

# On the way to a cross-cultural thought: Steps between European and Sino-Japanese aesthetics

Marcello Ghilardi

*Abstract:* The article focuses on some aesthetic issues in an intercultural perspective. The confrontation with a context of thought that developed outside the Western influence for centuries, such as the Sino-Japanese one, allows to discuss and intertwine some notions, experiences and arguments, in order to provide a possible mutual understanding and self-reflection among different cultures through aesthetics and artistic experience. In particular, the notions of “image” and “body”, traditionally relevant in Western aesthetics, are presented as thought-provoking in a cross-cultural “fusion of horizon”. So, a *de-coincidence* with the European atavic categories and their “unthought” can be promoted and enhanced, thus providing new perspectives and non-Eurocentric views.

*Keywords:* intercultural thought; art; image; body; decoincidence.

In this paper, I will focus on a possible pathway on the way to an intercultural thought and aesthetics. I am going to present and discuss some notions and experiences, crossing philosophical concepts and artistic insights, in order to provide a possible mutual fecundation and self-reflection among different patterns and horizons. In my point of view, a displacement in thought to Japan and to Japanese aesthetics and art can be useful to question Western philosophy of art about what it does not question at all, because it is taken as an evidence (a certain interpretation of the notions of image and body, for instance). The effort to decode some Japanese categories and put them in dialogue with European patterns reveals itself not only as a sort of methodological lever for questioning the general framework of the so-called “Western rationality”. It is also an opportunity to create a space of cross-cultural inquiry “that maintains the integrity and the richness of both Eastern and Western schools of thought” (Persson, Shrivastava 2016: 520). This method does not imply at all that Europe should follow Japan, or viceversa. Reflecting each other on the grounds of different languages and aesthetic experiences means rather to strengthen “the

sensitivity of ‘being affected’ [...] as an aspect of ‘being in phase’ [...] with the environment. Reflexivity as self-reflection of what it means to be humans in nature and in culture could favor a sustainable hygiene” (Persson, Shrivastava 2016: 520-521; see also Jullien 2007).

In this perspective, aesthetics can be regarded as the philosophical enterprise tout court, when it takes into serious account the embodied dimension of our thinking, the mutual relationship and interdependence between language and thought, the implication and overlapping of argumentations, emotions and feelings in our understanding of the world. Given that every statement or assumption *on* the world’s matter of fact (“How the world is”) is always a statement *in* the world, something that belongs to it, there is no statement that can encompass all reality, just as that statement was made by an external observer. This is exactly what a cross-cultural approach clearly shows: when we speak about art, when we try to define it or to practice it, we are always entangled and implicated in a series of different “practices” or behaviors, such as the conceptual habit of Western philosophy, or the practice of conceptualization determined by alphabetic writing, or a particular stress on logical argumentation or on the use of metaphors. In other words, we are always inheriting a wide range of assumptions, perspectives, or “horizons” of meaning. All this does not mean that every single human being is fixed and closed in his or her own mental frame, language, or culture. My claim here is that a culture is always an *inter-* or *cross-*cultural process; it is not a static, monolithic identity (see Panikkar 1999; Pasqualotto 2003; Jullien 2016). So, we can get close to foreign experiences of art and aesthetics, and reveal what is shared among cultures and patterns of thought, even if we recognize the gaps and differences, even if we realize that we do not understand all the other’s conceptions or behaviors (see Panikkar 1999: 11-19).

According to ontological contextualism, for instance, artworks are defined by some features, related to their historical and socio-cultural identification (Fongaro 2018: 107). We do not deny this rootedness. At the same time, we assume that a common horizon can be built, patiently and tentatively, without presupposing an original “universality”, but working on the common intelligibility of cultures, i.e., on their *translatability*. The possibility and opportunity to translate patterns of thought and conceptual frames into each other is implicitly discussed and fostered in Hans-Georg Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*, which was published sixty years ago. Gadamer discusses different kinds of encounter with the “other” (Gadamer 2004: 352-355) and shows the role of prejudice when we face the other’s oddity, strangeness, or difference (François Jullien would rather speak of *écart*, taking distance from the notion of “difference”: see Jullien 2012: 23-29). In most cases, according to Gadamer, we

avoid the other to express his or her view, building up a sort of cage in which “otherness” is neutralized. Only if we are able to accept the gap that persists between our categories and the other’s, we can recognize his or her experiences as something that holds its truth or validity. We need to feel engaged in the other’s perspective, or horizon of thought. Gadamer, in fact, calls this kind of encounter a “fusion of horizons”. As Fongaro clearly explains,

