

Asian and Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies



SPRING 2022

VOLUME 21 | NUMBERS 1-2

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APA NEWSLETTER ON

Asian and Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies

A. MINH NGUYEN, EDITOR

VOLUME 21 | NUMBERS 1-2 | SPRING 2022

FROM THE EDITORS

The Multitudinous Dimensions of Japanese Aesthetics

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The essays in this special double issue (*APA Newsletter on Asian and Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies* 21, nos. 1-2) represent a cross-section of contemporary philosophical work on Japanese aesthetics, variously complementing, challenging, and expanding upon previous studies in the field.¹ They display a widening theoretical attention to the range of concepts and practices that characterize Japanese artistic and cultural traditions, beyond the more traditionally studied Zen-based concepts like *mono no aware*, *wabi*, *sabi*, *shibui*, and *yūgen*, although these ideas, too, receive some consideration here. In addition to providing insight into central aspects of Japanese artistic and cultural traditions, including a wide range of Japanese categorical aesthetics, these essays provide an opening into ways of rethinking common aesthetic concepts from Western traditions such as “art,” “beauty,” “elegance,” “taste,” “representation,” “expression,” “emotional response,” “creativity,” “originality,” “authenticity,” “design,” “style,” and “form” and, indeed, into ways of rethinking our conceptions of aesthetics and philosophy themselves.² They also remind readers of features of some Western artistic practices that are often underappreciated or overlooked, such as the importance of working with and responding to material for artistic creativity, traditions that emphasize the impermanence of performance as opposed to recording, and the folk aesthetics of imperfection and insufficiency found (albeit in highly modernized, sometimes deliberate, and perhaps affected form) in musical styles like lo-fi. This issue, then, seeks to treat Japanese aesthetics in a cosmopolitan fashion, in dialogue with and in (occasionally unexpected) relation to other aesthetic traditions.³

By applying this cosmopolitan lens, this collection of essays provokes the reader to question how one should understand “Japanese aesthetics,” and how one should situate it with respect to other traditions and its own subject

matter. These essays are primarily philosophical essays and not essays in art history or the history of ideas. So how their authors understand the trajectories of influence on traditional Japanese aesthetic practices, including the influence of important Eastern wisdom traditions like Zen Buddhism and Shinto and other cultural traditions, whether Chinese, Indian, or European, is often left implicit or less central to the claims in these essays than may be the preference of scholars in these other disciplines. To leave them implicit or on the periphery is not, however, to deny these religious, cultural, or intellectual influences, which of course are central, as a matter of historical fact, to whatever may be called “Japanese aesthetics.”⁴

The focus of the essays, as philosophical essays, is more on the second of the two terms, namely, *aesthetics*. Here the content is more open-ended. What these essays reveal is a conception of aesthetics that is broad along two dimensions. The first concerns the kinds of practices, objects, and subjects that are aesthetic. The second concerns the role that these practices, objects, and subjects play in the whole of interconnected existence.

As regards the first dimension, the essays in this issue cover not only the traditional set of Japanese artistic practices like *Noh* theater, *haiku* poetry, and *ikebana* floral arrangement, but also contemporary Japanese cinema, photography, and landscape architecture. Other discussed items, recognized for giving rise to genuine aesthetic experiences in the Japanese tradition, include design of contemporary consumer products and “various ingredients of everyday life,” from “artifacts of daily use” and “chores around the house” to “interactions with other people” and “quotidian activities such as eating, walking, and bathing.”⁵ These essays thus widen the scope of aesthetics, following Yuriko Saito, in “raising theoretical issues that have not received adequate attention from the prevailing mainstream Western aesthetics,” and “illuminating and challenging the prevailing aesthetics discourse in contemporary Western philosophy.”⁶

As regards the second dimension, while some essays focus on the human aspects of existence, or at least *begin* from that human perspective, others aim to pull us away from those (simply) human concerns toward larger and more capacious perspectives.⁷ The essays also reveal a wide variety of possible starting points for philosophical investigation into Japanese aesthetics. While some begin from particular works, forms, or styles, others take their opening from particular religious traditions, artistic exemplars, or philosophical figures, and others still from a comparative standpoint.⁸

Yet among all this breadth and diversity, there are some recurring related themes. The first is an emphasis on ongoing aesthetic process and activity, in contrast to a focus on the completed artistic product. Aesthetic analysis in the Japanese tradition treats the “finished” artwork as part of a wider constellation of activities, practices, and relationships. Meaning, relevance, and significance inhere primarily in those activities, practices, and relationships, and not only in the work itself. To understand the work involves seeing how it is situated in and interactive with that wider constellation. This first theme is epistemological or methodological in the sense that it describes how artistic subjects of all kinds (whether artists and practitioners, or readers, viewers, listeners, audiences, and “consumers” more broadly) approach aesthetic objects of all kinds (treating “objects,” as suggested earlier, in very broad terms).

Alongside this first, epistemological or methodological, theme sits a second, metaphysical, theme, one of relationality and holistic contextualism. Japanese aesthetics treats objects (like artworks) not as standing by themselves, like the New Criticism thought of the work, but as in constant and changing relations with a larger whole.⁹ Artworks and other art “objects” (here in quotation marks because, on this view, they are not merely objects but also enact their own agency as subjects) themselves *participate actively* in that larger whole and are not just representations or reflections of it. As David E. Cooper argues, the ink painting is not an attempt from a conventional human standpoint “outside nature” to represent nature, but is itself part of nature; the music of the *shakuhachi* flute is not an imitation of the sounds of nature, but partakes in the entire soundscape. The changes to the tea instruments through use are not to be “remedied” in an attempt to recapture their original “undamaged” luster, but are developments in the aesthetic character of those objects. Artists and those who experience art are also part of this larger whole in which the artwork participates, and they are themselves transformed by that participation. This holism resists a variety of common dualisms such as those between culture and nature, subject and object, representer and represented, the animate and the inanimate, the cognitive and the affective, the aesthetic and the moral. It is reflected in the multimodal nature of many Japanese artforms, which—unlike, for instance, the influential modernism of someone like Clement Greenberg, who wants to isolate a “pure” form specific to each artistic medium—emphasize and celebrate multiple forms of detailed and deep sensory engagement, not only through sight and sound, but also through touch and taste and smell.¹⁰

The third theme that the authors in this issue explore concerns subject matter and content. In contrast to aesthetic traditions that focus on the timeless, the permanent, the absolute, the complete, Japanese aesthetics values the ephemeral, the impermanent, the changing, the incomplete. Celebrating what Saito calls “everyday aesthetics,” an “aesthetics of the familiar,” and an “aesthetics of imperfection and insufficiency,” Japanese aesthetics begins with a certain humility in the acceptance that “all things must pass.”¹¹ The physical and spiritual aspects of a work or practice change over time. Arranging

flowers in the spring is different from arranging flowers in the winter; to achieve a similar effect with an arrangement in a particular space requires a different arrangement than in another space. That the flowers wither and die is part of the practice and the art, and is not a falling away from the arrangement’s initial beauty or significance. In a similar vein, in contrast to modern aesthetic traditions that emphasize originality and creative, uncontrolled genius set above the constraints of nature and tradition, Japanese aesthetics situates the development and exercise of those creative capacities both within traditions that form and cultivate skills and capacities for aesthetic appreciation and within a larger metaphysical framework that does not isolate creativity or aesthetic power in the artist, but extends them to the everyday.

The connections among these three themes should be readily apparent. Our aesthetic approach toward artistic practices and objects is relational and holistic because the aesthetic properties inhere in those relations and in the wider whole in which the art object or the art practice is located. Since that whole is not metaphysically complete or unchanging, or developing in Hegelian fashion toward such a completed state, but is rather in flux and contingent, to value that whole appropriately is to value it precisely as impermanent, imperfect, and changing. Artforms are a deeply appropriate way of coming to be in touch with and to understand this changing whole, precisely because physical objects fade and chip, decay and wither, and because the repeated performance of a series of actions is temporally bound and influenced by context and circumstance. Art is art not because it *captures* timeless essence, but because it is a (human-directed and human-crafted) part of changing nature, a part that can open us up to thinking of the whole from different and larger points of view.

These essays thus not only treat “Japanese” as functioning to modify “aesthetics,” but also reflect how “aesthetics” modifies—or, better, is a significant part of—“Japanese.” They illustrate, of course in incomplete, exceptionable, and limited ways, how certain aesthetic sensibilities are central to forms of Japanese culture. It is in this space that we can locate one final, relevant theme: the relation between the “aesthetic” and the “moral,” conceived broadly as regarding how to live and act. (These terms are placed in quotation marks to signal that their meaning is to be derived from examination of the relevant practices and forms, and not determined beforehand.) Many of the essays in this issue stress the interrelatedness of these two terms in different dimensions: how to act well involves forms of sensible appreciation, how aesthetic experience can develop moral virtues and moral capacities, how living well in the fullest sense of that phrase is a kind of human flourishing practiced in and through aesthetic forms, and how one can take as a moral exemplar not only other humans but also nature as it is embodied in particular art objects and art forms.¹²

It would be remiss not to say a few words about the larger moral and spiritual concerns raised by these investigations into Japanese aesthetics. Several of the essays in this issue argue that the ways of thinking characteristic of Japanese aesthetics can be brought to bear on contemporary pressing issues.¹³ Aesthetic ways of seeing that are from

a broader-than-human perspective, for instance, may help us in thinking through our current environmental crises. Learning to feel more keenly through aesthetic practices the affective power that things (both animate and inanimate, if the former can be called “things”) have may enlarge our sympathy with and tolerance for other human beings. Appreciating what, from a different perspective, may be seen as imperfections or insufficiencies, and fostering a deeper connection with objects through those imperfections or insufficiencies, may be a small corrective to the rampant consumerism of our time and the capitalist machine that it feeds.

It should go without saying that these are possibilities not found only in Japanese aesthetics. Moreover, those possibilities do not depend on treating that aesthetics as part of the Japanese Other as opposed to “Western,” as if the rapacities of capitalism and the attendant barbarities of colonialism, imperialism, racism, and unbridled nationalism were not also to be found in the history of the eastern half of the world and in Japanese history in particular, or as if it fell to the “Orient” to be the corrective or supplement to Europe. Nonetheless, those possibilities are to be found in these Japanese traditions and practices. In a cosmopolitan spirit, we ought to welcome such philosophical and social possibilities wherever they may be found, to bring them into conversation with one another, and thus to illuminate and, perhaps, to begin to tackle the complex issues that all humans, and the world as a larger more-than-human whole, face.

We have decided to organize the contributions to this issue thematically. This organizing principle is not intended to draw clear-cut distinctions or dividing lines between the themes. Rather, it is intended to provide different ways of approaching the material and to provoke conversations among these wonderful essays that will illuminate each of them in the light of the others. The issue contains five sections. The first three deal with general dimensions of the subject matter: the *Spiritual*, *Moral*, and *Metaphysical Dimensions of Japanese Aesthetics*. The fourth section, entitled *Japanese Artworks and Artforms: Philosophical Explorations*, contains some more explorations of particular artworks and/or artforms. The fifth and final section, entitled *Intercultural Encounters and Metaphilosophical Concerns*, delves into some aspects of the relationship between Japanese aesthetics and other traditions, including the Western canon and early Indian Buddhism, and some of the metaphilosophical issues of intercultural exchange and the defining features of Japanese aesthetics.

SPIRITUAL DIMENSIONS OF JAPANESE AESTHETICS

The first section contains four essays dealing with the spiritual aspects of Japanese aesthetics. We construe “spiritual” here broadly, to refer to how human beings find themselves in the world, and in relation to one another and to themselves. The spiritual in this amplified sense encompasses both what we moderns would now call the “religious” and what has long been called the “philosophical.” It thus sets a direction and acts as a kind of methodological ground for the essays to follow.

John C. Maraldo and Mary Jo Maraldo propose that the traditional Japanese *dō*, or “pathway arts,” embody a principle of “ante-originality.” In contrast to the prevalent Western value of originality, especially the idea that it is through being *original* that one is authentic, or true to oneself (and oneself as *distinct from others*), the Maraldos argue that training in a pathway art requires subsuming oneself to traditional forms of the art, modeling oneself on exemplars, and thereby learning—and, in the end, appropriating and embodying—a form of activity, the perfection of which consists in the performance of a certain know-how that allows one to adapt that tradition to the concrete circumstances and contingencies that one faces. Following the rules, seeing how those rules are embodied by one’s masters, and modeling the masters is a means of developing and deploying an interconnected set of capacities that, in the end, enable a form of freedom.

David E. Cooper explores what it may mean for aesthetic practices to enable “unity with nature.” Such claims, if taken literally, are either banal or false. Cooper argues, through an analysis of traditional Japanese *hōgaku* music and its modernist appropriators, that such claims ought to be understood, with the early Wittgenstein, not literally as “saying” that humans are identical with nature in its banal or false senses, but as “showing” or expressing a kind of practical and sympathetic intimacy with, of receptivity and responsiveness to, nature. That expression of receptivity and responsiveness is premised on, Cooper suggests, an understanding of nature as continuous with those practices themselves. It is because of that continuity that the practices can direct our attention to particular aspects of nature. As Cooper puts it, through “jamming” with nature (as opposed to, say, observing it from more of a distance), one comes to a deeper appreciation of nature and sees it not as mere material, something just there, but as the larger whole of which we are a part and which can act as teacher and guide to us.

Raquel Bouso begins her paper with an analysis of the notion of playful and dynamic “freedom from attachment” that she draws from Hisamatsu Shin’ichi’s modernist conception of the defining features of Zen art. She argues that this notion shows how, in Zen-influenced artistic and aesthetic experiences, humor or irony implies at the same time a serious engagement with the deepest questions of human life. She contends that the phrase can be appropriately used to describe not only the orientations of Zen art and Zen-inspired art, but also other artistic trends exemplifying playful and ironic gestures (see, for instance, Banksy’s work). These modernist readings of the essentially “spiritual” nature of Zen art should not be dismissed, Bouso submits, just because, according to some critics, such readings underestimate or overlook the material, political, and historical conditions in which Zen art developed, and thereby reinforce the essentialist ideology that nourished Japanese nationalism and imperialism. Thus, in the face of criticisms directed at Hisamatsu’s characterization of Zen aesthetics as elitism (one can only appreciate Zen art if one has experienced enlightenment) or essentialism (the uniqueness of Zen art in expressing certain spiritual values), Bouso attempts to understand his interpretation within his project of reviving Zen and, on a broader level, to recognize

what may be philosophically useful in these aesthetic categories beyond the context in which they originated.

Peter L. Doebler gives us two essays. The first addresses issues at the intersection of aesthetics and spirituality, whereas the second addresses issues at the intersection of ethics and aesthetics. Doebler's first essay, "The Enlightenment of Things: Living with Everyday Objects," examines the influence of Buddhist traditions on the Marie Kondo phenomenon. What is common to these traditions, he argues, is the convergence of art, ethics, and metaphysics in the idea that non-sentient things have a life of their own. In particular, he reads Kondo through the literary tradition of *tsukumogami*, tools that obtain spirits through repeated use. Doebler conjoins this tradition with a reading of Ishiuchi Miyako's photographic series focusing on the continued lives of the ordinary objects that the dead leave behind. Doebler suggests that in Kondo and in Miyako, as in the background traditions in light of which he interprets them, we can find an aesthetics of the everyday. This aesthetics is potentially transformative for our relations with ordinary objects.

MORAL DIMENSIONS OF JAPANESE AESTHETICS

The four essays in this section consider how Japanese aesthetic concepts and notions may support moral change and moral improvement. The term "moral" in these essays ought to be taken in a fairly wide sense, extending beyond morally right actions to the whole person, including habits, sensibilities, and ways of thinking and feeling.

Jesús Ilundáin-Agurruza examines the traditional Japanese *dō* artforms in light of the practical and soteriological forms of flourishing they exemplify. People engaged in the practice of such arts, argues Ilundáin-Agurruza, holistically develop an interconnected set of cognitive, aesthetic, affective, and moral skills that manifest, in the particular, in virtuosic performances and, more generally, in a normative way of life in which the ongoing instantiation of the way is what is of value. Ilundáin-Agurruza uses this claim to illustrate aspects of the central Zen concepts: *hōben*, *wabi*, *yūgen*, *mushin*, and *shugyō*. His essay may usefully be read in conjunction with John C. Maraldo and Mary Jo Maraldo's essay from the first section.

Yuriko Saito describes how certain features of an "other-regarding" Japanese sensibility, one that is simultaneously aesthetic and moral, inform contemporary Japanese design. The demand on the artist is to withdraw and empty themselves in order to listen to the others involved in the artistic activity. "Others" here include not only the recipients of and other participants in the artistic practice, but also the material and subject matter of the work. Saito traces this sensibility, which predates the introduction of Zen to Japan in the thirteenth century, back through various Japanese artistic traditions, and argues that we can find it in the design of contemporary consumer products. Such a sensibility asks us to approach both ordinary consumer objects and "high" objects of design (like buildings) differently than we currently do, in a humbler spirit of care. Such an ethics of care, she suggests in closing, may resist some of the more troubling consumerist, fast-fashion, and environmentally damaging aspects of contemporary capitalist culture.

Johnathan Flowers examines Motoori Norinaga's argument that cultivating *mono no aware* through experiencing and responding to art can serve as a means of fostering more compassionate and enriched social relations, both through interpersonal relations and through humane governance. Flowers argues that responding to art develops one's general capacity to be appropriately moved in one's heart (or *kokoro*) by the *aware*, or the affective power, of things, which can lead to a greater understanding of the worlds that others inhabit. Central to Flowers's interpretation is the claim that *mono no aware* is not simply an intuitive or felt appropriate sensibility, but also one richly laden with cognition. Individuals with *mono no aware* are aware (in the English meaning) of the *aware* of things, and this intentional awareness is necessary for understanding the worlds of others.

This section ends with the second essay by Doebler, "Saving Beauty: Art Museums, Empathy, and Impermanence." Doebler extends recent literature on the possible role of museums in cultivating ethical capacities in visitors as a means of fostering positive personal and social change. Drawing on an analysis of Tsukioka Yoshitoshi's woodblock print series *One Hundred Aspects of the Moon*, Doebler argues that the key theme of impermanence in Japanese aesthetics can serve as a means of cultivating empathy. Key themes in the Japanese aesthetic tradition can thus enhance the ethical role of museums in building community and combating indifference.

METAPHYSICAL DIMENSIONS OF JAPANESE AESTHETICS

The third section focuses more strictly on the metaphysical themes that have been featured in the previous essays.

Leah Kalmanson explores the relationship between Japanese aesthetics and a *ki*-based metaphysics. She makes two major claims in her essay. The first is that the predominant Zen-based focus in theorizing Japanese aesthetics may be usefully complemented with a *ki*-based framework. Drawing on Chinese Song-dynasty influences, such a framework emphasizes metaphysical themes of activity, permeability, interaction, and harmony. The second is that this *ki*-based framework provides resources for addressing certain issues faced by contemporary Western process philosophies and new materialisms that situate themselves against dominant Western dualisms of mind and matter, of subject and object. In this way, Kalmanson looks to begin a non-Eurocentric conversation with those traditions of thought.

Mayuko Uehara provides an interpretation of part of Kuki Shūzō's views of contingency, which Kuki articulates and defends in his writings on aesthetics. Contingency, for Kuki, comprises everything in the work of art that is not determined by artistic intentions. Uehara focuses, in particular, on what Kuki calls "the human existentiality of the artist." How is it that the contingent matter of the artwork, say, the lump of clay that is to become the earthenware dish, takes the form that it (in the end) does? One answer is the artist's intentions. The artist sees the work latent in the material, as Michelangelo is said to have

seen David in a block of marble and then chipped away all extraneous matter.¹⁴ This process of creation, however, cannot be captured in the form of law; no matter how firm the intentions of the artist, there are always surprises, deviations, and incongruencies. So, for Kuki, “the human existentiality of the artist” must come into play—the latent intuition by which the artist works with the contingencies of the material and the circumstances to *co-create* with nature the end result. Artistic intentions cannot fully determine the work; there is always a play between those intentions and contingency.

Carol S. Gould also looks at Kuki’s writings, this time on his analysis of the Edo-era “floating world” concept of *iki*. Gould argues that *iki* is best understood as an aesthetic property of persons, an ontologically complex property specific to Japanese culture, which comprises fundamentally a phenomenological structure of attitudes and dispositions that embodies a way of experiencing the world and responding to that lived experience. For Gould, *iki* as an aesthetic property of persons is not an aesthetic virtue or vice—a state of character—but rather a piece of one’s *personality*, like charisma or glamour, that both informs how one responds aesthetically to the world and is responded to aesthetically by others. Personality traits, unlike character traits, cannot be deliberately cultivated. They are rather *developed* through how one lives one’s situation. *Iki*, on Gould’s analysis, is an erotic aesthetic property of persons, one based on fostering desire, deferring its fulfillment and thereby perpetuating it, and achieving a certain lightness and insouciance of being through resigning oneself to that endless deferral of desire. *Iki*, Gould argues in closing through reference to Donald Keene, is a concept that is quintessentially Japanese, in part because it exemplifies key features of Japanese aesthetics. But, Gould wonders, in a world where cultures are not singular, separate, or internally unified, what of the potentials for cross-cultural fertilizations, and what are the possibilities for *iki* in such a world?

JAPANESE ARTWORKS AND ARTFORMS: PHILOSOPHICAL EXPLORATIONS

The five essays in this section take a more particularist attitude toward Japanese aesthetics by studying its features as they manifest in particular artworks and/or artforms.

Like Doeblner, Mara Miller also contributes two essays to this issue. Her first, “The Atomic Bombings in Anime: How Aesthetics Makes Actual Historic Terror Tolerable to Children (A Prolegomenon to Existential Aesthetics),” examines how Japanese anime—particularly the two films *Barefoot Gen* and *Grave of the Fireflies*—draws on features of traditional Japanese aesthetics to convey the horror of the atomic bombs dropped on Japan at the end of World War II in a manner that both engages the viewer (adults and children alike) and does not negate that horror or the attendant agony through psychical distance or through a false moral transcendence (“we will never follow in that path”). Those traditional aesthetic features are mobilized to promote ethical engagement with the horror and the agony through an empathetic identification not only with the characters but also with specific and ordinary experiential features

of their situation in each moment, in a kind of presentist awareness of the *aware* of those moments.

Miller’s second essay, “The Aesthetics and Ethics of Suicide in Japanese Literature and Film,” examines the changing depictions of taking one’s own life voluntarily and intentionally in Japanese literature and film. She notices a recent and radical turn in contemporary postmodern Japanese literature from traditional, idealized, and aestheticized ways of depicting suicide as honorable to portraying it as horrible or reprehensible. Miller finds in that turn a feminist challenge to masculinist and imperialist conceptions of power, authority, and honor, which is reflected at the level of aesthetic form in a refusal to romanticize, idealize, or glorify suicide by beautifying or aestheticizing it and in a commitment to keep unflinchingly in view the aftereffects of the event.

Jason M. Wirth analyzes Mizoguchi Kenji’s well-known film *Sanshō Dayū* as an exercise in Buddhist filmmaking that aims to evoke a Buddhist compassionate sensibility in its viewers. For Wirth, this sensibility is not only or even primarily evoked by the content of the film, as can be seen through a comparison with the short story on which it is based. Rather, it is a matter of cinematic form: *how* that sensibility is expressed visually in the film and calls to the viewer for uptake. Wirth suggests that this compassionate sensibility has political and anti-oppressive significance. But it—and the way it is expressed visually in *Sanshō Dayū*—operates at a level prior to the overtly political, to what Hannah Arendt called the “public.”¹⁵ It does not guarantee the right kind of politics; indeed, one can overtly express its sentiments and not feel the core of the sensibility. In this sense, claims Wirth, the sensibility is fundamentally religious, a matter of how we fundamentally exist in and respond to the world.

Rudi Capra provides us with a phenomenology of sand. Sand, for Capra, is characterized by *elusiveness* and *neutrality*. It is a medium that allows for other things to be expressed through and in it, for associations to form and re-form, for, finally, the impermanence and significance of things to be given voice. This means of indirect expressiveness is found, Capra argues, in the great *karesansui* or dry gardens in certain temples located in Kyoto, in the use of white sand as an amorphous background in miniature *bonseki* landscapes, and in the liminality and temporality that sand expresses visually in Hiroshi Teshigahara’s film *Woman in the Dunes*.

Julianne N. Chung’s essay is usefully read against this phenomenological analysis of sand. It draws on Ian James Kidd’s claims that “[c]ertain traditions . . . incorporate a cosmic mode of emulation, where the virtues are manifestations, in human form, of qualities or aspects of the ground or source of the world,” and that “there are forms of emulation where the ultimate model for the good or flourishing life as manifested by the exemplar is nothing human.”¹⁶ If these claims hold, then ethical emulation need not take as its object human beings who lead or have led a good life, but we can also take non-human entities as exemplars of virtue. While Kidd focuses on the *Zhuangzi* and on cosmic emulation of “qualities or

aspects of the ground or source of the world”—in short, the *Dao*—Chung focuses instead on cosmic emulation of *karesansui*. She argues that *karesansui* gardens exemplify “nothingness” or “emptiness,” qualities of the ground of being. In conceiving *karesansui* gardens to be exemplary in this way, we recognize that we, like all beings, are part of a larger whole and interdependent with all other beings. *Karesansui* gardens allow us to appreciate, in a sensible, direct, and unmediated fashion, this aspect of the world, rather than to apprehend it in the detached form of a belief. Chung suggests that this method of appreciating rather than believing may have consequences for how we think about emulation and exemplification more broadly.

INTERCULTURAL ENCOUNTERS AND METAPHILOSOPHICAL CONCERNS

This issue closes with some reflections on the relation between Japanese and non-Japanese aesthetics and the relation between Japanese aesthetics and larger thoughts concerning the philosophical enterprise.

Gerald Cipriani compares Nishida Kitarō and Jean-Luc Marion on the nature of beauty, particularly the resonances and dissonances between Nishida’s conception of *muga* and Marion’s conception of *phénomène*. There are historical connections between the two, both drawing on while distancing themselves from Kant and the Kantian tradition. Cipriani’s comparison is of interest not merely for these historical reasons, however. He hopes to gain from the comparison support for a more holistic conception of the relation of beauty, one that includes not only the perceiver and the beautiful object, but also the creative role of the artist and the situation of the beautiful object in a larger world. Beauty, Cipriani argues, is for Nishida and for Marion—whatever important differences there may be between the two—potentially transformative of the self and of one’s relation to others.

Steve Odin’s essay looks also at the historical trajectory of Nishida’s conception of *muga*. The essay expands on Odin’s previous work, which argues that Nishida was heavily influenced by Schopenhauer and, in particular, Schopenhauer’s appropriation of early Indian Buddhist themes. For Schopenhauer and for Nishida, beauty, and beautiful *art* in particular, is a symbol of and a means to the kind of liberation achieved through religious renunciation of this world. But, one might object, giving such a pride of place to art may run counter to trends in early Indian Buddhism that see art as a distraction from the divine, as drawing one’s attention back to the suffering and the attachments of this world. Odin argues that the artwork in the Ajanta caves in Maharashtra, India, along with associated writings and historical records, show that beauty has long been a Buddhist value. Nishida and Schopenhauer ought to be read as extending this line of thought and not simply as running a modernist rereading of the Buddhist tradition.

Adam Loughnane’s paper examines the conditions for intercultural philosophical discussion. He claims that some commitments of Japanese aesthetics have the potential to expand the Western conception of philosophy and important philosophical concepts. But this potential cannot be

fulfilled, Loughnane argues, unless Western philosophers are able to bracket certain of their deep commitments. Primary among those requiring bracketing is the idea that while art is a perfectly good *subject* of philosophical inquiry, it is not itself a way of *doing* philosophy. Seeing the artist as a philosopher (Loughnane’s case in point is Sesshū Tōyō) is a means for bracketing other deep metaphysical assumptions, like the idea that art is set apart from nature, that color and form are essential to art, and that art is the expression of a substantive self. Loughnane does not argue, however, that Western philosophy ought simply to negate its commitments. Rather, there is a particular double bind faced by the philosopher who wants to engage in intercultural encounter. One can choose to remain within the methodological norms of one’s own tradition, thus rendering encounter impossible. Or one can reject those commitments, thereby opening oneself to cultural appropriation or a false neutrality. Loughnane suggests that precisely this double bind is a productive condition for intercultural philosophical encounter and ought not to be solved so much as engaged with.

Thomas P. Kasulis also begins with this question of intercultural encounter. He proposes six deep and linked differences between the predominant tendencies of Western philosophical aesthetic traditions and those of Japanese traditions, drawing on ink wash paintings and poetry as media studies. Those differences concern the source of creativity, the role of the audience, the boundaries of the artwork, and the relation between artistic practices and the personal qualities they develop on the one hand, and the kind of epistemology that, at least some may think, finds its culmination in philosophy on the other. These are, Kasulis argues, deep *metaphysical* differences that ramify out into wider cultural differences on a number of levels and in a number of respects. But wherever one, in the end, locates these differences, Kasulis’s articulation of them invites reflection on one’s own philosophical commitments and philosophical methods, reflection that cannot but be beneficial for one’s own philosophical practice.

The breadth of the contributions to this issue indicates the range and the fertility of Japanese aesthetic traditions and concepts. The editors hope the work here will spur further philosophical consideration of these ideas, a consideration that they fully deserve.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank Nhi Huynh, Vivian Nguyen, Brent Robbins, Yuriko Saito, and Caylee Weintraub for their helpful comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this introduction. Our gratitude to all the contributors to this issue—especially Raquel Bouso, Julianne N. Chung, Peter L. Doebler, Carol S. Gould, Thomas P. Kasulis, Adam Loughnane, John C. Maraldo, and Mary Jo Maraldo—for helping us present their work clearly and accurately. Vivian, Brent, and Caylee are currently serving as our editorial assistants, and we are grateful for their outstanding contributions to the editing of this issue. Brent’s work is underwritten by the Honors College of Florida Gulf Coast University, where he is a rising senior, and we would like to thank the FGCU Honors College, especially Dean Clay Motley, for their generous support. Lastly, tremendous thanks to Erin Shepherd, APA Publications and Communications Coordinator, for her extraordinary patience and understanding during the preparation of this issue.

NOTES

1. Such studies include but are not limited to the following: Nancy G. Hume, ed., *Japanese Aesthetics and Culture: A Reader* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995); Michael F. Marra, trans. and ed., *A History of Modern Japanese Aesthetics* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001); Michael F. Marra, ed., *Japanese Hermeneutics: Current Debates on Aesthetics and Interpretation* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002); Michele Marra, trans. and ed., *Modern Japanese Aesthetics: A Reader* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999); and A. Minh Nguyen, ed., *New Essays in Japanese Aesthetics* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018). While *New Essays in Japanese Aesthetics* presents multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives on Japanese aesthetics, the essays in this issue are primarily philosophical essays. Bibliographic information about other notable works in the field, both historical and recent, can be found in "Selected Bibliography," in *New Essays in Japanese Aesthetics*, ed. A. Minh Nguyen, 413–23.
2. For the latter, see Thomas P. Kasulis's and Adam Loughnane's contributions to this issue.
3. For more on cosmopolitanism, see Yarran Hominh and A. Minh Nguyen, "Cosmopolitanism, Creolization, and Non-Exceptionalist Buddhist Modernisms: On Evan Thompson's *Why I Am Not a Buddhist*," *Comparative Philosophy: An International Journal of Constructive Engagement* 13, no. 1 (2022): 139–59, <https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/comparativephilosophy/vol13/iss1/10/>.
4. For work on these issues of influence in philosophy, see Thomas P. Kasulis, *Engaging Japanese Philosophy: A Short History* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018); Michael F. Marra, trans. and ed., *A History of Modern Japanese Aesthetics* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001). For recent intellectual histories of major religious Japanese traditions, see Richard M. Jaffe, *Seeking Śākyamuni: South Asia in the Formation of Modern Japanese Buddhism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019); James McMullen, *The Worship of Confucius in Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020); Inoue Nobutaka, ed., *Shinto: A Short History*, trans. Mark Teeuwen and John Breen (London: Routledge, 2003).
5. Yuriko Saito, "Aesthetics of the Everyday," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2021 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta, accessed April 19, 2022, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2021/entries/aesthetics-of-everyday/>.
6. Saito, "Aesthetics of the Everyday." It is worth noting that Saito views this recent development of "including objects, events, and activities that constitute people's daily life," which have not been included in the realm of art in the West at least until recently, as "restoring the scope of aesthetics rather than opening a new arena" (emphasis in original).
7. For the first, human-focused category, see the essays by Jesús Ilundáin-Agurruza, Johnathan Flowers, Carol S. Gould, and Jason M. Wirth. For the second category, see those by David E. Cooper, Yuriko Saito, Leah Kalmanson, Julianne N. Chung, and Thomas P. Kasulis.
8. The fourth group of essays, in the section entitled "Japanese Artworks and Artforms: Philosophical Explorations," begins from particular works, forms, or styles, as do the essays by John C. Maraldo and Mary Jo Maraldo and Carol S. Gould. The influence of Chinese and Indian religious traditions is examined in the contributions by Peter L. Doebler, Leah Kalmanson, Jason M. Wirth, and Steve Odin. The fifth and final group of essays, in the section entitled "Intercultural Encounters and Metaphilosophical Concerns," considers Japanese aesthetics from a comparative standpoint.
9. The New Criticism was a (largely North American) formalist movement in literary theory and aesthetics in the middle decades of the twentieth century. For the New Critics, the artwork was a standalone object that could be studied on its own terms, independently of extrinsic factors like historical context, authorial intention, morality, and audience response. See John Crowe Ransom, *The New Criticism* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1941) for the original use of the term; also Cleanth Brooks, "The New Criticism," *The Sewanee Review* 87, no. 4 (1979): 592–607 for a later reassessment. For an overview of the New Criticism and its deconstructionist critics, see Miranda B. Hickman and John D. McIntyre, eds., *Rereading the New Criticism* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2012).
10. This doctrine of Greenberg's is known as *medium specificity*; see Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon," *Partisan Review* 7, no. 4 (1940): 296–310. As the title of that essay indicates (rather obliquely), Greenberg traces this doctrine back to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's 1766 essay *Laocoon*, where Lessing makes a similar claim to distinguish painting and poetry in virtue of what those media are capable of representing. Claims to medium specificity for particular media are widespread: for instance, André Bazin for cinema, John Szarkowski and Susan Sontag for photography, and Arthur Schopenhauer for music. See also Noël Carroll, "Medium Specificity Arguments and Self-Consciously Invented Arts: Film, Video, and Photography," *Millennium Film Journal*, nos. 14–15 (1984–1985): 127–53.
11. Yuriko Saito, *Aesthetics of the Familiar: Everyday Life and World-Making* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); *Everyday Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); "The Japanese Aesthetics of Imperfection and Insufficiency," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55, no. 4 (1997): 377–85.
12. See the contributions to this issue by Jesús Ilundáin-Agurruza, Yuriko Saito, Peter L. Doebler, Johnathan Flowers, Mara Miller, Jason M. Wirth, and Julianne N. Chung.
13. See, for instance, the essays by Yuriko Saito, Johnathan Flowers, Leah Kalmanson, Jason M. Wirth, and Adam Loughnane in this issue.
14. Bob Considine, "Galileo Wouldn't Have Believed In," *Boston Herald American*, November 22, 1974, 18; Mildred S. Fenner, "Editor's Notebook," *Journal of the National Education Association* 53, no. 6 (1964).
15. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), especially Chapter II, "The Public and the Private Realm." See also Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, rev. ed. (New York: Viking, 1964).
16. Ian James Kidd, "'Following the Way of Heaven': Exemplarism, Emulation, and Daoism," *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 6, no. 1 (2020): 1.

I. SPIRITUAL DIMENSIONS OF JAPANESE AESTHETICS

Ante-Originality in Japanese Pathway Arts

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ABSTRACT

Traditional Japanese pathway arts emphasize ways of modeling exemplars more than creating an independent, original work. The artist in the making spends years incorporating the knowledge and skills of teachers before she introduces variations and innovations. Masters, as well as beginners, continue to embody forms that are not abstract but rather compliant with one's concrete situation. Authenticity in these traditions means appropriating a pliable model that has been refined through the practice of numerous predecessors. Emphasis is placed on perfecting an activity rather than producing a unique artifact. In contrast to prevalent notions of originality in art, the relevant notion might be called "ante-originality," for it is embodied in a model that precedes and takes precedence over the production of original works. We illustrate this

notion in the practice of floral arrangement, tea ceremony, and calligraphy—arts that among others are often called “pathways” (*dō* 道), as in *kadō* (花道), the Way of Flowers, or *shodō* (書道), the Way of Writing. Ante-originality is not unique to artistic practice in Japan, nor is it characteristic of all Japanese arts, but its prevalence there lets us better notice its working elsewhere.

In his 1935 essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin famously wrote that “the presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity.”¹ This evaluation of the work of art is undermined by one common feature of traditional Japanese aesthetics: the esteem placed on modeling the work of a teacher who herself has learned by emulating the work and actions of a model master. While other aesthetic traditions have also recognized the educational value of reproducing the styles and techniques of exemplary artists, several Japanese traditional arts prioritize the practice of modeling oneself and one’s work after exemplars. Instead of striving from the start to become independent and original, the artist-in-the-making spends years incorporating the awareness and skills of teachers before she introduces variations and innovations. Masters, as well as beginners, continue to embody forms that are not abstract but rather compliant with one’s concrete situation. Authenticity in these traditions means appropriating a pliable model that has been refined through the practice of numerous predecessors. Emphasis is placed on perfecting an activity rather than producing a unique artifact. In contrast to prevalent notions of originality in art, the relevant notion might be called “ante-originality,” for it is embodied in a model that precedes and takes precedence over the production of original works. We will illustrate this notion in the practice of floral arrangement, tea ceremony, and calligraphy—arts that among others are often called “pathways” (*dō* 道), as in *kadō* (花道), the Way of Flowers, or *shodō* (書道), the Way of Writing. Ante-originality is not unique to artistic practice in Japan, nor characteristic of all Japanese arts, but its prevalence there lets us better notice its working elsewhere.

Since Japan is often described as a “copy culture,” it is important to distinguish the aesthetic practice of modeling from the practice of imitation noted throughout Japanese history. The ability of the Japanese to assimilate foreign technologies and artificially remake and automate the world around them is renowned.² A common stereotype (which itself is a kind of copy) depicts Japanese artists and engineers through the centuries as borrowing, copying, and sometimes improving upon products and methods of producing them. The notion of copying implies an original, but Japanese history reveals several modalities of originality and copying—from flawlessly tracing over a piece of Chinese writing and displaying it alongside the original, to adapting “quality control” in the production of automobiles and claiming it as Japan’s invention. Traditional “arts of citation,” including some calligraphy and poetic composition, “demonstrate the originality and creativity of the copy by identifying a process and particular persons by which the copy is made.”³ Copying can generate creativity

by transforming the character of the copier and employing new materials and techniques. Calligraphic artists as well as painters in Japan often apply a stamp or seal to their work to signify its temporal origin, but each successive owner of the work may add a seal to indicate a provenance that extends its caretaking over time. Poetic composition may cite a verse (without credit) and then build new verses upon it. In short, what is often simplistically differentiated as *original* and *copy* displays a wide variety of modes. But the arts that display ante-originality challenge that difference in all its modifications.

Imagine that an encounter with a Japanese floral arrangement has surprised and delighted you for its striking liveliness and way of configuring space. The space around it seems charged with electricity. You decide to begin formal instruction in *ikenobō*, the oldest school of *ikebana*, the art of displaying the momentary life of flowers.⁴ In your first lesson, you watch as your teacher lays out three or four flowers alongside five or so branches of different lengths and holds each branch up to notice its shape. She selects one to place in the pin holder in a vase or container with water, then the second, the third, and so on, trimming each in sequence and adding the flowers. Pausing to gaze at the composition, she may make small adjustments, trimming here and there or coaxing a branch or flower to curve a bit more or a bit less. Finally, she sits back to appreciate the composition and its space. All the while you have been sitting slightly behind her to notice how she holds and turns the materials as she examines them and executes each step. You take advantage of the opportunity to see her seeing.

After a few moments, she motions you to remove all items from the container and then to recreate the arrangement with the very same materials and vase. What you imagined to be a simple act of replacing the materials soon proves to be a challenging assignment: your branches somehow stand differently, the flowers seem a bit misplaced, and the arrangement looks a bit askew even to your beginner’s eyes. The teacher gracefully guides you through some adjustments that shape the arrangement closer to her model. She shows you how the branches display a shade (or *yin*) side and a sun (or *yang*) side in their natural growth, and how the arrangement forefronts their interaction with each other under a specific light source. She may clarify that this particular work exhibits the classical *shōka* style, with the tallest branch standing for *heaven*, the shortest branch representing the *earth*, and a mid-length branch standing in for the *human* as mediator in this mini-universe. The three elements with other “attendant” branches and the flowers together configure a space that now comes clearly into view. At the end of your lesson, you disassemble the arrangement, take it home, and put it back together again. And yet it is not exactly the same arrangement, for the shapes of materials have slightly changed, the vase or container is different, and the space in which it is placed is altogether distinct. After a few days, the flowers wither, following the natural way of all life forms, and the arrangement is gracefully discarded.

Over the following one or two years of weekly lessons, you repeat the pattern of watching the teacher compose

and recreating her composition. There is variation enough. Even within the same style, *shōka* for example, the materials change according to the seasons; the number, shape, and color of branches and flowers vary; new placement techniques are required; and, in every recreation of the teacher's model, your arrangement reflects your own level of active understanding. Further seasons of instruction gradually introduce other styles, each with its own guidelines, some styles simpler yet and some complex, some more regulated and others more free-form. Each lesson embodies your unique interaction with a manifold of factors. You learn to see cutting as shaping that expresses the temporal limits of every life form,⁵ and for each arrangement you trim branches and flowers anew. It might take four spring seasons to learn to cut an iris leaf adeptly. A repertoire of practical solutions builds into a body of experiential knowledge. That knowledge, in turn, lets you see plant life differently, noticing the stage of a bud's blossoming, for example, the sun and shade sides of leaves, the ways that different plants grow precisely and compliantly in response to their surroundings and sources of light and water.

At some point in your training, your teacher instructs you to do an alteration (*henka* 変化) on a formal style while still remaining within that style. The set of rules that specifies a particular style, more or less, has guided your interactions with the material, and the teacher's actions have modelled appropriate interactions. If you have internalized the guidelines, you need not "bend the rules" but can now realize them in your own way. You come to see your teacher's arrangements not as originals that you copied but rather as models to which you learned to conform. "Once you learn the form," she tells you, "the flowers (the arrangement) become(s) *your* flowers (*your* arrangement)." This sounds like a contradiction: if all you are doing is applying rules that are not of your own making, how could you be creating something that is uniquely your own? But the form circumscribed by a set of rules is not a fixed and transcendent Platonic form whose instantiations are inevitably only imperfect copies. It is rather a compliant form that comes to life only through creating actual, unrepeatable arrangements. The contour and color of the branches and flowers will differ on each occasion, so the material immediately at your disposal serves as a guideline as much as do the rules. The teacher, too, has been modeling a form that comes to life only in virtually infinite variety. Just as natural things never repeat themselves exactly, your precise actions in arranging as well as the materials you use are singular, one time only. Your experience has not been a matter of learning to "do your own thing" and make something original, as is often stressed in art education focused on originality.⁶ Your education in *ikebana* has been a matter of realizing a form over and over again by modeling the natural growth of plants as well as the actions of a teacher.

The Way of Tea (*sadō* 茶道) provides another example of a form that precedes the endeavor to produce something original. This example reveals further insight into the nature and origin of rules. Like *ikebana*, the art of tea produces no lasting artifact. As we shall see, however, that lack does not determine the form. In tea lessons one learns to model

a master's movements and skill, to pay close attention to hands and gestures, and to follow the precise order of minutely prescribed steps in preparing and serving the tea. For example, one learns precisely how to lift the lid from the little iron pot of heated water and where to place it, how to lower the bamboo dipper into the pot and gently pour water into the tea cup, then replace the dipper on its stand and slide one's fingers along its handle before lifting the hand for the next move. We need not recount all the details here to make the point. To the beginner or the unfamiliar observer, the activity may seem an excessively rule-bound procedure. True, the implements used and the occasion provide some variation: the charcoal used to heat water will burn differently each time, the utensils and tea bowls as well as the tea itself will vary, and the movements of the teacher and student will change to adapt to the situation. Despite these variations, however, the rules seem to take precedence. And they do—but only because they express a model that has previously emerged from extensive practice.

The tea master and philosopher Hisamatsu Shin'ichi explains their origin in relation to the performance. "The Way of Tea is unthinkable without conformity to the rules," he writes.⁷ However, the rules do not represent some external mandate. They have been formulated from the proficient practice of making and serving tea. Their origin lies in the refined activity of tea masters, practitioners who sought the most efficient and elegant ways of preparing and appreciating an everyday refreshment. The rules that guide the movements of the body, the handling of the implements, and the attention to everything and everyone present express the forethought that paves a way to harmonious interaction. Each object and each person are treated with respect. Respect also entails seeing how a rule ensures the simplicity, elegance, and appropriateness of an action. The beginner might respond, "Of course, this makes perfect sense!" And because one is following the most direct, simple, and appropriate way to accomplish something, unfettered by distractions and extraneous matters, one is becoming free. The interiorized rules take the truism that "creativity thrives under constraints" to the next level.

Hisamatsu makes a comment that, taken out of context, seems contradictory: "[A]utonomous and free activity becomes the rule, so that conformity with it occurs naturally. For this reason, the practitioner is forever breaking away from the rules to work freely."⁸ We once watched a student who had been taking lessons for about a year do "tea ceremony." Afterwards an old Japanese philosopher who had learned decades earlier prepared and served tea. It was obvious that the student had memorized the rules and was consciously, somewhat stiltedly, conforming to them. When the old person "did tea," the motions were fluid and the ambiance relaxed; the rules, it seemed, had been interiorized and forgotten. Perhaps this is what Hisamatsu meant by "breaking away . . . to work freely." By freeing up a fixed form to comply with ever-changing situations, the rules are kept alive and adaptive. One learns to keep the rules alive and make this art one's own by modeling a teacher's performance. Once again, a prior origin facilitates the "originality" of the artist.

The Way of Writing (*shodō* 書道) is another art form that exhibits ante-originality. It could also be called the Way of Drawing, for calligraphy in this guise is as much drawing as it is writing Sino-Japanese characters or kanji. The “Way of the Brush” in the broad sense includes both *shodō* and sumi-ink painting, both of which involve mastery by way of modeling. These arts differ from the ways of flowers and tea in that they leave a durable object in the world, the writing or the painting that can be displayed in a tokonoma, an exhibition, or a museum. Indeed, museums often collect Chinese, Korean, and Japanese calligraphic works as superlative examples of an individual artist’s originality. The Way of Writing would seem to exemplify a pattern of originality commonly celebrated in modern Western cultures. It developed from distinct kanji that are intelligible because of their repeated usage, but it re-presents them in unique and unrepeatably patterns. Various styles have developed over the centuries, from very distinct writing resembling uniform printing to very cursive and nearly illegible flows. The artist may adhere to a relatively fixed number and order of brush strokes within each style, but the few styles depicted in writing manuals are patterns generalized and simplified from historical works. The *avant-garde* “calligraphy” that developed in the second half of the twentieth century transgressed historical patterns both by creating abstract images and by displaying works in exhibitions. As long as the “writing” is of ink brushed on paper or another surface, whether based on kanji or not, it is considered *sho*. In both traditional and *avant-garde* calligraphy, an unwritten rule constrains the way the brush is used: the brush never retraces its path.

What, then, is the place of modeling in this art form that seems geared toward originality? Of course, the beginner first learns to prepare the sumi-ink and to brush kanji on the paper by closely watching the teacher’s actions and then trying things out herself. But mere imitation will get the student nowhere. Far too many contingencies arise for straightforward copying to work. One usually already knows how to form the kanji, what stroke order to use, and what “radicals” or often-repeated elements to write. But writing with brush and ink is entirely different from writing from rote memorization with a pen. It demands constant attention and fluid bodily movement; it engages the whole body-mind at once. At the same time, it demands a willingness to let go of one’s will and conform to the quirks of the material that may thwart one’s initial intentions. The speed of the flow of the ink from the tip of the brush guides the speed of the brush moving along the paper as the writer intends. The surface of the paper eases and sometimes impedes the flow. It can seem as if the whole world becomes located in that tip, but it is crucial to widen one’s vision and see the field of the entire paper too. One’s focus on a point of rolling ink expands to the space that takes shape with the developing contours of the inked image. The artwork is the space opened by the image as much as the inked image itself. The agency behind this art is the interaction of artist, brush, ink, and paper. The *avant-garde* calligrapher Morita Shiryū goes so far as to say that what is created is the artist as much as the artwork; the artist becomes the activity of writing.⁹

The model in Japanese calligraphic art is manifold. For the novice, the teacher who first demonstrates the method sketched above is a model. In the traditional practice called *rinsho* (臨書), artists take an example of classical Chinese calligraphy (or sometimes later Japanese calligraphy) as their model, which they copy as exactly as possible. (Often, the model itself is one of several classical copies of a work no longer extant). Yet artists who practice *rinsho* are already proficient writers of kanji, and what they are doing is more than producing a copy that a photographer could do better today. They are modeling their movements after the movements their eyes trace in the exemplary work. In a sense, then, it is the performance captured in the exemplary writing and visible to the trained eye that serves as the model. While calligraphers want to conceal the effort required to achieve technical mastery, they cherish the way that their work makes spontaneity visible. There is no hiding the dynamic movement that created the work, and trained viewers try to trace in their mind or with their hand the choreography of the brush across the surface. The work is a record of an “expressive gesture”—still another way to define what it is that the artist models.¹⁰

These prior (ante-original) models point the way to a “different kind of creativity.”¹¹ By way of modeling, the artist is neither reproducing the work of another nor attempting to express herself independently. Through patient practice, the expressive gestures become her own, and her personal style emerges. As in the case of *ikebana* and the Way of Tea, creativity does not reduce to producing an original or independent work, but appears in the unique performance of the art. Here the parallel between calligraphic art and the floral and tea arts becomes apparent: the outcome is ephemeral. Some calligraphers liken their artistry to the performance of a musical composition, “an activity where one *performs* forms of words envisaged in mind.”¹² The Western abstract painting that features nothing but the agency of the artist also served as a model for *avant-garde sho* artists (just as their work was a model for Western painters). It is remarkable, however, that *sho* artists often discarded a work as soon as it was created. They recognized that creativity truly lies in the performance, not in a durable “original” work to be hung on a wall. “Authenticity is not then directly linked to originality but to reproductive performance.”¹³ In other words, authenticity is achieved by reenacting an ante-original.

The notion of ante-originality reminds us that the practice of modeling is not something unique to Japan and is not its original invention. Nor is this practice characteristic of all Japanese art forms. We find it decisive for Japanese “pathway” (道) arts—those that present flowers, tea, and writing, for example—and for theatrical arts like *Noh*. In this limited sense, its presence in Japanese aesthetics is exemplary. However, precedents are apparent especially in classical aesthetic practices of China, the home of the pathway traditions. Outside those traditions, modeling was a practice of artists who trained in institutions in Europe as well as in Japan—the Renaissance art academies of Italy, for example, or the Kanō school of painting that thrived from the fifteenth century to the Meiji period (1868–1912).

What is more, subsequent interaction between modern Euro-American visual artists and Japanese calligraphers has erased imagined boundaries between “East” and “West.” For some seventy years now, *sho* artists and Euro-American abstract painters have engaged in a virtual dialogue of images that transformed methods and objectives on both sides.¹⁴ *Ikebana* and the Way of Tea, although adhering more closely to Japanese traditions, have become international practices, and the modern Sōgetsu School of *Ikebana*, with its use of plastic, plaster, and steel in its arrangements, arose partially in response to Western cultural influence in the twentieth century. There is no monopoly on creativity.

Modeling has, of course, been practiced in cultural forms in which originality has not been an issue. Practitioners of martial arts such as Taekwondo, aikido, and judo learn by modeling forms or *kata*. Apprentices in trades such as welding learn by modeling the techniques of experienced teachers and by conforming to the demands of the material. Learning a language requires its own modes of modeling. There is no premium placed on originality in these practices. But where an artwork is defined as “an original object that can be created only once,”¹⁵ the role of modeling is undervalued. In the facet of Japanese aesthetics reviewed here, the “artwork” designates the one-time performance as much as the object of temporal duration, and the performance uniquely models what we may call the ante-originality of the art.

NOTES

1. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 170. The original German emphasizes the haecceity of the object: “Das Hier und Jetzt des Originals macht den Begriff seiner Echtheit aus.” Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2010), 13.
2. Rupert Cox, introduction to *The Culture of Copying in Japan: Critical and Historical Perspectives*, ed. Rupert Cox (New York: Routledge, 2008), 4. Parts of this paragraph adapt descriptions from that introduction.
3. Cox, *The Culture of Copying in Japan*, 11.
4. This definition is inspired by a reading of Nishitani Keiji, “*Ikebana*,” in *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook*, ed. James W. Heisig, Thomas P. Kasulis, and John C. Maraldo, 1197–200 (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2011), which stresses the art’s attention to the impermanence of flowers and plants.
5. Ōhashi Ryōsuke, “Cutting,” in *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook*, 1192–94.
6. Theodore Adorno argues that, for all the originality we see in works of all eras of art, the focus on creativity or originality and on art detached from religious functions is a modern Western phenomenon. See Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (New York: Routledge, 1998); cited in Fuyubi Nakamura, “Creating or Performing Words? Observations on Contemporary Japanese Calligraphy,” in *Creativity and Cultural Improvisation*, ed. Elizabeth Hallam and Tim Ingold (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2007), 80.
7. Hisamatsu Shin’ichi, “The Way of Tea,” in *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook*, 1195.
8. Hisamatsu, “The Way of Tea,” 1195, translation adjusted.
9. Morita Shiryū, “Calligraphy,” in *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook*, 1200–202.
10. “Expressive gesture” is the anthropologist Tim Ingold’s phrase to describe musical performance, and adapted by Fuyubi Nakamura to describe calligraphic art in “Creating or Performing Words?” 85. That article presents insights we have appropriated here as well as many details about Japanese calligraphic art that we have

had to pass over. Our presentation differs from Nakamura’s by emphasizing modeling in distinction from “imitating.”

11. Nakamura, “Creating or Performing Words?” 80.
12. Hidai Nankoku (1912–1999), in his book co-edited with Uno Sesson, *Gendaisho [Contemporary Calligraphy]*, vol. 1 (Tokyo: Yūzankaku, 1983), 26; cited in Nakamura, “Creating or Performing Words?” 87.
13. Nakamura, “Creating or Performing Words?” 86.
14. For reflections on and further references to this interaction, as well as the issue of nationalism in Japanese *sho* art, see John C. Maraldo, “The Aesthetics of Emptiness in Japanese Calligraphy and Abstract Expressionism,” in *New Essays in Japanese Aesthetics*, ed. A. Minh Nguyen (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), 335–52.
15. Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 30; cited in Nakamura, “Creating or Performing Words?” 80. Contemporary digital art erases the distinction between original and copy more than Walter Benjamin imagined, and yet art buyers still seek authenticity: “[I]n a fast-growing market for ownership rights to digital art, ephemera and media called NFTs, or ‘nonfungible tokens,’ the buyers are usually not acquiring copyrights, trademarks or even the sole ownership of whatever it is they purchase. They’re buying bragging rights and the knowledge that their copy is the ‘authentic’ one.” “Why an Animated Flying Cat With a Pop-Tart Body Sold for Almost \$600,000,” *The New York Times*, February 22, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/22/business/nft-nba-top-shot-crypto.html>, accessed May 12, 2022.

“The Secret of Music” and Unity with Nature

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ABSTRACT

The title of this paper is taken from a short story by Tanizaki that implies the idea, very familiar in Japanese literature, that music—like other arts—inspires an intimacy with natural environments. Several features of Japanese music traditions encourage this idea, such as the common use of natural sounds in musical performance and enthusiasm for playing music in natural environments. The meaning, however, of hyperbolic claims about music enabling “oneness” or “fusion” with nature is opaque. In this paper, it is suggested that such claims are gestures towards expressing an understanding of our relation to nature that cannot, however, be propositionally articulated. It is an understanding or sense that “shows” itself, but cannot be “said.” The focus should therefore be on musical practices in which this understanding or sense shows itself. This proposal, it is argued, is consonant with the Zen Buddhist sensibilities to which much Japanese music and art bear witness. These include antipathy to “theory,” the thought that there is “nothing special” in enlightened understanding, and an aesthetic in which self-denial is preferred to self-expression.

TENKO’S LESSON

In Jun’ichirō Tanizaki’s short story, “A Portrait of Shunkin,” the eponymous music teacher describes how she has trained a nightingale, Tenko, to sing so as to evoke a secluded ravine, a rushing stream, and clouds of cherry blossoms, and to

make us “forget that we are still in the dusty city.”¹ Here, Shunkin comments, is “where art rivals nature. And here too is the secret of music.”² For some readers, it is the first of those comments that explains the point of the story: the great irony that artifice more effectively conveys aspects of nature than does nature itself. It is, however, on the second comment that I focus. Whatever else Tanizaki intends, he is claiming that it is of the essence of music—its “secret”—to enable certain experiences of nature. Many writers have rued the seeming impossibility, as Aaron Copland put it, of “stat[ing] in so many words what meaning [in music] is.”³ Tanizaki claims to have responded to this complaint, to have “penetrated [one of] of the mysteries of art.”⁴

NATURE, ART, AND MUSIC

In maintaining that there is an intimate relationship between music and nature, Tanizaki is continuing a long Japanese tradition in which perception of an affinity between nature and art has been prominent. “Plum blossoms and poetry, how wonderful together,” declared Ryōkan, while for Bashō it was “rice-planting songs from the heart of the country[side]” that constituted “culture’s beginning.”⁵ As D. T. Suzuki observed, without reference to “their intensive love of nature,” it is not possible to “understand the cultural life of the Japanese people.”⁶

The literature is replete, too, with remarks on the particular case of music and nature. For the central character in Natsume Sōseki’s novel, *Kusamakura*, music is, quite simply, “the voice of nature.”⁷ He is perhaps expressing the allegedly Japanese view that nature and music must be “appreciated together, for music is considered a subset of nature.”⁸ If that is right, then it is unsurprising to find writers, like the composer Toru Takemitsu, pleading that “music should be based on a profound relationship to nature.”⁹

These are large claims to make about art and nature, but familiar in the literature are even more ambitious ones to the effect that art enables the achievement of a unity or “oneness” between people and nature. Echoing Bashō’s remark that the poet must not only “follow nature,” but also be “one with nature,” the novelist Yasunari Kawabata, in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, exclaimed that the authentic poet “sinks into nature, becomes one with it.”¹⁰ Remarks like these on a unity with nature enabled by art and poetry are frequently accompanied by ones on the unreality or illusion of the distinction between subjects and objects, selves and the world. An aesthetic relationship to the natural world, writes one commentator, “necessarily destroys the subject-object dichotomy.”¹¹ In the same vein, Richard Pilgrim states that in practices ranging from poetry to the tea ceremony, the artist or participant “lets go of the subject/object ego perspectives.”¹²

Once again, remarks like these about the arts in general are repeated in the particular case of music. One writer holds that, in the Japanese view, through music “one becomes nature” so that there is, in effect, a “transcending [of] subjective borders and merging of one’s self into nature.”¹³ Elsewhere, the same author stresses that because of a “fusion between the self and sound,” there is a “blurring” or erasing of “the relationship between

the subject and object.”¹⁴ Claims about music’s capacity to achieve oneness of persons and nature are especially frequent in the literature on the Japanese bamboo flute, the *shakuhachi*, particularly where the focus is on the flute as a “spiritual tool” rather than as an instrument played to entertain. One author who draws this distinction between a “spiritual tool” and a “musical instrument” argues that the “sweeping,” “wailing,” “thrashing” sounds of the flute confirm the alleged Zen insight that there is “no ontological distinction between the sound of humans and the sound of nature,” or more generally that there is a “complete lack of distinction” between people and their environments.¹⁵

ASPECTS OF JAPANESE MUSIC

How should we understand and assess these large claims about the power of art to induce a sense of unity with nature and dissolve such contrasts as those between culture and nature and subjects and objects? These claims are problematic. One of the problems is the high level of generality and abstraction at which they are made. This provides a good reason to confine our reflections, in the first instance, to a particular art form or practice with the prospect of then generalizing from them.

There is, in my judgment, a good case to be made for this focus to be on music rather than, say, painting. To begin with, the large claims about fostering oneness with nature are peculiarly plentiful in connection with music. Second, there are several features of Japanese music that are apt to invite reflection on its relationship to nature—for instance, the copious use of natural sounds alongside musical tones.

Before considering these features, it might be thought, it is first necessary to determine which types of Japanese music are under consideration. No one, after all, would claim that every kind of Japanese music—J-rock and J-pop, for instance—is apt to inspire a sense of harmony with nature. There is no need, however, to be prescriptive here and to determine in advance which kinds of music to consider. Our choice of these kinds can be guided, rather, by the question we are interested in. That is, we should consider those kinds of music about which large claims of the sort mentioned above have been made.

Since it is traditional Japanese music (*hōgaku*) that has primarily invited such claims, it is with this that we’ll be concerned—but with the proviso that relevant, too, is modernist music, by composers including Takemitsu and Michio Miyagi, that consciously draws upon traditional forms. There are, of course, many forms of *hōgaku*, including traditional court music (*gagaku*), Buddhist chanting (*shōmyō*), and Nō theatre music. Among Japanese instruments, it is the *shakuhachi* whose playing has especially invited reflection on the relationship between music and nature. But the music of the zither-like *koto*—and its variants and predecessors—has also, since the days of *The Tale of Genji* in the eleventh century, prompted the same reflection.

Let’s turn, then, to some aspects of traditional Japanese music in which a relationship to nature is prominent. First, there is the ancient, but continuing, enthusiasm for *al fresco* music-making, for playing music in natural

settings—by the sea, for instance, or in a grove. When “the wind blows and makes the leaves dance,” wrote Chōmei at the beginning of the thirteenth century, “I play the *biwa* . . . ‘Song of Autumn Breezes.’”¹⁶ A glance at the covers of most CDs of *shakuhachi* music reveals that today’s players share Chōmei’s predilection for playing in natural environments. It is important to note, though, that the enthusiasm is not simply for playing outdoors, but for, as it were, “jamming” with nature. In *The Tale of Genji*, many passages attest to the enjoyment of playing music in concert with natural sounds. “The sound of the flutes mingled with the sighing of the pines,”¹⁷ while the *koto* is heard “to the singing of the waves.”¹⁸ A striking feature of the novel, notes one scholar, is how “natural music and human music cooperate.”¹⁹ Prince Genji even subscribes to the belief, also found in Shinto myth and practice, that music may influence the course of nature—“mov[ing] the moon and stars and [bringing] unseasonal snows and frosts.”²⁰

A second aspect is the copious use in several forms of traditional music of unpitched noises, many of them—like the sound of cicadas—taken from or simulating the sounds of nature. It is not unknown in Western music, of course, to import such sounds—bird calls, frog croaking, and the like—into pieces of music. But this, in the West, is a marginal practice in comparison to the employment of “paramusical sounds” in, for example, Kabuki and Nō theatre music, and in compositions for the *shakuhachi* and *koto*.²¹ Takemitsu goes as far as to hold that *sawari* (“noise-like elements”) provide the “unique character of Japanese music.”²²

A third and related aspect is the high incidence of representations or evocations of nature in Japanese music. Pieces mentioned in *The Tale of Genji* include “The Royal Deer,” “Joy of Spring,” and “Green Willow.” It is not only natural sounds, like that of wind in the pines, that the music may represent. The contours of musical phrases may also seek to capture the flight of a crane or the rhythm of the waves. Nor is the evocation of nature confined to that of particular sounds or phenomena. It has been argued that the contrasting sounds made by the *shakuhachi* and also by certain drums are intended to represent “the duality of yin and yang” and other dimensions of “the flow of *ki* [Chinese *qi*]” throughout the cosmos.²³

A final feature deserving of mention is an attitude, not to the music, but to the instruments that play it. In the charming novel, *The Forest of Wool and Steel*, the piano-tuner is alert to the relationship between the instrument and the natural materials it is made of. The wool of “good sheep make for [the] good sound”²⁴ of the hammers, and the piano’s wood “replicates the atmosphere of the forest”²⁵—so that, in effect, the “sound of the piano [is] connected up with the whole world.”²⁶ Many *shakuhachi* players express a similar sentiment, including the most famous player of the twentieth century, Watazumi Doso, whose flute of choice was the rough-sounding, unlacquered *hōchiku*.²⁷ Another player reports that “when I play *shakuhachi* I feel a very strong connection to the earth’s energy, especially because of the root-end of the bamboo.”²⁸ Parallel remarks are sometimes made about string and percussion instruments, confirming that it is not only the sounds an instrument

makes, but also its actual physical properties that can induce a sense of relationship to nature.

Here, then, are four aspects of Japanese musical tradition in which connections are made, in different ways, between music and nature. They demonstrate in their different ways “mutual inflections” between musical practice and nature.²⁹ When the flute or *koto* player “jams” with the wind in the pines or the lapping of waves on a beach, his or her experience of a natural environment is modified or inflected at the same time as their experience of the music is. Feeling the root-end of the *shakuhachi* prompts an awareness of its source in a bamboo grove, while attention to its natural provenance inspires further appreciation of the instrument.

But how, if at all, do these aspects of Japanese music lend support to claims about music’s power to foster a sense of oneness with nature? How do we move beyond “mutual inflections” between culture and nature to their identity with one another?

UNITY WITH NATURE

While talk of unity with nature and erasure of the subject/object contrast is familiar in nature writing, it is often difficult to determine what a given writer intends by it, let alone to find a meaning shared by the various authors. One problem is that such utterances as “humans are not set apart in any way from the processes of nature” lend themselves to readings that render them either absurd or relatively banal, with nothing obvious in-between.³⁰ If the utterance means that human beings do not differ in any significant ways from everything else in the natural world, it is patently false. Only human beings, for instance, engage in mathematical reasoning, have a sense of history, and think about music. If, on the other hand, it means that human life, like all life, is subject to natural processes, no one is likely to challenge it.

Often, the same author will veer between these poles. D. T. Suzuki, for example, portentously tells us that “the merging of nature and man” means that a person is “in no way different from the birds . . . insects . . . flowers . . . water—not even from Mt Fuji.”³¹ But a little later, he writes that it simply means that a person, like everything in nature, belongs in a “nexus of infinite inter-relationships.”³² Taken literally, the first of these statements about our “merging with nature” is absurd, while the second is unobjectionable to the point of being trite.

A further problem is that different authors intend different things by the term “nature.” Sometimes, it refers to what embraces or pervades everything, or a very considerable slice of everything—the cosmos, the bio-sphere, energy, *ki* (Chinese *qi*), and the like. Elsewhere, it refers to something like natural environments. But this reference, too, is ambiguous. According to which author one reads, these environments might or might not include “human landscapes,” such as parks and farmland, as well as “wilderness.” It is often pointed out, moreover, that the nature many Japanese writers, including Kawabata in his Nobel Prize speech, have in mind seems to be a “secondary” and “romanticised” nature. In Donald Richie’s words, the

“nature” that prevails in much of the Japanese aesthetic imagination is “edited and abbreviated,” subjected to “the rules of art.”³³ By contrast, the nature Bashō instructed the artist to follow and be one with was primarily “the ‘lonely’ wild nature of the Japanese countryside,” harsh and austere.³⁴

Despite these problems and ambiguities, one might try to soldier on in the hope of arriving at a common understanding—at once cogent and substantial—of a unity with nature that art has the power to inspire. In my judgment, this hope is misplaced, and one would end up simply prescribing, not interpreting. Does this mean, then, that one should abandon the claims about art and music’s power to foster a sense of oneness?

