

On Japanese Aesthetics

By Aisaku Suzuki

I would like to talk to you about some characteristics of Japanese aesthetics. That would make it easier for you to approach my work, because I have been brought up in the area of Japanese culture and therefore my work is marked by its aesthetic sensibility.

It is certainly difficult to determine what is most important in life, but there are things which are useful as well as agreeable, for example: "to eat and to drink". Therefore it would perhaps be suitable to begin by talking about different ways of presenting a meal in Japan and in Europe by juxtaposing the characteristics of Japanese aesthetics with those of Western aesthetics.

There is a different conception of presentation between French and Japanese meals. The French meal proceeds as if you were driving on a one-way street. You begin with an aperitif and then pass on to an hors d'oeuvre, and to an entrée or a soup, afterwards a main dish, then to cheeses, to coffee and perhaps at last a pousse-café or a liqueur. It's not possible to reverse this order and to go back in the opposite direction, because as soon as you have finished a dish, it will be taken away in order to serve another dish. The Japanese meal, on the contrary, is served on very small plates and in bowls at the same time and so you can "wander" freely from one plate to another. For example you can taste a soup made from soja and at the same time try a grilled fish or fried vegetables. Each plate is prepared in such a way that it harmonizes well in taste with other plates. Moreover the dishes are often so minuscule, that they don't give you the impression that you have eaten something substantial. They are so light that you have always a desire to eat more, because the Japanese believe that, seeing a big quantity of food you quickly lose your appetite. All in all one can say that the French meal goes on according to a chronological pattern, while the Japanese meal is organized according to a pattern of spatial juxtaposition.

I would now like to present three essential aspects of Japanese aesthetics: economy in using space, asymmetry and sensual perception. The first point, namely the economy in the use of space : Having seen the example of an aesthetic meal you have remarked that the perception of space plays an important role in Japanese aesthetics. There is in Japan a particular concept called "ma" which means interval (that of space as well as of time), but "ma" is not nothing. Let us suppose that there are two things A and B. Therefore A is not B. But between the two there is X which is attached to A as well as to B, however it's neither A nor B. This X is "ma". In order that you understand it better, I can give you an example of a mediator of marriages in Japan. He is called "nakoodo", which means literally "between-man". Almost all marriages concluded today are made by a nakoodo. But he joins together not only two candidates for marriage, but what is also important is , that he is also responsible for the future of the couple. In case of crisis or of conjugal problems the married couple can always ask him for advice. It is he who is a personified "ma". In Japanese art the perception of "ma" is extremely important: In Japanese painting, at least in the classic painting, you remark that the empty space is as important as the motif. It is the "ma" which gives the value to the motif. In the music also it's the moment of silence coming between sounds which stresses them. In the common language if you qualify someone as "manuke", you mean that he lacks the sensibility to perceive the "ma", namely a man without sense.

Perhaps you ask yourself how this “ma” could be realized for the aesthetic presentation of a Japanese meal. If there are so many small plates and bowls with different foods, is there still an empty place on the table? Yes, surely there is. Because on the plates and in the bowls is presented so little food that it looks beautiful. You can perceive the importance of the empty space in Japanese arts like ceramic, Ikebana, calligraphy, painting and poetry.

The haiku, the shortest and probably the most popular Japanese poetry, is also known and appreciated in the West. It is a poem of 3 lines and 17 syllables. In a most reduced space thoughts and sentiments are expressed. Let me quote as example a haiku of Bashô (1644-94) who lived in the second half of the 17 th century and is considered as the most original poet of Japan.

Saying something	Mono ieba
The lips grow cold	Kuchibiru samushi
Autumn wind	Aki no kaze

You notice at once that a word is omitted between the second and third lines. Correctly it should be completed with a preposition “in”. But what is not said in this poem and which is the most essential, is the answer to the question why the lips become cold when you say something. This answer is intentionally not given by a word. It exists, however, between the lines of the poem and you can guess it only through the context of the poem and of the Zen philosophical thought of poet Bashô. By each statement, thinks Bashô, we limit our sentiment. By words we separate ourselves from a thing, with which we constitute a unity. In order that this unity between the subject I and the object that we feel being kept intact, stays the essential without words between the lines.

What is intimately linked with the principle of economy in the use of space is the principle of asymmetry. This is particularly perceivable in urbanism, in garden making, in painting and in ceramics. Symmetry and uniformity are for the Japanese sensibility equal to boredom. The Japanese people find in the symmetric composition something artificial and static. While asymmetry suggests dynamics and mobility. A vase made of clay, after it has been thrown on the wheel, will be intentionally deformed in order to give it dynamics, spontaneity and movement. The foot of a beautiful tea bowl is most often twice photographed, once from the side and another time from the bottom, so that you could see a dynamic aspect of its foot.

