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## Body and Space

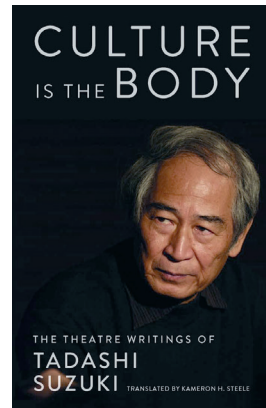
Essay on Suzuki Tadashi's  
post-humanist-humanist creative thinking

### Abstract

The paper presents Suzuki Tadashi's theatrical thinking, with a special focus on his insights into the body and space. It introduces the key stages of his creative career and discusses why the director sees the social function of theatre as primarily critical. Following a discussion of the importance of artistic reflections, the author discusses Suzuki's unique insights, contextualising them with an interpretation of the Japanese cultural tradition. The paper depicts the actor's body and the theatrical space as an inseparable unit, and their interdependent relationship is elucidated in the theatrical act. Continuing this idea, the author frames Suzuki's humanist philosophy with some of the claims of postphenomenology.

**Keywords:** Suzuki Tadashi, Suzuki actor training method, body and space, bodymind, bodyworld

*“As I was constantly searching for ways to achieve my creative goals, I went against these tendencies and decided to work without sacrificing my ideals.”*  
**(Suzuki Tadashi: Culture is the Body<sup>1</sup>)**



Suzuki Tadashi’s theatrical thinking and philosophy is extremely complex and multifaceted. His work is constantly in contact with tradition, which he constantly questions, reimagines and represents according to the socio-cultural context and problems of the present. In order to resolve the paradox in the title, I first need to present Suzuki’s oeuvre from a broader perspective, and then turn to the relationship between body and space, showing how the director anticipates the thinking of his time.<sup>2</sup>

Suzuki’s track record is an inspiration in itself. Joining the Waseda Jiyū Butai, the theatre circle at Waseda Jiyū University in Tokyo, he has been experimenting with theatrical expression since the 1950s. In contrast to the Japanese realistic theatre trend, the shingeki, he sought his own theatrical thinking and formal language in his early theatre works. In the 1960s, after leaving the university group, he founded first Jiyū Butai and then Waseda Shōgekijō in 1966 (Goto 1988, 46). Although the critical reception of his performances was not always favourable at first, their production of *A kis gyufaárslány* [*The Little Match Girl*], co-edited and produced with playwright Minoru Betsuyaku, brought Suzuki and Waseda Shōgekijō professional recognition in 1966.

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1 This essay is based on the Hungarian translation of the US edition of Tadashi Suzuki’s *The Culture is the Body* (2015). The Hungarian edition is expected to be published in the spring of 2023 by the University of Theatre and Film Arts and Theatre Olympics Nonprofit Ltd.

2 In my essay I use parts of my PhD thesis, which will be defended in 2022. The quotations from non-Hungarian sources are my own translations.

Along with Kara Jūrō, Terayama Shūji, Satō Makoto and Ōta Shōgo, Suzuki would become one of the most influential creators of the *angura* movement, which was opposed to the Japanese mainstream, questioned shingeki and sought other forms of expression (Goto 1988, 9–10). *Angura* is a shortened form of *andāgurando*, which evolved from the use of the English word underground in Japanese theatre parlance. Suzuki opens Waseda Shōgekijō's studio building on the roof of Tokyo's Mon Cheri café with *A kis gyufaáruslány [The Little Match Girl]* (Goto 1988, 46–50). His theatrical experiments turn towards the physicality of the actor, seeking full-bodied expression and the creation of a formal language that can bridge the gap between classical performance traditions and contemporary theatrical messages.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, he and his company achieved breakthrough success, and in 1972 Jean-Louis Barrault invited them to Paris for a festival, which proved to be a revelatory experience for Suzuki. According to his description, Kanze Hisao's performance of the *nó* revealed a new strength for him. He recognised the liveliness and exquisite theatricality of the *nó* as it emerged from its own medium (Suzuki 1987, 71–72). Suzuki's thinking in the 1970s was embodied in a search for methodology. Through constant experimentation, he begins to develop the Suzuki method of actor training, which functions as a continuous training for his company. In the 1970s, the director enjoyed success after success, including the premiere of his emblematic production of *A trójai nők (The Trojan Women)* in 1974. In 1976, Suzuki moved his headquarters from Tokyo to the mountain village of Toga in Toyama Prefecture and changed the name of his company to Suzuki Company of Toga (SCOT). It is from this village that his art, pedagogy and thinking have become known worldwide over the last fifty years. Suzuki, in establishing his rural centre, joined the wave that characterised the work of Copeau, Grotowski, Barba and Staniewski: the isolated medium became an integral part of his way of working. What makes SCOT's work unique, however, is that they are not only creating a thriving cultural centre, but also integrating it into the international theatre circuit by hosting tours and international events. In 1982, Suzuki established the first international theatre festival in Japan, the Toga Festival, which has been held every year since. In addition to the continued development and expansion of Toga Arts Park, Suzuki also took on the artistic direction of Art Company Mito (ACM) from 1989–1995 and the Shizuoka Performing Art Centre from 1995–2007. It would be beyond the scope of this essay to list Suzuki's Japanese and international accolades, so I will not

