

World as Surface

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0. Japan or Post-modernity?

Being invited to a colloquium on “the Floating World”¹, I immediately took the subject to be an aspect of so-called post-modern culture. The theme seemed to be an extraordinary new word. On reading through the prospectus of the colloquium, however, I gradually realized that, in fact, it was about the Japanese concept *ukiyo*: indeed, it had slipped my mind how Western people use a literal translation of this Japanese word.

When I came to understand their relationship, I could not help being impressed with the great distance between the two expressions. While the “floating world” is not only poetic, but also suggests a postmodern view of the world, “ukiyo” inspires a sense of the old and traditional, i.e. a very Japanese way of perceiving our life-world. While the “floating world” seems to be an ontological determination of the world, “ukiyo” is an entirely ethical concept. The word appears in such idiomatic phrases as “ukiyo-no nasake”, or “ukiyo-no giri”. “Nasake” and “giri” represent the cardinal virtues of old Japan, and are therefore difficult to translate. I could perhaps translate “nasake” as kindness or pity, and “giri” as moral obligation. These virtues imply that we should not take “profit or loss” into account in matters of “nasake” or “giri”. “Ukiyo”, as a word attracting those concepts to form its basic associations of ideas, means that place in our life where we are expected to behave according to moral standards, including kindness and obligation. Such a world-view is perfectly unfashionable, something we find only in the films that take idealized *yakuza* as their heroes.

I assumed that the organizer of the colloquium expected me to talk about something related to Japanese culture. Moreover, in the last ten years I have become increasingly orientated toward this direction. I wish, then, to take advantage of this occasion for a further inquiry into the Japanese sense of the aesthetic. By this I mean that I will here concentrate on observing my own way of feeling and thinking, without glossing them in terms of Western philosophy in the way that Japanese philosophers usually do. I call the results of such observation a philosophy or aesthetics of the Japanese mentality, simply because I was born and raised in the atmosphere of Japanese culture. In other words, I pretend neither to myself nor to my readers that my view represents an authentic understanding of Japanese culture, if there is such a thing.

In response to the idea of the organizer of this colloquium, then, I will here adopt the viewpoint of a Japanese way of thinking. However I will concern myself not with “ukiyo” but with “the floating world”, because I find in this literal translation of “ukiyo” a basic factor of the Japanese world-view, which consists in not seeking any substantial entity that founds and supports the phenomenal world from

¹ The International Conference on “The Floating World”, organized by Prof. Mario Perniola, University of Rome “Tor Vergata”, took place at the University and the Culture Institut of Japan in Rome, February 21-22, 2003. An Italian translation of this paper is published : “Il mondo come superficie”, *Agalma, Rivista di studi culturali e di estetico*, n.6, settembre 2003, Melttime editore, Roma, pp.16-24. I express my gratitude for this invitation to Prof. Perniola, an old friend of mine.

outside that world. Hence the vision of world as surface, as I announce it in the title of my paper. I mean by this phrase not strictly a two dimensional vision, but rather diverse ways of perceiving and thinking that wish to stay at the level of phenomena. Let me begin by citing some examples of this surface culture.

1. Surface as such

The first instance of surface character I wish to offer is an experience a young Japanese painter had in France. He and I got scholarships from the French Government in the same year and became friends. He started his studies in Nice while I stayed in Aix-en-Provence. One day, he told me about two discoveries he had made at his school in Nice. As he was much older than the French students, he played the role of leader among them. The first thing he was surprised at was how they would not accept the idea of leaving a blank white space in a watercolor to represent the sky, as we do very often. The French boys felt they must cover the entire paper with one color or another. This was his first experience of *horror vacui*. His second experience also concerned surface. He was amazed by the fact that when those young boys, though much less adept than he, drew straight crossing lines on paper, those lines had depth: some stood out and others submerged. He made me notice this difference in the check design of neckties: while the check on the ties produced in Western countries is in clear relief, Japanese check appears flat².

The stage settings of the *kabuki* theater share this relatively flat character. While the modern Western stage is tall and deep, the stage of *kabuki*, originating in the same period as *ukiyo-e*, is wide and shallow. The standard proportions of a so-called Italian stage are cubic³: width, depth and height are equal. It is an interesting contradiction that the Italian stage, though finding its ideal in painting-like illusionism, with its proscenium arch assimilated to the picture frame, sought to develop the depth dimension of the stage space. In the *kabuki* theater, on the contrary, the scenery is just like a painting because of the shallowness of the stage.

