Tsuyumi, suggests that *Amerika no yoru* references the triangle of young Sensei, his friend K, and Ojōsan in *Kokoro* to derive its own images of male coming-of-age from there. While Abe's postmodern use of popular culture certainly is demonstrable, I would stress that, at the same time, Abe's fiction, particularly that of the 1990s, notably locates itself within the context of modern Japanese *junbungaku*.

<sup>14</sup> HASUMI 2002: 312.

<sup>15</sup> Thus, the concept of *écriture* would be an addition to HIKITA Masaaki's (2006) insightful analysis of *Amerika no yoru's* multiple intertextual references on postmodern theory. My interpretation also would be a different take on Abe from that of Sasaki Atsushi, who, in his 2001 explanatory essay (*kaisetsu* 解説) on *Amerika no yoru*, claims that Abe Kazushige's writing is not related to any "écriture-like problem awareness of writing being a complicated endeavor" (SASAKI 2001: 194) – I consider this rather a strategic statement vis-à-vis the literary establishment at the time, aimed at softening Abe's edge and making him appear less "avant-garde".

<sup>16</sup> See ABE 1995: 8, 68.

representational side of the sign. In *Of Grammatology*, Jacques Derrida highlights that in the conventional hierarchy of the structuralist linguistic sign, the signifier is subordinate to the signified as a derivative expression of the latter. Derrida calls this principle logocentrism, meaning a prioritization of “‘thought’ as logos” over the linguistic expressions of thoughts as, firstly, spoken words and, secondly, written words. As a result, script comes last in this order.<sup>17</sup> To overcome this debasement of writing, Derrida proposes grammatology as a science of “writing” (*écriture*), inherently increasing the value of writing as written language vis-à-vis spoken language.

I recognize in *Amerika no yoru* precisely such a self-awareness of language being a linguistic representation as well as a deconstruction of meaning in a centralized and singular sense. In addition to Derrida and his notion of *écriture*, I propose that Roland Barthes’ definition of the same term is a useful conceptual angle from which to analyze the experimental narrative modes of Abe’s early novels and short stories. The reason is that the novel renders the idea of storytelling as problematic by blurring the boundaries between text types and, in doing so, the notions of “text types”, or “genres” in general. Sasaki Atsushi already highlights that *Amerika no yoru*’s distinction is its borderless writing at the interface of literature and criticism (*hihyō*). *Amerika no yoru* in particular destabilizes the assumption that criticism and literature are different genres Barthes advocated for in *Criticism and Truth* (1966). Generally overthrowing the understanding of prose, poetry and criticism as belonging to different genres, Barthes posits that “not only do the writers themselves practice criticism, but their work, often, articulates the conditions of its own birth (Proust) or even of its own absence (Blanchot); the same language tends to circulate everywhere in literature and even behind itself; the book is often approached from the other side by the person writing it; there are no longer either poets or novelists; there is no longer anything but writing [*écriture*]. (...) And so it is that the critic, in a complementary movement, becomes a writer in his turn.”<sup>18</sup>

I propose that *Amerika no yoru*’s entrance sequence can be read as a dialogue with what Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida call “writing”, while at the same time questioning the nature of what they refer to as “writing”. Through a mercurial narrator, whose digressions continuously postpone the story of protagonist Tadao, *Amerika no yoru* complicates linear storytelling and, by doing so, tackles the problem of *écriture* from multiple angles: the boundary between literature and criticism, as well as the questions of what criticism and literature are in and of themselves, are addressed.

In the following examination, I will initially focus on a close reading of Watashi’s opening narratorial speech. In reading that passage as a destabilization of the notion of “genre” in the sense of Roland Barthes, I will show that Watashi’s digressive speech begins with a

<sup>17</sup> DERRIDA 2016: 11–13.