A “horizon” is a dynamic point of view formed by one’s “system of prejudices,” and otherness necessarily presupposes a “different system of prejudices” that determines its different horizon. When otherness becomes predictable from the viewpoint of one’s system of prejudices, one’s horizon becomes closed. Otherness is nevertheless understood but only superficially as it becomes anticipated and fixed within a single, static, self-contained perspective. When predictability is abandoned as a basis of exchange, however, the unfamiliarity of otherness emerges as an inexhaustible source of ever-changing possibilities that are capable of changing not only one’s understanding of the other but also one’s own self. In fact, both the self and the other are affected and changed by the new shared understanding (Fongaro 2018: 108).

A fusion, indeed, does not mean that one horizon disappears, or annihilates itself, in order to give space to the other and accept it entirely, with no questioning at all. Nonetheless, the mindset should be *not* assuming that “things must always have been just as they are for us, for things are naturally like this” (Gadamer 2004: 352). Rather, “every rewarding dialogue is an excursion into the unknown. We enter the unknown for what lies there to be discovered. In dialogue we wander in unexplored territory not with the intent of annexation, but of returning home to our familiar horizons and seeing them in a new way because of what we have seen elsewhere” (Snodgrass 1991: 39).

### 1. *The role of art and aesthetics: a path of research*

Works of art and, generally speaking, cultural products, have the power of revealing the world we live in. If they do not repeat stereotypes and do not aim to simply shocking people, they convey a sort of unpredictability, i.e., the novelty and wonder of discovering reality with new eyes, new ears, or renewed senses. “The cultural horizon they embody would then challenge us to engage with the fundamental difference they represent without recourse to the reductionism of Western universalism or the alienation of cultural relativism” (Fongaro 2018: 109).

A quick comparison between the notion of art that developed in Europe and the parallel notion of *yi*, that originated in China and spread over to Japan,

can open indeed an intriguing scenario. Anyway, comparison is not the aim of intercultural aesthetics. It is only a possible starting point, a heuristic or theoretical tool. An example could serve as a hint, or suggestion, to get accustomed with the *écart* praised by François Jullien (see Jullien 2012: 31-47). When we look back at the European tradition, we find that the word “art” (from the Latin word *ars*) points to a gesture, an activity, that is meant to produce an “order as a harmonious arrangement of the parts of a whole” (Benveniste 1969: 379). Giving a form to the formless is one of the main achievement Western art tried to accomplish since its very beginning. But if we move to East-Asian cultures, we find a classical character that is read as *yi* (藝) in Chinese, and turns into *gei* (芸) in Japanese. This character recalls the image of a human being who is planting a young tree in the earth (Shirakawa, Schmitz 2014: 114). Its meaning focuses on the capacity of letting blossom and grow up. The artist has to convey and enhance a vital energy that sprung up before, by a spontaneous activity that he or she does not master completely, because that energy exceeds a human being’s will or control. In fact, in classical Japanese texts there is no mention about a (artistic) “creation”, or a creative intentionality. What is generally translated as “creation” is, more correctly, a “modification-transformation” (*zōka* 造化 in Japanese). We can thus understand how the categories to which Westerners are generally accustomed when they reflect about art and aesthetics lose their “grip”, when we plunge into a different tradition. Once again, putting these notions in dialogue is not only a way to widen our knowledge, or to write down a *tabula presentiae et absentiae* – what is present or what lacks in one tradition or in another. We can go further, trying to elaborate a sort of “deconstruction from the outside” and working, so to say, at the intersection of East-Asian and European philosophy, drawing out the “unthought” of our conventional categories and mental habits or frames. Given that the “unthought” can silently condition our thought, if we shed a light on it we can then open up new ways of thinking and understanding. The in-between that is widened by this work of confrontation does not aim to find out new definitions. It is rather a space of turbulence, it elicits a disturbance, a derangement. And art can be a privileged field to experience such a transformative operation of thought through an intercultural encounter – at one condition: we must not urge the categories and argumentative forms we find outside European thought into the logical frames that developed within the Western tradition. Even if it could seem appealing, this operation would reveal: 1) the persistence of an implicit “logical colonialism” (only if the “other” can be reduced to the logical forms we are used to, that “other” is fully understandable, recognizable, and valuable); 2) the inability to open our mind to different forms of argumentation; 3) the blindness to the fact that every thought or philosophical insight is