Let me now refer to some observations Roland Barthes made in his *Empire of Signs*. In this book, which teaches me much more about Western than Japanese culture, I find nevertheless some remarks about the facts in our life that have escaped my attention. I focus here on the emptiness he found in several places in Japan. A typical case is the layout of the city of Tokyo. "The city I am talking about (Tokyo)", he says, "offers this precious paradox: it does possess a center, but this center is empty". This empty center is the palace of Tenno, which, unlike palaces in Western countries, is forbidden to the public; all cars have to make detour around this space. According to our semiologist, this "center is no

² Regarding the influence of the flatness of Japanese painting, I quote a passage from one of Gauguin's letters to Emile Bernard in 1889, by way of example. "You are discussing the problem of shadows with Laval and want to know whether I give a damn about them. Insofar as they are explanations of light, no. Look at the Japanese, who draw so admirably, and you will see life out-of-doors and in the sun, without shadows; they only use color as a combination of local tints giving the impression of heat, etc. Moreover, I consider Impressionism as a completely new undertaking, completely different from anything mechanical such as photography, etc. It follows that I reject as far as possible anything that gives the illusion of a thing, and since shadows are the trompe l'oeil of the sun, I am inclined to eliminate them." (Linda Nochlin, *Impressionism and Post-Impressionism*, 1966, p.161).

³ Cf. Etienne Souriau, "le Cube et la sphère", in *Architecture et dramaturgie*, Flammarion, 1950.

more than an evaporated notion, subsisting here, not in order to irradiate power, but to give to the entire urban movement the support of its central emptiness⁴". This is, of course, a matter of the symbolic, and the author concludes the chapter as follows: "In this manner, we are told, the system of the imaginary is spread circularly, by detours and returns along an empty subject⁵". From my viewpoint, I am inclined to crystallize this description into an image of busy movement around an empty subject, which seems to me to translate very well the life of the Japanese. As personal subjects we are nothing, but there exists intense activity.

I may relate to this symbol another remark by Barthes, about the packing of presents. Barthes notes that "it is precisely a specialty of the Japanese package, that the triviality of the thing be disproportionate to the luxury of the envelope⁶". A gift packed in such manner occasions an exchange of "bowing". In order to introduce the Japanese manner, he explains the Western manner. "Why, in the West, is politeness regarded with suspicion? Why does courtesy pass for a distance or a hypocrisy? [...] Western man is reputed to be double, composed of a social, factitious, false 'outside' and of a personal, authentic 'inside'. [Therefore] as soon as the 'inside' of the person is judged respectable, it is logical to recognize this person more suitably by denying all interest to this worldly envelope⁷". As it might be easily guessed, our champion of semiology opposes to this Japanese manners, which consists precisely in the "envelope". Two Japanese women exchange very deep bows, with a wrapped box between them, which Barthes conjectures "may contain nothing". Though the action can seem to the Western critic "excessive", in fact "the salutation here can be withdrawn from any humiliation or any vanity, because it literally salutes *no one*⁸". Finding "something sacred" in these manners, the author closes the chapter with the following comment: "religion there is merely a politeness, or better still, that religion has been replaced by politeness⁹".

This comment incites me to reflect on my own behavior in front of Japanese gods at a Shinto shrine. I am Shintoist, as most Japanese may be regarded to be, and therefore I make a bow in such a place. However I know that the sanctuary is empty, and the gods are absent. Peeking into the sanctuary at Izumo shrine, one of the two most ancient shrines, I was impressed by the fact that the interior is empty. My father worshipped a wooden shrine in miniature in my house. When I was a child I used to polish this tiny shrine during the big house cleaning that most Japanese people do at the end of the year. It was just like a toy; so charming that I wished I could make one. I wondered about the contrast between the interior emptiness of this miniature shrine and the reverent attitude my father showed before it every morning.

More exactly, there was in fact something in the small shrine. It was a miniature mirror, so unlike the mirrors I knew that I had to ask some adult what it was. I had no idea of relating the mirror to the gods. Now I perceive its meaning. It is not a modern mirror, reflecting the figures of those who look into it. On the contrary, what this ancient mirror reflects is the presence of the gods¹⁰. That is the place of god,

⁴ Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, translated by Richard Howard, Hill and Wang, 1982, pp.30-32.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.32. (I have modified the translation).

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.45-46.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.63.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.68.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Ancient people took the figure appearing in the mirror for the spirit of the onlooker, hence a magical power was

in the same way as the empty space in Izumo shrine delimits the space to receive the gods.