<sup>18</sup> BARTHES 2007: 23; square brackets added.

contradictory self-introduction as the unreliable narrator of *Amerika no yoru* that lays out the route map for a gradual turn of his speech into something different in tone and theme. Indeed, Watashi's self-introduction meanders into a separate, subsequent discussion in which his personal narrative voice changes into what reads as a theoretic piece of media criticism. The media criticism is not labeled in the narrative as a "criticism" by means of generic indications. Yet, I will point out that we are allowed to understand it as an independent piece of evaluative analysis, however, heterogenous throughout and in itself.

In a second step, my analysis will turn to an examination of how Jacques Derrida's notion of *écriture* is discussed in the section. For that purpose, I will single out one particular sentence from Watashi's narratorial speech and show how it reflects a preoccupation with itself being written language. In looking into this sentence's individual words, I will indicate how exactly their syllables and logograms articulate a consciousness of their own sonic and material qualities as signs, their signifying aspect in particular.

### 3 Writing Beyond Genre: A Kind of Media Criticism

Watashi's opening monologue immediately follows the Bruce Lee essay. The subsequent analysis shows how, throughout it, critical digressions alternate with narratorial comments. Both flow into one another and blur their boundaries, while at the same time always holding their ground as distinct representations of speech.

Watashi's monologue begins with the sentence: "Let me tell you about a sad man. This man's name is Nakayama Tadao."<sup>19</sup> Having said that, his words immediately lapse into a long digressive speech, that presents a dilemma: Watashi wants to talk about Tadao but cannot help himself diverging on other pressing issues. These appear to be chosen on impulse, addressed in a random and arbitrary manner. Indeed, Watashi contradicts himself on almost every statement he makes, both on the syntactic and narrative level through evoking and negating content consecutively or at the same time. These contradictions are a characteristic deconstructionist narrative technique of Abe's early fiction in general and possibly inspired by Hasumi Shigehiko's habit of using overly long, meandering sentences in his criticisms.<sup>20</sup> Monika Fludernik points out that conventional narratives are "based on cause-and-effect relationships that are applied to sequences of events".<sup>21</sup> Watashi's contradictions seem to deconstruct exactly this causality that serves to create the illusion of teleological linearity within a regular narrative. Instead, Watashi's speech reads as if we are following the instantaneous stream of his distracted soliloquy:

<sup>19</sup> ABE 2001: 14.

<sup>20</sup> See MIURA 1997.

<sup>21</sup> FLUDERNIK 2009: 2.

Let me tell you about a sad man. This man's name is Nakayama Tadao. Not that I can clearly pinpoint what about Tadao is sad. 'Sad' is a word almost close to being untrue. Which is why one may apply any word for 'sad'. Yet, as 'sad' has already been chosen, I will try and tell Tadao's story 'sadly' for now. There probably is no definite reason compelling me to do so. However, I do neither see any legitimate grounds compelling me to tell Tadao's story to begin with at this point. So I will stop telling it 'sadly' for no reason and either find some plausible rationale, or rather start telling it after erasing the word 'sad'. Having done that, I still may have committed an incorrect act. If that is the case, you may as well abandon telling Tadao's story at all, people might say. Of course, they are right. While maybe not conclusive, their opinion is valid. Yet, it is in human nature to feel an attraction for incorrect acts, precisely, when one hears a correct opinion. Being no exception, I count myself as one example of it as well. Which is why I would like to misbehave here. However, as with anything, becoming someone is an extremely complicated endeavor. I hear that it happens a lot that people suddenly adopt a correct attitude while having intended the opposite. Or, rather than having heard it, I have read it somewhere. I read about such a topic in some book. Well, whatever. In other words, I intend to tell Nakayama Tadao's story 'sadly' for no justifiable reason. However, notwithstanding, I still do not have the confidence to clearly indicate 'yes or no!' on whether narrating something for no reason is incorrect. As a result, I do not even know whether I already am committing an incorrect act here. Which is why, of course, it is entirely possible that, while I have intended to tell Tadao's story in a 'sad manner', people may feel the exact opposite. Or, alternatively, maybe this 'different feeling' is the root to shake the horizon of my foundationlessness from its very foundations. I wonder if this is the wriggling subterranean crevice, otherwise put, foundation. It is possible that this might be clarified anyway at the same time as it could be left unclear. Either way, for both options, I have to first begin telling the story of a man whose name is Nakayama Tadao.<sup>22</sup>

