

The Decline of Tradition & Civilization: Mishima and The West

Suan Sonna
Kansas State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/ksuugradresearch>

 Part of the [Comparative Philosophy Commons](#), [Esthetics Commons](#), [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#), [Japanese Studies Commons](#), [Other Philosophy Commons](#), [Political Theory Commons](#), and the [Theory and Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sonna, Suan (2019). "The Decline of Tradition & Civilization: Mishima and The West," *Kansas State University Undergraduate Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/ksuugradresearch/2019/panels2/1>

This Event is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Kansas State University Undergraduate Research Conference by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

The Decline of Tradition & Civilization: Mishima and the West

Abstract

On November 25, 1970, the prolific Japanese author and right-wing nationalist Yukio Mishima performed ritual suicide. His demonstration disturbed the literary, political, and intellectual world of Japan and has had far-reaching implications for the world. In this analysis, I offer a brief biographical sketch of Mishima's life and how he became one with his philosophy, politics, and literature. My ultimate aim is to show how the hyper-"modernization" and westernization of Japan parallels many of the same conflicts Western Civilization is currently facing with the collapse of both modernity and tradition. To do this, I examine five themes of Mishima's work – Contradiction as Truth, The Virtue of Authenticity, The Necessity of Myths, Masculinity, and The Power and Politics of Beauty – to warn us about the dangers and conditions of fanaticism in our own cultural context. In particular, elements of radical leftism and the alt-right are already anticipated and understood by Mishima, as both views are premised on a deep dissatisfaction with current systems of power and advocate non-standard epistemologies. Mishima was critical of capitalism and the rampant materialism corrupting Japanese Society, but his alternative required going back to the traditions and values of the past. His ultimate thesis is that with the disenchantment of reality and the decline of tradition, civilization enters into disorder and a crisis of identity. I close by asking us to ponder what the future holds, and if we are ready to address the challenges of fanaticism.

Introduction

We are often tempted to think our place in history is unique and somehow culturally isolated. Our struggles are supposedly new ones and distinct based on culture. I think this is false. When I first encountered the writings of Yukio Mishima in high school, I thought he was bizarre and the antithesis of Western culture. But, as I ventured into my own existential questions and our condition as a civilization, I found Mishima's voice uncomfortably relevant. In the *Live Ideas Journal*, I wrote a short story titled "Mishima in Love" as a tribute and examination of his work and philosophy. The plot centers around a British journalist, deeply engrained in Western culture, interviewing the Japanese hyper-nationalist Yukio Mishima. In the end, the journalist is convinced that Mishima created a philosophy worth dying for. Now, I do not endorse everything Mishima advocated. I want to focus on Mishima's life, his philosophy, and its relevance to the West.

Mishima & Post-World War II Japan

Yukio Mishima was originally born as "Kimitake Hiraoka" on January 14, 1925 and died on November 25th, 1970 at the age of 45. Mishima was born into a family with aristocratic connections but not at the top tier of Japanese society. His grandmother, Natsue, stole him away from his mother a little while after he was born. She was controlling, imposing, and dying of illness. She forbade him from playing outside with other boys and made him play with dolls with other girls. Her most important contribution to Mishima, however, was a love of art. She took him to No plays, a traditional form of Japanese theater, and allowed him to access books from the Western world. Before her death, she let him return to his mother, Shizue, who noticed he was not a normal boy.

The Decline of Tradition & Civilization: Mishima and the West

Mishima loved writing, and this unsettled his father, Azusa, who considered literature the pastime of homosexuals. He would shred and burn his son's writings, and, according to Mishima's biographer, John Nathan, Azusa once held Mishima's face against a passing train and demanded he show emotion.ⁱ The young Mishima, however, remained emotionless.

Mishima began as a mediocre student in his aristocratic Peers School in Tokyo, but when he harnessed his writing skills, his intellectual and aesthetic awakening began. When he was 12, he was already crafting beautiful short stories. At age 16, he wrote what many consider a Tour de Force of 120 pages, which impressed far right-wing Japanese writers, because he had flawlessly written his story in 11th century court Japanese. He graduated top of his class and was recognized by the Emperor for his work.

Japan then entered World War II and began drafting all able-bodied men. Mishima was found to be physically unfit and denied admittance into the Imperial Army. Mishima felt humiliated by that rejection. Nonetheless, he studied law at the University of Tokyo, worked in a factory, and later as a banker in the Japanese Ministry of Finance. His first major breakthrough as a writer was the publication of *Confessions of a Mask* in 1949. The story concerns a young homosexual who must deal with ostracization from his surrounding society – an autobiographical tale.

After his book's success, Mishima dedicated his life to writing and body building, hoping to become a work of art and beauty. This intellectual and physical refinement was a response to what he considered the westernization and diminishment of Japanese culture after the second world war. He was passionate about reclaiming the Japan that existed before the United States' victory. The new Japanese constitution, under the watchful eye of General John MacArthur, reads in Article 9:

Article 9.

Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes. In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized.ⁱⁱ

This article disturbed Mishima, because he believed there are two core elements of Japan – Chrysanthemum and what he called “The Sword.”ⁱⁱⁱ The former deals with beauty, art, and traditions like tea ceremonies. The latter captures Japan's militaristic, aggressive, and more disciplined side – such as the Samurai Code of Ethics, Bushido. The West brought to the shores of Japan modernity, capitalism, materialism, and a more systematized, bureaucratic state – or at least at a pace faster than ever before.

In Mishima's eyes, the only solution is the tragic one – we cannot avoid living with our contradictions, replacing our most precious beliefs with ones deemed more rational or acceptable. The solution for Mishima was glorious death in the pursuit of some higher vision.

Thus, Mishima formed a small army called “The Shield Society”, which was allowed to train at a military base in Ichigaya located in the eastern portion of Shinjuku, Tokyo, Japan. On November 25th, 1970, he committed ritual suicide after holding the base's general hostage with a group of his Shield Society soldiers. This stunning display of seppuku affected Japan and the rest of the world. He unified his vision of art and action that day in death itself.

The Decline of Tradition & Civilization: Mishima and the West

Five Themes & Western Civilization

It may seem odd to premise my examination of Western civilization on a character as flamboyant, radical, and – in all honesty – unusual as Mishima. However, I think Yukio and his literary work illuminate our condition.

So, let me examine five core themes in Mishima's work.

"Contradiction" as Truth

Mishima often told the actors in his plays that they should not portray human emotion as dualities. Tenderness and wrath are compatible. He was getting at a fundamental truth about human beings – we are contradictions. Mishima, for example, had many alter egos and was a psychologically complex individual. Some consider his behavior and philosophy schizophrenic due to its alleged inconsistency. In fact, students at the University of Tokyo once criticized him during an appearance for having contradictory political and philosophical views.

Mishima believed that in order to survive the downfall of modernity and save the "magic" of the past, we would have to affirm something about the human spirit. Seeing that human nature is contradictory, multi-layered, and complex, Mishima sought out some unifying principle. He first went to art but saw that art is meaningless without action, without some correspondence to reality. He looked to eroticism and violence as a higher mode of artistic expression. But, I think he found something even higher.

When he was a child, he discovered in his grandmother's library a book containing works of Western art. In it, he saw the execution of St. Sebastian. In that painting, the saint is tied to a tree and arrows pierce his flesh. Mishima describes this as his sexual awakening and the beginning of his obsession with death.

The West is still suffering from the collapse of modernity and especially the downfall of rationalism. It seemed as if our attempt to exemplify reason and order had only divorced us of the most intimate elements of our humanity. Indeed, many are concerned about how what we deem as rational has been shaped by the power structures around us – often to the detriment of the other and the excluded.

Even with the advancements in science and medicine, as someone like Stephen Pinker would emphasize as progress and enlightenment, we are still anxious and uncertain about the future. Some have hoped that with the decline of religion and the "rise" of science & reason fanaticism would disappear. Instead, fanaticism seems like an ever-present threat.

Indeed, Mishima's martyrdom has inspired other right-wing terrorists in the West,^{iv} and a writer in the Europe Now Journal compared Steve Bannon to Mishima: "Mishima and his comrades were, in essence, the alt-right of the day, and were expressing many of the same fears: the fear of change, the fear of difference, the fear of being replaced, the fear of being forgotten along with all they represent. The fear that their conjured myth or mythos of their respective nations, and who can rightfully belong to them, will be shattered in the realities of an ever-evolving, globalizing society."^v

The Decline of Tradition & Civilization: Mishima and the West

The Virtue of Authenticity

This flows naturally into the second theme of Mishima's work – authenticity. In *Confessions of a Mask*, Mishima deals with this idea of pretending to agree with “civilized” norms and the conflict those norms produce in terms of identity. On its own, a mask cannot confess anything. However, when it is worn, its bearer reveals something about himself depending on how he acts, on how he publicly presents himself to you.

Masks are often used in the Japanese tradition to connect to or represent deity. Mishima considers confession a way of aligning oneself with the divine, as he cites Augustine and the practice of confession in the Catholic tradition.

Mishima's basic argument in *Confessions of a Mask* is that all confessions require masks, and all masks, if embodied and connected to flesh, are capable of confession. Confession purifies us, and it is through the contradictory practice of being ourselves and viewing ourselves from the outside that we learn who we are.

Authenticity, genuine self-expression, is paramount in this day and age. It has become, some would argue, a replacement for truth itself.

The British philosopher Sir Roger Scruton noted in his essay “The Great Swindle” a new kind of tactic in discourse. Instead of engaging with whether someone has said something true you “discover ‘where they are coming from’, and to reveal the emotional, moral and political attitudes that underlie a given choice of words. The habit of ‘going behind’ your opponent's words stems from Karl Marx's theory of ideology, which tells us that, in bourgeois conditions, concepts, habits of thought and ways of seeing the world are adopted because of their socio-economic function, not their truth.”^{vi} In short, you try to get at their character and unmask their advances – you are trying to see who they really are...

