

Chora: The Sacred Space of Performance

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コーラー (chora) : 神聖な演技空間

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In much of the scholarship on dramatic performance emphasis is put on the role of the actor. In this paper I would like to draw on the arguments by Frederick Nietzsche in “The Birth of Tragedy” about the role of the chorus as an “ideal spectator.” According to Nietzsche, if the chorus can perform well, then the ordinary spectators will be drawn into the performance as co-participants. In light of this, I examine Komparu Kunio’s explanation of the functions of the Noh chorus, musicians and even the atmosphere of the theater itself. In an excellent performance, there should be an experience of transcendence, which I call “*chora*.” This Greek word refers to Plato’s treatment of the term to describe the origin of the cosmos.

演劇学の論考では、多くの場合、役者の役割に力点が置かれている。本論ではフリードリッヒ・ニーチェが『悲劇の誕生』で論じた「理想の観客」としてのコーラス (chorus) の役割に注目して論考する。ニーチェによれば、もしコーラスがうまく機能すると、一般の観客が共演者として劇中に引き込まれるという。これに照らし合わせて、能における地謡、囃子、能楽堂の雰囲気の機能に関する金春國雄の解説を検証する。優れた上演では超越体験が得られるが、この論文ではこの体験は「コーラー」 (chora) と呼んである。このギリシャ語は、宇宙の始原を説明する際にプラトンが使用したことばである。

Though the historical record is sketchy, it is generally agreed that both ancient Greek drama and Noh developed from agricultural religious festivals in which the chorus had a central role. As dramatic performance became cosmopolitan, and consequently more sophisticated, the role of the chorus declined and that of the actor increased. In this paper, I would like to recall the role of the chorus. I argue that the chorus should not be regarded as an ornamental interlude or background music.

Rather it is the vehicle by which the sacred space of the stage is summoned up. Without this sacred atmosphere, the action of the drama runs the risk of becoming merely an entertainment.



Jonah Salz and Michael Lazarin listen to a talk

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1. Religious Origins of Greek Drama and Noh

In the case of Greek drama, scholars rely mainly on the account given by Aristotle (384-322 BC) in the *Poetics*. Dithyrambic odes—choral dances of about 50 dancers accompanied by flutes and drums—were performed as purification rituals in service to the god Dionysus dating back to 1200 BC. Dionysus is a god of vegetation who dies each winter and is reborn each spring. For this reason, he receives the epithet “dithyrambos,” which means “he of the double door,” that is, the “twice-born” or “reborn.” Other epithets include: (a) Bromios (of the loud shout), (b) Dendrites (of the trees), (c) Liknites (of the winnowing fan), and (d) Lyaeus (he who releases). His most important name is Oeneus (he of the wine press) because Dionysus taught men how to make wine.

Sometime in the 7th c. BC (c. 625), Arion of Corinth wrote specific calls and responses between the leader and dancers of a chorus. Between 540 and 527, Pisistratus, tyrant of Athens, founded the festival of the Greater Dionysia, and around 536-533, Thespis put on a tragedy at this festival. He stood on an elevated stage (*skene*) and wore masks to represent various characters rather than merely narrate the story. Nevertheless, most of the action remained in the *orchestra*, literally dancing place, where the chorus sang and danced. Throughout the next 50 years, theaters (*theatron*) that could seat 15,-20,000 people were constructed at cities throughout Greece and formal competitions were begun.

Aeschylus (525-456 BC) is credited with developing real dramatic action by adding a second actor and elevating the tone and grandeur of the performance. From this time on, the role of the chorus was diminished and that of the actors increased. The rowdy atmosphere of the old dithyrambic odes was preserved in Satyric dramas which were also performed at the Greater Dionysia. Satyric dramas would deal with similar themes as the tragedies, but the chorus would rush onto the stage and disrupt the action from time to time. Typically a poet would compose three tragedies and one Satyric drama.

Similarly, Noh is supposed to have developed out of countryside festivals, especially sarugaku (猿楽) and dengaku (田楽). Sarugaku were probably imported from China in the Nara period (710-784) and merged with indigenous dengaku. According to Zeami Motokiyo (世阿弥, c.1363–c.1443) in *Fushi Ka Den* (風姿花伝), the “saru” of sarugaku derives from removing the radical from the character for *kami* (神, god). The root is the same as that used for the Chinese 7th month (August) or Monkey month; thus, it is likely that the original festivals were purification ceremonies to prepare for the harvest.