2. Field/Place vs. Substance.

I have noticed that Japanese philosophers or scholars in the humanities are generally fond of the word “field” or “place”, denoting a concept to be contrasted with those of substance or being. I think most Japanese philosophers agree in considering Kitarô Nishida (1870-1945) as a representative of the metaphysics of place or field. I will here outline the basic conception he wished to establish in his paper “Field” (1925), and then try to relate his metaphysics to the world-view or feeling of life that I am living. The paper “Field” represents one of the basic points of his philosophical reflections and is regarded as one of his most difficult writings. I hope I can grasp the fundamental vision of this paper, which I think is rather simple notwithstanding its complicated development¹¹.

To begin with, I have to explain the meaning of the paper’s title, for, in a sense, the understanding of the whole paper depends on the understanding of this title. I hesitate between “field” and “place” to translate the Japanese word Nishida uses in the title: “basho”. By this word he means consciousness, and he focuses on its comprehensive function in the literal sense of the word¹²: everything is found or enveloped in “basho” (field or place). Here I already encounter a basic difference between Japanese and English or probably any Western language. According to Nishida’s conception, I should say that «“basho” wraps or envelops everything», but English does not allow such an expression, rather we have to take a person as the subject of the sentence and say “we wrap everything in “basho””. This correct English sentence, however, has nothing to do with Nishida’s idea. He thinks that “basho” wraps or envelops every object, and of course Japanese allows such syntax.

To underline this comprehensive or enveloping function, the word “field” is preferable as a translation of “basho”. The word “basho”, however, corresponds rather to “place”. Our consciousness is an extension with regard to its comprehensive function, but every consciousness represents a point or spot vis-à-vis the whole world. I presume therefore that he adopted the word “basho” meaning “place” from the second viewpoint¹³. Here I use “field” to translate “basho” in order to underline its comprehensive function, but I ask you to keep in mind that this word literally means “place”. Moreover I wish to give a brief comment on the notion of “comprehensive” (“housetu-suru”, or “tsutsumu” in Japanese) function, which constitutes the basic logic of the metaphysics of the “field”. In my opinion, the closest corresponding word in Western philosophical terminology is K. Jaspers’ “umgreifen”. At the

attributed to mirrors, which were even considered as divine entities. The mirror is, along with the seal and the sword, one of the “Three divine instruments” kept in the Tenno family from the ancient times. Moreover, the mirror is often taken as the divine body in Shinto shrines. This custom is related to the conception that the image in the mirror represents another world. Cf. “Kagami (mirror)”, by T. Harada, Y. Iijima, *Great Encyclopedia of the World* (Sekai-dai-hyakka jiten), 2nd CD-ROM edition, 2002, Heibonn-sha.

¹¹ Indeed, he several times repeats the same argument. This entirely personal style comes, I think, from his struggle in philosophical speculation: in tracing in a new way the line of argument he had been assured of yesterday, he now tries to break through the difficulties he had encountered.

¹² Nishida notes that he borrows the word, not the idea, from the *Timaues* of Plato. Cf. “Basho”, in: Nishida Kitaro, *Philosophical Papers I*, ed. by Shizuteru Ueda, Iwanami Publishing Co., 1987, p.68. Within Western philosophy perhaps the closest equivalent to Nishida’s “basho” is to be found in Malebranche’s concept of “étendu intelligible”.

¹³ Probably the sound of the word is involved too: the Japanese word meaning field is “ya” and appears too short for a technical term. In fact, Nishida uses these two words interchangeably at the beginning.

level of images, however, I feel attached to “pack” or “wrap”, which might refer to the observation made by Barthes on the importance the Japanese accord to the package, so much so that I might use the expression “wrapping” function of “the field” as well as “comprehensive” function.

I think we are now ready to start to describe the structure of Nishida's metaphysics of the field. His basic standpoint is the philosophy of consciousness, as opposed to that of being or substance. Western philosophy, which is a philosophy of being, wishes to explain the world in terms of its foundation or the principle of being. Substance being defined as something that becomes subject and never predicate in a sentence, Western philosophy directs itself to transcend in the direction of the more subjective subject. The philosophy of consciousness wishes to direct itself to the side of the predicate. Nishida says: “In (the standpoint of) the comprehensive judgment, the particular as subject is considered as being comprehended in the general predicate, while in (the conception of) the substratum that becomes subject and never predicate, the general is regarded as being comprehended in the particular¹⁴”. “The general predicate” corresponds, of course, to consciousness. “To define consciousness from the standpoint of judgment, we can say that it is what becomes predicate and never subject: the category of consciousness consists in predicativeness¹⁵”. To adopt this standpoint of consciousness implies an attitude of not substantializing it. According to Nishida, in Kantian epistemology, the subject that constitutes the object remains something objective and particular, because we can ask about its nature and functions, and therefore it can become the subject of a judgment. Nishida orients his reflection toward this higher, or more exactly “lower” consciousness that looks at epistemological consciousness. He says: “Generally they regard even the ego as like other material things, as a subjective unity, but ego must be not a subjective but a predicative unity¹⁶”. That is to say, “I” constitutes a unity not as the identical subject of all possible sentences of judgment, but as something comprehending all possible predicates. In other words, such a thing comprehending all different predicates is possible, because this “I”, or consciousness, is a field. This field enwraps (contains) all contradictions. Besides, this consciousness is pure predicate and never becomes subject; while a subject is a particular being, the pure predicate is nothing. Consciousness is a field of nothingness, comprehending all contradictions.