go into that. The trajectory of his career clearly places him among the most influential theatre-makers and thinkers of the 20th and 21st centuries.

For me, Suzuki's inspiration lies not in the grandiose arc of his career, but in the nuance of his theatrical vision and thinking. Suzuki's philosophy carries a complex world view, a broad interest and a strong ethical outlook. The director certainly conceives of his own work as an artistic reflection of society.

"Contrary to popular belief, the people who have influenced world theatre and succeeded in making a significant difference have not been interested in making theatre itself, but in changing the minds of those who shape society. They chose drama simply as a means to do so."

Suzuki sees creation as a 'social action', which cannot lack a critical edge. Accordingly, in his work he constantly reflects on the phenomena around him. The experience of the Second World War, the changing national identity, and the upheaval of classical Japanese values and customs in the course of modernisation are all starting points for Suzuki's reflections. "Acting is always most active when a nation is going through an identity crisis". Suzuki himself often refers in his book to the fact that the basis of European acting is the common discussion of social issues and the exposure of problems. The political dimension of his work is strong in this sense. The director's task is not only to reflect and criticise society, but also to formulate an idea for improvement. In this respect, Suzuki sees the artist as being able to exercise this through his own society, but he is not sure that it stops there.

"When the desire to change the society of a given country transcends the boundaries of that country and becomes universal, that is the moment when a work of art can become great art (...) A true artist does not merely deal with the problems of a particular nationality or ethnicity, let alone the problems of his own group, but rather asks questions that concern humanity as a whole, exploring the spiritual condition of the universal human being."

In this respect, Suzuki sees theatre as both a local forum and a universal tool that can address shared human experiences.

The director's relationship to the text is also determined by this social engagement and message-shaping attitude. For him, theatre is a physical and linguistic expression, created by a kind of fragmented structuring rather than by the formation of a coherent linear narrative. For him, the written play only defines 'the text and context of the performance'. In his thinking, the intellectual heritage of Artaud and the classical logic of 20th-century directorial theatre can be recognised. Suzuki often makes use of the technique of text montage, even when he chooses an existing dramatic work as the starting point for his performances: "[...]he preferred to use the term *honkadori*, a term from Japanese literature meaning »allusive variation«, to describe his intertextual practice" (Carruthers 2004, 125). This practice has defined the director's work from the beginning of his career. Even when he directs plays by Euripides, Shakespeare or Chekhov, he himself acts as an author, incorporating various guest texts into the text of the performance. "As the text is embodied in space, so the drama exists in the theatre. [...]Does the text help the actor's »magic« or not? This is the real question". For Suzuki, this 'magic' is the actor's physical and vocal effect, which fully engages the spectator: not an intellectual stimulus, but an auratic experience of presence in a shared space and time.

"The extra power needed for the »magic« is created when the actor is able to create a kind of extraordinary, ever-changing atmosphere of visceral alertness between the audience and himself through the animating effects of language and space, action and energy. This is commonly referred to as an actor's presence. [...]These moments, the actor's »magic« creates a saturated space in which the spectator who sees and the actor who is seen – the two who have just existed structurally separated and alienated from each other – merge into one. At the moment when the fusion of actor and audience is achieved, the theatre is born."