Zeami gives several other explanations for the origins of Noh. One is that it derives from a myth concerning Amaterasu-o-mikami (天照大神), the sun goddess. Displeased with her brother, the storm god Susa-no-o (須佐之男命), Amaterasu-o-mikami secreted herself in a cave. Deprived of sunlight, animate beings in the world began to die off. The 80,000 gods gathered outside the cave, and Ame-no-Uzume-no-Mikoto (天宇受売命) danced the Sei-no, perhaps imported from

Korea and likely the origin of Kagura. The dance was wildly erotic and caused the gods to laugh. This piqued Amaterasu-o-mikami's curiosity and she emerged from the cave to see what was going on. She agreed to remain in this world if Susa-no-o were banished to the Japan sea. Ze-ami's treatment of this myth is rather refined and omits the eroticism usually found in other versions of this myth. In any event, the myth is similar to the death and rebirth of nature in the worship of Dionysus.

It is likely that these agricultural religious festivals were preserved by itinerant theater groups. During the Muromachi period (1336-1573), Kanami (観阿弥, 1333-1384) and his son Ze-ami elevated the tone of the performance and it became a favorite entertainment of Ashikaga Yoshimitsu Shogun (1358-1408). Like the Greek drama, which separated dramatic performance into refined tragedies and comical Satyric dramas, so sarugaku evolved into Noh and Kyogen. Also, like Greek drama, the role of the chorus diminished, while that of the masked actor increased.

Scholars have pointed out various, external similarities between Greek Tragedy and Noh. These are important, and it is likely that the closest experience of the original Greek dramas that a Westerner can have is watching Medieval Asian court dramas such as Noh. However, I think the most important connection between Greek drama and Japanese Noh is that both aim at spiritual transcendence. The role of the chorus in creating the proper atmosphere for transcendence is often undervalued. Therefore, I think it is worthwhile reconsidering what the chorus contributes to the dramatic performance.

2. Two Misconceptions of the Dramatic Chorus

According to Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), the essence of Greek drama must be found in its origins. The first six chapters of *The Birth of Tragedy: Out of the Spirit of Music* pursue this matter through an analysis of two religious-artistic forces of nature: the Apollinian and the Dionysian.

With Chapter 7, Nietzsche relaunched the investigation by considering the role of the "chorus" in Greek drama. As mentioned above, the evolution of Greek drama involves an increase in the importance of the leader of the dance and a corresponding decrease in the importance of the chorus. For Nietzsche this is carried too far in the plays of Euripides (480-406 BC) such that the artistic spirit of tragedy is lost. Thus, if the diminishment of the chorus can bring about the death of tragedy, there must be something in the chorus which can show us the vitality of the original artistic spirit.

To begin, Nietzsche rejects two ideas of the chorus which he claims killed off the artistic spirit of tragedy. He finds that both are prevalent in his day and are important reasons why moderns cannot appreciate ancient dramas.

The first idea is that the chorus represents the democratic spectator. This view is supported by the fact that the chorus quite often makes third person comments about the actors and their

mental or emotional condition. As such, the chorus makes public the private thoughts of the audience or helps lead the audience to opinions that the playwright would like them to have. For example, in *Antigone* (442 BC) by Sophocles (496-406 BC), the chorus speaks as the citizens of seven-gated Thebes who have recently suffered a civil war between two brothers who claim the throne. The brothers kill each other during the battle and afterwards the chorus comments:

For seven captains at seven gates, matched against seven,
left the tribute of their armor to Zeus who decides battles;
save those two of cruel fate, who, born of the same father and mother,
set against each other their two conquering spears,
and together share a common death.¹⁾

Something like this can be seen in *Aoi no Uye*, where the demonic spirit of Hikaru Genji's spurned lover Rokujyo assails Genji's wife Aoi. The chorus sings lines of sympathy for the suffering of Aoi:

O Hate, Hate!
Her [Rokujyo] hate so deep that on her bed
Our lady [Aoi] moans.
Yet, should she live in the world again,
He would call her to him, her Lord
The Shining One, whose light
Is brighter than fire-fly hovering
Over the slime of an inky pool.²⁾

And a little later, the chorus recites the *Hannya Kyo* to pacify the vengeful Rokujyo.