expressed through a particular style or, conversely, to the fact that a style is not a neutral stance or position able to convey an aseptic meaning: on the contrary, thought exploits the style's resources, so it is not indifferent the way we utter or write a proposition, a discourse, or a text. A good translation is not a simple decanting of a thought from one container to another one. It should respect, at the same time, the possibility to be received and understood into a new frame of mind, a new language. It should abide the peculiarity of its original form (as long as it is possible without leaving it untranslated). We can undermine the effectiveness of cross-cultural engagements in two ways: by perpetuating Eurocentric conventional understanding, and by reducing otherness to predictable variables, without leaving the mesh of our conceptual network.

So, it is hopefully clear why aesthetics and the role of images are particularly important. Through their "practice", we can recognize our embodied dimension, the implication of intellect and thought with sensitivity, the role of imagination and emotions. Exceeding the intellectual frame, images possess a specific performativity and summon us to a deeper awareness in the exchanges, translations, intercourses we are always involved in. Such reflexivity may help us to avoid a narrow-minded ethnocentrism, a deluded universalism, and post-colonial attitudes. Therefore, a passageway could be unlocked, in order to shift from an exclusive (i.e., meaning exclusion and seclusion) notion of identity to a thought of an inclusive and open identity, setting forth the centrality of sensation and images for intercultural communication. In other words, the relation between art and existence can enhance and foster the awareness of the situatedness of subjectivity, involving us in an ethical transformation.

To do so, two main resources of philosophical traditions can be exploited, intertwining 1) a *phenomenological exercise*, focused on theoretical notions, works of art, patterns of recognition (here philosophy meets art criticism, history of art, history of religion, or anthropology), and 2) a *hermeneutical understanding*, taking into account the overall architecture of textuality, that is always at work when concepts are produced or interpreted. The general frame of this methodology has been provided years ago by Giangiorgio Pasqualotto, who has elaborated a "three interdependent dimensions" scheme. "The 'field', that makes possible the existence of the two poles and their mutual interaction, coincides with the space that cannot be closed due to the force of problems. [...] In this perspective [...] a dynamic with three variables which condition each other is produced" (Pasqualotto 2003: 47-48). The comparison or the *vis-à-vis* of theoretical objects (notions, concepts, images...) is constantly in relation with the comparing subject, and viceversa. None of them can stand isolated and autonomous, but interacts with all the others. Of course, "comparison" is to be understood here not as a positivistic exercise of a neutral observation, but

the existential engagement in a vital movement of experience and thought. The respect of difference and distance, and the acceptance of some unavoidable gaps, is mandatory – but this does not imply to give up the effort of a mutual, strenuous clarification and the task of translating one’s categories into each other’s language.

## 2. *Two exemplary notions: “image” and “body”*

I will deal here with a couple of examples, trying to show how challenging can be putting *vis-à-vis* some philosophical concepts – communicating and enriching each other is not at all a lazy or pacifying activity, it is indeed a demanding task.

Firstly, we could stress the specificity of the Sino-Japanese notion of “image”, focusing on the character *zō* 像 (also *shō* 象). My approach will depend mostly on the notion of image as it is elaborated in the texts and teachings of traditional ink painting, and by the observation of classical ink landscapes and calligraphy. For this reason, I would translate *zō* 像 or *shō* 象 by coupling two terms, “image-phenomenon”: two terms that in Western tradition – at least since Plato’s *Cratylus* (432b) or *Sophist* (236e-237a) – have been normally separated, or well differentiated. The image is as (ontologically) “valid” as the phenomenon it depicts. Every image is alive and contributes to the global flowing of the vital energy (*ki* 氣) that permeates every single aspects of reality. An image that does not express that breathing character of reality is far from the vitality of the phenomenon. If the painter is not able to convey in his picture the life of phenomena, so the painting will be “dead”, motionless, torpid, detached from the general process of reality. What really counts is not a “photographic” representation: figuration is rather the attuning to the movement of *ki*, to the dynamic character of life, expressed in this case as ink traces on the white page.