This would be premature. Instead, we should rethink the relationship between the idea of unity and the practices of art. So far, I have been assuming that claims about our “oneness” with nature are propositions that can be assessed for their truth or falsity—that they are descriptions of the relationship between human beings and nature. We might do better, however, to think of utterances like “We are one with nature” in a different way, as being what Ludwig Wittgenstein called *Äusserungen*. By this term, he meant utterances whose role is not propositional description, but the expression of attitudes, moods, or feelings—as, in effect, continuations of the forms of behavior that also convey them. Some religious utterances, for example, might best be treated not as propositions about reality, but as belonging to, or being akin to, rituals that express religious commitments or sentiments.³⁵

It can be especially helpful to regard utterances as *Äusserungen* in cases where, if they are treated as statements of how things are, they appear to be either wildly false or boringly true. And this, I suggest, is precisely the case with the kind of utterance that concerns us, the rhetoric of oneness with nature. Instead of first asking what is meant by “oneness with nature,” and then trying to see how music and other artistic practices might promote it, the strategy should be almost the reverse of this. We should first identify certain practices and then ask why it is natural for the practitioners to express the attitudes and feelings that inform their practices in the language of unity with nature. To understand such language is, in effect, to understand why people find it natural to express themselves through it.

We already have a fair idea, from the previous section, what the relevant aspects of Japanese musical practice are—*al fresco* playing, the copious use of natural sounds, and so on. So our question becomes, what features of Japanese culture—religious and spiritual ones, perhaps—inspire people engaged in traditional musical practice to reach for the rhetoric of oneness with nature?

ZEN BUDDHISM AND THE PRIMACY OF PRACTICE

For some people, it has been said, “to play *shakuhachi* is to play Zen.”³⁶ That may be exaggerated, but it gives dramatic voice to the familiar perception that Japanese arts, including music, have been powerfully shaped by Buddhist, especially Zen, tradition. This is due, in part, to

what Suzuki calls the “immense impetus” Zen has given to the appreciation of nature,³⁷ thereby guaranteeing that it is in “the atmosphere emanating from Zen” that the relation between art and nature is largely to be understood.³⁸ (In focusing on Zen, incidentally, I am not pretending that other schools of Buddhism have not also had profound effects on the arts.)

Shortly, I shall identify some prominent features of Zen that help to explain why many practitioners of Japanese arts are drawn to the rhetoric of unity with nature. For the moment, however, I want to emphasize how congenial to Zen is the strategy I have proposed—that of understanding this rhetoric by reference to the practices themselves. This is because of what has been called the “fiercely pragmatic stance” of Zen.³⁹

It might be thought that, to appreciate Zen’s impact on the relationship of art to nature, we need to turn to characteristic Zen doctrines, such as those of “emptiness [*kū*],” “nothing [*mu*],” and the universality of “Buddha-nature.” However, this would be unhelpful. For one thing, these doctrines share with claims like “We are one with nature” the problem of finding interpretations that do not render them either absurd or banal. Indeed, it may be that the doctrines themselves are best viewed as expressions of attitudes that inform various practices. Simon P. James, for one, has proposed that such doctrinal utterances are not “philosophical propositions which can be assessed as true or false,” but “skilful means” to discourage certain attitudes.⁴⁰ Second, it is doubtful that it is through such opaque doctrines that Zen could have exerted its influence on the arts of Japan. As Suzuki remarks, it is not due to “the teaching of Zen,” but to its “atmosphere,” that its impact on “aesthetic sensibility” owes.⁴¹

The primacy of practice over doctrine is attested to in many Buddhist texts. For Dōgen, in the Buddha-dharma, practice and realization are inseparable, as are “performing practice and attaining realization” for the main architect of the tea ceremony, Sen no Rikyū.⁴² It is plentifully attested to as well by *shakuhachi* players. It is when he “play[s] a simple piece of bamboo in the forest,” surrounded by animals, that Watazumi possesses “understanding of the entire natural world.”⁴³ His student, Yokoyama, kept silent about his understanding of music and nature, his “awareness of being in the world shown by [his] practice.”⁴⁴ Another player denies that the understanding expressed in his playing owed to “ever [having] thought consciously about nature.”⁴⁵ All these players, I suspect, would endorse a point Wittgenstein makes about understanding a piece of music: “Don’t look inside yourself. Ask yourself, rather, what makes you say that’s what *someone else* is doing”—phrasing the theme, perhaps, or ornamenting it, in a certain way.⁴⁶

The primacy of practice means that engagement in music is not a means to something further and separate—to a *eureka* moment of metaphysical enlightenment, say. Rather, it is a vehicle of understanding and, to recall an earlier phrase, of awareness of one’s being in the world. To ask what is meant by talk of a oneness with nature achieved through music is to ask what are the aspects of the “atmosphere”

surrounding this music that make it natural for those engaged in it to talk in that manner.

RETREAT, HUMILITY, AND NATURE'S VIRTUES

There are at least three ingredients of Zen "atmosphere" that help explain the readiness to speak of music, in its "mutual inflections" with nature, as fostering unity with nature.

Tanizaki's nightingale, recall, spirits its listeners away from "the dusty city" to the countryside—to streams, ravines, blossoms. Implicit here is not only music's power to relate us to nature, but also the prominent Zen theme of nature as a salvific retreat from the city. Ryōkan, himself a Zen priest, instructs us to "abandon the floating world" of urban life, a place of "sadness" and "suffering."⁴⁷ John Cage's love of mushrooms in the wild enabled him to recognize the truth in D. T. Suzuki's remarks that "there is no Zen life except outside the city."⁴⁸

In fact, Zen's hostility is less to the city, in its literal sense, than to the degraded condition of human existence that it epitomizes. In modern urban life is found everything that prevents living in accordance with the Buddha-dharma—febrile "busyness," the relentless pursuit of wealth and reputation, seductive temptations, rigid conventions, and so on.⁴⁹ The city, in effect, is an arena of *duhkha* (suffering, unsatisfactoriness). By contrast, nature affords a place of retreat, where people can, as it were, cleanse themselves of "the dusty city." In the countryside, it is possible to liberate oneself from the pressures of modern civilization, and to achieve a more relaxed, and a more accepting, "objective and impersonal" perspective on the world.⁵⁰

The metaphor of a musical space is a common one in musicology. It might be extended to that of music as providing a retreat from everyday existence with the same benefits as a natural environment. An old monk and *shakuhachi* player refers to the way his music offers a context for "seeing and dealing with things as they are," impersonally and objectively.⁵¹ Crucially, though, music is not always a space or retreat separate from nature. It is in "song and nature" together that Chōmei, in self-exile from the world of urban life, exhorts the reader to "find your friends."⁵² Takemitsu's pieces evocative of water, forests, and the like were explicitly intended to offer respite from the "unnatural quality of city life," and bring us into "balance with nature."⁵³ Through "jamming" with nature, using natural sounds, and so on, music appreciation and experience of nature are "mutually inflected" and enhanced. The spaces of music and nature intersect.

Because of this intersection, music and nature collaborate or conspire in providing a retreat from the city, from forms of life that make it next to impossible to follow *dharma*. For the musician to talk of a sense of oneness with nature may, therefore, be to express recognition of nature as a co-conspirator, a close ally of music, in the attempted escape from "the dusty city" and everything it represents.

A second ingredient in the "atmosphere" of Zen, and indeed Buddhism at large, is its disparagement of self-expression and a corresponding accentuation of the virtue of humility.

Yuriko Saito points out how many Japanese poets and artists, including Bashō and the painter Tsubaki Chinzan, recommend practices that "result in a de-emphasis" on the artist's own creativity. Artworks should not strive to communicate "expressive power," but rather the qualities of naturalness and spontaneity.⁵⁴

This ideal is one that many Japanese musicians, implicitly or explicitly, have embraced. Takemitsu, for example, denounces "the ideology of self-expression" that he thinks dominates in Western musical practice.⁵⁵ The musician's task is not to "giv[e] meaning to the world," but to respond to the meanings that are already there.⁵⁶ The composer should not "shape anything, but . . . merge with the world" by, for example, "giv[ing] [natural] sounds the freedom to breathe."⁵⁷ It is self-denial, not self-assertion, the composer should aim for.⁵⁸

But how might one graduate from remarks like these to the hyperbolic claims of, for example, the philosopher and champion of "folk art," Yanagi Sōetsu? The artist must aim at "discarding the self," he writes, and for the "vanishing" of the subject/object distinction.⁵⁹ Two pages earlier, he has spoken, less feverishly, in praise of the artist's "submissiveness" to and "humility" before his materials and the natural world. We should, I suggest, regard the hyperbolic claims as *Äusserungen*, as utterances that give voice and expression to the qualities that are manifested in the artworks Yanagi advocates.

Likewise, the sense of oneness with nature to which Japanese musicians attest may, then, consist in the spontaneous, respectful, reticent, and humble responsiveness to natural environments that is manifested in musical practices that engage with nature—employing natural sounds, evoking nature, jamming with it, honoring the materials an instrument is made from, and so on.

A final ingredient of the "atmosphere" of Zen is hinted at in Bashō's instruction to artists to "follow nature." This is the idea, partly inherited from Daoism, that nature is a teacher from which we should learn. Dōgen makes the point explicit: "grass, trees and lands . . . expound the profound dharma . . . [and] bring forth the teaching for beings," so that we might obtain "Buddha virtue."⁶⁰ It has been proposed, in fact, that the Zen attribution to all beings of "Buddha-nature" should be understood as telling us that "these beings have something to teach us . . . that [they] exemplify virtues, and that we can, in turn, learn virtue" from them.⁶¹ Examples abound in the literature of Zen: attention to nature enables us, *inter alia*, to discern and appreciate the spontaneity or "self-so-ness" of natural beings, the virtues of patience, endurance, and impartiality, and the freedom from contrivance to which we should aspire. As Ryōkan puts it, when you "abandon the fleeting world" of society, "then the moon and flowers will guide you."⁶²

The same idea figures in writings on music. Takemitsu claims that the "stream of sounds" issuing from a *gagaku* orchestra effectively conveys "the concept of transitoriness."⁶³ *Shakuhachi* music, in particular, is credited with helping us discern qualities of nature from which we have much to learn for the conduct of our lives. The sounds

of the instrument, it is claimed, “provide a sensitization to the natural world,” so that it is an “ideal advocate for the environment.”⁶⁴

The point here is that music—and art more generally—can, ironically, render aspects of nature more salient than simply attending to nature itself. This seems to have been Tanizaki’s point: remember that Tenko, whose song conjures up the beauties of nature, is a trained singer—an avian artist—not a wild nightingale. The role of music, then, is to provide and shape experiences of the qualities and virtues of nature that we need to contemplate in order to live according to “the Buddha Way.”

To participate in musical practices, like *shakuhachi* playing, that engage with and “sensitize” to nature is, then, to encounter the natural world not as something dumb, something that’s “just there,” but as a teacher and guide. Better, perhaps, it is to experience nature as a whole school of learning to which one belongs and in which one feels at home, dependent upon for the direction of one’s life, and grateful to. It is not surprising if people who experience such an intimacy with nature reach for the vocabulary of identity or “oneness” with nature.

SUMMARY

“The secret of music,” suggested Tanizaki, resides in its power to put human beings in a certain relationship to nature. Some very large claims, we saw, have been made as to the form of that relationship—notably ones that speak of “oneness” or unity with nature, and the dissolution of the subject-object relation. These claims, I argued, are problematic, and I proposed that, instead of treating them as philosophical propositions, we might regard them as attempts to express attitudes that inform various musical practices that engage with the natural world—as, in effect, extensions of these practices.

In order to understand why practitioners might invoke the rhetoric of unity, their practices should be seen in the context of a cultural and spiritual “atmosphere” emanating from Buddhism, especially from the Zen tradition. Belonging to this “atmosphere” are the perception of nature as a salvific retreat from “the dusty city,” the elevation of humility and self-denial over self-expression and self-assertion, and the appreciation of nature as a teacher of wisdom and virtue. Each of these ingredients helps to explain how recognition of the many “mutual inflections” between music and nature might modulate into an impression of “oneness” with nature.

NOTES

1. Jun’ichirō Tanizaki, “A Portrait of Shunkin,” in *The Book of Music and Nature: An Anthology of Sounds, Words, Thoughts*, ed. David Rothenberg and Marta Ulvaeus (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 227.
2. Tanizaki, “A Portrait of Shunkin,” 227.
3. Aaron Copland, *What to Listen for in Music* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1957), 10–11.
4. Tanizaki, “A Portrait of Shunkin,” 227.
5. Ryōkan Taigu in *One Robe, One Bowl: The Zen Poetry of Ryōkan*, ed. and trans. John Stevens (New York: Weatherill, 2001), 41; Bashō quoted in Donald Richie, *A Treatise on Japanese Aesthetics* (Berkeley, CA: Stone Bridge, 2007), 36.

6. D. T. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973), 345.
7. Natsume Sōseki, *Kusamakura*, trans. Meredith McKinney (London: Penguin, 2008), 70.
8. Henry Johnson, “The Sounds of *Myūjikkū*: An Exploration of Concepts and Classifications in Japanese Sound Aesthetics,” *Journal of Musicological Research* 18, no. 4 (1999): 291–306, at 296.
9. Toru Takemitsu, “Nature and Music,” in *The Book of Music and Nature: An Anthology of Sounds, Words, Thoughts*, ed. David Rothenberg and Marta Ulvaeus (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 184.
10. Bashō, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North and Other Travel Sketches* (London: Penguin, 1986), 72; Yasunari Kawabata, *Japan, the Beautiful, and Myself: The 1968 Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech*, trans. Edward G. Seidensticker (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1969).
11. Arshi Pipa, “Some Remarks about Western and Eastern Aesthetics,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 8, no. 4 (1968): 365–72, at 369.
12. Richard Pilgrim, *Buddhism and the Arts of Japan* (Chambersburg, PA: Anima, 1993), 68.
13. Koji Matsunobu, “Performing, Creating, and Listening to Nature through Music: The Art of Self-Integration,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 47, no. 4 (2013): 64–79, at 67.
14. Koji Matsunobu, “Japanese Spirituality and Music Practice: Art as Self-Cultivation,” in *International Handbook of Research in Arts Education*, ed. Liora Bresler (New York: Springer, 2007), 1427.
15. Zachary Wallmark, “Sacred Abjection in Zen *Shakuhachi*,” *Ethnomusicology Review* 17 (2012): 3.
16. Kamo-no-Chomei, *Hojoki: Visions of a Torn World*, trans. Yasuhiko Moriguchi and David Jenkins; illust. Michael Hofmann (Berkeley, CA: Stone Bridge, 1996), 65.
17. Murasaki Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji*, trans. Royall Tyler (London: Penguin, 1981), 133.
18. Murasaki, *The Tale of Genji*, 113.
19. Fredric Lieberman, “Music in *The Tale of Genji*,” *Asian Music* 2, no. 1 (1971): 39–42, at 39.
20. Murasaki, *The Tale of Genji*, 605–06.
21. See Johnson, “The Sounds of *Myūjikkū*.”
22. Toru Takemitsu, “On *Sawari*,” in *Locating East Asia in Western Art Music*, ed. Yayoi Uno Everett and Frederick Lau (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 200.
23. Matsunobu, “Japanese Spirituality and Music Practice,” 1432.
24. Natsu Miyashita, *The Forest of Wool and Steel*, trans. Philip Gabriel (London: Random House, 2019), 7.
25. Miyashita, *The Forest of Wool and Steel*, 88.
26. Miyashita, *The Forest of Wool and Steel*, 135.
27. On Watazumi and the *hōchiku*, see Jay Keister, “The *Shakuhachi* as Spiritual Tool: A Japanese Buddhist Instrument in the West,” *Asian Music* 35, no. 2 (2004): 99–131.
28. Quoted by Matsunobu, “Performing, Creating, and Listening,” 71.
29. On “mutual inflections,” see Holly Watkins, “Musical Ecologies of Place and Placelessness,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 64, no. 2 (2011): 404–08.
30. Matsunobu, “Japanese Spirituality and Music Practice,” 1426.
31. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, 336.
32. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, 346.
33. Richie, *A Treatise on Japanese Aesthetics*, 26.
34. Roy Starrs, “Japanese Poetry and the Aesthetics of Disaster,” in *New Essays in Japanese Aesthetics*, ed. A. Minh Nguyen (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), 289.

35. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and Rush Rhees, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (London: Macmillan, 1958), 89e; and *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*, ed. Rush Rhees, trans. A. C. Miles (Nottinghamshire: Brynmill, 1983), 10.
36. Keister, "The *Shakuhachi* as Spiritual Tool," 108.
37. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, 21.
38. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, 362.
39. Simon P. James, *Zen Buddhism and Environmental Ethics* (Hampshire, UK: Ashgate, 2004), 10.
40. James, *Zen Buddhism*, 98.
41. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, 386.
42. Dōgen, *Moon in a Dewdrop: Writings of Zen Master Dōgen*, ed. Kazuaki Tanahashi (New York: North Point Press, 1995), 143; Rikyū, quoted in *Sources of Japanese Tradition, Volume One: From Earliest Times to 1600*, 2nd ed., ed. Wm. Theodore de Bary, Donald Keene, George Tanabe, and Paul Varley (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 397.
43. Watazumi Doso Roshi, "The Way of Watazumi," lecture/demonstration at the Creative Music Studio, Woodstock, NY, 1981, <https://komuso.com/people/people.pl?person=1222>, accessed May 31, 2021.
44. Keister, "The *Shakuhachi* as Spiritual Tool," 118.
45. Quoted in Daniele Sestili, "'Nature' in Japanese Traditional 'Music': Reflections on *Hōgaku* and Two Euro-American Concepts in Present-Day Japan," in *Rethinking Nature in Post-Fukushima Japan: Facing the Crisis*, ed. Marcella Mariotti, M. Roberta Novielli, Bonaventura Ruperti, and Silvia Vesco (Venice, Italy: Edizioni Ca' Foscari, 2018), 37–48, at 45.
46. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G. H. von Wright, trans. Peter Winch (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 58e.
47. Ryōkan, *One Robe, One Bowl*, 76.
48. Quoted in Kay Larson, *Where the Heart Beats: John Cage, Zen Buddhism, and the Inner Life of Artists* (New York: Penguin, 2013), 326.
49. These are some of the denunciations of the city in Sōseki's *Kusamakura*.
50. Makoto Ueda, *Matsuo Bashō: The Master Haiku Poet* (New York: Twayne, 1970), 156.
51. Quoted in Ray Brooks, *Blowing Zen: Finding an Authentic Life* (Novato, CA: Kramer, 2000), 57.
52. Kamo-no-Chomei, *Hojoki*, 72.
53. Takemitsu, "Nature and Music," 183.
54. Yuriko Saito, "Historical Overview of Japanese Aesthetics," in *New Essays in Japanese Aesthetics*, ed. A. Minh Nguyen (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), xli, xliv.
55. Takemitsu, "Nature and Music," 184.
56. Takemitsu, "Nature and Music," 188.
57. Takemitsu, "Nature and Music," 184.
58. Takemitsu, "Nature and Music," 184–85, 188–89.
59. Yanagi Sōetsu, *The Unknown Craftsman: A Japanese Insight into Beauty*, ad. Bernard Leach (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1989), 152–53.
60. Dōgen, *Moon in a Dewdrop*, 146.
61. James, *Zen Buddhism*, 67.
62. Ryōkan, *One Robe, One Bowl*, 23.
63. Takemitsu, "Nature and Music," 186.
64. Lydia L. Snyder, *Voicing Mother Nature: Ecomusiological Perspectives on Gender and Philosophy in Japanese Shakuhachi Practice*, MA Thesis (Kent State University, 2019), <https://etd.ohiolink.edu/>, accessed May 31, 2021, 91, 94.

The Dancing Truth: Spiritual Play in Zen Aesthetics

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ABSTRACT

The philosophers of the Kyoto School have devoted countless pages to reflecting on art, especially poetry and painting. Among these philosophers, Hisamatsu Shin'ichi 久松真一 famously wrote about Zen aesthetics and attempted to systematize the characteristics of Zen art. As knowledge about the history of Asian art increased in the West, Hisamatsu's pioneering attempt, like that of D. T. Suzuki, at interpreting Zen arts through their religious background was criticized for ignoring the sociohistorical context of this type of artistic production (e.g., Levine 2007). However, here I suggest that both approaches may be complementary rather than exclusive. One can read certain works of art as expressions of a spiritual experience without overlooking the material conditions of their production. Based on one of the aesthetic notions with which Hisamatsu defined Zen art, *shadatsu* 洒脱 ("free from attachment"), which he links to the Buddhist teaching of the absence of obstruction *muge* 無礙 and the Zen expression *yuke sammai* 遊化三昧 (the "samadhi of absolutely untrammelled play"), I propose to examine how this approach is fruitful for understanding not only the conception of art in a premodern religious context but also certain works of contemporary art.

INTRODUCTION

"We must function like a spider, which never gets stuck in its web, not like a silkworm, which gets bound by its creation." This metaphor was used by the Japanese philosopher and Zen master Hisamatsu Shin'ichi 久松真一 (1889–1980) to convey his insights.¹ He applied it to his educational and socially engaged project "The Association for Self-Awakening,"² but it also found expression in his performance of poetry, calligraphy, and the tea ceremony. Perhaps the British artist Banksy adhered to a similar principle in 2018 when his *Girl with Balloon*, which was sold for a considerable amount of money at an auction house in London, promptly self-destructed right before an astounded audience. According to art critics, Banksy's gesture outdid Marcel Duchamp's provocative display of his *Fountain* in a gallery in 1917. Both artists subverted inertias of the art world in order to denounce the artistic conventions of the time. Moreover, there is something ironic or playful in these artistic gestures.

In contemporary art, it is possible to identify practices that are directly influenced by the artist's reception of Zen Buddhism or that, even without having any apparent link to it, can be related to the aesthetic categories that have been used to describe Zen art. Consider Jackson Pollock, John Cage, or Yves Klein, to cite a few well-known examples. Nevertheless, it is not necessary to resort to the 1950s or the 1960s *avant-garde*, as works by contemporary artists or movements, such as Land-Art, also utilize practices of

Zen Buddhism. Land-Art's dialogue with the environment is reminiscent of the artist composing a Zen garden. However, my interest here is in one of the aesthetic categories used by Hisamatsu to characterize Zen art, "free from attachment," or "unrestricted freedom."³ I suggest that this aesthetic category can shed light not only on traditional Japanese Zen-inspired art but also on certain contemporary artistic practices.

ON DEFINING ZEN ART

Many Westerners came into contact with Zen art and aesthetics through D. T. Suzuki's *Zen and Japanese Culture* (1938) and Hisamatsu Shin'ichi's *Zen and the Fine Arts* (1971).⁴ In the twentieth century, the influence of Zen was so pervasive in Western culture that the historian Lynn Townsend White, Jr., dared to predict that "Suzuki's first *Essays in Zen Buddhism* in 1927 will seem in future generations as great an intellectual event as William of Moerbeke's Latin translations of Aristotle in the thirteenth century or Marsilio Ficino's of Plato in the fifteenth."⁵ Yet, in recent years such influential works have been subject to revision. As Gregory Levine has rightly shown, the characterization of Zen art has changed with the new studies on Zen tradition and the tools provided by critical theory and historiography in art history.⁶ Both Suzuki and Hisamatsu described Zen arts as a set of works expressing core spiritual values without taking into account the material and historical conditions of production of the works of art themselves. The fact that Suzuki virtually identified Zen with Japanese culture and Hisamatsu's interpretation of Zen art from the standpoint of the spiritual experience of awakening, which rendered this art distant from most people, has been the target of considerable criticism.⁷ Indeed, Suzuki and Hisamatsu failed to account for the transformation of Zen arts over time and to acknowledge Zen arts' political dimension as an object of intellectual inquiry. Thus, some of their claims contributed to nurturing both the myth of Japanese uniqueness, and therefore cultural nationalism, and the exoticist discourse of Orientalism in the West.

When Hisamatsu established the distinctiveness of what he called "Oriental nothingness" and emphasized the need of a Zen realization to appreciate Zen art, he certainly accentuated the gap between East and West, as well as the existence of an insider and an outsider perspective. However, it could be said that he wrote, often to an uninformed audience, from an internal or emic viewpoint (to borrow a term employed in anthropology and other disciplines in the social and behavioral sciences), that is, from within the tradition as a Zen practitioner and artist. At the same time, as a philosopher, his notion of the Selfless Self speaks more of an attempt to grasp an experience of self-denial and transformation of the self-centered Self than of fixed identities. In the same way, his famous seven categories to define Zen art tell us more about his way of understanding and living Zen and creating art from this vantage point than about a dogmatic and universalizing theoretical proposal.⁸ Thus, a balanced way to interpret the legacy of these authors is to read their writings with a critical eye while trying to understand them in their own terms and time. In this regard, Hisamatsu provides us with both an aesthetic discourse on Zen art and his

embodied experience as someone who participated in it and attempted to modernize the tradition in which he was educated.⁹

ZEN AESTHETICS ACCORDING TO HISAMATSU

Hisamatsu's approach to aesthetics is clearly seen in *Zen and the Fine Arts*, where artistic considerations are intertwined with references to Zen literature. He offers concrete examples from different fields of Japanese art (paintings, calligraphy, architecture, flower arrangement, gardens, crafts, and dramatic art), which he regards as creative expressions of a unitary cultural complex. The analysis of the qualities common to these various cultural forms leads him to identify the following seven interrelated characteristics: Asymmetry, Simplicity, Austere Sublimity or Lofty Dryness, Naturalness, Subtle Profundity or Profound Subtlety, Freedom from Attachment, and Tranquility. Furthermore, he argues that Zen teachings provide the basis for all these characteristics, through which Zen finds a concrete expression.

For the Japanese philosopher, what turns a work of art into Zen art is not that it has been made by a Zen monk or that it deals with a Zen theme, but that it aesthetically expresses a Zen meaning.¹⁰ Since this meaning is not intellectual, Hisamatsu assures that it can only be discerned by a living Zen mind. Does this mean that Zen art requires both the artist and the viewer of the artwork to be enlightened? If so, how can that be determined? Certainly, art is conceived here as an expression of what the artist has experienced inwardly, and the cardinal experience of the Zen tradition is usually called "awakening" or "enlightenment." For Hisamatsu, Zen is "the self-awareness of the Formless Self" so that the Zen artist gives expression to her self-awareness, allowing the observer to delve into her own Formless Self as well. In the case of the self-aware viewer, namely, the one who is able to see what is formless within a form, their own Formless Self is reflected in a specular way in that expressed in the artwork. Rather than a kind of elitism,¹¹ esoterism, or mystification, this can be seen as a conception of the work of art as an occasion for meditation, both during the process of its making and during its enjoyment, since the aesthetic experience becomes, in turn, a religious experience.

Consequently, when Hisamatsu describes Zen painting as subjective and expressionist, he implies that the Formless Self is expressing itself freely and creatively.¹² Although he concedes that many modern aesthetic movements follow this same path, Zen expressiveness for him lies specifically in the capacity to evoke detachment and profound peaceful quietude.

THE AESTHETIC QUALITY OF THE "FREE FROM ATTACHMENT" AND THE BUDDHIST "ABSENCE OF OBSTRUCTION"

However, if we go through this issue with an even finer-tooth comb, the Zen work of art that Hisamatsu has in mind is not a mere object of contemplation: as a concretion of the formless, it refers primarily to a dynamic process of self-expression. This is seen paradigmatically in the painting "Dancing Budai,"¹³ which, according to Hisamatsu,

embodies the Zen quality of the unconditioned freedom, “what is called in Japanese, *yuke sammāi*¹⁴—the samadhi of absolutely untrammelled play.”¹⁵

The Sanskrit term *samādhi* in the context of Buddhist meditation theory and practice means “concentration.” The Mahāyāna sutras describe as *samādhis* a wide variety of profound meditative experiences denoting attainments of the *bodhisattva*—a being who has resolved to become a buddha—through the stages of training. The element of “play”¹⁶ appears in these sutras in connection with the bodhisattva’s activity. Rather than highlighting the austerity of asceticism, it is said that such activity will be successful when the bodhisattva enjoys what he is doing. Hence, not conditioned by his goal, his task becomes an easy practice similar to “playing.”¹⁷ Indeed, as Johan Huizinga explains in his famous book *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (originally published in Dutch in 1938), freedom is a necessary condition for playing insofar as playing means expressing one’s own freedom through play. Moreover, he also stresses the disinterestedness of play, as it is not connected to any material interest, nor to any benefit, reason, or purpose.¹⁸ The play element in the life of a bodhisattva lies in his freedom from every form of constraint and restraint; his compassionate heart functions all the time freely and self-sufficiently. His free and sovereign activity allows him to go from one domain of Buddha to another, to enjoy in the state of Buddha, to have an unhindered mind, to come and go, to be comforted and consoled, and to be without attachment.¹⁹

The emphasis on the bodhisattva’s freedom and detachment from self-actualizing goals characteristic of much of the Māhāyāna tradition is even more visible in Zen literature. For example, in his work *Shōbōgenzō*, the Sōtō Zen master Dōgen (1200–1253) refers to the upright sitting position in meditation as the right way “to make *samādhi* playful.”²⁰ The context is the master’s explanation of the “*samādhi* of self-fulfilling activity”²¹ as the criterion to transmit the Buddha’s teachings (the Dharma) and to realize the supreme enlightenment. It would be like simply receiving and accepting one’s own spiritual position in the world and effortlessly letting all things be what they are in their self-nature. This translates into ceasing to be affected by convoluted explanations and theories, which Dōgen likens to the knots of bamboo that block free passage. It is the *samādhi* of the self in which one finds joy, fulfillment, or satisfaction, away from discriminatory and dualistic thinking. Without discriminating thought, there is nothing else or outside of this self, as this self does not have an object. It is an experience that takes place here and now; it is not something that can be acquired or obtained. As Hee-Jin Kim observes, for Dōgen, it means a total freedom of self-realization without any dualism. However, dualities are not erased or even blurred, but rather realized, as this total freedom is not separated from duality.²² With the *samādhi* criterion of self-fulfilling activity, Dōgen would not have an abstract principle in mind, but a mode of activity itself.

Therefore, for Hisamatsu, Liang Kai’s painting emblematically expresses the mode of being in which one goes about freely, unattached and calm. Free from rigid beliefs, judgments, and preferences, the portrayed monk is

immersed in his activity, showing a humorous and carefree attitude towards the world and towards himself. It is worth noting that *samādhi*, in the locution *yuke sammāi*, does not refer merely to the concentrated mind but also to the fact of being entirely and exclusively immersed in something, for instance, in the case of Budai, dancing. Therefore, *samādhi* perfectly applies to arts. It is important to recall here that Hisamatsu establishes a clear correspondence between the seven aesthetic characteristics and Zen teachings, the latter being articulated through the use of negative language in the following way: No Rule, No Complexity, No Rank, No Mind, No Bottom, No Hindrance, No Stirring. Despite the negativity of the language, the content expressed in this way is positive, since it points to the aforementioned creative act: the concretion of nothingness into forms. In particular, the aesthetic quality that concerns us here, “free from attachment,” matches the teaching of “no hindrance” or “unobstructed.”²³ In the Buddhist tradition, it may refer to a type of conduct that is not constrained by the restrictions of customary morality or mundane societal expectations.²⁴ As an aesthetic-religious quality expressed in the freedom from conventions, it is not against any principle, pattern, law, or rule. Hisamatsu argues that the freedom in question falls within the rules of reason.²⁵ It is not that law is bad, as Nishitani Keiji, another Kyoto School philosopher, clarifies with regard to the Zen standpoint; rather, what is bad is to fix one’s self on some universal.²⁶ The Formless Self, lacking a fixed form, can freely adopt any form without being attached to it.²⁷

To elucidate this Self in terms of modern philosophy, while still reminiscent of Dōgen’s views, Hisamatsu specifies that this self should not be understood as the subject against the object, for, in the true self, there is neither subject nor object. The awareness of this self is not of something else but of itself. Since there is no duality between that which is aware and that which comes to awareness, Hisamatsu posits that the Buddhist term *kenshō*²⁸ is more adequate to describe this self-awareness than the usual notion of self-consciousness:

Kenshō is the perfectly non-noesis-noema awareness; it denotes the dancing truth, full of vigorous activity, of the true self and certainly not a contemplative consciousness. In *kenshō*, nature is not the object but the subject. It is, if you want, a noesis without noema.²⁹

CONCLUSION

Following this line of reasoning, as Liang Kai’s Formless Self is expressed in the dancing Budai, the dancing truth expresses itself through the activity of the self-aware and unattached self. We could say that through his reflection on Zen aesthetics, Hisamatsu draws our attention to the creative process that underlies the work of art. Thus, Hisamatsu’s perspective does not only contribute to an understanding of the works of art as Zen—a perspective that should undoubtedly be complemented with the knowledge of their cultural and historical context—but it also shows their scope beyond said context and helps us grasp what lies at the basis of certain contemporary artistic practices.

Interestingly, in tune with the playful, open, and unrestricted aspects of Zen art that we have seen, the piece by Banksy mentioned at the beginning was not completely destroyed, but transformed into an entirely new piece, which the artist retrospectively titled *Love Is in the Bin*.³⁰

NOTES

1. Christopher Ives, "True Person, Formless Self: Lay Zen Master Hisamatsu Shin'ichi," in *Zen Masters*, ed. Steven Heine and Dale S. Wright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 231.
2. In 1958, it became the F.A.S. Society (Formless Self – All Mankind – Suprahistorical History).
3. *Shadatsu* 酒脱.
4. Originally, *Zen to bijutsu* 禅と美術 (Kyoto: Bokubisha, 1957), translated by Tokiwa Gishin as *Zen and the Fine Arts* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1971). In 1958, Hisamatsu had given a lecture at L'Association Française des Amis de l'Orient in France. See his "Le Zen et les Beaux-Arts," *Arts Asiatiques* 6, no. 4 (1959): 243–58. Also, in English: "On Zen Art," *The Eastern Buddhist* 1, no. 2 (1966): 21–33, and "The Nature of 'Sadō' Culture," *The Eastern Buddhist* 3, no. 2 (1970): 9–19.
5. Lynn Townsend White, Jr., "Conclusion: The Challenging Canons of Our Culture," in *Frontiers of Knowledge in the Study of Man*, ed. Lynn Townsend White, Jr. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956), 301–16, at 304–05.
6. Cf. Gregory Levine, "Two (or More) Truths: Reconsidering Zen Art in the West," in *Awakenings: Zen Figure Painting in Medieval Japan*, ed. Gregory Levine and Yukio Lippit (New York: Japan Society Gallery in Association with Yale University Press, 2007), 52–61; Gregory P. A. Levine, "Critical Zen Art History," *Journal of Art Historiography* 15 (2016), <https://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2016/11/levine.pdf>, accessed May 31, 2021.
7. "In order, however, to determine which calligraphic style or which style of painting or which music expresses a Zen style, one must have a thoroughly vivid Zen realization. If one lacks this realization, one probably will not be able to understand why a certain calligraphic style, a certain painting style, a certain piece of music or a certain living manner especially expresses Zen-meaning." Hisamatsu, "On Zen Art," 31.
8. Hisamatsu mentions, for instance, Okakura Kakuzō (also known as Okakura Tenshin) and Ernest Fenollosa (*Zen and the Fine Arts*, 32).
9. As a calligrapher, Hisamatsu was unorthodox, and he attempted to reform the tea ceremony of his time, which seemed to him to depart from the spirit of Zen with its tendencies towards mannerism (Hisamatsu, "The Nature of 'Sadō' Culture," 18).
10. Hisamatsu, "On Zen Art," 28–30.
11. Ives, "True Person," 232.
12. "Accordingly, the question is not how skillfully something may be realistically or impressionistically painted. It is rather a matter of how freely, as the self-expressing creative subject, the Formless Self expresses itself." Hisamatsu, *Zen and the Fine Arts*, 19. Cf. Paul Tillich and Hisamatsu Shin'ichi, "Dialogues, East and West: Conversations Between Paul Tillich and Hisamatsu Shin'ichi: Part One," *The Eastern Buddhist* 4, no. 2 (1971): 89–107, at 101.
13. "Dancing Budai" (Odori Hoteizu 踊布袋図) is a painting attributed to the Chinese painter Liang Kai (twelfth–thirteenth centuries) preserved in the Kōsetsu Museum of Art, Kobe.
14. 遊化三昧.
15. Paul Tillich and Hisamatsu Shin'ichi, "Dialogues, East and West: Conversations Between Paul Tillich and Hisamatsu Shin'ichi: Part Three," *The Eastern Buddhist* 6, no. 2 (1973): 87–114, at 89.
16. *Yuge* 遊戯, "wandering freely," can also be translated as "playing freely," "disporting oneself freely." The Chinese character 遊 originally meant "to travel," but it can also mean "to swim," "float," "drift," "wander," "roam," and 戲 "frolic," "play," "sport."
17. *Asobi* 遊び or *yuge jintsū* 遊戯神通, cf. William R. LaFleur, *The Karma of Words: Buddhism and the Literary Arts in Medieval Japan* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983), 54. The latter is mentioned, for instance, in Tendai Buddhism referring to the supremacy of Buddhas and bodhisattvas in being able to freely and joyfully lead and teach sentient beings, as well as the unobstructed, joyful powers of Buddhas and bodhisattva. See Paul Swanson, *Foundations of T'ien-T'ai Philosophy: The Flowering of the Two Truths Theory in Chinese Buddhism* (Berkeley, CA: Asian Humanities Press, 1989), 243.
18. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 7–9.
19. Frédéric Girard, *Vocabulaire du Bouddhisme japonais*, Tome II (Genève: Droz, 2008), 1610.
20. *Kono zammai ni yuke suruni* この三昧に遊化するに. See *Dōgen zenji zenshū* 『道元禅師全集』 [Complete Works of Zen Master Dōgen], Volume I, ed. Dōshū Ōkubo (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1969–1970). It seems that in a later version of *Shōbōgenzō's* fascicle *Ben-dōwa* (Discourse on the Practice of the Way), the characters of *yuge* 遊戯 become *yuke* 遊化, which would mean "go out and expound the teaching"—see Shohaku Okumura, *Soto Zen: An Introduction to Zazen* (Tokyo: Shotoshu Shumuchō, 2017), 77—while, curiously, the second sinogram conveys the idea of "change" or "take the form of."
21. *Jijuyū-zanmai* 自受用三昧, literally, "self-enjoyed," that is, the "samadhi of self-realization," the "bliss of self," or the "samadhi of self receiving or accepting its function."
22. Hee-Jin Kim, *Eihei Dōgen: Mystical Realist* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2012), 55.
23. *Muge* 無礙. In Buddhism, this term is used in the central doctrines of the Huayan school (J. Kegan), which Hisamatsu refers to in "Dialogues: Part One," 100.
24. *Mugegyō* 無礙行, "unhindered action" or "unconstrained conduct," appears with this meaning in the *Avatamsakasutra*, see Robert E. Buswell Jr. and Donald S. Lopez Jr., *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 2918.
25. Hisamatsu, *Zen and the Fine Arts*, 36.
26. Nishitani Keiji, "I-and-Thou," in *The Buddha Eye: An Anthology of the Kyoto School*, ed. Frederick Franck (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 58.
27. This can be related to the process of learning traditional arts indicated in Japanese as *shuhari* 守破離. *shu* means "respect" the rules, exercise imitation, be faithful to tradition; *ha* means "infringe," go beyond the rules, invent and renew; *ri* means "separate," which alludes to the need to separate oneself from both, to hold on to the forms and therefore to the personality of the master, not to one's own transgressive and creative abilities and therefore to one's own personality. *Ri* proves to have incorporated the norms to the point of violating and surpassing them, and to have separated oneself from the reference to the self that has expressed itself with such force.
28. 見性, "seeing one's nature."
29. Quoted in Hoshino Gempō, "Hisamatsu Sensei's Theory of Zen and Shin Buddhism," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 9 (1989): 107.
30. For more on Zen arts and Zen aesthetics, see A. Minh Nguyen, ed., *New Essays in Japanese Aesthetics* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), 3–6, 10–13, 45–50, 63–67, 113–17, 123–29, 275–78, 341–47, 354–64.

The Enlightenment of Things: Living with Everyday Objects

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ABSTRACT

In her best-selling book *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*, Marie Kondo advocates expressing gratitude to the objects you are about to discard. Having regard for the “life” of non-sentient objects is not new; rather, it is an important thread in the Japanese aesthetic tradition where art, ethics, and metaphysics converge. This essay aims to elucidate this perspective by discussing its roots in Japanese Buddhism, drawing on Shingon, Zen, and Pure Land teachings. I also discuss the literary tradition of *tsukumogami*, tools that obtain spirits after years of use. In order to illustrate the theoretical discussion, I draw on Ishiuchi Miyako’s photography series *Mother’s* (2000–2005), which documents daily life objects from her deceased mother. Overall, I aim to further an aesthetics of everyday life, arguing that such regard for non-sentient things has the potential to transform how we engage with the environment around us. It cultivates an aesthetic sensibility that appreciates the uniqueness of each thing, even those with perceived deficiencies, and nurtures an ethic that aims to help all things flourish and reach their full potential.

INTRODUCTION

In her popular book *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*, Marie Kondo¹ gives the following advice: “[T]he best way to choose what to keep and what to throw away is to take each item in one’s hand and ask: ‘Does this spark joy?’ If it does, keep it. If not, dispose of it.”² This assessment is an internal dialogue where the individual reflects on themselves through the things they have accumulated; Kondo even likens it to a meditative state. However, she goes further and suggests that it is a *conversation*. She advises against listening to music or watching TV while tidying to avoid distracting “the internal dialogue between the owner and his or her belongings.”³

Kondo amplifies this point throughout the book. She progressively talks about things as living partners that have feelings and with which we can converse. For example, folding clothes “is really a form of dialogue with our wardrobe. . . . It’s like a sudden revelation—*So this is how you always wanted to be folded!*—a historical moment in which your mind and the piece of clothing connect.”⁴ Coins that are stored and unused are “stripped of their dignity.”⁵ A handbag is “a hard worker” that “utters no word of criticism” for the demands the owner places on it.⁶ Even the house is included, as Kondo encourages the dweller to greet it daily: “You will sense its pleasure passing through like a gentle breeze.”⁷ This way of viewing things as alive and treating them with respect is made most explicit in the following:

Express your appreciation to every item that supported you during the day. . . . Of course, I know some people find it hard to believe that inanimate objects respond to human emotion. . . . Still, we often hear about athletes who take loving care of their sports gear, treating it almost as if it were sacred. I think the athletes instinctively sense the power of these objects. If we treated all things we use in our daily life, whether it is our computer, our handbag, or our pens and pencils, with the same care that athletes give to their equipment, we could greatly increase the number of dependable “supporters” in our lives. The act of possessing is a very natural part of our daily life, not something reserved for some special match or contest.⁸

For Kondo, every object that we encounter each day is an opportunity to form and develop a mutually supportive relationship.

Kondo’s conception of mundane daily objects like handbags and pens as “dependable supporters” and intuition of the sacredness of this bond with the owner are expressed visually in the profound photographs of Ishiuchi Miyako. Since 2000, Ishiuchi’s work has especially focused on series that intimately explore the lives of objects after their owners are gone, such as her mother (*Mother’s*, 2000–2005), the artist Frida Kahlo (*Frida by Ishiuchi*, 2012), and anonymous victims of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima (ひろしま/*hiroshima*, 2007–). *Mother’s* includes photos of lipstick (Fig. 1), shoes, a wig, a hairbrush, dentures, and undergarments. Coupled with these objects are detailed closeups she had previously taken of her mother’s body, highlighting scars, making the owner and owned inseparable, imbuing the silent objects with both a sense of the presence of the absent owner and the continuing life of the object.

Kondo’s comments about having regard for the “life” of non-sentient objects and Ishiuchi’s photos that seem to preserve this life are not new; rather, they echo an important thread in the Japanese tradition where aesthetics, ethics, and metaphysics converge around the human-made things that support our daily lives. In the following, I will tease out this thread, focusing in particular on contributions from the Buddhist tradition that entertain the possibility of the enlightenment of non-sentient objects and the path through which they may achieve enlightenment.⁹ I will conclude by returning to Kondo and Ishiuchi to reflect more broadly on how having regard for non-sentient things has the potential to transform how we engage with the



Figure 1. Ishiuchi Miyako (Japanese, born 1947), *Mother’s* #36, 2002–2005, chromogenic print. © Ishiuchi Miyako. Image courtesy of The Third Gallery Aya.

environment around us, especially the quotidian objects that support our mundane existence.

THE POSSIBILITY OF ENLIGHTENMENT FOR THINGS

Can non-sentient things attain highest enlightenment or Buddhahood? In the eighth century, Buddhist thinkers in China and Japan began to consider this question as a logical extension of the Mahāyāna tradition, which developed a teaching about the progressive enlightenment of all sentient beings. Saichō (766–822), founder of the Tendai school in Japan, used the phrase “the Buddha-nature of Trees and Rocks,” but he did not elaborate.¹⁰ Over the following centuries, the Tendai school progressively defended either the possibility of plants achieving Buddhahood, or that they already were in an enlightened state.

However, it was the Shingon school that would take the idea of the Buddhahood of non-sentient things to its furthest extreme. This originates in the thought of Kūkai (774–835), Shingon’s founder, who asserts the Buddhahood of non-sentient things based on their participation in the *dharmakāya* (法身, *J. hosshin*). This is the Dharma-body, a metaphysical ideal of which all things, sentient and nonsentient, are manifestations and in which all things are interrelated. Kūkai comments:

The explanation of the Buddhahood of insentient trees and plants is as follows: the Dharmakāya consists of the Five Great Elements within which space and plants-and-trees are included. Both this space and these plants-and-trees are the dharmakāya. Even though one might see the coarse form of plants-and-trees, it is with the Buddha-eye that the subtle color can be seen. Therefore, without any alteration in what is in itself, trees-and-plants may, unobjectionably, be referred to as Buddha.¹¹

By connecting non-sentient things to this deeper reality, Kūkai laid the groundwork for subsequent Shingon thinkers to give sustained attention to non-sentient phenomena, particularly material objects.¹² This is exemplified in a remarkable way in the *Tsukumogami ki* (付喪神記, The Record of Tool Specters), an example of the genre of short, entertaining, and edifying tales popular from the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries.¹³

The text opens by introducing the custom of throwing out old tools in a year-end cleaning because of the belief that after one hundred years they will receive souls and trick people. This leads into the narrative, where a group of tools gather to strategize how they can get revenge on the people who threw them out. A string of Buddhist prayer beads advocates benevolence, but he is beaten by a club and kicked out of the group.

On New Year’s Eve, the creation god reorganizes everything, and it is then that the tools receive souls and become specters in the form of men, women, demons, animals, etc. They go on to exact revenge by eating people and causing a nuisance. Buddhist protectors attack

the malevolent specters with wheels of fire. Rather than destroy the tools, however, the divine figures tell them to seek Buddhahood.

Meanwhile, the prayer beads advanced to the stage of a Buddhist priest, so the tools come back, repentant, and seek its spiritual guidance. They become novices and study the precepts of Buddhism with a sense of urgency: “If possible we would like to receive profound teachings and attain Buddhahood swiftly.”¹⁴ The priest responds that the only way to attain Buddhahood immediately and in one’s current body is through the three-fold mystic practices of the Shingon sect (mudra, mantra, and meditation), and goes on to tell the story about how the founder, Kūkai, proved that it was possible to enter into an enlightened state during one’s lifetime. The tools agree to follow the way of Shingon and eventually all the tools achieve Buddhahood in their current bodies. It is then in the conclusion that the text applies the tale, unashamedly promoting Shingon:

Regarding the teaching of realizing Buddhahood by nonsentient beings, although both Tendai and Kegon sects also preach this, their teachings are amorphous and they have not mastered all the subtleties. Therefore, while other sects advocate only *sōmoku jōbutsu* (the enlightenment of plants), the teaching of the Three Mysteries of the Shingon sect alone goes so far as to say *sōmoku hijō hosshin shugyō jōbutsu* (plants and nonsentient beings become Buddhas by arousing the desire for enlightenment and performing ascetic and religious practices). . . . If attainment of Buddhahood by awakening and training is possible for animate beings, how much more so for the nonsentient beings?¹⁵

Tsukumogami ki illustrates how abstract philosophical discussions about the place of non-sentient things in a Buddhist cosmology can spread on a popular level. It can also serve as an impetus to ask broader questions such as the following: If non-sentient things may also attain enlightenment, just as humans can, what is the relation between the two? If all is interrelated, is there a role humans may play in the enlightenment of things?

THE PURSUIT OF ENLIGHTENMENT FOR THINGS

One potential way humans may contribute to the enlightenment of things is by cultivating a sensitivity to materiality and time, which is part of a basic change of mindset from thinking in dualities; for example, person vs. thing. Of particular importance here is the Buddhist teaching of *shinnyo* (真如), or “suchness.” *Shinnyo* denotes “the true form of things”¹⁶ and it requires overcoming logical distinctions and subjective attachments to grasp a thing as it is internally without turning it into an object.¹⁷

Perceiving things in their “suchness” requires a particular kind of thinking. The Zen priest Dōgen (1200–1253) called this kind of thinking *hishiryō* (非思量), or “without-thinking.”¹⁸ This contrasts with thinking (*shiryō*, 思量) and not-thinking (*fushiryō*, 不思量). Speaking about the difference between these, Michael Marra comments:

The peculiarity of “without thinking” is its nonconceptual and prereflective mode of consciousness, which makes the individual perceive reality as it is (*genjōkōan*), without letting consciousness and the construction of categories intervene in the modification and distortion of reality. . . . Reality is then perceived in its phenomenological aspect of constant transformation (*mujō*). . . .¹⁹

Sensing things in this way, “without-thinking,” has qualitative and quantitative aspects that are relevant for the aesthetic experience of anything. Qualitatively, *shinnyo* “cultivates an attentive and respectful attitude toward the characteristics essential to defining its individuality.”²⁰ Quantitatively, if each thing is to be appreciated in its “suchness,” as it is without the restriction of subjective attachments, this levels the perceptual playing field and makes anything a potentially significant object of attention, because it will communicate ultimate reality, but in a completely unique and particular way—and unavailable in any other way—within the immanent. Furthermore, usual hierarchical binaries such as beautiful/ugly, perfect/imperfect, important/unimportant are also destabilized, because if even common, imperfect things express their own intrinsic Buddha nature, then they should be valued as they are.

In his essay “The Dharma Gate of Beauty,” Japanese folkcraft advocate Yanagi Sōetsu (1889–1961) emphasized this way of appreciating “ugly” or “imperfect” things as they are. Yanagi discovered the basis for a beauty beyond the duality of beauty and ugliness in the fourth vow of Dharmakara in the *Larger Sutra of Eternal Life*, where it states, “unless there is no beauty and ugliness among them, I will not attain highest enlightenment.”²¹ Yanagi argues that achieving this beauty is quite simple; it depends on experiencing the thing in its “suchness.”²² This is to recognize the beauty naturally inherent in all things; it is only humans who distinguish between beautiful and ugly:

Since the nature inherent in all things is prior to beauty and ugliness, if instead of striving for more beauty, everything stays within its original nature, there is no reason why anything should fall into ugliness. The nature of things is such that everything, however clumsy, is beautiful just as it is, even in its clumsiness. And yet, having inflated opinions of themselves, most people endeavor by their own means to work their influence on things.²³

For Yanagi, things in nature naturally exist in this state, and can remind humans of it, but for humans to enter it what is required is a change of mindset. In words that echo Dōgen’s “without-thinking” noted above, he says:

Since this means a liberation from attachment to things, it also means the free mind. In Buddhism, becoming free-mind [means] returning to the “non-abiding mind.” This “non-abiding mind” is the “mind of non-obstruction” inherent in the Buddhist way of life. . . . To conclude, if a [person] lives a life of free-mindedness, then whatever [they]

make will avoid ugliness. . . . Ugliness finally is a representation of an unfree state, and therefore is an indication of bondage.”²⁴

A free mind that goes beyond conventional dualisms created by human attachments—skilled/clumsy, high/low art, beauty/ugliness—takes one into what Yanagi calls the “Pure Land of Beauty,” a place where all things, sentient and nonsentient, are liberated and participate in a free beauty that transcends rigid classifications and discriminations.²⁵

This egalitarian feature of Buddhist thought helps explain in part Yanagi’s appreciation of traditional folk craft in East Asia, and more broadly the appreciation in Japanese culture for the quotidian and imperfect. A preeminent example is the *wabi* (わび) tea ceremony that came to prominence in the sixteenth century and is exemplified in the aesthetics of the tea master Sen no Rikyū (1522–1591). This form of tea ceremony placed a high value on mundane, misshapen, or even broken implements as expressing *wabi*, a form of beauty marked by simplicity, imperfection, and austerity.²⁶

This appreciation of the materiality of things in the *wabi* aesthetic, especially their fragility, has a temporal aspect and is related to the Buddhist teaching of impermanence (無情, *mujō*). This teaching asserts that all things are in a constant state of flux, arising and passing away. Backward looking with nostalgia at the past or forward with longing to some meaningful *telos* are misguided ways of perceiving and dealing with the existential situation of constant change. This is also exemplified in the tea ceremony. As Yuriko Saito describes it:

Though highly stylized and guided by almost excruciatingly detailed instructions, the overall purpose of the *wabi* tea is to celebrate and appreciate the aesthetic experience brought about by the chance meeting of many elements beyond human control. The occasion thus created by meticulous preparation *and* chance is for one time only, referred to as *ichigo ichie* (one chance, one meeting). In a sense, this aesthetic activity represents our entire world and life where the ruling principles are transience, insufficiency, imperfection, and accidents.²⁷

While certainly a formalized activity set aside from daily life, the tea ceremony has as its goal providing an intense microcosm of what our entire lives are in their ephemeral beauty. Likewise, the appreciation of aged and imperfect artifacts both in the tea ceremony and more broadly finds an aesthetic value in the way time interacts with materiality; the ways beginnings and endings are remembered and anticipated in the present moment of the thing’s life as it engages a person who faces a similar situation. “By celebrating the aesthetic value of such objects,” Saito observes, “human submission to and eventual affirmation of life with all its contingencies become aestheticized.”²⁸ However, this experience is not merely aesthetic. Nor is it only for the individual. Instead, by sensitively attending to things in their uniqueness and recognizing a common fellowship in impermanence, humans may support the liberation, the enlightenment, of things.

Returning to Yanagi's celebration of folk crafts created by anonymous craftspeople, Ronald Y. Nakasone notes how Yanagi's "proposal for the 'liberation of things' radically extends our understanding of sentience and spiritual transformation."²⁹ Humans do not merely make and use things with no consequence; rather, their spiritual state has a direct impact on the life of the objects. As Yanagi comments:

If the article is beautiful, we may say that it has achieved Buddhahood, for it is not [humans] alone that may become Buddha. A beautiful artifact may be defined as one that reposes peacefully where it aspires to be. A [person] who achieves Buddhahood has entered the realm that lies beyond that of duality; by the same token, beauty is that which has been liberated—or freed—from duality.³⁰

Liberation, enlightenment, the Buddhahood of the object is intimately linked to the Buddhahood of the person who makes it and uses it.

EVERYDAY ENLIGHTENMENT

One may wonder how far the Buddhahood of things can be extended. Speaking of austere, rough Korean bowls valued by tea ceremony masters like Rikyū and, centuries later, Yanagi seems plausible, but what about the mass-produced, disposable objects we employ on a daily basis, the clothes we buy for only a season or even a single vacation? Looking at Ishiuchi's photograph of her mother's lipstick, where does the Buddha potential originate and how is it realized? In the cosmetic manufacturer? In her mother who used it? In Ishiuchi's photograph? Across the interplay of these?

The central themes of Marie Kondo's philosophy of tidying are service and joy. Things desire to serve, support their owner, and the owner in turn cares for things with thoughtful attention. This applies even to the act of storage, which Kondo refers to as "the sacred act of choosing a home for my belongings." Just as humans find peace and security in having a safe place, "possessions that have a place where they belong and to which they are returned each day for a rest are more vibrant."³¹ The result of this mutually supportive relationship is joy that is manifest in both the person and the thing:

When you examine things closely, you can begin to discern whether or not those things bring their owner joy. When a woman is in love, the change in her is apparent to everyone around her. . . . In the same way, things that are loved by their owner and treated with care are vibrant and radiate an aura of wanting to be of more service to their owner. Things that are cherished shine. . . . The genuine emotion of joy resides in the body and in the possessions of the owner, and therefore it can't be concealed.³²

Kondo then applies this criterion of joy to deciding what to keep and what to throw away when organizing one's environment.

One of the most unsettling aspects of reading Kondo on tidying is how she relates working with clients who throw out sometimes over one hundred garbage bags full of things that no longer "spark joy." The popularity of Kondo's book is symptomatic of these deeper issues raised by rampant material consumerism, which in turn raises the question: If indeed there is a Buddhahood of things, are humans impeding this in their avaricious production, consumption, and disposal of things? Kondo does not address this directly, but her solution is to not simply throw things out, especially in exasperation, but to take each thing in one's hand, consider whether it sparks joy, and, if not, to express gratitude for its service, no matter how minimal, and send it on.

Then what do the things in our homes that don't spark joy actually feel? I think they simply want to leave. . . . For this reason, when you part with something, don't sigh and say, "Oh, I never used this," Instead, send it off joyfully with words like, "Thank you for finding me," Make your parting a ceremony to launch them on a new journey. Celebrate this occasion with them. I truly believe that our possessions are even happier and more vibrant when we let them go than when we first get them.³³

While this may sound overly optimistic about putting things in landfill, it is possible to argue that cultivating a sense of what sparks joy in oneself may help ameliorate the deleterious side of material consumerism. If the focus shifts from only thinking of what is cheapest or most convenient for oneself to giving consideration of the things we bring into existence through our creating, purchasing, and using—one approach being the sensitivity to materiality and time delineated from a Buddhist perspective above—this may in turn reduce thoughtless waste of natural resources and callous use and disposal of things.

This tension between the ideal, surrounding ourselves with quality, well-made things that we joyfully share our life with, and the real, the haphazard and often thoughtless way we acquire and use things because of numerous factors (convenience, economics, availability) pervades Ishiuchi's photos. The quotidian thing stands alone, usually with no background that would distract from it, and it fills the frame as the body of a person in a portrait would. Looking closely at things serves as a means for Ishiuchi to both reflect on the people who owned them and the things themselves. Speaking about the series *Mother's*, she notes, "What I have now are only the things that my mother left behind for me. I bring them out into the light one by one, to sea- their [sic] image onto photograph, as a farewell to her."³⁴ As with Kondo, the thing becomes a medium for dialogue, this time with another person. At the same time, Ishiuchi has spoken of how when photographing things such as dresses, it becomes a meditation on the life of the thing, how cloth was woven, cut, sewn, and worn.³⁵

The peculiar power of Ishiuchi's photos is that they simultaneously preserve the uniqueness of items and their owner—her mother, Frida Kahlo, victims of Hiroshima—while creating a microcosm of all the quotidian things that

humans make, use, and discard. As Miryam Sas notes, it is a “heightening of specificity until it becomes so precise and so clearly seen that it ruptures from within, paradoxically bringing us closer to the unique particularity of the objects and memories of our own lives, and of those close to us.”³⁶ As in the Buddhist Japanese aesthetics discussed above, attention to the suchness of a material thing leads to an awareness that overcomes dichotomies that would divide the self from other people or things and discriminate between beautiful/ugly, perfect/imperfect, or important/unimportant.

The lipstick of Ishiuchi’s mother bears the trace of the particular woman and the thing itself stands in the photo with a calm dignity. The person is transposed into the object and the object is transposed into the photograph as if each participant found enlightenment as it is enfolded into the next stage. The photo is a sort of ascetic practice in the best sense that liberates the object—think of the *tsukumogami* who strove to attain Buddhahood—and that in turn provides guidance for the artist and viewer to develop their own spiritual state in relation to all the things—sentient and non-sentient—that they co-exist with. It is a mutually enlightening process, where person and thing at different times play the role of teacher or disciple.

While one may hesitate to use the word joy, as Kondo does, perhaps a better word is equanimity. Ishiuchi’s photos recognize the fragility and fallibility of human lives and the lives of things—how we fail things in our joint quest for enlightenment but also how we get it right sometimes—and how they interrelate in the broader flow of impermanence.

NOTES

1. Regarding the order of Japanese names, I have written Marie Kondo’s name in the English order because this is used in her official English website, <https://konmari.com/>. I have retained the Japanese order for Ishiuchi Miyako, as this is the common way her name is written in English publications. For works cited, if the work was written in English, I have used the English order. If a work was translated from the Japanese, I have retained the Japanese order.
2. Marie Kondo, *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up: The Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organizing*, trans. Cathy Hirano (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2014), 41.
3. Kondo, *Life-Changing Magic*, 58.
4. Kondo, *Life-Changing Magic*, 74–77, italics in the original.
5. Kondo, *Life-Changing Magic*, 114.
6. Kondo, *Life-Changing Magic*, 153.
7. Kondo, *Life-Changing Magic*, 190.
8. Kondo, *Life-Changing Magic*, 169–70.
9. The indigenous Japanese tradition of Shintō undoubtedly plays a role in this perspective, but for sake of space and focus is not discussed here.
10. William R. LaFleur, “Saigyō and the Buddhist Value of Nature,” in *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*, ed. J. Baird Callicott and Roger T. Ames (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), 186.
11. Quoted in LaFleur, “Saigyō and the Buddhist Value of Nature,” 186–87.
12. See Fabio Rambelli, *Buddhist Materiality: A Cultural History of Objects in Japanese Buddhism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 19–20.
13. See Noriko T. Reider, “Animating Objects: *Tsukumogami ki* and the Medieval Illustration of Shingon Truth,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 36, no. 2 (2009): 232, <https://nirc.nanzan-u.ac.jp/nfile/2986>, accessed May 18, 2021.
14. “*Tsukumogami ki* 付喪神記 (The Record of Tool Specters),” trans. Noriko T. Reider, *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 36, no. 2 (2009): 1–19, Online-Only Supplement, 16, <https://nirc.nanzan-u.ac.jp/nfile/2987>, accessed May 18, 2021.
15. “*Tsukumogami ki*,” 18.
16. James W. Heisig, Thomas P. Kasulis, and John C. Maraldo, “Glossary,” in *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook*, ed. James W. Heisig, Thomas P. Kasulis, and John C. Maraldo (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2011), 1265.
17. See Yoshifumi Ueda, “Thinking in Buddhist Philosophy,” *Philosophical Studies of Japan* 5 (1964): 88–89.
18. A related concept is *mushin* (無心), or “no-mind.”
19. Michael Marra, “Japanese Aesthetics: The Construction of Meaning,” *Philosophy East and West* 45, no. 3 (1995): 371.
20. Yuriko Saito, “Japanese Aesthetics: Historical Overview,” in *Oxford Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, vol. 2, ed. Michael Kelly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 550; Yuriko Saito, “Introduction: Historical Overview of Japanese Aesthetics,” in *New Essays in Japanese Aesthetics*, ed. A. Minh Nguyen (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), xl.
21. Quoted in Yanagi Sōetsu, “The Dharma Gate of Beauty,” trans. Bernard Leach, *Eastern Buddhist*, New Series 13, no. 2 (1979): 5.
22. See Yanagi, “The Dharma Gate of Beauty,” 9.
23. Yanagi, “The Dharma Gate of Beauty,” 11.
24. Yanagi Sōetsu, “Pure Land of Beauty,” adapted by Bernard Leach, *Eastern Buddhist*, New Series 9, no. 1 (1976): 32–33.
25. See Yanagi, “Pure Land of Beauty,” 23–26.
26. See Yuriko Saito, “The Japanese Aesthetics of Imperfection and Insufficiency,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55, no. 4 (1997): 382.
27. Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 188, emphasis in original. Cf. Saito, “Introduction: Historical Overview of Japanese Aesthetics,” xxxi.
28. Saito, “The Japanese Aesthetics of Imperfection and Insufficiency,” 383.
29. Ronald Y. Nakasone, “Giving Form to the Formless: Yangai Sōetsu and the Pure Land of Beauty,” in 北畠典生博士古稀記念論文集日本仏教文化論叢, *Kitabatake Tensei hakushi koki kinen ronbunshū Nippon Bukkyō bunka ronshō* (Essays on Japanese Buddhist Culture in Honor of Dr. Tensei Kitabatake on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday) (Kyoto: Nagata Bunshōdō, 1998), 466.
30. Yanagi Sōetsu, “Buddhist Idea of Beauty,” in *The Unknown Craftsman: A Japanese Insight into Beauty*, adapted by Bernard Leach (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1989), 129.
31. Kondo, *Life-Changing Magic*, 171.
32. Kondo, *Life-Changing Magic*, 200.
33. Kondo, *Life-Changing Magic*, 192–93.
34. Ishiuchi Miyako, *Mother’s* (Tokyo: Sokyū-sha, 2002), 55.
35. See Lena Fritsch, “The Bittersweet Beauty of Ephemerality – Ishiuchi Miyako’s Photography,” in *Ishiuchi Miyako: Hasselblad Award 2014*, ed. Dragana Vujanovic and Louise Wolthers (Heidelberg: Kehrer, 2014), 139.
36. Miryam Sas, “Second Skin,” in Amanda Maddox, *Ishiuchi Miyako: Postwar Shadows* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2015), 126–27.

II. MORAL DIMENSIONS OF JAPANESE AESTHETICS

A Cut Above: Aesthetic and Moral Virtuosity in Japanese Dō

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the aesthetic and moral facets of Japanese *dō* such as the Way of Tea or the Way of the Sword. As artistic paths, they aim at personal flourishing within an ethos of *shugyō* that embraces lifelong striving. Thus, they offer unique soteriological and artistic methods to thrive. These Ways, I argue, normatively embody cognitive, aesthetic, affective, and moral dimensions of personhood that amalgamate into improvisational virtuosic performances. A holistic, situated, and enactive model of embodied cognition helps explain *dō* given that they are enacted by way of attentive and polished ritualized movement. Pivotal, and enabling consummate transformative action, are *hōben* (improvisational virtuosity) and *mushin* (engaged presence). *Wabi* (austere beauty) and *yūgen* (deep mystery) illustratively embody how normatively complex *dō* blend aesthetic and moral facets.

AN ILL-FATED ENCOUNTER – INTRODUCTION

Once upon a time during the Tokugawa Shogunate (1603–1868), a master of the Way of Tea, *chadō*, had an ill-fated encounter with a disreputable *rōnin*, masterless samurai, that ended with a challenge to a duel. The tea master, sure that he was to be cut down, convinced the *rōnin* to momentarily postpone the fight under the ruse of finishing an errand for his lord. Having never wielded a sword, he went to a nearby fencing school he had noticed earlier to ask for advice on how to die honorably so as not to embarrass his lord. After listening to his account, and before teaching him how to die, the sword master asked him to serve a cup of tea. The tea virtuoso forgot about his plight and fully gave himself to the task of preparing the tea. Impressed by the tea master's skill and complete absorption, the fencing master exclaimed, "There you are! No need for you to learn the art of death! The state of mind in which you are now is enough for you to cope with any swordman."¹ The sword master proceeded to explain that, once facing his opponent, the tea master was to act as if he were going to serve tea. Then, he should ready his garments for the duel. When collected, he should raise his sword above his head and strike down as the opponent attacked. The sword master expected it would end in an honorable mutual slaying. Upon looking at the tea master, the *rōnin* immediately noticed the change in attitude: the erstwhile fear had been replaced by a resoluteness to die there and then. One cut would decide their fate. Cowering, the *rōnin* asked for forgiveness and took off running.