Suzuki shares Grotowski's thinking that theatre is best defined by stripping it of all the elements without which it can still exist. The director agrees with Grotowski that theatre cannot be imagined without an actor, but he is not satisfied with this and also evokes Brook's concept of empty space (Brook 1973, 5). From the fusion of the two, for Suzuki theatre is not only an encounter between spectator and actor, but what is created in that specific space. His philosophy is pervaded and deeply informed by thinking about body and space.

One of the central elements of Suzuki's social reflection is the thematisation of de-physicalisation. Although the rise of intellectual disciplines in the second half of the 20th century, including phenomenology, has led to a widespread turn towards the body, Suzuki also pays particular attention to the themes of the body and disembodiment, as well as to the theme of living or mediated communication. Suzuki distinguishes between corporeal (animal) and incorporeal (non-animal) energies. His observation focuses on the ways in which modern society is changing people's physical experiences and cultural images through the inclusion of non-animal energies. As more and more work and activities are replaced by machines during modernization, the physical activity of humans decreases, and the expression of animal energies naturally declines. Suzuki's perception of culture is also shaped by its relationship to bodily energy:

"[...] (The) culture means, on the one hand, the animal energy that the group uses and, on the other hand, the mutual trust with which this energy is managed by the members of the group. Culture is a form of response to stimuli, be it art, sport, sexual activity or even cooking. The extent to which these forms differ across groups, especially as far as ethnic groups are concerned, tends to be treated as cultural difference."

In the product-oriented perspective of disembodied modernisation and the market economy, embodied culture is also redefined: since it cannot contribute effectively to production, this is why Suzuki sees the social engagement and critical function of culture and theatre as so important.

In Suzuki, mediated communication breeds mistrust. As he describes it, he tried to avoid telephone conversations when he was young, because it bothered him not to see the other person's face and the non-verbal communication of their body. Perhaps because of his own experience, his attention turns already in the 1960s towards tendencies that only with the rapid spread of digital and information culture become a truly significant shared experience. Suzuki recognised early the global changes around him, and he watched with suspicion as human experience became increasingly disconnected from the own intense, bodily experience. This, Suzuki says, is also significantly changing people's perception of space.

The director thinks about space from many angles. Above all, he is very attentive to the effects of space on the body, values and habits. He details

at length how modern Japanese architecture of the 1960s is changing the everyday experience of his nation. He explains how the *tokonoma*, which is so prominent in classical architecture, has been transformed. This type of niche traditionally housed either a sacred picture or an ideological symbol. The ceremonial nature of the space demanded that whoever sat before the symbol was aware of their own unquestioned authority and had to represent their unchallengeable authority. As post-World War II reconstruction squeezed living spaces into narrow prefabricated dwelling units, the function of the spaces was transformed, and the *tokonoma* became the space where television was located. Since television demanded a frontal viewing direction, it forced people to sit facing it, and therefore in effect took over the physical and metaphorical place of authority in everyday life. Suzuki argues that culture is constantly changing and should not be identified with old value sets. Yet his reflections force the reader to think about his own space and the value system it generates. In a broader sense, Suzuki provokes our insight into our behaviour as determined by space. In this sense, our behaviour is not determined, but is made sense of by adaptation and suggested by others.

Suzuki uses two other examples to illuminate the relationship between space and the use of the body. Another result of modern Japanese housing design is the disappearance of the traditional *rōka*, which were passageways that led to the interior of the family home. Their floors were made of wood and had a slippery surface due to their polishing. Walking on wooden floors thus required care to avoid slipping and creaking floors. Since these passageways were separated from the adjacent rooms by rice-paper walls, they functioned as a kind of common space for the family. Suzuki draws the reader's attention not only to the controlled way of using the body, but also to the importance of communal attention and the responsibility of living together. He shows the relationship between the individual and the closest community, the family: the individual had to limit his own use of the body in order to ensure the tranquillity of the community. In another example, he points to the disappearance of the classic Japanese toilet. He claims that this was brought to his attention by the producer Tetsuji Takechi when, during the American occupation, English toilets gradually began to replace traditional Japanese toilets. The latter required the body to do active muscle work, as the squatting gesture meant that one had to constantly control one's body centre and weight. In the case of the English toi-

let, this body use is not required, and the comfortable sitting position has also changed time management .