The classical Japanese tradition makes us think of another possible relationship between the “thing” and the “image”, apart from any metaphysics or transcendence of the phenomenon to the sign that stands in its place. Every dualism between the event and its representation is useless, “out of order”. The Western classical notion of *μίμησις* (“imitation, representation”) falls and comes out of order in this context. Painting does not mean imitating objects, persons, landscapes, giving the illusion of a new reality; image itself is already admitted to the realm of natural entities, it belongs to the same reality. Here we cannot find any dichotomy or tension opposing the physical to the intelligible world, the domain of appearance to that of essence. *Zō* is considered an emergent formation, it is the process of “emerging” in the realm of visibility,

guided and fostered by brush strokes. It conveys the idea of a dynamic process that brings on the movements of a new developing situation, of a relational system. In this context, the notion of “representation” loses its importance in the debates or researches about art. In Western history of art we can say that the image struggles with the phenomenon to attain true presence, showing to what extent the thing really “is” and placing the thing itself in its presence; but in ink paintings the logic is different. Here, every single brush stroke expresses a relational system. There is not an “inside” and an “outside”, two detached domains, but an energetic process, flowing by the means of the painter’s hand and brush in the work. When we speak about representation, in fact, we think implicitly of the notion of presence (from the Latin word *praesentia*: *prae(s)ens*, the being that is up there, in front of us). It is the presence that we must re-present to the eye and to the mind. In the Japanese tradition, true painting means rather going beyond the images’ exteriority and being able to generate them as living forms. The painter’s action brings to a new birth, at the same time is a regeneration of the landscape in the artist’s interior, and a regeneration of the artist in the landscape’s dimension, in its rhythm and vital flux. I am going here to deal in particular with this notion, because it seems to me that it is a crucial one. Depending on its originality and specificity, the other notions I will evoke later can assume a sounder meaning, interacting or re-acting among each other.

If we choose to translate the term *xiang* by the conceptual pair *image-phenomenon* and plunge into Chinese aesthetic vocabulary we can appreciate a different way of understanding not only the painting’s procedures, but also the relationship with nature, with the world. *Xiang* is indeed not only “image”, or “shape”, “form”, or “appearance,” it can also be translated as “phenomenon”, i.e., the phenomenon whose image is painted, for instance, on the paper or silk. Originally, the character seems to have symbolized the shape of an elephant. In the chapter *Jielao* 解老 of *Hanfeizi* 韓非子 (3rd century BC) we can read:

Men seldom see elephant [*xiang* 象] alive, and when they find the skeleton of a dead elephant, they imagine [*xiang* 想] (the animal) alive on the basis of its shape [*tu* 圖]. This is the reason why what people imagine by intention [*yi* 意] is called image [*xiang* 象]. Even if the *Dao* cannot be heard or seen, the sage man sees its form [*xing* 形] by its effects. For this reason one says: form of the formless [*wu zhuang zhi zhuang* 無狀之狀], image with no thing [*wu wu zhi xiang* 無物之象] (Chen 2000: 414; my translation).

What is interesting here, is the coupling of two dimensions that Western culture, after Plato’s ontology, tends to separate: only the Ideas have a real

ontological substance because they are eternal and incorruptible, and phenomena have a lower degree of substantiality, but are even more valid and more substantial than their images. The phenomenon of a mountain will never be as “real” as its Idea, but that mountain’s image will be always less real than the phenomenon it represents. This kind of distinction, just like descending steps from the true reality to the false one, is ignored in Chinese and Japanese traditional thought. Image is as valid as the phenomenon it depicts. Every image is *alive* and contributes to the global flowing of the vital energy that permeates every single aspect of reality. Only an image that does not express that breathing character is far from the vitality of the phenomenon, but this fact does not depend on its ontological dimension – it depends only on the painter skill level. If the painter is not able to convey in his picture the life of phenomena, the painting will be detached from the general process of reality. What really counts is not the perfect, “photographic” representation. Figuration is rather the attuning to the movement of the atmosphere, the vital breath, or the dynamic character of life, expressed as ink traces on the white paper.