This story illustrates a number of issues at the heart of this commentary on virtuosity in the context of Japanese artistic

dō: a skillful ability to handle veritable predicaments (even lethal situations), the tea master's concentration, and the implicit normative principles and corporeal and kinetic nature underlying such arts. All these present an aesthetic and moral mode of ameliorative self-transformation. Indeed, *dō*, as fulfilling paths, embody normative ways of life that blend cognitive, aesthetic, affective, and moral dimensions into improvisational virtuosic performance.² The next five sections will discuss the following: 1) Japanese *dō* as unique soteriological and artistic paths; 2) *dō* in terms of ritualized embodiment both in their traditional context and in relation to embodied cognition; 3) *hōben* and *mushin* as virtuosic and transformative; 4) aesthetic and moral facets of *dō*, specifically *wabi* and *yūgen*; and 5) *shugyō* as lifelong striving.

PRIVILEGED ARTISTIC PATHS – JAPANESE DŌ

Even the humblest, most ordinary objects and simplest everyday-life moments are highly aestheticized in Japan. Indeed, the commonplace hides in plain sight a sophisticated aesthetics. This is most evident in Japanese *dō*, deeply transformative practices such as the Way of Tea (also referred to as *chanoyu*, tea ceremony), *kadō* (Way of Flowers), and *kendō* (Way of the Sword), as well as related traditional arts such as *Nō* theater. Through their highly refined ritualized techniques, Japanese *dō* act as soteriological methods for self-realization and spiritual liberation. An ethos that seeks flourishing through relentless dedication to seemingly unachievable perfection is vital. Crucially, this manifests immanently and concretely in action and individuals rather than through abstract frameworks and principles. Exemplars³ include groundbreaking Zen priests Dōgen Zenji (1200–1253) and Takuan Sōhō (1573–1645), formidable swordsman Musashi Miyamoto (1584–1645), virtuoso *Nō* actor Zeami Motokiyo (1363–1443), multifaceted Buddhist nun Ōtagaki Rengetsu (1791–1875), and contemporary *takumi* (master craftsman) *kirie* (Japanese papercutting) artist Kojima Nahoko (1981–).⁴

Japanese *dō* afford transformative openings where action and practice are fundamental, formative, and foundational, and precede theoretical analysis and intellectual understanding. In other words, epistemically, embodied intuition leads to conceptual discernment. Tea masters' posture, hands, and movements refine their character and enable them to acquire Socratic insight from the very tea brewing and tea serving. Thereby, they cultivate the capacity for fully attentive and fluid engagement in their actions while remaining aware of the broader situation, which includes being attuned to the mood of the ceremony's attendees. In this way, they are poised and prepared to skillfully redirect the overall ambiance and energy in the room, e.g., kindly easing anxiety or subtly tempering overenthusiasm.

To be clear, methodology does not preclude intellectualization necessarily. It is a matter of emphasis and circumstance. Verbalization and instruction often get in the way, as Eugen Herrigel frustratingly found out when learning *kyūdō* (the Way of the Bow).⁵ Sōtō Zen master Dōgen fiercely advocated for the primacy of *zazen* (seated meditation) as *shikantaza*: One just sits

in a state of without-thinking and thereby bypasses any sort of conceptualization or verbalization. Yet, he wrote extensive treatises that recursively commented—both philosophically and doctrinally—on this tension between *logos*, propositional thought, and action. At the core lies the problem of transmission: how to communicate what is not just ineffable but manifestly personal *qua* experienced. Sometimes, the answer is to just do it. Further, lessons are to be in-corpor-ated—integrated psychosomatically: the union between mentality and corporality is not a metaphysical given but phenomenologically experienced and an achievement.⁶ As such, it is trainable, subject to being perfected, and liable to both improvement and deterioration.⁷

Biomechanically, Western sports and fine and performing arts share kinematic facets and formal elements with but differ in crucial aspects from Japanese *dō*. The most salient difference is that, as Robert E. Carter explains, “There is nothing like this understanding in the West, which does not employ its arts and crafts, or its sports to achieve spiritual self-transformation.”⁸ While sports and the arts can result in existential insights, this is neither commonplace nor fully comparable.⁹ Rather than results and victory in sports or self-expression for its sake in the arts, in the Japanese case the onus lies on striving after a *personal* performative excellence.¹⁰ As Carter points out, “Self-cultivation by means of the Japanese arts is transformative. It can yield enlightened seeing and enlightened being.”¹¹ In *dō*, this happens in and through *the* body.

INCARNATE TRACES ON PAPER – THE ARTS AND EMBODIED COGNITION

To discuss the artistic case in more detail, the “real” work of art is not the painting (this medium being the clearest case) but the artist and her performance.¹² This is so in two ways: first, it refers back to the artist; second, it is less an aesthetics for an audience than one concerned with the artist’s own cultivation-through-performance (explored in the next section). To delve into the first issue, even when looking at a “simple” *sumi-e*, the Japanese minimalist monochromatic ink painting, the actual *object d’art* is but a finger pointing at the moon, to elicit a common Zen trope of fittingly obscure origin: the painting is not to be enjoyed *simply* for its overt aesthetic qualities, although this can be part of the process, but it should primarily lead discerning eyes to *how* the artist moved inclusive of her affective state.¹³

Viewers recreate kinesthetic and proprioceptive dynamics as they empathetically explore the lines on paper or silk. Whatever the image may depict, the point is to parse it for the artist’s character and her emotional state when creating it. The lines depicting a shriek on a dead branch, in swordsman Musashi’s drawing, evince the assurance, vigor, and determination of a warrior who finds himself self-composed and at peace yet ever alert.¹⁴ Contrastingly, the image of a samurai in a rush, accompanied by the witty lines of a poem about a romantic rendezvous reveal the whimsical and playful irreverence of Buddhist nun Rengetsu’s carefree joviality.¹⁵ Of course, what applies to calligraphy and painting more readily applies to other more physical arts.

A closer look at calligraphy is beneficial for two reasons. First, it is a relatively simple case that necessitates little in the way of familiarity with art forms, styles, or artistic periods. Second, it further elucidates the congruence between the cognitive framework discussed below and Japanese ritualized movement. Although the original analysis pertains to scholarship concerned with Chinese calligraphy, the insights are transferable given that Japanese kanji borrow Chinese characters and that hiragana transcriptions also rely on equivalent techniques and movements.

Calligraphy in East Asia is an *art* of writing in its own right; it is not simply about beautiful writing as in the West. Jean François Billeter says it is “an art of movement.”¹⁶ John Hay explains that there was a correspondence between looking at the characters themselves as being arteries and bones and the suggestion that they grasped kinesthetically the implications of movement.¹⁷ Such kinesthetic resonance, Billeter writes, makes it possible to “intuitively grasp our body” and simultaneously “gives us the power to give body to the characters themselves, that is, to make of them the expression of our lived body [*vécu corporel*; lived experience].”¹⁸ Michelle Merritt helps bring together movement and meaning, explaining that “our gestures just are communicative. In fact, gestures have been shown to alter our thinking patterns—facilitating, augmenting, and in some cases, impeding them.”¹⁹ The compelling evidence supports the view that gestures “are not mere movement, but instead are thought *in* movement.”²⁰ Moreover, Kenji Tokitsu clarifies that, in Japan, “the gesture,” whether technical or in everyday life, “was received as a total expression of the person making it.”²¹ Briefly put, East Asian calligraphy is an art of gesture. Further, calligraphy also partakes of morality for both calligrapher and reader. In the process of writing, the former inks down a model of her character as well as moral and artistic standards to follow while the latter traces these in his imagination and effectively co-creates a community.²²

In the case of Dōgen, who was as much a profound philosopher-monk as he was a skillful calligrapher, these points regarding calligraphy are particularly valid. Examining the *Fukanzazengi*, a sort of instruction manual to clearly guide acolytes how to properly sit in *zazen*, Charlotte Eubanks argues that Dōgen’s calligraphy “is a carefully orchestrated performance . . . it does precisely what it asks its readers to do: it sits calmly, evenly, and at poised attention in a real-world field of objects (trees, grasses, and so forth).”²³ Since the concern lies with Dōgen’s writing as performance, we can evoke Zeami’s analysis of the three essential endowments of the *Nō* actor and say that the lines immanently and materially record the Zen skin/flesh/bones that animate the monk’s brush.²⁴ This millenary virtuosity coheres with certain contemporary views of embodied cognition.

The version of embodied cognition that best supports the present analysis is holistic, situated, and enactive. As holistic and situated, it advances continuities in kind between lower and higher organisms, cognitive and affective modes, and psychophysical processes. A key element to accentuate is the mutual and *constitutive* relationality among performer, performance, and situation. As enactive,

it posits a two-level scaffolded intelligence. One layer involves mental representations as truth-bearing stand-ins that involve semantic content (meaning/intensionality) typical of linguistic sociocultural practices. The other layer operates without representations or mental content but *still* engages an environment-targeting intentionality that enacts dynamically according to the situation.²⁵

If tea or sword masters explain what they do to someone unfamiliar with the ceremony or dueling, this would engage the first layer. When one serves the cup of tea or the other cuts and parries, however, each relies on flexible, intelligent, embedded habits that act as repertoire from which to improvise as needed.²⁶ When it comes to performance, given that practice leads the way, it is the latter aspect that we are concerned with. Ritual and patterned movement infuses, intensifies, and incorporates our skills and virtues into a holistic relational performance.²⁷ The constraints of ritualized action embed past engagements as a repertory from which to open novel opportunities to act. These openings both nurture and test our skills. Improvement in this context thrives on the unique psychosomatic states characteristic of the improvisational *bodymind* that *dō* foster.

VIRTUOSITY IN ACTION – MUSHIN AND HÖBEN

Compared to mainstream spectator-centric Western artistic practices, within the framework of *dō* art is created less as object of appreciation than as execution of self-cultivating performance. Of course, the object or the performance is offered to others for appreciation oftentimes. Yet, if art pieces or performances are to partake of any value worth appreciating, this is premised on the artist's mastery of herself first and foremost. Somewhat paradoxically, even in cases where the primary concern of the artist is the delight of the audience, as Michiko Yusa attests regarding nonpareil *Nō* actor Zeami, the highest expression of the artform is concerned with the direct experience of *mushin*.²⁸

Mushin literally translates as “no-mind” or “without mind,” however, for our purposes, it is better conceived of as committed, awakened, virtuosic, and engaged *presence*: a skillful attentiveness that is improvisational and fully present. In this state, the artist, attuned to the situation, responds untrammelled and instantaneously. Much as the moonlight reflects on water, another common Buddhist trope, action takes place without delay. Rinzai Zen monk Takuan “brushed” a long missive to legendary samurai Yagyū Munenori (1571–1646) that in essence explained *mushin* as improvisational, immovable—in the sense of imperturbable—wisdom. In the Buddhist context, this is about not getting caught up in the karmic net of interdependence while still skillfully interpenetrating with phenomena; for the sword master, this is about not getting cut up by the adversary's sword while becoming more virtuous because more able; for the artist generally, this is about being attuned to audience, artwork, and herself in a way that her creativity flows unimpeded. In short, *mushin* is an improvisationally engaged presence that relies on without-thinking; this amounts to being present in things as they are.²⁹

On a broader scale, this concerns the Buddhist notion of *hōben* (Sanskrit, *upāya*), which usually translates as skillful or expedient means. As John Schroeder points out, *hōben* eschews metaphysical explanation for practical results in tune with the needs of the situation and the persons involved.³⁰ Functionally, it operates as a relational and improvisational virtuosity, as Peter D. Herschok argues, characterized by a liberating attentive mastery that works much as jazz musicians attune to unfolding acoustic dynamics and achieve creative synchrony expressed in shared appreciation of unlimited possibilities, thereby “giving birth to entirely new worlds.”³¹ In virtue of their underlying Buddhist ethos, *dō* bring to the table a clearer, firmer moral facet. They foster relational emancipation from karmic fetters through responsive improvisation—each in their own way. Indeed, if *dō* have methodological particularities, these are but different paths to the same destination: awakening or fulfilling self-transformation. Remarkably, this is achieved by means of tailored corporeal engagements that range from the meticulous but fluid movements of hands and fingers in tea masters to the taut yet comfortable intensity of *kyudō* archers.

The worry may arise that Japanese *dō* problematically instrumentalize the artistic process as a mere means to self-realization or awakening, thereby removing any meaning from the process itself. Accordingly, the practice becomes irrelevant so long as awakening takes place. Therefore, in themselves, they are valueless. A corollary is that this trivializes the aesthetic peculiarities of each art ultimately. Overtly, this seems to be the case. The arts *are* means to awakening. This poses the matter mistakenly, however. The Buddhist canon, particularly Zen, addresses this putative instrumentalization squarely and successfully. As Thomas P. Kasulis explains, practice, for Buddhists such as Dōgen, “is not simply the path to enlightenment, but it is enlightenment itself.”³² Herschok puts it thus, “*zazen* is not sitting to become a Buddha. *Zazen* is sitting as Buddha.”³³ Effectively and ideally, this applies to all *dō* and action generally, not just seated meditation. To wit, if we look at martial arts and swordsmanship, in his treatise on Musashi, Tokitsu explains that the traditional notion of *waza* (technique) “is not a means of achieving a preconceived end. . . . The process in itself constitutes the goal.”³⁴

Another way to confront the quandary is to subvert the means/ends relation. The problem arises with the application of instrumental rationality as the criterion of choice. As Garrett Thomson argues, we should never treat “our actions instrumentally” for, as mere instruments, just in virtue of being *instruments* they are valueless.³⁵ Instead, as he paradoxically puts it, we should think that “The ends are means to the means” or, alternatively, that “goals are means to non-instrumentally valuable activities, which are also means.”³⁶ Hence, completing the poem, painting, or hitting the target with the arrow are but incentives to more and better composing, drawing, or shooting in an ongoing process of improvement conditions and opportunities. In this way, the virtuosity itself becomes a way of life where noninstrumentality, and hence meaning, thoroughly permeates action. This is profoundly transformative as it results in engaged and appreciative action that, in the case of Japanese *dō*, is concomitantly aesthetic and moral.

A BEAUTIFULLY GOOD REPERTOIRE – THE AESTHETIC AND THE MORAL

At the heart of this awe-inspiring and stimulating virtuosity lies a normatively rich palette that, in Japanese *dō*, fuses aesthetic and moral values and concepts. An initial discussion of how bodily aesthetics nurtures moral virtues leads to two illustrative concepts: *wabi* (austere beauty) and *yūgen* (deep mystery).

Yuriko Saito shows how bodily aesthetic factors such as “handling of objects, tone of voice, facial expression, [and] bodily movement,” by way of artistic training, nurture “virtues such as respect, care, civility, consideration and thoughtfulness.”³⁷ This connects to the aesthetics of the performer. As Saito explains, to achieve excellence artists must rigorously train and cultivate a particular way of life, which means developing moral virtues.³⁸ In Japanese culture, respecting “the other,” for instance, encompasses even inanimate natural objects such as rocks or plants in Zen gardens and, of course, extends to people. In fact, “other-regarding” considerations poignantly are exemplified by *shitsuke*, whose kanji combines those of body and beauty, and is concerned with a discipline or cultivation of manners through which “artistic skills and respectful conduct *tend* to become internalized so that one becomes a certain kind of person.”³⁹ One value that “becomes the person” involves austerity.

The austere beauty of *wabi* is best appreciated and most developed in the art of tea and in the context of Zen.⁴⁰ The endorsement of austerity and simplicity extends to an appreciation of usage-acquired imperfections that also challenges the assumption that beauty costs a fortune. Further, it “sets up as an ideal ridding of desires and acceptance of one’s lot in the world,” as Richard Bullen writes.⁴¹ He further traces the fusion of the epistemic, aesthetic, and moral to Shingon Buddhist school founder Kūkai (774–835).⁴² More appositely, the communal dynamics between masters and followers set up standards and moral roles to be emulated. Our tea master is in the thick of it again, for it turns out that the tea ceremony best exemplifies this: the process fully revolves around hosting and the peremptory rules for civilized behavior and refined etiquette.⁴³ The next concept offsets the, perhaps for some, fastidious preciseness this involves.

Yūgen, according to Yuasa Yasuo, means profound or suggestive mystery.⁴⁴ Much like fog shrouding a forest transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary, *yūgen*’s inner workings remain hidden but to those who know how (or where?) to look. Its conceptual borders are foggy indeed. Effectively, *yūgen* stimulates the imagination, and also asks us to become comfortable with ambiguity, inconclusiveness, and uncertainty. This has moral implications as far as how to confront life. Nonetheless, *yūgen* primarily developed in the context of *Nō*. Zeami viewed it as the most ineffable kind of beauty possible onstage. For him, the way to foster *yūgen* was by dint of arduous work over many years as the actor strived to acquire the mystery of the supernatural. Developing the ability to conjure *yūgen* is thus premised on backbreaking discipline. This is a protracted and difficult, yet stimulating, process.

IN FOR THE LONG HAUL – *SHUGYŌ* AS PERPETUAL STRIVING

One last unique aspect of Japanese *dō* worth exploring is *shugyō*, a sustained lifelong dedication to perfecting *dō* practice as a way to temper and enrich one’s character. Consonantly, *shugyō* also enhances performance or artistic creation. Its beginnings lie in the Buddhist practice of *sennichi shugyō* (one thousand days of practice): devotees were to engage in extended, strenuous, and punishing exercises aimed at perfecting themselves. Self-cultivation is the rendering of choice, but Yuasa points out that *shugyō* lacks the overtones of land tilling, refinement, and education; rather the Japanese word connotes the strengthening of spirit and enhancement of personality—crucially for us—by training the body.⁴⁵ In short, it is a perpetually enacted and spirited skillful striving that steadfastly and lucidly seeks unattainable personal perfection.

Takumi, exceedingly skilled artisans, fittingly illustrate this relentless devotion. In the West, the established view posits 10,000 hours of practice for expertise, which amount to about three daily hours for ten years. In contrast, the threshold for *takumi* is 60,000 hours, which is the equivalent of five and a half daily hours for thirty years. This has deep roots in the land of the rising sun. Musashi, at the end of the Scroll of Water, wrote, “A thousand days of training to develop, ten thousand days of training to polish,” which equals about thirty years.⁴⁶ *Kiriu* (Japanese papercutting) artist Kojima Nahoko, who began her arduous training as a five-year old, is one such *takumi*.⁴⁷ As she explains, the essence of *takumi* is “to gain a sublime understanding of the nuances of a particular art.”⁴⁸ Echoing familiar themes by now, she adds that, “to be focused and spend countless hours on one thing, and to carry on. . . . It requires one to empty the mind and focus in a way that is simply not possible when still acquiring a skill.”⁴⁹ This process is endless—no matter the age.

Eventually, regardless of how young we begin or fast we progress, the realities of human ageing impose themselves: physical skills deteriorate. Yet, the “mandate” to perfect oneself remains. Because Japanese *dō* and *shugyō* involve perfection not as an absolute but rather as a personal quest for self-transformation, the goals are dynamically revisable. To this effect, Zeami writes about how aging actors must keep reinventing themselves and continue learning. Specifically, his advice is to learn to deliver their performance with more simplicity, which brings its own kind of aesthetic quality and is foreclosed to younger actors.⁵⁰ Normatively, *shugyō* is ethical in its perennial struggle as it involves resilience and an enduring “beginner’s mind” always open to learning.

It is time to return to the tea master for a parting cup. As his skilled motions froth the tea to perfection and we slowly turn the cup in our hands admiringly, we can reminisce and appreciate both the how and why his clean-cut moves, the accurately swift slicing blade of the sword master, the on-target sharp words of the awakened Zen monk and nun, the incisively polished movements of the *Nō* actor, and the impossibly silhouetted trimming of the *kirie takumi* are all a cut above the rest. As such they become inspiring paragons for the rest of us.

NOTES

1. Daisetz T. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 191.
2. See Peter D. Herschok, *Liberating Intimacy: Enlightenment and Social Virtuosity in Ch'an Buddhism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996).
3. Originally, peerless poet Bashō was in the roster of artistic epitomes to be discussed. Adequately doing so was unfeasible given space limitations. In essence, the argument is that his itinerant lifestyle is *constitutive*, not just causally contributory, of both his poetic and moral qualities. Cheryl Crowley shows how Bashō and Yosa Buson “both argued that haikai was not only a means to literary self-expression but also a way to improve the character of those who wrote it.” See her “Knowing Elegance: the Ideals of the *Bunjin* (Literatus) in Early Modern Haikai,” in *New Essays in Japanese Aesthetics*, ed. A. Minh Nguyen (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), 249.
4. Traditionally, in Japanese culture the last name comes first then the given name. In cases of historical figures, the first name alone is often used. While I observe this convention, I refer to historical figures by the most common appellation.
5. Eugen Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery* (New York: Vintage, 1999). Herrigel’s account is controversial as to the accuracy of his discernment of Zen in his *sensei*’s teachings. For a critique, see Yamada Shōji, “The Myth of Zen in the Art of Archery,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 28, nos. 1–2 (2001): 1–30. Nonetheless, it remains instructive because of the insights it gives as to *his* struggles as a philosopher trying to make intellectual sense of something eminently nonintellectual.
6. Yuasa Yasuo, *The Body: Toward an Eastern Mind-Body Theory*, ed. Thomas P. Kasulis, trans. Shigenori Nagatomo and Thomas P. Kasulis (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987).
7. This means that the process is subject not to rationally established success conditions but rather to corporeal intentions that regulate improvement conditions. See Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor, *Retrieving Realism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).
8. Robert E. Carter, *The Japanese Arts and Self-Cultivation* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008), 4.
9. Jesús Ilundáin-Agurruza and Takayuki Hata, “Eastern Philosophy,” in *Handbook for the Philosophy of Sport*, ed. William Morgan and Mike McNamee (London: Routledge, 2015), 98–114.
10. Jesús Ilundáin-Agurruza, *Holism and the Cultivation of Excellence in Sports and Performance: Skillful Striving* (London: Routledge, 2016), chap. 9.
11. Robert E. Carter, “A Philosophic Grounding for Japanese Aesthetics,” in *New Essays in Japanese Aesthetics*, ed. A. Minh Nguyen (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), 15.
12. Painting is the clearer case because artists produce relatively stable objects rather than temporary performances (comparing performances would obfuscate the issue and make discernment of signal differences more difficult).
13. For simplicity’s sake, the other senses are not discussed. *Ceteris paribus*, what applies to eyesight extends to the rest. Even the gustatory could be explored similarly. See Graham Parker, “Savoring Tastes: Appreciating Food in Japan,” in *New Essays in Japanese Aesthetics*, ed. A. Minh Nguyen (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), 109–19, for a delectable exploration of Japanese cuisine that presents the rich interactions between Zen and the tension that arises between engaging in amenable social repartee and paying attention to the what, when, and how of the food.
14. For a revealing analysis of Musashi’s style, see William Reed, “The Brush Is the Sword of the Mind, Vol. 1 – Miyamoto Musashi,” last modified July 23, 2018, <https://budojapan.com/feature-articles/miyamoto-musashi/>, accessed May 22, 2021.
15. For an image of Rengetsu’s painting, see Cultural Heritage Online, available at <https://bunka.nii.ac.jp/heritages/detail/204399/1>, accessed May 22, 2021. For an image of Rengetsu’s painting, see “Samurai Footman with Poem,” available at <http://www.portlandartmuseum.us/mwebcgi/mweb.exe?request=record;id=78932;type=101>, accessed May 22, 2021.
16. Jean François Billeter, *Essai sur l’art chinois de l’écriture et ses fondements* (Essay on the Chinese Art of Writing and Its Foundations) (Paris: Éditions Allia, 2010), 12, my translation.
17. John Hay, “The Human Body as Microcosmic Source of Macrocosmic Values in Calligraphy,” in *Self as Body in Asian Theory and Practice*, ed. Roger T. Ames with Wimal Dissanayake and Thomas P. Kasulis (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), 179–212.
18. Billeter, *Essai*, 183, my translation.
19. Michelle Merritt, “Thinking-Is-Moving: Dance, Agency, and a Radically Enacted Mind,” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 14, no. 1 (2015): 106.
20. Merritt, “Thinking-Is-Moving,” 106, her emphasis.
21. Kenji Tokitsu, *Miyamoto Musashi: His Life and Writings*, trans. Sherab Chodzin Kohn (Boston and London: Shambhala Publications, 2004), 287.
22. Richard Bullen, “Authority in Taste,” in *New Essays in Japanese Aesthetics*, ed. A. Minh Nguyen (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), 39–40.
23. Charlotte Eubanks, “Performing Mind, Writing Meditation: Dōgen’s *Fukanzazengi* as Zen Calligraphy,” *Ars Orientalis* 46 (2016): 173, her emphasis.
24. Yuasa, *The Body*, 333.
25. See Daniel D. Hutto and Erik Myin, *Evolving Enactivism: Basic Minds Meet Content* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017).
26. Massimiliano Lorenzo Cappuccio, Katsunori Miyahara, and Jesús Ilundáin-Agurruza, “Wax On, Wax Off! Habits, Sport Skills, and Motor Intentionality,” *Topoi* (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11245-020-09720-3>, accessed May 22, 2021. For an analysis of this in relation to swordsmanship, see Jesús Ilundáin-Agurruza, Kevin Krein, and Karl Ericson, “High Performance, Risk Sports, and Japanese Thought and Culture,” in *Handbook of Embodied Cognition and Sport Psychology*, ed. Massimiliano L. Cappuccio (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019), 445–83.
27. Jesús Ilundáin-Agurruza, “Emergent Technologies – Promethean Promises or Frankensteinian Fears? An Enactivist and Japanese Cultural Analysis,” in *5E Cognition in the Age of Virtual Environments and Artificial Intelligence*, ed. Maki Sato (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 2021), 101–47.
28. See Michiko Yusa, “*Riken no Ken*: Zeami’s Theory of Acting and Theatrical Appreciation,” *Monumenta Nipponica*, 42, no. 3 (1987): 331–45.
29. This notion of without-thinking is found in Thomas Kasulis, *Zen Action, Zen Person* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1981).
30. John Schroeder, *Skillful Means: The Heart of Buddhist Compassion* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2004).
31. Herschok, *Liberating Intimacy*.
32. Thomas P. Kasulis, “The Body, Japanese Style,” in *Self as Body in Asian Theory and Practice*, ed. Roger T. Ames with Wimal Dissanayake and Thomas P. Kasulis (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), 308.
33. Peter D. Herschok, *Public Zen, Personal Zen: A Buddhist Introduction Book* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 196.
34. Tokitsu, *Miyamoto Musashi*, 289.
35. Garrett Thomson, *On the Meaning of Life* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2003), 51.
36. Thomson, *On the Meaning of Life*, 52.
37. Yuriko Saito, “Bodily Aesthetics and the Cultivation of Moral Virtues,” in *New Essays in Japanese Aesthetics*, ed. A. Minh Nguyen (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), 62–63.
38. Saito, “Bodily Aesthetics,” 63.
39. Saito, “Bodily Aesthetics,” 69.
40. Graham Parkes and Adam Loughnane, “Japanese Aesthetics,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2018 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/japanese-aesthetics/>, accessed May 22, 2021.

41. Bullen, "Authority in Taste," 39.
42. Bullen, "Authority in Taste," 39.
43. Bullen, "Authority in Taste," 39.
44. Yuasa Yasuo, *The Body, Self-Cultivation, and Ki-Energy*, trans. Shigenori Nagatomo and Monte S. Hull (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), 24.
45. Yuasa, *The Body, Self-Cultivation, and Ki-Energy*, 10.
46. Tokitsu, *Miyamoto Musashi*, 289–90.
47. See Kojima Nahoko, *Nahoko Kojima*, last modified 2019, <http://www.nahokokojima.com>, accessed May 22, 2021.
48. *Takumi - The 60,000 Hour Story of Human Craft*, directed by Clay Jeter (The & Partnership London, 2018), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9EI3aEFANBo>, accessed May 22, 2021.
49. *Takumi*, directed by Clay Jeter.
50. Katsunori Miyahara, "Dreyfus and Zeami on Embodied Expertise," in *Reflections on Epistemic Agency and Epistemic Environments in East-West Philosophy*, ed. Karyn Lynne Lai (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

Despite these changes, there are consistent threads that form Japan's aesthetic sensibility. One such strand is the "other-regarding" aesthetic sensibility, both in creating and experiencing an aesthetic object. This paper explores how this ethically grounded aesthetic sensibility continues to inform contemporary design in Japan.

One enduring ethos of Japanese art-making is respecting the material used or the subject matter featured. The earliest statement regarding this attitude is found in the eleventh-century treatise on garden-making, *Sakuteiki (Book on Garden Making)*, written by an aristocrat, Tachibana-no-Toshitsuna. In this treatise, Toshitsuna emphasizes the principle of "obeying (or following) the request" (*kowan ni shitagau*) of rocks, the primary ingredients of the garden at the time. This principle means that their placement and arrangement should be dictated by each rock's individual characteristics. For example, Toshitsuna recommends that the gardener "should first install one main stone, and then place other stones, in necessary numbers, in such a way as to satisfy the requesting mood of the main stone."²

In later centuries, the same design strategy extends to the care and maintenance of plant materials. Instead of allowing their free growth, Japanese gardeners meticulously shape and maintain the trees and shrubs by extensive pruning, clipping, shearing, pinching, plucking, or by using various gears, such as wires, ropes, poles, and weights, and even sometimes stunting the growth of some parts by applying retardants. Such manipulation aims at accentuating the particular shape of the individual tree by eliminating what is considered to be adventitious, inessential, or irrelevant. As such, the extent of human artifice in the Japanese garden equals that of the European formal garden. However, while the European topiary method imposes preconceived geometrical or representational shapes on the plant materials, Japanese gardeners work closely *with* rather than *in spite of* or *irrespective of* the material's natural endowments.³ Contemporary garden makers still adhere to this principle, as stated by Masuno Shunmyo, a leading master gardener: "[T]he most important thing in executing a design is to talk to the plants and stones and hear what they themselves have to say about how they want to be laid out. In other words, I engage in a kind of dialogue with them."⁴ The gardener is primarily a listener in this dialogue, characterized by Robert E. Carter as "emptying" one's mind.⁵

Similar considerations also govern the art of flower arrangement (*ikebana*), elevated to an artistic status primarily through its contribution to the tea ceremony during the sixteenth century. While this art form begins paradoxically by cutting off a live flower or branch and initiating its death, its primary aim is to "let flower live," literally the translation of *ikebana*, to "let flower express itself" (*ikasasu*), or "to represent nature in its inmost essence."⁶ This can be achieved by further cutting of branches, leaves, and blossoms so that only the essential parts defining the particular plant can be clearly delineated. A contemporary master teacher of flower arrangement states, "[W]hen the students themselves become *empty*, they do very well at *ikebana*."⁷

Ethically Grounded Aesthetic Sensibility in Japan: From Traditional Arts to Contemporary Design

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ABSTRACT

One of the enduring themes of art-making in Japan has been humility and other-regarding considerations toward materials, subject matters, and experiencing agents. Despite their thorough Westernization and technologically advanced life, this ethos still informs today's design practice in Japan. It is often described as "emptying the designer's self" by respecting user experiences and the cumulative wisdom accrued from repeated use. Resultant objects are characteristically simple and modest in appearance, lacking ostentatiousness or conspicuousness, as if they had not been designed. This design philosophy affords freedom for the users to exercise their own imagination and creativity to suit the object's use to their needs, but it also encourages them to live and grow with the object. Particularly today, when rampant consumerism discourages consumers from developing an enduring and intimate relationship with the material world, this time-honored Japanese aesthetic sensibility offers pragmatic wisdom to the designers outside of Japan who are concerned with design's role in promoting a more sustainable future.

Japanese aesthetic sensibility has a long lineage formed over many centuries. Historically, major political changes gave rise to distinct aesthetic concepts and artistic practices of each period, from the court culture of the Heian period (794–1185) to the warrior culture starting in 1185 with the Kamakura period (1185–1333), followed by the popular culture of the Edo period (1603–1868), and the modern period that ushered in rapid Westernization.¹

The same principle of articulating the distinctive characteristics of an object is found in the art of representation. For example, haiku, a 5-7-5 syllable verse, established in the seventeenth century by Matsuo Bashō (1644–1694), aims at presenting the native characteristic of the subject matter. According to Bashō, the poet must “enter into” and identify himself with the object, summarized in his well-known saying: “Of the pine-tree learn from the pine-tree. Of the bamboo learn from the bamboo.”⁸ To achieve this, what he calls “the slenderness of mind” is required, as one has to overcome one’s personal feelings and concerns in order to grasp and appreciate the qualities of the object. Sometimes described as “impersonality,” the ideal of haiku-making should be object-centered rather than subject-driven. When successful, the poet’s effort will “grow into” (*naru*) a verse rather than “doing” (*suru*) a verse.⁹

Bashō’s contemporary Tosa Mitsukuni (1617–1691) develops a similar theory regarding the art of painting. For him, the main purpose of a painting is mimesis, thereby repudiating factual errors, but it is “the spirit of the object” that the painter must grasp and present.¹⁰ Toward this end, the painter should omit certain elements, making the overall effect “incomplete” and “suggestive,” facilitating the presentation of the essential characteristics more readily, such as bird-ness. Most likely conscious of the teachings by Bashō and Mitsukuni, another painter, Tsubaki Chinzan (1800–1854), also claims: “[E]ven when painted with black ink, bamboo is bamboo; with red ink, bamboo is also bamboo. If the spirit of bamboo is embodied in the brush, the *ambience* of bamboo will naturally arise. This is the essence of painting.”¹¹

Even when engaging in everyday activities not specifically intended to be art, a similar ethos prevails. In Japanese cooking, the manipulation of each ingredient (cutting, choice of cooking method, seasoning, arrangement) is done in order to bring out the best of its native qualities. For example, in *nimono*, a Japanese version of vegetable stew, each vegetable is cooked and seasoned separately to retain the respective color, taste, and texture, and then arranged in a bowl so that each ingredient can be presented in the best light, instead of being dished out as a heaping mound of mixture. The outcome of such labor-intensive fussiness is that the consumer enjoys the synthetic orchestral sound created by each instrument playing in its own tonal quality, as it were. Taking the Japanese lunchbox as a microcosmic illustration of this Japanese aesthetic sensibility, Kenji Ekuan, a noted industrial designer, observes: “[O]ur lunchbox . . . gathers together normal, familiar, everyday things from nature, according to season, and *enhances their inherent appeal*. . . . [T]he aim of preparation and arrangement revealed in the lunchbox is to include everything and *bring each to full life*.” In short, the mission of Japanese “culinary artifice” is “to render fish more fishlike and rice more ricelike.”¹²

These accounts from classical treatises and today’s practitioners together indicate that one of the enduring themes of Japanese artistic practices is respecting the material or the subject matter’s specific characteristics. This requires carefully listening to the other’s voice by

emptying one’s mind. “The other” here does not have to be natural objects such as rocks and plants. Some noted contemporary designers adopt the same stance toward materials that have been manufactured. For example, Tadao Andō’s architecture often emphasizes the concrete-ness of concrete, while Issey Miyake explores synthetic materials and rubber in his apparel design.

The other-regarding attitude in art-making is directed not only toward the materials used in creation but also toward the experiencing agent. In addition to the principle of “obeying the request” (of each rock) articulated in *Sakuteiki*, another principle of garden-making advocated by Toshitsuna is *suji kaete*, changing the axis, meaning avoiding symmetry. Reminding us of Alexander Pope’s criticism of European formal gardens that adhere to strict symmetry where “Grove nods at Grove, each Ally has a Brother, And half the Platform just reflects the other,” absence of a central axis recommended in *Sakuteiki* is meant to honor and enrich the owners’ and visitors’ experience of walking through the garden.¹³ By avoiding symmetrical design, the garden provides continuous sources for nourishing stimulation and imagination, such as meandering paths, gradually unfolding views, and partially hidden vistas.

Probably by far the most eloquent expression of being respectful of the experiencing agent is the art of tea ceremony. Established in the sixteenth century under the tea master Sen no Rikyū (1522–1591) and still widely practiced as a mode of cultural refinement by many, this participatory art embodies consummate thoughtfulness and care expressed by the host toward the guest. This expression takes place nonverbally through the host’s elegant body movements and her selection, arrangement, and handling of various implements and preparation of the tea hut. While there are basic rules to guide these considerations, the ultimate decisions are made by the host according to the specific occasion and particular guest. Orchestrating various aspects of the tea ceremony to render a memorable experience of one-time event, *ichigo ichie*, requires the utmost sensibility, flexibility, and improvisational skills. Described as the expression of care, respect, and thoughtfulness, the aesthetics of tea ceremony promotes “vigilant consideration of others.”¹⁴

For both modes of respecting the other, the materials, and the recipient of creation, minimizing one’s self and ideas is paramount. Emphasis is placed on being open- or empty-minded so that the creator can listen to the other and to imagine what the experience will be like on the receiving end. Creativity comes not in the form of preparing some idea beforehand and imposing it upon the materials or the recipient, but rather from collaboratively working with the other. Instead of a lone genius engaging in self-expression, the ideal stance taken for artistic creation is that of a humble partner.

Sakuteiki predates the introduction of Zen Buddhism to Japan in the late twelfth century to the early thirteenth century by priests Eisai (1141–1215) and Dōgen (1200–1253). However, it is no accident that the practitioners of other arts were often Zen adepts, and they practiced art-making as a form of Zen discipline.¹⁵ Zen teaches the thoroughgoing

rejection of egocentric and anthropocentric worldviews, as stated by Dōgen: “[A]cting on and witnessing myriad things *with the burden of oneself* is ‘delusion.’ Acting on and witnessing oneself *in the advent of myriad things* is enlightenment.” He continues, “[S]tudying the Buddha Way is studying oneself. Studying oneself is *forgetting oneself*. Forgetting oneself is *being enlightened by all things*.”¹⁶ This transcendence of ego is facilitated by recognizing and overcoming self-centered and all-too-human schemes that govern our perception. Once we succeed, Zen is optimistic about our ability to experience directly the thus-ness or being-such-ness (*immo*) of the other-than-self. Thus, guided by the Buddhistic transcendence of ego, the Japanese artists’ practice of respectfully listening to the other’s voice and directing their creative activity accordingly is not simply an aesthetic practice but also a cultivation of moral virtue directed toward enlightenment.

This vision of artistic practice is also held by today’s leading designers in Japan. One of the major themes shared by them is avoidance of imposing their ego onto the design process. For example, Hara Kenya, whose writings indicate a deep indebtedness to the traditional Japanese arts mentioned above, characterizes his attitude toward design by the notion of emptiness:

“Emptiness” (*utsu*) and “completely hollow” (*karappo*) are among the terms I pondered while trying to grasp the nature of communication. When people share their thoughts, they commonly listen to each other’s opinions rather than throwing information at each other. In other words, successful communication depends on how well we listen rather than how well we push our opinions on the person seated before us. People have therefore conceptualized communication techniques using term like “empty vessel” to try to understand each other better.¹⁷

Applied to the design process, this notion of emptiness encourages the designers to refrain from forming a preconceived design. Instead, they should empty their mind, listen to the users, materials, and similar objects that have endured the test of time. It does not mean suppression of the designer’s creativity; rather, the creativity is enacted by collaborating with these others by listening to what they have to say.

Another leading designer, Fukasawa Naoto, also states that he is against the kind of design that calls attention to itself with “expression of self” and recommends taking “ourselves a little less seriously” and “get(ting) rid of the ego that says, ‘I designed this object,’” as well as encouraging “a motivation to put the object ahead of the individual creative ego as opposed to the urge to have it noticed.”¹⁸ He fully embraces the seeming paradox of the creative act of “design” that is at the same time anti-design, minimizing or even erasing the sense that the resultant object was a product of human manipulation, which design is. The kitchen utensils and appliances designed by him accordingly are characterized as “quietly being there as if it was not designed and blend in with living.”¹⁹

Both designers work for MUJI and the firm is said to aim for designing things that are “good enough” (*kore de ii*) rather than those that “are good” (*kore ga ii*).²⁰ The former may sound as if to imply a kind of resignation and a bit of disappointment, but it is rather presented positively with an attitude of restraint and concession, that is, to give way to the other. In contrast, the latter implies some degree of egoism and dissonance. The resultant products that are “good enough” are characterized by minimalism, simplicity, and understatement, devoid of showy self-assertion, ostentation, and garrulity, while maintaining meticulous and thoughtful attention to details. However, these qualities are not a matter of styling or branding. They are rather generated in response to the cumulative wisdom of user experience and body movement associated with using the product. As such, MUJI does not identify the designer behind the product; instead, it advocates “anonymous” design.²¹

A similar sentiment is expressed by another designer, Uchida Shigeru. In his discussion of the concept of “the ordinary,” he argues against the common understanding of “design” as something special or unexpected that stands out from the rest. Accordingly, he rejects characterizing the design profession as doing something distinct from others by creating a concept that is uniquely one’s own. Such a way of designing is self-regarding rather than other-regarding, according to him.²² He also challenges a rather pejorative connotation of another commonly shared understanding of “the ordinary” for being boring.²³ By citing Okakura Tenshin’s statement in *The Book of Tea* (1906) that the tea ceremony is a kind of courtesy to worship beauty in everyday life, Uchida celebrates the ordinary as an understated, modest quality that is born out of the longevity of use in everyday life.²⁴

Hara explains the simplicity characteristic of products designed with an emptied mind by invoking another relevance of the notion of “emptiness.” He draws an analogy to classical examples of Japanese art: the empty spaces of many monochrome ink paintings from the medieval period, the sparse interiors of traditional Japanese rooms, the tea room being the quintessential example, and the use of only one flower or only a few flower petals to express a season. Such minimalism provides a fertile ground for engaging the imagination: “[E]mptiness provides a space within which our imaginations can run free, vastly enriching our powers of perception and our mutual comprehension.”²⁵

When applied to the interaction with the objects designed with emptiness, the user can create an individual relationship with it through using it in her daily life as she sees fit. Hara refers to it as “emptiness as limitless potential”²⁶ that “can hold every possible meaning”²⁷ in that “an empty state possesses a chance of becoming by virtue of its receptive nature.”²⁸ In a sense, the so-called “finished” product off the assembly line is not finished at all but offers an empty vessel which continues to be filled and morphed by use.

While affording freedom for the user to fill in the empty vessel as she sees fit, this notion of design also encourages an ethically grounded interaction with the object. A typical attitude toward consumer goods today is promoted

by fast fashion and the industry strategy of planned obsolescence, both of which encourage consumers to treat various products as disposables. In contrast, these designers together advocate for consumers to cherish and honor the object by being fully engaged and developing a relationship with it. Living with the object through use involves appreciating its service to us and our continuing use facilitates accrual of the “beauty that occurs with time when an object survives constant use.”²⁹

Through repeated use, one personalizes the object and creates a (hi)story of living with this object. Fukasawa refers to this interaction as *shutaku* (worn or spoiled by handling), “a metaphor for something that has taken on a personality of its own, or improved with age.” In other words, “it fits comfortably in one’s hand, a metaphor for something that has come to fit in our lifestyle.”³⁰ The user and the object interact to create “the deepening of a relationship” and “we may discover its beauty not just in how it ages but in how we age with it.”³¹ Today’s consumerism tends to regard an object that shows age and wear and tear negatively, a fall from grace because its condition is no longer perfect and pristine as it once was. But Fukasawa considers it as embodying one of the most prized traditional Japanese aesthetic values, *wabi-sabi*.³² Accepting and appreciating what may be commonly decried as imperfection or deterioration requires not only a sophisticated aesthetic sensibility but also an open-minded receptivity of the object for what it is, with warts and all, and this is an ethical attitude.

The pleasure we derive from using well-designed objects thus comes with a responsibility. This attitude expected from the recipients of aesthetic gifts is another theme running through the Japanese aesthetic tradition. Commenting on Japanese food, Graham Parkes remarks that “the care with which the food has been prepared and presented invites corresponding care and attention in the handling and eating of it.”³³ In a similar manner, a successful experience of the tea ceremony makes demand not only on the host for setting it up but also on the guest who needs to attend carefully to various details that express the host’s care. Today’s tea master Sen Genshitsu XV thus explains that the primary purpose of the tea ceremony is a tacit communication, “contagion,” whereby “the guests will ‘feel’ what the host intended to ‘give’ them in and through the ceremony. An intense level of kindness prevails, and the guests learn through this enveloping atmosphere to be kind to one another in turn.”³⁴ Similarly, if I hurry through a garden oblivious to the thoughtful ways in which the rocks and trees are arranged, not only is my aesthetic life most likely impoverished, but my moral life is also probably compromised to the extent that I fail to gratefully acknowledge the aesthetic gift offered to me.

Hara considers this ethically grounded aesthetic sensibility marked by respectfulness and humility as a rich resource Japan can offer to the world, compensating for Japan’s lack of natural resources needed for industrial production.³⁵ I should note that, although the Japanese aesthetic sensibility thus explained has been nurtured through many centuries, it is gaining resonance outside of Japan today. There is an increasing attention to and call for “care” and

“thoughtfulness” among designers and architects world over. This plea is a reaction against the prevailing design process in the West, which the designers themselves admit has not paid enough attention or respect to the experiences of users and inhabitants. They take recent designs to task for exuding the qualities of “ego trips,” such as “arrogance,” “narcissism,” “impudence,” “formal authority,” and “showiness.”³⁶ Himself an architect, Juhani Pallasmaa criticizes the contemporary architectural profession as encouraging the superstardom of individual geniuses whose creations exist for the sake of self-aggrandizement, alienating the experiencing agents.³⁷ Similarly, Victor Papanek writes that designers and architects tend to think of themselves as artists whose mission is to make artistic statements. As a result, he observes that “a good deal of design and architecture seems to be created for the personal glory of its creator.”³⁸ Sim Van der Ryn and Stuart Cowan express a similar sentiment by criticizing the architect in Ayn Rand’s *The Fountainhead*, depicted as a hero committed to the “‘pure’ process” that is not “‘contaminated’ by any real-world constraints or needs: social, environmental, or economic.”³⁹

These critics offer an alternative model of design process that reflects other-regarding attitudes, such as “courtesy,” “responsiveness,” “humility,” “patience,” and “care.” These qualities are embodied in an appropriate size for humans, with a spatial arrangement sensitive to the bodily oriented experience as well as its temporal sequence, and design features that are simply delightful to the senses. The designed objects and built environments that respond to our experiences communicate a moral attitude affirming the importance of others’ experiences. “Good design,” Donald Norman writes, “takes care, planning, thought” and “concern for others.”⁴⁰ Similarly, in discussing the importance of “care” in architecture, Nigel Taylor points out that a building that appears to be put together thoughtlessly and carelessly, without regard to our experience as users or its relationship to the surrounding, “would offend us aesthetically, but, more than that, part of our offense might be ethical. Thus, we might reasonably be angered or outraged, not just by the look of the thing but also by the visible evidence that the person who designed it didn’t show sufficient care about the aesthetic impact of his building.”⁴¹ He concludes by stating that “to care . . . for how something looks, and thereby for the people who will look at it, is to exhibit not just an aesthetic but also a moral concern. Or, rather, it is to exhibit an aesthetic attentiveness which is itself moral.”⁴²

Contemporary designers in different parts of the world who are concerned with various environmental problems caused by the rampant consumerism that encourages over-consumption also advocate designs that are not completely “finished,” or “good enough.” Such design promotes consumers to “live with” the object by personalizing it, creating its story with us, and caring for its longevity.⁴³ Thus, the time-honored and ethically grounded aesthetic sensibility nurtured in Japan has a timely relevance and resonance in today’s world. While it is important to understand its historical and cultural situatedness, we should also take note of Japanese aesthetic sensibility’s pragmatic applicability in today’s world.

NOTES

1. According to the standard Japanese system of dating, Japan's modern period comprises the Meiji period (1868–1912), the Taishō period (1912–1926), the Shōwa period (1926–1989), followed by the Heisei period (1989–2019) and the Reiwa period (2019–present).
2. Tachibana-no-Toshitsuna, *Sakuteiki: The Book of Garden-Making, Being a Full Translation of the Japanese Eleventh Century Manuscript: Memoranda on Garden Making Attributed to the Writing of Tachibana-no-Toshitsuna*, trans. Shigemaru Shimoyama (Tokyo: Town and City Planners, 1985), 20. The other pages with reference to the notion of “obeying the request” are 7, 10, and 13. I explore this principle of Japanese garden design in “Japanese Gardens: The Art of Improving Nature,” *Chanoyu Quarterly: Tea and the Arts of Japan* 83 (1996): 40–61.
3. Zōen, *Illustrations for Designing Mountain, Water, and Hillside Field Landscapes*, trans. David A. Slawson, included in David A. Slawson, *Secret Teachings in the Art of Japanese Gardens: Design Principles, Aesthetic Values* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1991), sec. 56, emphasis added.
4. Quoted by Robert E. Carter, *The Japanese Arts and Self-Cultivation* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008), 63. In this paper, I follow the Japanese order of a person's name by placing the family name before the given name. Hence, Masuno is his family name. In cases where the person is well-known, such as Tadao Andō, mentioned below, or the person's publication is in English, I put the given name first.
5. Carter, *Japanese Arts*, 65.
6. The first two passages are from Ryōsuke Ōhashi's entry on “Kire and Iki” in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, vol. 2, ed. Michael Kelly (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 553. The last passage is from Makoto Ueda, *Literary and Art Theories in Japan* (Cleveland, OH: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1967), 86.
7. Quoted by Carter, *Japanese Arts*, 102, emphasis on “empty” added.
8. Recorded by Bashō's disciple, Hattori Dohō, in *The Red Booklet*, first published in the eighteenth century, trans. Toshihiko and Toyo Izutsu, included in Toshihiko and Toyo Izutsu, *The Theory of Beauty in the Classical Aesthetics of Japan* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1981), 162–63.
9. Izutsu and Izutsu, *Theory of Beauty*, 167.
10. Ueda, *Literary and Art Theories*, 137.
11. Tsubaki Chinzan, *Chinzan Shokan (Correspondence of Chinzan)*, from the nineteenth century, my translation, included in *Nihon no Geijutsuron (Theories of Art in Japan)*, ed. Yasuda Ayao (Tokyo: Sōgensha, 1990), 251, emphasis added.
12. Kenji Ekuan, *The Aesthetics of the Japanese Lunchbox*, trans. Don Kenny (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), the long passage from p. 6 and the “fishlike . . . ricelike” passage from p. 77, emphasis added. Short of actually experiencing Japanese lunchbox, Ekuan's book has abundant photographic images of Japanese lunchbox; so does Junichi Kamekura, Gideon Bosker, and Mamoru Watanabe, *Ekiben: The Art of the Japanese Box Lunch* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1989).
13. Alexander Pope, *An Epistle to Lord Burlington in The Genius of the Pace: The English Landscape Garden 1620–1820*, ed. John Dixon Hunt and Peter Willis (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 213. This avoidance of symmetrical design also reminds one of William Hogarth's notion of a serpentine line as the line of beauty.
14. Kristin Surak, *Making Tea, Making Japan: Cultural Nationalism in Practice* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 52.
15. It should be noted that Masuno, a master gardener, whom I cited earlier, is a Zen priest.
16. Dōgen, *Shōbōgenzō: Zen Essays by Dōgen*, trans. Thomas Cleary (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1988), 32, all the emphases added.
17. Kenya Hara, prologue to *White*, trans. Jooyeon Rhee (Baden: Lars Müller Publishers, 2009), i–ii. Hara's discussion of emptiness is also found in *Mujirushi Ryōhin no Dezain (Mujirushi Ryōhin's Design)*, ed. Maruo Hiroshi et al. (Tokyo: Nikkei BP Sha, 2015), 50, 67–69, and the chapter “Simple and Empty—Genealogy of Aesthetic Sensibility,” in Hara Kenya, *Nihon no Dezain—Biishiki ga Tsukuru Mirai (Japanese Design—Future Created by Aesthetic Sensibility)* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2012), 41–78.
18. Naoto Fukasawa and Jasper Morrison, *Super Normal: Sensations of the Ordinary*, trans. Mardi Miyake (Baden: Lars Müller Publishers, 2008), 107, 110, 110, 108.
19. Maruo et al., eds., *Mujirushi Ryōhin*, 25.
20. Maruo et al., eds., *Mujirushi Ryōhin*, 54. Outside of Japan, the company is known as MUJI, but it is an abbreviation of Mujirushi, which means “No Mark.”
21. For examples of their products and designers' own comments, see Masaaki Kanai et al., *Muji* (New York: Rizzoli, 2010) and Maruo et al., eds., *Mujirushi Ryōhin*.
22. Uchida Shigeu, *Futsū no Dezain: Nichijō ni Yadoru Bi no Katachi (Ordinary Design: Form of Beauty Dwelling in the Everyday)* (Tokyo: Kōsakusha, 2008), 93.
23. Uchida, *Futsū no Dezain*, 103, 92.
24. Uchida, *Futsū no Dezain*, 102.
25. Hara, *White*, 60.
26. Hara, *White*, 39.
27. Hara, prologue to *White*, ii.
28. Hara, *White*, 39.
29. Fukasawa and Morrison, *Super Normal*, 111.
30. Fukasawa and Morrison, *Super Normal*, 110.
31. Fukasawa and Morrison, *Super Normal*, 111.
32. Fukasawa and Morrison, *Super Normal*, 106.
33. Graham Parkes, “Savoring Taste,” in *New Essays in Japanese Aesthetics*, ed. A. Minh Nguyen (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), 111.
34. Cited by Carter, *Japanese Arts*, 90.
35. Hara Kenya, *Nihon no Dezain*, 4 and “Nihon no Dezain, sono Naritachi to Mirai” (“Japanese Design, Its Origin and Future”), in *Sōzō suru to iu Koto (To Create)*, ed. Tōkō Gakuen et al. (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 2018), 93.
36. These terms are culled from Juhani Pallasmaa, “Toward an Architecture of Humility,” *Harvard Design Magazine*, no. 7 (1999): 22–25; Sim Van der Ryn and Stuart Cowan, *Ecological Design* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1996); and Victor Papanek, *The Green Imperative: Natural Design for the Real World* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995).
37. Pallasmaa, “Architecture of Humility.”
38. Papanek, *Green Imperative*, 203.
39. Van der Ryn and Cowan, *Ecological Design*, 147.
40. Donald A. Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 25, 27, emphasis added.
41. Nigel Taylor, “Ethical Arguments about the Aesthetics of Architecture,” in *Ethics and the Built Environment*, ed. Warwick Fox (London: Routledge, 2000), 201–02.
42. Taylor, “Ethical Arguments,” 205, emphasis added.
43. I explore promoting longevity of consumer products through design strategies and consumers' relationship with them in “Consumer Aesthetics and Environmental Ethics: Problems and Possibilities,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 76, no. 4 (2018): 429–39.

Norinaga on the Cultivation of *Mono no aware*

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ABSTRACT

In developing *mono no aware*, Motoori Norinaga sets forth an aesthetic theory that would enable individuals to act with sensitivity towards one another through the understanding of the *aware* of things. In Norinaga's view, understanding the *aware* of things would allow for the understanding of *aware* across social and cultural worlds. Moreover, through understanding *mono no aware*, Norinaga believes it would be possible to reduce or eliminate social conflict, as understanding *mono no aware* would allow the individual to understand not only the *kokoro* but also the way that the *kokoro* is moved through its cultivation within discrete social worlds. To this end, Norinaga argues that the cultivation of *mono no aware* not only allows for sensitivity to the moving power of phenomena but also allows for the cultivation of more humane individuals. On this view, *mono no aware* is more than the cultivation of aesthetic and affective sensibilities; it is the cultivation of individuals' awareness of the *aware* of social and cultural phenomena such that they may engage more humanely in our social relations.

Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801) argues that cultivating *mono no aware*—a term that he uses to refer simultaneously to the awareness of the *aware*, or affective power of things, and to the specific *aware* enacted by objects in the world—is crucial to developing a more harmonious society.¹ For Norinaga,² it is the embodiment of *mono no aware* in art through the skilled organization of the artistic medium that enables art to connect the *kokoro* of individuals across time, distance, and social position.³ Norinaga argues that the careful consideration of aesthetic works and the *mono no aware* embodied within them enables individuals to come to know the *kokoro* of things in the world. This, in turn, enables them to respond more harmoniously and appropriately to the events encountered in their lives. Thus, for Norinaga, the cultivation of *mono no aware* is not simply the cultivation of an aesthetic sensibility; it is the cultivation and refinement of the capacity to experience and respond to the world more fully through experiencing its moving power.

Norinaga relies upon the Japanese Preface to the *Kokin Wakashū*, an early anthology of Japanese *waka* poetry authored by Kī no Tsurayuki, to ground *mono no aware* as an affective sensibility that drives the creation of art. In doing so, Norinaga presents the origins of Japanese poetry and aesthetic creation as a transaction between the human *kokoro* and the broader world. In a passage often referenced by Norinaga, Tsurayuki states,

Japanese poetry has the human heart as seed and
myriads of words as leaves. It comes into being

when men use the seen and the heard to give voice to feelings aroused by the innumerable events in their lives. The song of the warbler among the blossoms, the voice of the frog dwelling in the water—these teach us that every living creature sings.⁴

Kokoro or the “human heart” referenced above is both the source of poetic creation and that which enables affective responsiveness to the moving power embodied in poetry. Thomas P. Kasulis elaborates this as follows:

A key characteristic of *kokoro* is that it involves a propensity for engagement, a sensitivity expressed as either being in touch with something else or being touched by it. Through such an engagement meaning—whether factual or valuational—comes into being. Hence, *kokoro* is what makes responsiveness possible.⁵

This capacity for being in touch with the broader world and for being touched by it is what enables Norinaga's *aware* to connect human *kokoro* across cultural and temporal distances. As the *kokoro* of a poet is embodied in poetry through the arrangement of words in poetic language, Norinaga argues that poetry enacts the *aware* of the poet's experience as it is experienced. A poem thus allows the reader to connect with the *kokoro* of the poet through the *aware* that emerges as the “voice” of the feelings aroused in ongoing experience. Studying poetry allows readers to recognize the “innumerable events” in human experience, despite not having these experiences.

However, for Norinaga, the feelings aroused through the encounter with the world do not initially emerge as poetry. Poetic language, or the patterning of words to make present the *aware* of experience, is necessary to give voice to the initial response to *aware* in the world. This point is important given that the initial experience of *aware*, for Norinaga, is embodied in the act of sighing. In *The Tale of Genji: A Little Jeweled Comb*,⁶ Norinaga states,

[A]ware is used to designate a situation of any sort whatever about which one may feel *aa hare*. And, thus, when one encounters something that by all rights should move one to exclaim *aa hare*, and one does indeed apprehend this emotional quality, we say of this *aware o shiru* that one is susceptible to emotion.⁷

The expression “*aa hare*,” used here by Norinaga, is an expression that indicates the verbal act of sighing. Further, the ability to be moved to “sighing,” or to exclaim *aa hare*, indicates the ways that an individual's *kokoro* can be moved in the encounter with the world. Moreover, as *aware* is used to point to the moving power of a situation, any situation that can move the *kokoro* and result in a sigh is a situation suffused with *aware*.

Despite his grounding of the expression of sensitivity to *aware* in the act of sighing, Norinaga argues that “*aa hare*” is best understood as encompassing a range of exclamations in response to an especially moving *aware*.

In *Isonokame sasamegoto*,⁸ Norinaga argues that *aware*, when used as an expression, and *aa hare* also encompass exclamations like “ah,” “alas,” and “oh,” as in when one is struck by the immediacy of a feeling and must give voice to it. While Norinaga agrees the initial sense of *aa hare* as “ah” or “oh” is much closer to sighing, he distinguishes sighing, as a form of exclamation, from the *aware* that prompts it. We should best interpret *aa hare* and *aware* in an enlarged sense, as also encompassing being moved by an *aware* that would prompt exclamations like “oh no,” as exclaimed in the experience of making a mistake; or “how beautiful,” as exclaimed when struck by the beauty of an experience; or “I’m sorry,” when one is struck by the painful experiences of other people.

It is the initial, inarticulate expression of *aware* as a sigh that prompts Norinaga to argue for the necessity of poetry specifically and aesthetic creation broadly. For Norinaga, when the *kokoro* is moved in experience, this movement results in the building up of emotion within the *kokoro*. If this emotion is not released, the movement of the *kokoro* becomes unendurable and is expressed through exclamations or sighs. However, these sighs and exclamations are inarticulate; they may give voice to the movement of the *kokoro* as a kind of release, but they do not communicate the experience. Poetry patterns the “voice” of these inarticulate expressions so that the content of the expression and the event that occasioned it can be clarified and released appropriately. In so doing, the elongation of sighs and exclamations, the “giving voice” to experience described by Tsurayuki, serves to embody the *kokoro* of the author and the *aware* of the experience in a form that enables others to understand it.

Norinaga’s etymology of *aware* as describing the quality of situations that move us to sigh or make exclamations provides context for Norinaga’s broader *mono no aware*. As *aware* is the quality of situations that moves the *kokoro*, it is how the *kokoro* is moved that results in the varieties of acts of sighing in response to the degree of movement. Norinaga describes the movement of the *kokoro* as “being stirred” or “being stirred deeply.”⁹ The depth of how the *kokoro* is “stirred” is crucial to understanding Norinaga’s distinction among varieties of *aware*. For example, sorrow and love “pierce the human heart more deeply than any other feeling and therefore [they are] phenomenon[a] extremely difficult to endure.”¹⁰ Put another way, the experiences of love and loss, for Norinaga, move the *kokoro* in a “deeper” way than other kinds of experiences and thus demand a wider variety of ways of being released. Furthermore, since love and sorrow are experienced in relatively similar ways across human experience, Norinaga argues that they are experienced regardless of individual social or cultural cultivations. This, for Norinaga, is the result of a “general and specific distinction” between the deep and shallow emotional effects. Norinaga explains thus:

The general distinction is that, as I mentioned earlier, “charm” is included in *aware*. The specific distinction is that, among the many feelings operating in a person’s heart, charm and joy stir the heart in a shallow way, whereas sadness and love move it deeply. This is why a deep feeling is

labeled especially “*aware*” (moving)—a fact that explains why, in common parlance, the content of *aware* is believed to be only sadness.¹¹

The above distinctions between the emotional effects are what Norinaga calls “depth” and “shallowness,” referring to the degree to which the heart is moved. Such distinctions are the results of the cultivation of the *kokoro* and not necessarily a normative judgment about the *aware*. The increased depth of love and sorrow, as made present by the number of works that arise from their *aware*, serves as the basis of the universality of the sentiment. For Norinaga, “since people are not as deeply moved by joy as they are by something that wounds their heart, all poems expressing joy are not deeply moving, whereas many of those expressing the sadness and distress of an unfulfilled heart are of profound inspiration.”¹² Unlike sorrow and love, for Norinaga, joy is dependent on the specific things that bring joy and is most often related to the cultivation of individual “tastes.” In other words, how the *kokoro* is oriented towards joyous objects in experience determines the degree to which a joyous object is moving. Therefore, while there are common situations that may be counted as joyous, and the *aware* of joy can be recognized, Norinaga argues that sorrow cuts across the human condition to move the heart deeply, regardless of cultivation.

Thus far, *aware* has been treated as describing “emotional” states in general. However, Norinaga’s brief comments on the art of painting in *Isonokame sasamegoto* extend *aware* beyond the simply emotional into the deeper and socially mediated affective sense that we may have upon encountering a person. Thus, for Norinaga, a painter must capture not only the external appearance of a subject but also the “attitude” of the individual:

In drawing people from the past, painters should strive to match the status and the knowledge of that person, since we do not know what those people looked like. The portrait of a nobleman should be elegant and should look like the portrait of a really noble person. A knowledgeable person should be portrayed exactly as a man of knowledge.¹³

Like poetry, painting should strive to use the materials of the medium to capture the specific *aware* of the subject as experienced, without which the image cannot be said to appropriately represent the individual. Further, Norinaga’s assertion that the “painter should strive to match the status and the knowledge of that person” implies a connection between the attitude and other social roles taken up by an individual. To capture fully the attitude of an individual requires capturing how they embody their position in society. Hence, “elegance” as a quality of nobility, in Norinaga’s view, is crucial to making present the *aware* of the image of a nobleperson. Here, Norinaga implies that social status also has an *aware* that can be perceived by the sensitive person.

Norinaga clarifies the *aware* of rank in *Genji monogatari tama no ogushi*:

One also finds numerous instances, in chapter after chapter, of being moved by a person's rank or position. This is something different from calculated obsequiousness or sycophancy toward the powerful and the rich; it is a natural and ineluctable sense of awe before a person of exalted station.¹⁴

Here, the *aware* of rank is a combination of the cultural organization of the social rank and the individual embodiment of the rank. Put another way, for Norinaga, it is not simply the rank itself that moves the *kokoro* in the encounter with the nobleperson; rather, it is how that rank is embodied by the individual nobleperson that moves the *kokoro*. Members of the nobility may be inelegant or cruel, but the *aware* of "inelegance" or "cruelty" is not simply a function of their status as nobility. It is, in addition, a function of the way that they embody their status as experienced within the world.

As an example, Norinaga refers to the *Suma* section in the *Genji monogatari*, where Genji's rank, combined with the situation of his playing the *koto*, moves observers to tears. For Norinaga, it is neither Genji's rank nor his playing the *koto* that moves observers. It is the *aware* inherent in his courtly rank, together with his skill in playing the *koto*, that allows Genji himself to become more moving. Genji, in this moment, makes present the *aware* of nobility through the combination of his rank and the elegance of his playing, resulting in the "ineluctable sense of awe" before Genji's station. Hence, the experience of being moved by the rank of an individual is dependent upon how an individual embodies that rank and subsequently enacts the *aware* of the rank. It is not a product of the rank alone.

As discussed above, *aware* is the movement of the *kokoro* in experience. However, *mono no aware* refers both to how the *kokoro* is moved in experience and to the specific *aware* of the experience itself. For Norinaga, "to be moved by all sorts of feelings, and to be able to have deep thoughts, whether one is happy or sad, are all examples of 'being stirred.' Therefore, 'to be stirred' is nothing but the knowledge of *mono no aware*."¹⁵ While Norinaga's definition of *mono no aware* uses the same language as his description of *aware*, there are some subtle differences because of the addition of *mono*. In *Genji monogatari tama no ogushi*, Norinaga defines *mono* in the following: "The *mono* is the *mono* that is added in order to generalize the reference of a word—as when *iu* [speak] becomes *mono iu* [discuss], *kataru* [tell] becomes *monogatari* [tale], or, in *monomōde* [pilgrimage], *monomi* [observation], *monoimi* [abstinence]." Put another way, the shift from *mi* (see) to *monomi* (observation) reflects a change in the specificity of the activity. Seeing is the general function of vision, whereas observation suggests a more focused use of the eyes. On this reading, the attachment of *mono* to a word seems to imply a focusing of the activity indicated by the word, but a focus with a certain generality, namely, without specifying a subject of that activity. Combined with *aware*, *mono no aware* is the individualized *aware* that "stirs" the *kokoro* in experience. Put another way, *mono* specifies an affect understood as "knowledge of *mono no aware*."

The generalization of *mono* means that it refers to the "external world" or the whole field of experience. This should be understood to include events and concepts. For Norinaga, "events and words are things in reciprocal response,"¹⁶ by which Norinaga intends a close relation among events (*koto*), words (*kotoba*), and things (*mono*). It is this closeness among words, events, and things that grant words the power to convey the reality of events and things as they are experienced.

Norinaga's hermeneutic reading of the *Kojiki*, where the first kanji in *kotodama* 言 is used interchangeably with the first kanji in *kotoba* 事 to create the compound of *kotodama*, supports this close relation between events and words. The correlation between the first kanji used to represent *koto* "word, speech" and the second kanji used to represent *koto* "thing, experience" allows Norinaga to argue that "kotoba" are the "leaves" of "koto," thereby grounding words in the events that give rise to them. Norinaga develops the connection of *mono* to events through his reading of Tsurayuki's Preface. As Japanese poetry has the human heart, *kokoro*, as seeds, and words, *kotoba*, as flowers, Norinaga interprets Tsurayuki's statement to indicate that poetry has the capacity to relate the movement of the *kokoro* in response to the external world through making present the *aware* and the *kokoro* of the event. For Norinaga, to be moved in the encounter with the world and the events in it is to know *mono no aware*.