What compels us nowadays is personality, sincerity, and authenticity. Scruton thinks that this cult of personality, however, has resulted in making academia and high culture fake – they are filled with thinkers, artists, and students who espouse ideas they don't really believe but are only held for some other motive. Thus, we are stuck in a contradiction, an insincere game with slogans and mantras, that has angered those who yearn for authenticity.

The Necessity of Myths

Before committing ritual suicide, Mishima saluted the Emperor. However, he was not saluting the actual Emperor at the time, Hirohito, who had denied his status as deity. Mishima was saluting the grand myth of the Emperor as a supernatural being. For Mishima, that myth was something worth dying for and preserving.

Psychologists from Carl Jung to Joseph Campbell and now, in more popular form, Jordan Peterson push forward this idea that myths and archetypes play a large role in understanding the human condition.

The Decline of Tradition & Civilization: Mishima and the West

I am not an expert or well-read in those theories, but I don't think you need expertise to understand this simple point – we create narratives around archetypes to make sense of the world. We pick up on common themes and form traditions around some central story.

I think all of us know what central myth has grounded Western Civilization. My question is – what will replace it? With the events I see on the news and everyday experience, I think the new narrative must be of religious and cosmic proportions. It will be radical in one form or another.

Masculinity

Psychologist Ronald F. Levant wrote an excellent paper titled “Towards the Reconstruction of Masculinity”. Let me focus on one point I found fascinating. In order to save the concept of masculinity, Levant referred to Campbell and Augustus Napier's idea of the hero's journey.^{vii} Every man must confront his inner demons and triumph over them as the test of his might. Levant and Campbell both understand that identity, especially masculine identity, is connected to some grander narrative. For a long time, militaristic nationalism and masculinity went hand in hand. Religion, family, and nation were defining features. The weakening of all three of those institutions has increased confusion about the masculine mandate.

That same weakening occurred in post-World War II Japan. The religion of the Emperor was lost and strands of Anti-Japanese-ism formed. Capitalism and more materialistic modes of living allowed for a more egalitarian family structure, making the fatherly patriarch less relevant. Mishima is quite explicit about this concern in his book *The Sound of Waves*. However, due to time, I will save this for discussion.

The Power and Politics of Beauty

I want to emphasize a prophetic point of Mishima's. He predicted future political and cultural battles will not be primarily fought through force but through aesthetics. The conservative columnist Tim Stanley writes, “I've reached the conclusion that traditionalists should reject politics and focus on art. We should take back control of the cultural institutions—universities, academies, churches, periodicals—and use them to promote beauty... We mustn't turn our backs on the people we disagree with, but embrace and cherish them (please, do not conflate traditionalism with snobbery—Yukio wrote, ‘The highest point at which human life and art meet is in the ordinary. To look down on the ordinary is to despise what you can't have.’) And we should not accept our fate as mere critics of civilisation (the figurative version of Mishima's suicide) but instead become the architects of a new one.”^{viii}

We complain that free speech has become weaponized and everything from sports to TV shows have become politicized. I think we are at a point where the concept of beauty has become politicized, but I am unsure and worried about what the weaponization of beauty would entail.

Conclusion

Here we are now left with more questions than answers. I guess the art of it all is to figure out what we will construct for the future. I think that's how Mishima would've wanted it.

The Decline of Tradition & Civilization: Mishima and the West

ⁱ See Nathan, John. *Mishima: a Biography*. Da Capo Press, 2000.

ⁱⁱ “Article 9 and the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty.” *Asia for Educators*, Columbia University , afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/japan_1950_usjapan.htm.

ⁱⁱⁱ Verbovszky, Joseph. "Overcoming Modernity in Yukio Mishima." *Discussions* 9.2 (2013). <<http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/a?id=797>>

^{iv} Flanagan, Damian. “Yukio Mishima's Enduring, Unexpected Influence.” *The Japan Times*, 21 Nov. 2015, www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2015/11/21/general/yukio-mishimas-enduring-unexpected-influence/.

^v Impiglia , Christopher. “The Essence of Our Era: Yukio Mishima, Steve Bannon, and the Alt-Right.” *EuropeNow*, 1 Feb. 2018, www.europenowjournal.org/2018/01/31/the-essence-of-our-era-the-rise-of-the-alt-right/.

^{vi} Scruton, Roger. “A Cult of Fakery Has Taken over What's Left of High Culture – Roger Scruton | Aeon Essays.” *Aeon*, Aeon, 12 Dec. 2012, aeon.co/essays/a-cult-of-fakery-has-taken-over-what-s-left-of-high-culture.

^{vii} Levant, Ronald F. “Toward the Reconstruction of Masculinity.” *Journal of Family Psychology*, vol. 5, no. 3-4, 1992, pp. 385., doi:10.1037//0893-3200.5.3-4.379.

^{viii} McCarthy, Daniel. “What Yukio Mishima Teaches Traditionalists.” *The American Conservative*, www.theamericanconservative.com/mccarthy/what-yukio-mishima-teaches-traditionalists/. McCarthy cites an article from one of Stanley’s works, but the original seems to have been lost.