Nietzsche rejects this interpretation of the chorus on several grounds, but most important is that the dramatic stage is a sacred space in which no ordinary human can appear. The chorus cannot represent ordinary humans: its voice is as divine as the actors. Thus, the chorus is not speaking for the ordinary humans who watch the drama. The chorus must be seen as participants in the drama rather than observers of it. This also must have been a controversial issue in the Classical Age. Though Aristotle comments only once on the role of the chorus, he insists that it must be treated on an equal level with the actors by the playwright.³⁾

The second idea is that the chorus represents the ideal spectator, as suggested by A.W. Schlegel (1767-1845). In this case, the chorus represents the audience in an omniscient position, which reveals the inner thoughts of the characters and background information about what has brought events to this state of affairs and what is at stake in the crisis of the drama. In Greek drama, most of the audience would know the story on which the play is based, but the chorus is

able to provide details or variations which they might have forgotten or not know.

We can see this omniscient role of the chorus in *Kumasaka* by Zenchiku Ujinobu (1414-1499?). In this play, a priest from the capital meets the ghost of the robber Kumasaka-no-Chonan disguised as a priest of Amasaka. Kumasaka asks the cosmopolitan priest to pray for the spirit of a man buried nearby but refuses to reveal his name. The chorus sometimes speaks the thoughts of the priest and sometimes those of Kumasaka. Most of the time, it narrates the events which led to Kumasaka's death during an attempted robbery.

Nietzsche is more sympathetic to this idea, but it must be understood in the proper way. First of all, he argues that if the chorus is the representation of the audience (whether democratic or ideal), then the essence of the drama would lie in the audience, which would be absurd: that is, drama would be mainly spectators without a spectacle. Of course, at this point we could abandon the notion of the importance of the chorus, but this would lead to the equally absurd situation of a spectacle without deeply engaged spectators. Or, even worse, drama would be only a cosmopolitan entertainment that owed nothing to its popular, religious origins.

3. The Chorus as *Chora* of Sacred Space

In Greek, chorus is *choros* and may refer to the dance, the dancers or the place of the dance. It is related to the Greek word *chora*, which is usually translated as space, but as soon as we make this translation all manner of caveats must be cited. First of all, both Plato and Aristotle distinguish it from the Atomist concept of void, *kenon*, which evolved into our post-Cartesian concept of an infinite expanse that can be infinitely divided. Neither is it a positive place, *topos*, that is, the spatial dimension of some existing thing.⁴⁾ As neither expanse, nor place, *chora* resists translation; indeed, it resists explanation.

In Plato's *Timaeus*, a dialogue on the origin of all beings, the *chora* is the site from which all beings emerge into existence. Plato acknowledges a logical puzzle in this: space and time are qualities of existing things, so how could a site and starting point like *chora* exist before anything exists. *Chora* is essentially an interruption in both the genesis of beings and our ability to understand such things.

Interruption can be understood in two ways. First, it can be seen as the beginning and end of an event insofar as both interrupt what has been going on thus far. On the other hand, it can be seen as an eruption out of the midst of the event itself, whereby something comes into the full flower of its existence. In this, it has already been existing as one among the many events that constitute the flow of existence, but suddenly it is lifted out of the background and thrust into the foreground.

To explain this, Plato gives an analysis of two senses of production (*poiesis*). The first is our normal sense of making something by working with materials. In this, the producer or poet employs some technique to "generate an image" (*ikon*) designed by his/her intellect (*nous*). The product has a beginning and a tangible presence. In the second case, Plato considers the produc-

tion of things which have always, already been by necessity (*ananke*). Such things are called paradigms (*paradeigma*) which come from origins (*arche*) and are present as beautiful (*kalon*), that is, the shining (*ekphanestaton*) and lovely (*erasmotaton*).⁵⁾

In modern terms, these two kinds of production distinguish things made by the artifice of humans and things that come to be by nature. However, both the ancient Greeks and the Medieval Japanese lived in a world full of gods, where much of nature also comes into existence by way of design. The difference between merely human and divinely inspired production is that the latter aims at the beautiful, shining loveliness of necessity.

It is not necessary to believe in gods to notice that some things aim merely at their survival while others strive for aesthetic ecstasy. Nietzsche used the names of two Greek gods, Apollo and Dionysus, to describe aesthetic forces of nature that came together in ancient Greek tragic drama. For him, dramatic performance lost its power when the role of the chorus was diminished in Euripides for the sake of realistic representation of the actions and psychological motivations of the actors.

