

Abe Kôbô and the Politics of Fantasy

Darcy Gauthier (University of Toronto)

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Throughout the 1950s, Abe Kôbô expressed a sustained interest in ghosts and ghost stories, producing several plays, short stories, films, as well as non-fiction essays concerned with exploring the potentialities of this figure. During this time, however, Abe also advocated for realism in literature, writing for example in his essay "Towards a New Realism" (Atarashii riarizumu no tame ni) that "we [writers] must first of all aim to understand reality." How are we to integrate these two topics, fantasy and realism—ones which are, on the surface at least, seemingly opposed? I would like to argue that there is indeed a coherent method behind Abe's simultaneous treatment of the two. Out of his ghost stories, Abe developed a conception of realism that differed from current conventions of literary realism—the discourse of empirical veracity constructed around I-novels, documentary fiction, records of the everyday, etc.—and was also radically opposed to the spirit of 1950s Japanese realpolitik—its normalization of (cold-war) crisis justifying a "realistic" politics of capitalist growth and imperialism. Thus, his ghost stories constituted a new form of "anti-realist" historical realism attuned to disavowed, invisible, or ghostly structures underlying postwar Japanese society. This presentation will focus on two of Abe's ghost stories from the 1950s, Record of a Transformation (Henkei no kiroku) and The Ghost is Here (Yûrei wa koko ni iru), in order to explore the political nature of Abe's fantasy writing as well the fantastic nature of contemporaneous politics, especially in terms of "spectral" Capitalist economies and the "haunting" disavowal-and-repetition of imperialism.

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Lecture in English / No prior registration necessary