In keeping with the above, "knowledge of *mono no aware*" is the cultivated sense of the moving power of *aware* in general and the moving power of the specific *aware* of an object. Beyond being sensitive to how the *kokoro* is moved, knowledge of *mono no aware* also involves "knowing the essence of things and knowing the essence of events."¹⁷ Essence here does not refer to an unchanging quality of an entity. Rather, it refers to the affective quality of the encounter that "stirs" or moves the *kokoro* in a particular way. Thus, for Norinaga, the experiential nature of knowledge of *mono no aware* is always primary; the capacity to discern the nature of the world develops through affective responses to the encounter with the world as events and things are experienced. The more phenomena encountered in experience, the more an individual can come to know the essence of the phenomena through their affective response to it. On this view, the "essence" of phenomena in the world is not restricted to their atomistic composition. Nor is it solely the province of the material constitution of a thing or event. It is how that thing or event evokes an affective response that determines its nature or essence. Thus, for Norinaga,

When one encounters something for which he should be happy and has happy thoughts, his happiness derives from the understanding of the essence of that very thing about which he should feel happy. Likewise, when one encounters something for which he should be sad and has sad thoughts, his sadness derives from the understanding of the essence of that very thing about which he should feel sad. Therefore, "to know *mono no aware*" is to discern the nature of happiness or sadness while experiencing the

world. When we do not understand the nature of things, there is no feeling thought in our hearts, since we are neither happy nor sad.¹⁸

For Norinaga, the “knowledge of the essence of things” is circumscribed by the social and physical world that the individual inhabits. Norinaga, therefore, takes it to be the case that knowledge of *mono no aware* takes on different forms based upon the social and physical environments in which *mono no aware* is cultivated. For Norinaga,

In the first place, it is said that human feelings [*hito no kokoro*] never change, whether past or present, high or low; yet they are not without slight differences among them, resulting from differences in the worlds that each and every individual inhabits, such as the customs of their age and their station in life.¹⁹

Put another way, immersion in a particular social environment cultivates the *kokoro* and the *mono no aware* in line with the encounters with a given world as structured by the customs of that world. Thus, the *kokoro* of different individuals come to express the differences in their knowledge of *mono no aware* not because of a fundamental distinction in the *kokoro* in question. It is only the “things and events” that an individual encounters and how those things generate knowledge of *mono no aware* that results in the differences between *kokoro* and knowledge of *mono no aware*. Norinaga, therefore, argues for a universal receptivity to the moving nature of the world, cultivated differently depending on the social world occupied by the individual.

Norinaga is clear that all humans have a minimal understanding of *mono no aware*. Distinctions only emerge through comparing the depth of the knowledge of *mono no aware*. As the depth or shallowness of knowledge of *mono no aware* is a result of the experiences within the “world” occupied by a given human, the differences among knowledge of *mono no aware* are a product of the encounters within that world. As a result of these encounters with the social world, the *kokoro* becomes sensitive to the *aware* of matters within that world, and “anything that does not directly concern us, that we do not constantly see and hear of, is unfamiliar to us, and our interest in it is slight.”²⁰ This is the source of the disinterest in the affairs of other worlds, as there is no direct encounter with the events in other worlds and thus no understanding of the *aware* of the events within different worlds. Because there is no understanding of the *aware* of other worlds, there is no understanding of how to respond to the events in those worlds. Despite this, Norinaga does not make any normative judgment about the feelings and events within the worlds in question. Rather, his focus is on the universality of the human *kokoro* and its ability to know *mono no aware*. To be clear, while all humans have the capacity to understand *mono no aware*, it is also the case that the different worlds occupied by humans result in differing depths of knowledge of *mono no aware* in humans.

These differences in depth of knowledge of *mono no aware* have specific effects on society. As *mono no aware* enables an understanding of the essence of things, including the

myriad events in the various worlds occupied by humans, the degree to which an individual has cultivated their *mono no aware* affects the kinds of social relationships formed. Where humans occupy their discrete worlds, with little interaction with the worlds of other humans, their lack of exposure to events from outside of their worlds results in a *mono no aware* that is shallow in comparison to those who encounter events beyond their worlds. More seriously, as understanding the nature of things where other humans are concerned consists in understanding the *kokoro* of other humans, the distance between worlds reduces the empathy felt for others beyond one’s world because of the inability to know the *aware* within other worlds. Thus, for Norinaga, “those who do not know *mono no aware* show no considerateness in anything and are often hard-hearted and cruel. Because they have no encounters with various matters, they do not understand them.”²¹ “Heartless” responses to events in the world are a result of a shallow *mono no aware* cultivated through limited encounters with the “various matters” beyond a given world. Because the distance between worlds typically denies individuals access to the “various matters” in other social worlds, they do not understand the nature of things within those worlds, making it difficult for individuals across worlds to be moved by the nature of things within worlds that they do not occupy.

A deeper knowledge of *mono no aware* can help to transcend the separations between worlds. That separation inevitably leads to the mistreatment of others and inhumane exercises of authority.

Norinaga is specifically concerned with the cultivation of *mono no aware* to enable humane governance. Humane governance, for Norinaga, is governance that responds appropriately to the *aware* of the situations experienced by the governed and is not simply directed by the needs of social organization. On this point, Norinaga states,

[W]ere they [the governors] to empathize with all the labors of the peasantry and the travails of their servants, surely there would be no inhumane lords in this world. But the fact that there are inhumane lords and unfilial children in this world, in the final analysis, is because they are insensitive to human emotion [*mna o shiraneba*].²²

Here, empathy emerges through the cultivation of knowledge of *mono no aware*, specifically insofar as this knowledge encompasses the knowledge of the *aware* experienced in the world occupied by servants and the peasantry. Generalizing Norinaga’s assertion here, to know the *aware* of these worlds is to understand the essence of these worlds, the contexts in which the *aware* arises, and to understand how to respond appropriately to that *aware*. This empathetic understanding, in Norinaga’s view, should necessarily lead to the cultivation of lords who seek to organize a world to reduce the suffering of their subjects. Actions in accord with social responsibilities that do not proceed from *mono no aware* ultimately result in heartlessness and the cultivation of heartless subordinates, specifically when those actions are taken by individuals in positions of power and influence. It is in this mode that

Norinaga's treatment of *mono no aware* serves to enable his extension of *mono no aware* beyond a mere thesis of affective experience and intersubjective communication, and into a broad social project wherein human society is enriched through the cultivation of *mono no aware*.

Thus, for Norinaga, knowledge of *mono no aware* leads to more compassionate actions and enables the harmonious functioning of human society through cultivating knowledge of the experiences of other people. While Norinaga's formulation of *mono no aware* is traditionally taken up as an aesthetic or literary theory, *mono no aware* serves to cultivate more humane individuals through engaging with the experiences represented through literature. More than an aesthetic theory, *mono no aware* is a theory of self-cultivation aimed at more humane governance and social organization. To this end, for Norinaga, "when people deeply understand the hearts of others, they naturally act so as not to harm society or other people. This is another benefit of making people know *mono no aware*."²³

NOTES

1. This article draws on Johnathan Flowers, "Tokimeku: The Poetics of Marie Kondo's KonMari Method," *SPECTRA (Social Political Ethical and Cultural Theory Archives)* 7, no. 2 (2020): 5–12, doi: <https://doi.org/10.21061/spectra.v7i2.146>.
2. Selections from Norinaga's *Isonokami sasamegato*, 1763 (*Whisperings of Isonokami*) in translation, in which he develops the concept of *mono no aware*, can be found in *The Poetics of Motoori Norinaga: A Hermeneutical Journey*, trans. and ed. Michael F. Marra (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007) and *Early Modern Japanese Literature: An Anthology, 1600–1900*, ed. Haruo Shirane (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002). Selections from Norinaga's *Genji monogatari tama no ogushi*, 1799 (*The Tale of Genji: A Little Jeweled Comb*) in translation (by Satoko Naito) can be found in *Reading The Tale of Genji: Sources from the First Millennium*, ed. Thomas Harper and Haruo Shirane (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015). For more on *mono no aware*, see A. Minh Nguyen, ed., *New Essays in Japanese Aesthetics* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), lv, 132–33, 175, 277, 290, 356–57.
3. Norinaga, *Isonokami sasamegato*, 189.
4. Ki no Tsurayuki, Kana Preface to the *Kokin Wakashū*, in *Kokin Wakashū: The First Imperial Anthology of Japanese Poetry*, trans. and annot. Helen Craig McCullough (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1985), 3–13.
5. Thomas P. Kasulis, "Cultivating the Mindful Heart: What We May Learn from the Japanese Philosophy of *Kokoro*," in *Educations and Their Purposes: A Conversation among Cultures*, ed. Roger T. Ames and Peter D. Hershock (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), 142–56.
6. Norinaga, *Genji monogatari tama no ogushi*, trans. Satoko Naito, in *Reading The Tale of Genji*, ed. Thomas Harper and Haruo Shirane, 411–505.
7. Norinaga, *Genji monogatari tama no ogushi*, 454.
8. Selections from Norinaga's *Isonokami sasamegato* in translation can be found in *The Poetics of Motoori Norinaga*, trans. and ed. Michael F. Marra, and *Early Modern Japanese Literature*, ed. Haruo Shirane.
9. Norinaga, *Isonokami sasamegato*, 174.
10. Norinaga, *Isonokami sasamegato*, 174.
11. Norinaga, *Isonokami sasamegato*, 184.
12. Norinaga, *Isonokami sasamegato*, 129.
13. Norinaga, *Isonokami sasamegato*, 139.
14. Norinaga, *Genji monogatari tama no ogushi*, 457.
15. Norinaga, *Isonokami sasamegato*, 174.
16. Motoori Norinaga, *Kojiki-den, Book 1, Motoori Norinaga*, trans. Ann Wehmeyer (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, East Asia Program, 1997).
17. Norinaga, *Isonokami sasamegato*, 172–73.
18. Norinaga, *Isonokami sasamegato*, 172–73.
19. Norinaga, *Genji monogatari tama no ogushi*, 503.
20. Norinaga, *Genji monogatari tama no ogushi*, 503.
21. Motoori Norinaga, *My Personal View of Poetry (Isonokami sasamegato)*, trans. Peter Flueckiger, in *Early Modern Japanese Literature*, ed. Haruo Shirane, 618.
22. Norinaga, *Genji monogatari tama no ogushi*, 484–85.
23. Motoori Norinaga, "Isonokami sasamegato," in *Motoori Norinaga shū (Shinchō Nihon koten shūsei)*, no. 60, ed. Hino Tatsuo (Tōkyō: Shinchōsha, 1983), 444–46. Quoted in Peter Flueckiger, *Imagining Harmony: Poetry, Empathy, and Community in Mid-Tokugawa Confucianism and Nativism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 178–79.

Saving Beauty: Art Museums, Empathy, and Impermanence

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores how key ideas in Japanese aesthetics may enhance the current interest in the intersection of empathy, art, and museums. First, I provide a brief discussion of empathy, focusing on how it attenuates an egocentric perspective by providing an experience of otherness, leading to an awareness and appreciation of human interconnectedness. Second, I explore how the appreciation of impermanence in Japanese aesthetics may elucidate the interconnectedness and fellow feeling that empathy implies. In particular, I discuss the aesthetic concepts of *mono no aware*, *wabi*, and *sabi*. Third, I consider one example of how empathy and impermanence relate to the experience of visual art through a discussion of Tsukioka Yoshitoshi's woodblock print series *One Hundred Aspects of the Moon*.

INTRODUCTION

When was the last time you went to an art museum? What did you see? What do you remember from that day? Art museums can do many things: inform us about important people in art history, train visual literacy, function as places to meet with friends in a special space apart from daily life. But can they be agents of change, both for our individual selves as well as our communities?

Art museums are long-standing institutions—many US art museums, including my institution, the Dayton Art Institute, are now over one hundred years old—and throughout they have often claimed to provide a necessary social service, but exactly what constitutes this is not always made clear. To simply elevate the "taste" of the common person? To instruct in the loftiest of human ideas and artifacts? Even before the social justice movements of the last few years

and the COVID-19 pandemic, art museums have been working to refine how they can best serve the communities of which they are a part. There has been a trend away from traveling blockbuster exhibitions to focusing more on using the museum's own collection in creative ways. Also, museums are assessing the limitations of the standard geographic and chronological paradigm of laying out the galleries and presenting objects.

In light of this, we may think of art museums as "gyms" for cultivating aesthetic value, not purely in a disinterested, formalist sort of way, but one that is bound up with ethical considerations. Just as you go to the gym to focus on exercising for overall bodily excellence in daily life, museums can be a place to reflect more intentionally on the role of aesthetics in fostering human flourishing. Here I would suggest that a central ability that art museums can develop is empathy. I am not alone in this, as others working in art museums have also been researching and promoting this, one example being the Minneapolis Institute of Art's Center for Empathy and the Visual Arts.¹ By providing direct encounters with artworks, museums present curated, concentrated experiences of otherness—from different times, places, and backgrounds—opening our horizons to those outside of ourselves. At the same time, they can create a feeling of solidarity, confirming that we are not alone in our joys and sorrows. Through this, they can serve as catalysts for creating a more hopeful future. In short, art museums may serve as sites for cultivating empathy and thereby contribute to positive change.²

In this essay, I will explore how key ideas in Japanese aesthetics may enhance the current interest in empathy, art, and museums. First, I will provide a brief discussion of empathy, focusing on how it attenuates an egocentric perspective by providing an experience of otherness, leading to an awareness and appreciation of human interconnectedness. Second, I will consider how the appreciation of impermanence in Japanese aesthetics may elucidate the interconnectedness and fellow feeling that empathy implies. In particular, I will discuss the aesthetic concepts of *mono no aware*, *wabi*, and *sabi*. Third, I will provide one example of how empathy and impermanence relate to the experience of visual art through a discussion of Tsukioka Yoshitoshi's woodblock print series *One Hundred Aspects of the Moon*.

EMPATHY AND INTERCONNECTEDNESS

Empathy may be broadly understood as "our basic capacity to recognize and understand others as minded and expressive creatures."³ Modern research on the topic goes back to the end of the nineteenth century when the German philosopher Robert Vischer (1847–1933) coined the term *Einfühlung* ("feeling into") and used it within aesthetics to understand how we may attribute emotions to art objects through the projection of our own feelings, treating things as if they are sentient. Theodor Lipps (1851–1914) then made the transition from empathy as feeling into objects to interpersonal human empathy, the ability to understand the feelings of others through our perception of them.⁴ The term was then translated into English as "empathy" by the psychologist Edward Titchener (1867–1927) in 1909.

Current understandings of empathy focus on how it enables us to understand the feelings and minds of others through (internal) bodily simulation and imaginative projection. The increase in interest in empathy over the past few decades has been supported by advances in neuroscience, such as the discovery of mirror neurons. Often research tends to split into two areas of focus: "low-level empathy," a pre-conscious, bodily activity where we mirror another person's gestures, facial expressions, and such, and "high-level empathy," which is more complex and depends on imagination and perspective-taking.⁵ These can also be called "primary" and "extended" empathy.⁶

At its most expansive, empathy research offers a vision of the integration of body, cognition, and emotion that fosters understanding, compassion, and even metaphysical insight. For example, Emily McRae considers how Indo-Tibetan Buddhism employs imaginative projection, such as visualization practices, to grasp the feelings of others and to cultivate key virtues in Mahayana Buddhist ethics, including compassion and "exchanging self and other."⁷ However, this goes beyond simply providing a model for altruistic behavior. "It is a transformative practice that uses empathic imaginative projection to chip away at self-clinging by softening the boundaries of self and other."⁸ In this way, the view of self is fundamentally reoriented and opens out towards others, training one to be aware of and alleviate suffering. For McRae, "[a]n appreciation of the myriad ways in which beings suffer and having an adequate response to that suffering is not a basic set of moral skills in Buddhist ethics; it is a rare moral accomplishment that requires a major transformation of our habitual ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. Empathy is one of the main ways by which this transformation can occur."⁹ Empathy, in other words, helps develop our capacity to respond appropriately to the many varieties of suffering that afflict the world.

McRae's description of empathy "softening the boundaries of self and other" speaks to the power of empathy to unite, crossing divisions by creating awareness of the variety of human experience and feeling, and the fundamental interrelatedness of human life. This is also highlighted in Elif M. Gokcigdem's extensive work on museums and empathy, where she employs the idea of "oneness," "the ancient recognition of our interdependence and interconnectedness; a realization that we as individuals do not live and operate in silos."¹⁰ Museums are effective platforms for increasing an awareness of oneness in people, especially through the ways they foster empathy. "Museums provide a readily available platform for cross-pollination of ideas and the exploration of empathy. They are natural storytellers that can show and tell us how all things are interconnected, and let us feel the wisdom inherited in ancient narratives about our oneness, while discovering new ones through science and exploration."¹¹ Museums, then, may serve as training centers, gyms, where our self-centered "habitual ways of thinking, feeling, and acting" are attenuated, and we strengthen our empathic muscles and our facility to see and sustain interconnectedness.

Central to this interconnectedness, as McRae notes, is our ability to be aware of suffering and have a response to

it. Indeed, human suffering and its attendant emotional expression through the body of the sufferer are among the most affecting empathetic experiences. But can we be more specific about this suffering? On the one hand, as McRae notes, the challenge is to be open to the “myriad of ways in which beings suffer.” On the other hand, it may be possible to generalize broader, overarching themes that address suffering. I would like to consider one: impermanence. In particular, I want to explore how three concepts from Japanese aesthetics articulate this theme and how these concepts enrich our thinking about empathy and the uses of art.

IMPERMANENCE IN JAPANESE AESTHETICS

One of the classic books in medieval Japanese literature is Yoshida Kenkō’s (1283?–1350/52?) *Essays in Idleness*.¹² There, he comments: “If man were never to fade away like the dews of Adashino, never to vanish like the smoke over Toribeyama, but lingered on forever in the world, how things would lose their power to move us! The most precious thing in life is its uncertainty.”¹³ Referring to Adashino, a graveyard near Kyoto often used as a poetic symbol of impermanence,¹⁴ Kenkō suggests that the fact common to all creatures—death—charges daily experience with a vitality in its uniqueness.

“The power of things to move us” here is a translation of the phrase *mono no aware* (もののあはれ),¹⁵ an essential term in Japanese aesthetics. Often translated as “the pathos of things,” the expression dates back to Heian court aesthetics, around 1000 CE. It was later identified as a defining characteristic of Japanese culture by the philologist Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801). The term denotes an intuitive understanding between a person and thing. Indeed, according to Motoori, “If I need to be more detailed about it, I would say that ‘to be stirred by external things’ is an exact definition of knowing *mono no aware*.”¹⁶ *Mono no aware* may include transferring one’s emotion onto a thing in order to, as Yuriko Saito notes, “appreciate the way in which natural objects and events reverberate with our emotion.”¹⁷ On the other hand, we may “intuit the *kokoro* (essence, spirit) of the object or situation and sympathize with it.”¹⁸ The border between self and other is porous and bilateral. At the heart of this emotional exchange is a deep awareness of a sharing in common impermanence, that we, like the fragrant cherry blossoms, are here for a moment and will pass away. *Mono no aware*, then, is characterized as a bittersweet, fleeting beauty.¹⁹

This appreciation of impermanence is rooted in the experience of the natural world and also shapes how nature is aesthetically appreciated, particularly the passing of the seasons, which plays such an important role in all aspects of Japanese life.²⁰ The arts in Japan—whether literary, performance, visual, or more integrative such as the tea ceremony—have always been closely connected to the appreciation of nature, in particular drawing on nature as subject matter or, perhaps more accurately, as co-creator, integrating nature into everyday life. What supports such an integrative practice is a foundational orientation that views nature and human as of a piece rather than starkly different, and that nature can serve as a means for uniting humans in fellow feeling.

The primary spiritual traditions in Japan, Shintō and Buddhism, have further refined the close relation of humans and nature, particularly in the shared feature of impermanence. Shintō is based on a reverence for *kami* (神), or spirit, an impersonal force that pervades nature but is not identical with it. This belief in *kami* throughout all things in nature means each thing may possess a sacred aura or even revelatory quality. Also, the dynamic character of *kami*—an ever moving, coming and going—highlights the temporal features of process and change in nature. Sensitivity to this movement is one factor in the formation of the Japanese emphasis on the four seasons.²¹

Likewise, Buddhism teaches that all things are connected and constantly changing. The basic fact of existence is impermanence (無常, *mujō*) and humans are not exempt from this fact; rather, much of our suffering comes from trying to deny it, to give permanence to our lives, our sense of self, and seeing ourselves as distinct from, and superior to, nature around us. What is needed is a way of changing our thinking, of transcending the self in order to see the world, including ourselves, as it really is. This can be summarized by the thirteenth-century Zen master Dōgen (1200–1253): “[S]tudying the Buddha Way is studying oneself. Studying oneself is forgetting oneself. Forgetting oneself is being enlightened by all things.”²² Dōgen also refers to this state as “without-thinking” and others have referred to it as “nothingness.” But as the Nobel Prize-winning novelist Kawabata Yasunari points out, it would be a mistake to see such a nothingness as a version of Western nihilism. “It is rather the reverse, a universe of the spirit in which everything communicates freely with everything, transcending bounds, limitless.”²³

Appreciating impermanence, especially as expressed in nature, in turn guides artistic practice, creating a sensitivity to the unique features of natural materials and their experience in time. The goal of art is not to express the artist’s ego, in dominance of the material, but to bring the self into harmony with the material, to let the thing fully live, be it a flower arrangement, a ceramic plate, a painted scroll, a wooden sculpture, or a printed page.

So, *mono no aware* names that emotional feeling of the transience of life we share with the world around us. Other key concepts in Japanese aesthetics also express this. These include *wabi* (わび) and *sabi* (さび). I will touch on each briefly.

Wabi is especially associated with the tea ceremony as developed by the master Sen no Rikyū (1522–1591). This form of tea ceremony placed a high value on mundane, misshapen, or even broken implements as expressing *wabi*, a form of beauty marked by age, imperfection, and austerity.²⁴ Apparently damaged or deformed ceramics were given a place alongside more refined artworks, a sort of egalitarian aesthetics rooted in this deeper philosophical perspective of impermanence and continuity with nature. Experiencing the *wabi* tea ceremony was a way to train oneself, as it were, to understand this truth.

Another key term in Japanese aesthetics is *sabi*, or loneliness. Often *wabi* and *sabi* are used together. *Sabi* is

especially associated with the seventeenth-century haiku poet Bashō (1644–1694). For Bashō, the job of the poet is to penetrate into any object and grasp its inner life, the profound feeling that each thing shares with the universe.²⁵ When the poet captures and expresses this, a poem will evoke *sabi*, but it is a loneliness that is in the world, objective and impersonal, and thus supersedes subjective emotion. As Makoto Ueda comments,

Basho conceived loneliness as an impersonal atmosphere, in contrast with grief and sorrow, which is a personal emotion. The contrast cannot be over-emphasized, because loneliness thus conceived lay at the bottom of Basho's view of life, pointing towards a way in which his plea "return to nature" can be fulfilled. . . . There is no escape for men from sorrow, since it is inherent in humanity. If there should be an escape, it would be only through a denial of humanity, through men's dehumanizing themselves. They can escape from sorrow only when they transform it into an impersonal atmosphere, loneliness.²⁶

By going beyond the egocentric self and understanding a deeper continuity with nature, one can better assess and respond to the suffering that humans endure.

Mono no aware, *wabi*, and *sabi*. These are three key terms in Japanese aesthetics, and I have suggested that each expresses different aspects of the basic fact of impermanence linked to the constant transformation in nature. Together, they express the truth that all things are simultaneously co-arising and have their place in the flow of life, which each of us are privileged to share in at this specific place and at this specific moment, never to come again. The discussion has focused on the human experience of nature and how this finds expression in artistic practices, such as poetry or the tea ceremony, which may function as aids to help the individual empathize with nature. This may seem to go back to the early understanding of empathy as projection onto objects. However, these ideas from Japanese aesthetics remind us that empathy may go beyond only being between humans, and at the same time our understanding of nature may deepen our understanding of and solidarity with other humans.²⁷ It need not be either/or.

My suggestion here is not that empathy is reducible to impermanence, but that it may be a more overarching insight that our experiences of the emotional lives of others in their diverse expressions gesture towards. This can further flesh out Elif Gokcigdem's discussion of empathy as oneness and interconnectedness, and also speak to Emily McRae's challenge that empathy should not only make us aware of the myriad of human suffering, but to have a response to it, ultimately with compassion. Training ourselves to be more sensitive to this is something art can support. Art may provide empathic encounters, but in such a way that suffering is made impersonal, in Bashō's sense, aestheticizing it, but not cutting it off from the ethical; rather, intensifying it. To consider this further, I would like to close with a discussion of a particular artwork, Tsukioka Yoshitoshi's *One Hundred Aspects of the Moon*.

EMPATHY AND IMPERMANENCE IN YOSHITOSHI'S ONE HUNDRED ASPECTS OF THE MOON

Tsukioka Yoshitoshi (1839–1892) was one of the most prolific and popular print artists of his generation. Throughout his career, he produced prints in different genres, including beautiful ladies, historical figures, kabuki actors, and contemporary events. Toward the end of his life, from 1885 to 1892, he completed *One Hundred Aspects of the Moon*. Made during a time of drastic social change in Japan, the series is a wide-ranging look back on centuries of Japanese history and culture. Each print relates to a single story, but all are linked by the theme of the moon. Sometimes the moon is visible, other times it is referenced in a poem; yet it is always there, as if to remind us that each human life, with its unique experience and emotion, is transient. Here I will only focus on three examples: *Gravemaker Moon*, *Moon above the Sea at Daimotsu Bay – Benkei*, and *Moon of Pure Snow at Asano River – Chikako, the Filial Daughter* (Figures 1, 2, and 3).²⁸

What is immediately striking when looking at the series is the range of emotion Yoshitoshi depicts and the directness he does it with through his formal designs. This speaks to an important observation in research on empathy and visual art. At the beginning of this essay the distinction between low-level and high-level empathy was noted. Low-level empathy deals with the automatic process by which our bodies mirror, or simulate, the bodies of others and the feelings their gestures and expressions imply. Applied to visual art, it speaks to the way we can grasp an image even without extensive cultural knowledge. As David Freedberg notes, "The possibility that gestures and emotions might be understood through embodied simulation suggests a form of translation not necessarily constrained by cultural bounds. You understand the emotions such movements entail because you have a body, not because you know the story."²⁹



Figure 1. Tsukioka Yoshitoshi (Japanese, 1839–1892), *Gravemaker Moon*, 1886, woodblock print, ink and color on paper, 14 5/16 x 9 5/8 inches. Dayton Art Institute, Museum purchase with funds provided by Jack Graef, Jr., Linda Stein, Susan Shettler, and their families in memory of Jack and Marilyn Graef, 2019.9.49. Courtesy of Dayton Art Institute.

When asked about the emotions of the figures in these three prints, responses may include the following: the figure's rigid pose and neutral face in *Daimotsu Bay* expresses resolution; the contorted face and furrowed brow in *Asano River*, worry; the seated, sedate figure in *Gravemaker*,



Figure 2. Tsukioka Yoshitoshi (Japanese, 1839–1892), *Moon above the Sea at Daimotsu Bay – Benkei*, 1886, woodblock print, ink and color on paper, 14 5/16 x 9 5/8 inches. Dayton Art Institute, Museum purchase with funds provided by Jack Graef Jr., Linda Stein, Susan Shettler and their families in memory of Jack and Marilyn Graef, 2019.9.76. Courtesy of Dayton Art Institute.

calm. Sometimes the emotion may be immediately discernable, but other times it may not. Nevertheless, we gain a sense of the general range of emotion—joy vs. sadness, etc.

At the same time, as Noël Carroll comments, mirror responses only take us so far in our empathic experience of an image and it is context that fills in the picture, including other depicted elements in the work or the title, which may clue us into the larger story the image refers to.³⁰ In Yoshitoshi's case, each print has a title in a white box (the pink box is the series title). These may be a direct

mention of a person's name, a poem, or allusion, but all give direct pointers as to what story is being depicted and the situation the figure is going through. In *Daimotsu Bay*, it refers to when, after the climactic Battle of Dannoura (1185) and the defeat of the Taira clan by the Minamoto, Minamoto no Yoshitsune had to flee with his men from his power-hungry brother. As they sailed west, a tremendous storm struck and ghosts of the drowned Taira soldiers appeared. The monk-warrior Benkei confronted the ghosts with prayers and quieted them. This may further refine our understanding of the emotion Benkei is feeling as he faces the supernatural waves with stoic determination. *Asano River* relates to the story of Chikako, the daughter of a businessman who prospered by supplying rice during a famine, but ended up in jail in the fallout of a failed venture to fill a lake to create more rice fields. Praying for justice for her father, she proved her sincerity by jumping into the Asano River in an act of self-sacrifice. The story was recent news in Yoshitoshi's time. This context will add further depth to our understanding of Chikako's feelings, as this is not simply a person jumping into a cold river, but someone facing the moments before their death. As for *Gravemarker*, the title alludes to a Noh drama play about Ono no Komachi, a ninth-century woman famed for her beauty and poetry. In the play, a worn old lady sits on a fallen gravestone and recounts to two passing priests her past loves and her cruelty to her lovers. This context of romantic nostalgia, possible regret, and acceptance will further condition how we perceive the old woman's feelings.

This is just a cursory discussion of three prints out of one hundred. Further analysis of the use of color, scenic details, and other features could add additional layers to our

understanding of the emotional content of each. Throughout Yoshitoshi's masterful series, there are direct and indirect references to a myriad of stories, poems, plays, history, and other cultural store that would have been familiar to an educated person of his time, creating a rich intertextuality. Each print conveys a distinct emotion, rooted in a particular context, and each may provide a unique empathic experience for us, especially as most of the prints depict figures at pivotal moments in their lives. But taken together as a series, what emerges is a multifaceted exploration of the variety of experience and emotion across hundreds of years that fits with the perspective of impermanence we discussed through key terms in Japanese aesthetics—indeed, one effective way to look at the prints could be through the different lenses of *mono no aware*, *wabi*, and *sabi*. For the viewer, the series encourages comparison and contrast across the different prints and in turn with one's own experience, resulting in a moving awareness of how all human lives, embedded in nature, are linked by their intense feeling and their evanescence, an experience of empathy through art that cultivates oneness and, in turn, compassion for others.³¹



Figure 3. Tsukioka Yoshitoshi (Japanese, 1839–1892), *Moon of Pure Snow at Asano River – Chikako, the Filial Daughter*, 1885, woodblock print, ink and color on paper, 14 5/16 x 9 5/8 inches. Dayton Art Institute, Museum purchase with funds provided by Jack Graef Jr., Linda Stein, Susan Shettler and their families in memory of Jack and Marilyn Graef, 2019.9.78. Courtesy of Dayton Art Institute.

We could then transpose the experience of Yoshitoshi's series to the art museum as a whole: individual works will provide singular opportunities to exercise empathy, but through the museum's diverse collections, works can be actively curated and presented in such a way that encourages making connections and forming a broader perspective that speaks to the perennial concerns and hopes of all. I have here drawn on ideas in Japanese aesthetics related to impermanence, but this could be done from other aesthetic, religious, and wisdom perspectives, providing further insights for reflection and mutual dialogue.

NOTES

1. <https://new.artsmia.org/empathy/>, accessed February 21, 2022.
2. For a similar perspective, see Zorana Ivcevic and Fundación Botín, "Introduction," in *Designing for Empathy: Perspectives on the Museum Experience*, ed. Elif M. Gokcigdem (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 1–2. At the outset, it is important to note that while I present a relatively optimistic view of the relationship between empathy and ethics and of the potential for museums to support this, I do not want to discount the complexities surrounding both. Empathy alone is not enough to

- produce change, and there are criticisms of empathy's relation to morality that should be kept in mind. For an overview of some of these topics, see Heidi L. Maibom, "Introduction: (Almost) Everything You Ever Wanted to Know about Empathy," in *Empathy and Morality*, ed. Heidi L. Maibom (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1–40. At the same time, even if museums engage audiences with empathy, the museum environment and the particular kind of experience it creates, and whether this leads to effective ethical action is a subject for ongoing consideration.
3. Thomas Fuchs, "Levels of Empathy—Primary, Extended, and Reiterated Empathy," in *Empathy: Epistemic Problems and Cultural-Historical Perspectives of a Cross-Disciplinary Concept*, ed. Vanessa Lux and Sigrid Weigel (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 27.
 4. See Sigrid Weigel, "The Heterogeneity of Empathy: An Archaeology of Multiple Meanings and Epistemic Implications," in *Empathy: Epistemic Problems and Cultural-Historical Perspectives of a Cross-Disciplinary Concept*, ed. Vanessa Lux and Sigrid Weigel (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 12–13.
 5. See Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie, "Introduction," in *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, ed. Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), xxxiii–xxxiv.
 6. See Fuchs, "Levels of Empathy," 31–38.
 7. See Emily McRae, "Empathy, Compassion, and 'Exchanging Self and Other' in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism," in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Empathy*, ed. Heidi Maibom (London: Routledge, 2017), 123–24.
 8. McRae, "Empathy, Compassion," 127. This may resemble Edith Stein's idea of reiterative empathy, where I empathically grasp how you perceive me and thereby experience myself as an other for you, providing "a non-egocentric and intersubjective view of our own lived body in the public world." See Fuchs, "Levels of Empathy," 41–42.
 9. McRae, "Empathy, Compassion," 129.
 10. Elif M. Gokcigdem, "Forward," in *Designing for Empathy: Perspectives on the Museum Experience*, ed. Elif M. Gokcigdem (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), xv–xvi. See also Elif M. Gokcigdem, *Fostering Empathy through Museums* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).
 11. Gokcigdem, "Forward," xvii.
 12. Regarding the order of Japanese names, if the work was written in English, I have used the English order. If a work was translated from the Japanese, I have retained the Japanese order.
 13. Yoshida Kenkō, *Essays in Idleness: The Tsurezuregusa of Kenkō*, trans. Donald Keene, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 7.
 14. See Kenkō, *Essays in Idleness*, 8, note 1.
 15. See Kenkō, *Essays in Idleness*, 8, note 3.
 16. Motoori Norinaga, "On *Mono no Aware*," in *The Poetics of Motoori Norinaga: A Hermeneutical Journey*, trans. and ed. Michael Marra (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 173.
 17. Yuriko Saito, "Nature: Japanese Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature," *Oxford Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, ed. Michael Kelly, vol. 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 344. This sense echoes the early uses of empathy by late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century aestheticians.
 18. Saito, "Nature," 345.
 19. See Mark Meli, "Motoori Norinaga's Hermeneutic of *Mono no Aware*: The Link between Ideal and Tradition," in *Japanese Hermeneutics: Current Debates on Aesthetics and Interpretation*, ed. Michael F. Marra (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), 60.
 20. See Haruo Shirane, *Japan and the Climate of the Four Seasons: Nature, Literature, and the Arts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 212.
 21. See Matsuoka Seigow, "Aspects of *Kami*," in *MA: Space-Time in Japan*, ed. Matsuoka Seigow (New York: Cooper-Hewitt Museum, n.d.), 56.
 22. Dōgen, *Shōbōgenzō: Zen Essays by Dōgen*, trans. Thomas Cleary (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1986), 32. Quoted in Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 133–34.
 23. Kawabata Yasunari, *Japan, the Beautiful and Myself: Nobel Lecture, December 12, 1968*, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1968/kawabata/lecture/>, accessed February 21, 2022.
 24. See Yuriko Saito, "The Japanese Aesthetics of Imperfection and Insufficiency," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55, no. 4 (1997): 382. On the *wabi* aesthetic specifically, see Haga Koshiro, "The *Wabi* Aesthetic through the Ages," trans. Martin Collcutt, in *Japanese Aesthetics and Culture: A Reader*, ed. Nancy G. Hume (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), 245–78. See also A. Minh Nguyen, ed., *New Essays in Japanese Aesthetics* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), xxxiii–xxxix, xliii, lv, lxx–lxxi, 20–22, 37–38, 47, 93, 132–33, 293–94, 394.
 25. See Makoto Ueda, "Basho on the Art of Haiku: Impersonality in Poetry," in *Japanese Aesthetics and Culture: A Reader*, ed. Nancy G. Hume (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), 160.
 26. Ueda, "Basho on the Art of Haiku," 155.
 27. For more on how some theorists helpfully nuance the relationship of empathy for people and empathy for things, not drawing a sharp distinction, see Andrea Pinotti, "A Question of Character: Analogy and the Empathic Life of Things," in *Empathy: Epistemic Problems and Cultural-Historical Perspectives of a Cross-Disciplinary Concept*, ed. Vanessa Lux and Sigrid Weigel (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 245–69.
 28. The full series within the Dayton Art Institute's collection can be viewed at <http://collection.daytonartinstitute.org/search/%22One%20Hundred%20Aspects%20of%20the%20Moon%22>. For a print version of the series, see John Stevenson, *Yoshitoshi's One Hundred Aspects of the Moon* (Leiden: Hotei, 2001).
 29. David Freedberg, "From Absorption to Judgment: Empathy in Aesthetic Response," in *Empathy: Epistemic Problems and Cultural-Historical Perspectives of a Cross-Disciplinary Concept*, ed. Vanessa Lux and Sigrid Weigel (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 155.
 30. See Noël Carroll, "Empathy and Painting," in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Empathy*, ed. Heidi Maibom (London: Routledge, 2017), 288–89.
 31. It is perhaps no surprise, then, that within the series Yoshitoshi includes a print of Kannon, the bodhisattva of compassion.

III. METAPHYSICAL DIMENSIONS OF JAPANESE AESTHETICS

From Speculative Realism to Ki-Realism: Or, Reality as Realization in Japanese Aesthetics

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ABSTRACT

Recent trends in speculative realism and new materialism call for renewed investigation into overlooked European discourses such as vitalism and panpsychism as possible responses to the perceived intractability of the dualistic legacy of modernity in its approach to questions of mind, matter, and meaning. In this vein, in his 2014 book *The Universe of Things*, Steven Shaviro calls for a turn toward

a “speculative aesthetics.” Here, I consider the resources offered by Japanese aesthetics to any such critical turn. We move first from contemporary speculative realism to a “qi-realism” rooted in Song-dynasty Chinese discourses; then we follow this path to the “ki-realism” expressed in Japanese arts and artmaking practices. These *ki*-based aspects may receive less attention due to the prevalence of Zen in academic discourses on Japanese aesthetic theory, but the two are not opposed—the *ki*-based explanatory model works alongside Zen doctrine, lending complexity to claims about an artwork’s aesthetic efficacy and the art practices that produce such efficacious works. Overall, the *ki*-based dimension establishes fruitful lines of conversation with critical projects such as Shaviro’s by underscoring artmaking as a fundamental part of the dynamic exchange that builds our shared reality.

Recent trends in continental philosophy and critical theory have called for renewed investigation into overlooked European discourses such as vitalism and panpsychism, which constitute historical countercurrents against the dominant paradigms in metaphysics and ontology. Fields such as speculative realism, new materialism, and object-oriented ontology direct themselves to the perceived intractability of the dualistic legacy of European modernity in its approach to questions of spirit, mind, and matter. Accordingly, they call for attention to the dynamic, perceptive, and agentic aspects of phenomena outside human consciousness.

As I have argued elsewhere,¹ these recent trends are only “new” in the limited context of European intellectual history; taking a broader view, we find complementary approaches to questions of mind, matter, and meaning in East Asian sources. The current essay engages Steven Shaviro’s recent book *The Universe of Things*, in which he calls for theorists in speculative realism and new materialism to consider a turn toward aesthetics. Here I hope to show that the existing field of Japanese aesthetics as an academic area—a rich heritage of scholarship dating back to the Meiji (1868–1912)—has a wealth of theoretical and practical resources to offer any contemporary critical aesthetic turn. However, the aspects most relevant to a possible conversation with Shaviro’s “speculative aesthetics” remain partially obscure due to the centrality of Zen thought in Japanese aesthetic discourses. Thus, my related task in this essay is to draw attention to some of the Zen-adjacent, as it were, aspects of Japanese aesthetics, which preeminently position it as a resource for contemporary theory.

SPECULATIVE REALISM AND THE AESTHETIC TURN

Fields such as speculative realism and new materialism offer critiques not only of the dualistic metaphysics and substance ontology that mark European philosophy traditionally, but also of more recent work in areas such as phenomenology, which is itself opposed to the historically dominant paradigms. For example, Quentin Meillassoux associates the phenomenological perspective on non-dualism with what he calls the problem of

“correlationism.” In short, as the argument goes, ever since Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) made the distinction between noumena and phenomena, philosophers have accepted the thesis that our understanding of reality is correlated with our own perceptual and cognitive abilities and limitations. Meillassoux makes the even stronger claim that philosophers (especially phenomenologists) correlate being, or existence itself, with the experience of being, which produces, as he says, what “could be called a ‘species solipsism’, or a ‘solipsism of the community’, since it ratifies the impossibility of thinking any reality that would be anterior or posterior to the community of thinking beings.”² As a result, we lose access to the “great outdoors,” which is to say, we lose the ability to make any sense of mind-independent reality.³ Here, Meillassoux’s speculative realism calls for a renewed investigation into the great outdoors—i.e., speculation—without returning to the assumptions of a naïve realism in which we simply have unimpeded access to what we know and perceive.

Such speculative trends in the work of Meillassoux and others are related to a renewed interest in panpsychism as a philosophical position. As Steven Shaviro says in *The Universe of Things*, “When we step outside of the correlationist circle, we are faced with a choice between panpsychism on the one hand or eliminativism on the other.”⁴ That is, either we accept the nihilistic elimination of all the qualities that the mind apparently grants to experience (value, morals, meaning, and so forth), or instead we challenge the presumed dualism between the psychical and physical. Shaviro, for his part, sides with panpsychism and argues convincingly that many of the speculative realists’ concerns can be addressed through the existing philosophies of Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947) and William James (1842–1910).⁵ Shaviro’s openness to panpsychism is echoed by others in the related fields of object-oriented ontology and so-called new materialisms. For example, Jane Bennett proposes the theory of “vital materiality” as a direct antidote to the disenchanted view that matter is supposedly inert and thus fundamentally devoid of the vitality and agency that marks biological and sentient life. She suggests that we might hesitantly indulge in anthropomorphism—that is, to allow ourselves to believe in the sentience of material things—as a way to overcome the old habits of modernity and its dualisms.⁶

Nonetheless, in Shaviro’s conclusion, he acknowledges that the question of correlationism is not answered simply by asserting that all existing entities “have insides as well as outsides.”⁷ That is, even a sophisticated panpsychism does not necessarily solve the solipsistic dilemma in which individual sentient entities may find themselves. As a result, Shaviro takes an aesthetic turn: “My own version of speculative realism therefore focuses not on epistemological questions at all but rather directly on aesthetics, for aesthetics is the realm of immanent, noncognitive contact.”⁸ On the final page of his book, he says, “[T]hrough aesthetics, we can act in the world and relate to other things in the world without reducing it and them to mere correlates of our own thought. This is why I propose a speculative aesthetics. . . . Such a speculative aesthetics is still to be constructed; Kant, Whitehead, and Deleuze only provide us with its rudiments.”⁹ As I discuss

in what follows, many of the ideas that Shaviro identifies as latent “underground motifs”¹⁰ in Western philosophy are front and center in East Asian traditions. We begin below by moving first from speculative realism to a “qi-realism” rooted in Song-dynasty Chinese discourses, and then following this path to the “ki-realism” expressed in Japanese arts and artmaking practices.

QI-REALISM IN CHINESE PHILOSOPHY

The central term in this discussion, i.e., *qi* 氣 (Jp. *ki*), has been translated into English variously as “vital stuff,” “psychophysical stuff,” and “lively material.”¹¹ By the time of the Song (960–1279), it had come to be thought of as the matter–energy matrix that accounts for all that exists, whether we mean what is condensed and palpable, as in physical objects, or what is dispersed and ethereal, as in the mental energies of human thoughts and feelings. Contemporary philosopher JeeLoo Liu coins the term “qi-realism” to capture this sense in which *qi* “constitutes everything and is responsible for all changes.”¹²

Under *qi*-realism, the Chinese tradition arguably avoids what Western philosophy refers to as the “fact–value distinction.” Because *qi* possesses its own dynamism and agency, so-called facts are always value-laden—the efficacious functioning of the cosmos is “good” just as the efficacious functioning of the human heart-mind is “good,” and both senses of “good” have a moral valence. Or, as the contemporary historian Tze-Ki Hon comments, “As part of the ceaseless flow of *qi* in the universe, morality is understood metaphysically.”¹³ Whether we speak of chemical reactions, biological processes, moral values, or aesthetic impact, we can express it all through the nature and functioning of *qi*, such that anything that exists can be considered axiologically significant.

To understand how this *qi*-realism frames our discussion of aesthetics will require a closer look at (1) the recursive behavior of *qi*, or its ability to interact with itself in its different phases to produce increasingly complex manifestations of structure (*li* 理); and (2) the resonant power of *qi*, or the ability of similarly structured manifestations to mutually influence each other, like tuning forks vibrating in harmony. Together these two aspects account for both novelty and stability—*qi*-based phenomena are capable of intermixing to produce new and increasingly complex forms, while at the same time establishing patterns of interaction that can be observed and tracked.

The first aspect is rooted in the general pattern expressed in *qi*-based cosmologies: First, there is the undifferentiated field of primal *qi* (*yuanqi* 元氣); next, there is the initial distinction into the polar forces of *yin* (陰) and *yang* (陽); and, then, from the increasingly complex interactions of *yin* and *yang* arise the myriad things of the cosmos as we know it. In general, *yin* refers to forces that settle and sink, that are dark and heavy, and that tend to condense; and *yang* refers to forces that rise or flow, that are clear and light, and that tend to disperse. No single phenomenon is *yin* or *yang* on its own but only in relation to other phenomena in specific contexts; moreover, all phenomena have their own *yin* and *yang* characteristics, allowing for increasingly fine-grained analyses. Or, in the words of the famous Song-

dynasty philosopher Zhu Xi (1130–1200), “any given *yin* and *yang* has its own *yin* and *yang* [陰陽中又各自有陰陽也].”¹⁴

Primordial undifferentiated *qi* is not only a feature of our cosmological origins but a force that remains with us in the present. In other words, all existing forms emerge (*sheng* 生) from undifferentiated *qi*, whether we are speaking of the first forms at the inception of the cosmos or the myriad forms around us now that continue to live out, in the present, ongoing processes of materialization, persistence, and eventual disintegration. And, under the right conditions, this primordial *qi* is available to us as a raw material, as it were, from which we can manifest or realize new forms, events, or processes. The ability to draw on this primal material is often portrayed as revitalizing, refreshing, and healthy.

Song-era philosophers referred to various methods for “daily renewal” (*rixin* 日新), including meditative techniques such as “quiet sitting” (*jingzuo* 靜坐) for calming and concentrating the mind, the method of reverence (*jing* 敬) for moral cultivation, and scholarly study for “investigating things” and “extending knowledge” (*zhizhi* 致知 and *gewu* 格物). In particular, the method of quiet sitting was meant to relax the heart-mind into its primordial formless state, for the sake of reinvigorating the mind’s own productive and creative powers. As such, it was seen as a necessary precursor to scholarly study, especially reading the classic texts. Or, as Zhu Xi says, “Now, when you want to read books, you must first settle the mind so that it becomes like still water or a clear mirror [今且要讀書，須先定其心，使之如止水，如明鏡].”¹⁵

These comments on settling the mind reflect the idea that, in a *qi*-based framework, the heart-mind can be clear and bright or cloudy and agitated, depending on its state of cultivation. In other words, human consciousness is here understood according to the same “*qi*-realism” that explains the behaviors and tendencies of other phenomena. As Zhu Xi says, “The capacity for awareness is the numinous aspect of *qi* [能覺者，氣之靈也].”¹⁶ On the *yinyang* model, the condensed or turbid *qi* of physical matter is a *yin* force in relation to the *yang* force of the etheric or refined *qi* of human thoughts and sensations; and, taken on its own, human consciousness has its own *yin* and *yang* aspects, depending on levels of cultivation. The most purified or rarefied *qi*-consciousness is called “spirit” (*shen* 神). As contemporary scholar Joseph Adler explains in a study of “neo-Confucian” spirituality: “In human beings, spirit is a quality of mind—specifically mind-*qi* in its finest, most free-flowing state.”¹⁷ This point gives concreteness to our point about the recursive and interactive behavior of *qi*. Another contemporary scholar, Yung Sik Kim, explains that the recursive interactions of *qi* mean that an individual’s mental life is not simply an internal experience, nor is it restricted to the confines of her physical body:

Mind, for Zhu Xi, was really nothing but *qi*, its “essential and refreshing” (*jingshuang* 精爽) or “numinous” (*ling* 靈) portion, to be more specific. Thus, *qi* was endowed with qualities of mind, and could interact with the mind. The mind-*qi* interaction was not restricted to man’s *qi* and

his own mind, but was extended to the *qi* of the outside world and to the minds of others.¹⁸

Here, the transpersonal significance of self-cultivation practices, such as quiet sitting, comes into sharper focus. The well-developed heart-mind was believed to directly influence other people, our shared social world, and even the physical environment.

The mechanism by which the well-cultivated heart-mind and the well-ordered world mutually sustain each other takes us to another *qi*-based theory regarding *ganying* (感應), translated literally as “response-stimulus,” referring to the “mutual resonance” of similarly structured phenomena. The idea of *ganying* underlies what is often referred to as the “correlative cosmology” of the *qi*-based worldview.¹⁹ According to this idea, certain correspondences can be mapped between phenomena of similar structures or constitutions. In particular, the five phases (*wuxing* 五行) of water, fire, wood, metal, and earth were often associated with specific bodily organs, seasonal changes, human affairs, and so forth, influencing practices as diverse as medicine, agriculture, politics, and pedagogy.

As the *yinyang* dynamic plays out across increasingly complex and fine-grained associations, we can see that various energies respond to each other according to relatively predictable tendencies. For example, as Yung Sik Kim discusses, Zhu Xi explains that summer is both the response to spring and the stimulus for autumn, and thus the seasons turn in regular rotation.²⁰ This pattern of stimulus and response can be used to explain all manner of phenomena, from the stretching and contracting involved in animal locomotion, to seasonal hibernation periods, to overall ecological health.²¹ As Zhu sums it up, “What has responded (*gan* 感) in turn becomes stimulus (*ying* 應); what has stimulated in turn becomes response. . . . This is the necessary pattern-principle of contracting and expanding, going and coming, and stimulus and response.”²²

In the dynamics of *qi*-based correlative thought, the heart-mind of the sage solicits a predictable response in others. We ordinary people attune ourselves to a sage’s power like tuning forks resonating in harmony. In a telling passage, Chan-liang Wu emphasizes the transpersonal scope of this correlative framework: “This is a holistic worldview that puts the utmost emphasis on intra-subjectivity—each subject’s existence intermixes with and penetrates into other subjects’ existence, and is reflected in the Chinese ideas of family and society.”²³ Building on these points established so far, we can say that this same intra-subjective scope and dynamic vitality of *qi* is reflected in East Asian art theories and practices, as well.

In his 2015 essay “The Aesthetics of *Qi*,” Nicholas S. Brasovan describes how the intermixing of *qi* operates in the arts and art-making practices according to Chinese discourses:

The work of art is an intentional transformation of *qi* into a dynamic structure. The term *qi* refers to energetic and material modes of being; so, it is at times translated as “material force.” However, *qi*

is not just matter: *qi* is numinous, qualitative, and vital energy. The transformation of *qi* is continuous from the artist’s thoughts and feelings, through the artist’s body, into the medium. The entire process is circumscribed under the concept of “work.” It begins with an inchoate feeling, intention, or disposition to create, express, and communicate. The initial disposition is developed through the artist’s work with a medium. The original intention finds consummation in a concrete, formalized, meaningful presentation and its attendant experience. The aesthetic object continues to do work in the presence of prepared appreciators.²⁴

As is evident in Brasovan’s description, the dynamic intermixing of *qi*-based energies reaches across phenomena conventionally divided into “subjective” and “objective” in Western discourses, drawing together art theories regarding the expressive aims of the artist with those regarding the formal qualities of the artwork. Not only are feelings transmitted from person to person via artworks, but the works themselves retain the agentic vitality of *qi*, continuing to “do work” thanks to their own dynamism. This is the thread that we follow to *ki*-realism as reflected in Japanese art theories and practices.

KI-REALISM AND JAPANESE ARTS

When we speak of “realism” in art, a lot depends on what we mean by “reality.” Traditional Chinese art theories are distinctive for analyzing artworks that convey the spiritual *qi* (*shenqi* 神氣) of their subject matter, and hence such theories prioritize the attainment of *qi*-resonance (*qiyun* 氣韻) over formal likeness.²⁵ At various points in the history of Chinese art theory, *qi*-resonance has focused on the dynamic power of art objects themselves (as Brasovan indicates above) or, instead, on the spiritual character of artists, which can be transmitted through their works.²⁶ In her contribution to *New Essays in Japanese Aesthetics*, the art historian Mikiko Hirayama discusses the influence of these traditional Chinese art theories on the artist Kishida Ryūsei (1891–1929) and his theory of realism in painting. By his lifetime, the Japanese terms *shajitsu* 写実 or *shajitsushugi* 写実主義 were translations referring to Western artworks in the style of “realism,” as exemplified by the medium of oil painting and its photorealistic capacities. As Hirayama discusses, Kishida sought to merge this Western heritage with the techniques and philosophical priorities of traditional Chinese art theory: “Kishida Ryūsei’s statements on Inner Beauty and the Spiritual Realm reveal that his realism was by no means confined to superficial physical likeness. He strove to express something that was not readily perceivable to the eye, and traditional Chinese aesthetics played a crucial role in this endeavor.” In short, he promoted art that captures a reality deeper or more fundamental than what everyday perception conveys. Toward this end, as Hirayama says, he even advocated realism via a “lack of realism,” by which an artist resists naturalistic depictions in order to convey what is spiritually real.

Kishida himself was inspired by Western mysticisms and especially the Christian mysticism of William Blake.²⁷ However, alongside this reference to Christian mysticism,

I suggest here that his views on realism in art can be fruitfully understood via a “*ki*-realism” that draws on Chinese precedents but reflects Japanese contributions and developments. In the Song-dynasty approach to *qi* we considered earlier, we focused on *qi* as an all-inclusive matter–energy matrix that accounts for material as well as mental and spiritual phenomena. But in specific contexts, various modes of purified or rarified *qi* are often spoken of as spiritual energies operating separately alongside other bodily, mental, and ecological processes. This sense of *qi* comes to the fore, for example, when an acupuncturist speaks of the meridians along which *qi* flows through the body, or when a *fengshui* practitioner speaks of facilitating or impeding the movement of *qi* in a given environment. This sense of *ki* also comes to the fore in the work of Yuasa Yasuo, perhaps the most well-known philosophical figure in twentieth-century Japan to write explicitly on *ki* as the foundation of a theory of bodily and moral self-cultivation.

In Yuasa’s writings on the body, he refers to Japanese aesthetic and martial traditions to explain how training in the arts relates to moral and physical development, comparing this training to contemplative methods such as Zen “seated meditation” (*zazen* 座禪).²⁸ Although he notes that the dimension of *ki* comes to the fore especially in Daoist meditation styles, he maps all body-mind cultivation techniques onto a *ki*-based framework, Zen included. In particular, he attributes the Zen enlightenment experience of *satori* (悟) to the transformation of *ki* in the body as it attains increasingly rarefied states.²⁹ In other words, Yuasa explains *satori* via a “*ki*-realism” that readily invokes the operation of *ki* to account for causal relations. On the model of *ki*-realism, the experience of the “Spiritual Realm” that Kishida describes is perhaps quite different from a Christian mysticism where “mystical” means absorption into a transcendent absolute. Rather, like Yuasa, we might understand this spiritual insight on a *ki*-based causal model regarding transformations of consciousness very much rooted on the side of immanence; or, perhaps it is better to say that *ki*-realism avoids the transcendent/immanent distinction altogether. Either way, through *ki*-realism, we open a line of conversation between Kishida’s Spiritual Realm and Shaviro’s understanding of aesthetics as “the realm of immanent, non-cognitive contact.”³⁰

CONCLUSION: *KI*-REALISM AS *KI*-REALIZATION

Generalizing from the case of Kishida above, this brief essay draws a modest conclusion: The field of contemporary Japanese aesthetics tends to be dominated by a Zen-based philosophy and worldview, but *ki*-based assumptions regarding experience and reality are relevant to understanding both aesthetics and Zen in Japan. In English-language literature, the Zen aspects of Japanese aesthetics tend to be parsed according to two related Buddhist themes: impermanence and interdependence. That is, a wide range of Japanese aesthetic terminology focuses either on the aesthetic appreciation of impermanent phenomena or on art-making practices aimed at attaining a sense of oneness with the artist’s subject matter. It is in this latter aspect that the assumptions of a *ki*-based worldview are especially relevant.

In Yuriko Saito’s introduction to *New Essays in Japanese Aesthetics*, she references the well-known advice to artists, across many Japanese art practices, to become one with their subjects:

For example, Bashō instructs his disciples to “listen to the pine tree” and “enter into the bamboo” when composing a haiku about them. . . . If one captures the heart of bamboo into the paint brush, the nineteenth-century painter Tsubaki Chinzan (1801–1854) claims, the painting of bamboo will take form by itself. A similar suggestion is given with respect to acting in a Nō play: if the actor discerns and identifies with the essence of the character to be portrayed, the outward expression of imitation will follow naturally. Indeed, the actor’s preparation before the performance includes a period during which he meditates on the character of the mask he is to don.³¹

She relates this sense in which the artist enters into or becomes the subject matter to the influence of Zen thought: “As a powerful and persistent legacy of Zen Buddhism, the Japanese aesthetic tradition considers artistic endeavor to be a secular means of experiencing enlightenment. . . . Zen enlightenment requires, among other things, transcendence of oneself because ordinary egocentric concerns . . . hamper the direct experience of the Buddha-nature of everything.”³² The simultaneous experience of decentering the ego and attaining direct experience of the interconnectedness of all existing phenomena is indeed a hallmark of Zen and Mahāyāna Buddhism generally. But it is also an apt description of the permeable *ki*-based self, which is open to intermixing with other selves, open to environmental exchanges and interactions, and preeminently susceptible to resonant harmonizing with all phenomena across the interconnected matter–energy matrix of *ki*.

Some work has already been done to show the influence of a *qi*-based worldview on Buddhism in China, such as the use of *ganying* theory to explain a bodhisattva’s responsiveness to prayer and the portrayal of karma as a kind of energy produced and circulated among humans.³³ In the Japanese Buddhist context, various Shingon and Jōdo (Pure Land) practices are described explicitly as the manipulation of *ki*-energy through visualization and concentration techniques.³⁴ Indeed, following Yuasa, Shigenori Nagatomo claims that this confidence in the efficacy of *ki*-based practice is the “underpinning” of all religious and ethical thought in Japan.³⁵

In line with the syncretism that marks East Asian traditions, I emphasize that the *ki*-based and Zen-based aspects of Japanese aesthetic theory are not opposed to each other—rather, the *ki*-based explanatory model works alongside Zen doctrine, lending an additional line of credibility to claims about an artwork’s aesthetic efficacy and the art practices that produce such efficacious works. Moreover, keeping this *ki*-based dimension in focus when engaging Japanese aesthetics helps to underscore—and celebrate—the sense in which artmaking is a fundamental part of the dynamic exchange that builds our shared reality. Realism

means here, in other words, not a passive representation of the preexisting world but an active realization of new conditions. Thus, in answer to Shaviro's call for a "speculative aesthetics" that allows us to "act in the world and relate to other things in the world without reducing it and them to mere correlates of our own thought,"³⁶ the Japanese tradition provides a wealth of theoretical and practical resources.

NOTES

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2. Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (London: Continuum, 2008), 50.
3. Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 50.
4. Steven Shaviro, *The Universe of Things: On Speculative Realism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 83.
5. Shaviro, *The Universe of Things*, 78.
6. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 120.
7. Shaviro, *The Universe of Things*, 104.
8. Shaviro, *The Universe of Things*, 148.
9. Shaviro, *The Universe of Things*, 156.
10. Shaviro, *The Universe of Things*, 86.
11. Respectively: Stephen C. Angle and Justin Tiwald, *Neo-Confucianism: A Philosophical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017); Daniel K. Gardner, trans., *Learning to Be a Sage: Selections from the Conversations of Master Chu, Arranged Topically*, by Chu Hsi [Zhu Xi] (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Three Streams: Confucian Reflections on Learning and the Moral Heart-Mind in China, Korea, and Japan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
12. JeeLoo Liu, "The Is-Ought Correlation in Neo-Confucian Qi-Realism: How Normative Facts Exist in Natural States of Qi," *Contemporary Chinese Thought* 42, no. 1 (2011): 60–77, esp. 62.
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14. Zhu Xi 朱熹, *Zhuzi yulei* 朱子語類, in *Chinese Text Project*, ed. Donald Sturgeon (2011), <https://ctext.org/text.pl?node=597170&if=en>, accessed May 17, 2021. My translation.
15. Zhu Xi, *Zhuzi yulei*, <https://ctext.org/zhuzi-yulei/11/zh>, accessed May 17, 2021. I consulted Gardner, trans., *Learning to Be a Sage*, 145.
16. Zhu Xi, *Zhuzi yulei*, <https://ctext.org/text.pl?node=586504&if=en>. I consulted Curie Virág, "Moral Psychology and Cultivating the Self," in *Zhu Xi: Selected Writings*, ed. Philip J. Ivanhoe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 35–55, esp. 40.
17. Joseph Adler, "Varieties of Spiritual Experience: Shen in Neo-Confucian Discourse," in *Confucian Spirituality: Volume Two*, ed. Tu Weiming and Mary Evelyn Tucker (New York: Crossroad, 2004), 120–48, esp. 141.
18. Yung Sik Kim, "Zhu Xi on Scientific and Occult Subjects: Defining and Extending the Boundaries of Confucian Learning," in *Returning to Zhu Xi: Emerging Patterns within the Supreme Polarity*, ed. David Jones and Jinli He (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2015), 121–46, esp. 129.
19. See Michael J. Puett, *To Become a God: Cosmology, Sacrifice, and Self-Divinization in Early China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2004). See especially the fourth chapter for a discussion of the history of the use of this term by scholars such as Marcel Granet and Claude Lévi-Strauss.
20. Yung Sik Kim, "Science and Natural Philosophy," in *Zhu Xi: Selected Writings*, ed. Philip J. Ivanhoe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 162–86, esp. 176.
21. Kim, "Science and Natural Philosophy," 176.
22. Qtd. in Kim, "Science and Natural Philosophy," 176–77.
23. Wu Chan-liang, "The Worldview of Zhu Xi," in *Dao Companion to Zhu Xi's Philosophy*, ed. Kai-chiu Ng and Yong Huang (Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2020), 579–92, esp. 579.
24. Nicholas S. Brasovan, "Aesthetics of Qi: Building on the Internalist-Essentialist Philosophy of Art," *Dao* 14, no. 1 (2015): 75–93, esp. 76.
25. Perhaps most famous are the six principles of painting by Xie He 謝赫 (sixth century), the first of which regards *qi*yun. See, for example, Susan Bush and Hsio-yen Shih, *Early Chinese Texts on Painting* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), esp. 14 and 23.
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28. Yuasa Yasuo, *The Body, Self-Cultivation, and Ki-Energy*, trans. Shigenori Nagatomo and Monte S. Hull (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), 23–28.
29. Yuasa, *The Body*, 92.
30. Shaviro, *The Universe of Things*, 156.
31. Yuriko Saito, "Introduction: Historical Overview of Japanese Aesthetics," in *New Essays in Japanese Aesthetics*, ed. A. Minh Nguyen (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), xxx–xlvi, esp. xl. It is telling, for our purposes here, that this aesthetic trope of "becoming bamboo" is cited in Daoist and literati sources, as well as Buddhist ones (e.g., the Yuan dynasty source cited in Hirayama, "Inner Beauty," 306).
32. Saito, "Introduction," xli.
33. For example, on *ganying* and a bodhisattva's responsiveness, see Chiew Hui Ho, "Sinitic Buddhist Narratives of Wonders: Are There Miracles in Buddhism?" *Philosophy East and West* 67, no. 4 (2017): 1118–42, esp. 1127–29. See also Charles B. Jones, "Mentally Constructing What Already Exists: The Pure Land Thought of Chan Master Jixing Chewu 際醒徹悟 (1741–1810)," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 23, no. 1 (2000): 43–70, esp. 63. For more discussion on *ganying* and karma specifically, see Beverly Foulks McGuire, *Living Karma: The Religious Practices of Ouyi Zhixu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 6–7.
34. Shigenori Nagatomo, "Ki-Energy: Underpinning Religion and Ethics," in *Merleau-Ponty and Buddhism*, ed. Jin Y. Park and Gereon Kopf (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2009), 229–40, esp. 239–40; Yuasa, *The Body*, 83.
35. Nagatomo, "Ki-Energy: Underpinning Religion and Ethics."
36. Shaviro, *The Universe of Things*, 156.

Kuki Shūzō: Art and Existence as the Play of Contingency-Necessity

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ABSTRACT

Recognizing the “contingent” nature of art, Kuki Shūzō focused on the fundamental and intrinsic relationship between the work of art and the “human existentiality (人間の実存性 *ningenteki jitsuzonsei*) of the artist.” For Kuki, who was sympathetic to the views of Paul Valéry and Oskar Becker, the very “heartbeat of life” of the poet is symbolically expressed in artistic creation, and the beauty of the work of art stems from the fragility of this “heartbeat.” Kuki’s philosophy of contingency comprises three “logical modes” (categorical, hypothetical, disjunctive) and possesses a dialectical structure of “contingency-necessity.” By focusing on Kuki’s understanding of the “contingent nature of artistic structure” and the tendency of art to “locate contingency in the content of objects,” this paper examines the fundamental relationship between the work of art and “the human existentiality of the artist” from the perspective of the dialectical interplay of contingency-necessity that exists within the very structure of the work of art.

I. INTRODUCTION

The creation of a work of art results from the coincidence of two dimensions: the deliberate or intentional act of creativity of the artist and the effects that are the result of unintentional factors. This dual nature of artistic creation is both well-known and often discussed. Paul Valéry, for instance, mentions it in his “First Lecture in Poetics” given at the Collège de France. In the creation of poetic language, Valéry writes, “words are no longer associated with the same kind of attractions [as everyday words].” Poetic language simultaneously exhibits “two values” in equal measure: “sound and momentary mental effects.” However, the two values are only “occasionally” brought together in the desired way. For Valéry, the unification of “sound” and “mental effects” takes place “moment to moment” from person to person and always in an “uncertain” manner and in “unequal” proportion.¹ The creation of poetic language, therefore, occurs in a place and at a moment that escape planning or the intentions of the artist and, thus, we can only wait for that place and that moment to present themselves.

Let us consider another example taken from Kichizaemon (1949–), the fifteenth head of the Raku family of Japanese traditional artisans. Reflecting on the tea bowls he has created, Kichizaemon writes:

[To speak of them] as daily tools, or to [refer to] the “beauty of use” does not [fully] encapsulate them. They break-through and transcend everyday life, going far beyond language or understanding. But where is it that they move? This movement takes place in the midst of phenomena as they repeatedly change from moment to moment and

is directed at some far beyond that even I myself do not know.²

Kichizaemon’s account alludes to a place “far beyond” “everyday life,” “language,” or “understanding,” a place he himself does not “know.” It points to the fact that the work of art exceeds the artist’s intentions and recognizes that there is an aspect of the work of art that cannot be predicted. Kichizaemon is speaking from the perspective of an artist reflecting on the objectivity of his own work and not specifically about the creative process per se or about the nature of the place where creativity itself takes place. What Kichizaemon is doing is telling of the “destiny” of his own intentions in the creative process: for instance, the artist’s desire to realize a certain glaze or texture on the tea bowl when it is fired in the kiln.