Chinese tradition makes us think of another possible relationship between “thing” and “image” apart from that of a metaphysical or transcendent one between the phenomenon to the sign that stands in its place. *Xiang*, as we have just seen, can mean at the same time “image” and “phenomenon,” thus every perception of a dualism between the event and its representation is useless and “out of order”. Painting is not imitating objects, persons, landscapes, giving the illusion of a new reality; image itself is already admitted to the realm of natural entities, it belongs to the same reality. Here we cannot find any dichotomy or tension opposing the physical to the intelligible world, the domain of appearance to that of essence. *Xiang* is considered an emergent formation, it is the process of “emerging” in the realm of visibility, guided and fostered by brush strokes. It conveys the idea of a dynamic process that brings on the movements of a new developing situation, of a *relational* system.

In the *Book of Changes*, this same term, *xiang*, designates the shapes of stars appearing in the sky – “phenomena” in the Greek sense – and thus serves as a counterpart to *xing*, the forms that come into actuality and take on opacity on earth. Then, following the hierarchy of these agencies, *xiang* signifies with increasing abstraction the more initial and structural phase, not yet totally explicit, of *configuration* (heaven), preceding in that capacity the more material and realized phase of *concretion* (earth) (Jullien 2012: 228).

The frame that has been built by this synthetic consideration of *xiang* brings us to a second crucial issue. An “image” is not a mere representation of the ex-

ternal shape, and it refers to the dynamism between configuration and concreteness. Its features also affect the inner nature of *body* (alternately *xing* 形, “configuration”, or *shen* 身 “personal entity”, or *ti* 体, “inner structure”). A body is distinct, but not separated, from what we could call the inner or invisible dimension – be it called soul, spirit, heart, or mind. So, the somatic, or “soma-aesthetic” (Shusterman 2015: 201-211) domain is another important field of comparison and research, to cross different aspects, perspectives, and insights, from the Eastern and the Western extremes. Given that humans have (and are) bodies, they can “bodily” understand art by letting themselves be involved in the practice of an art – without trying to grasp its meaning or definition by words. It is the living gesture, the artistic act itself to give an expression to one’s understanding. Integrating these different modes of comprehension produces a transformation of identities, engendering thus an ethical, transformative process. Moreover, given that humans speak and write differently, the aware, conscious understanding of art appears to be necessarily “ambiguous”, exposed to multiple, creative interpretations. For instance, the binomial word *shinjin* 身心 – its striking originality occurs in Eihei Dōgen’s *Genjōkōan* 現成公案 – is very interesting and almost shocking, for a Western reader (Yuasa 1987: 116-117). In fact, it reveals the non-separation of the two realms, or substances, as they are usually conceived in the West after the vulgarization of Descartes’ philosophy and his classical distinction of *res cogitans* and *res extensa*. Nonetheless, due to the Twentieth century phenomenological attitude, some passages or doorways have been enhanced. The following quotation, by Merleau-Ponty, testifies the possibility of a bridge and a dialogue:

Whether we are concerned with my body, the natural world, the past, birth or death, the question is always how I can be open to phenomena which transcend me, and which nevertheless exist only to the extent that I take them up and live them; *how the presence to myself (Urpräsenz) which establishes my own limits and conditions every alien presence is at the same time derepresentation (Entgegenwärtigung) and throws me outside myself* (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 381).

It is not by chance that one of the chapters in the book written by Yuasa Yasuo on *The Body* deals precisely with phenomenology, and with Merleau-Ponty’s fruitful insights:

For Merleau-Ponty the important issue was not finding some compromise for mind-matter dualism, but clarifying the condition in which the for-itself (*pour soi*) is incarnated in the bodily in-itself (*en soi*), that is, clarifying the concrete mechanism of a human subject’s existence as a being-in-the-world (Yuasa 1987: 169; Kopf 2009: 59-64).

A couple of pages before, Yuasa had stated that “in the Japanese language, such expressions as ‘learning with the body’ and ‘the body learns’ are often used with regard to the skills and techniques acquired through repetitious training” (Yuasa 1987: 166). So, a Japanese attitude that comes up and reveals itself through language and idiomatic expressions finds a counterpart in a French philosopher’s thought, and that convergence conveys new meanings and a mutual clarification or fecundation.