For Nietzsche, citing Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805), the chorus is “a living wall that tragedy constructs around itself in order to close itself off from the world of reality and to preserve its ideal domain and its poetical freedom.”⁶⁾ As an ideal domain, the chorus should not be taken as anything realistic, for example, the population of Athens or the audience at the theater. As an opposition to ordinary reality, however, the chorus should not be taken as something un-real. Rather it is another kind of reality, that is, religious reality, what Nietzsche calls “fictitious natural beings.” The chorus marks off a domain for the presence of the god Dionysus. The members of the chorus are the worshippers of Dionysus, that is, a band of satyrs.

“The satyr, as the Dionysian chorist, lives in a religiously acknowledged reality under the sanctions of myth and cult.”⁷⁾

For the modern mind, “fiction” (literally something made by man) and “natural” are opposites. It seems to be a paradox and Nietzsche admits this. His task is to understand the truth of this contradiction.

“Perhaps we shall have a point of departure for our inquiry if I put forward the proposition that the satyr, the fictitious natural being, bears the same relation to the man of culture that Dionysian music bears to civilization. Concerning the latter, Richard Wagner says that it is nullified by music just as lamplight is nullified by the light of day. Similarly, I believe that the Greek man of culture felt himself nullified in the presence of the satyric chorus...”⁸⁾

In summary,

Daylight nullifies lamplight.

Dionysian music nullifies civilization.

The satyric chorus nullifies the man of culture.

The English word “nullify” in the above quote translates the German word “*aufheben*,” which simultaneously means: (1) to cancel and (2) to preserve. The dramatic chorus cancels the ordinary reality of performers and theater-goers, and at the same time, it preserves them at a higher level of reality.

Nietzsche goes on to explain that the actors do not pretend to be the characters; rather, they become the characters. In the same way, the audience should not view the drama as the depiction of something artificial; rather, it should be dramatically engaged in the performance. The chorus is a “living wall” that prevents the audience from watching the drama as a spectacle happening in ordinary reality. It is the chorus that draws the audience into the sacred space of the actors and actions. The chorus must elevate the performance to a state of enthusiasm, a Greek-based word that literally means filled with the divine. Rather than something that divides the audience from the stage, the chorus must serve as a bridge by which the audience crosses over to the stage at the same moment that the actor sets foot upon the stage.

“...for centuries, the Noh stage has embodied in both structure and function the principle of creating drama with the intangible participation of the audience.”⁹⁾

4. The Chorus as Bridgeway to Sacred Space

Our knowledge of how the Greek chorus performed is limited, but the Japanese Noh chorus likely gives us a good idea of the kind of atmosphere it produced. The main difference is that the Greek chorus danced, while in Japanese Noh, movement is mainly done by the actors. The Noh chorus consists of three drummers, a flutist and six to ten singers. According to Komparu Kunio, the essential functions of the chorus are to regulate rhythm and establish an atmosphere of “*ma*” (間).¹⁰⁾

The Japanese word is as difficult as *chora* to translate into a modern Western language. The usual English translation is “interval” because, like the Japanese word, it combines both spatial and temporal senses. Like *chora*, *ma* denotes an interruption. In painting, it means the unpainted area of the work; in music, it means a pause between the notes. But it is not simply a void, negative space. In architecture, *ma* denotes a space in which the walls and furnishings fuse together so as to provide an atmosphere of vitality. The architect Isozaki Arata says this sense of *ma* is most notable in sacred places such as Shinto shrines, Buddhist alters and the Noh stage.

Komparu says that this sacred atmosphere is mainly constructed by the vocal chorus, the *jiu-tai*, literally “ground chant,” which has the function of moving the narrative along and providing the *gyou* moment of the *shin-gyou-sou* (真行草) artistic progression. The sequence derives from three levels of formality in calligraphy: block, italic and cursive, but Komparu argues that the increasing fluidity of style also describes artistic maturation or fulfillment.¹¹⁾ He goes on to explain that such development consists in reversing the normal relationship of figure and ground.