The program of Watashi's performance is "digression" based on narrative unreliability: Watashi evokes the image of a teleological omniscient narrator in his first statement, only to exhaustively negate it in his second. Here is a narrator well aware of what is expected of him and at the same time deeply at odds with his task. Here is a narrator who struggles with his obligations and his inclinations, when he admits to "feel an attraction to incorrect acts, precisely, when one hears a correct opinion".<sup>23</sup> Here is a narrator who expresses insecurities about his duty, as he reveals that he "does not have the confidence to clearly indicate 'yes or no!' on whether narrating something for no reason is incorrect",<sup>24</sup> almost as if he wants to excuse himself. In thus continuously postponing his duty of narrating Tadao's story,

<sup>22</sup> ABE 2001: 14–16.

<sup>23</sup> ABE 2001: 15.

<sup>24</sup> ABE 2001: 15–16.

Watashi questions the notion of narrative reliability as much as that of narrative omniscience. The fact that Watashi is not in command of his narrative challenges his omniscience, which traditionally elevates the narrator to a God-like position. In contrast, Watashi emphasizes his weaknesses as much as his humanity and indicates that he is one of his audience rather than completely above everything. He also admits to not knowing everything as would be expected of him as an omniscient narrator.

I would like to particularly focus on one of Watashi's following digressions in this overall paragraph, which is so thorough that it stands out as an independent section, namely the discussion on "aliteracy" (活字離れ *katsujibanare*), a term that refers to the estrangement of Japanese people from printed letters during the 1980s in favor of the moving image, specifically film and television. I suggest that this digression has a self-contained value as a theoretic piece of media criticism moving far away from the speech type of narratorial monologue. Its argument attacks the truth value of news. By denaturalizing the assumed authority of an impartial "newscaster" as well as the empirical truth of "statistical data", the digression highlights both as *devices* serving the media to construct what they report as true. In this regard, the passage cautions that, while news is presented to the consumer as facts, it in fact is not. Instead, news is a linguistic or visual representation of real events. It is humanly pre-selected and arranged. By this very nature, news is but one *discourse* producing reality, not reality *per se*.<sup>25</sup>

From a possible announcement of Tadao's story, the paragraph instantly digresses into the observation that news programs on TV have been reporting how more and more people in Japan have become "aliterate" during the last couple of years. This is described as a general development from "'printed letters' towards 'images'".<sup>26</sup> Through clarifying the detail that news programs are "reporting" this information,<sup>27</sup> emphasis immediately is placed on the complication that the passage intends to make. News, it contextualizes, is information mediated and communicated by an announcing organ. As such, it can only represent the subjective reality of those who *construct* it.

Fully deploying this problem in the following, the passage turns to making us aware of the linguistic nature of all facts. It does so through the self-referential verbal gesture of pointing at itself being speech: "The person called 'newscaster', when reporting the 'estrangement from printed letters' of Japanese people to the viewers, would probably

<sup>25</sup> While *Amerika no yoru's* media criticism, in 1994, focuses on news broadcasting, Abe revisits the issue from the perspective of 21<sup>st</sup> century information society in his most recent, 2019 novel *Orga(ni)sm* オーガニズム; *Orga(ni)sm* addresses the reality of Fake News in times of social media and the iPhone (see ABE 2019).

<sup>26</sup> ABE 2001: 21.