In the field of art practice, we could also summon an excerpt by the calligrapher Morita Shiryū (1912-1998), a perfect example of communication and dialogue among art, philosophy, and poetic prose, in which different concepts resound and reflect on each other – the classical aesthetic notions of ink and brush, the Nishidian concept of *basho* 場所, and the typically Western word “I”:

Because there is no self by itself and no brush by itself, no relationship comes about between some prior “me” and some prior “brush”. Rather, we must say that what exists is a whole we may call “me and my brush”. The one, inseparable whole lives here and now, and that is the very substance of my being a calligrapher here and now. Let us call this single totality *place*. [...] In the sense that I and my brush are born in a place and that a place gives birth to us. [...] In the unity of the place, I and the brush are one. As a calligrapher I transcend myself and am released from myself (Morita 2011: 1200-1202).

Not only an intellectual knowledge is necessary, but a sort of bodily understanding. Again, the Japanese language gives to us a perfect hint with the word *taitoku* 体得, “to get (*toku*) by the body (*tai*)”. This binomial term is close to other words, like *rikai* 理解, or *etoku* 会得: they all generally mean “understanding”, but *taitoku* emphasizes the presence and role of our body in our uptake of the world. It is like when you are surrounded by water, while you are swimming: you get used to a different gravity and to unusual movements, and at the same time you learn to be in the world in a different way, you learn a new posture or attitude, unprecedented gestures. You get accustomed to your own body, and you re-discover yourself. In this sense, artworks are a sort of “diving sites”, by which we experience an enterprise of de-coincidence, in the way François Jullien explains this notion (see Jullien 2017). De-coinciding means to open a “gap” (the French word *écart*, in this context, is indeed more effective) with respect to a congruity that does not concede any further initiative; it means to get out of a fulfilled perspective, out of an order that inhibits any new solution and, finally, sterilizes by an excess of coincidence, adequation, or adaptation.

### 3. *From aesthetics to ethics: art, emptiness, and subjectivity*

We could go further, claiming that a core issue at the basis of this enterprise of a cultural translation goes around the experience of visibility, or the relation between visible, invisible, and visibility itself. In the West, *theory* (from the Greek verb θεωρέω, “I see”) is indeed a crucial form of practice since ancient philosophy. The original move by Plato, who distinguished the sensible vision of the eye and the body from the metaphysical vision of the mind or soul, is still at work in the modern scientific revolution (see Sini 2018: 10-17). In the Japanese language, the word *miru* 見る (“to see”) and the word *kan* 観 (“to see deeply, to contemplate”) have often been used to grasp – or to get in touch with – what lies beyond the visible forms, but with no ontological separation between the so-called (in the West) physical and metaphysical worlds. Anyway, the three dimensions of visible, invisible, and visibility cannot be thought or inquired as three different “things”, substances, or objects that stand in front of us. Like Merleau-Ponty underlined in his analysis, an “absolute vision” takes place when the roles between the artist and the visible are reversed (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 167-169), and the represented objects appear as iridescent processes. When an image can give the impression of coming “from me, and yet from beyond me and over me” (Heidegger 1962: 320), thus a work of art can reveal itself as an *intensification of a space-time*, of a gesture, and a vision. A work of art is not only a form, not only an event: a form and an event take place at the same time.

In attempting to give way to the source of visibility, by the means of a visible form/event, we can also experience a sort of “conversion” of the gaze. In ink painting (*sumie* 墨絵), we are not simply standing in front of an image, we find ourselves *in* the painting, plunged into it, integrated with it. This is the great insight of traditional landscape painting, where the invisible becomes “sensible”, and you feel a respirational reversibility by the diffused luminescence and the transition from the physical dimension to the spiritual one, back and forth. In calligraphy, brush strokes clearly exhibit the character of gesture, carrying the trace of the original movement that generated it, bearing its memory. The calligrapher or painter abandons (a part of) his or her psychological self in order to give space to a play between background and figures. The drawn image is the tentative result of a single touch, which weaves into the visible the intention and the senses of sight and touch.

The picture, however, is not simply a “thing”, it is rather the name we give to a meeting that happens, to a mode of relation to the world. That particular image that you objectify on a surface is for us a sort of μετὰξυ: (“in-between”, “middle”, “mediation”) an intermediary or mediating dimension that stretches

out toward the subject and the world at the same time. It keeps them connected and it belongs to both of them; it shows that they are never disjointed, even if they are distinguished. The creation of the work is the upcoming of this reflection, its turning into experience; it is the movement – that coagulates in an object – that the world makes in itself, a sort of self-drawing. Subject and image are not external to the world, they are peculiar modes of it. The world reveals itself, makes itself visible, through the gestures of the artist.