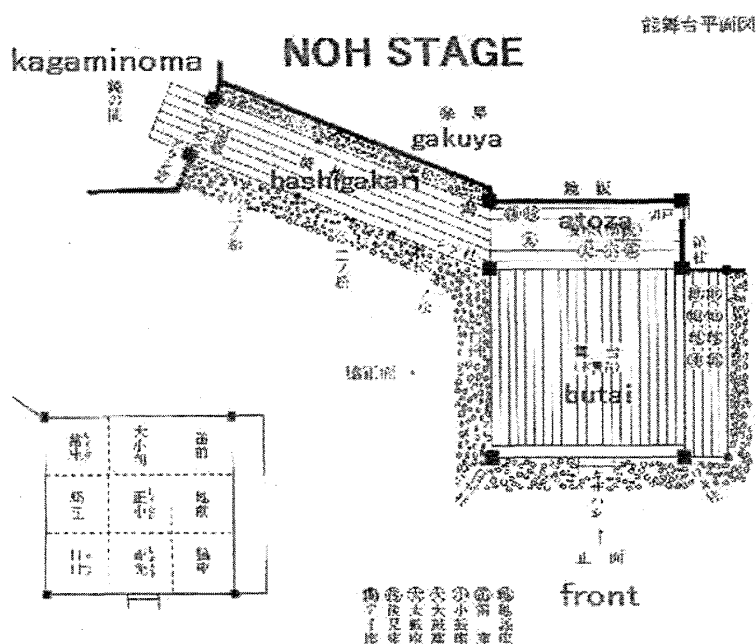
In the *shin* stage, the actor is foremost and the chorus is in the background. In the *gyou* stage, the relationship between the actor and chorus becomes ambiguous, interchangeable, fused.

Finally, if the *sou* stage can be achieved, then the relation is reversed and “*ma*” is achieved.¹²⁾ The chorus comes to the fore and the actor recedes, but this does not mean that the actor becomes less important in relation to the chorus. Rather, as Nietzsche explains above, the actor as mundane existence, as a man playing a role, is exalted into sacred space. The chorus comes to the fore as a cascade of divine light and sound that fills the theater.

Returning to the here and now for a moment, it must be remarked that something is out of step in the sequence described above. The choral musicians are the first to enter and the last to leave the stage because it is their role to establish and finalize the dramatic space of the performance, the *ma*. How can there be a *shin* stage if the chorus is doing their job? Should there not already be an ambiguous interplay of the actor and the chorus from the outset? It is the same problem posed by Plato in his discussion of cosmic creation: how can there be a site of creation before the creation of space and time? How can the actor be elevated to the level of dramatic performance before the performance has begun? It seems that we need something as uncanny as virgin birth and this is what *chora* provides.

Chora receives everything or gives place to everything, but Plato insists that in fact it has to be a virgin place, and that it has to be totally foreign, totally exterior to anything that it receives. Since it is absolutely blank, everything that is printed on it is automatically effaced. It remains foreign to the imprint it receives; so in a sense, it does not receive anything—it does not receive what it receives nor does it give what it gives. Everything inscribed in it erases itself immediately, while remaining in it. It is thus an impossible surface—it is not even a surface, because it has no depth.”¹³⁾

In a Japanese Noh theater there is a long bridgeway (*hashigakari*) between the dressing room



and the stage proper. In a Western theater, the actor is either offstage (behind the curtains) or onstage; the passage from one to the other occurs in an instant. While it is true that a Noh actor passes through a curtain to the bridgeway, it cannot be said that he is yet onstage. An atmosphere of anticipation is established by the procession to the stage through a *jo-ha-kyu* (序破急, *proso-dia*, *capriccio*, *presto*) movement.

Komparu explains that *jo* means “beginning” in the sense of

“beginning-middle-end” and is therefore essentially a spatial element. On the other hand, *kyu* means “speed or suddenness,” so it is a temporal element. *Ha* means “break or ruin” and thus is a disordering element.¹⁴⁾ When it is performed with excellence, the elements should counterpoint their distinctness and establish a harmonic tension between them. *Jo-ha-kyu* is a design element for various Japanese arts, especially musical compositions, but also spatial arts, for example, the heavy, brooding roof of the main hall (*jo*) beside the soaring elevation of the pagoda (*kyu*) which come into view upon passing through the main gate (*ha*).

Regarding the bridgeway of a Noh theater, Komparu describes the area near the curtain as the *jo* area, the central part as the *ha* area and the last stretch before stepping onto the stage as the *kyu* area. In fact, *jo-ha-kyu* is a fractal concept, that is, it applies not only to the larger structures of the bridgeway and stage but also every movement along the way. Each step forward, turn of the body, gesture of the hand should be accomplished by a *jo-ha-kyu* progression.

Though each moment of the progression is essential, the moment of *ha* seems to have a special importance. All too often, the *jo-ha-kyu* progression appears to be a simple acceleration. This puts too much emphasis on beginnings and endings. The second sense of interruption, the emergence of what already is into the full flower of its being, is lost. But, this is precisely how the *ma* of the performance gets established. Komparu explains that in the chanting of Buddhist sutras “each reciter proceeds at his own pitch and tempo, producing an eerie harmony believed to have some magical force.”¹⁵⁾ He goes on to speculate that the Noh chorus may have originally performed in this way, but today the leader of the chorus sets the key and the tempo which all the others follow. Since the chorus is supposed to be composed of performers with equal mastery of the art, this conformity to a single pattern may explain why the *ha* or capricious moment of the performance is in such short supply.