Kichizaemon’s reflection makes clear the connection between the duality of artistic “intention” and that which “transcends intention,” on the one hand, and the issue of contingency, on the other hand. In “Contingency and Art,” which appears in *The Problem of Contingency* (偶然性の問題 *Gūzensei no mondai*, 1935), Kuki Shūzō (1888–1941) refers to the phenomenon of how earthenware changes its color in the process of being fired as an example of contingency—of the work of art maintaining its independence from the intentionality of the artist.³

To provide a complete account of the role of contingency in the creative process of a work of art, a great number of related, even interrelated, factors would have to be considered—the nature of the subject that creates, the material used as a means of creation, the environment and world in which the creating takes place and in which the created object exists, the people who appreciate the created work, to name a few. For Kuki, this analysis of the rule of contingency in the creative process would also necessarily concern a consideration of Nishida Kitarō’s (1870–1945) logic of “acting intuition” (行為的直観 *kōiteki chokkan*), which is a logic of *poiēsis* (ποίησις) for “making a thing” (物を作る *mono o tsukuru*).⁴

As an initial step towards such a complete philosophical inquiry, this paper investigates the problem of contingency in the creative process by focusing on what might arguably be the most important of these factors: “the human existentiality of the artist” and, by extension, the connection between art and human existence.⁵ This paper develops Kuki’s understanding of “the human existentiality of the artist” (人間の実存性 *ningenteki jitsuzonsei*).⁶ I attempt to clarify Kuki’s concept of contingency and its role in artistic creativity.

II. “THE HUMAN EXISTENTIALITY OF THE ARTIST” IN KUKI

In *The Problem of Contingency*, Kuki writes about the character of contingency in the creative process and its ground in the existentiality of the artist:

First, as I have said, there is an internal relationship between the work of art and contingency such that the character of artistic structure is itself contingent.

Secondly, art prefers to locate contingency in the content of objects. However . . . , it seems that these two points have their common roots deep within the human existentiality of the artist.⁷

Although Kuki only briefly alludes here to “the human existentiality of the artist” and does not develop this idea further, it forms the core factor in the creation and character of the work of art. In order to understand the relationship between the work of art and the existentiality of the human being in Kuki’s thought, we need first to consider the logic of contingency as it was developed by Kuki.

III. THE LOGIC OF CONTINGENCY

In *The Problem of Contingency*, Kuki distinguishes between three “modes” of necessity: “categorical necessity,” “hypothetical necessity,” and “disjunctive necessity.” Each mode of necessity has its own negation. These negations yield three forms of contingency: categorical, hypothetical, and disjunctive. Kuki develops this conception of contingency by reference to Aristotle and Cournot. According to Kuki, contingency belongs to modal logic.⁸

“Disjunctive contingency” is discussed in chapter three and it is here, in a section titled “Contingency and Art,” that Kuki speaks of “the human existentiality of the artist.”⁹ For Kuki, “art” must be regarded as “the expression of existence itself” and therefore understood as a particular undertaking of existence within the mode of “disjunctive contingency.”¹⁰

For Aristotle, the law of excluded middle forms an exclusive logical and even metaphysical disjunction that is the expression of identity: that which *cannot not be* is logically and metaphysically necessary. Necessity, then, is the manifestation of logical and ontological identity, arising from the disjunctive form of the law of excluded middle. In contrast, disjunctive contingency, says Kuki, is by its very nature the “negation of necessity.”¹¹ In other words, the fundamental nature of the contingency is the “extreme being that intervenes in the surface where being (有 *u*) and nothingness (無 *mu*) contact.”¹² Consequently, it is the “reality bearing a character of nothingness” as the impossibility of being.¹³ Disjunctive contingency itself is a logically necessary consequence of disjunctive necessity: whatever is not necessary is necessarily contingent.

Let me contrast disjunctive contingency with Kuki’s other two forms of contingency. “Categorical contingency” occurs when “the predicate signifies the non-essential sign of the subject.”¹⁴ In such a case of contingency, any judgement assigning such a predicate to that subject would lack certainty. The core meaning of categorical contingency relies on “each phenomenon as well as the individual” and not on “the general concept.” That is, “categorical contingency” means that the predicative judgement is itself contingent. When we say, for instance, that *S* is *P*, and the *P* being spoken of *S* is not essential to *S*, but accidental, then “*S* is *P*” is categorically contingent.¹⁵

“Hypothetical contingency,” which is “exterior to the causal relation of the hypothetical judgement,” is located in the causality found in experience. In our everyday experience of the world, we experience events that are associated

together that have no logically necessary connection. “I” experience event *A* coming after event *B* and link them through a judgement “*B* causes *A*.” This is a hypothetical judgement because we do not experience the necessary connection between these events, but only the series of events that is, strictly speaking, contingent as regards the relation between the events in the series. The hypothetical contingency is the “structure of the encounter between one series of events and another series.”¹⁶

Compare these to “disjunctive contingency,” which, Kuki says, concerns the “relation existing between a whole and parts.”¹⁷ Being, taken as a whole, is “self-identical . . . as far as it is determined as completed” and accompanied by “necessity.” By contrast, each “part” *qua* part of the whole lacks an “absolute self-identity”: each part is “predicted to the other parts.”¹⁸ That is to say, the part has in itself the nature of being able to be a part (of a different whole) other than the part that it is: in this consists the contingency of the part. In other words, disjunctive contingency expresses a relation between a part and a whole such that the membership of the part in the whole is contingent and not necessary. Thus, the part can be a member of another whole insofar as its membership in any given whole does not determine or exhaust its self-identity. In short, the relationship between the part and the whole of which it is a member is thoroughly contingent. Each part is contingent in relation to the self-identity that is inherent in the whole of this disjunctive structure. The core meaning of the disjunctive contingency is characterized by the impending of the “possibility of nothing” over the “necessity of nothing (無いことの必然 *naikoto no hitsuzen*).”¹⁹

For Kuki, these three modes of contingency are inseparably fused. One can see “each phenomenon as well as each individual” within the “core meaning of categorical contingency,” but this latter is nothing other than the “encounter between one series and another series” from the standpoint of hypothetical contingency. Furthermore, the “core meaning” of the “encounter between one series and another series” consists in the “possibility of nothingness,” for the “non-encounter is possible too.”²⁰ As a consequence, contingency exists where there is no conviction of a self-identity and where, as a result, “there is a duality of the one and the other.”²¹ How are we to understand art as the “expression of existence itself” in terms of disjunctive contingency? As we saw in the previous section, for Kuki, there exists an “internal relationship” between art and contingency: both in that “the nature of artistic structure is itself contingent” and in that “art prefers to locate contingency in the content of objects.”

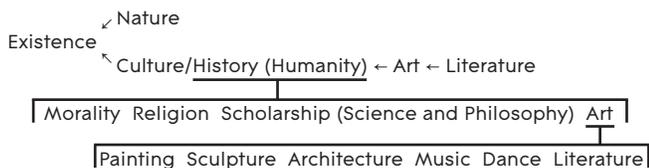
IV. THE NATURE OF ARTISTIC STRUCTURE IS ITSELF CONTINGENT

Let us consider in more detail what Kuki means by “the nature of artistic structure is itself contingent.” As a first gloss, Kuki says that “art, partially and in an independently-existing manner, enriches and completes itself.”²² As a completed state (完成態 *kanseitai*), the work of art is separated from “its relationship with the others (他 *ta*)”²³ within what Kuki calls a “microcosmic structure.” Here, “the structural character of art itself is contingent” and art is

taken as “the end form of contingency.”²⁴ This claim relating to artistic existentiality is not sufficiently developed in *The Problem of Contingency*. To understand Kuki’s claim, then, let us look at some of the texts on which Kuki draws.

The idea of a “completed state” guarantees the work of art its independence as a “microcosmic structure.” Kuki supports his claims with reference to Oskar Becker’s argument in “Von der Hinfälligkeit des Schönen und der Abenteuerlichkeit des Künstlers” (1929)²⁵ that the work of art is “completed” and forms a microcosm, and that “art is a complete form” that “emerges and is watched.”²⁶ Becker himself insists on these ideas on the basis of György Lukács’s article, “Die Subjekt-Objekt-Beziehung in der Ästhetik.”²⁷ Becker explains the meaning of the completed artistic work as a microcosmos in the following way. The “aesthetic object” itself has only latent power as “*energeia*.” That latent power becomes “reality in the experience of beauty for the first time.” According to Becker, the “grasping” of “aesthetic existence” can be conceived only as a “leap.” By a “leap,” Becker means that this “grasping” is “isolated” from the “everydayness” and the “primary *Dasein*.”²⁸ In making this leap necessary for grasping a work of art, Becker preserves the “fragility” of “beauty”²⁹—an idea to which Kuki is sympathetic.

For Kuki, art is to be understood as cultural, historical, and human, and these three are subsumed under his concept of existence. Finally, it is important to note that Kuki defines art as “the expression (intuition) of existence itself.”³⁰ We can outline Kuki’s framework for understanding art as follows:³¹



In order to clarify the relationship between real existence (*実存 jitsuzon*) and art, we need first to consider the distinction between philosophy and art. For Kuki, “Philosophy [conducts its] primary negotiation with existence from the position of cognition, [whereas] art does so from the position of expression.”³²

We can explain this claim that “the nature of artistic structure is itself contingent” by situating it in the “horizon of time.”³³ For Kuki, “artistic works” are “completed states” that “partially, and [in an] independently-existing [way,] enrich and complete themselves.” This points to the chronological character of art. It is because human existence is chronological as Kuki claims that “human beings have history.”³⁴ Similarly, the above schema suggests that culture necessarily contains art as a moment within its own self-formation. Art has the character of being the “intuition” or intuitive expression of existence itself, and this is only possible in the present.

This present corresponds to the Augustinian “present of present,” which is to say that it is an “enduring intuition.” For Kuki, real existence is fundamentally rooted in time, as it is

for Bergson, Heidegger, and Husserl. However, in contrast to Bergson and Heidegger, and more akin to Augustine and Husserl, the present and the “now,” for Kuki, “is not static, but draws circles” and “is infinitely profound,” the “ewige Wiederkunft” as it is for Nietzsche with the idea of eternal recurrence. According to Kuki, time characterized by this dynamism is called “metaphysical time” and comparable with “a kind of recurrent time.”³⁵

The above-mentioned concepts, “culture / history (humanity),” are subsumed under “existence” and subsume the concept of “art.” This can be explained from the perspective of time. Art is the “existence of the time” and “itself occupies in the ‘present’ and has the feature of ‘intuition’ (*Anschauung*),” thus giving rise to Kuki’s conception of “metaphysical time.” Kuki writes that it “is in this ‘present’ that ‘intuition’ is conditioned to emerge (現前 *genzen*).” Metaphorically speaking, the “emergence” of “intuition” is a “surface intersecting at the right angles to history that moves in a fixed direction.” In other words, the “so-called self-projection of history that casts itself over the surface of the present (現在面 *genzaimen*) is art.” This is the “emergence” that is art. The emergence as art is also “what history matured and completed.”³⁶ By analogy, we can interpret “completed state” to signify a “microcosmic structure.” It is a “completed state” situated at the end of disjunctive contingency.

V. ART PREFERS TO LOCATE CONTINGENCY IN THE CONTENT OF OBJECTS

For Kuki, the artwork is the “maturity” or the “crystallization” of the “stream of time” over the “surface of present.” As he observes, “true art does not come into being without the profound living of personality (個性 *kosei*) and social nature.”³⁷ Let us interpret this passage in reference to Kuki’s philosophy of contingency in order to develop Kuki’s insufficient explanation regarding the problem of “the content of objects” of art as contingency. Of the problem of “the content of objects” of art as contingency, Kuki writes:

The contingency of natural phenomenon is something unpredictable and inseizable by law. A personality and liberty appear there. The dissoluteness (放埒 *hōratsu*) of the life and the play of arbitrariness appear. These life and play are beautiful. The surprise towards the lively deviationism moves us.³⁸

We are all familiar enough with examples of natural phenomena that can become objects of art. However, for Kuki, to discover the latent—i.e., the aesthetic play in natural phenomena—is entrusted only to the “human existentiality” of the artist or his awareness of himself. On the basis of Becker’s idea, we can say that the awareness and intuition of the latent is an occasion for the artist to actualize them into a work of art. We can take, as an example, a verse from Heinrich Heine’s *Die Nordsee* in which the stars that the poet observed—all natural phenomena—were rendered artistically as “gold tacks” in an azure sky.³⁹ Heine’s implicit awareness of the play of stars enabled him to capture—in a moment of intuition—that awareness in poetic form.

Or take, as another example, the aforementioned “earthenware changes” (窯変 *yōhen*) in the production of pottery. An essential part of this process is the way in which “a fire of a kiln participates in the production keeping its independency of the creator’s intention.”⁴⁰ Kuki describes this process as a contingent one: “contingency as the beauty of nature or the beauty of art.”⁴¹ I argue that, in such a production, there is a refined negotiation between nature and the artificial that brings the latent out into the actual. A singular contingent beauty can be discovered and consented to (by the artist) in the actualized state of earthenware changes appearing in a fired pottery ware. This is entrusted only to “human existentiality.” We cannot say that the potter realized a work that reflects solely her or his internal *idea* of beauty. The changes in earthenware are the actuality that is completed in the work of art. The artist must accept that they co-create with nature, knowing it is not possible to monopolize the creativity with their own personality. We already encountered this when considering Raku Kichizaemon’s philosophy of bowl. If, as we mentioned at the end of Section III, “contingency” is deep-rooted in the “dualism of the one and the other” where identity as an immovable confidence has been lost, then personality and otherness ought to live and create artistic work together quite naturally. The following and abovementioned words of Kuki should be understood in this way: “true art does not come into being without the profound living of personality and social nature.” “Social nature” can be understood in a broader sense as an inclusive and ethical occasion or situation such as nature, world, or place.

Another example presented by Kuki is “linked verse” (連句 *renku*). This is a genre of Japanese collaborative poetry, where a poem is composed by linking short verses sung alternately by different poets. We find here again the co-creation of the work of art. Kuki, in a gesture towards collaborative creation, takes up Watsuji Tetsurō’s explanation of *renku*:

Each verse in a *renku* has its independent world. Moreover, there are subtle connections between verses [and worlds], with one world unfolding into another world, while also constituting a whole [of the worlds] . . . one unity possessed by one creator’s creativity is intentionally renounced, and the direction of its development is consequently rather entrusted to “contingency” . . . What results are the twists and turns which a creator cannot expect.⁴²

A monadologic space of art is opened here. However, since “there are subtle connections between verses,” the poets certainly feel and know the others who sing. Each one lives their “personality and social nature” in the artistic space (in a narrow sense) and at the same time in their lives (in a wider sense). The question is about “how to live deeply.” Different depths of life bring about different senses of the poem (as a whole) and different types of “completed state.” Needless to say, “to live deeply” does not mean to live a life of necessity, to live deliberately, intentionally, according to plan.

After all, the “human existentiality” of the artist cannot help but locate the contingent “content of objects” in the art. Involved in the field of metaphysics is the notion of contingent artistic expressions, carried into effect by “human existentiality,” where these two aspects are deeply rooted. This is what Kuki means by saying that the “nature of artistic structure is contingent.” Moreover, we must keep in mind that contingency is the “reality bearing a character of nothingness.” The coming and going on the frontiers of latency and actuality, of nothingness and being, is anticipated in the artistic act. Kuki calls this coming and going, in my view, the “internalization of the contingency.” He explains this phrase as follows: “The one being isolated encounters the other here and there out of design at a moment, while he internalizes the external other into his depth. This should have a meaning of the connection of anguish and pleasure in a whole real existence.”⁴³ “The one being isolated” can be read as the artist.

The self of an artist becomes deeply aware of its relationality with the other at the moment of the encounter with one of the innumerable others that precede and are incorporated into the creation of the art object. This is an “enrichment” of the self that conceives of artistic work as a “completed state.” Inquiring into a “true contingency,” Kuki asserts the structure of “interrelationship of contingency-necessity,” since “identity” is among the “fundamental principles of thinking,” which support necessity and at the same time function as the “principles of internalization.”⁴⁴ This self-awareness and this self-enrichment take place without thinking.

VI. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I attempt to clarify the relation between the work of art as a completed state and the artist’s existentiality by reference to the theoretical structure of Kuki’s philosophy of contingency. We have seen that works of art are “emergences” out of history in the present that is “endowed with indefinite depth.”⁴⁵ Of course, the work of art is very often located in a place between the existentiality of its creator and the existentiality of its appreciator. Although the existentiality of each of them should be analyzed, the logic of contingency apparently does not structure society as a place for co-living (共に生きる *tomoni ikiru*). When we examine the society and the world as places of artistic creation, the viewpoint of co-living—i.e., that of the inter-relationality of existences—accompanies necessarily our examination, but there is no concrete consideration in Kuki. Nevertheless, I should perhaps clarify the problem relative to my main interest by connecting it with the “interrelationship of contingency-necessity”: the play between the natural and the artificial, which is widely seen in artistic acts, takes part deeply in the artist’s existentiality.⁴⁶

NOTES

1. The first lecture was given in 1937. See Paul Valéry, “Variété V,” in *Variété III, IV et V* (Paris: Gallimard, 2010), 846–47; *Variété Shūsei (A Compilation of the Works of Valéry)*, Volume III (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 2011), 34. Valéry also states that there is no reciprocal relationship between sound and meaning. Rather, this reciprocal relationship is a deep-seated illusion we have created for ourselves (*Variété III, IV et V*, 846; *Variété Shūsei III*, 33). This reminds us of the complex numbers of mathematicians.

The combination of phonetic parameters and semantic parameters generates various problems relating to extension and convergence, and poets solve these problems in a blind-folded state (*Variété III, IV et V, 847; Varerī Shūsei III, 34*).

2. *Chawan no Naka no Uchū: Raku-Ke Isshi Sōden no Geijutsu (The Cosmos in the Tea Bowl: Transmitting a Secret Art Across Generations of the Raku Family)* (Tokyo: NHK Promotion, 2016), 233.
3. *Complete Works of Kuki Shūzo* (KSZ), Volume II (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1990), 223–24.
4. A reflection on the artistic act in reference to a more complex and realistic relation between environment-society-world and the self and others will be developed more effectually by relying on Nishida Kitarō's logic of "acting intuition." Nishida set on the axis of acting intuition his original dialectic structure, which negates a modern predominance of "subjectivity" and "subject." He claimed the idea of "from the made to the making" (作られたものから作るものへ *tsukurareta mono kara tsukuru mono e*). However, he considered intuition to be diverse acts of the human being in a broader sense (including daily activities and practical actions in culture and society). Nishida sought to explain the "historical world" from this viewpoint. I wish to examine the problem of artistic creation and the existentiality of the human being through a comparative study of these two Japanese philosophers' extremely systematized logic. This approach will allow me to bring deeper reflection to my concerns in another paper.
5. What initially drew my attention to this problem was François Jullien's book, *Dé-coïncidence: D'où viennent l'art et l'existence* (Paris: Grasset, 2017). Jullien himself translated his neologism "dé-coïncidence" into Chinese as *qù xiāng hé* (去相合). It struck me that Jullien's book might provide us with a useful and interesting starting point from which to consider the conflicting character of a work of art as the outcome of both intentional and unintentional factors and as the product of necessity and contingency. A comparison of Jullien's *dé-coïncidence* with Nishida's acting intuition and Kuki's theory of contingency will be undertaken in a future paper.
6. Even if the term "existentiality" necessarily implicates "human" for Western philosophers, Kuki proposes the expression "human existentiality" (*ningenteki jitsuzonsei*). This is probably because he sees the possibility of non-human existences in his philosophy on the basis of the system of contingency and stresses the "human" (*ningenteki*) in artistic creation. In this paper, then, we add the word "human" to "existentiality" to respect his Japanese expression.
7. KSZ II, 224.
8. KSZ II, 15.
9. KSZ II, 224.
10. *Lecture: An Introduction to Literature*, KSZ XI (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1991), 23. This is a transcript of the lecture that Kuki gave in 1933 at Kyoto Imperial University (see KSZ XI, 293). This lecture can be considered as supporting the ideas of contingency and art that he formulated, articulated, and defended in his 1935 book, *The Problem of Contingency*, as it was given during the preparatory period of the book.
11. KSZ II, 9.
12. KSZ II, 9.
13. KSZ II, 254.
14. KSZ II, 252.
15. KSZ II, 16, 251–52.
16. KSZ II, 16, 251–52.
17. KSZ II, 149.
18. KSZ II, 149.
19. KSZ II, 253.
20. KSZ II, 254.
21. KSZ II, 255.
22. KSZ II, 221.
23. KSZ II, 221.
24. KSZ II, 221.
25. He was a philosopher endowed with a high sense of beauty and developed a theory of rhyme regarding Japanese forms of poetry (*haiku, tanka*) in his later years, even though he did not write a book on his own aesthetics and philosophy of art because of his early death. We should not forget Becker's aesthetics and philosophy of art, which seem to support his sense of artistic creativity based on the philosophy of contingency.
26. *Lecture*, KSZ XI, 138.
27. Oskar Becker, *Fragility of the Beauty and the Artist's Adventurous Nature* (美のはかなさと芸術家の冒険性), trans. Kuno Akira (Tokyo: Riso sha, 1979), 11.
28. Becker, *Fragility*, 10–11.
29. Becker, *Fragility*, 10–11.
30. *Lecture*, KSZ XI, 15.
31. *Lecture*, KSZ XI, 13. This schema is a slightly arranged one extracted from the original, which Kuki made.
32. *Lecture*, KSZ XI, 23.
33. KSZ II, 207, 221.
34. *Lecture*, KSZ XI, 137–38.
35. KSZ XI, 127–39.
36. KSZ XI, 137–38.
37. KSZ XI, 140.
38. KSZ II, 222.
39. In *An Inquiry into the Good*, Nishida Kitarō insists that even if an astronomer does not notice it, the truth of the reality of stars can be seen in Heine's poetic phrasing. See NKZ I (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1978), 60.
40. KSZ II, 222–23.
41. KSZ II, 223.
42. KSZ II, 223. This passage is extracted from Watsuji Tetsurō, *Fūdo: A Réflexion on the Human Studies* 『風土 - 人間学的考察』 (Tokyo: Iwanami Bunko, 1993), 231–32.
43. KSZ II, 256–59.
44. KSZ II, 256–59.
45. KSZ XI, 136.
46. For more on Kuki's philosophy of contingency and the relationship between the contingent and the aesthetic, see Peter Leech, "Scents and Sensibility: Kuki Shūzō and Olfactory Aesthetics," in *New Essays in Japanese Aesthetics*, ed. A. Minh Nguyen (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), 397–412.

The Ontology and Aesthetic of Iki: An Unbearable Lightness

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ABSTRACT

Kuki Shūzō, in his *Iki no kōzō*,¹ presents the canonical analysis of *iki*, a feature he considers unique to Japanese culture. *Iki* is an aesthetic category that can be predicated of both the subjectivity of a person and, derivatively, what he terms its "objectifications," that is, aspects of the empirical world—a person's attire, a garden, an interior design, or a hair style. In this essay, I examine the ontology

of *iki* in order to shed new light on it as a Japanese aesthetic category and, more so, on why it is primarily an *aesthetic* way of being. Here is the central problem: If *iki* is in its primary sense an intensional structure, a subjective state, then in what sense is it an aesthetic category and not simply a philosophical and psychological attitude, a *Weltanschauung*? The phenomenology of *iki* does not entail what we usually consider an aesthetic appreciation of the world, although it does not preclude it. As I argue in this essay, its aesthetic character lies in the very structure of the subjective state itself, in the person. It is an aesthetic property of a person.

I. INTRODUCTION

Kuki defines *iki* primarily as a threefold intensional state, one that ontologically emerges from an intensional structure of consciousness. It is formed by the collective Japanese experience rooted in culture and history. *Iki* emanates from a person's subjectivity and applies to inanimate things only in a sense derived from its application to the subjectivity of persons. Space does not permit me here either to do justice to the brilliant complexity of his analysis or to give a thorough ontological account of *iki*. Rather, my aim is more modest, to demonstrate how the aesthetic nature of *iki* lies in subjectivity and in an aesthetic appreciation of structure itself. At the close of this essay, I suggest some implications of Kuki's study for cross-cultural aesthetic influence.

THE ONTOLOGY AND AESTHETIC OF *IKI*

Iki falls into the category of what I term an "aesthetic property of persons," a feature ontologically more complex than other objects of aesthetic judgments, such as artworks and nature. Kuki Shūzō wrote his *Iki no kōzō* during his stay in France in 1926, and it remains the authoritative study today. *Iki*, Kuki contends, is a distinctively Japanese aesthetic category, distinctively Japanese yet not utterly opaque to Westerners or other non-Japanese. Given that *iki* is, on Kuki's account, primarily an intensional, subjective structure, it is heuristically valuable for understanding aesthetic properties of persons, as well as the elusive category of *iki* itself. Unlike many other aesthetic properties of persons, *iki* belongs to one distinctive culture. Consider, for example, the concept of beauty. Criteria for applying it cut across cultures, although the meaning of "beauty" does not. *Iki*, in contrast, has meaning in one culture alone. One, therefore, cannot appeal to culturally variable criteria in using it.

Iki is ontologically dependent on a complex phenomenological state, not simply a set of empirically perceived features; it is a way of being, of interacting with and responding to one's lived experience. Arising from the elegant floating world of Edo Japan,² *iki* inherited a connotation of refined eroticism. *Iki* is not, however, what we would see as a detached, insouciant self-presentation, as some might think. In its authentic form, *iki* is deeper.

Iki, at its foundation, is the resignation to perpetual desire, desire ineluctably unfulfilled. Kuki notes that *iki* is frequently translated as the French, or French-derived, "chic," which itself may be derived from "chicane" or "intricate trickery."³ Although Kuki himself does not draw the connection, "chic" would thus have an origin in French

similar to that of "glamour" in English, with both developing from earlier terms for "occult knowledge" or "power with magic spells."⁴ But *iki* cannot be the same as glamour or chic because, according to Kuki, *iki* is a uniquely Japanese mode of experience, whereas the latter notions have meaning across cultures. Moreover, *iki* is far more complex than chic. Kuki affirms that *iki* itself resists translation: "In summary, words that carry meaning similar to that of *iki* can be found in European languages, but none has the same semantic value of *iki*."⁵ In fact, the term in Japanese has a semantic intricacy and breadth that no non-Japanese word can capture. As Kuki conceptualizes it, the meaning of *iki* is culture-bound. While seemingly every language has such terms, *iki* is interesting in that even the terms for its constituents lack non-Japanese correlates. Hiroshi Nara uses "coquetry" or "coquettishness" for *bitai*, one of the phenomenological constituents, perhaps the hardest of the three to pin down.

Iki is an inelastic category, both in its subjective and exterior manifestations. More precisely, it supervenes on the intensional structure.⁶ Although Kuki has criteria for bodily and sartorial expressions ("objectifications") of *iki*, these are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for *iki* so much as they are clear signs. As Kuki puts it,

... it is a grave error to base one's understanding of the structure of *iki* on its objective expressions. For *iki* does not necessarily exhibit all the nuances available to that expression. Objectification itself is subject to a number of constraints. That is why *iki* that has been objectified rarely embodies, both in depth and breadth, the entirety of *iki* as a phenomenon of consciousness. Objective expression is no more than symbolic of *iki*.⁷

Lived experience is a "phenomenon of consciousness." For Kuki, "objectifications" of *iki* do not constitute its essence. Instead, for him, such qualities are constituted by and emerge from lived experience, experience embedded in a broader cultural ecosystem and collective history. For Kuki, these include Japanese Buddhism and the historically grounded ethos of *bushidō* courage and loyalty. Although Kuki explicates *iki* in terms of a relation between self and a specific other and conceives of it in the context of a heterosexual relationship, it can apply equally to any dyadic erotic relationship. As we see later, *iki* extends beyond the amorous, presenting itself as a sort of casual nonchalance as one moves through every aspect of life and other types of relationships.

Iki's first-person phenomenological state has three key constituents: a coquettish attitude (*bitai*), *bushidō* bravery, and an acute Buddhist awareness of the fleeting quality of existence. Kuki characterizes *iki* as it expresses itself in the theater of flirtation. The coquetry amounts to the felt sexual chemistry and desire to arouse and sustain it in the other. At first glance, it seems odd to conjoin coquetry with *bushidō* courage and monk-like, Buddhist resignation. Kuki, however, shows insight in pointing out that erotic interaction requires a certain *bushidō* quality. In his Pontigny lecture, "The Notion of Time and Repetition in Oriental Notions of Time," Kuki describes *bushidō* as

“immanent, voluntarist liberation” and a determination “to truly live.”⁸

The coquette’s *bushidō* bravery is her attitude of resignation (*akirame*) that she maintains her power by remaining in a state of possibility. Thus, her *akirame* requires not only resignation to fate but also *bushidō* bravery to remain aloof and “detached”⁹ from the blandishments of the lover and her own desire. She recognizes the illusory nature of permanence, and so is always open to change, having “a frame of mind that . . . [remains] stylish.”¹⁰ “*Iki* must transcend the bonds of love to maintain its free and flirtatious spirit”¹¹ and thus “maintain possibility as possibility to the bitter end.”¹² Therefore, there can be no consummation and no destruction of the erotic tension unless the pair drift apart or another magnetic possibility intervenes.

Kuki claims that if they consummate desire, desire would vanish. Desire includes a sense of possibility and consummation destroys that sense of possibility: The coquette aims to conquer, so it is vital that she not surrender. To do so would make her the victim, for her mystery would evaporate. Hence, *iki* requires an acceptance (*akirame*) that she will inevitably lose her charms if she succumbs. Thus, she must maintain distance, however minimal. Kuki, writing from a limited heterosexual male perspective, presumes that, after sexual union, the male will devalue the woman. Given the patriarchy that dominated both Japan and Europe, Kuki does not consider that, after a liaison, the woman might lose interest in the male.¹³ One who freely chooses *iki* implicitly posits freedom, lightness, as a foundational value. In his remark on “protecting possibility,” Kuki seems to be adopting what would become Sartre’s characterization of existence as contingency, except without Sartrean disgust or nausea.¹⁴ One who accepts contingency or possibility may easily shed the heaviness of everyday life and focus.

Iki requires, then, a Buddhist sense of *akirame*: Understanding that erotic alliances weaken once consummated, the coquette must internally accept the necessity of detachment.¹⁵ She must diminish the significance of the actual erotic connection to maintain a weightlessness, thus her sad insouciance. Her “lightness of being,” the source of her desirability, requires that she absorb the ephemerality of everything and the futility of desire. To acknowledge flux would make one value the sensuous and the sensual. Thus, the foundation of *iki* is the threefold phenomenological mode of consciousness that manifests itself in one’s aesthetic choices, as well as in her comportment.

II. THE ONTOLOGY OF *IKI*

Iki is, as noted, ontologically what I term “an aesthetic property of persons.”¹⁶ To understand what such a property is, we must make two crucial distinctions: (1) between character and personality, which are sources of ethical and aesthetic properties of persons, respectively, and (2) between aesthetic virtues and vices, on the one hand, and aesthetic properties of persons, on the other hand. Turning first to character and personality, when we ascribe an evaluative property to a person, we must be clear on whether it applies to character or personality. Many philosophers maintain that aesthetic properties of persons

emerge from their personalities.¹⁷ The constellation of one’s personality traits constitutes a person’s uniqueness.¹⁸ Each individual with *iki* would emit it distinctively. Interestingly, many ethical works, such as Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, can help us improve our characters, for a good character (however defined) applies broadly across human life. No analogous work could authentically guide us to develop a good personality. Although some works purport to do so, the most they can achieve is to help their readers behave more adaptively. Kuki’s text is not a guide to acquiring *iki*, despite his exhortation to the Japanese people to develop it, for one develops *iki* from one’s exclusive history and situation; it is not deliberately cultivated.

The singularity of a person lies in two things: (1) one’s subjective, phenomenological take on life and (2) the constellation of features formed by one’s unique emotional and psychodynamic history. Before saying more about aesthetic properties of persons, it will be helpful first to distinguish aesthetic properties of persons from what some contemporary philosophers refer to as “aesthetic virtues (or vices),” because the latter sound as if they would be aesthetic properties of the person *qua* person, but they differ significantly.

Virtue aesthetics examines the role of virtue in aesthetic discourse and offers a taxonomy of specific aesthetic virtues and vices.¹⁹ Examples of aesthetic virtues include discernment, creativity, and artistic courage. To clarify, artistic courage²⁰ would include taking artistic risks by, say, creating artistically, socially, or politically subversive art. Examples abound: (1) Shiota Chiharu, Salman Rushdie, and Robert Mapplethorpe; (2) Harold Bloom’s “strong poet,”²¹ that is, an author like Virginia Woolf or James Joyce who stands up to their literary predecessors in pushing the boundaries of a genre; and (3) the defiant Yukio Mishima²² and, to use Alison Hill’s example, the Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich in his compositions that so enraged the Soviets. Artistic critical acuity and musical insight are other aesthetic virtues. Insensitivity to fine musicianship or opposition to new music would be aesthetic vices. Aesthetic virtues are thick properties that carry inseparable evaluative and descriptive weight.

Three aspects of the person are sources of evaluative claims: character, personality, and sensibility. Aesthetic virtues and vices speak to one’s sensibility and/or character. An astute critic might be sensitive to artistic subtleties but arrogant towards people who are ignorant of art. Her critical sensitivity would be an aesthetic virtue, her arrogance, a moral vice. The first arises from her cultivated sensibility, the second, her character. A brilliant orchestra conductor could be condescending towards some of the players. Stories about well-known musicians who barely conceal their contempt for their collaborators, fans, or audiences. This is a vice of character expressed in an artistic, aesthetic context. Aesthetic virtues, however, are not “aesthetic properties of persons” *qua* persons. They are properties of a person *qua* member of the artworld or the person *qua* ethical agent.

In her insightful article,²³ Alison Hills explores the relation between moral and aesthetic virtue in another way.

Aesthetic virtues and vices, as Hills portrays them, are predominantly features of a person's aesthetic abilities and dispositions to create and/or appreciate artworks and other things of aesthetic interest. Being virtues, they are evaluatively positive. On her account, then, such aesthetic virtues belong only to persons who are members of the artworld—creators, critics, and appreciators, while many aesthetic vices belong to those oblivious to the artworld. In his canonical article, "The Artworld,"²⁴ Arthur Danto invents a character he names "Testadura," a person who does not get the point of art, who cannot enter the artworld. Clearly, Testadura embodies several aesthetic vices. Testadura's aesthetic obtuseness is consistent with Testadura's having many positive aesthetic properties as a human being: for instance, Testadura could be charismatic as a teacher, politician, or athlete. Testadura's charisma definitely would be an aesthetic property of him as a person.

Charisma embodies a passion and a magnetism that allows a person to motivate others, be it for political ideals, a subject of study, an artistic pursuit, and so forth. When we hear musical virtuosi, we appreciate their performances. But some will make us passionate about their instrument or a particular composer for whom they evince special excitement. Not all virtuosi are charismatic, however brilliant be their sound or interesting their phrasing (aesthetic virtues). A charismatic musician can change someone's life. Notice that charisma applies only within a given domain, not the more general sphere of life. A charismatic actor may be a boring person.

For now, let us note that charisma cannot be emulated by performing certain actions or uttering calculated words. There are no rules for achieving it, as there are for a painter who sets out to create a certain sort of artwork or a musician who wants to achieve a certain timbre. The observation conditions for an aesthetic property of a person may be different from, or more complex than, the observation conditions for an aesthetic property of a symphony or painting, but that does not entail that we cannot observe these properties, as we do other expressions of their thoughts, intentions, and attitudes. So, *iki* is an aesthetic property of persons that suffuses all aspects of their being. When Kuki speaks of the lightness that *iki* brings, he implies that it frees us to take an aesthetic journey through life rather than remaining tediously earthbound. The lightness of *iki* brings the freedom to remain aloof or "detached" from many things in which others invest so much of their egos.

Charisma, glamour, *iki*, and their companions all radiate from a person's subjective mode of being. When Kuki tells us that it is distinctively Japanese, he is implicitly warning that we cannot become *iki* through imitating someone who genuinely has it. Here we must remember that Kuki wrote this work in Paris in the 1920s, when *Japonisme* was still all the rage in France. Although he was quite impressed and influenced by French thought (especially that of Bergson's), he may have been ambivalent about French elegance and somewhat offended by those who incorporated (appropriated) Japanese style into the aesthetics of their everyday life.

III. *IKI* AS EXAMPLE OF JAPANESE AESTHETICS

As suggested above, one might well ask Kuki how *iki*, at its core, can be essentially aesthetic and fundamentally an intensional, subjective feature of its possessor. As we just saw, *iki* is an aesthetic property of persons that informs one's aesthetic mode of life. But it is its structure in the erotic realm that exemplifies Japanese aesthetics. "Japanese aesthetics" is ambiguous. Here my criteria are Donald Keene's well-known aesthetic categories²⁵ of suggestiveness, irregularity, simplicity, and perishability.²⁶

(1) *Iki* exemplifies *suggestiveness*. The term "suggestive" is ambiguous, having two meanings, meanings that one could easily conflate in examining *iki*. First of all, it can mean "sexually provocative." Secondly, it can mean "subtle." *Iki* embodies suggestiveness in the second sense. Coquetry, one of the three intensional components, has a subtlety in that it "come[s] as near as possible, and at the same time making certain that nearness stops short of actual touch." This is suggestive of an erotic connection. As for its objectifications, consider the nonchalant hairdo, redolent of Robert Herrick's "sweet disorder in the dress".²⁷ Hair in a bun with random loose tendrils might suggest an undoing of the bun or the bun hastily redone. A woman may signal her *iki* by wearing a *suggestive*, translucent fabric over a chemise or an Issey Miyake column dress made of his characteristic flowing, silky pleats, evoking movement without being body-conscious or tightly fitted. *Iki*'s manifestations or expressions include, too, the way one speaks, gestures, and carries herself. The coquetry of her bearing is never overtly seductive as he alleges it is in the West: It precludes "unabashed hip-wagging coquetry, Western style." *Iki* must be subtle, implying movement, in Kuki's scenario, in the direction of the opposite sex.²⁸ The midriff cutouts currently in vogue would be the antithesis of *iki*.

(2) Irregularity applies to two intensional features of *iki*. First of all, the Buddhist awareness of impermanence leads to detachment, for how could one form an attachment to the evanescent? Secondly, *iki* as a mode of consciousness over time has an emotional irregularity and an erotic tension with weight constantly shifting between the coquette as object of desire and the lover. The coquette approaches, only to evade, the lover's touch. Through this nonlinear movement, she embraces the freedom to which she is resigned. On this erotic stage, the asymmetry lies in the structure of the relationship itself. One objectification of *iki*, which embodies irregularity and suggestiveness, would be *décolletage*, which he describes as "[symbolizing] *iki* because it breaks the equilibrium of a garment slightly and suggests a possible pathway to the woman's flesh." He draws an invidious contrast with the Western custom of a woman exposing her back, shoulders, or even part of her breasts. Irregularity translates into asymmetry in Japanese art and everyday life.

(3) Both the intensional structure and the objective expressions of *iki* exemplify simplicity, Keene's third category. Kuki describes the phenomenology of *iki*: "*Iki* ignores a careless positing of reality. It boldly brackets everyday life, and engages in autonomous play in a manner disinterestedness and purposeless, as it breathes a neutral

air transcending all of life around."²⁹ *Iki* is an aesthetic mode of experience ("autonomous play," "disinterestedness") in an alliance that perpetually approaches but never reaches erotic consummation. As it involves "bracketing everyday life," the coquette and her suitor are actors following an erotic script. Kuki contrasts it to the "boorish" experience of being in love, which is to abandon the possible for the actual. That is, there are two possible unpleasant outcomes of consummation that amount to "abandoning the possible for the real": either one loses desire or one falls in love. Either of these possibilities destroys the aesthetic of *iki*. He opposes "the realistic inevitability of love and the transcendent possibility of *iki*."³⁰ Consummated, committed love unfolds amidst everyday demands. Whereas the intricacies of the *iki* dynamic are nuanced, the "script" has a simplicity to it. Through the perpetual approach and retreat, the duo sustains energy and imagination. Both parties understand the potential results of consummation: If they do not commit to love, each drifts away, the man from boredom, the abandoned coquette from resignation. If they do commit to love, they fall into the heavy earthbound state of quotidian life, leaving behind the dynamic lightness of *iki*.

The structure of an *iki* relationship has a phenomenological simplicity that allows one to remain aloof from complex emotional entanglements. Kuki speaks of the *iki* outlook as having a simplicity. *Jimi*, for instance, embodies the phenomenological element of resignation. He describes *jimi* as such: "... always simple and understated, [it] exhibits a certain type of *sabi* 'quiet elegance' ... *jimi* attaches itself to things that are notable for being refined, things whose design speaks for the modesty of the elegant but simple outlook that *jimi* represents."³¹

Speech, posture, and gesture are natural manifestations of *iki* that exhibit simplicity. For example, the voice has a "*sabi* pitch," "never shrill." *Iki* requires a certain cadence and inflection. The posture is somewhat relaxed, neither complicated nor provocative. He describes the slender *iki* body type, delicate, angular facial structure, and indirect gaze tending towards the sideway glance. As mentioned, *iki* fashion choices and comportment fall under suggestiveness. Similarly, such choices come naturally from the simplicity of taste flowing from one with *iki*.

(4) The connection between perishability and *iki* is evident, as one of the three intensional components is awareness of the ephemeral nature of everything. The tripartite intensional structure of *iki* not only includes the awareness of the perishable but also allows for the unfolding of shifting alliances as one floats through mature life.

A young person cannot have *iki* because the detachment of *iki* requires both life experience and a calloused spirit formed by the emotional wounds of rejection. *Iki* is the opposite of *kawaii*, the Japanese aesthetic of cuteness that is so childlike. Although Kuki's model of *iki* is the mature geisha, his analysis makes evident that *iki* can belong to others, including males who might be more aptly described as "seductive" or "rakish" rather than coquettish. (For Kuki, sexual identity is binary.) He says, "The sincerest heart, callously betrayed over time, is tempered by that repeated pain and ceases to pay attention to deceitful targets. A

heart that has lost its innocent trust in the opposite sex can hold to its resolve to love no more."³²

IV. CONCLUSION: KUKI ON CULTURAL CROSS-FERTILIZATION

As noted above, Kuki wrote this during his stay in Paris when France was still in the throes of *Japonisme*. He evinces disdain at how he thought the French had distorted his culture's aesthetic. Proudly contrasting the Japanese with the European aesthetic, he implicitly disapproves of the aesthetic dialectic that we now take for granted in such areas as design, art, architecture, and music—conversations that had started before Kuki arrived in Europe. What we recognize as artistic cross-fertilization may have struck him as potentially insidious³³ or, at best, inauthentic and uninspired. The French, regardless of their sophistication, could never achieve *iki*, for they could not unconsciously express the sensibility formed by a Japanese "ethnic being." He mentions specifically that the contemporaneous European artists such as Degas, Massenet, and Debussy do not "exhibit nuances that qualify as *iki*."³⁴ How could they be artistically *iki* if they could not possibly internalize *iki* in life? Kuki ignores the marvels borne of aesthetic syncretism.

A paradox surrounds Kuki's pride in *iki* as uniquely Japanese: Kuki recommends that Japanese people appreciate and cultivate *iki*, which arises from lived experience embedded in Japanese culture. However, on examining the ontology of *iki*, we find that one cannot deliberately cultivate it and that it comes not only from culture but also from one's individual, personal experience formed by the culture. If a Japanese person is not authentically *iki*, how can they become *iki* without the requisite life experience? Kuki himself would manifest another sort of paradox: Although he himself was taken by French taste and exquisite "fragrances of Paris,"³⁵ and ironically would return to Japan to lecture on Bergson and European philosophy, he did not see how the Japanese sensibility had already helped to form much of the France he so greatly admired philosophically and artistically. Nor did he ask whether he was viewing the Western aesthetic through a lens tinted by his own culture.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Nicholas Pappas and David Levine for their comments and questions on this work. I am deeply indebted to A. Minh Nguyen for the advice he gave me on this and an earlier essay from which this one grew. This essay represents an evolution of my earlier ideas, some of which I now question. See my "Iki and Glamour as Aesthetic Properties of Persons," in *New Essays in Japanese Aesthetics*, ed. A. Minh Nguyen (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), 383–96.

NOTES

1. Hiroshi Nara, *The Structure of Detachment: The Aesthetic Vision of Kuki Shūzō, with a translation of Iki no kōzō* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004).
2. 1603–1868 CE.
3. Nara, *Structure of Detachment*, 16.
4. See Carol S. Gould, "Glamour as an Aesthetic Property of Persons," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63, no. 3 (2005): 238–47.
5. Nara, *Structure of Detachment*, 16–17.
6. I am drawing here on the traditional notion of aesthetic supervenience as a type of ontological emergence.

7. Nara, *Structure of Detachment*, 34.
8. Stephen Light, *Shūzō Kuki and Jean-Paul Sartre: Influence and Counter-influence in the Early History of Existential Phenomenology* (Carbondale, IL: University of Southern Illinois Press, 1987), 50.
9. Hence, Nara translates it as "detachment."
10. Nara, *Structure of Detachment*, 24.
11. Nara, *Structure of Detachment*, 23.
12. Nara, *Structure of Detachment*, 22.
13. See Carol Steinberg Gould, "Iki and Glamour as Aesthetic Properties of Persons," in *New Essays in Japanese Aesthetics*, ed. A. Minh Nguyen (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), 383–96.
14. See Robert Wicks's insight about this feature of Japanese aesthetics, more generally in his "The Idealization of Contingency in Traditional Japanese Aesthetics," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 39, no. 3 (2005): 88–101.
15. *Iki* etymologically/semantically related to "detachment."
16. I lay the groundwork for this concept in my article, "Towards a Theory of Aesthetic Properties of Persons," *Contrastes, Suplemento* 17 (2012): 157–69. I am elaborating on this concept and revising it in my forthcoming book tentatively titled *Glamour and Personhood* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022).
17. Aesthetic properties, as construed by Frank Sibley and others, are in some way grasped through perception. Some features of character may have aesthetic dimensions, but this is a different matter. One might argue that the ethical and aesthetic aspects of a person are inseparable. Even if that were in some sense true, they are conceptually distinct.
18. Some features of a person designated as belonging to personality actually belong to character, as discussed in some bioethical literature.
19. Alison Hills, "Moral and Aesthetic Virtue," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 118, no. 3 (2018): 455–69; Alan T. Wilson, "The Virtue of Aesthetic Courage," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 60, no. 4 (2020): 455–69; David Woodruff, "A Virtue Theory of Aesthetics," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 35 (2001): 23–36; Tom Roberts, "Aesthetic Virtues: Traits and Faculties," *Philosophical Studies* 175, no. 2 (2018), 429–47.
20. Cf. Wilson, "The Virtue of Aesthetic Courage."
21. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd edition (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
22. Mishima, like Kuki, opposed any threat to the traditional Japanese culture and national identity. The similarity ends there, however.
23. Hills, "Moral and Aesthetic Virtue."
24. Arthur Danto, "The Artworld," *Journal of Philosophy* 61, no. 19 (1964): 571–84, accessed May 16, 2021, doi:10.2307/2022937.
25. I use Keene's criteria in my earlier essay on *iki*. See Gould, "Iki and Glamour."
26. Donald Keene, "Japanese Aesthetics," in *Japanese Aesthetics and Culture*, ed. Nancy G. Hume (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995), 27–41.
27. Robert Herrick, "Delight in Disorder," in *Hesperides: or, The Works Both Humane & Divine of Robert Herrick, Esq.* (London: John Williams and Francis Eglesfield, 1648), no. 83.
28. Nara, *Structure of Detachment*, 35.
29. Nara, *Structure of Detachment*, 23.
30. Nara, *Structure of Detachment*, 23.
31. Nara, *Structure of Detachment*, 27.
32. Nara, *Structure of Detachment*, 21.
33. See especially Peter Leech, "Scents and Sensibility: Kuki Shūzō and Olfactory Aesthetics," in *New Essays in Japanese Aesthetics*, ed. A. Minh Nguyen (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), 397–412; and Jan Walsh Hokenson, *Japan, France, and East-West Aesthetics* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickenson University Press, 2004).
34. Nara, *Structure of Detachment*, 57–58.
35. Leech, "Scents and Sensibility," 98.

IV. JAPANESE ARTWORKS AND ARTFORMS: PHILOSOPHICAL EXPLORATIONS

The Atomic Bombings in Anime: How Aesthetics Makes Actual Historic Terror Tolerable to Children (A Prolegomenon to Existential Aesthetics)

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ABSTRACT

Two Japanese anime films, *Barefoot Gen* and *Grave of the Fireflies*, depict up-close some of the worst atrocities of World War II. The task is difficult: To present emotionally agonizing, physically terrifying, and disgusting effects of the bombs, while avoiding both emotional distancing and those "pleasures of the cinema" acknowledged as morally unacceptable for treatments of the Holocaust: the provision of pleasure in other people's suffering, the simple relief that it was them it happened to and not us, the easy answers of transcendence for the viewer ("This was awful, but it worked out for the best in the end"), and the assurance that we in the audience would never have behaved like those morally repulsive perpetrators. In order to make films for children (and adults) that keep viewers watching, the filmmakers relied heavily on traditional Japanese aesthetics. Using aesthetics facilitates engagement with the characters and situation and understanding of the horrors of the bombings. Interestingly, it also strengthens ethical and moral growth.

INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM

Two Japanese anime films from the 1980s, *Barefoot Gen* (はだしのゲン *Hadashi no Gen*, 1983, dir. Masaki Mori) and *Grave of the Fireflies* (火垂るの墓 *Hotaru no Haka*, 1988, dir. Isao Takahata), depict up-close some of the worst atrocities of World War II. *Barefoot Gen* originated as a manga (comic book) series by Keiji Nakazawa, who subsequently wrote a non-manga memoir and also wrote the film. *Grave of the Fireflies* originated as a memoir by Akiyuki Nosaka.¹ Tackling head-on serious historical content with disturbingly realistic treatments of the absolute worst that happened during and after the Americans' atomic bombing of Hiroshima (*Gen*) and the carpet bombing of dozens of major cities, including Nagoya (*Fireflies*), these films aim to educate children so that these events and their effects will be neither forgotten nor wrapped up tidily so we can ignore them later.

The material is extremely difficult. Setting aside the questions of whether and to what extent the filmmakers were concerned with the emotional well-being of young viewers, the success of these very successful films depended on avoiding both disgusting or horrifying everyone and terrifying children so audiences left the theater and/or bad-mouthed the films. Such films could well be simply too

scary to watch. But this makes the question of how these two films achieve their success the more intriguing.

How is it possible to make films for children that keep the viewers watching—and *identifying with the characters*—while showing them effects of the bombs that are emotionally agonizing and even disgusting? How can one do this while preventing emotional distancing and those “pleasures of the cinema” that are acknowledged as morally unacceptable for treatments of the Holocaust: the provision of pleasure in other people’s suffering, the simple relief that it was them it happened to and not us, the easy answers of transcendence for the viewer (“This was awful, but it worked out for the best in the end”), and the assurance that we in the audience would never have behaved like those morally repulsive perpetrators?

Examination shows that aesthetics—much of it traditional Japanese aesthetics—is crucial.² I have argued,³ thanks to Halle O’Neal,⁴ that one of the roles of beauty in Japanese art, particularly post-War art, is to keep us engaged. Engagement is crucial to prevent distancing, although the aesthetic pleasures here are not only beauty but also other traditional Japanese aesthetic values: exuberant energy, spontaneity, and humor exhibited by the children. Beauty and these other aesthetic forces play other roles as well: aesthetic pleasures ensure identification with the characters, even as they experience the most painful events imaginable, and lift viewers’ spirits as they do the characters’, and induce us—entice us?—to consider ethical behaviors and attitudes, to see their value in the characters’ lives, and strengthen our own resolve to engage them: loyalty, kindness, generosity, perseverance, as well as attitudes we may not consider ethical but that are crucial in extreme circumstances, such as hope, optimism, intimacy, open-mindedness, empathy, and sympathy.⁵

This paper has two purposes: first, to explicate the range of aesthetic and art-historical values used in the two films (which are remarkably similar in these respects) in the context of their cinematic, narrative, and symbolic strategies; and second, to show the effects, or accomplishments, of these aesthetics. Such usages of aesthetics demonstrate two *existential* dimensions of aesthetics (at least under such circumstances where the rejection of pleasure, or of life itself, could prevail), in the sense of making life and/or the understanding of it possible and in the sense of making living itself desirable. Such usages thus suggest that we may need new ways of understanding aesthetics—as in some cases existentially valuable, even critical. This discussion, however, must be postponed because of space constraints.

ANOTHER ASPECT OF THE PROBLEM

Anime originated in the still pictures of manga, a centuries-old illustrated book tradition for adults covering serious subjects (Buddhist sutras, literary classics, national histories), and retains manga’s artistic and literary conventions. Because of manga’s accommodation of serious subject matter and its close links with styles from elite arts, Japanese anime has been able to take on such difficult subjects—the erotic and political and social criticism—utilizing approaches from older arts.

Gen and *Fireflies* are shockingly realistic, showing almost unbearable images of suffering graphically and at length. The protagonists, young boys, six-year-old Gen and *Fireflies*’s roughly twelve-year-old Seitai, witness their cities and homes getting destroyed and their family members getting injured and killed as a result of the bombings and their after-effects; Gen watches his father and two siblings burning to death in their home. After their parents die, each boy becomes a primary caregiver for his younger sibling: an adopted younger brother replacing his late biological brother in *Gen*, and, in *Fireflies*, a biological sister Setsuko, little more than a toddler, who starves to death under his care. The films depict, evoke, and accommodate a wide range of emotions: horror, terror, sadness, hopelessness—but also enjoyment, pleasure, joy, exuberance—much of which is conveyed to and aroused in the audience through the aesthetics. Both also contain a preponderance of ethical values: altruism and generosity, hard work, determination, forgiveness, *amae* (the seeking of nurturance), family intimacy, caring, and love.

COMPARISON OF THE FILMS *BAREFOOT GEN* AND *GRAVE OF THE FIREFLIES*

It will help to consider the overall similarities between the two films and their few but significant differences. Both are Japanese feature-length anime films made for children that are readily available in English. Both are based on memoirs written by grown men recounting their childhood experiences watching their cities and homes being destroyed by American bombings, and members of their families getting injured and killed as a direct result of the bombings and their aftereffects—and trying, futilely, to save them.

Both focus on the horrors of war: early on, the terror of the air raids and stories of the deaths of neighborhood children, and, later, the devastation of the atomic and carpet bombings.

The films pull no punches. Excruciating scenes are shown forcefully. Neither relies on physical distancing or turning away to buffer the effects on the audience; there are few long shots, and many close shots. Although they come nowhere close to the long “takes” Japanese film aficionados are accustomed to, they are longer than one might expect given the subject matter and the intended audience. And while some longer scenes of the fires, wounds, injuries, walking dead, and so on, are highly stylized, they are not necessarily less powerful for that.

Horror stories for children—fairy tales, for instance—commonly circumvent the terror by one of two techniques. Either the spoken/written word provides a degree of relative distancing, or the narrative or narrator reassures the child that it is “only a story,” often including specific rhetorical formulas that help the child distinguish between the made-up story and personal or social “history.” These movies, in contrast, are intended to be understood as historical from the beginning, never shirking that responsibility.

There are, however, important differences between the two films, including different locales: Hiroshima versus Nagoya,

and their consequent different kinds of bombings (atomic versus carpet bombing). These have different implications, historically, biologically, and ethically.

There's a bigger age difference between Seita and his little sister in *Fireflies* than between Gen and his two little brothers (one biological and soon deceased, the other newly adopted); and Seita himself is older than Gen. Although ultimately plot differences (and aesthetics) account for more of the difference in tone (*Fireflies* is far darker, even hopeless), Seita's greater age allows him the survivor guilt and the incapacitating illusion that he might somehow have saved Setsuko. Gen, who is younger, comprehends less, and also has the advantage of being able to rescue the orphaned Ryuta, who functions for him as a surrogate for the brother he lost. Gen has another advantage: having had the explicit command from his father (as Gen watches him engulfed in their flaming house) that he and his mother leave them to die and save themselves and the unborn baby. Additionally, he has the moral support of his mother, even in the immediate aftermath.

Beyond that, Gen and both his little brothers end up being able to provide food for their family through their own efforts. Indeed, during the war (but before the bombing), Gen's entire family also receives assistance from neighbors and others not morally bound to help them, but who do so out of the goodness of their hearts. Seita and Setsuko, by contrast, cannot rely on help even from those who are morally bound to help them: their aunt takes advantage by stealing their food; the doctor provides no treatment, placing responsibility for feeding Setsuko on Seita.

Gen has additional support from the ghost of his father, who appears to him as a ghost at the end, restored to life and laughing, and from the highly symbolic reappearance of wheat growing at the end of the film. The atomic bombing aroused widespread fears that nothing would grow there again; the growth of the wheat thus demonstrates that they and the world will recover. *Fireflies*, by contrast, begins and ends with a sense of ultimate hopelessness—in fact, *Fireflies* opens with the observation: "On September 21, 1945. That was the night I died"—a reference to Seita's emotional and spiritual death after his little sister finally dies of starvation. (This crucial scene also provides one of the few flashbacks in the two films.) The symbolism in *Fireflies*, unlike *Gen's* wheat, works against Seita and his sister: the magic box of hard candies finally runs out, the captured fireflies that light their hope die.

Still, the help Gen gets is little enough, and neither pair of children is assisted by relatives, the social system, or the health system from which they request help. This leads to important similarities in tone, moral force, and aesthetics. The tone is realism. (This realism is reinforced by artistic accuracy, in, for example, the depiction of the bomber.) In spite of the animation, the beautiful colors, and other dimensions explored below, a terrible sadness (not fear) predominates. Finally, both films convey powerful messages about the importance of love, of caring, of the intimacy of siblings, especially under difficult conditions, and of helping one another.

THE QUESTIONS AND STRATEGIES

We return to our basic question: What, then, makes it possible to show such things to children—without so traumatizing them that they and their parents emerge unable to recommend the film to others, and creating emotional, psychological devastation?

The answer is the aesthetics—but also some aspects of the world depicted (notably some helpful people), the protagonists' agency and (limited) success, and the films' aesthetic, narrative, and cinematic ways of depicting this world.

CINEMATIC AND NARRATIVE STRATEGIES

Most far-reaching among their cinematic and narrative strategies is the decision to make children the protagonists and the most important supporting characters. There are few intrusions of adult knowledge. Those there are, such as the announcements of the end of the war and voiceovers telling (in adult voices) about the war and the bombings, are presented at a child's level of reception and comprehension. Although many of the dilemmas are the kind that only adults should have to face, others belong distinctively to kids and often contribute humor (such as Gen's little brother Shinji's desperate question, "Can we eat caterpillars?"). Analysis is what a child can absorb. The children's language, with many "I" and "me" statements, is accurate Japanese children's language, using children's terms for body parts, family members, etc. Sentence structure and vocabulary belong to the intimate language of the Japanese family. (The Japanese language accords importance to levels of intimacy and politeness.) There is warmth within each family—love expressed between parents and children (more physically and in intonation and word choice than explicit verbalizations such as "I love you"). There is easy intimacy between the siblings, and sharing within the family. The brothers' rivalry, at least as strong as their affection, is readily expressed and resolved. In *Gen*, although not *Fireflies*, neighbors and even employers before the bombing provide some assistance, sometimes unasked. In spite of the serious travails, this provides a bedrock of positive emotion before the bombings—that, in aesthetic terms, provides contrast with what follows, and psychologically and emotionally helps the children and audience survive the ensuing horrors—although neither film resorts to minimizing or trivializing them, or taking easy "outs" of black humor, over-intellectualization, or cutting to the next scene.

The children's emotions are strong and varied: fun, exuberance, easy anger and release; boredom with father's moralizing; relief; love. There are many scenes of cuddling and getting picked up, ridiculing authority figures, sibling rivalry and skirmishes. The humor is also typical of kids: much of it physical or at adults' expense. There is no humor during/after bombing—and it is never used to undercut or provide escape from the horror.

This decision to stay with the children's points of view (POVs) commits the filmmakers to fast pacing, with many climaxes and resolutions. This means the transitions between the emotions are swift—so viewers don't get bogged down in one forever. The films stay on the children's levels:

simple, emotional. They avoid the distancing that excessive cogitation affords adults. They provide explanations that children understand—with no recourse to rationalizations and justifications of adult views of war, although the bare facts are outlined in voiceovers. What the children don't understand (how can their aunt be so cruel?) is shown without the film's pretending to offer explanation.

Since the audiences include children, the narrative structures are simple, with only a few flashbacks (to cherry-blossom viewing with the family) or memory sequences. There are none of the "iconic memories" or "intrusions" characteristic of trauma. Other than Seita's opening sentences, there are no flashforwards.

Although there are a few impossible POV shots—aerial views of the plane and the falling bomb from the side and from above—the children's POVs are mostly literal, so adult viewers also identify with the children.

The plots are such that while the protagonists are incapable of achieving many of their intensely desired goals, they do achieve some of them, encouraging viewers toward hope.

Finally, the Japanese value *amae* is prominent in both films. *Amae* has been translated as "dependence."⁶ Given the negative connotations of "dependence" in the US, however, it might better be recognized as the desirable, and typically legitimate, soliciting of affection, care, love, nurturance. As such, it is required among the young of all animal species, but in Japan it has a much broader social acceptance, including, for example, subordinates' eliciting mentoring behavior from bosses or advisors. Gen, his little brothers, and Setsuko all demonstrate *amae*, making us, like Gen and Seita, find them loveable and want to take care of them.

SYMBOLIC STRATEGIES

Although the films handle them differently, each makes strategic use of symbols, particularly for the purpose of generating hope and joy: *Gen's* wheat, *Fireflies's* box of candy and fireflies, and, in both, gardens of various kinds. Hope, of course, is characteristic of the garden as a human activity and as a symbol, regardless of country of origin—and in spite of the longstanding association of Eden with despair and the introduction of suffering into our world.⁷ *Gen's* gardens are a site of Gen's and Shinji's personal efficacy: they find food for their mother in a neighbor's pond; a later garden, that of the aged invalid they care for, for which they earn money to buy food for the infant, carries a similar message. *Fireflies's* vegetable gardens, by contrast, are not symbolic in this way: Seita steals tomatoes from a farmer's truck garden, but is chased and cruelly forced to give them back.

Interestingly, there are no symbols in either film that carry overwhelming negative connotations. Negative events are treated as events, pure and simple. They affect the future, of course, but they do not prognosticate, nor explain human existence in general, but only the particular lives in which they occur.

MORE PURELY CINEMATIC STRATEGIES

The use of anime creates automatic distancing that prevents viewers from needing to establish emotional distance themselves; this paradoxically keeps them more vulnerable. Seeing the cartoon figures, we let our guard down, forget to put ourselves at a distance—until it is too late.

The most obvious aesthetic, definitive of anime, has little to do with classical artistic values. This is *kawaii*, cuteness or charm: the enormous eyes, exaggerated facial expressions, and large bowed head coupled with the sideways and upwards look that characterize infant and immature mammals and that signal helplessness (and both define and trigger *amae*), making babies attractive to adults even across species.

Kawaii encourages viewers to feel compassion and a desire to nurture—as indeed Gen and Seita do toward their younger siblings. While in many films (and television productions) the manipulation of the audience's feelings by making characters or props cute is criticized as reprehensible, here it is appropriate, for the audience needs to feel both the urge to nurture and the outrage the children themselves felt at their abandonment by adults.

The children's voices, too, are "cute." And their immature behaviors—their inability to realize just how bad their situation is, their quick laughter and excitement at having fun even when it doesn't help them solve their problems—replenish our spirits even as they increase our sense of foreboding.

During and just after the bombings themselves, sound stops: something that can only be accomplished in film, theater, or music. The silence not only signals the shift in fundamental realities but also underscores the solitude of characters' new plight. It is also a form of realism, as our attention during crises often prevents sounds (and other sensory qualities) that are irrelevant to our survival from penetrating our consciousness. The slow-motion effects at this point are also a form of psychological realism, as subjective experience distorts our sense of time.

The children's POVs are maintained by the camera angle. We watch the films from the height of the children themselves, echoing director Yasujiro Ozu's cameras, which were fixed at the height of Japanese sitting on the floor, albeit with a different motivation and different effect, though both cases reinforce traditional relationships and values. Most exceptions are from *below* the children and looking up.

NARRATIVE STRATEGIES

What could have been in each case a devastating decision—to restrict the films' POVs to the first person, and particularly to the first-personal POVs of children, who are relatively helpless and ignorant and therefore more readily confused and terrified—is balanced by three decisions that counterbalance these vulnerabilities.

First, while doctors in both films turn the starving children away without treatment or a kind word, and no one offers them food, the sibling relationships are extremely close

(as is common within abusive and neglectful families), and the desire to save the younger child increases the older brothers' determination to survive and keeps them from falling into despair, helplessness, and depression. They bring everything they have to bear on their task: all the ingenuity, intelligence, cunning, and strength they possess. They revel in the little ones' ability to giggle, to take delight in small comforts (a box of candy, fireflies), as well as their own childish irrepressible capacity for joy, comfort, and laughter, making the films pleasurable even through the pain. In addition to the aesthetics, their kindness, generosity, and ability to empathize with the little ones sustain the adult viewer, while preventing children in the audience from experiencing the full despair that parental deaths and cruel adults otherwise entail. It is not a sense of transcendence, which implies that good *results* from evil or suffering, but a recognition that evil need not be unrelieved, an awareness of the possibility of sustenance and meaning even under terrible circumstances.

Second, although we see in their reactions much of the toddlers' POVs, both films rely primarily on the older child's POV—on the sibling who is stronger, more capable, the one who can experience the utmost agency permitted him by the wartime chaos. These older brothers are able to provide a coherent view of the topsy-turviness of war and the violation of expectations, with implications for ethical agency as well.

Third, both films focus strongly on opportunities for celebration, exultation, and joy. (Admittedly, the younger siblings' willingness to indulge in hope and joy backfires, excruciatingly at times—and is the harder to bear because we see these moments through the eyes of the older child, who understands more fully.) A corollary provides one of the most important features making these films tolerable: all the children, even the toddlers, are active agents, contributing to their own and others' survival. In spite of their constraints, both films allow the children a sense of efficacious action.

ART-HISTORICAL AND AESTHETIC STRATEGIES

Artistic and aesthetic values are crucial to making these films bearable. The visual and aural languages derive from ancient and recent artistic forms, and encompass not only Westerners' familiar (and deservedly beloved) beauty, but also a wide range of Japanese "categorical" aesthetics. These include *aware/mono no aware* (物の哀れ) (an awareness of the poignance of things, based on the Buddhist awareness of transience, that in *mono no aware* becomes almost celebratory, and that has been a major aesthetic in Japan for over a thousand years); *wabi* 侘 (powerlessness, loneliness, shabbiness, wretchedness); *sabi* 寂 (the beauty accompanying loneliness, solitude, quiet); *shibui* 渋い (an ascetic quality or astringency, literally the sensation afforded by a pomegranate, found *inter alia* in wood stains, etc.); *mingei* 民芸 (folk art, craft); and aesthetics of tea: *wa* 和 (harmony), *kei* 敬 (respect), *sei* 清 (purity), *jaku* 寂 (tranquility), etc.⁸ Although my analysis derives from years of studying Japanese art history and aesthetics, people without such specialized knowledge are nonetheless readily affected by their use in arts, and Westerners for over a century have found compelling many

of the artworks and aesthetics that are sources or exemplars for these films.