<sup>27</sup> ABE 2001: 20.

describe Tadao as a laudable man for his active pursuit of reading books, a pursuit so uncommon for our times overall.”<sup>28</sup>

What is important here, is the detail that “newscaster” is highlighted as a word. The narrative of *Amerika no yoru* repeatedly uses the technique of referencing selected nouns, verbs or adjectives in quotation marks to emphasize their lexicality and, in doing so, refer to itself as linguistic construct. Here, it doubles this emphasis with the indication “person called”.<sup>29</sup> In this specific case, the quotation marks as well as the indicative verb serve to denaturalize the figure of the newscaster: s/he is not referenced as a newscaster plain and simple, but as the person who is called “newscaster”. By indicating the newscaster as “newscaster”, s/he is referenced in her/his capacity as a linguistic sign, meaning as discourse to begin with. By highlighting the name-giving side of the sign (“person called”), emphasis is further placed on the signifier: the newscaster is a newscaster because we call her/him such. With this emphasis, any assumption of the newscaster’s self-evident naturalness is destabilized: if the newscaster is a newscaster because we call her/him such, then the newscaster is *not* a newscaster because s/he essentially *is* a newscaster. Through this denaturalization, *Amerika no yoru*, yet again, makes a case for the primacy of language in a post/structuralist sense. In this specific case, this overall principle of the narrative serves at putting into question the newscaster’s authority: it renders incredible the assumption that s/he is an impartial organ that supposedly announces objective facts as news. The newscaster is a person the linguistic community calls by this name. Again, in the connotation of the narrative, s/he is *not* a newscaster by means of ontic entitlement. Accordingly, the narrative randomizes the newscaster as one individual labeled “newscaster”. I would argue that, in doing so, it implicitly indicates that news is decisively dependent on the capabilities of *human beings*, with their impulses and desires, opinions and positions. As a consequence, it destabilizes the authority of news as an institution of objective knowledge-transmission generally: news not only is texts and images humanly prearranged by journalists and editors. It is also humanly transmitted to the audience by an announcer, a random living individual labeled newscaster.<sup>30</sup> As a result, any guarantee for objectivism in an empirical sense is denied. The mere assumption of such a guarantee would be an impossibility.

Moreover, the narrative undermines the non-questionability of statistical data employed by the media as a base for news making: in a similar logic to the denaturalization of the “newscaster” above, these sources are not simply brought up as statistical data, but as “that

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<sup>28</sup> ABE 2001: 20.

<sup>29</sup> ABE 2001: 20.

<sup>30</sup> The importance of humanity is foregrounded by the text itself: when it discusses the convenience of passive image consumption over the active intake of information through printed letters, it remarks that this is certainly owed to the idea of some “laudable people” and concludes: “In the end, these humans are somewhere to be congratulated” (ABE 2001: 21).

which is called ‘statistical data’”.<sup>31</sup> In other words, the narrative similarly, yet by means of a different example, articulates its precautions vis-à-vis consuming news thoughtlessly. It highlights that empirical data are what they are because they are thus termed, reminiscent, as above, of the presuppositions of structuralist linguistics. In this case, this denaturalization serves to dismantle the unquestioned empiricism of statistical data. In a similar vein, as with the “newscaster”, the implication made is that statistical data is evidence collected by humans based on the humanly devised method of quantitative data analysis. At the same time, again, the spotlight is turned on statistical data as being just one *discourse* among others. Statistical data is what we call “statistical data”, meaning speech. The narrative makes sure this fact is highlighted: “statistical data” is a linguistic sign.<sup>32</sup> Accordingly, *Amerika no yoru* attacks the truth-value of news head-on, as it continues to discuss the “aliteracy” of Japanese people: “So what about statistical data? If those were facts or something, then it would be of similar certitude that people are not estranged from printed letters yet.”<sup>33</sup> Put simply, the passage seems to imply, never believe statistical data.