The logic of comprehension or wrapping pursues transcendence toward the bottom of consciousness, or in the direction of immanence, that is, from particular beings to the generality of the predicate, or nothingness. At the bottom of this immanent transcendence, just above the final stratum that is pure intuition¹⁷, is found the will. I propose to interpret this argument as follows. The movement of immanent transcendence consists in negating the particular for the general. In the first place, it is the material entity that is negated in the field of consciousness for the sake of “functions without substratum”; then, negating this field, this pure function disappears and we get “images without substance¹⁸”. This dimension of pure images constitutes the actual state of consciousness. Here, however, something like ego does not settle itself as the understanding subject. Rather there exists only a state of self-consciousness. Consciousness consists in the power actualizing such images, and therefore the will

¹⁴ Nishida, *art. cit.*, p.100-101. My own translation for this paper.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.140.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.141.

¹⁷ “Intuition goes beyond the field of the will to penetrate deeply to the basis of nothingness” (p.119).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.108.

is its most basic element. We can interpret the following passage from this perspective. "Consciousness must be the perpetual present: in consciousness, the past is the past in the present, the present the present in the present, and the future the future in the present. The so-called present is the image of the present appearing in the present. What reveals this essence of consciousness is not the experience of cognition but the experience of will. Therefore, it is in the experience of will that our consciousness becomes most clear: insofar as it is consciousness, cognition can be considered as a kind of will¹⁹". In short, consciousness is the vivid nothingness that activates the world as images in its field

3. Consciousness as mirror and its two sides

When we see something, we negate it, i.e. determine it as such and pose it as object. Consciousness consists in this negating function. As consciousness, we are pure nothingness, in which, however, something occurs: in other words, consciousness is a vivid or illuminating field. Now it seems very natural that the metaphor of a mirror should be applied to this field of nothingness. Indeed, Nishida often appeals to this image: "In the comprehensive [or connotative] judgment, subject is in predicate: this is the fundamental sense of 'to reflect' or 'to see'. The predicative is the mirror that reflects, and the eye that sees²⁰". Of course, this is not a matter of the modern mirror that gives back our physiognomy, but rather of the ancient mirror in which the world makes an appearance. I wish to emphasize the intransitive character²¹ of this reflection or appearance.

We are, then, fields or places of nothingness, rather than personal substances. As I mentioned before presenting Nishida's thesis, I refer to him only because his conception seems to represent the intimate world-view I live. Suppose we are in the Sistine Chapel and enjoying the masterpiece by Michelangelo. Let me invite you not to think or imagine that *you* look at the painting with aesthetic admiration, deep religious feeling and a profound sense of the Christian concept of human history, but assume that these things, including the pictorial image, admiration, religious feeling and historical vision, *occur in you*. You are not a personal substance ruling over the phenomena, but a field where something happens. If the life illuminating this field is extinguished, nothing will happen in this field, or rather this field will disappear. I find it interesting that this representation seems to correlate to the simile in Japanese comparing life to fire or flame.

With regard to this desubstantialized person as field, I think it appropriate to refer to a pair of concepts: 'omote' and 'ura', which mean respectively 'front' and 'back'. As there is only two-dimensional extension, these two sides are like those of a sheet of paper; they correspond strictly to one another, like the Saussurian *signifiant* and *signifié*. In old Japanese, these two words had particular meanings: 'omote' signified face, and 'ura' mind or heart. This pairing may signify that the face directly expresses the heart²²: this is one way of reading it. We can, however, also read the pair in the opposite

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.92. I add another passage: "the true intuition must be full of life, like the pure duration of Bergson" (p.127).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.109. Cf. Mario Perniola's concept "specularism" in his *Enigma*, 1990 (Japanese translation, 1999, p.36 *et seq.*).

