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SABI

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It. *Sabi*; Fr. *Sabi*; Germ. *Sabi*; Span. *Sabi*. 寂 is an aesthetic category developed within Japanese culture. It is relevant in a contemporary and cross-cultural perspective not only because of its success as a principle of design worldwide, but also because its non-European origins pose a set of conceptual challenges for aesthetic analysis. It is hard to translate univocally: referred to objects it is a “patina of time”, in the case of natural and artistically arranged spaces it is an “atmosphere of quiet melancholia”, as a state of artistic subjects it signifies a state of “spiritual loneliness”.

JAPANESE AESTHETICS AS A GLOBAL DISCOURSE

An important premise is that talking of “aesthetics” in the case of pre-modern Japan might not be technically correct. The Japanese term *bigaku* 美学 is a recent translation of the German *Ästhetik* dating back to the Meiji period (1868-1912) and even the word *utsukushii* 美しい, “beautiful”, becomes prominent in the same period as translation of the German *das Schöne*. In Japan the interconnected history of poetry, prose literature, crafts and “event art forms” such as tea ceremony, *ikebana* and incense ceremony never produce a single overarching idea of “beauty”, developing instead a wide array of *aesthetic categories*, namely terms that form a wide and more specific net of aesthetic evaluations (for a reasoned vocabulary, see Hisamatsu 1963). Whereas European culture conceived “beautiful” as a relatively abstract and general propriety, with only the notion of sublime gaining an independent status, Japanese aesthetic developed these words across different ages and contexts as a net of specialized, even opposed concepts. Among the main ones there are *mono no aware* (“deep feeling of things”) characterizing the poetics of impermanence (*mujō* 無常) in Heian age (794-1185), the medieval *yūgen* 幽玄 (“dark indistinction”), *sabi* itself, increasingly connected with the twin ideal of *wabi* 詫び (“serene poverty”) in the tea ceremony and refined in the poetics of Bashō’s *haikai*. The originally Chinese aesthetic idea of *fūryū* 風流 (literally “windflow”) crosses the whole history of Japanese culture assuming multiple and even opposite meanings, from “sensuous,

mundane beauty” to “eccentric, spiritual aestheticism”. In more recent times the notion of *iki* いき (“elegant erotic detachment”), diffused among the pleasure quarters of Edo in late 18th century, became more known because of Kuki Shūzō’s analysis in his *The Structure of Iki* (Kuki 2005) and the mention of his work made by Heidegger. Another contemporary Japanese aesthetic paradigm, gaining traction in pop production worldwide, is *kawaii* 可愛い, “hypercute”. *Sabi* has to be understood on this plural background, of which it is an important element.

THE ZEN-CENTRIC INTERPRETATION OF *SABI*

The chief element of interest in the case of *sabi* is that it praises objects that are old, consumed, worn, frayed, dented, asymmetric, imperfect, dull and darkened: namely, examples of what would normally be considered *anti*-aesthetic. It is easy to contrast this attitude with the stress for form, symmetry, regularity and purity that is supposedly central to Greek art, and to traits that can be more generally perceived as aesthetic positives: freshness, youth, organic vitality, bright light and vibrant colors.

The literature on *sabi* available in English is numerous but often commercial. In texts such as J. Crowley, S. Crowley (2001), Juniper (2003), Gold (2004), Powell (2005) and Koren (2008), the aesthetics of *sabi* is almost infallibly presented in its relationship to Zen Buddhism, or outright identified with a “Zen sensibility” so vague and wide to be identified with Japanese culture at large. This view ought to be put in its context: the strong identification between Japanese aesthetic expressions such as tea culture or *haiku* and Zen was actually part of a strategy of cultural dissemination of the Japanese cultural heritage abroad, carried out in different moments by authors like Okakura Tenshin (1863-1913), Suzuki Daisetz (1870-1966) and Hisamatsu Shin’ichi (1889-1980). Suzuki in his *Zen and Japanese Culture* (Suzuki 1959) is most aggressive in this identification of religious and aesthetic, not only defining the “imbalance,” “asymmetry,” “poverty” and “aloneness” of *sabi* as “the most conspicuous and characteristic features of Japanese art and culture,” but also stating outright that “all these emanate from one central perception of the truth of Zen, which is ‘the One in the Many and the Many in the One.’” (Suzuki 1959: 27-28).

While the contiguity and the overlap between the aesthetics of *sabi* and Buddhism is undeniable, two objections can be raised against this view. First, these connected genres are not by any means representative of the whole of Japanese aesthetic production, which does include bold, colorful, vibrant and life affirming artistic expressions of no less complex and relevant than the subdued elements of *sabi*. Already in 1937 Kuki Shūzō Kuki was warning against this intellectual tendency to emphasize the elements of *sabi*, subtleness and irony in Japanese culture at the expense of the cheerful, bold and sublime aspects of its aesthetic production (Kuki 1990: 80).