A thread can be followed between (neo)platonism, European Middle Ages' mysticism and Japanese philosophical and religious insights: what gives rise to the visible is not visible in itself. On this basis, Plato's *Republic* (507d-508d) can be put in dialogue with some daoist insights of the *Zhuangzi*; or Heidegger's thought can be crossed with Nishida's (Heidegger 2013; Nishida 2003: 341-648). It is *no-thing*, it is *not a thing* – or a ground, an ontological substance; it goes beyond, or stays below, the opposition between transcendence and immanence.

The Nothing on which even blandness pivots does have something transcendent about it, though not to the exclusion of immanence, especially not of total immanence. Yet such *total* immanence transcends itself and can no longer be adequately conceptualized as only or exclusively 'immanence'. The idea of absolute transcendence cannot be excluded from it either. Immanence as such absolutely transcends every possible conception of it. *Total* immanence is without confines and involves or contaminates everything, transcending all limits (Franke 2014: 16-17).

As we have already seen, we can thus learn to loosen the fixation about "representation". In the Western history of art, generally speaking, the image struggles with the phenomenon to attain true presence, but in Japanese ink paintings every single brush stroke expresses a relational system. There is not an "inside" and an "outside", two detached domains, but an energetic process, flowing by the means of the painter's hand and brush in the work. When we speak about representation, it is the presence that we must *re-present* to the eye and to the mind. "Representing" means also bringing to a new presence what was concealed, hidden, or forgotten. The substance (οὐσία) should be taken in presence (παρουσία) in order to feel and live the actual living dimension of Being. We cannot understand most part of Western art without these links between ontology, theology and aesthetics. But if we read some lines by one of the most important texts in the Chinese pictorial tradition, the *Huayulu* 畫語錄 (*Treatise on Painting*) by Shitao (1642-1708), we can find precious hints to get closer to the theory of image and art that belongs to East-Asian culture:

The inner nature of landscape is caught by getting the universe's intimate structure. Possessing the techniques of brush and ink, one realizes the external aspects of landscape. [...] The landscape expresses the form and tensions of the whole universe. [...] Before I was fifty, I was not generated in the landscape. It is not to say that I treated landscape as a meaningless thing, but I let it as an independent thing, on its own. Now the landscape speaks by myself, it is expressed by me. It is generated by me, just like I am generated by the landscape (Han 2000: 200; my translation).

The symbolic aspect of every artistic endeavour consists in the dissolution of the imaginary identity of the subject and the object as well. This uncovers, properly, a transformation or passage from an aesthetical concern to an ethical one. Each ink stroke can also be figured out as a "threshold"; each painting can be a shadow line that allows you to know in an unexpected way a fragment of the world, a fragment of ourselves; each time it can happen a metamorphosis of the gaze. During an artistic and aesthetics experience, we undergo the experience of a shattering of all objectifications and reifications of the self, something that comes from beyond our own subjectivity.

It is the internal vibration of the picture that makes it unavailable to any determination of possession or knowledge. In ink painting, an attempt of a progressive purification and decantation is fostered – it is a sort of liberation from stereotypes, means and techniques that are taken for granted. The result is a new attention to the vital breath that animates the act of painting, in order to get in touch with what emerges from the paper. One tries to be a receptive place for the *sign* of that event, of that apparition. In fact, you can contemplate a poetic landscape, but you cannot stare at it. You must learn to move in it, along with it, and feel it with all your senses, in order to capture a "figuration over the figuration" (in a classical Chinese expression: *xiangwai zhi xiang* 象外之象). The nature of landscape is as elusive as that of the vapor rising from the fields in the summer heat; you can contemplate the vapor, and the impalpable atmosphere, but you cannot fix it, because it is not an object you can catch.

As an empty, or nearly-empty image, it can be the occasion of the gaze's movement – being kept in suspension, the gaze stays alive. Beyond figuration lies the origin of every figure. As its origin or source, it never becomes a figure in itself. It is as the pure light that the eye cannot see, that the hand does not grasp; the light which allows all the other things to be seen and held. It is necessary that eye and hand try to shape the background and figures stemming out of it, so that they are traces leading to the source of visibility. In this perspective, the visible – what is offered to the gaze: the picture, the canvas, the paper and the traces that appear there – works as a screen. It is the screen

on which the eye can notice that it cannot see directly the source of the visible, because as soon as it grasps some-*thing* to see, it turns this “*something*” in an object, and loses what it was looking for.