The third principle of Japanese aesthetics is the sensual perception. In order to explain it, I would like to compare briefly the Western thought and the Japanese. By the famous thesis of being: “I think, therefore I am” (Cogito, ergo sum), Descartes has presented the self-consciousness as the foundation of his philosophical system. The self-consciousness is a concept related to time and has nothing to do with space. The cogito is, according to Descartes, the reality which transcends the world and is independent from it. In the tradition of Japanese thought, on the contrary, it is unimaginable that an “I” or the subject exists independently from the world. For the Japanese thought, the only reality is the world of phenomena of which we are conscious at a determined place and time. As Basho says, whose haiku I quoted just before: “What the pine is, learn from the pine. What bamboo is, learn from bamboo”. That is to say that the real world is always accessible, because it is directly connected with our perception.

This manner of thinking, which is directly linked to the sensual perception, forms also correspondingly the aesthetic sensibility. Contrary to the European concept of aesthetics which is based on perfection and durability, the Japanese sense of beauty is founded on impermanency. All that is living is ephemeral. Kenkô Yoshida (1285-1350), Japanese man of letters, asks himself if we should look at cherry blossoms only in full bloom, the moon only when the sky is cloudless. He says that "there is much to be seen in young boughs about to flower, in gardens strewn with withered blossom. To long for the moon while looking on the rain, to lower the bamboo curtains and not to know the passage of Spring - these are even more deeply moving" (Tsurezuregusa 137).

"In everything, no matter what it may be, perfection is undesirable. Leaving something incomplete makes it interesting, and gives one the feeling that there is room for growth- (82, Essays in Idleness, translated by Donald Keen).

As origin of such thoughts you find the buddhistic consciousness of impermanency (sanskrit: anitya, jap. mujo). "All that is born, is liable to disappear" (Mehavagga Vinaya Pitaka, I,6,29). All being is then without substance. Therefore according to Buddhism it's absurd to think only to perfection and to permanence, because all is in flux of becoming and passing away. To understand really that all is impermanent must give a feeling of peace and consolation. "In all things it's the beginning and the end which is really attractive" (Tsurezuregusa 137). He was deeply conscious of the impermanence of life and has appreciated it all the more.

The Japanese culture, in comparison to the Western culture, is one of sensual perception, of the direct experience. The traditional Japanese arts like tea ceremony, painting, poetry, Ikebana and ceramics are means to come to a personal unity between body and mind. Learning these arts consists in learning a certain bodily manner to behave (katachi), which will be achieved in an aesthetic bodily form of behaviour, to which the mind is called to follow. The Western tradition which under the influence of ancient Greek and Christian thoughts, has given a priority to the spirit as opposed to the body, and has thus very much underestimated it. Although the ancient Greeks have given much importance to the training of the body, Plato, who has associated the head as seat of intellect and of rational thinking, has turned away the attention from the philosophical tradition about the body. In this regard let us quote a characteristic example of Pascal's thought: "I can well conceive a man without hands, feet, head (because it's only by experience that we learn to know that the head is more necessary than the feet), But I cannot conceive a man without thought: it would be a stone or an animal" (Pascal, Pensées, éd. Brunschwig n° 339).

It is only with Nietzsche and later with Merleau-Ponty that Western philosophers have begun to develop extensively their thoughts about the body. In "The Gay Science", Nietzsche proposes a radical change of view about the body to the Western philosophical tradition: "The unconscious disguise of physiological needs under the cloaks of the objective, ideal, purely spiritual, goes to frightening lengths - and often I have asked myself whether, taking a large view, philosophy has not been merely an interpretation of the body and *misunderstanding of the body*. Behind the highest value judgments that have hitherto guided the history of thought, there are concealed misunderstandings of physical constitution(der leiblichen Beschaffenheit) - of individuals or classes or even whole races" (Gay Science, preface to the second edition 2). In this sense Nietzsche is a turning point of Western philosophy, because he has radically questioned the foundations of Western philosophy.

In the Far Eastern thought on the contrary, the body has been always at the center of philosophical preoccupations, in particular in Zen Buddhism, which exercised a strong influence on arts. The zazen, sitting meditation of Zen Buddhism, is not at all a meditation on some thoughts, but an exercise to eliminate all thoughts, by means of which you transform yourself into the pure body-self. As Dôgen (1200-1253) puts it : While you are thinking about the Buddha Way you can never attain it. When you abandon to think and stop all your reasoning and practise the zazen only with the body, then you will arrive at the Buddha Way (Shôbôgennzô Zuimonki 3, 21). A Zen master said: when he eats, he eats and when he sleeps, he sleeps, and this is Zen". This concentration on what you are doing at the moment, is the foundation of Zen Buddhsm.

I would be pleased if these thoughts on Japanese aesthetics would give you not only a free access to my works, but also give a possibility to understand the differences between Japanese and Western cultures.

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