The extended theoretic discussion of news as linguistic and human constructs is interrupted by an insertion of *Watashi* in his personal narrator’s voice that weighs in to add an opinionated comment on this analytical part. This comment is another critical take on news reporting, however this time not from an enquiring standpoint but from an emotional one. One could claim that *Watashi*, having provided us with the analysis part of his criticism, now adds a personal judgment to it. Thus, *Watashi*’s previous personal voice we have grown familiar with as a result of *Watashi*’s intimate confessions of his professional dilemma reemerges; however now turning its attention to the topic of news criticism hitherto discussed in the evaluative tone of critical analysis that almost makes us forget it is narratorial speech. By this means, *Watashi*’s personal voice takes a *position* on the discussion by first clarifying that its owner’s interest is not to plead for “protecting a culture of printed letters”.<sup>34</sup> He then clarifies his interest in a characteristically unintelligible, long, meandering sentence (which is another variant in contradiction: a clarifying sentence that is unintelligible). The sentence plays around the phonetic similarities between the active and passive inflected forms of the verbs “state” (述べた and 述べられた) and “call” (呼ぶ). They succeed each other in the melodic phonetic sequence *nobeta-noberareta-yobu*. This is an early indication of *Amerika no yoru*’s consciousness of the poetic quality emanating from the *sounds of words*, an aspect, which I will explain in detail further below. Right now, I would

<sup>31</sup> ABE 2001: 21.

<sup>32</sup> The implications of such a perspective are far-reaching, if we look at how this was exploited in recent politics. It reminds one of the former Trump administration’s abuse of the notion of discourse by coining the oxymoron “alternative facts” in 2017.

<sup>33</sup> ABE 2001: 21.

<sup>34</sup> ABE 2001: 23–24.

like to draw your attention to the *semantics* of the sentence. For the first time since we have come to know his narrative voice, Watashi becomes moral:

What I want to say is not that, I do not want to comment on ‘printed letters’ as a topic. I would like to get indignant for the moment about information media having shifted from ‘printed letters’ to ‘images’, that to this day there exist people who shamelessly state what is called reasons for that, as well as a climate in what is called reasons stated are received and approved.<sup>35</sup>

While Watashi has pretended to be completely indifferent and merely playful, forgetful and indifferent about his duties, without any plans or motivation, a procrastinator, with a questionable sense of responsibility, he suddenly presents himself as having an agenda and an opinion and, not the least, morals. Accordingly, he calls out those people and media, who “shamelessly” state things as if they were facts, and tags them as irresponsible liars. Shame as a moral emotion implies strong judgment here. Watashi expresses open discontent concerning the fact that the media can manipulate people so easily in current society. What the narrator is unhappy about, furthermore, is according to his own words, what could be called the passivity of the spectator. The spectator is a lazy consumer in that s/he lets her/himself become the passive side in this. S/he does have the freedom to make her/his own decisions and be an independent agent in the process, but s/he mostly does not use this power. This emotionality, or, the calculated passion of Watashi here, echoes the foregoing theoretic part of the passage in a different tone: Watashi’s discontent is directed at the fact that the media infiltrate the spectator with information on the one hand and that on the other hand the spectator willingly allows it to happen.

Further criticizing the evidence of news information, the passage then advances a counterargument. In doing so, it relies on the discourse of film theory in order to contradict the information provided by the news reporting, namely that images are for easier consumption, while reading is “tedious” requiring more effort.<sup>36</sup> Watashi proceeds through first articulating his doubt about this reported fact through four successive indirect positive questions, gradually intensifying their urge by repetitively letting them end in an anadiplosis on the question particle *ka*:

But is it really possible to gain a large amount of information through comfortably watching ‘images’? No, is gaining a large amount of information from ‘images’ really that easy? What really is this large amount of information gained from what people call ‘images’? Well, what about?<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> ABE 2001: 24.

<sup>36</sup> ABE 2001: 22.

<sup>37</sup> ABE 2001: 24.