The second, more fundamental objection to the conflation of *sabi* and Zen is that by referring to such trans-historical, intuitive essence, it has actually stifled any analysis of *sabi* going beyond a superficial categorization or an exotic essentialism. In effect, the most comprehensive aesthetic study of *sabi* in modern times is still the work of Ōnishi Yoshinori (1888-1959), professor of Aesthetics at the University of

Tokyo and first Japanese translator of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, who explicitly rejected this identification.

ŌNISHI'S THEORY OF *SABI*

Ōnishi rejected the presupposition of a "Japanese aesthetics" as "theoretically meaningless" (Ōnishi 1940: 8) and tried to build instead a cross-cultural system that saw in European and Japanese aesthetic categories particular instances of three general modes of aesthetic consciousness. Beginning with the volumes *Yūgen to aware* (*Yūgen and Aware*, Ōnishi 1939) and *Fūgaron: sabi no kenkyū* (*On the Spirit of Beauty: A Study of Sabi*, Ōnishi 1940) he concentrates on the three categories of *yūgen*, *aware* and *sabi* seeing in them a parallel of the Western ideas of "das Schöne", "das Erhabene" and "das Komische". Both triads are culturally specific modes of three more general categories of "beauty", "sublimity" and "humor", a classification borrowed from Robert Vischer, which he will later organize in his *Bigaku* (*Aesthetics*, Ōnishi 1961).

Ōnishi identification of *sabi* with a mode of humor, despite its ostensible negativity and melancholia, is carried out through a phenomenological analysis concentrating on the poetry of Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694) and the poetical treatises organized by its disciples. From this philological materials, Ōnishi distillates three different etymologies for the term *sabi*:

1. The first one originates from the verb *sabu* 荒ぶ, to be wild and desolate, connected to *sabushiki* 不樂しき, "unpleasant", and *sappukei* 殺風景, "ugly". The adjective *sabushi* 淋し has the more objective sense of "desolate", but these terms generally refer to what is perceived as anti-aesthetic as such. Another key element of this set of ideas is their spatial sense, referring to a physical withering or to a separation from social life (Ōnishi 1940: 145).
2. The reading *sabi/sabu* is also connected to the sense of "old age", (written as 老, 宿 or 古). This temporal connotation is also present in the verb *sabiru* 錆び, literally "rusting" (Ōnishi 1940: 147).
3. A third meaning, important in early texts but later fallen in disuse derives from the independent expression *saobu* 然帯ぶ, "having the air of", "with the appearance of something".

While the anti-social and oppositional value of the first point was an important part of Daoist and Buddhist ethics, Ōnishi notes that the appreciation of the negative aspect of *sabi* does not actually need an external, extra-aesthetic value to reach its meaning. The same applies to the sense of "old": the positive sense of "venerable" and "antique" does not really belong to *sabi*. In other words, it is negativity as such that must be turned into a "positive aesthetic moment" (Ōnishi 1940: 200). In this sense, *sabi* is an inherently paradoxical aesthetic notion, aiming at the totality of reality by a negation of its positive phenomenal forms, as a black ink painting would do with an actual landscape. Ōnishi sees in this point the key to explain the similarity between *sabi* and Romantic irony: a mode of aesthetic and philosophical consciousness able to reject any definitive affirmation and see within the negative aspects of life not

something tragic or nihilistic, but a way to grasp a fundamental interplay of reality and surreality in existence.

The temporal aspect of *sabi*, too, works in a contrastive way: by stressing the “accumulation of life” into an object *sabi* engulfs it in the “fundamental atmosphere” of human life (Ōnishi 1940: 234). In age, the contradiction between the constant flow of life is contrasted with the objectivity of the artwork, and in turn the human quality of the artwork is reintegrated into a “metaphysical stillness” of nature acting as its background. Therefore, while the ironic perspective alone mostly pertains to the side of language and human constructs, the stress on age and temporality puts *sabi* in a strong connection to nature.

The third sense of “air” or “appearance” of something is lastly used by Ōnishi to suggest how *sabi*, by stressing the negative elements of the phenomenic object, actually suggests much more clearly something going beyond it, might it be in the sense of an ideal or a general atmosphere, just as a withered branch can communicate the purity of winter through the negation of its usual appearance (Ōnishi 1940: 268). Through *sabi* the negation of the object as such is therefore turned over in a certain sense of freedom.

POSSIBLE DIALOGUE

Ōnishi’s work has the merit of already putting *sabi* in a dialogue with European aesthetic ideas, showing both the continuity and the cultural differences implied by the notion. One aesthetic idea that would be fruitful to compare with *sabi* is that of “aura” as theorized by W. Benjamin. The “strange tissue of space and time” making up the aura stresses the age of the object as a form of unbridgeable distance inherent to artworks, that is as an experience of creative “negativity” and disclosure that would be erased from reproduced object, closer to be mere positive things. While Benjamin first introduces the idea of aura through the example of a landscape (Benjamin 2008: 23), its stress stays on artworks as human products.

Another potentially fruitful perspective is the relation between the “aesthetic oxidation” of *sabi* and the phenomenological study of atmospheres carried out by H. Schmitz and G. Böhme. Focused not on positive things and formal qualities but rather on their atmospheric ecstasies, their work is highly consonant with the stress on ambiance and interconnectedness typical of Japanese aesthetics.

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