Suzuki points out the changes, but he is not driven by idealisation of the past or mere nostalgia. Rather, his writing focuses on a search for cause and effect, a search for the effects on the human body. Somehow, he is looking for obstacles against which man can exert his energy. Sartre's philosophy is mentioned several times in his book as having had a great influence on him. It is as if Suzuki is constantly looking for those 'hopeless' situations of struggle where he can do work, where he can express energy. Changing society could be seen as the hopeless task of the Sartrean, absurdist man, but Suzuki still fulfils his mission by creating physically active theatrical experiences, and works against the tendencies I have listed above. Suzuki's theatre is thus a space of social struggle: not against something, but for the experience of something; for an intensely and collectively lived, physically and mentally active shared experience. It is not narrowly focused, goal-oriented propaganda, but a forum for public social politics in the broader sense.

Suzuki explores the theatrical implications of both changes in body use and changes in space. The disembodiment of modernisation naturally affects actors. The "[...] Japanese people received a kind of basic actor training through *tokonoma* and *rōka*, simply by growing up in these houses". Suzuki sees the gap that occurs as one that the actor must make up for through regular training in order to be free to experience the vital bodily presence, the intensity of his expression, the 'magic' and the quality of 'physical sensitivity' and to be able to convey the director's message to the audience.

"Against this crippling modernisation of the acting craft, I have sought to restore the wholeness of the human body in my performances, not simply by borrowing elements of stage forms such as the *nó* and *kabuki*, but by drawing on the universal values of these and other premodern traditions. For through them we have the possibility of regaining the full strength of our currently fragmented physicality and of reviving the sensory and expressive capacities of our bodies."

The director's approach is best embodied in the Suzuki actor training method he has created, which gives SCOT members the opportunity to practice daily.



The actors train their physical and vocal expressiveness, as well as their physical sensitivity and the intensity of their imagination through the exercises.

His method is seen as a skill-building tool to counteract the performance limitations of modernization; a language for actors to communicate with each other; a diagnosis by which the director can assess what 'illness' the actor is suffering from; and a standard against which the actor's work can be compared to certain performance minimums. Yet for me, his training fits beyond its functionality into some broader philosophical and 'ethical framework' (Camilleri 2009, 27). It proclaims the unattainable restoration of the wholeness of the human body. It is a space for consistent daily confrontation and a means of coping, through which performers choose to better their creative selves every day through physical and mental work. Suzuki's work reveals both a Sisyphean and a Sartrean struggle: hopeless, futile, physical and yet perhaps ultimately happy.

Suzuki analyses the relationship between space and performer from a number of perspectives. In this case, I would like to focus on Suzuki's analysis of the importance of the fixed stage structure in the *nó* tradition.

"In order to show the *nó* in all its glory, it was necessary to have a fixed playing field, interiorised by each player. If we underestimate the importance of this fact, we will not understand anything of the art of the *nó*. The collective sense of space evolved through the memorisation of just such a playing space, and although actors must pass on the tradition from generation to generation, it seems unlikely that their art could flourish without the collective nature of the *nó* stage. The basis for this lies not in the choreographed gestures but in the space itself. These actors never say that their art is based on this or that performance technique; because when the quality of a performance reaches its highest level, it is because their teachers have explained to them in detail the knowledge of space that has allowed the actors' bodies to become accustomed to the *nó* stage. There is a huge difference between the fact that the performing skills have developed on their own and the fact that these skills are inseparable from the space in which they are shown."

On the one hand, sensitivity to the relationship between the performer and space is also culturally determined. In Japanese, the stage is called *butai*, where

*bu* means dance, movement, and *tai* means stage. A rough translation is therefore it is the stage of dance, the space of dance. However, *tai* also means the body. The alternative meaning of the term thus refers not only to the space in which performers dance, but to a space that is made to dance by the actor's performance (Oida and Marshall 1997, xviii). In this way of thinking, the actor is not the centre of the process, but the operator, not occupying but animating the space through their physical presence. On the other hand, Suzuki, even within the Japanese way of thinking, treats the relationship between space and performer with particular care. The director sees the actor as having to inhabit the space in which he is performing in order to achieve the maximum of his physical presence and expressiveness.