²¹ Cf. my paper: "Poetics of Intransitivity", *International Yearbook of Aesthetics*, vol.3: Aesthetics and Philosophy of Culture, ed. by H. Paetzold, 2000, <http://www2.ntu.ac.uk/ntsad/research/iaa/iaa3/contents.htm>.

²² Megumi Sakabe, in his *Hermeneutics of the Mask* (Kamen-no Kaishakugaku), the University of Tokyo Press, 1976,

sense, as underlining the autonomy of expression. This is what Roland Barthes did when he wondered about the meaning of the Japanese bow that he found too low to be addressed to another person. But, he would not be right if he took it for an empty sign, because face (front) may construct mind (back).

To illustrate the nature of the being of a person in this surface vision of the world, I think it best to quote an anecdote. It is a story that the Director of my secondary school told at a morning assembly of the whole school. I remember it as being part of the biography of Commander Hirose, one of the most famous Japanese officers at the time of the Russo-Japanese War. My memory may, however, be at fault, because on consulting his biography²³ I could find no such anecdote. However, since we need a name for our hero, I will call him Pseudo-Hirose.

When he was secondary school boy, our Pseudo-Hirose was far from being serious, and was indeed the ringleader of the delinquents. One day, something happened to him—I don't remember the details—that made him mend his ways. Unable to understand this sudden change in their boss, his fellows made fun of him, jeering that he was only putting on the semblance of being a good boy, and would soon show his true colors. Pseudo-Hirose replied to them as follows: "Well, I may now be putting on an act, but if I continue to do so, it will be my true colors"²⁴.

In connection with this anecdote, I remember the philosophy of Malebranche, according to whom our mind is the most obscure thing. Such a remark must arise from the assumption that our mind is a substance and must, therefore, have a definite nature. But if we give up this presumption, we will not be bothered by the bad dream of ignorance.

4. *Ukiyo* today.

While thinking about 'ukiyo' as a topic to discuss, part of a popular song from the 50's came back to me: "even a love born thanks to a good wind might disappear because of a bad wind, that is 'ukiyo'..." I have the impression that many images of 'floating' circulated during the 50's and 60's in popular culture in Japan; in songs, movies and TV dramas. Not only was 'ukiyo' used, as in the above-mentioned song, but 'uki-gusa' (floating grass) was also a popular word. Heroes in movies were often characterized as wanderers. A long TV series, a puppet drama entitled "Hyokkori Hyōtan-jima", is particularly worth mentioning. It was about a floating island constituting an independent country. The story had nothing particularly to do with the insularity of their world, but the opening song went "We don't know where our island will bring us. As the globe is vast, something waits for us on the horizon,

relates 'omote' (here meaning 'mask') directly to 'omoi', which means at the same time 'thought' and 'heavy' or 'serious' (p.14).

²³ *The Force-God, Commander Hirose* (Gun-shin Hirose Chūsa), Hakubunkan Publishing Co., 1904. The Hirose Shrine courteously provided me with a reprint of this book. In shintoism, distinguished persons, including officers, can be deified, as was the case with Takeo Hirose, whose shrine is in Taketa City, Oita province.

²⁴ Afterwards, I found in a classical text from the 14th Century a passage, which I could quote instead of the anecdote. "If you run through the streets, saying you imitate a lunatic, you are in fact lunatic. If you kill a man, saying you imitate a criminal, you are a criminal yourself. By the same token, a horse that imitates a champion thoroughbred may be classed as thoroughbred, and the man who imitate Shun [a legendary sage ruler of China] belongs to Shun's company. A man who studies wisdom, even seemingly, should be called wise." *Essays in Idleness, the Tsurezuregusa of Kenkō*, translated by Donald Keene, Columbia University Press, 1967, pp.72-73 (I change the last adverb from the original "insincerely" to "seemingly").

maybe pleasant or sad. That's O.K. We will not be discouraged!"

The original meaning of the Japanese word 'ukiyo' was "this hard world", and at the beginning of the 19th Century, people adopted a different Chinese character meaning 'floating'. The modern culture, which produced 'ukiyo-e', insisted on the hedonistic tone of their world-view: 'ukareru' means "to make merry". Popular culture in the 50's and 60's underlined the 'floating' character, the absence of rules, principles, and goals. But that, too, is already the past: the word 'ukiyo' is now almost dead. No one talks about 'ukiyo', and if someone presents the image of 'floating', he/she seems rather to have been inspired by a thinker like Derrida or Deleuze. Most Japanese intellectuals are happy to admit that the nature of Japanese culture consists in not having a definite nature. Maybe. But I wonder whether this characteristic does not derive from the surface character of the world.