Noh *Utoh* by Akira Matsui

Nevertheless, if all goes well, the entrance of the actor can send a real shudder of expectation through the audience. The point is that for quite a long interval (both spatial and temporal) the actor is neither here nor there. We see the performer but not yet the performance; the bridgeway entrance is a kind of yogic breathing exercise, an exhalation and inhalation of atmosphere within which the performance will take place. It is not a matter of moving so many meters in so many minutes in the visible world; rather, the “moment” of entrance is stretched out in order to produce a fantastic space of demons, ghosts and madness. It is an interval of space-time before objective, measurable space and time. In this way, the disadvantage of being first seen as an actor in costume entering the stage, that is, as a physical being of ordinary perception, is turned to advantage.

However, the success of the entrance is not mainly due to the performance of the actor. This is because the actor is not yet expressly performing. The atmosphere of expectation mainly depends on the chorus, since they are the ones who are already on stage demanding the attention of the audience. In many cases, the audience does not even notice that the actor—especially in the case of a secondary actor (*waki*)—has entered the bridgeway. By the time the actor sets foot on the stage, the chorus should have created an atmosphere that allows the actor to project the power and grace (*yugen*) of his/her performance to the audience. It should have created a spiritual bridgeway by which the mind of the audience simultaneously arrives at the stage with the actor.

...the two [actor and audience] begin gradually to blend as the actor enters into the fabricated space of the play and as the fabricated beauty made real by created dramatic incidents is absorbed into the everyday experience of each member of the audience. Eventually they join together in a close mutual relationship and generate a dramatic shared experience.¹⁶⁾

The chorus creates a space of transcendence which is prior to any sense of place. If the chorus functions well, the result should be that the place of the stage and the place of the audience are nullified. Instead, the whole space of the theater becomes an atmosphere in which all concerned (actor, chorus and audience) are fused together in an experience of sacred unity, oneness. The chorus creates a space in which each participant is elevated to a position that immediately erases itself as a particular position. Each participant becomes a free variable in the general atmosphere of the theater. The division between spectacle and spectators is dissolved. The ideal spectator is one who becomes part of the spectacle. All—actors, chorus and audience—become the singing, dancing performance.

“The most remarkable feature of Korean mask-dance drama is the enthusiastic participation of the audience. Toward the end of a performance there is little distinction between the actors and the audience as they join together in robust dance and bring it to a truly affirmative life-enhancing finale.”¹⁷⁾

Notes

- 1) trans. by R. C. Jebb.
- 2) trans. by Arthur Waley.
- 3) Aristotle, *Poetics* XVIII. 7.
- 4) In Plato, the distinction between *chora* and *topos* made in the *Timaeus* is not so rigorously maintained in the other dialogues. In Aristotle’s *Physics* IV, the discussion of *topos* mainly concerns kinetic movements (location, quality and size). As for the role of *chora* in genesis, Aristotle accuses Plato of confusing it with primal matter (*hyle*) (*Physics* IV, 209b).
- 5) cf. John Sallis, *Chorology*, Ch. 2 “Production of the Cosmos.”
- 6) Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy: Out of the Spirit of Music*, trans. by Walter Kaufman, (New York: Vintage Books, 1968).

- 7) *Ibid.* p. 58 .
- 8) *Ibid.*, p. 59.
- 9) Komparu, Kunio. *The Noh Theater: Principles and Perspectives*, tr. Jane Cordry, originally published in Japanese under the title *Noh e no izamai* (Invitation to the Noh), (Floating World Editions: 2005), p. 109.
- 10) *Ibid.*, pp. 161-62.
- 11) Komparu, Kunio. *op. cit.*, pp. 23-24.
- 12) *Ibid.*, pp. 70-74.
- 13) Derrida, Jacques. *Choral L Works: Jacques Derrida and Peter Eisenman*, ed. by Jeffrey Kipnis and Thomas Leiser, (Monacelli Press, 1997).
- 14) Komparu, Kunio. *op. cit.*, pp. 24-25.
- 15) *Ibid.* p. 162.
- 16) *Ibid.* pp. 17-18.
- 17) Korean Overseas Culture and Information Service, 1998.