Zen-based characteristics of the Japanese sense of beauty—identified by Shin'ichi Hisamatsu as "asymmetry, simplicity, austere sublimity or lofty dryness, naturalness, subtle profundity or deep reserve, freedom from attachment, and tranquility"⁹—are so ingrained that they appear readily in everyday life, and thus are ubiquitous in each film. Implicit in Hisamatsu's list are mindfulness, presence-in-the-moment, and exultation in and taking sustenance from nature. These features are found in abundance in each film.

A primary visual compositional device is the use of aerial view with roof removed (*fuki-nuki yatai*), widespread in illustrated handscrolls from the Heian period (784–1165). This allows a maximal view into the house, without committing either to the POV of a single individual or to the enforced perspective of an ideal observer (as happens with, for instance, one-point perspective); it might be considered the visual equivalent of an omniscient narrator.

As in Heian handscrolls, diagonal lines, especially floor (tatami mat) lines, are used to make situations feel emotionally precarious (see the circa 1130–1150 *Illustrated Handscroll of the Tale of Genji*¹⁰), as when Gen's mother's collapses at home. In such cases, the sharp diagonals, contrasting with flat horizontal lines establishing security, imply insecurity and potential for pain of characters whose world is literally and visually incapable of supporting them.

Graphic depiction of disease and the effects of warfare on characters whom we identify with (far more explicit and detailed in Japanese than in Western art, at least until the most recent film and television) are well attested in painting as early as the Kamakura period (1185–1333), when handscrolls illustrated war, illnesses, and the hells specific to particular kinds of sin. The frenzied crowds, roiling smoke and flames, and the violent action, rapid motion, and intensity compellingly depicted are familiar from the circa 1250–1300 *Burning of the Sanjo Palace* handscroll.

Early Modern woodblock prints of the Edo/Tokugawa era (1600–1868) contribute techniques to both films: a reveling in the detail of daily life, intimate scale, a certain use of landscape that underscores social and emotional life.

Also indebted to the Edo woodblock prints is the films' composition. We've noted the exploitation of the strong, recurrent, horizontal lines and grids of Japanese architecture and interior design as a device underscoring either stability or, when they are skewed or sharply angled, traumatic disruption. In addition, unusual POVs used in *Gen* are taken from master woodblock artists such as Katshushika Hokusai, who famously showed Mount Fuji through the spokes of a wheel. The tiny lone figure walking under an umbrella along a narrow path through a rainy landscape is also familiar from woodblock landscapes. Other compositions, such as Setsuko's curved body facing an open window through which she gazes at the larger landscape of physical, emotional, and social freedom, echo beloved tropes of scholar-officials or enlightened poets gazing at mountains and rivers that symbolize the Dao or "Way," as in Ikeno

Taiga's "The Convenience of Reciting Poetry" (1771).¹¹ The manner of showing ghosts, too, comes from woodblock prints. When Gen needs his father's approval for getting on with his life, his father appears in the sky as a gigantic head and chest, tapering off vaguely toward the waist—a configuration seen in many nineteenth-century prints of ghosts, such as Utagawa Kuniyoshi's 1845 "Tokiyasha the Witch and the Skeleton Specter" from *Soma dairi* (*The Palace of Soma*), and Hokusai's c. 1830 "Sarayashiki," from *Hyaku monogatari* (*One Hundred Ghost Stories*).¹²

The use of color, especially during the pre-bombing sections of the first half-hour of *Gen*, where it relies heavily on a few bright primary colors and simple bold drawing without the distraction of unnecessary patterning, is drawn from today's popular thinking about what appeals to children: bright primary colors and high contrast. But different as the two films' uses of color are, each has distinctive uses of color, with broad palettes, that is subtle and intense, even exuberant. To a large extent this comes from techniques of *ukiyo-e* and other woodblock prints: gradations of color, use of color that suits the emotion rather than objects represented, exploitation of emotional (not realistic) atmospheric qualities that are overwhelmingly beautiful, whether what they portray is good or bad, pleasurable or painful, morally sustaining or ethically indefensible. The fact that *ukiyo-e* was one of the original sources of Impressionism allows a fusion of aesthetics here, affording the immediacy and the intense emotionality of an individual's view of his surroundings (drawn historically from both mindful Zen appreciation of the moment and haiku poetry, both of which have long saturated Japanese culture generally).

Other than the reliance on primary colors used in the opening scenes of *Gen*, sunsets are probably the most important of the modern aesthetic tropes of the films. The intense, rich and varied palettes of sunsets, beautiful as they are, were rarely shown in pre-Modern Japanese art.

Other compelling effects are drawn from "traditional" Japanese performance aesthetics—widely used across the centuries, if in varied ways depending on the era and the art kind. Reliance on the beauty of nature and a grounding of literature and art in the seasonal have been pervasive throughout Japanese theatre, poetry, and prose for well over a millennium. Throughout *Gen* and *Fireflies*, our protagonists turn to nature for solace, reassurance, and the sustenance—the sheer aesthetic pleasure, conveyed aesthetically—required to keep going under daunting circumstances. While some of these activities seem modern—when Seita takes Setsuko swimming, it seems like a twentieth-century jaunt at the beach—there are paintings, hundreds of years old, depicting villagers swimming in rivers at Shinto festivals, that exhibit the same exuberant movement and joy in the purity of water. The latter is both an aesthetic and an ethical value in Japan.

THE ROLE OF AESTHETIC PLEASURE

Traditional themes such as the full moon and cherry-blossom viewing provide sources of aesthetic pleasure and joy to the children, and also suggest a possible reinstatement of

culture despite its apparent destruction around them. As film critic Roger Ebert explains:

Japanese poets use "pillow words" that are halfway between pauses and punctuation, and the great director Yasujiro OZU uses "pillow shots"—a detail from nature, say, to separate two scenes. "Grave of the Fireflies" uses them, too. Its visuals create a kind of poetry.¹³

Mono no aware, appreciation of the poignant beauty of the moment in spite of its transience, and the more Zen-like emphasis on the sensory experience of the moment, like the sound of water boiling in tea ceremony, as in the scene of Setsuko's doctor washing his hands in the sink, can be enjoyed by anyone, but derive from ancient Japanese aesthetics.

CONCLUSION

Films like these might have been too scary to watch. The continued threat of both renewed nuclear warfare and weapons testing, as well as of accidental catastrophe from power plants—a threat whose urgency was made evident with the disaster at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant in Ōkuma, Fukushima, Japan in March 2011 and, as I write this in March 2022, with Russia's attack on and takeover of nuclear power plants in Ukraine—brings the personal implications of nuclear power home to twenty-first-century audiences. The use of aesthetics in the films *Barefoot Gen* and *Grave of the Fireflies* not only allows empathetic identification and audience engagement with these themes, but also permits viewers to take in the new information and its complexities, while recognizing ethical and moral behaviors and attitudes that make life both possible and worth living in the most horrific circumstances.

NOTES

- Names of twentieth-century Japanese persons are listed in Western order, whereas those of historical persons in Japanese order, family name first. Artists are known by this second (personal or artistic) name.
- On aesthetics after the atomic bombings, see Mara Miller, "A Matter of Life and Death": Yasunari Kawabata on the Value of Art After the Atomic Bombings," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 74, no. 2 (2014): 261–75. On Japanese aesthetics, see Mara Miller, "Japanese Aesthetics," in *The Oxford Handbook of World Philosophy*, ed. Jay L. Garfield and William Edelglass (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 317–33; Mara Miller and Koji Yamasaki, "Japanese (and Ainu) Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art," in *The Oxford Handbook of Japanese Philosophy*, ed. Bret W. Davis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019 print / 2017 online), 735–54, doi: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199945726.013.33 (NB: These are completely different essays); Michael F. Marra, trans. and ed., *A History of Modern Japanese Aesthetics* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001); Michael F. Marra, ed., *Japanese Hermeneutics: Current Debates on Aesthetics and Interpretation* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002); Michele Marra, trans. and ed., *Modern Japanese Aesthetics: A Reader* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999); Nancy G. Hume, ed., *Japanese Aesthetics and Culture: A Reader* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995); A. Minh Nguyen, ed., *New Essays in Japanese Aesthetics* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018).
- On this point and regarding Japanese definitions of beauty, see Mara Miller, "Beauty, Religion and Tradition in Post-Nuclear Japanese Arts and Aesthetics," in *Artistic Visions and the Promise of Beauty: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Kathleen M. Higgins, Shakti Maira, and Sonia Sikka (Dordrecht: Springer, 2017), 57–75.

4. Halle O'Neal, "Performing the Jeweled Pagoda Mandalas: Relics, Reliquaries, and a Realm of Text," *The Art Bulletin* 97, no. 3 (2015): 279–300, doi: 10.1080/00043079.2015.1009326.
5. On the dangers and misuse of aesthetics, especially beauty, see Alan Tansman, *The Aesthetics of Japanese Fascism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009).
6. Takeo Doi, *The Anatomy of Dependence*, trans. John Bester (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). Originally published in Japan as *Amae no Kōzō* (The Structure of *Amae*) (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1971).
7. Mara Miller, *The Garden as an Art* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), 25.
8. This list is not exhaustive. Definitions here are taken from Earl Miner, Hiroko Odagiri, and Robert E. Morrell, *The Princeton Companion to Classical Japanese Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985).
9. Robert E. Carter, "A Philosophic Grounding for Japanese Aesthetics," in *New Essays in Japanese Aesthetics*, ed. A. Minh Nguyen (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), 3–15; Shin'ichi Hisamatsu, *Zen and the Fine Arts*, trans. Gishin Tokiwa (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1971). Early work in English is found in Daisetz T. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1959; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).
10. Mieko Murase, "Tale of Genji (Genji Monogatari Emaki)," in *Emaki: Narrative Scrolls from Japan* (New York: Asia Society, 1983), 66. For the crucial insights regarding the relationship of composition to emotional content, she cites: Terukazu Akiyama, *Genji E*, in *Nihon no Bijutsu*, ed. Staffs of the National Museums of Tokyo, Kyoto, and Nara, no. 119 (1976), and *Heian Jidai Sezoku-ga no Kenkyū* (Secular Painting in Early Mediaeval Japan) (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kobunkan, 1964), 213–77. See also Mieko Murase, *Iconography of the Tale of Genji: Genji Monogatari Ekotoba* (New York: Weatherhill, 1983).
11. From the 1771 *Jūben Jūgi* series in the collection of Yasunari Kawabata (Kanagawa Prefecture), reproduced in Yoshiho Yonezawa and Chu Yoshizawa, *Japanese Painting in the Literati Style*, trans. and ad. Betty Iverson Monroe (New York: Weatherhill 1974), fig. 122, and in Felice Fischer and Kyoko Kinoshita, *Ike Taiga and Tokuyama Gyokuran: Japanese Masters of the Brush*, exh. cat. (Philadelphia and New Haven: Philadelphia Museum of Art in association with Yale University Press, 2007), color plate 208, *Convenient for Chanting Poems*.
12. Reproduced in Penelope Mason, *History of Japanese Art*, 2nd ed., rev. Donald Dinwiddie (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2004), 290–91.
13. Roger Ebert, Review of *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988), March 19, 2000, accessed March 26, 2022, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-grave-of-the-fireflies-1988>.

The Aesthetics and Ethics of Suicide in Japanese Literature and Film

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ABSTRACT

The popular conception of suicide in Japan is that it is honorable, even the proper and ethical choice: a way of taking responsibility, and even *required* by certain ethical codes. The honor attributed to ritual suicide in popular conception is buttressed by the idealizing aesthetics of *harakiri*. The beauty of suicide in literature (aimed at readers, without intending to enable their deaths) arguably has a thousand-year tradition, where it has deep tragic overtones. But contemporary literature, where it is frequently depicted

negatively as horrible or reprehensible, suggests a radical turn from past traditions. How does Japanese aesthetics idealize—or refuse to idealize—suicide? How is aesthetics deployed in Japanese literature to contest the ethical value of suicide? This chapter analyzes literary examples from the eleventh through the twenty-first centuries to understand how aesthetics is used to further or undermine the romanticized, idealized view of suicide as beautiful and, therefore, acceptable. Yet it is interested less in what it teaches us about Japan and Japanese aesthetics than about what Japanese aesthetics can teach us about being human.

PERSONAL NOTE

Over the past several decades of reading Japanese literature (in both Japanese and English), I have repeatedly been struck by the poignancy, the beauty, and sometimes the nobility of Japanese literary depictions of suicide. Engrossing and compelling as these portrayals are, beautiful is not, in my experience, how suicide is.

Early in my sophomore year of college, on a lovely autumn day, more balmy than crisp, I was walking to class across a bridge over one of the gorges for which Cornell University is famous. I noticed a cluster of people and police cars across the street at the far end of the bridge. I couldn't make out what was going on, but I had no time to find out.

Suddenly someone broke away from the crowd and ran diagonally toward me. Stopping ten feet ahead, he catapulted himself over the yard-high stone parapet. I couldn't take in what I had seen. I stopped and looked over. There he lay, flat and motionless as the rock bottom of the stream bed, arms and legs at odd angles, mimicking the Japanese characters for "five" and "year" that I had not yet studied and would always struggle with because of this tragic and meaningless similarity.

This was not my introduction to suicide. In tenth grade, a friend had shot himself. It was common enough in our suburb that when my out-of-state boyfriend came to visit me, a close male friend who felt the need to impress him gave him and me a "suicide tour" of homes where people we knew had killed or tried to kill themselves. Our next-door neighbor had not yet taken her hotel room and jumped. Because of prescription drugs administered for stress headaches in high school, drugs that today doctors are forbidden to prescribe to teenagers, I'd had my own bouts with almost insurmountable urges to kill myself. Luckily, I'd resisted, reasoning it was irrational to kill oneself before I'd turned twenty-two.

But since seeing this young man jump and what he looked like after, I was never enthralled by the aesthetics of suicide. Yet this Japanese literature fascinated me. What had called it into being?

INTRODUCTION

Generally speaking, we find suicide disgusting, reprehensible, sometimes puzzling.¹ Suicide is contrary to nature, "unnatural" even, in spite of the fact that some animals do it. It carries a sort of natural revulsion, often accompanied by fascination, like the compulsion to view

dead bodies that Aristotle mentions. This revulsion suicide prompts is almost universal.

Yet, for a thousand years, Japanese literature idealized and romanticized suicide. It did this largely through aesthetics. Why? What are the effects of this? This bears examination—less for what it teaches us about Japan and Japanese aesthetics than for what Japanese aesthetics can teach us about being human.

Now there is a new twist. This pattern has stopped—if not dead in its tracks, at least overwhelmed by a contrary trend spotlighting suicide's negative side, as, over the past twenty or thirty years, writers began to focus, to the exclusion of its (possible) aesthetic effects, on the meaninglessness or futility of the act, the dreadful and long-lasting effects on survivors, the superficiality or arbitrariness of the decision, and even the resultant loss of beauty in the world.

How and why has Japanese aesthetics idealized—and now come to refuse to idealize—suicide? What are the effects? How is aesthetics deployed in Japanese literature either to support or to contest the specifically *ethical* value of suicide? This paper briefly analyzes some literary examples from the eleventh through the twenty-first centuries to understand how and to what effects aesthetics has been used either to foster or to undermine the romanticized, idealized view of suicide and to examine the new trend rejecting suicide as desirable, acceptable, or even intelligible.

The fact that many of these recent writers rejecting the idealization or aestheticization of suicide are women (Natsuo Kirino, Kyoko Mori, Banana Yoshimoto) raises the question of the role played by gender in this development. Is their refusal an aspect of an ethics of care? Because of Confucianism and Buddhism, care ethics is arguably less gender-specific and more deeply entrenched in Japan than in the West. Mori's two works are autobiographical (her mother killed herself over Mori's father's love affair), so we may also ask whether writing from a survivor's point of view doesn't force a recognition of suicide's negative effects, effects that are more easily evaded when the author identifies with the suicide himself. Yoshimoto's *Moshi Moshi*, about the aftermath of the protagonist's father's double suicide, is so convincing she felt obligated to add a note to later editions saying her father is still alive.

Yet this is not a new phenomenon: the effects of suicide on survivors are portrayed by even the earliest writers, such as Murasaki Shikibu, who was keenly aware of them. One could read Genji's obsession with his two greatest loves, who resembled his mother and were biologically related to her, as principally compensation for the deprivation caused by his mother's premature suicide-like death. (I haven't studied the character of Kaoru, whose father Kashiwagi wasted away after choosing not to kill himself, well enough to say whether his character is meant to suggest the effects of parental suicide-like death on the offspring.) One also recognizes the ancient themes of female jealous rage and the vitriolic effects on women of male sexual freedom that frequently co-occur with suicide. The male team behind the 2020 television drama *Shitto* (Jealousy), like Chikamatsu Monzaemon's *The Love Suicides at Amijima* and Masahiro

Shinoda's *Double Suicide*, takes an equally devastating centuries-old perspective on these effects of suicide on a spouse.

Before we move to the argument about the purposes and uses of aestheticizing suicide, we will consider some background issues.

BACKGROUND NOTES ON SUICIDE IN JAPAN

Suicide combines some of the most appalling phenomena life has to offer: the horror of death; the sensual offense of decay; death's terror of ceasing to be or, perhaps even worse, the terror of judgment; the pain and shock of violent death.

Suicide undoes normal rules of living. We all die—we know we will—but usually without foreknowledge of how and when, and often against our will.

The popular (American) conception of Japanese suicide is that it is honorable, socially acceptable, condoned, even the proper and ethical choice. In some cases, it is a way of taking responsibility, while *harakiri* is even *required* by certain ethical codes. All of these things are at least *sometimes* true; in fact, suicide has historically been required under some circumstances: either by law, by the legal order of a superior, or by an ethical "code" such as *bushidō* (the way of the warrior), demanding *junshi* (loyalty suicide) in war.²

At the same time, it was often forbidden by law—as in the case of the double love suicides among commoners during the Edo period (1603–1867). While there is no sense in Japan that it is sinful (except perhaps among the few Christians), largely because the religions have no concept of sin (presumably due to the lack of a creator god), it is contrary to Confucian principles, as *The Tale of Genji* points out in Kashiwagi's speech. It is presumably due to this awkwardness, perhaps strengthening to a sense of transgression, that Murasaki has Genji's mother waste away rather than overtly kill herself. She must remain tragic and morally pure.

While both the "custom" of suicide as a way of taking responsibility and the socio-politically obligatory *harakiri* may be exceptions to worldwide custom (and the latter to the more frequent rule that suicide should provide relief from pain, not cause it), the reasons for killing oneself are otherwise those shared by people around the world: to benefit others,³ to escape suffering or avoid some terrible fate, to find release from despair and hopelessness, to atone for wrong-doing, to make evident one's despair or bravery, to separate from others or distinguish oneself from the group, to define oneself.

Suicide, therefore, can enact the essence of agency, of will. Whether commanded or the result of one's own decision, it can signify taking full responsibility for one's life, one's character, one's acts. (Is this why Genji's mother and the woman he abducts don't actually take action to kill themselves but waste away or die of fright?)

Over the past millennium, Japanese literature has explored subjectivity, “interiority,” and agency with great subtlety and insight—perhaps greater than explorations of these themes in the West, where, since ancient Greece and Rome, and especially since Shakespeare, the preoccupation has been with the strengthening of the will, personal identity, and self-determination. Suicide, which facilitates such strengthening and identity confirmation, may appear as particularly useful for such purposes in a society like Japan, where boundaries between/among subjects are less well-defined and are more permeable, overlapping, intermittent, and variable.

There is also reason to believe that in the absence of an ideology promising eternal life and the need to overcome death, the boundary between the living and the dead—who, after all, return to visit the family once a year at Obon—is less clear-cut.⁴ This, too, is buttressed by literary aesthetics: Noh theatre often envisions the land of the dead as contiguous with ours, far off and out-of-sight, to be sure, but not unreachable.

BACKGROUND: AESTHETIC THEORY⁵

Aesthetic pleasure—along with its alleged sources, the beautiful or the sublime—has for centuries been the main focus of philosophical aesthetics. It is often defined, following Kant, as an intrinsic (not utilitarian) good, characterized by disinterest/distance, not engagement.⁶ Only recently have philosophers begun to analyze alternative types of aesthetics such as kitsch, camp, the ugly, cute, or “interesting”; the Japanese “categorical aesthetics”;⁷ and “negative aesthetics” (those causing pain or distress).⁸

But not only are there various kinds of aesthetics, there are actually numerous purposes for aesthetic treatment in addition to pleasure. Some of them use pleasure as instrumental to other purposes.

After analyzing a comment by the Japanese Nobel laureate for literature Yasunari Kawabata that “[l]ooking at old works of art is a matter of life and death,” I identified five “purposes” or capabilities of aesthetic experience, reasons that art might indeed be “a matter of life and death”:⁹

- A. Inspiration.
- B. Evocation or excitement of pleasure after trauma/alexithymia.
- C. Knowledge-that:
 1. Knowledge of suffering people have gone through.
 2. Knowledge of some of the means by which predecessors have survived.
 3. Knowledge that people felt like this before.
 4. Knowledge of our place in the landscape and in the land.
 5. Knowledge of our place in history.
- D. Wisdom.
- E. Knowledge-how: knowing how to do something.

In the context of Kawabata’s comment and my analysis, I originally thought this would typically be knowledge of how to survive after a devastating catastrophe or crisis. He was speaking about the aftermath of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but he meant, I think, something more: how to thrive, how to regain trust and hope.

Later I realized there are others:

- F. To hold our attention over time. Halle O’Neal’s article on medieval Buddhist mandala paintings points out another critically important role of beauty in traditional Japanese arts, with respect to the third value (the inculcation and dissemination of knowledge), but goes further, arguing that beauty is vital to the task of drawing in viewers, engaging them so that they continue to look and begin to penetrate the intricate and complex meanings of the work—whose formal intricacy and complexity mimic the qualities of the beliefs and teachings it is their task to make evident.¹⁰ O’Neal’s mandalas draw the attention of Buddhists for reasons that are partially extrinsic: their messages about ultimate realities and the viewers’ relationships to them.

After watching Ari Melber’s tribute to André Leon Talley (1948–2022) on MSNBC, I identified a seventh effect/purpose:

- G. To grab our attention.

Considering the examples for this article, however, I recognized two others that I had somehow overlooked, that are inextricably linked to the portrayals of suicide.

- H. To affect our emotions: either by inducing empathy and/or sympathy or, by contrast, by rendering the act regrettable or unacceptable, thereby increasing revulsion, horror, terror, and/or antipathy (toward the person or the act itself), and therefore:
- I. To make something acceptable or unacceptable.

These last two function hand in hand: the more they affect us emotionally in positive ways, the more attractive we find them and the more acceptable we find their subjects or causes, whereas the more they repulse, revolt, or disgust us, the more we retreat, and the less acceptable they become to us. Combined, they lead to a final effect:

- J. To come to understanding, by which I mean the more complex combination of kinds and levels of knowledge that eventually can lead to wisdom.¹¹

Developing knowledge, understanding, and wisdom takes time, time that our natural recoil from suicide ordinarily prevent. Aesthetic engagement lures us into the contemplation that allows empathy, acceptance, and understanding—or a more enlightened avoidance.

We see recognition of this fundamental progression from aesthetics to emotional response to attitude of acceptance

or rejection in the Japanese shogunal governments' (and other institutions') rejection of any aesthetic alliance with actual suicide.

BACKGROUND: LITERARY EXAMPLES

The main examples upon which my thinking for this essay is based are:

1. The Heian period classic *The Tale of Genji* by Lady Murasaki Shikibu (c. 1000 – c. 1010).
2. The *Tales of the Heike*, the medieval narratives about the (real) war between the Taira and the Minamoto clans, and various kabuki plays later based on it, such as *Yoshitsune senbonzakura*.
3. Edo period (early modern, 1603–1867) plays [*Chūshingura*, AKA the *Forty-Seven Rōnin*, and the double-suicide puppet plays by Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653–1724), “ripped from the headlines” in the early eighteenth century], also based on real events.
4. Countless novels by the great modernists such as Natsume Sōseki, Yasunari Kawabata, and Yukio Mishima.
5. In the last decades, film and television productions of many of these. Often, like the plays and novels, they celebrate real-life suicides, such as the politically imposed suicides of the Lord of Akō, whose enforced suicide led to the rebellion of his followers, portrayed in *Chūshingura*; Oda Nobunaga; and even Sen no Rikyū (in Teshigahara's 1989 *Rikyū*), the creative genius behind the modern tea ceremony (all of whose stories have been made into films); and the individualistic rebellions of the young monk who burned down the Temple of the Golden Pavilion and of novelist Yukio Mishima, who made the monk's story a famous and very moving novel.

Making the contrary point are:

6. Late- or post-modern fiction and memoir, especially by Natsuo Kirino, Kyoko Mori, and Banana Yoshimoto.

THE AESTHETICIZATION OF SUICIDE: CATEGORIES OF AESTHETICS USED

Depicting suicide aesthetically in literature has a thousand-year tradition, where it also has deep tragic overtones. Such suicides have been the subject of countless plays and films. Some argue Japan has no concept of tragedy, but the literary suicides and real suicides I've considered all feature not only the regrettable and horrific death of a sympathetic hero or heroine but also a demise caused by a tragic character flaw of theirs (not theorized as such).

Each historical period addresses its angst, its dilemmas and quandaries, its tragedies befalling its own types of persons, arising within and as a result of social organizations and

institutions, that sometimes had not existed ninety or even twenty years before. (Suicides in the Edo period plays evince economic motivations not seen before.) And each epoch has invented or evolved its own aesthetics even as subcultures within it maintain previous aesthetic values.

Not all the categories of Japanese aesthetics are used to aestheticize. *Miyabi* as described by Sei Shōnagon and *iki* as analyzed by Kuki Shūzō both seem to remain outside the sphere, as do *wabi*, *sabi*, and tea aesthetics, except where required by the subject matter.

But suicides in Japan are portrayed using a wide variety of aesthetics. Most are for readers' benefit. *Mono no aware*, the appreciation of fleeting beauty that stems from Buddhist recognition of the transience of life and the inevitability of suffering, dominates during the Heian period (794–1185), although it remains important to this day. (Art historians have noted the way Japanese aesthetics and art styles maintain close ties to their origins rather than being usurped by newcomers, as in the West.) *Mono no aware* captures the existential possibilities of aesthetics.¹²

Such Buddhist focus on the appeal of transience, with allusions to cherry blossoms, was crucial to the aestheticization of kamikaze pilots' suicides.¹³ (The term *kamikaze*, however, alludes to war as well, even as it underscores the sacrality of the warrior's way, since the original kamikaze were literally “divine winds” that blew Mongol would-be invaders' ships back to the continent, protecting Japan.) Warrior culture recognizes an additional set of aesthetics for *harakiri* aimed at (actual or would-be) practitioners: the formal, ritual suicide afforded to the privileged warrior class in *bushidō*, the way of the warrior, as exemplified (in real life and in the films about them) by the *harakiri* of Nobunaga and the Forty-Seven Rōnin's Lord of Akō, as well as in the theatrical, idiosyncratic, but ultimately illegitimate attempt by novelist Mishima. *Harakiri* aesthetics blends sacrality and a double-faced/two-sided aesthetic of single-minded decisiveness and militaristic purity (signified and guaranteed by the white garments), contrasted with extreme pain, toxic masculinity. Like tea aesthetics, *harakiri*'s are aimed at (actual or would-be) practitioners as much as guests or watchers.

Idealized and popularized by noted director Kenji Mizoguchi¹⁴ and novelist Yukio Mishima, the honor attributed in popular conception to *harakiri* is buttressed by its aesthetics as portrayed in literature and film: the elaborate ritual, the use of symbols of purity and sacrality. These are also reflections of the four basic values of tea today: *wa*, *kei*, *sei*, and *jaku*—harmony, respect, purity, and tranquility—insisted upon by the founder of the “modern” tea ceremony, Rikyū (1522–1591), who saved it from the increasingly elaborate, gorgeous, and ostentatious ceremony it had become, restoring it to its earlier Zen roots and devotion to simplicity and natural elements (as opposed to gold or expensive imported Chinese porcelains). The tea aesthetic predominates in the scene in the film where Rikyū heads to the place appointed for his death, through a field of desiccated reeds, reminiscent of the abandoned battlefields of the civil wars, and in colors reminiscent of the *wabi* and *sabi* aesthetic, which originated in medieval

poetry and eventually pervaded visual arts from ceramics to architecture.

Mono no aware (in its pre-warrior form) was popularized by Murasaki in what is arguably the world's first psychological novel, *The Tale of Genji*. There are at least four cases in which someone dies by suicide or wastes away because of overwhelming negative emotion, in one case, Kashiwagi's, after a beautiful soliloquy outlining his reasons for and against. *Genji* did a great deal to instill an ideal of suicide as an acceptable, if inevitable, or even tragic, death: regrettable but honorable and beautiful. The beauty is part of what makes it acceptable and underscores both the nobility of the act and the associated regret we are to feel.

What makes these cases appealing is the aesthetics of the literary—and often, subsequently, painted—works portraying them. The restraint intensifies the emotion of the work and keeps us from turning away. By riveting our attention, they allow us to spend the time needed to come to feel with the character, then to understand. Eventually, we can apply our understanding to our own lives and the lives of those around us.

Seven hundred years later, during the early modern period known as Edo, or Tokugawa, a commoner named Chikamatsu wrote popular plays for bunraku puppet theatre and kabuki for a growing middle-class audience. Four were love suicides. These, while fictionalized, were based on real-life events and, therefore, present some special ethical issues, even while the society he wrote about and that comprised his audience faced somewhat different ethical dilemmas and presented—and demanded—different aesthetics, as did, of course, the very different art of theatrical script.

Suicide could be a privilege accorded to the elite under specific circumstances. But suicide by commoners was illegal—especially given that it could only be for the commoners' own reasons and especially when it was due to ordinary human feelings (*ninjo*) rather than duty (*giri*). The love suicides were, therefore, triply offensive to the rulers.

The double-suicide plays became, nonetheless, very popular with middle-class audiences. This is largely due to their literary aesthetics: the poetics of the speeches, the structures of the plots, etc. (Kabuki and bunraku visual and performance aesthetics also played a large part.)

The suicides are made beautiful.

Why did Chikamatsu and his theatrical collaborators make these suicides aesthetically compelling? Here I want to distinguish between motivations and effects. Some of their (philosophically uninteresting) motivations are those of many playwrights and producers today: to make the productions popular, to sell tickets, to build their reputations, and to fill their wallets.

What is philosophically interesting are the effects. They made such suicides—Forbidden and illegal—understandable and acceptable, something the audience could identify with. (This is what really irritated the shogunate.)

Already titillated by what they had read or heard about the incidents, these commoners could now sympathize, even empathize, with the "criminals." Reading or seeing those plays, it is hard not to sympathize, even when we see the main characters are wrong-headed about their larger courses of action, the ones that got them into trouble in the first place. In spite of their wrong-doing, their selfishness (their tragic flaws, if you will), it is hard not to empathize.

There are other effects, of course. After teaching these plays through Shinoda's film and the translated scripts, I have come to see not only that they were "entertaining," the current American accolade, as well as irritating challenges to the Confucianist military rulers, as Japan historians see them, but also that they were among the early forces effecting profound changes in the cultural landscape from medieval values and social structure to the "early modernism" of the Edo period. In spite of its continued emphasis on rule by the elite, military governance, and elaborate social hierarchy, the Edo introduced many features of global modernism: improved education and literacy, a money economy, an improved road system, the beginnings of industrialization and widespread trade (many of the companies we know today originated in the Edo), a "hospitality industry" of restaurants and inns. All of these resulted in increased wealth among producers and the merchant class: a rapidly increasing middle class whose members could attend the theater (just one among many arts they indulged in). They wanted to see themselves reflected in these arts, in the theater. They could understand all too well the frustrations of the legal and economic systems under which Chikamatsu's protagonists chafed, triggering the indiscretions that lead to their suicides. They felt many of the same feelings, feelings that were now, in the theater, given voice, respected, clarified, made visible.

Waiting, of course, on a more detailed historical argument, is it too much to say that such plays paved the way for more democratic governance at the end of the Edo period?

REJECTING AESTHETICIZATION IN THE POST-MODERN PERIOD

The contemporary turn destroys any connections between the depictions of suicide and traditional positive categories of aesthetics in favor of unflinching recognition of the after-effects. Beauty and pathos of all kinds, and even tragedy, are rejected in favor of objective description and no-nonsense self-reflection. In Banana Yoshimoto's *Moshi Moshi*, the narrator's father's double suicide with his lover is a central event in her life and is pivotal to the novel and to the character development. "My depression after losing Dad wasn't acute—the suffering was more like a gradual accumulation of body blows," reports Yoshimoto's narrator.

I would be deeply sunken into it by the time I noticed, and then barely manage to lift my face to break the surface and come up for air. . . .

I grew pedantic and over-logical, and my body seemed to have hardened and shrunk. Out of self-protection, I took to wallowing in my own thoughts even more than before.

Flowers and light, hope and excitement all suddenly seemed like things that were very distant from me, and I was trapped inside a deep, putrid, and bloody darkness. In it, . . . what was beautiful or light had no value at all.¹⁵

Her language here is precise, yet descriptions of the suicide itself, and the love affair purported to have led to it, are as banal and flavorless as a police affidavit, only the occasional choice of a word like “lured” suggesting affect.

In Natsuo’s *Real World*, Terauchi is one of four teenaged girls, close friends, who unexpectedly find themselves assisting the teenaged boy living next door to one of them, nicknamed “Worm,” after he kills his mother. Their reasons for coming to his aid—lending him a bicycle, cell phone, etc.—are not easy to explain to themselves or to others. They despise him and his act but reveal catastrophic degrees of alienation, cynicism, and nihilism, in spite of their different temperaments and abilities to “fit in” with their society and with parents’ and school’s expectations. Although their world seems absurd to them—a world largely defined, through their eyes, by “negative aesthetics” (ugliness, noise, confusion, and absurdity;¹⁶ they explicitly reject traditional arts like *bonsai*)—they choose to see the good in one another even more than they want to see it in themselves.

Eventually, one of them, Kirarin, takes up with Worm, who is becoming increasingly uncertain and desperate. He ends up slitting their taxi driver’s throat, resulting in Kirarin’s and the driver’s deaths.

Ninna reports her phone conversation informing Terauchi of Kirarin’s death:

I got all this out in a rush of words and finally noticed Terauchi’s silence.

“What’s the matter, Terauchi? Did you hear what I said?”

She answered in this slow, casual way. “That’s awful. That things ended up like that.”

I was shaken, convinced I was to blame for the whole thing. . . . Terauchi tried to cheer me up.

“There’s no need for you to get all upset. . . . You didn’t do anything so bad. I’m the one who did something bad.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m the one who changed fate, I guess.”

. . . Then I heard this popping noise

“What’s that sound?”

“I’m setting my alarm clock.”

. . . I couldn’t believe how nervy she was. All I could think about was myself. About me and how the adults were going to blame me. Looking back on it now, I can see that when she set her clock she was setting a time limit for herself, for how much longer she had to live.¹⁷

Both Ninna and Terauchi take responsibility for Kirarin’s death; Terauchi jumps off an apartment building, seeking both to atone and to define herself.

There is no aestheticization of the suicide, though Ninna remarks that she cannot bear to think she will never see Terauchi’s beautiful face again. The absence of aesthetic concern reflects the absence of moral order in their world and their inability to act ethically. Rather than following the effects of the suicide through time as does *Genji*, for instance, the book ends abruptly shortly thereafter.

Mori wrote twice about her mother’s suicide in reaction to Mori’s father’s love affair.¹⁸ In *The Dream of Water: A Memoir*, her mother’s death is central, depicted with stark and unappealing realism. But in *Yarn: Remembering the Way Home*, one of the finest pieces of writing I’ve read, psychologically, emotionally, and aesthetically, aesthetics is central: to the ingenious, perfectly formed structure (ideally suited to the topic and the author’s journey); to knitting, the central metaphor and symbol, describing its aesthetic effects as she becomes more skilled at new techniques through several stages of her life; to her language, sensitive, beautiful, and apt throughout. (She is Japanese and was raised in Japan but wrote this in English.) But for Mori, there is no way to make her mother’s death an aesthetic experience; important as her mother’s death was to her, it barely appears in this memoir.

Interestingly, Masahiro Shinoda’s 1969 film *Double Suicide*, based on Chikamatsu’s 1721 puppet/kabuki play *The Love Suicides at Amijima*, seizes the issue precisely. At the film’s opening, the director, on the phone with his artistic director/photographer, instructs him, “Don’t make the end [the suicide] beautiful; it must not be beautiful.” Yet the film is itself one of the most beautiful I’ve ever seen, so visually compelling that although I’ve shown it to classes a dozen times, I cannot remember it in its black-and-white film: I visualize it in color. Its soundtrack is equally compelling. This is as aesthetically powerful a film as was ever made. The director’s initial instructions notwithstanding, the suicide at the end is also aesthetically mesmerizing.

CONCLUSION

Why idealize suicide? Why make it beautiful (or, in some cases, noble or courageous)? Here is a preliminary list of motivations:

- For military or political power: to encourage compliance, to make people think it is their own idea. Once it is made to appear beautiful—i.e., pleasurable, desirable—it can, under the right

circumstances (usually warfare), more easily stave off objections and be turned to someone's advantage.

- To make it popular, for profit and/or fame. Both profit/fame and power are obvious motivations. Yet there are other, less obvious motivations.
- Beautifying or aestheticizing suicide is one mode of idealizing it.
- But sometimes, as in *Genji*, it is not idealization, not to make it desirable, but to make it acceptable and to arouse sympathy.
- To seduce readers into empathy.
- To make them think about their own choices, as anyone reading Kashiwagi's soliloquy will.
- To make them think about how their actions affect others (Kashiwagi again), even to instill morality.

Aestheticized cases allow us to examine the ways in which aesthetics may function, not just in Japanese culture but also anywhere, in any society or culture, to link emotions and attitudes with certain actions that are typically seen as ethical (or, of course, unethical), and to form attitudes and valuations of types of ethical/unethical actions—or to change existing valuations.

The aestheticization of suicide was socially and emotionally valuable. By negating or counteracting the horror and disgust that are naturally triggered by death, including self-imposed death, it facilitates understandings of the reasons for the act and the mental states that conditioned them, thereby encouraging sympathy and even empathy, even if it may also lay the groundwork for political control.

According to literary evidence, suicide has been a choice for individuals for a millennium. Literary examples lead readers (and, later, audiences) to deeper understandings of characters' motivations, to empathy and sympathy, even to a better understanding of the human condition in general—arguably of their own family members and friends. They have afforded shifts in perceptions of and attitudes toward suicide that relate to increasing awareness of individuality in Heian and the rise of individualism (not individuality) in early and full modernism. They have provided ways to define oneself as well as to avoid undesirable situations and to atone for transgressions.

But if, by Edo, suicide was sometimes legally required, or if the military government of WWII required it; if aesthetics was used to justify it and/or make it acceptable, then post-modern writers have chosen to work against the aestheticization, de-aestheticize it.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Tom Seidner for his comments on this paper and Scott Robertson for moral and financial support.

NOTES

1. My own experience with common prescription and over-the-counter pharmaceuticals like naproxen (Aleve) and zolpidem (Ambien) requires me to report that the sudden, urgent compulsion to kill oneself described as an "adverse reaction" to drugs should always be considered when trying to understand an unmotivated, incomprehensible suicide or suicide attempt.
2. On the history of *bushidō* and Inazō Nitobe's historically inaccurate, idealized reification that misinformed its interpretation in the West, see G. Cameron Hurst III, "Death, Honor, and Loyalty: The Bushidō Ideal," *Philosophy East and West* 40, no. 4 (1990): 511–27.
3. Al Alvarez, *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1990).
4. The National Museum of Death in Aguascalientes, Mexico, presents material evincing worldviews of death diverging widely from those of the more familiar East Asian and Abrahamic religious traditions.
5. For an introduction to Japanese aesthetic categories and some general issues, see Mara Miller, "Japanese Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art," in *The Oxford Handbook of World Philosophy*, ed. William Edelglass and Jay L. Garfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 317–33; Mara Miller and Koji Yamasaki, "Japanese (and Ainu) Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art," in *The Oxford Handbook of Japanese Philosophy*, ed. Bret W. Davis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 735–54; and Koji Yamasaki and Mara Miller, "Ainu Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art: Replication, Remembering, Recovery," in *New Essays in Japanese Aesthetics*, ed. A. Minh Nguyen (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), 139–53.
6. For challenges to this view, see Arnold Berleant, *Art and Engagement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991).
7. Miller, "Japanese Aesthetics" and *The Garden as an Art* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), especially chapters 5 and 6.
8. Arnold Berleant, *Sensibility and Sense: The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2010).
9. "A Matter of Life and Death': Yasunari Kawabata on the Value of Art After the Atomic Bombings," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 74, no. 2 (2014): 261–75.
10. Halle O'Neal, "Performing the Jeweled Pagoda Mandalas: Relics, Reliquaries, and a Realm of Text," *The Art Bulletin: A Quarterly Published by the College Art Association* 97, no. 3 (2015): 279–300.
11. For analysis of the relation of understanding and wisdom to the DIK (Data-Information-Knowledge) Pyramid, see Mara Miller, "Atomic/Nuclear Weapons and Energy Technologies: The Need for Wisdom," in *Practical Wisdom in the Age of Technology: Insights, Issues and Questions for a New Millennium*, ed. Nikunj Dalal, Ali Intezari, and Marty Heitz (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 101–17.
12. For another example of the existential (rather than entertainment or pleasure) capabilities of aesthetics, see Mara Miller, "The Atomic Bombings in Anime: How Aesthetics Makes Actual Historic Terror Tolerable to Children (A Prolegomenon to Existential Aesthetics)," in this issue.
13. See Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, *Kamikaze, Cherry Blossoms, and Nationalisms: The Militarization of Aesthetics in Japanese History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); and *Kamikaze Diaries: Reflections of Japanese Student Soldiers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).
14. For a superb study of Mizoguchi's film-making, including its attention to the sacred within *bushidō*, see Darrell William Davis, *Picturing Japaneseness: Monumental Style, National Identity, Japanese Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966).

15. Banana Yoshimoto, *Moshi Moshi*, trans. Asa Yoneda (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2010), 2.
16. Mara Miller, "Negative Aesthetics in Art, Environment, and Everyday Life: Arnold Berleant's Theory and the Novels of Kirino Natsuo," *Contemporary Aesthetics*, Special Volume 9 (2021), *Aesthetic Engagement and Sensibility: Reflections on Arnold Berleant's Work*, ed. Bogna J. Gladden-Obidzińska, accessed March 5, 2022, <https://contempaesthetics.org/2021/01/05/negative-aesthetics-in-art-environment-and-everyday-life-arnold-berleants-theory-and-the-novels-of-kirino-natsuo/>.
17. Natsuo Kirino, *Real World*, trans. Philip Gabriel (New York: Knopf, 2008), 187–88.
18. Kyoko Mori, *Yarn: Remembering the Way Home* (Bucharest, Romania: GemmaMedia, 2009); *The Dream of Water: A Memoir* (New York: Henry Holt/Fawcett, 1996).

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ABSTRACT

This is an examination of Mizoguchi Kenji's masterpiece, *Sanshō Dayū* (1954), as an exercise in Buddhist filmmaking. By "an exercise in Buddhist filmmaking," I do not mean that this is primarily a film about Buddhism or that it promotes a Buddhist belief or ideology. Rather, it seeks to awaken a Buddhist sensibility for the world, rooted in Kannon, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. It is more a question of *how* the viewer comes to see than it is *what* the viewer sees. I pursue this thesis by examining the ways that Mizoguchi subtly but consequentially alters the famous 1915 short story by Ōgai Mori upon which the film is based, especially the amplification of the presence of Kannon, the complexification of Ōgai's largely schematic characters, and the special emphasis that Mizoguchi places on Sanshō himself. What emerges is a cinema in which the viewer is called to recall their suppressed compassion.

Among the many virtues of Mizoguchi Kenji's masterpiece, *Sanshō Dayū* 山椒大夫 (1954), is its ingenious deployment of cinema as Buddhist practice. This is not to say that this is a film with a Buddhist "message" or theme, although it certainly has conspicuous Buddhist elements. It is not fundamentally illustrating beliefs about Buddhism but rather rethinking cinema as a medium for a Buddhist sensibility, as if the eye of the camera also expressed what Dōgen, following the historic Buddha, called the "true dharma eye."

I pursue this possibility by comparing the film with its chief source, the famous 1915 short story of the same name by Ōgai Mori, the *nom de plume* of Rintarō Mori (1862–1922). In so doing, I consider the following: Why did Mizoguchi transfer the story's Buddhist icon that accompanies Zushiō (Hanayagi Yoshiaki) throughout the narrative from Jizō Bosatsu (Kṣitigarbha) to Kannon (Avalokiteśvara)? Why does he make Anju (Kagawa Kyōko) younger than her brother Zushiō when in the story she is older? What do such alterations say about Mizoguchi's celebrated gynocentric

perspective? And why does Mizoguchi foreground, against his studio's protest, Sanshō (Shindō Eitarō), who in Ōgai's rendering is comparatively peripheral? The consideration of these problems suggests a perspective through which the character of Mizoguchi's singular Buddhist Cinema comes into view.

I

The story that Ōgai retells, which would have consequently been widely-known by Mizoguchi's Japanese audience, is around a thousand years old. Ōgai gives the story his own neo-Confucian spin and it is the spirit of the latter that Mizoguchi largely resists. Mizoguchi's film both assesses the enormous, even overwhelming, gravity of the almost ubiquitous reign of the Sanshō-archetype—there are no happy endings here and no glib calls for optimism—while simultaneously envisioning the liberating force of Kannon's awakened compassion.

In Ōgai's version, the father, Taira Masauji, bequeaths a small gilded amulet of Jizō to his daughter Anju. The father had been implicated in a misdemeanor committed by his governor and exiled to far-flung Tsukushi Province in western Japan (in contemporary Fukuoka Prefecture on the Island of Kyūshū). Traveling a few years later to visit her husband, his wife, Tamaki, and her children, Zushiō and Anju, are kidnapped. Tamaki is sold into sexual slavery on Sado Island and separated from her children who are in turn sold as slaves to work in the brutal labor camp overseen by Sanshō. After Anju gives her younger brother the amulet and then sacrifices her life so that he can escape to Kyoto, he is eventually able to re-establish his identity by showing it to Morozane, chief advisor to the emperor, who recognizes the noble provenance of the object. "I have heard of this amulet before. It is a figure in gold of Jizō Bodhisattva, Ruler of Light. This statue was originally brought from Kudara and was paid special reverence by Prince Takami. Since you are in possession of the statue, your noble descent is clear."¹ This leads to Zushiō's recognition and subsequent political appointment, during which he abolishes slavery, and then travels to Sado Island for a heart-rending reunion with his broken mother.

That Taira Masauji would give his oldest child, Anju, the amulet, who subsequently gives it to her little brother Zushiō before she drowns herself, makes ample narrational sense in Ōgai's rendering. "I want you to have it. You will face greater dangers than I," Anju tells her brother, who does not suspect his sister's imminent sacrifice.² Jizō Bosatsu protects the spirits of children and for this reason is widely associated in Japan with lost children, especially children who have died from abortion or miscarriages or who were stillborn. Jizō is associated with the *mizuko kuyō* 水子供養, the water-child memorial service, performed on the occasion of such deaths.³ What better symbolic accompaniment for these two vulnerable children as they attempt to make their way through a mercilessly predatory world?

Although Mizoguchi, as well as his screenwriters Yairo Fuji and Yoda Yoshikata, exercise a discernable measure of fidelity to Ōgai's retelling of the folktale, several small but

consequential changes are made that deepen Mizoguchi's Buddhist slant. After all, Mizoguchi had begun a formal Buddhist (Nichiren) practice four years earlier. One such change involves the amulet, which is no longer that of Jizō, but rather Kannon, Avalokiteśvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion who hears all of the cries of the world and witnesses all of its pain. Rather than place herself first, even in the quite reasonable and understandable posture of a defense of one's own innocence, her priority is the suffering of others. She is emblematic of the bodhisattva ideal, namely, that one's own awakening is suspended so long as others still suffer. The spirit of Kannon's heart suffuses the film, contesting a world in which power is built on self-elevation and the domination of others.

Anju (who takes on the name "Shinobu," to persevere or endure), in another small but consequential alteration, is no longer older than Zushiō, but younger, which further accentuates her vulnerability. Yet Mizoguchi, in making her even more vulnerable, does not therefore make her weaker. Claire Cavanaugh argues that Ōgai's story was part of an anti-feminist backlash, hearkening back to "lost virtues and values that depended on a rigid social hierarchy and conservative views of women."⁴ This world where one class of people dominates another is precisely what Mizoguchi refuses. Seeing her brother's suffering, both in terms of his slavery and his slow descent into complicity with the cruelty of his circumstances, she sacrifices herself so that he may not only live, but also awaken to his forgotten Buddha nature. Zushiō had reconciled himself to accompany Anju's sick friend Namiji to the forest to die when the earth—another resonance of Kannon—sings their mother's song of longing for them. Zushiō's heart hesitates in a kind of *metanoēsis* in which he recalls who he was. Anju seizes the opportunity. Although she assures her brother that she will survive when she stays behind to slow down the guards, she has secretly already planned to sacrifice herself. After Zushiō escapes, Anju takes her life into her own hands by walking into a lake. She does not live for herself. She embodies the power of Kannon, whose source is the opposite of Sanshō. The latter, as I develop in the next section, sees only himself and is utterly indifferent to the violence and cruelty that sustain his power and empire.

Mizoguchi is celebrated for his embrace of women's strength and for his resistance to their exploitation. It is telling that he does not only find weakness in the victimized, but also a strength that invites us to rethink what strength can be. One need only think of the remarkable character Oharu (Tanaka Kinuyo) in *Saikaku Ichidai Onna* (conventionally known as *The Life of Oharu*) from two years earlier. Real strength is not the violence through which the vulnerable are dominated and exploited. It is the vulnerability and receptivity through which one sees oneself in another. Such paradoxical strength as vulnerability recalls the American poet Gary Snyder's (himself the product of ten years of rigorous Rinzaï Zen training in Japan) embrace of Tārā, who is associated in the Himalayas among various Vajrayana practitioners with Avalokiteśvara and, in some accounts, born of one of her tears. In *Mountains and Rivers without End*, Snyder cites her power to side with the marginalized and vulnerable. This is in part why Tārā chose to be a woman:

Those who wish to attain supreme enlightenment
in a man's body are many . . .
therefore may I,
until this world is emptied out,
serve the needs of beings
with my body of a woman.⁵

The man's body is a site of power and privilege and there is a long history in Buddhism (and beyond) of women's bodies being denigrated as impure and, as such, incapable of awakening. The best that they can hope for is to be reborn a man. "Those who wish to attain supreme enlightenment in a man's body are many," as if there were a power intrinsic to the male body that made it a privileged gateway to awakening. The desire to embrace the male body as a site of power, even as a putatively spiritual gateway, reenforces the perversion of power that Kannon contests. One does not awaken to enhance oneself—I am greedy for a male body because my ego is greedy for awakening. Rather, the self that would be upgraded by awakening is the chief obstacle that practice seeks to overcome. One practices for others—and for oneself as an other among others. The self that is separable from others and hence somehow mine falls away.

Kannon's cry, itself suffused with the call of the earth, literally interrupts the depravity and pain of those under the yoke of Sanshō's world, in the form of Tamaki's (Tanaka Kinuyo) remote song of longing for her lost children, which emerges directly from the Buddha's heart.⁶ The mother's cry is a liberatory non sequitur in the logic of enslavement. It is first heard when the newly arrived slave Kohagi (Kosono Yōko), freshly delivered from Sato Island (where Tamaki has been sexually trafficked under the name "Nakagimi"), sings a popular ditty, "How I long for you Zushiō, how I long for you Anju . . ." Suddenly, Zushiō and Anju recall that they are not slaves, but the precious children of a mother who laments their suffering.⁷ Anju subsequently sings this song repeatedly, much to Zushiō's anguish. Anju has always been open to this call, while Zushiō has retreated into himself to survive at any cost. As Michel Chion eloquently observes:

When the acousmatic voice sounds for the first time on the lake shore, Zushiō refuses to acknowledge it; he has made it out as the sound of the water and closed himself off from the voice's power. Anju the girl, who is completely open to it, recognizes it at once. Zushiō retains an inner space that he closes off and protects; Anju has nothing like this for herself.⁸

Anju is open to the call and remembers to whom it recalls her. As a survivor she is now called Shinobu, to endure or persevere (忍ぶ), but she does not merely patiently endure. *Shinobu* is also a homonym meaning to remember or recall (憶ふ), as if, in a radical *anamnēsis*, she recollects that she is her mother's daughter, not a slave, or even that she is the earth's daughter, or Kannon's daughter, or the Buddha's daughter, not an expendable human being to be disposed of as the slaveowners please. Moreover, the love that she feels as a daughter is the love that she freely expresses toward others. She recalls not only that she is loved by Kannon, but that she is Kannon's love.

Zushiō's awakening, as I have discussed above, is triggered in a forest that has been demoted to an ignominious place to dispose slaves when they are no longer useful. When Zushiō and Anju are breaking wood, as they did at the beginning of the film when they were still with their mother, the forest itself seems to sing out to them, calling them by recalling their names, prompting Zushiō to remember who he is. This voice is the opposite of Homer's Sirens, for in recalling their names, it calls them back to life. Zushiō had been carrying with him the compassionate final counsel of his father, but so far, they had been empty words, a hollow formula, a lifeless memento of his lost family. Now he recalls the living source—Kannon's heart—of such words.

When Zushiō, thanks to Anju's sacrifice, escapes the forest where he had escorted Namiji to die, he makes his way to Nakayama-dera (中山寺) where the Buddhist monks hide him from Sanshō's guards. Here Mizoguchi also makes some small but very important changes. Unlike in Ōgai's story, Sanshō's son, Tarō (Kōno Akitake), has not only escaped his father's hellish compound, but he has had a deep change of heart and become a Buddhist monk. He offers Zushiō decisive counsel:

I found that humans have little sympathy for things that don't directly concern them. They're ruthless. Unless those hearts can be changed, the world you dream of cannot come true. If you wish to live honestly with your heart-mind (*kokoro*), keep close to Buddha.

Unlike Ōgai, Mizoguchi also subtly suggests the spiritual and historical significance of Nakayama-dera. Located in Takarazuka in contemporary Hyōgo Prefecture, not far from Sanshō's slave compound, Nakayama-dera is now the twenty-fourth of the thirty-three stations of the *Saigoku Sanjūsan-sho*, popularly known as the Saigoku Kannon Pilgrimage. Contemporary pilgrims travel to these temples throughout the greater Kansai region, each of which features a prominent Kannon. Nakayama-dera is celebrated for its Jūichimen (or eleven-headed) Kannon. Of course, this pilgrimage was not yet part of the world in which the story is set, and Mizoguchi, a famous stickler for historical accuracy, does not pretend that it was, but once again, as he does throughout the film, he lets Kannon's power suffuse the world dominated by Sanshō.

Zushiō eventually hears the call of Kannon. Earlier in the film (and in contrast to Ōgai's rendering), he had slowly but decisively acclimated to the cruelty of his world, willing to help in the branding punishment of another slave, for example, figuring that it was kill or be killed, destroy or be destroyed. Not long after arriving in Kyoto, having been saved by Anju and Tarō, he is given the new name "Masamichi" 正道, righteousness, literally the right, correct or positive path or Way. His *kokoro* awakens not through his own power or through the logic of personality or life circumstances, but through other-power (*tariki*). Cavanaugh argues that there are explicit Jōdo Shin (True Pure Land) elements in the film.⁹ Zushiō consequently liberates the slaves and then renounces his own power (a power that includes gender privilege). He is no longer on the way to himself and his self-aggrandizement. He no longer takes

refuge in himself to survive at any cost. He becomes a vehicle of the compassionate Way. Terrence Malick, an ardent admirer of this film, staged a private workshop of his theatrical version of the film in 1993 at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, directed by the great Andrzej Wajda. One can detect echoes of Zushiō's transformation in the character of Franz Jägerstätter in Malick's most recent film, *A Hidden Life* (2019). Refusing to take an oath to Hitler and facing execution, Jägerstätter confides, "When you give up the idea of surviving at any price, a new light floods in."

Finally, Mizoguchi gives the father, Taira Masauji (Shimizu Masao), about whom we learn almost nothing in Ōgai's rendering, some small but critical embellishments. He was banished because he safeguarded the poor from what would have been a brutal and gratuitous military conscription. His parting counsel to his children accompanies them through and beyond their enslavement, shaping their hearts: "Without mercy, humans are like a beast. Even if you are hard on yourself, be compassionate to others. Humans are created equal. Everyone is entitled to their happiness." These words become like a light keeping the darkness from completely triumphing, a small beacon in an otherwise hellish world. Unlike Anju, Zushiō cannot really "hear" these words until he hears the call to remember who he is.

II

I conclude my consideration of the Buddhist sensibility of Mizoguchi's masterpiece with a deceptively simple question: Who is Sanshō? It is well-known that Mizoguchi fought the studio over his plans to make Sanshō a more prominent character and, although he did not completely succeed, Sanshō receives far more attention than he did in Ōgai's version.

Prima facie one might conclude that Sanshō is a great villain, a larger-than-life manifestation of cruelty, violence, and indifference to human suffering. Even with such a conclusion, however, it would be inappropriate to characterize Sanshō as an outlier in human history. When we think of Japan's Heian Period, we think of courtly elegance, poetry, *Genji Monogatari*, and the wistful sadness of beauty's ephemerality. Mizoguchi, as is well-known, had a profound admiration for Japanese classical culture. Yet upon what was such courtly luxury and leisure founded? What is the largely invisible yet miserable support of such prosperity? The *Sanshō Dayū* legend is the dark side of Heian elegance, the peasants and slaves and otherwise exploited peoples whose coerced bodies form the foundation of an elite, of the class of humans who really mattered.

Zushiō and Anju, moreover, are the children of such elegance. Tamaki, impeccably mannered and dressed at the beginning of the film, is a paragon of this culture. Taira Masauji is a divided man who is eventually destroyed because he sides with the underside of humanity, not with its beneficiaries. His crime? That politics would serve humanity, not administer it for its own benefit. The economic and political exploitation of others has been one of the most persistent truths in most all of human history, despite its great cultural diversity. The roots of many of our

great monuments and cultural extravagances take their sustenance from human blood. The legend of *Sanshō Dayū* received its staying power not from those who identified their plight with *Genji Monogatari*, but from the latter's hidden and squalid foundation.

Sanshō is anything but unusual. He is what props up the illusion of the ordinary, the hidden foundations of what we traditionally celebrate as proper human culture. He is, after all, first and foremost an administrator. He is just doing his job and his cruelty produces efficiencies among those he manages. Like Hannah Arendt's famous account of Eichmann, who may have been despondent about what his duty entailed (genocide), but who executed it with fidelity and care,¹⁰ Sanshō is an excellent bailiff, part of the machinery that props up Heian high culture. As Dudley Andrew astutely observes, Sanshō "incarnates not just evil, but its banality, for he routinely passes down a norm of action. Overseer, headman, he is the local official and doing, he is told, a terrific job."¹¹

The dark underbelly of the Heian is the dark underbelly of high civilization. One can imagine Sanshō busy at work as a colonial administrator or as a functionary in an empire. One can just as easily picture him running a factory, or a coal mine, or an industrial feed lot, or perhaps even an Amazon Fulfillment Center. Sanshō administers regimes that benefit from white supremacy, patriarchy, genocide, labor exploitation, and on and on in a despairingly endless list. Mizoguchi made *Sanshō Dayū* less than a decade after the nightmare of Japanese militarism, which had become the new normal of the time.

Sanshō is therefore not only the dirty secret of Heian elegance, but an archetypal administrator of the enforced amnesia among the dominated so that they do not remember that they are human beings. Slaves had to be broken. Otherwise, their dignity might lead them to commit suicide rather than acquiesce to their circumstances. In a sense, Sanshō is a great human problem. He is as much Japanese militarism as he is Wall Street profits and global capitalism. He runs the factories that make almost all the clothes that we wear, "supervising" invisible laborers in Bangladesh, India, Vietnam, Cambodia, China, Latin America, etc., whose barely remunerated work creates the illusion that clothes are inexpensive and can be easily replaced with every arbitrary shift in fashion. Tamaki is sold into sexual slavery, a fate to which women seem vulnerable these days more than ever.

At stake is not only the exploitation and humiliation of labor. Karl Marx had a point when he infamously charged in the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* that religion was an opiate of the exploited classes ("the masses" or *Volk*). The desperation of life in Sanshō's compound drives people to seek solace in spiritual life, but here the archetype of "Sanshō the priest" has also laid his or her snare. In Mizoguchi's film, this comes in the form of the old Shinto priestess (Mōri Kikue), whose kindness promises the weary family refuge on a long and dangerous journey. The road is a metaphor for the vulnerability of human affairs. Who knows what robbers and scoundrels await us around the next bend? She exploits this vulnerability, pretending

to help them on their way, only to deliver them to their kidnappers.

Not only can religious awakening be a snare in the hands of the unscrupulous, but it also cannot promise an end to Sanshō's global regime. Sanshō does not receive his comeuppance and his type will likely always be with us. After Zushiō liberates the slaves, they get utterly inebriated, burn down the compound, and revel in self-destructive abandon. So much for freedom! And the people for whom the Sanshōs of the world do their bidding remain largely obscure and above reproach. It is with bitter irony that, less than a decade after a world war that claimed the lives of somewhere between 70 and 85 million people, or about 3 percent of the whole world's population, the preface to the film refers to its setting as a time in which "mankind had yet to awaken as human beings."

There have been Sanshōs on both the political right and left, and Mizoguchi seems leery that human liberation—his ardent hope—can be achieved by politics alone. Mizoguchi does not offer a political alternative, not because in the end he resigns himself to the status quo, but because a just politics would be the symptom, not the root. Zushiō carries with him his father's liberatory and just adage ("Humans are created equal. Everyone is entitled to their happiness.") throughout his time in Sanshō's compound. In themselves, they are only words, an empty husk, if they are separated from the root that sustains them. The adage does not prevent Zushiō from assisting in the branding punishment of another slave. It is only when he hearkens to his mother's voice, the earth's voice (in the breaking of the branches), Kannon's voice, does he recall who he is as well as the root of his father's words.

If Sanshō haunts the full spectrum of the political, the root of liberatory politics manifests when one roots out the Sanshō in one's own heart.¹² This is what Zushiō does. When he finally tracks down his mother on Sado Island, he recognizes her song as it calls out to her children and laments the torture of life without them. He does not see the human refuse of an old and spent prostitute, blind and poor, but his own mother. Tamaki, who had been mercilessly deceived over the years that her children had returned, immediately spurns her son's initial overture. In one of cinema's most moving sequences, she blindly fingers the Kannon statue, and realizes who it is. He holds her broken body, just as we are called back to the broken bodies of each other, indeed, also to an earth ravaged by the Sanshō within. Here Kannon is neither ideology nor article of faith. Here Mizoguchi's camera calls us to remember how to see, to see as it does, and to remember who we are, we who imagine that we live in a time in which we have awakened as human beings.

NOTES

1. Ōgai Mori, *Sanshō the Steward*, trans. J. Thomas Rimer (1977), reprinted with the Criterion Collection edition (2007) of Kenji Mizoguchi's film, *Sanshō Dayū* (1954), 56.
2. Mori, *Sanshō the Steward*, 50.
3. See William R. LaFleur, *Liquid Life: Abortion and Buddhism in Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

4. Dudley Andrew and Carole Cavanaugh, *Sanshō Dayū* (London: British Film Institute, 2000), 19.
5. Gary Snyder, *Mountains and Rivers Without End* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2008), 110–11.
6. See Andrew and Cavanaugh, *Sanshō Dayū*, 49. Of special interest in this respect is also Michel Chion's brilliant analysis in his chapter "The Siren's Song" in his *The Voice in Cinema*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 109–14.
7. In this respect, it worth noting that, as Dudley Andrew explains, the story was traditionally told by Buddhist priests to peasants so that the latter could identify with and take solace in the story of Zushō and Anju. See Andrew and Cavanaugh, *Sanshō Dayū*, 49.
8. Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, 112.
9. See Andrew and Cavanaugh, *Sanshō Dayū*, 27.
10. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, rev. ed. (New York: Viking, 1964).
11. Andrew and Cavanaugh, *Sanshō Dayū*, 66.
12. Mark Le Fanu aptly calls this the film's "'religious' disdain for power and its trappings." "Mizuguchi: The Great Triptych," *The Cambridge Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (1997): 310.

White Sand, Blank Beauty: Figures and Meanings of Sand in Japanese Arts

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ABSTRACT

This article presents an aesthetic analysis of sand in Japanese arts, focusing in particular on sand patterns and backgrounds in Japanese "dry gardens" and in the miniature landscapes of *bonseki*, and on *Woman in the Dunes*, an existentialist movie by Hiroshi Teshigahara based on the homonymous novel by Kōbō Abe. After a brief phenomenological description, sand is specifically considered in its metaphorical dimension, which evokes an irreducible spatial alterity, and by extension, the unchanging law of change that is already contained in the simple idea of time.

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL DESCRIPTION OF SAND

Phenomenology is here intended, as Merleau-Ponty defines it, chiefly as a "philosophy for which the world is always 'already there' before reflection begins," whose effort consists primarily in "re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world, and endowing that contact with a philosophical status."¹ In this regard, a phenomenological description operates as a privileged tool that discloses the dialogical nature of the encounter between senses and sensed, which always takes the form of a reciprocal exchange of question-and-answer: "a sensible that is about to be sensed poses to my body a sort of confused problem."² The "problem" of this description is the element of sand, taken in its most general sense.

Recent scholarship in phenomenology has shown a growing interest in environmental and geological studies, resulting in publications and monographs on rocks, stones, landscapes, archaeological sites and monuments.³

Academic literature also accomplished phenomenological description of wind and atmosphere, of water in urban environments, and many other architectural or geographical features.⁴ Despite being, after water, the second most used natural resource on earth, and being simply indispensable for the production of glass, asphalt, concrete and the silicon chips that allow me to write this article on a computer, sand has never been seriously considered in philosophical scholarship.⁵

The main reason for this omission coincides with the first point I want to highlight in this phenomenological account—namely, that sand is elusive. At first glance, a sandscape does not present itself in a much different fashion from other landforms as, for instance, a dry plateau or a hilly terrain covered by grass. The first perceived difference is probably tactile; when a foot steps on a dune it plunges downward, and the more one, instinctively, pushes in search of a foothold, the more realizes the intrinsic precariousness of the sand element. In addition to that, there is the proverbial image of sand slipping through the fingers: sand, like water, adapts itself to the container, continuously passing through, manifesting itself as pure flow.

On a prolonged period of time, this precariousness is even more evident in the modality of sight. A time-lapse shooting in a sandy desert reveals the extraordinary effect of winds and weather on the dunescape, which is affected by veritable tides, creating all sorts of shapes and patterns. Along with the geological classification in five types (crescentic, parabolic, dome, star and linear), other languages and dialect offer more specific terms to indicate the peculiar shape of dunes: Kazakh *barchan* (crescent moon-shaped, wider than long), Arab *seif* (sword-shape dunes) and others. Any sand field is an intrinsically mobile landscape.

Sand itself, to a closer inspection, cannot really be considered an element, if not for its fine consistence. There are countless types of sand, all constituted by the erosion of rocks and minerals. There is calcium sulphate sand, calcium carbonite sand, quartz sand, coral sand, aragonite sand, volcanic sand, garnet sand, olivine sand, magnetite sand, and others. They have different thermal proprieties, origin, micro-shape and composition. The word "sand" itself is nothing but a conventional term used to indicate all this family of fine materials. Hence, the determination of a first characteristic of sand from a phenomenological point of view: its elusiveness.