Answering these questions, Watashi builds his argument by advancing the fact that each movie image is made of 24 frames appearing and vanishing within the timespan of one second (one frame is the smallest entity to build an image). In a deconstructionist turn-around gesture, Watashi then interjects that a consumption of images *cannot* be easier than a consumption of printed letters because "(...) there is no way that gaining information from something that appears and vanishes at such considerable speed is comfortable and easy".<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, sticking to his logic of contradiction, Watashi concedes in a final turn from a sensory viewpoint: "As long as the eye functions properly, it is easy to watch images."<sup>39</sup>

Thus, I suggest that the media criticism, which, as I have shown, deconstructs the news report on "aliteracy" (*katsujibanare*) bit by bit, is a heterogeneous text in which Watashi's narrative voice takes on different tones. As a result, the overall passage lapses from a conflicted opening performance of Watashi's, dramatizing his personal dilemma as an unreliable narrator, into an impersonal analytic piece, so thorough that it stands out from the overall passage as an independent segment. Still, midway, Watashi's personal voice chimes in again, however, staying in the context of the media criticism and now putting the personal tone of his narrative voice into the service of adding an opinionated comment on the preceding analytic part of the segment. Watashi then advances a counterargument against the gist of the news reporting, claiming that images are not easier to consume than printed words, while ending on an ambivalent note overall.

In confronting us with two ambiguous texts such as the media criticism identified as one part of Watashi's overall narratorial speech, ambiguous *in themselves* and *in comparison* to each other, I suggest that *Amerika no yoru* elaborately puts into question what writing is from Roland Barthes' perspective. The fact that the narrative is obviously reticent about formally clarifying what text types it is presenting us with throughout both passages, taken separately and as one, corresponds to Roland Barthes' ambiguation of any difference between dissimilar forms of writing. It is especially his destabilization of an assumed dissimilarity between the categories of criticism and literature, which I see reflected within this overall opening sequence of *Amerika no yoru*.

#### 4 Writing Beyond Meaning: Signifiers Unchained

In the following, I would like to explore to what degree and exactly how Jacques Derrida's understanding of *écriture* is referenced in the narrative by using the example of one single sentence taken from Watashi's above-quoted self-introduction. I suggest that this specific sentence distinguishes itself as a digression taken to extremes, as it is applied to the micro

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<sup>38</sup> ABE 2001: 25.

<sup>39</sup> ABE 2001: 25.

level of syntactic sense. I propose that we look closely at the Japanese original of the sentence:

Or, alternatively, maybe this ‘different feeling’ is the root to shake the horizon of my foundationlessness from its very foundations. I wonder if this is the wriggling subterranean crevice, otherwise put, foundation.

ひょっとしたらその「別様の感じ」というものが、私の無根拠さの地平を地盤からゆらしめる根、それが蠢く地下の断層、つまり根拠なのだろうか。<sup>40</sup>

In context and in denotation, the sentence is dispensable. It does not contribute significantly to the meaning of the larger passage, neither in its choice of words nor its resulting semantics. In fact, it stands out with its very different vocabulary and semantic abstractions:

Of course, this is why I think it is entirely possible that while I have intended to tell Tadao’s story ‘sadly’, I may feel completely different about it in the process. **Or alternatively maybe this ‘different feeling’ is the root to shake the horizon of my foundationlessness from its very foundations. I wonder if this is the wriggling subterranean crevice, otherwise put, foundation.** It is possible that this will be clarified anyway, at the same time as it might be left unclear. Either way, I am obliged to first tell the story of a man called Nakayama Tadao.

だからもちろん、私が唯生の話を「哀しく」語ったつもりが、まったく別様に感じられるということも、充分ありえる思う。あるいは、ひょっとしたらその「別様な感じ」というものが、私の無根拠さの地平を地盤からゆらしめる根、それが蠢く地下の断層、つまり根拠なのだろうか。そのことは、いずれあきらかにされるかもしれないし、判明せぬまま放りおかれてしまうかもしれない。どちらにしても、それにはまず中山唯生という男の話を、私が語りはじめなければなるまい。<sup>41</sup>