Suzuki's thinking is clearly humanistic: his choice of themes, his social sensitivity towards the village of Toga, his pacifist approach, his faith in cultural exchange, his body-centred thinking, his emphasis on the community role of theatre all reflect this. However, the way in which he analyses the impact of space on the individual and the community brings him into close contact with certain ideas of post-humanist philosophy, even if he would probably reject them.

With his concept of the inner aesthetic body [bodymind], Philip Zarrilli expands the conceptual framework of 20th century phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, Noë, Leder) by interpreting the body in terms of theatre and acting. He looks at the aesthetic inner bodymind as a realm of perception and experience beyond the everyday, which emerges as a result of long-term psychophysical practice or intensive participation in training. Through this type of training, the participant engages both their physical body and mind in action, whereby the experience and consciousness of both are taken to ever-subtler levels. This kind of attunement is aesthetic in Zarrilli's sense, because it is non-ordinary and takes time. In this way, instead of a dualistic bodymind dichotomy, it seeks to make our thinking and our dialogue

"[...] move to a dialectical relationship of body in soul and mind in body. It is therefore marked as aesthetic, as experience gradually refines to ever-subtler levels of consciousness, and internal, as the mode of experience begins with an inward discovery as consciousness learns to explore the body." (Zarrilli 2009, 55)

Through Suzuki's training and in his directorial vision, he seeks this ever-subtler state of the bodymind, which physiologically affects the viewer, reminding us of our collectively forgotten full bodily experience, lost to the achievements of modernisation. At the same time, Suzuki is ahead of his time in seeing that this state is vulnerable to the environment that surrounds it.

Frank Camilleri is moving away from the 'conservative' psychophysical practice of Zarrilli towards post-humanist intellectual trends. Although Merleau-Ponty and the phenomenological approaches that continue to reflect his work include the relation between the body and its environment, Camilleri proposes a more radical approach (Camilleri 2020, 57–69).

"The Cartesian dichotomy, which Zarrilli and others leave untouched in traditional psychophysics, is the dichotomy between human and non-human. How, for example, can my experience of the world be »fully human« if it is mediated by the clothes and glasses I wear; the air-conditioned spaces in which I exercise and perform; the equipment and objects I use; the mostly processed foods and drinks I consume; the air I breathe and the sounds I hear, especially in urban environments?" (Camilleri 2020, 61)

Camilleri, applying to the theatre the trend of post-phenomenology, including the work of Don Ihde, proposes the use of the term *bodyworld* instead of *bodymind*. Moving away from human-centred thinking, Camilleri focuses attention on the interaction between the human and the non-human. »I« am not merely a »bodymind«. »I« am a »bodyworld«, a set of human and non-human constituents that are bound and constituted in relation to exteriority' (Camilleri 2020, 62 emphasis in original).

Camilleri's term accurately describes what Suzuki also says: the human or acting experience cannot be separated from the environment in which it is created. Suzuki's thinking in this sense anticipates later philosophical trends. However, Suzuki's primary mode of expression is not the written or oral sharing of his thoughts, but their theatrical manifestation. He communicates his critical insights through his constructed use of the actor's body, the infinitely refined precision of his treatment of space, his eclectic, often meditative treatment of time, and the shared act of theatre.

“As far as I am concerned, even if the theatre dies before its time, I will still be a theatre-maker. That’s why I find it difficult to trust something that doesn’t have a certain degree of continuity or permanence. The contemporary theatre faces a single challenge: how to ensure historical continuity while relying on the spontaneity of the human body and spirit.”

His creative vision creates social exclamation points for us. It reminds us that we have lost a significant surface of our own bodily experience, and encourages us to undertake the desperate struggle to regain it. Through a critical view of his own society, he draws our attention to the shortcomings of our common culture. By thematising the universal human experience, his art becomes part of continuity and permanence, while expanding the vanishing moment.

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