A second feature can be immediately detected in a subjective encounter with the sand: its neutrality. While wandering in a sandy area, the most noticeable sounds are the howling of the wind and, in case of a beach, the patient roaring of the sea. In a way, a sandy place brings out in plain evidence the natural forces that contributed to shape it, highlighted by contrast with the mild, soundless background.⁶ Even one's sense of smell may undergo a similar experience. During days, weeks or months of dry and weather, plants exude a peculiar oil of which fine-grained soils and rocks get impregnated. The first rain triggers the cyanobacteria present in the impregnated soil

to produce geosmin, a chemical compound that diffuses the characteristic musty, muddy, argillaceous odour that is nowadays known as petrichor.⁷ Even in this case, it is the neutral olfactory field of sandscapes that let petrichor emerge in its full penetrant, pleasantly intoxicating scent.

The tactile perception of sand is also neutral, in the sense that it depends on the surrounding weather conditions. Sand is a poor thermal conductor, because it absorbs and disperses huge quantities of heat and cold in a very short time. Most sandscapes reflect thoroughly in any given moment the climatic conditions that affect them in that very moment; this is not a trivial observation, as it does not extend to most natural and urban environments. In particular, in conditions of extreme heat and peculiar light conditions, deserts give rise to mirages, optical phenomena that refract objects or events that are distant in the atmosphere. It can be said that the neutral voidness of a sandscape allows the forms of distant landscape to manifest more or less vividly before the observer.

SAND GARDENS

Therefore, a subjective encounter with sand reveals two distinct features. The first is its elusiveness: tactile, visual, and conceptual. The second is its neutrality, intended as a lack of distinctive aesthetic qualities that, in virtue of its blandness, allows the full blooming of indirect tactile, olfactory, visual, and aural conditions, as temperature, petrichor, mirages, and winds.

Merleau-Ponty claims that, in addition to its “positional spatiality,” the body has a “situational spatiality” that amounts to its orientation toward a set of affordances, actual or possible tasks.⁸ From this additional point of view, a sandscape does not offer significant affordances to most living creatures. It is perpetually unstable. Few or no resources at all: extreme temperatures, scarce vegetation, no food, no water. No landmarks, no shelter. Its neutrality is genuine in the etymological sense, from Latin *ne-uter*, “none of the two,” “not-this, not-that.” Its elusiveness amounts to a fundamental alterity that does not belong, and cannot belong, to human beings. Metaphorically, the neutral, elusive alterity of sand can easily be employed to visually represent the fourth, invisible dimension of reality: time. It is not merely the trivial image of the hourglass to suggest so; in Japanese arts, sand has been frequently associated with the idea of impermanence.

A first, remarkable case is exemplified by the tradition of *karesansui* 枯山水 (dry-landscape) gardens. The veritable term that indicates a “landscape” (*sansui* 山水) reflects the juxtaposition of mountains (*san* 山), a solid, steady, non-flowing, apparently unchanging element, and water (*sui* 水), whose incessant flux is a natural reminder of the impermanence that affects all phenomena in the universe. In *karesansui* gardens, pools and streams are replaced by massive rocks and oceans of sand or gravel, establishing an aesthetic and conceptual analogy between the microcosm of the artificial, human-made garden and the natural aspect of the macrocosm.⁹

Specifically, Japanese *karesansui* gardens have frequently been analysed in relation to Zen Buddhism. The

transfiguration of natural forms into abstract patterns of rocks and sand (or gravel) defers to the understanding of all phenomenal objects and events as manifestations of their inner vacuity (*ku* 空), emphasizing the universal law of impermanence (*mujo* 無常). Often, *karesansui* garden feature the principle of *shakkei* 借景 (“borrowing the scenery”), in which a part of the surrounding luxuriant natural landscape is enclosed within the frame, establishing a conflicting dialectic with the austerity of the dry garden. The conflict is precisely meant to remind one of the Buddhist truth that the two sides, the ever-changing rhythm of nature and the unchanging stillness of the *karesansui*, are one and the same.

Already before the advent of Buddhism, precincts of white sand marked ritual sacred areas in Shinto shrines, known as *niwa* 庭, a term that nowadays commonly translates “garden.”¹⁰ These spaces offered an ideal ground for religious and political ceremonies. Sand mounds known as *kiyome no mori* 清めの盛り were also employed in ritual purifications.¹¹ After the diffusion and institutionalization of Zen, lakes and oceans of sand, featured in several temples such as the Ginkaku-ji 銀閣寺, the Shisen-dō 詩仙堂, the Dasein-in 大仙院, the Hōnen-in 法然院 (all located in Kyoto), evoke the fundamental instability of existence, permeated by a vibrant sense of ephemerality. In fact, not only sand does not offer any solid foothold for human dwelling, but due to the combined effect of winds and weather, it cyclically cancels out all traces of human passage.

WOMAN IN THE DUNES

These evocative qualities attributed to the sand element echo in the renowned Japanese movie *Woman in the Dunes* (*Suna no onna* 砂の女, 1964, directed by Hiroshi Teshigahara), adapted by Kōbō Abe 公房安部 from his 1962 homonymous existentialist novel. Teshigahara, well-versed in traditional Japanese arts as *ikebana*, calligraphy, pottery, and painting, transposed the centuries-old fascination of sand from a classical religious and codified background into a lay, fluid, contemporary setting. Niki Junpei, amateur entomologist, visits a remote sandscape in order to collect new specimens. Trapped in a sand cave with a widow by the villagers, he is forced to dig every night for years, until he is completely stripped away of his previous social persona, and surrenders to his condition of captivity. In the end, even the opportunity for freedom appears as an absurd mirage, as a return to “freedom” would actually represent a second form of captivity, regulated and institutionalized by societal rules.

In *Woman in the Dunes*, the fine and fluid grain of the sand becomes a crucial component of the cinematography. A foggy sandscape is the ideal environment for the setting of an existentialist drama that plays with the concepts of human freedom and social persona. Although the movie, as the novel by Abe, is pervaded by an aura of dystopian pessimism that is generally alien to Japanese culture, evidently reminiscent of the writings of Kafka, Camus and Sartre, existential concerns about time and identity are traditional problems of Japanese philosophy. From this perspective, the oppressive, pervasive presence of sand generates a vivid contrast with the feverish image of Tokyo, frequently evoked throughout the movie. The mobile,

electric dynamism of a metropolitan landscape ideally opposes the still, unchanging neutrality of sand.

Yet, a city is an image of instability that arises from a firm ground, whereas a sandscape appears as an unchanging, timeless environment that nonetheless springs from an unescapable, totalizing instability. The reiterated shots among the dunes abstract the individuals from the meticulous construction of their social persona, opposing the contextual network of social bounds and moral conventions to the abrupt vacuity of a non-social, uncontextual isolation. As in ancient Shinto shrines, sandy terrains mark a liminal space in which all the rules of society and religion are suspended. Time is not anymore parcelled out, allocated and programmed by institutionalized relationships of power; the mathematical tyranny of the clock is banned, and the passing of time is only modulated through the blowing of coastal breezes over the dunes. In this sense, sand constitutes “a direct time-image, which gives what changes the unchanging form in which the change is produced.”¹²

THE WHITE SAND OF *BONSEKI* 盆石 AND CORRELATIVE THINKING

Sand is often employed in the composition of *bonseki* 盆石, miniature landscapes that feature beautiful-shaped rocks (石) over flat trays (盆). With the aid of mineral stones, coloured sands, *torii* gates, spoons, feathers and other tools, the gardener of *bonseki* can create mountain sceneries, hills, even seashores and luxuriant landscape gardens with water patterns. It is unclear when exactly the tradition of *bonseki* originated, but specific techniques and styles were already established well before the Muromachi Period (1336–1573), when the habit of working on miniature gardens was already spread among common people.

In the fourteenth century, the Rinzaï monk and poet Kokan Shiren 虎関師鍊 (1278–1347) wrote an important treatise on miniature landscape gardening, collected in his anthology of prose and poetry *Saihokushū* 濟北集. In introducing the concept of miniature landscape, he presents it as a serious play that he conceived at a late stage of his life:

What I liked to do for fun when I was a child was to gather up sacks of stones and pile them on a table near the window high and free. When I reached middle age, I felt ashamed of doing this and so I stopped, becoming like any other ordinary person, obtuse like a brick. Finally, I have reached decrepit old age, and I particularly dislike the sound of children’s games in the summer. So I had the children gather up stones in the corner of the wall. I brushed them off and washed them, preparing a green celadon tray with white sand on the bottom. The result was poetry that would lighten your heart. The landscape lent a coolness to the air and dispelled the heart.

It is interesting to note that the structure of this passage is similar to the famous saying of Qingyuan Weixin 青原惟信, Buddhist monk who lived in the ninth century:

Before I had studied Zen for thirty years, I saw mountains as mountains, and rivers as rivers. When I arrived at a more intimate knowledge, I came to the point where I saw that mountains are not mountains, and rivers are not rivers. But now that I have got its very substance I am at rest. For it is just that I see mountains once again as mountains, and rivers once again as rivers.¹³

The conception of *bonseki* is ingrained within a threefold dialectic, expressing the culmination of a process that differs from both the aimlessness of a child’s play and the gravity of adulthood. In playing with imitating the landscape, the *bonseki* gardener makes manifest an implicit analogy between microcosm and macrocosm, exposing the relevance of “correlative thinking.” For “correlative thinking,” I intend, following Angus Charles Graham, David L. Hall, and Roger T. Ames, a philosophical and aesthetic strategy that proceeds by metaphorical associations rather than analytical definitions, relying on the ambiguity of language for the production of meaning, rather than its vocation for clarity.¹⁴

Within this framework, sand stands for the inert, amorphous background on the basis of which all forms manifest and arise, the unchanging law of change. The “white sand” described by Kokan Shiren may also be regarded as an additional exemplification of the “beauty of the blank” (*yohaku no bi* 余白の美), an aesthetic ideal widely adopted in *sumi-e* paintings, where empty or negative spaces are employed to convey a sense of movement and ephemerality. This way, the vast blank gives form to the formless flowing of the universe, in perpetual and imperceptible motion, even when the appearance of things is divergent; in the paradoxical words of Dōgen 道元, “the mountains are always walking.”¹⁵ Once more, the dull neutrality of the sand element unveils the fourth invisible dimension of reality: time.

NOTES

1. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, vii.
2. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 259.
3. For instance, Hamilton and Whitehouse, “Phenomenology in Practice”; Howard, Thompson, and Waterton, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Landscape Studies*; Klaver, “Phenomenology on (the) Rocks”; Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape*; and Tilley, *The Materiality of Stone*.
4. For instance, Ogawa, “Qi and Phenomenology of Wind”; and Dicks, “A Phenomenological Approach to Water in the City.”
5. It should, at least by the field of environmental philosophy: Sand is a finite resource and its progressive depletion constitutes a serious environmental concern. For more on this, see Wesley and Puffer, “The End of Sand.”
6. Of course, with the exception of the renowned phenomenon of Sahara’s “singing” dunes.”
7. The term derives from Greek *ichor*, the supposedly ethereal blood of the gods, and *petros*, “stone.”
8. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 129.
9. Parkes, “The Role of Rock in the Japanese Dry Landscape Garden,” 92. Since early times, the Buddhist tradition theorized the co-existence (and paradoxical coincidence) of conventional and ultimate reality. The conventional reality is where phenomenal things abide; the ultimate reality means to regard all things as emptiness. The two are opposed, but complementary; in

Nāgārjuna's words, "Without a foundation in the conventional truth the significance of the ultimate cannot be taught. Without understanding the significance of the ultimate, liberation is not achieved" (Garfield, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, 296). East Asian Buddhism reiterates the necessity to detach from the illusory nature of conventional reality, while simultaneously avoiding to take a fixed abode in the blissful emptiness of ultimate reality. In fact, psychological detachment must be accompanied by ethical commitment, fulfilling the vow to help all sentient beings in their path to liberation.

10. Berthier, *Reading Zen in the Rocks*, 46.
11. Mansfield, *Japanese Stone Gardens*, 17. At that stage, it is possible that sand was also an implicit reference to the cosmogonic myth of Japan, the union of two deities who created small islands with a spear (Nitschke, *Japanese Gardens*, 14). After the creation of the islands, the couple gave birth to several *kami*, among whom Iwashime-no-kami, a divine princess who was intimately related to the element of sand (Coulter and Turner, eds., *Encyclopedia of Ancient Deities*, 246).
12. Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, 17.
13. Watts, *The Way of Zen*, 26.
14. Hall and Ames, "Chinese Philosophy"; Graham, *Yin-Yang and the Nature of Correlative Thinking*.
15. Parkes, "Dogen's 'Mountains and Waters as Sutras,'" 87.

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Karesansui Gardens as Exemplars of Virtue

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ABSTRACT

While many traditions recognize certain human beings as *exemplars of virtue*—that is, as models for a good or flourishing human life—less commonly discussed are traditions that recognize non-human entities as exemplars of this kind. In this paper, I engage in a case study of forms of exemplarity suggested by conversations regarding *karesansui*, or Japanese dry landscape, gardens. To do this, in Part I, I explain in detail relevant aspects of Ian James Kidd's account of a cosmic, non-human, mode of emulation facilitated by the *Zhuangzi*. Then, in Part II, I explore how *karesansui* gardens can be interpreted as facilitating a cosmic mode of emulation. Finally, in Part III, I conclude by very briefly explicating four questions of note to make way for intriguing further discussion.

In his paper, "Following the Way of Heaven': Exemplarism, Emulation, and Daoism," Ian James Kidd notes that while many traditions recognize certain human beings as *exemplars of virtue*—that is, as models for a good or flourishing human life—less commonly discussed are traditions that recognize non-human entities as exemplars

of this kind. On Kidd's view, a sustained case study of forms of exemplarity found in the *Zhuangzi*, a Daoist philosophical classic, suggests there are traditions that incorporate what might be termed a "cosmic" rather than a "human" mode of emulation (henceforth, *cosmic emulation* for short). In this case, the relevant virtues are held to be at bottom emulations of the ground, source, or nature of the world as experienced—*Dao*—rather than of human beings. Thus, it can be seen that there are forms of emulation where the ultimate model for a good or flourishing human life is not only nothing human, but also not in any way a person.¹

In this paper, I consider the possibility that other traditions incorporate cosmic emulation, too. Specifically, I engage in a case study of forms of exemplarity suggested by conversations regarding *karesansui*, or Japanese dry landscape, gardens. To do this, in Part I, I explain in more detail relevant aspects of Kidd's account of a cosmic mode of emulation facilitated by the *Zhuangzi*. Then, in Part II, I explore how *karesansui* gardens can be interpreted as facilitating a cosmic mode of emulation. Finally, in Part III, I conclude by very briefly explicating four questions of note to make way for intriguing further discussion.

I. KIDD ON COSMIC EMULATION

As Kidd reports, the idea that there are exemplars, which function as living symbols to inspire and guide others in the pursuit of a good or flourishing life—or *exemplarism*, as it might be called—has been most extensively explored and developed in contemporary Anglo-analytic philosophical discourse by Linda Zagzebski. A central concept in Zagzebski's account of the exemplarist process is emulation: "a form of imitation in which the emulated person is perceived as a model in some respects."² Briefly, to emulate *x* is to take *x* as a model for oneself through active imitation of some or all of *x*'s qualities as a way of acquiring them for oneself.³

According to Kidd, consulting other traditions that include exemplars indicates a feature of Zagzebski's exemplarism that invites attention: the exemplars she mentions are human beings (whether historical or contemporary, or legendary or fictional characters). Some might wonder what models of virtue there could be other than human beings (real or fictional) whose life or conduct invites admiration and sustains emulation. However, we find, in some traditions, a range of objects of emulation—human and non-human.

Specifically, Kidd is interested in non-human objects insofar as they can be identified with what he terms *the ground or source of reality, or of the world as experienced*.⁴ He proposes to call this form of emulation (borrowing a term from the Stoics) a *cosmic* mode of emulation (again, *cosmic emulation* for short). An aspirant is engaged in cosmic emulation when they emulate the ultimate ground, source, or nature of the world as experienced, whose qualities—when embodied by human beings—manifest as some form of excellence. Certain virtues of human exemplars are, as a result, at bottom emulations of qualities of the cosmos, or of whatever is understood (within the terms of the relevant traditions) as the ultimate ground, source, or nature of the world.⁵

To demonstrate the existence of this form of emulation, Kidd explores how the *Zhuangzi* can be read as facilitating it. As Kidd describes the practice, emulation requires a substantive process of modeling, where the qualities of the emulated indicate the characteristics that the emulator aims to exemplify. Objects of emulation are models, although not necessarily *total* models, complete in every detail. What matters, on Kidd's view, is that an aspirant aims to exemplify some partial or general set of qualities, or a "character."⁶ This prompts three questions:

- i. What is the ground, source, or nature of the world as experienced, according to the *Zhuangzi*?
- ii. What are its relevant qualities, or what is its "character"—and how might we attune ourselves to it?
- iii. How does the *Zhuangzi* facilitate emulation of these relevant qualities, or this "character"?

Concerning question i, one suggestion is *Dao* ("[the] Way"), partially explicable as, for example, "the totality . . . [e.g., of objects, events, and processes] that constitute[s] the cosmos"⁷ or "the ultimate metaphysical entity . . . responsible for the way the world is and the way that it ought to be."⁸ This raises a difficulty relevant to addressing question ii, as *Dao* is—at least in the case of texts now classified as "Daoist"—commonly taken to be ineffable. Yet, while *Dao* may not be literally describable, it is often thought that non-literal speech can play various roles in helping aspirants to attune themselves to it. For instance, *Dao* is frequently spoken of in terms of *spontaneity*—a word that points or gestures toward a quality that can be emulated by suitably attuned human beings. On Kidd's approach, spontaneity (*ziran*, which can be more literally translated as "self-so-ness") is among the primary Daoist virtues and the most important characteristic of *zhenren* ("true" or "genuine persons") and *Dao* alike. Kidd notes that this proposal fits not only a variety of textual evidence well, but also remarks from contemporary commentators such as Edward G. Slingerland, who claims that being "fully in harmony" with *Dao* requires living in a way that is "completely spontaneous."⁹

It is important to stress that the type of spontaneity admired and aspired toward is not that of a passionate impulsivity or thoughtless reactivity. Rather, spontaneity in the relevant sense is a supple responsiveness, apt to be spoiled by processes of analyzing possibilities, weighing options, and applying rules.¹⁰ Thus, although spontaneity in European-influenced traditions is commonly understood as being associated with features like *subjectivity*, *willfulness*, *caprice*, and *emotional excess*, as a variety of commentators have explained, the opposite can be said of the sort of spontaneity under discussion here. Indeed, there is a sense in which this sort of spontaneity can be thought of as representing the highest degree of features like *objectivity*, *sensitivity*, *stability*, and *equanimity*. For, while exemplifying it, one is thought to act in accordance with something larger than oneself: in this case, *Dao*.¹¹

Finally, regarding question iii, Kidd's study is rich with a number of suggestions regarding ways in which the *Zhuangzi* facilitates emulation of *Dao's* spontaneity. One concerns its illustrative accounts of individuals who are acutely concentrated on what they are doing. As he writes, "Cook Ding, for instance, 'comes to a halt' at 'gnarled joints of bone,' relying not on 'mere skill,' but the 'promptings of the spirit,' until—suddenly—the ox lies 'dismembered' at his feet. Asked to explain his preternatural skill, the old man swimming in a pool under a waterfall, too turbulent even for the fish, replies that he 'had no way,' but would simply 'enter with the inflow and emerge with the outflow,' to 'follow the Way of the water,' rather than try to 'impose' his own way upon it."¹² Kidd also argues that we find more specific parallels between figuratively rendered attributes of *Dao* and a set of virtues of spontaneity (in the relevant sense), including virtues of impartiality, constancy, and being nourishing; virtues that the *Zhuangzi* can also be read as promoting, along with a set of emulative practices, including the embracing of you ("wandering") and *xinzhai* ("fasting of the heart-mind").¹³ Briefly, on Kidd's account, embracing "wandering"—the capacity to go beyond one's own ways of experiencing and engaging with the world and to take on alternative perspectives—"enables the sage to 'see through to the way things fit together' and thereby to emulate the impartiality of *Dao*, which has . . . no scheme of 'likes or dislikes'—and the sage can therefore appreciate that 'true Virtuosity resides in the Heavenly,' not in the projects and activities of the human world."¹⁴ Further, "fasting of the heart-mind" prepares one to embrace such "wandering" by emptying or ridding the mind of tightly held plans, purposes, and preconceptions.¹⁵

II. KARESANSUI GARDENS AND COSMIC EMULATION

i. A Very Brief History of *Karesansui*

With the above outline of an example of a cosmic mode of emulation in hand, we can now turn to the question of whether other traditions incorporate cosmic modes of emulation, too. Specifically, as noted above, I will engage in a case study of forms of exemplarity suggested by conversations regarding *karesansui*, or Japanese dry landscape, gardens. To do this, I will begin by providing a very brief history.¹⁶ While gardening—considered as a fully developed artistic practice—is widely considered to have been imported to Japan from China or Korea in the sixth or seventh century CE, several aspects of Japanese garden design have prehistoric as well as Shintō origins. One that is germane to our explorations here concerns *teien*, among the most commonly used Japanese terms for "garden." As Marc P. Keane, renowned landscape architect and expert on Japanese garden design, explains, "*teien*" originally represented two opposing characteristics: *wildness* and *control*. This is because it is a compound term that, when composed using the writing system imported from China in the sixth century CE, employs two characters: one that can be pronounced as "tei," meaning "territory" (that is, an uncontrolled area of wild nature), and the other that can be pronounced as "en," meaning "bordered field" (that is, a controlled area of nature cultivated for human purposes). Thus, "*teien*" not only refers to gardens, but also expresses

a guiding principle of Japanese garden design: Japanese gardens aim to achieve a balance between both wild and controlled nature. Indeed, according to Keane,

[i]t is in the exquisite balance of these two fundamental qualities that the Japanese garden finds a universal voice. Sitting quietly on the veranda of a temple and looking out into the light of the garden, one can still feel the sensory world of the Jōmon period [a prehistoric era of Japanese history] although it has been transformed through the controlled art of the gardener into a spiritual, aesthetic, or even intellectual expression.¹⁷

Just how gardeners effect such distinct expressions—as well as how they are related to each other—depends on the style of Japanese garden under consideration, of which there are many. Here, I will focus on just one: *karesansui*, or Japanese dry landscape. Literally, *kare-san-sui* can be translated as "dry-mountain-water" and alludes to these gardens' composition, which includes abstracted, "dry" scenes of mountains and water depicted using other natural elements, such as stones, sand, and moss, and without the aid of real water.¹⁸ Because of their associations with rocks, and Zen Buddhism, these gardens are commonly referred to as "Japanese rock gardens" or "Zen gardens," especially in European contexts.

On Keane's account, *karesansui* gardens had existed during the Heian period (794–1185 CE) as elements of larger gardens (the term "*karesansui*" even appears in the *Sakuteiki*, widely considered to be the oldest extant Japanese gardening manual, dated circa 1000–1100 CE). However, it was not until the late Muromachi period (1333–1568 CE) that the classic dry landscape garden—in which a relatively small courtyard is given over entirely to such a composition—developed into an independent form. These gardens, in contrast to those that preceded them, are also appropriately called *kanshō-niwa* ("contemplation gardens"), as they are typically designed to be viewed from a nearby hall—often part of a Zen temple—rather than entered into. To this extent, they are primarily explored mentally rather than physically. Although *karesansui* gardens are often thought of as being used for meditation, using them as a focal point for long episodes of *zazen* ("seated meditation") is difficult. On the one hand, their expanses of white sand or gravel are often too bright to be comfortably viewed for extended periods during the day. But, on the other hand, at night it is too dark to see the gardens at all.¹⁹

Despite their being rarely used for extended periods of *zazen*, *karesansui* gardens relate to practical and theoretical ethics—Buddhist and otherwise—in other ways. The way that I will explore below concerns the possibility that *karesansui* gardens can be interpreted as facilitating a cosmic mode of emulation in virtue of exemplifying *nothingness* or *emptiness*. The choice of which of these two notions to employ will depend on the specific philosophers whose ideas one is considering; philosophers such as Nishida Kitarō often focus on conceptions of "nothingness," but others prefer to use conceptions of "emptiness" instead. And while conceptions of "nothingness" are often similar

to as well as inspired by conceptions of “emptiness,” and *vice versa*, as we will see there may be key differences between them worth recognizing.²⁰

ii. Emptiness and Emulation

To explore how *karesansui* gardens exemplify *nothingness* or *emptiness*—as well as how to interpret “nothingness” and “emptiness” in this context, and how engagement with them can be related to a cosmic mode of emulation—I will draw on the work of Robert E. Carter, who in his book, *The Japanese Arts and Self-Cultivation*, provides an exceptionally detailed and insightful exploration of a variety of Japanese art forms and their ethical import. Citing Nishida, he opens his chapter on “Landscape Gardening as Interconnectedness” thus:

Nishida emphasizes that Western art has form as its focus, whereas Eastern art expresses both form and the formless. He refers to the formless aspect as the “background” of things, and this background “is an integral part” of art worthy of the name. Using a sculptor’s image, he imagines “all great art” as a relief “cut out of the marble of eternity,” as Michelangelo released David from the stone in which he was held fast. In more formal philosophical language, the background is “absolute nothingness,” that formless, quality-less “no-thing” out of which all forms arise and to which they will all return. Nothingness is the creative matrix which exists prior to form, and like the eye which can see all things seeable but which cannot see itself, so nothingness is the origin of all form (things), but itself is formless. The formless cannot be seen (directly), and yet, for the discerning mind and heart, it can be seen (indirectly) in every thing. Nothingness is eternity at “the back of things.”²¹

Regarding gardens specifically, later in the chapter Carter continues:

The more austere and remarkably abstract Zen rock gardens have come to symbolize the uniqueness of the Japanese perspective on gardens. Whether one takes the most abstract rock garden of them all, at Ryōan-ji, in Kyoto, which consists of fifteen large rocks emerging out of a “sea” or “background” of (formless) sand, or more complex “dry rock paintings” which mimic Chinese landscape paintings (Daisen-in, interior garden), or a meditation garden which consists only of a field of sand raked into two small Fuji-shaped cones (Daisen-in, exterior garden), there is nothing quite like these expressions of the formless and the formed in other cultural traditions. If you will imagine the two cone-shaped forms emerging out of the sand background, each composed of the very sand which represents formlessness, then you may also understand how “empty” (in the sense of temporary and fragile) forms really are. A quick swipe of a rake or an arm, and the cones are gone, returned to the background from which they came. Moreover, the monk-gardener can quickly

re-create the two cones, or many more if he chooses, by giving shape to the background sand once more. What becomes evident in this example i[s] that the foreground cones are of the same stuff as the background whole—form is emptiness, emptiness form; or, in more traditional Buddhist terms, *nirvāna is samsāra, samsāra is nirvāna*.²²

As submitted above, we have in these passages the beginnings of answers to both of the following questions:

- a. How might we interpret “nothingness” and “emptiness” in this context?
- b. How do *karesansui* gardens exemplify nothingness or emptiness?

I will answer each of these questions in turn. Before I do this, however, I should point out that answers to these questions can be further built upon to respond to questions similar to those discussed regarding the *Zhuangzi* in section 1. They are:

- i. What is the ground, source, or nature of the world as experienced, in the cultural context germane to *karesansui* gardens?
- ii. What are its relevant qualities, or what is its “character”—and how might we attune ourselves to it?
- iii. How do *karesansui* gardens facilitate emulation of these relevant qualities, or this “character”?

Regarding questions a, i, and ii, we can begin by noticing that both “nothingness” and “emptiness” in this context need not be interpreted as referring to anything like a total void. What they might be interpreted as referring to instead is controversial; as a starting point, we might interpret “nothingness” as gesturing toward something (or, perhaps better, “something”) formless but capable of giving rise to a variety of different and changing forms. It is this sense employed by Carter’s talk of nothingness as a “creative matrix”—an open space of potentialities that can give rise to forms, partly through the meaningful actions of human beings. Likewise, “emptiness” can be interpreted similarly, as suggested by Carter’s allusion to a famous line from the *Heart Sūtra*, a Buddhist classic: “form is emptiness, emptiness form.” A common way of interpreting this passage proceeds approximately as follows. All forms in the world are empty of any independent, substantial self-nature or “own being.” This is because all forms are held to come into being in “interdependent origination”: everything, including the ego, is thought to be interconnected and in flux.²³

However, as Bret W. Davis explains, if the movement of negation were to stop at a one-sided negation of being (i.e., at negation of the illusory independent, substantial reality of things including the ego), the idea of “emptiness” would not itself be emptied. That would leave us with either a pessimistic nihilism or, ironically, a reified view of emptiness itself. These are what

Buddhist traditions often refer to as “*śūnyatā*-sickness” (or, in Japanese: *kūbyō*). Rather, “emptiness” must be understood to dynamically negate the opposition of being and (relative, though not absolute) nothingness. Davis sees this as “an explicit return—through a ‘great negation’ of a reified misunderstanding of being—to a ‘great affirmation’ of a non-reified understanding of being. ‘Emptiness’ thoroughly understood is nothing separate from or opposed to ‘being’ properly understood.”²⁴ Forms are held to only exist as they do in virtue of being empty in this way: empty of own-being, they can be formed and reformed into a wondrous variety of things—a fluid, quicksilver world of possibilities.²⁵ We can therefore see that on this interpretation, “nothingness” or “emptiness” can be understood as both the ground or source of the world as experienced, as well as its nature or “character.”

Regarding questions b and iii, we can also see the beginnings of answers in the quoted passages from Carter, to repeat:

If you will imagine the two cone-shaped forms emerging out of the sand background, each composed of the very sand which represents formlessness, then you may also understand how ‘empty’ (in the sense of temporary and fragile) forms really are. A quick swipe of a rake or an arm, and the cones are gone, returned to the background from which they came. Moreover, the monk-gardener can quickly re-create the two cones, or many more if he chooses, by giving shape to the background sand once more.²⁶

As Carter continues, what becomes evident in this example is that the foreground cones—and, by extension, all things in the world—are of the same stuff as the background whole, and are not distinct from it. Rather, the two are interdependent and, in a sense, one. Hence, we have a way in which *karesansui* gardens can be considered to facilitate cosmic emulation of nothingness or emptiness: they can be interpreted as artistic representations of the qualities or “character” of the ground or source of being such that they inform or remind us—in a visceral manner—that all things, including ourselves, are interdependent and, in a sense, one, too.

It should therefore be emphasized that *karesansui* gardens convey these insights not only in a way that might inspire *belief*, but also in a way that might inspire *appreciation*. If all that *karesansui* gardens did to facilitate cosmic emulation of nothingness or emptiness is inform or remind us of certain philosophical claims, one might justifiably wonder why we ought to bother looking to them for help in this regard. Why not just do philosophy instead? Thankfully, such gardens do much more, however: they provide affectively rich perspectives that engender aesthetic experiences and appreciations of the cosmic or even the divine. This is significant for at least two reasons.

First, as Brian J. Bruya has argued, a comprehensive and up-to-date theory of action should accept aesthetics as prior to ethics. Roughly, this is because, developmentally, an action must be practiced and habituated before it can

be executed in a well-timed and accurate manner. Whether an action is executed appropriate to one’s intentions necessarily involves an aesthetic judgment regarding timing, proportion, speed, force, accuracy, and so on.²⁷ Applying his argument to this case, we might speculate that one cannot effectively act in a way that recognizes nothingness or emptiness unless one aesthetically experiences and appreciates them to some extent prior to so acting.

Second, since nothingness and emptiness are both held to be without (independent, substantial) form, they arguably cannot be literally described. If this is so, it might not be possible to have any true beliefs about them. But, even if so, it might nonetheless be possible to recognize and aesthetically experience and appreciate them, and hence to emulate them, even if one cannot express in literal language what precisely one is emulating.²⁸

This suggests another way in which *karesansui* gardens facilitate cosmic emulation of nothingness or emptiness. To the extent that they inspire aesthetic appreciations of the cosmic or divine, they can provide us not only with insight regarding the ground, source, or nature of the world as experienced, but also with motivation to emulate it. This jibes with yet another remark from Nishida quoted in Carter, who writes:

Nishida . . . describes Japanese culture’s most characteristic feature as moving from the subject to the object—object here refers to the environment, or any feature of the environment. And this movement from subject to object requires: “negating the self and becoming the thing itself; becoming the thing itself to see; becoming the thing itself to act. To empty the self and see things, for the self to be immersed in things, ‘no-mindedness’ (*mushin*) [in Zen Buddhism] or effortless acceptance of the grace of Amida (*jinen-hōni*) [in Pure Land Buddhism]—these, I believe, are the states we Japanese strongly yearn for. . . . The essence of the Japanese spirit must be to become one in things and in events. It is to become one at that primal point in which there is neither self nor others.”²⁹

Applied to the case at hand, we might think that *karesansui* gardens facilitate cosmic emulation of nothingness or emptiness not only because they can inform, remind, or inspire, but also because they can *unify*. As Nishida claims elsewhere: “To say that we know a thing simply means that the self unites with it. When one sees a flower, the self has become the flower.”³⁰ Thus, we might also say that in experiencing and appreciating *karesansui* gardens, we are the gardens, and the gardens are us.³¹ Once we realize this fully, we are in a position to best emulate the ground, source, or nature of the world as experienced, and to arrange all of life’s contrasting aspects into a rich and variegated whole-in-flux.

III. CONCLUDING REMARKS

It may not come as a surprise to find a plausible example of a mode of cosmic emulation in a tradition so influenced

by Zen—and hence, by Daoism—given Kidd’s account. Nonetheless, it is my hope that this case study provides additional supporting evidence for the existence of philosophically interesting cosmic modes of emulation and helps to raise intriguing questions for further discussion. I will conclude by briefly explicating four.

First, if *Dao*, nothingness, and emptiness can only be figuratively, metaphorically, or otherwise non-literally characterized, might it nonetheless be possible to literally emulate them? If not, is it possible to non-literally emulate them instead? Indeed, one might think that there is a sense in which much emulation is “non-literal,” to the extent that it involves less literal copying than it does, perhaps just for starters, analogical or associative extension and application. Because of this, considering cosmic modes of emulation might make it easier for us to conceive of and to explore non-human exemplars of virtue more broadly construed, as it illuminates the possibility that we can conceive of figurative, metaphorical, or otherwise non-literal emulation, possibly alongside literal emulation.

Second, do these case studies suggest that not only aesthetic experience but also aesthetic appreciation is required in order to effectively engage in cosmic emulation—not only in light of Bruya’s remarks concerning the possibility that aesthetics is prior to ethics, but also in light of the possibility that *Dao*, nothingness, and emptiness cannot be literally described? If so, what are the precise contours of such experiences, or instances of appreciation?

Third, what are some other examples of art or aesthetic experiences that can facilitate emulation, cosmic or otherwise? Further, what, if anything, can these examples teach us about the value of art and the aesthetic? Specifically, in what ways can these examples be brought into current conversations about whether and how art and other aesthetic phenomena can have cognitive value of a meaningful sort—questions that are, as yet, important but far from settled?

Fourth, do these case studies suggest that cosmic emulation is of the deepest priority, at least in some traditions, as ultimately all other exemplars of virtue that we might seek to emulate are themselves emulating the ground, source, or nature of the world as experienced? If so, might we expect an account of how all supposed human virtues fundamentally stem from cosmic emulation? Concerning human virtues purportedly facilitated by *karesansui* gardens in particular, suggestions by leading contemporary Japanese landscape architect Shunmyō Masuno, in an interview with Carter, include gentleness, respectfulness, unselfishness, compassionateness, and lack of concern with reputation or position. Indeed, in his commentary, Carter himself explicates aspects of Masuno’s reflections as: “Ethics must take a ‘cosmic perspective,’ rather than a more limited perspective”:³² a cosmic perspective that, I propose, engaging *karesansui* gardens can help us to cultivate via cosmic emulation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Ian James Kidd for reading and commenting on an earlier version of this paper. As is too often the case, I could not do

justice to all of his excellent comments here, but I nonetheless could not be more grateful for them. Special thanks are also due to A. Minh Nguyen for inviting me to contribute this paper to the issue and for his patience and support as I have worked to compose it. Finally, I dedicate this paper to the memory of my friend, Daniel Eduard Harmsen. He was as close to a *zhenren* as anyone I have ever known. Also, if anyone could emulate the ground or source of being or exemplify Daoist spontaneity with any regularity, it was him. What an exemplar he was, and always will be, for me.

NOTES

1. Ian James Kidd, “Following the Way of Heaven’: Exemplarism, Emulation, and Daoism,” 1, 3.
2. Kidd, “Following the Way,” 1.
3. Kidd, “Following the Way,” 1.
4. Kidd, “Following the Way,” 2.
5. Kidd, “Following the Way,” 2–3.
6. Kidd, “Following the Way,” 4.
7. Chris Fraser, “Wandering the Way: A Eudaimonistic Approach to the *Zhuāngzi*,” 546, fn. 16.
8. Bryan W. Van Norden, *Introduction to Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 11.
9. Kidd, “Following the Way,” 5.
10. Kidd, “Following the Way,” 6.
11. Cf. Brian J. Bruya, “The Rehabilitation of Spontaneity: A New Approach in Philosophy of Action,” and Edward G. Slingerland, *Effortless Action: Wu-Wei as Conceptual Metaphor and Spiritual Ideal in Early China*.
12. Kidd, “Following the Way,” 6.
13. Kidd, “Following the Way,” 6–7.
14. Kidd, “Following the Way,” 9.
15. Kidd, “Following the Way,” 9. As Kidd notes, since the ancient Chinese did not distinguish the cognitive and affective, *xin*—“heart-mind”—includes our tendencies to “classify and evaluate,” to “affirm some things as right and some others as wrong,” our evaluations and interpretations.
16. This section draws heavily on Julianne N. Chung, “Moral Cultivation: Japanese Gardens, Personal Ideals, and Ecological Citizenship.”
17. Marc P. Keane, *Japanese Garden Design*, 10–14.
18. Keane, *Japanese Garden Design*, 59.
19. Keane, *Japanese Garden Design*, 59–60.
20. For more detail, see Bret W. Davis, “The Kyoto School.”
21. Robert E. Carter, *The Japanese Arts and Self-Cultivation*, 51.
22. Carter, *The Japanese Arts and Self-Cultivation*, 55.
23. Davis, “The Kyoto School.”
24. Davis, “The Kyoto School.”
25. I would like to thank Ian James Kidd for this way of putting the point.
26. Carter, *The Japanese Arts and Self-Cultivation*, 55.
27. Bruya, “The Rehabilitation of Spontaneity,” 241–42.
28. Cf. Julianne N. Chung, “Apophatic Language, the Aesthetic, and the *Sensus Divinitatis*.”
29. Carter, *The Japanese Arts and Self-Cultivation*, 64.
30. Carter, *The Japanese Arts and Self-Cultivation*, 64.
31. I would like to thank Melanie Coughlin for this way of putting the point.
32. Carter, *The Japanese Arts and Self-Cultivation*, 71–72. See also Carter, “A Philosophic Grounding for Japanese Aesthetics,” 10–12.

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conception of the beautiful are encapsulated in "The Phenomenon of Beauty" (*Le phénomène de beauté*, 2016), whereas other texts such as "The Idol or the Radiance of the Painting" (*L'idole ou l'éclat du tableau*, 2001) address aesthetic matters also from other angles and in greater details. Far from suggesting any polarizing comparative analysis East-West or an all-encompassing study of their respective aesthetics for that matter, this short essay reflects on the resonances and dissonances between the two aesthetic truths pertaining to *muga* and *phénomène*. This may subsequently contribute to a more holistic conception of the relational paradigm of the beautiful.

Bringing two philosophers from different traditions into dialogue is always a perilous exercise, not so much because of potential incommensurability (after all, this is how differences are revealed), but more because the interlocutors may be made to speak in a way and say things they would not have chosen or endorsed. But then, does not this risk concern all interpretive endeavors regardless of the number of speakers, including when dialogue takes place "only" between reader and text? The following notes should be read as suggestions for more thorough research on the junctions and worlds apart between Nishida's and Marion's understanding of the nature and fundamental of the experience of the beautiful.

Nishida's conception of the experience of the beautiful offers an interesting instance of critical syncretic philosophy so characteristic of what Kyoto School philosophers subsequently elaborated. In his 1900 short—albeit important—text "An Explanation of Beauty" (*Bi no setsumei 美の説明*), the young Nishida highlights the correlation between Kant's conception of "disinterested pleasure" from his *Critique of Judgement* (*Kritik der Urteilskraft*, 1790) that specifies the percipient's attitude in the experience of beauty and the Zen Buddhist sense of "selfless-ness" or "no-self" (*muga* 無我), sometimes also translated as "ecstasy." These initial reflections precede his first major philosophical work, *An Enquiry into the Good* (*Zen no kenkyu 善の研究*, 1911), where "pure experience" (*junsui keiken 純粹経験*) transpires as some self-constituting fundamental. Nishida subsequently developed more volarist approaches in his *Intuition and Reflection in Self-Awakening* (*Jikaku ni okeru chokkan to hansei 自覚に於ける直観と反省*, 1917) and *Art and Morality* (*Geijutsu to dotoku 芸術と道徳*, 1923) under the influences, among others, of Johann Gottlieb Fichte's idea of *Tathandlung* ("fact-act," a liberation from objecthood that Nishida sees as a source of creativity) and Konrad Fiedler's "bodily" artistic creation understood as an expressive and therefore active form of "vision" from his *On the Origin of Artistic Activity* (*Der Ursprung der Künstlerischen Tätigkeit*, 1887). Both "no-self" and "the body" remained in one way or another guiding principles of Nishida's aesthetics, whether in his idea of artistic creativity as a form of active "self-awakening" (*jijaku 自覚*) that expresses some conception of absolute will, in "Artistic Creation as Act of Historical Formation" (*Rekishiteki keisei sayo to shite no geijutsuteki sosaku 歴史的な形成作用としての芸術的創作*, 1941) whereby art actively takes part in the self-transformation of the world and its history, or in

V. INTERCULTURAL ENCOUNTERS AND METAPHILOSOPHICAL CONCERNS

Nishida and Marion on the Beautiful: Resonance and Dissonance

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ABSTRACT

Both Nishida Kitarō and Jean-Luc Marion, two philosophers from different cultural traditions, reflected on the nature of the experience of the beautiful. While Nishida, at the origin of the Kyoto School, develops a critical syncretism from aspects of Eastern thought and Western philosophy, Marion works within the fields of Western history of ideas, theology, and phenomenology. While the former initially brings to light the primacy of the Zen Buddhist conception of "no-self" (*muga* 無我) in aesthetic experience, the latter stresses the phenomenal nature of the beautiful—that which makes itself "manifest" (*elle se manifeste*). Nishida formulated his conception of the beautiful in an early short text, "An Explanation of Beauty" (*Bi no setsumei 美の説明*, 1900), that predated more elaborate epistemologies on the aesthetic and creativity such as *Art and Morality* (*Geijutsu to dotoku 芸術と道徳*, 1923). Key aspects of Marion's

shorter texts such as “The World of Art Objects” (*Geijutsu no taishōkai* 芸術の対象界, 1919) and “The Beauty of Writing” (*Sho no bi* 書の美, 1930). It should be noticed at this stage that very often in Nishida’s writing on aesthetics the idea of “beauty” is implied when discussing “art” under the assumption that one of the functions of art is to express beauty.

In Marion, questions pertaining to broader issues of appearing and visibility in painting or through images, icons, idols, or the face run through a number of his works such as *The Erotic Phenomenon: Six Meditations* (*Le phénomène érotique: Six méditations*, 2003), *The Crossing of the Visible* (*La croisée du visible*, 1996), *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness* (*Étant donné: Essai d’une phénoménologie de la donation*, 1997), or *Courbet ou la peinture à l’œil* (2014). It is, however, in his essay “The Phenomenon of Beauty” (*Le phénomène de beauté*, 2018) that he encapsulates more specifically his conception of the experience of the beautiful in terms that echo, dissonate, as well as potentially complement, Nishida’s own formulation of beauty with *muga* as center of gravity.

First, let me turn to what Nishida initially says about beauty. The element of “disinterestedness” that Nishida identifies in the experience of the beautiful is by no means a disembodied psychological state. Nor is it understood from the sole perspective of the spectator as in Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* (with the exception of the sections on the “genius”). Moreover, *muga* certainly amounts to the self losing its substance as self, but not to the self giving way to the objective world. The no-self is initially a unity between self and world, or subject and object that makes the perceptual experience unmediated, embodied, or “pure” (*junsui* 純粹) as formulated in *An Enquiry into the Good*:

What we usually refer to as experience is adulterated by some sort of thought, so by *pure* I am referring to the state of experience just as it is without the least addition of deliberative discrimination. . . . When one directly experiences one’s own state of consciousness, there is not yet a subject or an object, and knowing and its object are completely unified. This is the most refined type of experience.¹

If the absence of discrimination and therefore “interest,” its particular kind of “pleasure,” and its ensuing ethical outlook constitute a point of convergence between Nishida’s and Kant’s characterizations of the experience of the beautiful, the sense of unity understood from the Zen perspective of “nothingness” (*mu* 無) obviously does not.

At the early stage of “An Explanation of Beauty,” which focuses specifically on beauty, Nishida argues against any conception of aesthetic experience understood as solely giving rise to selfish pleasure.² Contra Henry Rutgers Marshall in his *Pain, Pleasure, and Aesthetics* (1894),³ the experience of beauty is more than a source of stable pleasure contrasted with the pleasure of the moment felt, for example, in the experience of the agreeable. In *Art and Morality*, the picture of the experience of the beautiful

presented as pleasurable only is again presented as partial and ill-guided.⁴ Art (and therefore beauty in art), spirituality, and morality are rooted in no-self, albeit in different fashions. From one angle, however, the Kantian perspective remains: should beauty be only understood as a source of pleasure, the question of the relevance of its universality would be flawed.

This is not to say that, for Nishida, the experience of the beautiful is completely foreign to any notion of “pleasure” (*kairaku* 快楽); it is simply a special kind of pleasure that is out of reach of psychology-oriented enquiries. The sense of beauty (*bikan* 美感) is a feeling of being detached from the ego,⁵ indeed disinterested and without prejudice, as it amounts to looking at things as they are, as such. This is, of course, a well-known theme in Zen Buddhism and aesthetics whereby the experience of the beautiful does not amount to any judgement that would determine beauty or even correlate with what beauty is supposed to be. (Marion will mention the irrelevance of any attempt to recognize or establish some alleged congruence between “judgement” and “disclosure” of beauty). Beauty calls for unprejudiced intuition not only from the percipient but also from the artist through a fusion between subject and object.

The concept-less nature of the experience of the beautiful is also for Marion what characterizes it as “phenomenal.” He makes it clear from the outset: “beauty pertains to phenomenality [for] beauty is to be seen, heard, touched; in short it makes itself manifest.”⁶ This bodily dimension of the phenomenon of beauty has had in the course of the history of Western philosophy its well-known detractors, above all Hegel, for whom beauty “becomes accessible to consciousness only through the concept.”⁷ In fact, not only is the sensible relegated to irrelevant instrumentality, but the “concept” also makes any understanding of the phenomenal nature of beauty impossible, as exemplified in Arthur Danto’s interpretation of Andy Warhol’s Brillo Boxes that find their alleged artistic worth elsewhere than in their “pure and simple appearing.”⁸ The Brillo Boxes find their alleged artistic worth *in* the concept, and the same applies to Duchamp’s ready-mades, Pop Art, and much of modern/postmodern art.

For Marion and contra Sartre, who in his own expression could not care less about “beauty as inner quality of the artwork,”⁹ beauty as *phenomenon* does matter. This is, however, no implicit way of embracing Heidegger’s ontological phenomenology that brought not only metaphysics to an end but also any conception of art as bearing any relevance to beauty. Marion evokes in this sense “the disqualification of beauty as value on the same footing as the right, the good, unity, and even Being (hence *par excellence*, God).”¹⁰ To requalify beauty, we must acknowledge that there is also more to its mere phenomenal nature. And just as, for Nishida, the kenotic concept of *muga* (among others) is central to understanding the experience of the beautiful and implicitly its relevance to art, Marion defines beauty in terms of “maximum of the idol which cannot but be loved.”¹¹

Marion’s treatment of Kant’s aesthetics is also in some way akin to that of Nishida, in that both take and depart

from it when qualifying the experience of the beautiful. For Nishida, although disinterestedness is central to understanding the nature of aesthetic experience, one cannot ignore the side of the artist and, more precisely, creativity as enacting a paradigm, that of beauty, truth, and the good, hence his recourse to Fiedler's aesthetics. Marion too sees in Kant a legitimate attempt at working out aesthetic judgement in the sense of being "conceptless" as, after all, we should not lose from sight the fact that the work of art (and therefore the beautiful when revealed through it) "can only make itself manifest in the absence of the concept."¹² Just as Nishida takes from Kant the fundamental of disinterestedness from the side of the percipient, Marion recalls that the one who experiences the beautiful cannot give a reason for it, whether based on "personal interest" or some "end." Indeed, such an individual cannot figure out what beauty is by referring to a concept.

But there is more to it. As Marion puts it, "beauty pertains to phenomenality."¹³ As such, the experience of the beautiful is that of a phenomenon that cannot by nature or definition be comprehended by means of representation; neither "fore-seen" nor "pre-dicted" (*pré-vu et pré-dit*).¹⁴ There is no "a priori concept" that would impose its condition. On the contrary, the phenomenon of beauty imposes itself to the one who lets it "come into view as intuited" so that it "appears in its own right."¹⁵ Beauty is experienced as *such* for it "expresses the full and authoritative way of appearing of particular phenomena."¹⁶ To induce such "freedom of intuition without the mediation of the narrative or concept"¹⁷ is obviously not the only privilege of music; it was and has been, albeit less and less as Marion suggests, what defines the work of art in general in terms of the phenomenon of beauty. But, in all cases, what is at stake is a "deployment" whose appearing cannot be limited by the boundary of a concept, and which can become an "excessive power" when such "presentation without representation" overwhelms the percipient (as Marion recalls from Kant).¹⁸ And whether this "excess" of the appearing—a "saturated phenomenon" (*phénomène saturé*) as formulated in *Being Given*¹⁹—over the recognizable can be handled depends indeed on the percipient's disposition whose limit is a "maximum" that is reflected in what Marion calls the "idol" of the phenomenon of beauty:

We name this maximum, which is each time different and proper to each, its *idol*. The idol not only saturates the eye . . . , but by bringing it to the precise limit of its last toleration with this visible extreme, the idol also shows its mirror.²⁰

Inasmuch as the "idol" reflects this "maximum" when "saturating" the capability of the percipient's "pure intuition," it comes as no surprise that the "exemplary" phenomenon of beauty leaves a mark on the self. Moreover, the idol can "hurt the ego, even inflict a trauma," albeit a pleasurable one.

The mirroring dimension of the idol and its "excessive power" finds echo in Nishida's *Art and Morality*, although Marion does not provide the same explicitly voluntarist interpretation so typical of Nishida's second period of his

philosophical life. Nishida defines the experience of the beautiful (again whether on the percipient's or artist's side) as creative will at work that mirrors itself—a recurring image of Buddhist inspiration throughout his work—in a moment of "self-awakening" of "absolute will."²¹ The self who experiences beauty actively reflects itself—its "maximum" by negation, through self-emptying "pure intuition" (*junsui chokkan* 純粹直観)—and sees itself in the mirror of beauty.

Moreover, as Marion highlights the "trauma" that the "idol" can inflict on the percipient, such is the "ecstatic" effect of the experience of beauty in Nishida. As Steve Odin recalls in his "Beauty as Ecstasy in the Aesthetics of Nishida and Schopenhauer," *muga* should not be understood in nihilistic terms.²² No-self in Nishida, as well as other thinkers partly inspired by or representative of Zen, certainly does not correlate with ideas of acquainted aesthetic values such as symmetry and harmony; "beauty as ecstasy" is, however, creativity at work. The ecstatic beauty at stake is asymmetry and disharmony that overwhelm the self-emptying self, again implying a particular form of "pleasure." The experience of the beautiful that amounts to no-self allows that which was aesthetically "unpleasant" to rise to "aesthetic pleasure." The effect is that the fundamental of no-self in aesthetic experience is such that, for Nishida, "everything in life gives a sense of beauty."²³ At first glance, this contrasts with Marion's assertion against contemporary "claims that beauty must incorporate ugliness, the despicable and evil, or, seemingly the opposite, that the canons of beauty in art need to be rejected."²⁴ There is, in fact, a profound resonance, precisely based on the kenotic dimension of Marion's formulation of aesthetic experience: "since in the phenomenon of the beautiful, beauty is defined and distinguished as that maximum of the idol which cannot but be loved."²⁵

Another resonance between Nishida and Marion can be found on what may be called their relational transformative conception of beauty. On many occasions and through his method, Nishida describes the experience of the beautiful and creativity in relation to each other whereby percipient, artist, work, and world are expressively enacting and transforming one another. Again, Nishida departs from Kant's aesthetics that analyzes judgement vis-à-vis an artistic configuration assumed to be a separate "object." If he found pertinent elements and concepts regarding the appreciative standpoint of the percipient in Kant's Third Critique, these have to be related to the transformative nature of art expressed through the embodied action of the artist. With Nishida, the experience of the beautiful had to be understood from within a mutually inclusive conception of percipient and the creative act of the artist. As he explained in *Art and Morality*, beauty is no quality intrinsic to things like blue or red; beauty pertains to the percipient. But, at first glance, the creative act of the artist that must equally characterize beauty is not an aesthetic appreciation per se. In truth, the appreciation may well be itself a form of creative act just as the percipient may need to become an artist to experience the beautiful.²⁶ Beauty is therefore conceived in relational terms or, more precisely, in some form of dialectical chiasm whereby judgement and the creative act intermingle with each other through a dynamic, mutually self-determining movement

that implicates percipient, artist, work, and, in later texts, "world." Nishida explains that not only expression excludes any conception of static object, but aesthetic judgment itself also cannot be conceived separately from an acting creative subject.²⁷ To illustrate his point further, he gives the example of beauty in nature that can only be actively perceived as such from within.²⁸

Echoing Marion's "idols," there is indeed a relational transformative power at work further developed in Nishida's conception of the experience of the beautiful in his later texts. In "Artistic Creation as Act of Historical Formation," Nishida explores the "acting intuition" (*koiteki chokkan* 行為的直観) of the artist who intuitively enacts the transformation of a world that is no longer seen as object outside of the self—a concept developed in "Acting Intuition" (*Koi-teki chokkan* 行為的直観, 1937) and "The Standpoint of Active Intuition" (*Koi-teki chokkan no tachiba* 行為的直観の立場, 1935). And, again, the formative act is chiasmatic: the historical formation of the world unfolds through the artistic creation of the self, which is in turn transformed by the world.

A last note, then, on the saturated phenomenon of beauty that can only be loved: perhaps Marion expresses a fundamental resonance with what Nishida saw as a fundamental dissonance with "Occidental culture."

Obviously, there is a great deal to esteem in the dazzling development of Occidental culture which made form into being and formation into the good, and a great deal to be learned from it. But is there not something that lies concealed in the ground of the Oriental culture that has nourished our forebears for thousands of years, something like seeing the form of the formless or hearing the voice of the voiceless? Our hearts never cease in its pursuit; what I want to do is give it a philosophical basis.²⁹

The form of the formless, the voice of the voiceless, may well be expressed in Marion through the language of Being, albeit phenomenologically.

NOTES

1. Nishida Kitarō, *An Enquiry into the Good*, trans. Masao Abe and Christopher Ives (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), 1-2 / 善の研究 *Zen no kenkyū* (1911), in *Nishida Kitarō zenshū* 西田幾多郎全, Volume I (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1979), 3.
2. Nishida Kitarō, "An Explanation of Beauty," trans. Steve Odin, *Monumenta Nipponica* 42, no. 2 (1987): 215 / 美の説明 美の説明 *Bi no setsumei* (1900), in *Nishida Kitarō zenshū* 西田幾多郎全, Volume XIII (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1979), 52-54.
3. Henry Rutgers Marshall, *Pain, Pleasure, and Aesthetics: An Essay Concerning the Psychology of Pain and Pleasure, with Special Reference to Aesthetics* (London and New York: Macmillan and Company, 1894).
4. Nishida Kitarō, *Geijutsu to dotoku* 芸術と道徳 (西田幾多全集, in *Nishida Kitarō zenshū*, Volume III (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1988 [1923]), 237-545, 10.3 / *Art and Morality*, trans. David D. Dilworth and Valdo H. Vigieliemo (Honolulu: University Press of Hawai'i, 1973).
5. Nishida, "An Explanation of Beauty," 216.

6. Jean-Luc Marion, "The Phenomenon of Beauty," trans. Gerald Cipriani, *Journal of Aesthetics and Phenomenology* 5, no. 2 (2018): 85.
7. Marion, "The Phenomenon of Beauty," 86.
8. Marion, "The Phenomenon of Beauty," 86.
9. Marion, "The Phenomenon of Beauty," 88.
10. Marion, "The Phenomenon of Beauty," 88.
11. Marion, "The Phenomenon of Beauty," 95.
12. Marion, "The Phenomenon of Beauty," 89.
13. Marion, "The Phenomenon of Beauty," 85.
14. Marion, "The Phenomenon of Beauty," 89.
15. Marion, "The Phenomenon of Beauty," 90.
16. Marion, "The Phenomenon of Beauty," 90.
17. Marion, "The Phenomenon of Beauty," 90.
18. Marion, "The Phenomenon of Beauty," 91.
19. The concept of "saturated phenomena" is first introduced in Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness (Étant donné: Essai d'une phénoménologie de la donation, 1997)*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), and then further explained in *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena (De surcroît: Études sur les phénomènes saturés, 2001)*, trans. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002).
20. Marion, "The Phenomenon of Beauty," 93.
21. Nishida, *Geijutsu to dotoku*, 10.3.
22. Steve Odin, "Beauty as Ecstasy in the Aesthetics of Nishida and Schopenhauer," in *New Essays in Japanese Aesthetics*, ed. A. Minh Nguyen (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), 47.
23. Nishida, "An Explanation of Beauty," 216.
24. Marion, "The Phenomenon of Beauty," 96.
25. Marion, "The Phenomenon of Beauty," 96.
26. Nishida, *Geijutsu to dotoku*, 1.1.
27. Nishida, *Geijutsu to dotoku*, 1.4.
28. Nishida, *Geijutsu to dotoku*, 1.1.
29. Quoted and translated by James Heisig, "Nishida's Philosophical Equivalents of Enlightenment and No-Self," *Bulletin of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture* 39 (2015): 46.

A Distinction between Art and Religion in the Aesthetics of Nishida, Schopenhauer, and Early Indian Buddhism

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I clarify how a distinction between art and religion in the modern Japanese aesthetics of Nishida Kitarō was influenced by the post-Kantian philosophy of Schopenhauer. Following Schopenhauer, Nishida asserts that an aesthetic experience of beauty in art is an ecstasy of the moment, while religious experience culminates in eternal ecstasy. Moreover, I argue that discoveries at the ancient artistic wonder in India known as the Ajanta Caves dating from the second century BCE, together with

scholarship about the Mulasaravastivada sect of Buddhism associated with Ajanta, suggest that the kernel of this distinction between art and religion established by the modern aesthetics of Schopenhauer and Nishida, was already present in the worldview of early Indian Buddhism.

INTRODUCTION

In a previous essay titled “Beauty as Ecstasy in the Aesthetics of Nishida and Schopenhauer,”¹ I analyzed the Zen-colored aesthetic ideal of beauty as *muga* (無我) in its meaning as ecstasy articulated by Nishida Kitarō (西田幾多郎, 1870–1945), founder of the Kyoto School of modern Japanese philosophy. It demonstrated how Nishida’s initial concept of beauty as ecstasy or selflessness has been profoundly influenced by Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) in post-Kantian German aesthetics. My thesis was that both Nishida and Schopenhauer develop an aesthetic of beauty as a function of “ecstasy” (Greek: *ek-stasis*), meaning to be transported beyond oneself in a state of rapture. I argued moreover that, following Schopenhauer, the Zen philosophy of Nishida asserts that an aesthetic experience of beauty is an ecstasy of the moment, while religious experience culminates in eternal ecstasy. Thus, for Nishida, as for Schopenhauer, the experience of beauty as ecstasy in art offers a fleeting glimpse of religious salvation. Following the tradition of early Indian Buddhism, Schopenhauer sought deliverance from suffering in the world of flux through mystical resignation, the paradigm for which is total renunciation of self in nothingness through attainment of nirvana.

Although Schopenhauer adopts much of what he understood to be early Indian Buddhism, he differs in the major role he assigns to art as the highest stage prior to realizing *moksha* or final liberation from suffering. It might therefore be argued that systematic philosophical discourse on the beauty of art in Nishida and Schopenhauer is a product of post-Kantian modern aesthetics, and not something to be found in the austere monastic worldview of early Indian Buddhism. From the standpoint of early Buddhism, aesthetic pleasure in the beauty of art can lead to egoistic desire, clinging, and attachment, which on the Buddhist wheel of life are the underlying causes of suffering. However, discoveries at the ancient artistic wonder in India known as the Ajanta Caves dating from the second century BCE, together with scholarship about the Mulasaravastivada sect of early Buddhism associated with Ajanta, suggest that the notion of art as an important stage on the path to nirvana was discoverable in early Buddhist teachings. The present writing is thus an addendum or postscript to my previous essay, explaining how the distinction between art and religion established by the post-Kantian modern aesthetics of Schopenhauer and Nishida, was already present, at least in seed form, in the worldview of early Indian Buddhism.

THE CONCEPT OF BEAUTY IN NISHIDA’S *BI NO SETSUMEI*

Nishida Kitarō wrote *Bi no setsumei* (美の説明), “An Explanation of Beauty,” in 1900, eleven years before publishing his first major work *Zen no kenkyū* (善の研究), “An Inquiry into the Good.”² Moreover, as one of his earliest philosophical essays, Nishida’s *Bi no setsumei* outlines an

initial formulation of themes characteristic of what has come to be known as *Nishida tetsugaku* 西田哲学, or “Nishida philosophy.” Elsewhere I have published a fully annotated translation of Nishida’s *Bi no setsumei*.³ All references to Nishida’s essay will therefore be to my own translation.

After reviewing various Western definitions of beauty as pleasure and finding them inadequate, Nishida asks: What is the special kind of pleasure characterizing the aesthetic pleasure of beauty? At this point, he turns to the explanation developed by the tradition of German aesthetics inspired by Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*,⁴ wherein the sense of beauty was defined as consisting in a “disinterested pleasure”:

Then what are the characteristics of the type of pleasure that makes up the sense of beauty? . . . According to the explanation of German Idealism since Kant, the sense of beauty is pleasure detached from the ego. It is a pleasure of the moment, when one forgets one’s own interest such as advantage and disadvantage, gain and loss. Only this *muga* is the essential element of beauty. . . . Therefore, if you want to obtain an authentic sense of beauty, you must confront things in the state of pure *muga*.⁵

Nishida here reformulates the Kantian sense of beauty as a disinterested pleasure, or artistic detachment from egoistic desires, in terms of a key philosophical notion of Zen Buddhism in Japan: namely, *muga* 無我 (Sanskrit: *anātman*), which can be translated in negative terms as “no-self,” “non-ego,” “self-effacement,” and in positive terms as “ecstasy.”⁶ As we know from Nishida’s journals and correspondence, *Bi no setsumei* was written during that period of his early years, extending from around 1896 to 1902, when he was most actively engaged in the intensive practice of Zen meditation.⁷ Although he makes no direct reference to Zen in this brief essay, nonetheless, his use of the signature Zen term *muga* to define the aesthetic experience of beauty is laden with traditional Zen associations.

THE INFLUENCE OF SCHOPENHAUER ON NISHIDA

It can be said that Schopenhauer was the first Western philosopher to appropriate the teachings of early Indian Buddhism. Schirmacher points out that due to the many profound insights Schopenhauer had discovered in common with the early Indian philosophy of Buddhism, he became known as “the Buddha of Frankfurt.”⁸ He adds: “Increasingly . . . we understand that behind the mask of a pessimist Schopenhauer was a Zen master and arguably the greatest mystic of the nineteenth century.”⁹ It should be emphasized that Nishida’s concept of beauty (*bi*, 美), as well the relationship to art (*geijutsu*, 芸術) and religion (*shūkyō*, 宗教), is clearly influenced by Schopenhauer, even if he does not make reference to the latter’s work. In her intellectual biography of Nishida titled *Zen and Philosophy*, Yusa Michiko reports that Nishida enthusiastically studied Schopenhauer during his early student years at Tokyo University.¹⁰ Likewise, James Heisig documents Nishida’s interest in Schopenhauer’s metaphysics of the absolute Will. He adds that Nishida’s writings on aesthetics was

especially influenced by Schopenhauer's philosophy of art: "Much of his interest in artistic expression also bears the mark of Schopenhauer's thinking though again it is not cited."¹¹

At this point I would like to elucidate the key distinction Nishida posits between art and religion in *Bi no setsumeï*:

"The *muga* of beauty is the *muga* of the moment, whereas the *muga* of religion is eternal *muga*."¹²
 「美の無我は一時の無我にして、宗教の無我は永久の無我なるなり」。(*Bi no muga wa ichiji no muga ni shite, shūkyō no muga wa eikyū no muga naru nari*).¹³

Both art and religion are based on the impersonal feeling of *muga* as ecstasy, nonego, or selflessness. However, while the impersonal feeling of ecstasy arising from the beauty of art is a "*muga* of the moment" (*ichiji no muga*, 一時の無我), the divine ecstasy of religion is "eternal *muga*" (*eikyū no muga*, 永久の無我). Nishida thus conveys Schopenhauer's aesthetic vision whereby there is a transition from the momentary release from suffering through delight in the beauty of art, to eternal salvation at the level of religious experience achieved by mystical resignation of the saints.

Nishida's distinction between art and religion no doubt traces back Schopenhauer's post-Kantian philosophy. In his magnum opus *The World as Will and Representation*,¹⁴ Schopenhauer holds that the best candidate for the *summum bonum* or highest good in life, is "the complete self-effacement and denial of the will, true will-lessness, which alone stills and silences forever the craving of the will."¹⁵ It is through self-effacement by denial of will that one penetrates the Hindu "veil of Maya" as the *principium individuationis* or "principle of individuation." Moreover, Schopenhauer explicitly states that what philosophy can express only negatively as "denial of the will," can also be expressed positively as "rapture" or "ecstasy."¹⁶ Elsewhere in the text he proclaims: "the mystics of all religions ultimately arrive at a kind of ecstasy."¹⁷ Moreover, there are two ways to achieve blissful repose in ecstasy as denial of the will: (1) *temporary ecstasy* through an occasional moment of will-less and selfless disinterested aesthetic contemplation of the beautiful in art and nature; (2) *eternal ecstasy* through complete negation of the individual will by asceticism: first through a moral transition from egoism to altruism as egoless compassion; and ultimately through resignation in a beatific state of holiness as achieved by saints in the great world religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity.