Was it unavoidable to insert the statement in order to clarify the meaning of Watashi’s overall self-reflection? Does the latter necessarily imply the former’s symbolic choice of words? I would say no. Instead, the sentence is suggestive of being an example of a set of words in which signs are invoked for the morphological associations between them, rather than for their semantic congruity. Even standing on its own, the statement reads as if it rather services the narrative technique of digression the passage unfolds, rather than it having meaning in itself or for the overall story. Indeed, it reads as digression in a sentence. Instead of wanting to make sense syntactically, Watashi’s utterance plays with the phonetic similarities between its single morphemes. In this regard, the phonemic transcription of the Romanization reveals what otherwise gets lost in translation: “*Hyotto shitara sono ‘betsuyō*

<sup>40</sup> ABE 2001: 16.

<sup>41</sup> ABE 2001: 16; my highlights.

*no kanji' to iu mono ga, watashi no mukonkyosa no chihei o chiban kara yurashimeru ne, sore ga ugomeku chika no dansō, tsumari konkyo na no darō ka?"* Accordingly, the Japanese original resonates with an alliteration on *chi* between the three nouns *chihei* 地平 and *chiban* 地盤 and *chika* 地下, as well as with an assonance on *i* and *a* between the latter two. In a similar acoustic relationship, the endings of the verbs *ugomeku* 蠢く and *yurashimeru* ゆらしめる mutually reverberate on *e-u*-assonances. Moreover, the indeterminate *dansō [...] na no darō ka* 断層 (….) なのだろうか melodiously resonates with an alliteration on *d* and a serial assonance on *a-o*.

As a result, I propose that the sentence fundamentally prioritizes playing with the signifiers of its signs over making sense either semantically or contextually. In doing so, it privileges a significance of the signifier over the signified in detail and in general. The sentence defamiliarizes familiar perceptions of the word itself by letting unchained signifiers take a semantic life of their own. As such, it is a micro level example of how the novel's opening favors form over content issues as it elaborately unfolds the problem from multiple angles.

French avant-garde literature uses the construction of "signifier-chains" by morphological association as a technique to destabilize the duality of signifier and signified which the linguistic sign presupposes as conceptually given. For example, French author Michel Leiris' autobiographical experiment *La règle du jeu* (The Rule of the Game), the third volume of which, *Fibrilles* (Fibers), was published in 1966; its narrative constructs a similar signifier chain by phonetic association between *la fièvre – la fière – Fier* (fever – the proud one – the gorges *Fier*) and comparably reflects on the similarities in corporeal appearance between the written words *Fier* and *fière*.<sup>42</sup> In doing so, it provocatively shifts power to the sonic representation of the sign, which structuralist linguistics consider inferior to its more important content representation, as indicated earlier. Through the inclusion of a meaningless sentence in a conventional understanding of syntactic and contextual meaning, *Amerika no yoru* opens a transcultural dialogue with these experimental upsets of global stoicisms surrounding "language" and "literature".

In a second implied morphemic conversation, the single words of Watashi's statement acknowledge each other in their emblematic corporeality. In a comparable logic to French Lettrism, relationships between words are formed through similarities in look and build.<sup>43</sup> In other words, the *written* word takes center stage as the basis for such an exercise. In doing so, the sentence opens a critical conversation between the spoken and written sign. In detail, it establishes a conversation between single logographic signs, or even more particularized, between single radicals of these signs: 無根拠さ (foundationlessness) – 地平 (horizon) – 地盤

<sup>42</sup> See LEIRIS 2003: 582.

<sup>43</sup> Given that Japanese words are not written in Roman letters, it may be safer to speak of "Lettrism" in inverted commas, or to call it "Logographism".