At the same time, the exercise of seeing manifests the fact that every entity is “empty”, both spatially – it has no autonomous, substantial nature but always exists in relation to something other than it; it is always penetrated and permeated by that which surrounds it – and temporally – every physical or mental entity is impermanent, transitory. The world is structured as an infinite network of interdependent, non-self-sufficient elements. And this “vacuity of essence” is not a matter of theory, but a question of experience. Breathing, in its alternation between fullness and emptiness, is the prime instrument of meditation in bringing the practitioner closer to the substanceless and impermanent dimension of being. Voidness is an infinite condition of possibility for the occurrence of any phenomenon, any physical, psychological, or metaphysical manifestation which, like a wave, rises from the great ocean and returns to it.

Art can be one of the different ways of coming into contact with the experience of the void, of making it an operating principle. There is no longer a subject who performs the work; the work occurs, gratuitously, giving a “sensible body” to the circulation of energy and interrelations. It is precisely the void that allows the circulation of the vital breath, the energetic exchange between subject and object, which are discovered to be one – not separate – in the process of generation and dissolution, inspiration-exhalation, emersion-immersion against the backdrop that animates and accommodates them. At the same time, however, the backdrop exists only in virtue of the phenomena played out against it. The backdrop is not a metaphysical foundation that exists *before* and *beyond* things, bodies, or events: backdrop and phenomena are one. The void is a phenomenological *here-and-now*, and can be made distinct from phenomena only by the intellect’s need to discern; in terms of processes it can never be separated or detached from them. Art is a function of the void: the power and efficacy of the void are brought back via figuration. The fullness emerges from the void while revealing it by contrast. It shows the efficacy of the void the same way that the void contains the potentials for fullness, without there being a splitting of planes – here the visible, the manifest, the tangible; there the latent, the extrasensory. The variation of fullness and emptiness confers dynamism and preserves the invisible within the visible; it is the only thing that can render the figuration in its totality.

A work of art is like a promise that constantly delays its fulfillment. The promise “is kept” because it continues to be pronounced and repeated in every brushstroke – as a fishing hook repeatedly is thrown into water: what really matters is throwing the hook, more than the likelihood of catching the fish.

That is the reason why art requires extreme fidelity, the simple trust in its gesture. Unlike the psychological ego, art and the self that plunge in it do not ask for any compensation – hence the tension that one often feels. You feel it, however, when you are not deeply immersed in the work. In the particular act that tradition generally defines as “artistic activity” you find a unique kind of knowledge, and a particular type of practice – such as a form of ethics. Through the work of art, the world is not revealed as a set of things to be manipulated; it appears as a pure befalling. Through the experience of the figure emerging from the paper or canvas, we experience the world as pure befalling, where new forms continuously interweave with each other.

#### 4. *Conclusion*

A figure emerges from the sheet of paper, from the canvas, and at the same time it emerges from the world. Viceversa, the world appears and is configured in each figure and single gesture. It is a circular movement: the world and the sign spring up together. Observing the world, and translating this observation in drawing or painting, we detach ourselves from and we approach the existing things, which are regained and re-discovered in an unexpected way. So, the relationship with the world is changed, the boundaries of disciplines such as aesthetics and ethics are left apart and exceeded.

Meeting the specific “otherness” of Japanese art, trying to build up bridges and widen our conceptions, we aim to a lively theoretical gesture – not to a supposedly encompassing frame or systematic thought. Putting the question of cultures and aesthetic traditions in terms of disturbance and restlessness means to stress the pluralism of forms, of practices, of argumentative structures (Kasulis 2009; Maraldo 2009). Given that there is no “Culture” as a singular, metaphysical substance, and that there are different cultures, we have to investigate and elaborate concepts respecting their resources and particular fecundities. We can take advantage of Japanese, Indian or Chinese coherences as well as of European or American concepts and move freely within them. Today’s vocation of philosophy can truly be to make the plurality of languages, ideas, and categories circulate, in order to explore them and exploit their fertility.

Marcello Ghilardi  
marcello.ghilardi@unipd.it  
University of Padua

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