Schopenhauer's philosophy can be envisioned as an ascending journey toward liberation from the suffering of transitory existence, marked by a series of *transitions* from stage to stage. There is an initial transition from ordinary experience of particular objects to the aesthetic experience of beauty in art and nature, whereupon an artist briefly silences the will, thus to cognize the universal in the particular as a Platonic Idea. Schopenhauer, like Nishida, here conceives of this transition to an aesthetic experience of beauty as a losing of oneself or a forgetting of one's individuality so as to become completely absorbed in the

aesthetic object: "We lose ourselves entirely in this object . . . in other words, we forget our individuality."¹⁸ Likewise, Nishida writes that beauty perceived by the intuition of poets is that wherein one has "separated from the self and become one with things."¹⁹ For both Schopenhauer and Nishida, this act of forgetting the self to become one with an object of aesthetic experience is in negative terms a loss of ego, and in positive terms a state of ecstasy. In Schopenhauer's pessimism the suffering of transitory existence arises through the blind striving of individual will, and release from suffering comes when we lose ourselves in aesthetic contemplation, moral compassion and ascetic renunciation. Yet in Schopenhauer's account of salvation, there is a transition whereby both the beauty of art and the virtue of morality lead to the holiness of saints at the standpoint of religion. In the realm of art this transition from disinterested aesthetic contemplation to spiritual resignation is especially facilitated by tragedy, wherein the misery and suffering of temporal existence is revealed. Schopenhauer goes on to argue that morality, like art, is a *transitional* activity that moves towards its consummation in the selfless ecstasy of mystical resignation.²⁰ Likewise, the key insight of Nishida's *Bi no setsumeï* is that while the standpoints of art, morality, and religion differ in degree, they all ultimately originate from the same fundamental experience of *muga* as ecstasy or self-negation. Yet for Nishida, both art and morality culminate in the supreme ecstasy of religion.²¹

Nishida, like Schopenhauer, agrees with Kant that an aesthetic experience of beauty is a disinterested pleasure.²² Following Kant, Schopenhauer holds that disinterested aesthetic contemplation of beauty is characterized by an objective attitude of detachment from selfish desires: "For the beauty with which those objects present themselves rests precisely on the pure objectivity, i.e., disinterestedness, of the perception. . . . Everything is beautiful only so long as it does not concern us."²³ While for Kant the disinterested contemplation of beauty in art is restricted to the autonomous sphere of aesthetic experience, for Schopenhauer it becomes a transitional step toward release from misery through the mystical resignation of saints as typified by the Buddhist renunciation of selfhood in nirvana. For Schopenhauer, disinterested aesthetic contemplation of beauty in art results only in a momentary calming of the will in an egoless state of blissful repose: "the momentary silencing of all willing which comes about whenever as pure will-less subject of knowing, the correlative of the Idea, we are devoted to aesthetic contemplation, is a principal element of pleasure in the beautiful."²⁴ However, for a permanent liberation from suffering one must shift from the temporary ecstasy of art to the lasting ecstasy of religious salvation, thereby to achieve complete denial of will through the selfless resignation of mystics: "Resignation . . . frees its owner from all care and anxiety forever."²⁵ Likewise, for Nishida, as for Schopenhauer, the momentary aesthetic ecstasy of the artist moves toward the eternal rapture of the saint at the standpoint of religion.

Schopenhauer's post-Kantian aesthetics, like Nishida's Zen aestheticism, has been deeply influenced by Buddhist thought. Schopenhauer cites with approval the four noble

truths of Buddhism: (1) suffering, (2) origin of suffering in desire, (3) cessation of suffering in nirvana; and (4) the middle path.²⁶ As Schopenhauer explains, his concept of salvation as an egoless state of resignation achieved by denial of will is in agreement with the Buddhist concept of liberation from suffering in nirvana realized by total renunciation of selfhood and its insatiable desires. He explicitly identifies “denial of will” with Buddhist nirvana.²⁷ For Schopenhauer affirmation of will results in the suffering of samsara, whereas negation of will is salvation and equivalent to Buddhist nirvana.²⁸ Schopenhauer elsewhere describes this final transition to the holiness of spiritual resignation achieved by denial of will as “a transition into empty nothingness.”²⁹ Moreover, he identifies nothingness with Buddhist nirvana.³⁰ Aesthetic contemplation of beauty, however, offers a brief intimation of nirvana.

Schopenhauer holds that even for the artistic genius an ecstatic state of disinterested will-less aesthetic contemplation of beauty is limited to only a “moment of rapture or exaltation.”³¹ A permanent deliverance from suffering in everlasting peace requires a shift from artistic enjoyment to religious salvation: “Therefore it [art] does not become for him a quieter of the will, as . . . in the case of the saint who has attained resignation; it does not deliver him from life for ever, but only for a few moments. . . . The St. Cecilia of Raphael can be regarded as the symbol of this transition.”³² And elsewhere:

[A]esthetic pleasure in the beautiful consists to a large extent, in the fact that, when we enter the state of pure contemplation, we are raised for the moment above all willing, above all desires and cares; we are, so to speak, rid of ourselves. We are no longer the individual that knows in the interest of its constant willing. . . . From this we can infer how blessed must be the life of a man whose will is silenced not for a few moments, as in the enjoyment of the beautiful, but forever . . .³³

Schopenhauer thus explicates the process of transition from momentary ecstasy through disinterested aesthetic delight in beauty achieved by artists, to the eternal ecstasy achieved through mystical resignation of saints.

ECSTASY IN SCHOPENHAUER’S AESTHETICS AND BUDDHIST YOGA

In her work *Schopenhauer as Transmitter of Buddhist Ideas*, Dorothea Dauer holds that Schopenhauer’s disinterested aesthetic contemplation of beauty establishes a parallel to early Indian Buddhist yoga meditation as a technique for release from suffering in a state of ecstasy. Dauer asserts that while early Buddhist yoga practice touches nirvana through the “psychological ecstasy of meditation,” for Schopenhauer one approximates this egoless state of resignation through the “aesthetic ecstasy” of art.³⁴ She continues:

The *aesthetic ecstasy* [of Schopenhauer] which makes the admirer forget the torments of life, consists of the fact that the intellect . . . liberates itself temporarily from the will. . . . And in this sense, it presents a parallel to the yoga which was

a psychological technique of creating an ecstatic feeling of union with the absolute. Buddhism incorporated this yoga in the form of meditation, in which the monks believed to have intuitively enjoyed the foretaste of nirvana.³⁵

According to Dauer, then, the aesthetic ecstasy of art in Schopenhauer, and the psychological ecstasy of Buddhist yoga, are both alike temporary reprieves from suffering, thus to provide a “foretaste of nirvana.”

THE AJANTA CAVES AND EARLY BUDDHIST ART

The ancient Ajanta Caves in the Indian state of Maharashtra were accidentally rediscovered by a British hunting party in 1819, who in doing so unearthed one of the greatest archeological finds of the nineteenth century. These magnificent rock-cut caves were created in two phases. The earlier caves, known as the Hinayana Caves, were excavated from the second century BCE to the first century CE. The Hinayana Caves display the artwork of early Buddhism where the Buddha still wasn’t represented in human form, but through symbols, such as the wheel, footprints, and stupas. In the fifth and sixth centuries CE there was a second period of excavations, known as the Mahayana Caves, where the Buddha is shown in human form, abiding in the peace and bliss of nirvana while making various mudras and ritual gestures. The Ajanta Caves served as a complex of temples and monasteries for resident monks, lavishly adorned with spectacular artworks, including architecture, pillars, sculptures, paintings, and images.

Richard S. Cohen’s work *Beyond Enlightenment: Buddhism, Religion, Modernity* discusses the Mulasaravastivada, an early Buddhist sect associated with the Ajanta Caves of India, and their emphasis on the importance of beauty as a Buddhist value.³⁶ In her essay “Only Nirvana Is More Beautiful,” Andrea Miller discusses her own pilgrimage to the awe-inspiring Ajanta Caves, and in this context sums up Cohen’s scholarship on early Indian Buddhist art, religion, and philosophy:

According to Richard Cohen, associate professor emeritus of South Asian religious literatures at the University of California, San Diego, the opulent artistic beauty of the caves was in keeping with the views of early Indian Buddhists. A scripture of the Mulasaravastivada, a Buddhist sect associated with Ajanta, “talks about the importance of creating beauty in this world and of having a beautiful monastery,” says Cohen. Inscribed into the rock at Ajanta, there is a verse by a monk claiming that it’s better to be in nirvana and free of this world, but if you are going to be in this world, you might as well be in a place of beauty. Ajanta, Cohen says, reminds us that “beauty is a Buddhist value.”³⁷

CONCLUSION

In this essay I have examined how Nishida’s early concept of beauty as *muga* or ecstasy has been influenced by Schopenhauer’s post-Kantian aesthetics. For Nishida, as for Schopenhauer, the aesthetic experience of beauty in art is an ecstasy of the moment, while religious experience is an eternal ecstasy. Nishida thus elucidates Schopenhauer’s

key doctrine, according to which the ecstasy realized by disinterested aesthetic contemplation of the beautiful in art offers a temporary release from suffering, while the supreme ecstasy of religion culminates at its apex with the exalted resignation of mystics, ascetics, and saints as a permanent renunciation of selfhood in the eternal peace and bliss of nirvana.

Furthermore, I have argued that recent scholarship on the ancient Ajanta Caves with its inscriptions and treasury of artworks dating from the second century BCE, as well as on the Mulasaravastivada, a Buddhist sect associated with Ajanta, reveal that the kernel of this distinction between art and religion established by the post-Kantian aesthetics of Schopenhauer in the West, as well as its reformulation by the Zen aestheticism of Nishida in the Japan, was already implicit in early Indian Buddhist teachings. In early Buddhism, like the modern aesthetics of Schopenhauer and Nishida, it was thus recognized that art is an important stage on the path to *moksha* or liberation, that the ecstasy of aesthetic contemplation provides a momentary glimpse or foretaste of nirvana, and that beauty is itself a profound Buddhist value. For according to the early Buddhist monks associated with the Ajanta Caves, until one enters nirvana, it is best to live in an exalted world filled with the beauty, splendor, and glory of art.

NOTES

1. Steve Odin, "Beauty as Ecstasy in the Aesthetics of Nishida and Schopenhauer."
2. Nishida Kitarō, *An Inquiry into the Good*.
3. *Bi no setsumei* 美の説明 is found in *Nishida Kitarō zenshū* 西田幾多郎全集, 2nd ed. (1965, 19 vols.), vol. 13, 78–80. It is also found in *Nishida Kitarō zenshū*, 1st ed. (1947–1953, 18 vols.), vol. 14, 52–54. The essay originally appeared in *Hokushinkai zasshi* 北辰会雑誌, 26 (March 1900). *Nishida Kitarō zenshū* is often cited as NKZ followed by volume and page number.
4. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*.
5. Nishida Kitarō, *An Explanation of Beauty*, 216.
6. Kitarō, *An Explanation of Beauty*, 216.
7. For an account of Nishida's practice of Zen meditation from about 1896 to 1902 as recorded in his diary and correspondence, see Viglielmo, "Nishida Kitarō: The Early Years," 535–60. Viglielmo further clarifies how Nishida's early notion of beauty as *muga* or "ecstasy" in *Bi no setsumei* was a blueprint for his later work on aesthetics titled *Art and Morality* (藝術と道徳, 1923), where the beauty of art and the goodness of morality tend toward the rapture and ecstasy of the saint in mystical experience at the standpoint of religion.
8. Wolfgang Schirmacher, *The Essential Schopenhauer*, x.
9. Schirmacher, *The Essential Schopenhauer*, vii.
10. Michiko Yusa, *Zen and Philosophy*, 38–39.
11. James Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness*, 292.
12. Kitarō, *An Explanation of Beauty*, 217.
13. NKZ: 1965, vol. 13, 80.
14. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*.
15. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, I, 362.
16. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, I, 410.
17. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, II, 611.
18. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, I, 178.
19. Kitarō, *An Explanation of Beauty*, 213.
20. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, I, 380.
21. Kitarō, *An Explanation of Beauty*, 217.
22. Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, 42.
23. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, I, 374.
24. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, I, 363.
25. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, I, 336.
26. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, II, 623.
27. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, II, 508, 560.
28. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, II, 609.
29. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 408–09.
30. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 508, 608.
31. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, II, 380.
32. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, I, 267.
33. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, I, 390.
34. Dorothea Dauer, *Schopenhauer as Transmitter of Buddhist Ideas*, 23.
35. Dauer, *Schopenhauer as Transmitter of Buddhist Ideas*, 23, italics added.
36. Richard S. Cohen, *Beyond Enlightenment*.
37. Andrea Miller, "Only Nirvana Is More Beautiful," 44.

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Japanese Aesthetics as Intercultural Double Bind: Philosophical and Artistic Practice between Nishida and Sesshū

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ABSTRACT

Encountering Japanese aesthetics from a Western philosophical standpoint holds great potential for expanding definitions of art, beauty, perception, expression, and truth. It also affords valuable opportunities for expanding our definition of philosophy itself. If we are to treat the peculiarities we discover as more than mere cultural curiosities, I argue that implicit to intercultural encounter with Japanese aesthetics is a methodological challenge arising by virtue of the status of the artist in the Japanese tradition. While artistic practices are *subjects* of philosophical analysis in the West, they are rarely considered to be philosophical practices, whereas in the Japanese tradition, being an artist is one way of being a philosophical practitioner. The issue I consider is whether encounter can be truly “intercultural” if we resist bracketing our definitions of philosophy and our methodological norms, which dictate that artistic practices be considered *other than* or *less than* philosophical practices. By way of the landscape painting of Sesshū Tōyō as interpreted by the philosophy of Nishida Kitarō, I propose a new way of seeing the art of Japan, which enables us to expand our definition of philosophy and render productive a double bind inherent to intercultural encounter.

Japanese aesthetics, as well as its background of Buddhist, Shinto, and Japanese philosophies, has become the focus of increasing interest in the West and subject to growing scholarly attention. While opening to foreign cultures and their intellectual and artistic traditions is one positive aspect of a broader move towards internationalizing academic philosophy, ethnocentrism can endure beneath what otherwise appear to be well-intentioned intercultural encounters. I look to Japanese aesthetics and philosophy to discuss how this vulnerability becomes discernible. To do so, I first outline some methodological considerations implicit to encounter with Japanese aesthetics from a Western philosophical standpoint. Secondly, I suggest a way of meeting the methodological challenges that arise by considering the Japanese landscape painting of Sesshū Tōyō (雪舟等揚, 1420–1506) as interpreted according to the philosophy of Nishida Kitarō (西田幾多, 1870–1945).¹ I conclude by outlining an intercultural double bind we find ourselves in and propose a productive stance therein.

METHODOLOGICAL AND DEFINITIONAL BRACKETING

An encounter with the intellectual or artistic works of a foreign culture will not be productive if one evaluates these strictly according to the conventions already established

within one’s own tradition. An openness to other cultures is a pre-requisite for overcoming the deep Eurocentrism of our tradition, yet even such a stance might never fully erase the deep biases we inherit. If one seeks intercultural learning, I argue, there must be a willingness to work within a new evaluatory context that is not fully reducible to one’s own. Doing otherwise might put any encounter outside the realm of what we can consider “intercultural.” It might, in fact, be the opposite: not intercultural at all but one way of perpetuating Eurocentrism under the guise of foiling it.

It is not entirely difficult to understand why the Western academy might be reluctant. Even for those who are willing, it is by no means easy to manifest productive openness to the thought or art of other cultures. But, more crucially, that kind of openness, while potentially enriching the Western tradition, also brings profound challenges to the methodological norms the discipline is deeply invested in maintaining.

There are many possible provocations evoked when cultures meet. Turning to Japanese aesthetics can incite us to ask important questions about the relation between philosophical and artistic practices. Whereas a strict demarcation between the two prevails in the West, in the Japanese tradition, artistic practices are legitimate sites for embodied philosophical practice. Landscape painting, for example, can be a form of Buddhist practice. Painting is not simply the *subject* of philosophical speculation but a real way of being a philosophical practitioner. Thus, we find examples of what are referred to as “artist-monks” or “painter-priests” in Japan.

Sesshū Tōyō, one of Japan’s greatest artists, is exemplary in this regard. He was the head of the Shōkoku-ji Rinzai Zen monastery and was known for strict adherence to his meditative practice, which included seated meditation and painting every day of his life from the time he began at the age of twelve until the day he died at eighty-six. For Sesshū, rigorous embodied artistic practice was a way of being a Buddhist practitioner.

Of course, invoking an artist-monk such as Sesshū will provoke arguments regarding the status of Buddhism as philosophy. One could certainly contend that, by virtue of its religious aspects, Buddhism is not, strictly speaking, a philosophy as we understand that concept in the West. An artist-monk might be an interesting subject to study, but their methods have no bearing on how we define what we do as academic philosophers and even less on *how* we do what we do, so the reply might go. Even within these limiting confines, exploring Japanese aesthetics could be fruitful, but if the grounds for encounter are that our methodological and definitional norms remain fixed, we might pause before claiming that such explorations are intercultural.

To meet a foreign tradition on its own terms requires a willingness to bracket the methods and definitions handed down by one’s own tradition. This does not guarantee that a more inclusive definition of philosophy will be reached. One *could* legitimately arrive at a claim that artistic practices are *not* philosophical practices, or

that some intellectual traditions are not justified in calling themselves “philosophy,” but the key proviso must be that such a conclusion is not decided at the outset; it is not the grounds for an encounter, but is rather what is to be determined through the encounter.

If the encounter we seek is with Japanese aesthetics, and if we want to avoid the ethnocentrism of dismissing that tradition’s differences as simple regional curiosities against which our definition of philosophy remains immune, then the requisite openness brings along more than a challenge to the content of our philosophical speculation: the methodological tendencies of our Western tradition and those we invoke to distinguish that tradition from others must be bracketed. While suspending one’s own definitions and methodologies might appear to be quite a demand, let us consider Japanese landscape painting to see how this openness is not as perplexing or threatening as it might appear.

SEEING JAPANESE LANDSCAPE PAINTING

If one is curious to learn from Japanese artworks, one should first have seen the works in question before any conclusions are reached. Yet, the idea that we can see a painting based solely on our having a coherent visual representation of the work might obstruct the encounter we desire. Take Sesshū’s famous *Splashed Ink Landscape* (Figure 1) as an example. Certainly, one’s eyes can admit the light reflecting off of its surface and enable visual representation. Yet, the question of whether we can actually see a painting goes beyond the fact of having a representation. Even for those who have never studied art or philosophy, our Western tradition has theorized about aesthetics for millennia and this has made artworks *visible to us* in particular ways. And, crucially, this has also made some artworks *invisible to us* in other ways.



Figure 1. Sesshū Tōyō, *Splashed Ink Landscape*. 1495, ink on paper, Tokyo National Museum.

Let us dwell briefly on some broad prevailing factors that shape Western visual experience. Of course, anyone can seek nuanced understandings of artworks, but doing so is against a backdrop of deeply entrenched norms and visual hermeneutics determining what we see *art as* and how we *do not* and *cannot* see it. Until very recently, our Western theories have overwhelmingly sought to define artworks according to their “essential” features. Most predominant is the Greek notion of *mimesis*, where a painting is a copy of something with a more real essence. Much later,

Kant construes the essence of painting as its form. Hegel then turns the tables asserting that form is only the result of color and that color itself is what is essential about painting.

Another prevailing supposition turns essentialist thought towards artists, who determine the essence of their selves as creative genius in the act of expression.

Of course, all four assumptions are much too broad for academic analysis, but the point is that these stand as background assumptions determining how artworks are seen without one needing to analyze or invoke the philosophical texts where these ideas are developed. The power and ubiquity of these assumptions are given by their having become so imbedded in our culture’s visual hermeneutics that they need not be learned explicitly. Yet, employing Japanese landscape painting as an experiment for intercultural methodology demands that we attempt to question these assumptions in order to see artworks according to the visual norms of another culture. To do so, one should attempt to place in abeyance all four of the above essentialist assumptions and thus open the possibilities of (1) seeing art as *nature*, not a copy thereof; (2) exceeding the idea of form being the essence of painting, since Japanese artists would strive towards formless depiction; (3) exceeding the idea of color being the essence of painting, since Japanese landscape painters rarely used color; and (4) understanding artistic expression not as the creation of an essentialized self but the negation of self. Attempting to bracket these four assumptions might open the possibility of seeing Japanese landscape paintings slightly more on their own terms.

OCULARCENTRISM AND “SEEING WITHOUT A SEER”

The structure of visual encounter has been such a foundational aspect of how we in the West have tended to pursue philosophical investigation that our tradition has been labelled “ocularcentric.” The dominant metaphor for knowledge, understanding, and truth has been derived from the process of gaining a clear visual grasp. Likewise, a great deal of Western art has advanced by ever-refined visual techniques and technologies. To be a philosopher in the West has been construed as the sharpening of one’s vision, to proceed out of the dark and into the light of reason, to gain *insight* and perspective through speculation; that is, to be a “seer.” No doubt extraordinary achievements have come from this mode of intellectual and artistic engagement, yet to learn from Japanese aesthetics demands a shift away from ocularcentrism, away from the idea of the artist or philosopher as seer. Nishida offers a path in this direction with his concept “seeing without a seer” (*mirumono nakushite miru koto* 見るものなくして見ること),² which not only suggests an understanding of what a Japanese painter achieves when rendering a landscape, but also helps us see landscape painting beyond our ocularcentric visual norms.

“Seeing without a seer” is not the eradication of the seer; it is simply the way a negated self sees. While Nishida has a technical conception of negation we cannot elaborate here, the idea of the self being negated simply means that it is a relational self: a self not defined by an *internal essence* but one whose existence is constituted by its ever-changing *external relations* with the world. Such negation is ontological. It is not only the self that is construed as

relational. So too are all things, phenomena, and actions, including thought, speech, movement, and vision. Thus, “seeing without a seer” refers to a real visual event, but the seer is not ontologically primary; instead, vision is fundamentally relational. One could counter by rightly pointing out that most theories of vision are “relational” since vision is, by definition, a relation between a seer and something seen. Yet, the critical difference is that our dominant Western conceptions, with very few exceptions, cast vision as a *faculty of a pre-existing and underlying self*. For Nishida, the visual is not merely something a self possesses. As one of its most complex and multivariate relations, vision is one way the self *is what it is*: a negated and relational non-self constituted by vision but without there being a pre-existing and underlying seer.

SPLASHED INK LANDSCAPE: SEEING BEYOND REPRESENTATION

What is immediately striking about Sesshū’s *Splashed Ink Landscape* (*Haboku Sansui* 破墨山水図, 1495) are the deformations, which bring its forms as close to incoherent as conceivable while also somehow depicting a coherent landscape. Contemplating this dramatic visual tension, we might ask how we should understand what we see. How should we see what we see? Perhaps, we might ask how Sesshū saw the landscape. Is he representing something that corresponds to what he saw when looking at the scene? Do we see the same landscape he did? Or is it a perspective on the world he wants to guide us towards seeing? While these are reasonable questions, they disclose further ocularcentric assumptions we should overcome in hopes of learning from Japanese landscape painting. These assumptions arise from a dominant feature of ocularcentric metaphysics, namely, the “representational” model of perception, which extends the framework of mimesis by casting perception, like painting, as a copy of a more real object.

Let us attempt to shift away from representationalism by first considering what it could mean to be an artist-monk such as Sesshū in the Zen Buddhist monastic and landscape painting traditions. As opposed to many schools of Buddhism, Zen practitioners meditate with open eyes. While they typically practice facing a blank wall, for a painter-priest such as Sesshū, the act of gazing at a landscape he sought to paint was another form of meditation. But what are they trying to do in these meditative visual practices? Potentially many things, but first we should acknowledge that they are not trying to construct a foundation for the self as an artist. Facing a blank wall or an expansive landscape, Zen artists seek to negate the self, to minimize its presence so that an entire context of relations can express itself. Visually, they seek to minimize their role as seers and enable an expressive event that goes beyond their individual experience. The painter is not striving to be a subject representing an object; they negate their subjectivity such that an alternate visual relation becomes possible. How, though, can we understand that relation?

The difficulty with answering this question is that when bound to the subject-object metaphysics of the representational framework, we remain limited to a mode

of questioning that blocks us from understanding the visual relationality a painter such as Sesshū would have sought. While there are innumerable theories of vision taking for granted subject-object metaphysics, nevertheless, when binary opposition is the underlying framework, any theory has two basic ontological positions to describe how visual subject and object relate; the subject is either *continuous* or *discontinuous* with the object seen. The dilemma of the representational framework is that neither of these two possibilities enables perception: if a subject were fully *continuous* with an object, there would be no perception, because perception is a relation and there must be some *discontinuity* between the relata for a relation to exist. On the other hand, if the subject were fully *discontinuous* from the visual object, here too no perceptual encounter would obtain. In this case, subject and object would overwhelm and obstruct each other. Neither continuity nor discontinuity can explain visual relationality.

To see a painting such as Sesshū’s requires thinking beyond the binaries of representation, which cast vision as a relation between continuous or discontinuous subjects and objects. This is crucial for our discussion because the type of relation the painter works to achieve with the landscape tells us something important about the visual relation we should cultivate in our attempts to see their paintings. Here, we can make a shift beyond the visual norms of our aesthetic tradition. The goal of the painter is not to make a passive object that an active subject can represent, but in negating *both* subject and object, a different type of relation emerges, beyond the representational alternatives of continuity or discontinuity. Nishida conceives of a structure of relationality that avoids the representational binaries that impede visual encounter. For him, relationality—whether in time, space, as action, force, between “I and thou,” individual and universal, thing and thing—is best understood as an expressive “continuous discontinuity” (*hirenzoku no renzoku* 非連続の連続).

It is as the continuity of discontinuity that what is called expressive activity comes into being. Therefore, to say that a thing acts is to say that a thing itself expresses itself. And to speak of internal perception-qua-external perception, external perception-qua-internal perception, must be to say that the world expressively determines the world itself. In the artistic world all things express the self itself.³

How can we bring this understanding into our attempt to see Sesshū’s work? The key is that it is not just seers but likewise the object that is negated. The painting itself must be understood beyond the metaphysical framework that casts it according to its objective materiality, and instead grasped as a formless event defined not in terms of an essence, but in terms of its relations. That is, the painting too is negated; it is a non-object. There is nothing essential on the objective or subjective visual pole. As continuously-discontinuous with the landscape, a painting arises out of a relation not discernible within subject-object metaphysics. The self does not have a pre-constituted essence, which reaches out to encounter the landscape. Landscape and self are co-constituting.

Thus, as Nishida writes above, “things express the self,” especially in the artistic world.

What is crucial for our discussion is that this continuous-discontinuity, which explains the painter’s relation to the landscape, *also obtains between us viewers and the artwork*. Sesshū’s painting is not best encountered under the assumption that it is an object with an essence we can represent. Just like the landscape, the painting is also a negated object, and it is ever-available to us as viewers to enter into its definition through a continuous-discontinuity. We too are negated visual selves, we can see without an underlying substantive seer, and the painting is a non-object that allows us, like all phenomenal reality, to enter into an ontologically co-constitutive relation. The point is not to have a representation of an object as a finished painting. In fact, what is crucial is that we do not see the painting as *finished* at all. Its formlessness means that what is definitive of it is not a static essence but the relations it affords. The Japanese landscape painting never achieves a final moment of completion since it is only one node in an ever-shifting relational milieu, ever transforming as it comes into new relations. Seeing a painting such as Sesshū’s is not a connection between a subject and an object whose essences remain untouched by the meeting, but a mutually creative event between a continuously-discontinuous visual non-self and non-object.

This way of understanding painting is challenging for our Western visual norms. We do not tend to approach images assuming that such visually constitutive relations are possible. But, in the Japanese aesthetic tradition, a painting of a landscape is no less natural than the landscape itself. It is, in a very literal sense, not a copy. As Sesshū himself says, “Painting is not imitation of other things,”⁴ it is part of nature itself. We must strive to free ourselves of our Western tendency to grasp paintings according to representational metaphysics.⁵ The opportunity for visual immersion with Sesshū’s painting is just as present for us as the landscape was available for the artist. Great paintings are sometimes even thought to afford greater possibilities for such an intertwining than what we take to be “actual” landscapes.

As viewers of Japanese paintings, we have the same opportunity not simply of representing a copy of a landscape, but also of coming into an expressive relation of co-constitution through visual negation/relationality. As viewers, we too can see without being substantive seers. But we potentially go wrong if we conceive of achieving this by educating ourselves to see paintings in new ways. Insofar as novel information about artworks is conceived as an addition to a self, as an accumulation rendering a self increasingly knowledgeable, we risk going in the wrong direction, further solidifying the kind of subjectivity that obstructs our relation to an artwork. The right approach is not building up the self but breaking it down. What we look for are not new theories to describe vision but a different focus on the experience that is already happening before we apply our knowledge. By attending to the relationality obtaining prior to our intellection and theorization, we find that the body is already intertwined in co-constitution with a painting, and in that structure of relationality, seeing still

happens, but it is there prior to the presence of a reified seer as a central node that vision can be reduced to. While negating one’s visual subjectivity might sound like quite a challenge, in the next section I discuss how it is a mode of engagement that is not entirely foreign to the Western aesthetic tradition or even our everyday experience.

COLOR(LESSNESS) AND MOTION(LESSNESS)

Whether one’s aesthetic position is Hegelian or not, our Western expectations tend to ready the viewer for believing that paintings are more real if they reflect the full chromatic range seen in the world. Yet, the implicit binary assumption regarding color and colorlessness misconstrues our relation to monochrome Japanese painting.

One way we avoid the reduction of ourselves to mere seers is by expanding the visual by uncovering the motor aspects accompanying vision. With very few exceptions, vision and motion have been treated as two *separate but connectable* bodily capacities.⁶ Contrary to this separation of the motor and visual, Nishida writes that “there is no seeing when faced with things lacking any sort of connection with our movement,”⁷ and further that “[w]e act through seeing, and we see through acting. . . . Indeed, artistic creativity is a kind of action in such a sense.”⁸

It is quite natural to notice how things in our perceptual field evoke movement, but color itself is typically understood as an inert property of an object, one that is irrelevant to the perceiver’s moving body. Contrary to this, Nishida writes that “a type of red becomes a force and an activity.”⁹ More broadly speaking, Nishida refers to things as “acts” or what he calls “volitional objects” (*ishitaishō*, 意志対象). In his philosophy, there is no strict division between bodies that move of their own volition and objects that only receive motion externally. Rather, they form a continuity that he calls a “unity of act and act” (*sayō to sayō to no chokusetsu no naimen-teki ketsugō* 作用と作用との直接の内面的結合).¹⁰ Colored objects are not inconsequential to the moving body. As we intuit them, they act on us and their colors are one of several motor-determinative forces within a continuity of acts. This finding is well documented in modern psychology and behavioral analysis. The colors of objects and environments deflect our movements. Certain tones excite us, whereas others sedate us. Some tones extend the range of motion and the tonicity of muscles. Color affects the depth of the breath and the speed of cognition. Most of us have little need to pay attention to this level of color’s motor-determination. Yet, highly skilled artists such as Sesshū, by way of a lifetime’s dedication to the visual world, could not only notice the ways that the colored world exerts itself on them but, more decisively, they could also allow these forces to determine their brush strokes. Thus, they enable the colored world to express itself by way of their body’s motor-perceptual negation; that is, how their body’s movement and vision are relational. Nishida comments on how the artist achieves a motor-perceptual continuity with the visual world when he writes that “as the act of pure visual perception develops into language, it . . . naturally moves our body and develops into a kind of expressive movement. This is the creative act of the artist.”¹¹ Similarly, one viewing a deeply evocative painting such as Sesshū’s is also invited into the bodily

movements that continue to animate the work even once it is complete.

In Nishida's philosophy, continuous-discontinuity is the structure of the body's relation with the perceptual world, not as a subject representing an object, but through an expressive mutual-negation. Color is not simply a secondary quality of objects a painter or the viewer of a painting represents. Color vision is a way of intertwining with the world through a mutual sensorimotor negation.

If colors do solicit the body's movements, then we must now ask a question regarding the motor demands of monochrome paintings such as Sesshū's. While his *Splashed Ink Landscape* lacks color, a monochrome painting can, nevertheless, call on the colored world just as well or, some have theorized, even better than a color painting.¹² A Chinese saying goes that "Whoever masters the use of [black] ink can paint it in all five colors."¹³ Thus, monochrome painting affords us as viewers the same opportunity for motor-perceptual intertwining. It is this co-constitutive intertwining, *not a representation*, which should be our focus when encountering a painting such as Sesshū's.

But what about those of us who have not dedicated our lives to attuning our bodies to the motor-perceptual pull of the visual world? How can we be in the mode of "seeing without a seer" when beholding a monochrome painting? Although it sounds like quite an undertaking, it is actually only a matter of shifting one's attention to a stratum of experience that is not normally thematized, but not entirely absent from visual encounter. Sesshū's painting and its dramatic sweeping brushstrokes are instructive. One does not need to be educated in art history or aesthetics to have a felt sense of the spontaneity that went into rendering his landscapes. We can feel a resonance in our bodies of the painter's movements.

"Motor-resonance" is a common experience one feels when seeing bodies of highly trained performers enacting amazing physical feats in arts, dance, sports, etc., but a similar resonance is also provoked by the marks in a painting. *Splashed Ink Landscape* is not an inert object meant only to be represented visually. It is an expression calling on the body and inviting it into its motions. As Nishida explains, the artwork is not a passive object but is one expressive act in a continuity of acts, which also expresses the selves who view it and thus enter into motor-visual co-constitution.

If we can focus on this motor-resonance, then we find that, already in viewing Sesshū's painting, there is an aspect of our continuously-discontinuous motor-relation between ourselves and the work, revealing ourselves as already connected to it, as selves *already expressed by it*, beyond any motor-neutral position of a representational self or seer.

Although rarely thematized in Western philosophy until recently, it is not entirely outside of everyday experience to notice our mutual motor-visual co-constitution when encountering things. A helpful way to notice this is by

likening a Japanese landscape painting to a musical score.¹⁴ A score comprises notes on paper, but we all know that it is not meant to be appreciated as *marks on paper*, but as solicitations for specific movements. Those movements can be those of a musician, a singer, or even a dancer, but even for us experiencing a musical piece, we can also notice our motor co-constitution with the world in the simple act of tapping our feet in rhythm with the music. Although this is perhaps a very minimal motor-intertwinement, the point is that this aspect of our engagement expresses our relation to music much better than a representation of the score would. Likewise, with a painting such as Sesshū's, we do, in a certain sense, receive visual data from its surface and have something like a representation of the artwork, but seeing it on its own terms will be much more likely if we focus on the motor-resonance evoked by its brushstrokes rather than solely on our static visual representations.

CONCLUSION: DOUBLE BIND OF CONTINUOUSLY-DISCONTINUOUS INTERCULTURALITY

Having considered an alternative way of seeing and moving with Japanese landscape painting, we can now return to the question regarding the methodological implications for intercultural philosophy. Let us consider how, in the past century, numerous domains of Western philosophy, both Analytic and Continental, have sought to articulate alternatives to the Enlightenment or Modern conceptions of selfhood, individuality, or subjectivity. As this project continues to evolve, the implicit methodological challenge of intercultural philosophy becomes all the more pressing. Do we as Western philosophers treat methods of artistic/philosophical practitioners such as painters only as cultural curiosities, only as subjects of analysis, but assume our methodological norms remain untouched by practices aimed at overcoming the forms of subjectivity we theorize about? While one might argue that there is an imperative in intercultural philosophy to do otherwise, I do not believe that this is the best approach. What is more potentially binding is to reveal that resistance to such a methodological challenge actually relies on a fallacy. Let us call it the fallacy of the "given subject." If we can speak of a broad conception of "the subject" that we can call "Modern" or "Enlightenment," and if we believe this tells us something meaningful about how we are human at this present moment, then we must recognize that that form of subjectivity is *not given*, but rather the result of a project, however historically and culturally diffuse, of creating a particular kind of human. Our version of subjectivity is not given; it is the result of many determining factors, *some of which include conceptions of selfhood worked out in philosophy*. The crucial point for intercultural encounter with Japanese aesthetics is that Western philosophy has not tended to explicitly develop techniques or embodied practices for the determination it has carried out. Japanese landscape painting is, however, a technique in this sense. Thus, if one invokes methodological norms for defending a definition of philosophy as distinct from art practice, then Western philosophy either disavows its determinative relation to the subject or simply ignores it. In either case, encounter with other cultures will remain, in one crucial way, on the terms of one's own tradition, i.e., not genuinely intercultural. This is tragic since, as the example of Sesshū's

paintings illustrates, different forms of visual selfhood only require a shift in focus to a stratum of experience that is always completely available to us, although not typically thematized by our tradition.

If one might be willing to entertain this proposition, one might wonder what to do next. Can we simply assert that aesthetic practices should be included as legitimate philosophical practices and start training in painting as a means of attenuating our Eurocentrism and enabling learning beyond our culture? Here we find a double bind of intercultural encounter. If we were to bracket our methodological norms in hopes of opening up to a foreign tradition, we would then find the other side of the intercultural coin, the inverse of the problem of ethnocentrism, which are the dangers of cultural appropriation and intellectual imperialism. Even for those of us who are open to expanding definitions of what we do based on encounters with foreign traditions, intercultural philosophy must not involve the suspension of one's own cultural specificity. While we should respond to challenges from other traditions, a simple appropriation of their methods would deny that specificity. How though do we cultivate the kind of openness that places our methodological norms in suspension while avoiding the naive incorporation of foreign practices into our own?

My suggestion is, if we feel the tension of this double bind, we do nothing. This is the appropriate and productive intercultural position. The double bind is what we should aim for. To resolve the tension on either extreme is to exit the bind, but it is a tension that is productive and should be sustained as the bounds of intercultural openness.

To close, we can return to Nishida and notice that such an intercultural position that sustains a double bind accords with his thinking; that is, it is a position of continuous-discontinuity between traditions. We must not seek to reduce intercultural tension by positing an unambiguous discontinuity between traditions, thus closing off and rendering us immune to legitimate challenges to our methods and definitions. Nor should we assume a naïve continuity between all intellectual or artistic traditions: this simply forgoes the productive tension for the ease of a false relativism where any intellectual tradition is automatically philosophy. A position of continuous-discontinuity does not resolve the intercultural bind but sustains it as an irresolvable yet productive tension between traditions.

NOTES

1. While Nishida rarely refers to Sesshū directly in his writings, in his first major work he invokes the painter in such a way that foreshadows the ontology of expression he later develops when he writes, "we can say that things move the self or that the self moves things, that Sesshū painted nature or that nature painted itself through Sesshū." Kitarō Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, trans. Masao Abe and Christopher Ives (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 135.
2. Kitarō Nishida, *Nishida Kitarō zenshū* (Complete Works of Nishida Kitarō) (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1965), III, 255.
3. Kitarō Nishida, "The Standpoint of Active Intuition," in *Ontology of Production: Three Essays*, trans. William Haver (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 96.
4. Jon Carter Covell, *Under the Seal of Sesshū* (New York: De Pamphilis Press, 1941), 53.

5. We should acknowledge that, throughout the twentieth century, many Western artists and schools of art have worked towards non-representational forms of depiction. When speaking of tendencies in Western art and philosophy, my underlying claim is that, despite such artistic efforts, Western culture remains overwhelmingly ocularcentric and wedded to ontological assumptions associated with representation and subject-object metaphysics. Alternatives to representational art are now part of the norm in the West, yet we have not developed associated practices for embracing the visually negative. Shifting one's form of visual engagement to experience artworks beyond representation is available to us but requires practices that are not typically part of Western visual culture. Thus, many of the experiments in non-representational arts will not be taken up beyond the representational/ocularcentric commitments Western culture remains determined by.
6. This specific question was brought up most prominently in "Molyneux's Problem," where the Irish philosopher William Molyneux, along with his interlocutors John Locke and George Berkeley, concluded that vision and motion are two separate bodily modalities.
7. Kitarō Nishida, "Logic and Life," in *Place and Dialectic: Two Essays by Nishida Kitarō*, trans. John W. M. Krummel and Shigenori Nagatomo (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 251.
8. Kitarō Nishida, *Fundamental Problems of Philosophy: The World of Action and the Dialectical World*, trans. David A. Dilworth (Tokyo: Sophia University Press, 1970), 193.
9. Nishida, *Nishida Kitarō zenshū*, II, 357.
10. Kitarō Nishida, *Art and Morality*, trans. David A. Dilworth and Valdo H. Viglielmo (Honolulu: University Press of Hawai'i, 1973), 36, 43.
11. Nishida, *Art and Morality*, 24.
12. See Sei-roku Noma, *Artistry in Ink*, trans. Edward Strong (Tokyo: Tōto Bunka, 1958) and Thomas Hoover, *Zen Culture*, 1st ed. (New York: Random House, 1977).
13. Fritz van Briessen, *Way of the Brush: Painting Techniques of China and Japan* (Rutland, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 2011), 105.
14. van Briessen, *Way of the Brush*, 35.

The Field of Japanese Aesthetics

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ABSTRACT

Because of differences in intellectual and cultural history, the academic subfields of Western philosophy and their terminologies do not mesh with native Japanese categories. This is true of aesthetics, which in traditional Japan might be better described as "theories of art and artistry." To illustrate the probative value of the distinction, this paper explores six tenets underlying Japanese systems of art and artistry that are not stressed in most Western aesthetic constructs.

- (1) The creative element in artistic production lies in the medium as much as the artist.
- (2) The quality of the artwork depends in part on the audience.
- (3) The painter's last stroke or poet's final word does not complete the work of art.

- (4) The artist is not the primary agency in the artwork's creation.
- (5) Artistic expression is a form of knowing.
- (6) The qualities of the artwork reflect the artist's depth of wisdom.

Kokoro—the inter-responsive field of internal relations among artist, artwork, medium, and audience—is the true force in artistic creativity and the basis for the six tenets of Japanese art and artistry outlined in the paper.

The fundamental differences between Western and Asian philosophies seldom derive from their reaching different conclusions about identical questions. Even when addressing a similar topic, the questions asked are likely dissimilar. This suggests that we should be wary of projecting the names of Western philosophical fields or subdisciplines on to Asian, in our present case Japanese, philosophical activities. Our first question then must be whether the term *Japanese aesthetics* itself is problematic. To some extent, I have no problem with that choice of words.

When formulating any aesthetic, we can outline either a general theory for all (or most) arts or a theory focused on one specific art. In both cases, we differentiate among the artist, the medium, the completed artwork, and the audience. As for the artist, we may consider intention, style, and perhaps a theory of creativity, for instance. Regarding media, there seems an almost endless variety, limited only by the ever-expanding applications of human imagination to anything from words to paint to stone to architectural materials to food to musical notes. Similarly, the completed artwork might be a literary work, a photograph, a piece of pottery, a garden, a dance (choreographed or performed), a light display, and so on. Finally, the audience may include such onlookers or participants as readers, viewers, listeners, or tasters.

Japan offers its own plenitude of art forms: literary, plastic, performative, folkcraft, and so forth. Furthermore, Japan has a significant corpus of commentaries, many philosophical, reflecting on each art. We even often find a significant overlap in terminology, suggesting the parameters for an underlying general theory of art. I see no harm in grouping those activities and calling it collectively *Japanese aesthetics*.

Yet, when the Western term *aesthetics* entered their country in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the Japanese felt the need to coin a word for it since it seemed different from any native field of study. Why? Once we go beyond a simple interest in the production and appreciation of art to the rigors of philosophical questioning and establishing norms about that interest, the Western and Japanese traditions have less in common. For this reason, I will often use the phrase "Japanese theories of art and artistry" rather than "Japanese aesthetics" to better capture the more traditional Japanese approach to the subject. My concern

is when we invite the term *aesthetics* into the Japanese cultural context, we do not unwittingly also accept its full Western entourage of cultural assumptions as well (beauty, artistic intention, sublimity, etc.). The incongruity is just as troubling in the opposite direction, incidentally. Key issues and concepts from Japanese theories of art and artistry (*kokoro*, *yūgen*, *wabi*, etc.) seldom correlate with those of Western aesthetics. Although I will discuss a few key Japanese terms in this paper, my primary concern is meta-aesthetic. I intend to explore *why* the two cultural approaches diverge so sharply.

Although my analysis applies to the Japanese arts at large, for the sake of simplicity and limits of space, I draw examples mainly from ink wash painting and poetry. To focus further, I will organize my interpretation around six linked tenets common to most traditional Japanese theories of arts and artistry, tenets that only rarely drive Western aesthetic theories. (1) Creativity in artistic production lies as much in the medium as in the artist. (2) The quality of the artwork depends in part on the audience. (3) The last stroke of the painter's brush or the last word written by the poet does not mark the completion of the painting or the poem. (4) The Japanese painter or poet is not the primary agency in the painting's or poem's creation. (5) Artistic expression is a form of knowing. (6) The qualities of the artwork reflect the artist's depth of wisdom.

In both Japan and the West, aesthetic theory developed within the context of an established philosophical worldview. In the modern West this included a preference for understanding connections as external relations and an increasingly fixed idea of the self as an individual, autonomous agent. Together, those two presuppositions undergird the assumption that the world exists as external objects independently of the personal subject. In turn, the autonomous subject acts upon the world and can transform it through the power of will and intentionality.

Within that broadly conceived paradigm, the Western presumption arose that the artist creates something novel via the artwork, a thing arising from the artist's creative activity and intentionality, causing a brand-new item to appear in the world of things. That object might fill what the artist sensed as a lack in the world. Or it might be the product of the artist's impulse to give external expression to inner feelings or intuition, making it publicly accessible to others through the manipulation of an artistic medium.

Although that description is certainly crude and problematic on many levels of specificity, it underscores a crucial point. Namely, because modern Western philosophy privileges external relations, it tends to view art as a bridging activity. Art serves as an external link between two pre-existing things: artist and world, artist and medium, artwork and audience, inner subjectivity and outward expression, world of value and world of fact, and so forth. In short: art *makes* connections. And once completed, that artwork endures as an item with its own integrity independent of the artist and of other things in the world. We can diagram the external relation model as Figure 1, wherein *A* and *B* can be any of the binaries of discretely existing entities just mentioned.

Traditional Japanese philosophers, by contrast, predominantly construe their worldviews and senses of self in terms of internal rather than external relations. So they do not see art as bridging the binaries of artist/world, artist/medium, artwork/audience, inner subjectivity/outward expression, created values/given facticity, and so forth. Instead, art is a discovery of an already existent or emergent conjunction of those entities. Art is not *what* connects things, but rather reveals *how* things interconnect. Figure 2 represents the internal relation model wherein A and B represent the same pairs as before in Figure 1. Now, however, they are intrinsically interdependent rather than intrinsically independent: part of A is part of B, and part of B is part of A. Indeed, A cannot be completely A without its intersection with B and vice versa.

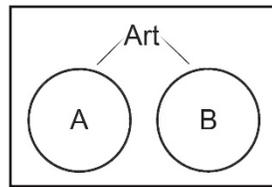


Figure 1. Art as External Relation.

If we consider A to be the artist and B the artistic medium, for example, then tenet (1) in the list above is comprehensible. That is, creative expression does not bridge a gap between the artist and the medium, but lies in the overlap between the two—a collaboration, as it were. This notion is not unique to Japan; we find it expressed by artists around the world. Michelangelo spoke of seeing his figures in the uncarved block of marble and that his role as a sculptor was in freeing that image from its stone prison. Many a potter, East and West, has described the artistic experience as working *with* the clay instead of working *the* clay. Japanese calligraphers as well as painters in various cultures speak of allowing the brush and ink/paint to express themselves along with the artist. And what poets have not at some point expressed their creative experience as “the words came to me” rather than “I chose the words”? (The ancient Japanese called that agency of power in words *kotodama*, the “spirit of words.”) When we think about art in terms of internal relations, such locutions come naturally.

Suppose now in our two diagrams we substitute “audience” for B, while continuing to allow A to signify the “artist.” And for this discussion let us take the relator “Art” to be more specifically the artwork. Let us consider first the external relation model depicted in Figure 1. That yields the familiar Western idea that once the artist completes the artwork, the artist’s original intention is no longer relevant. The finished artwork stands alone as a thing-in-the-world, independent of both the now discrete artist and audience as an object for their subjective gaze and evaluation. The situation is quite different if we look at it from the standpoint of an internal relation as depicted in Figure 2, a standpoint that will help us understand tenet number (2) in our list, the role of audience in Japanese theories of art and artistry.

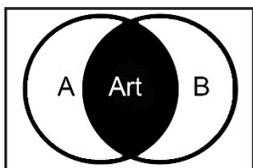


Figure 2. Art as Internal Relation.

Figure 2 implies that (part of) the audience is part of the artist, and that (part of) the artist is part of the audience. Furthermore, in their conjunction, they constitute the artwork together. For example, a

contemporary Japanese *haiku* poet and scholar, Hasegawa Kai, has said in an interview:

[A] haiku is not completed by the poet. The poet creates half of the haiku, while the remaining half must wait for the appearance of a superior reader. Haiku is literature created jointly by the poet and the reader.¹

East Asian ink wash landscape paintings share the sentiment. Amid the mountains, rivers, and tiny human figures in either huts or boats of many Chinese Song-style landscapes, for example, we commonly find an expanse of open space containing a poem written in exquisite calligraphy. A poet-calligrapher other than the original landscape artist often added the poem later, sometimes centuries later. This suggests that the painting is not complete with the depiction of the landscape but continues as an ongoing work of performance art in which the viewers participate so much that at a later time, one may be invited to continue the artwork by adding a poem. This illustrates not only tenet number (2) about the audience’s role in creating the artwork, but also tenet (3), that the painting is not completed with the last brushstroke of the artist. In fact, we can say that the painting is just that: a painting, not a paint-ed, that is, a gerund expressing ongoing activity involving artist, artwork, and audience, rather than an artifact of a concluded activity.

As another example, as many performers East or West attest, the aesthetic value added by an appreciative audience is intrinsic to the value of the performance itself. Master Zeami (1363–1443) of the Nō drama art form insisted that the excellence of a performance depends not only on the script, the actor’s talent, and the staging, but also those in attendance:

Even if the actor is an unsurpassed master of a level suited to the play, unless the play is performed for a discerning audience in a grand venue, it will not always be such a great success.²

We can better grasp the complex relation between artist and audience by examining the influential poetics of Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801). Norinaga claimed poetry arises from the poet’s sense of *aware*, a classical Japanese term meaning roughly a sensitivity of being so in touch with things as to be touched by them. (Note this is an internal relation between self and the outside world.) Although this leads to the impulse to write poetry, a true poem is not realized until that *aware* takes form as a poem shared with others, confirmed by and in them. He writes:

In order to feel comfort, one must read the poem to someone else. If the other person hearing the poem finds it has *aware*, this will greatly comfort the poet. . . . And since this is the intent of poetry, it is a basic principle and not an accident that a poem must be heard by others. Someone who does not understand this might say that a true poem describes one’s emotions exactly as they are, whether bad or good, and it has nothing to do with whether or not people hear it. Such an argument

sounds plausible, but it betrays ignorance of the true meaning of poetry.³

For Norinaga, the role of the poem's reader or listener is critical because it allows straightforward, plain expression to attain a stylized sophistication (*aya*) appropriate to the sensitivities of its cultured audience. The poetic impulse that might have begun as a blatant venting of emotion becomes refined in response to the aesthetic readers with whom it is to be shared. This extra dimension of cultivated sensitivity makes it not only genuine but also resonates with its particular time and place, expanding its capacity to touch and be touched by the responsiveness of others.

It is now becoming clearer why, as tenet (4) implies, Japanese aesthetic philosophies might not locate creativity solely in the artist. The dominant modern Western model, as I have submitted, takes the artist or poet to be a discrete, autonomous agent whose independent will determines and creates the artwork or poem. When we privilege external relations in our understanding of reality, our analysis of the poetic act might go as follows:

Suppose Bashō casts his gaze at a misty mountainside and is moved to write a poem. He draws on his mastery of a vocabulary for the natural phenomena and for the feelings arising from within himself, conjoining them into a verbal scheme he finds satisfying. He writes this down as the poem. After finishing the last word of his literary effort, the poem is complete and he may or may not share it with others. The poem has made the connection between himself and the external world of the mountain mist, and through that connection he has expressed his inner subjectivity via the outward expression of the poem.

The just rehearsed description was framed within the terminology of external relations and would be unacceptable for someone like Norinaga, who favors internal relations. From his perspective, we should instead seek in the poetic act a complex web of inter-responsiveness. The event of the misty mountains inspires the poet, nourishing his own sensitivities, poised to be inspired. That inter-sensitivity (the aforementioned *aware*) also resonates with the spirit of words (the aforementioned *kotodama*), words the poet has always known but which come to him in new ways and combinations arising both from the particular situation and from the social-cultural world shared with others. That social world has cultivated a participant audience of aesthetes, comprising sensitive readers and fellow poets. All those factors—the mountain mist, the sensitivity of the poet, the evocative power of the words themselves, and the social constructs of the receptive audience—combine to create expression as a poem. We can characterize this diagrammatically as Figure 3 below.

For traditionalist theorists of art and artistry like Norinaga, the complex depicted in Figure 3 suggests the field of *kokoro*, an indigenous Japanese concept with a broad semantic range that no single English word can capture. Indeed, when the previously illiterate Japanese adopted the Chinese sinographs for their writing system, they could

find no single corresponding Chinese word either and thus used different sinographs in different contexts: one meaning the faculty of the mindful heart or simply mind (*xin*), another meaning intention or signification (*yi*), and still another meaning affect or feelings (*qing*). Since even the Chinese translations of the indigenous word would not always do, when the Japanese developed a system of phonetic writing, they often simply wrote the word as *kokoro*.

In general, *kokoro* is a field of mutual interaction, an invitation to significance, and a capacity for poignancy. *Kokoro* animates the genuine human mindful heart (*makoto no kokoro*), resonates with the event beckoning our response (*koto no kokoro*), answers the call of words (*koto no kokoro*), and amplifies the sensitivity of the audience's genuine mindful hearts (*makoto no kokoro*). Although Norinaga does not use a diagram like Figure 3, clearly it accords with his understanding. At the end of this paper, we will return to this field of *kokoro*, but let us for now resume the discussion of our final two tenets behind Japanese theories of art and artistry.

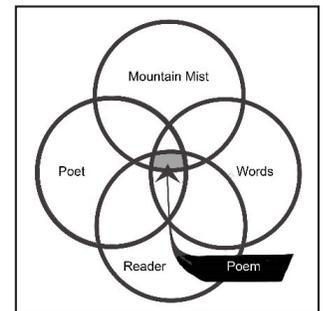


Figure 3. Poem as Created by Internally Related Whole.

Tenet (5) claims there is an epistemic or knowing dimension to artistic expression. This runs counter to the is/ought binary of modern Western philosophy that allocates to knowledge the descriptive world of facts, and to art the prescriptive world of norms. Yet, if we view the relation between artists and their media as internal rather than external, the situation assumes a different cast. For the artist and the medium to collaborate in the creation of the artwork, the artist must know the medium in a special sense. Potters know their clay, photographers the qualities of light and color, and poets the nuances of verbal meanings and sounds in ways that no textbook or dictionary can ever fully convey. Instead of bifurcating subject and object, this form of knowing assumes the conjunction of the two.

Returning to our internal relation model portrayed in Figure 2, the *A* can represent the knower, the *B* the object known, and the overlap would in this case be not the art but instead the knowledge that is discovered in the conjunction between the two. Although this is no place to discuss the issue, this sense of knowledge as an internal relation obliterates the strict opposition between idealism and realism, because knowledge by its very nature is part of the subject and part of the object. (For this reason, incidentally, rare is the Japanese philosopher who conceives of a disembodied form of knowing. Most commonly, the knower is thought of as not simply mind nor simply body but rather as an indivisible *bodymind*.⁴)

According to this way of thinking, if all of philosophy's disciplines emphasize internal over external relations, the themes or foci of those disciplines would in fact be understood as the overlaps between self and other

(whether “other” refers to persons or things). See Figures 4a and 4b below for a comparison between external relation-dominant philosophies and internal relation-dominant ones. The former place knowledge, ethics, creativity, expression, aesthetics, and law as existing independently of self and other, forming a link between the two without infringing on their independent integrities. By contrast, philosophies stressing internal relations see those same philosophical foci as a discovery and nurturing of the intrinsic interrelation between self and other and cannot be divorced from them.⁵

Figures 4a and 4b not only show how the various fields of philosophy focus on different thematic objects, but also hint at how those objects might themselves be related. In Figure 4a, we find no obvious reason to suspect any necessary connection among knowledge, ethics, and aesthetics, for example. In the case of Figure 4b, however, the thematic foci of philosophical inquiry generally share a common region, namely, an area of overlap between self and other. That does not guarantee that knowledge, ethics, and aesthetics are themselves internally related, of course, but it does increase the likelihood they might be. Could that explain, for example, why in Zen Buddhism we find a confluence of discourses about understanding the natural world for how it is (knowledge), about being inter-responsive with its cycles in a responsible way (ethics), and about expressing our harmony with it in creative modalities of poetry, architecture, painting, and gardens (aesthetics), for example?

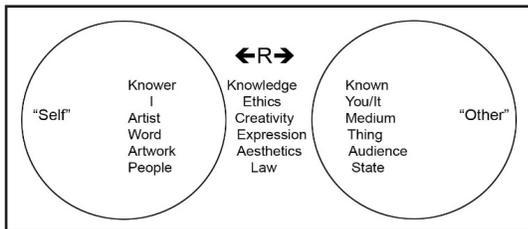


Figure 4a. Philosophical Themes as Externally Related to Self/Other.

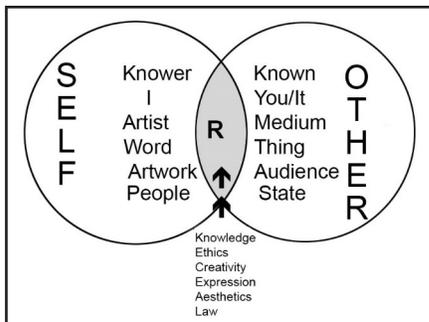


Figure 4b. Philosophical Themes as Internally Related to Self/Other.

I visited a Zen master who specialized in the design and maintenance of Japanese rock gardens. As we stood there, quietly gazing at the splendid, serene garden he

had designed, I looked him in the eye and quietly asked, “How do you know where to put the rocks?” “I just put them where they want to be.” Knowing the rocks is essential to their aesthetic expression.

I also heard an anecdote from the head of research in a major American electronics company about the invention of the home videocassette recorder (VCR). Both Japan and the United States had been rivals in developing the VCR, struggling with the complexity of having a mylar tape negotiate its way across spinning multiple magnetic heads without getting entangled and jamming. After sharing their engineering formulas about torque, vectors, and strength of magnetic fields, a consortium of American engineers had decided that any such VCR would necessarily be too fragile for home use. So American companies put their focus on developing video discs, even though at the time they were limited to playback only. Meanwhile, in Japan a small team of expert engineers from Sony was given a prototype VCR to work on. After months of tinkering, watching the tape become repeatedly entangled, an engineer placed a paperclip-like piece of metal at a specific point in the tape path within a cassette. Then the tape flowed smoothly without jamming, even when the VCR was slightly jostled. The home VCR was born. When asked how the breakthrough occurred, the engineer reportedly replied, “I just helped the tape go where it wanted to go.”

Both anecdotes exemplify the confluence of cognitive insight with aesthetic sensitivity. The Zen gardener and the electronics engineer creatively addressed their situations by finding common ground between the rock and self, or between the moving tape and self. The more the artist finds the common ground of self and other to be not just aesthetic but also epistemic, ethical, creative, expressive, and socially engaged, the closer the artist approaches wisdom, the focus of our sixth and final tenet.

To move from knowledge to wisdom is a transition from the particularistic to the holistic. Wisdom involves grasping the connections among the connections. To make this more intelligible, we need another diagram, another one with two versions: Figures 5a and 5b. Figure 5a depicts a whole consisting totally of internal relations, whereas Figure 5b depicts that same whole except the relations are not only internal but also holographic. By “holographic,” I mean simply the configuration or structure of the whole (*holo-*) is inscribed (*-graph*) in each of its parts.

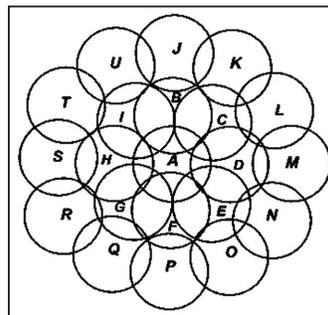


Figure 5a. A Whole of Internally Related Parts.

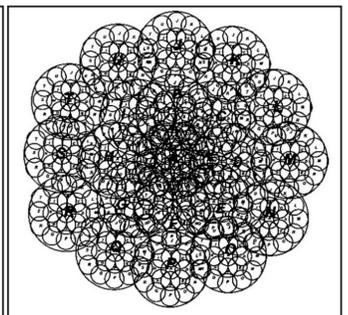


Figure 5b. Same Whole as Holographic.

For example, part *P* from Figure 5a, when transformed to the holographic version in Figure 5b, now contains the configuration of the entire whole A-U. The same is true for each part of the whole in the diagram. With today's understanding of recursiveness and fractals, such holographic thinking is no longer exotic. A drop of blood or a single strand of hair at a crime scene reveals the full genetic blueprint of the perpetrator. Yet, in Japan such holographic thinking is nothing new. Holographic models from Chinese and Indian Buddhism lent a philosophical interpretation to archaic Japanese animism and sympathetic magic.

The holographic model opens wisdom to an innovative interpretation. Suppose we think of wisdom as determined not by *what* one knows, but by insight into *how* everything fits together, how all the connections are interconnected. Metaphorically, wisdom occurs not when one solves the jigsaw puzzle, having placed all the pieces to reveal the full picture. Instead, wisdom arises when we see how jigsaw pieces interlock, where pieces are missing, and how to approach every situation of lack. Indeed, as the twelfth-century Zen Master Dōgen said, when we fully engage phenomena, we recognize there is always something more left out.⁶

Critics have admired many Japanese artworks for their simplicity or "minimalism," but not enough credit has been given to the underlying assumption of holographic relations that inspire the approach. If reality is such that the structure of the whole is contained in each of its parts, then an ink wash painting of a single blossom on a withered branch or a haiku of just seventeen syllables may reveal the structure of all reality. For that to occur, however, the artist must have the wisdom to engage the recursiveness, and the insight to express it so that an appropriately wise viewer or reader can take part in the revelation. The paradigm here would be the ink wash painting of the Zen circle as revealing of enlightenment. If both the painter and the viewer are wise, then the painting, the artist, and the viewer together transform the single circular stroke of ink into a fractal expression within a holographic whole, revealing the interconnection of all connections. The emptiness at the heart of that open circle is the shining forth of wisdom, the overlaps of all the circles that philosophy supposedly loves in Figure 4b.

A final point. Everything I have said up to here, including all the diagrams, has been a series of heuristic expressions (called *hōben* in Japanese, *upāya* in Sanskrit), pointing the way to an understanding of Japanese theories of art and artistry. As we approach that understanding, though, we now realize that the terms we have been using cannot mean exactly what they ordinarily do in everyday discourse. Most importantly, we have resorted to diagrammatic circles to explain internal and holographic relations. Yet, a drawn circle is an enclosed boundary with an inside and outside, whereas the whole thrust of the analysis is that in internal and holographic relations, that boundary is permeable. Hence, we commonly say, for example, "the boundary between self and other breaks down" or "the self dissolves into the other (or self and other dissolve into each other)" or "the subject-object distinction is overcome." The literature on Japanese aesthetics, and even Japanese philosophy in general, is

littered with such statements, but they are not literally true. Why not? *Because there are no such boundaries separating self and other, or self and world, or you and me to begin with. So there is no boundary to overcome, breakthrough, or dissolve.* Great art does not break through the boundaries but instead shows that boundaries are not there, or at least are no more than the wispy surface of iridescent bubbles that glisten for a moment in fragile stability on the surface flow of events and then pop! dissolve back into the fluid field of impermanence, taking us with them.

The heuristic expressions are not more than guides in the praxis of thinking, pointing us to the field where there is no-I (*muga*), where without-thinking (*hishiryō*) pays no-mind (*mushin*) to the ephemeral bubbles of artist, event, medium, and audience as they appear within the flow of the field of *kokoro*. When they conjoin, art is born "just so naturally" (*jinen*). As in acquiring skill in the praxis of any other bodymind activity—learning the fingering of a musical instrument, studying and repeating the proper forms of an athletic move, mastering the rules of syllogistic thinking—the Way of artistry begins with absorbing what must be eventually forgotten to conscious thought. In the words of Zen Master Dōgen:

To model yourself after the Way of the buddhas is to model yourself after yourself; to model yourself after yourself is to forget yourself; to forget yourself is to be authenticated by the totality of phenomena. To be authenticated by the totality of phenomena is to completely drop away one's own bodymind as well as the bodymind of others. All traces of enlightenment are depleted, and those depleted traces of enlightenment go on and on.⁷

NOTES

1. Hasegawa Kai, "An Interview with Hasegawa Kai," interview by Robert D. Wilson, trans. Tanaka Kimiyo and Patricia Lyons, *Simply Haiku: A Quarterly Journal of Japanese Short Form Poetry* 6, no. 3 (2008), <http://simplyhaiku.com/SHv6n3/features/Kai.html>, accessed May 17, 2021.
2. Zeami, "Transmitting the Flower through Effects and Attitudes," in *Zeami: Performance Notes*, trans. Tom Hare (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 62–63, translation adapted slightly.
3. Motoori Norinaga, "A Small Boat Cutting Through the Reeds" (*Ashiwake obune*), trans. Donald Keene, in *Sources of Japanese Tradition: 1600 to 2000*, ed. Wm. Theodore de Bary, Donald Keene, and Ryusaku Tsunoda, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 507.
4. Yuasa Yasuo did the pioneering study on this approach in the history of Japanese thought and its relevance to contemporary issues in comparative philosophy, neuropsychology, psychoanalysis, and medicine. See, for example, Yuasa Yasuo, *The Body: Toward an Eastern Mind-Body Theory*, ed. Thomas P. Kasulis, trans. Shigenori Nagatomo and Thomas P. Kasulis (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987).
5. My 1998 Gilbert Ryle Lectures explored how the cultural preference for internal or external relations influences the development of philosophical systems. The lectures were published as Thomas P. Kasulis, *Intimacy or Integrity: Philosophy and Cultural Difference* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002).
6. See the discussion in Thomas P. Kasulis, *Engaging Japanese Philosophy: A Short History* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018), 227.
7. Kasulis, *Engaging Japanese Philosophy*, 239.

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES AND INFORMATION

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The *APA Newsletter on Asian and Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies* is sponsored by the APA Committee on Asian and Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies to report on the philosophical work of Asian and Asian American philosophy, to report on new work in Asian philosophy, and to provide a forum for the discussion of topics of importance to Asian and Asian American philosophers and those engaged with Asian and Asian American philosophy. We encourage a diversity of views and topics within this broad rubric. None of the varied philosophical views provided by authors of newsletter articles necessarily represents the views of any or all the members of the Committee on Asian and Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies, including the editor(s) of the newsletter. The committee and the newsletter are committed to advancing Asian and Asian American philosophical scholarships and bringing this work and this community to the attention of the larger philosophical community; we do not endorse any particular approach to Asian or Asian American philosophy.

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 - i) Please submit essays electronically to the editor(s). Articles submitted to the newsletter should be limited to ten double-spaced pages and must follow the APA submission guidelines.
 - ii) All manuscripts should be prepared for anonymous review. Each submission shall be sent to two referees. Reports will be shared with authors. References should follow *The Chicago Manual Style*.
 - iii) If the paper is accepted, each author is required to sign a copyright transfer form, available on the APA website, prior to publication.
- 2) **Book reviews and reviewers:** If you have published a book that you consider appropriate for review in the newsletter, please ask your publisher to send the editor(s) a copy of your book. Each call for papers may also include a list of books for possible review. To volunteer to review books (or some specific book), kindly send the editor(s) a CV and letter of interest mentioning your areas of research and teaching.
- 3) **Where to send papers/reviews:** Please send all articles, comments, reviews, suggestions, books, and other communications to the editor: A. Minh Nguyen (atnguyen@fgcu.edu).
- 4) **Submission deadlines:** Submissions for spring issues are due by the preceding November 1, and submissions for fall issues are due by the preceding February 1.
- 5) **Guest editorship:** It is possible that one or more members of the Committee on Asian and Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies could act as guest editors for one of the issues of the newsletter depending on their expertise in the field. To produce a high-quality newsletter, one of the co-editors could even come from outside the members of the committee depending on his/her area of research interest.