(foundation) – 根 (root) – 地下 (basement) – 根拠 (foundation). As highlighted, there is a semantic variation on the radical 根 (root) from 無根拠 (non-foundation) over to 根 (root) and 根拠 (foundation). There is also a repetition of 地 (earth) in the three different meanings of the words 地平 (horizon), 地盤 (foundation) and 地下 (basement). If we single out 根 (root) and 地 (earth), there is then another semantic wink between these two logograms, as the root is known to grow in the soil. In that sense, both are complementary.<sup>44</sup> Note that the sentence also plays with the different linguistic options for “ground, foundation”, as 根拠 and 地平 both carry that meaning. As a result, there is also a play on the different semantic choices for “foundation” which goes beyond that of a mere signifier play. It is repeated in the meanings of the single logograms 平 and 盤 from the composites 地平 and 地盤, which both signify “level” in different accentuations.

In a final ever-winding turn, the sentence finally fits with the context of the overall passage in the sense that it is yet another of Watashi’s contradiction plays: It starts with 無根拠さ (foundationlessness), only to arrive at 根拠 (foundation). While thus testifying to the limitless possibilities of signification, this sentence still is a mere play on the level of discourse; it does nothing for the narrative’s story. As such, though, it blends in exactly with the general narrative delay of Tadao’s story, which Watashi long-windedly performs throughout *Amerika no yoru*’s opening.

## 5 Conclusion

Hasumi Shigehiko has already pointed out that Jacques Derrida’s definition of *écriture* as written language lies at the heart of the deconstructionist narrative discourse of Abe Kazushige’s second novel *ABC sensō*.<sup>45</sup> In addition, I have analyzed similar defamiliarizations of the linguistic sign based on an essential understanding of it as *script* throughout one selected segment from Abe’s debut novel *Amerika no yoru*.

Moreover, my analysis of two different segments has shown that on top of Jacques Derrida’s notion of *écriture*, *Amerika no yoru*’s narrative discourse reflects Roland Barthes’ definition of the same term from multiple angles throughout its opening. In doing so, I have highlighted the productiveness of such an approach with regard to *Amerika no yoru*. While Abe’s early fiction’s references to Jacques Derrida are demonstrable, the dialogue with Barthes is less obvious. Therefore, I have shown how Watashi’s opening speech incessantly shapeshifts into different text types. Indeed, the media criticism passage’s evaluative analysis, which fragmentarily emerges out of his speech, initially reads as an entirely self-contained piece, only to subsequently complicate this impression by changing back into the

<sup>44</sup> My colleague Michael Toole suggested that this could also be read as an implied dialogue with de Saussure’s iconic use of the image of a tree to explain what he means with the notion of the signified, as a tree grows out of a root in the soil.

<sup>45</sup> HASUMI 2002: 312.

personal narrative voice of *Watashi*. In this personal voice, *Watashi* adds a moral judgement to the criticism's foregoing analytical part, which reads as an opinionated comment on it. As such, the whole media criticism reads as the "mode of writing" Barthes tried to push for: experimental and aware of itself in that it is never able to be objective or true, but always and necessarily a subjective interpretation and re-reading. Indeed, *Watashi's* emotional statement not least reveals that the media criticism is composed by a subject that is conscious about it.

In that sense, using the notion of Derrida's, but especially Barthes' *écriture* for analyzing the specific formalist writing of both critics and fiction writers associated with the activities and legacy of *Nyū Akademizumu* in Japan, seems like a fruitful approach to precisely capture what essentially characterizes their writing. Postmodernism was, if anything, the rendering literary of criticism and rendering critical of literature on a global scale. The concept of *écriture* may help us reassess some of the complicating, verbal and non-mimetic modes of writing characteristic of not few works of Japanese literature and criticism, which emerged during the 1990s.

Their overarching interest in language games makes Abe's early fiction untranslatable in a strictly linguistic sense. However, I hope that my comparative approach has shown how fascinating Abe's early fiction is for exactly a comparative analysis and what a comparative analysis yields for it in turn. Abe Kazushige is an author well-worthy of being introduced into the global canon of World Literature. I would like to think that it is just a matter of time, until Abe's fiction finds the recognition of precisely that international readership it has been implying since his debut with *Amerika no yoru*.

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